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Study guide

The story behind the story

Finding greater truths behind Bible stories

By Robert C. Blezard

The Bible expresses God's truth, right? But does that mean that everything in the Bible is historically and scientifically accurate? Well, some things are and some things maybe not. How then, can we say the Bible is really the written word of God? ELCA Lutherans prayerfully look beyond historical and scientific accuracy to find deeper truths, wisdom and guidance from the Bible.

EXERCISE 1: TWO DITCHES

In discussing how truth is revealed in the Bible, there are two unhelpful "ditches" in which many people get stuck, writes Diane Jacobson in "What Lutherans Think About the Bible." The essay was prepared for the ELCA's Book of Faith Initiative, of which Jacobson, professor emerita of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., was director from 2008 to 2016. (Find the essay at bookoffaith.org.)

One "ditch," Jacobson writes, is a fundamentalist understanding: "The logic goes something like this: The Bible is true. The only way something is true is if it is literally, factually true. No contradictions. No mistakes."

The other "ditch" is a secularist understanding. She writes: "The logic goes something like this: The only way the Bible can be true is if [it is] literally true, scientifically verifiable. Because the Bible is not consistently literally true, it's not true at all and hence not the Word of God."

ELCA Lutherans take a "middle road" between the ditches, holding that the Bible is the written word of God through which God's intentions and instructions are revealed. The Constitution of the ELCA (2.02.c) expresses this understanding of the Bible: "The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world."

Discuss:

- How and why are both of the two "ditches" of biblical interpretation—fundamentalism or secularism—unhelpful or limiting to a disciple's walk of faith?
- Where and when have you seen evidence of people who are in either the ditch of fundamentalism or the ditch of secularism?
- In your study of Scripture, have you ever found yourself in one of the ditches that Jacobson describes? Can you share? How did (or do) you cope?



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- How do you understand the Lutheran “middle ground”? In what ways does the middle ground understanding free us to use our imagination, creativity, scholarship, reason and prayerful discernment to mine the deeper truths of the Bible? How does it open us to the inspiration of the Spirit?
- How has the Bible informed, enlightened and guided you?

EXERCISE 2: SOUR GRAPES

One of Aesop’s fables tells of a hungry fox who leaps into the air to reach some grapes hanging on a vine high above. After numerous unsuccessful attempts, the fox goes away scowling, “Those grapes were sour anyway!” (This story is the origin for our expression “sour grapes.”)

Now the stories of the Bible are *not* fables, but how we understand fables may give us insight into how Bible stories can reveal truth, even if their historical and scientific accuracy are not certain. Discuss:

- What characteristic of human behavior is illustrated by *The Fox and the Grapes*?
- In what ways does this fable tell the truth to people in all contexts and times?
- Did this really happen? Did someone actually observe a fox jumping unsuccessfully for grapes and then hear the fox complain that they were sour? Do foxes talk (or even eat grapes)?
- Does the story’s lack of historical or scientific accuracy take away from the truth it expresses? Why or why not?
- Though Bible stories are not fables, how might this understanding of a fable’s ability to communicate truths be helpful in approaching the Bible?

EXERCISE 3: THE DOME OF HEAVEN

The account of creation in Genesis 1 is beautiful in its imagery and scope. But does it hold up scientifically? And if not, what does that say about how we approach the Bible? Read Genesis 1, focusing first on verses 1-9. Discuss:

- Water is the dominant element present in the universe before God begins the work of creation. What do you make of that?
- What happens in verses 6-8? What is the purpose of the dome? What is meant in verse 7 by “waters above”? What is the name that God gives to the dome?
- What happens in verse 9?
- In this way, verses 1-9 describe earth as a flat expanse of land and water underneath an enormous upside-down punch bowl sky that keeps the waters of outer space at bay. Is this a scientifically accurate view of earth and heavens? Explain. What does science tell us about the shape of earth and the composition of outer space?



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- Is the intent of Genesis to impart scientific truths? If not, then what?
- As people of faith, how can we look at the story and discern theological truths?
- What truths does Genesis 1 reveal about the origins of our planet, the sky and all of creation?

EXERCISE 4: ADAM AND EVE

Read Genesis 2 and ponder: Was there really an actual humanoid creature, the very first one, named Adam? And did God really form Eve from one of Adam's ribs? Some faithful Christians believe that yes, Adam and Eve were historical figures created by God and put in the Garden of Eden. Others believe that the story, while not historically true, nonetheless conveys deep meaning about God's relationship to human beings as creator. What do you think? Discuss:

- From what substance was Adam created? Scientifically speaking, don't our bodies consist of earth elements?
- Are we simply earth elements? What distinguishes Adam from just so much earthly stuff? What makes Adam come alive?
- In what way do we, all human beings, have the breath of God in us? What theological truth does the passage reveal?
- How does the Genesis passage describe and explain the complementary nature of men and women?
- Whether Adam and Eve were historical human beings, does that change the theological truths that the passage reveals?
- What does Genesis 2 say about the nature of human beings and our relationship to God? How do those teachings inform, inspire, ennoble and enrich our self-understanding as people of faith?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Share with the study group: What are your two favorite Bible stories? Why are they your favorites? How do they help you understand your relationship with God? How do they reveal God's love and intention for your life?
- The Bible is not a single book but a collection of books that includes stories, history, theology, poetry and wisdom. Moreover, the Bible's books were written and collected over a span of hundreds of years. As a person of faith, how do you make sense of the Bible's varied perspectives and voices? How does the Bible speak to you?
- Our common modern understanding of truth holds that things are false (or at least suspect) unless they can be proven historically or scientifically. How is this understanding not helpful in our study of the Bible? What is the difference between a theological truth and a historical or scientific truth? How does the Bible give us theological truths?

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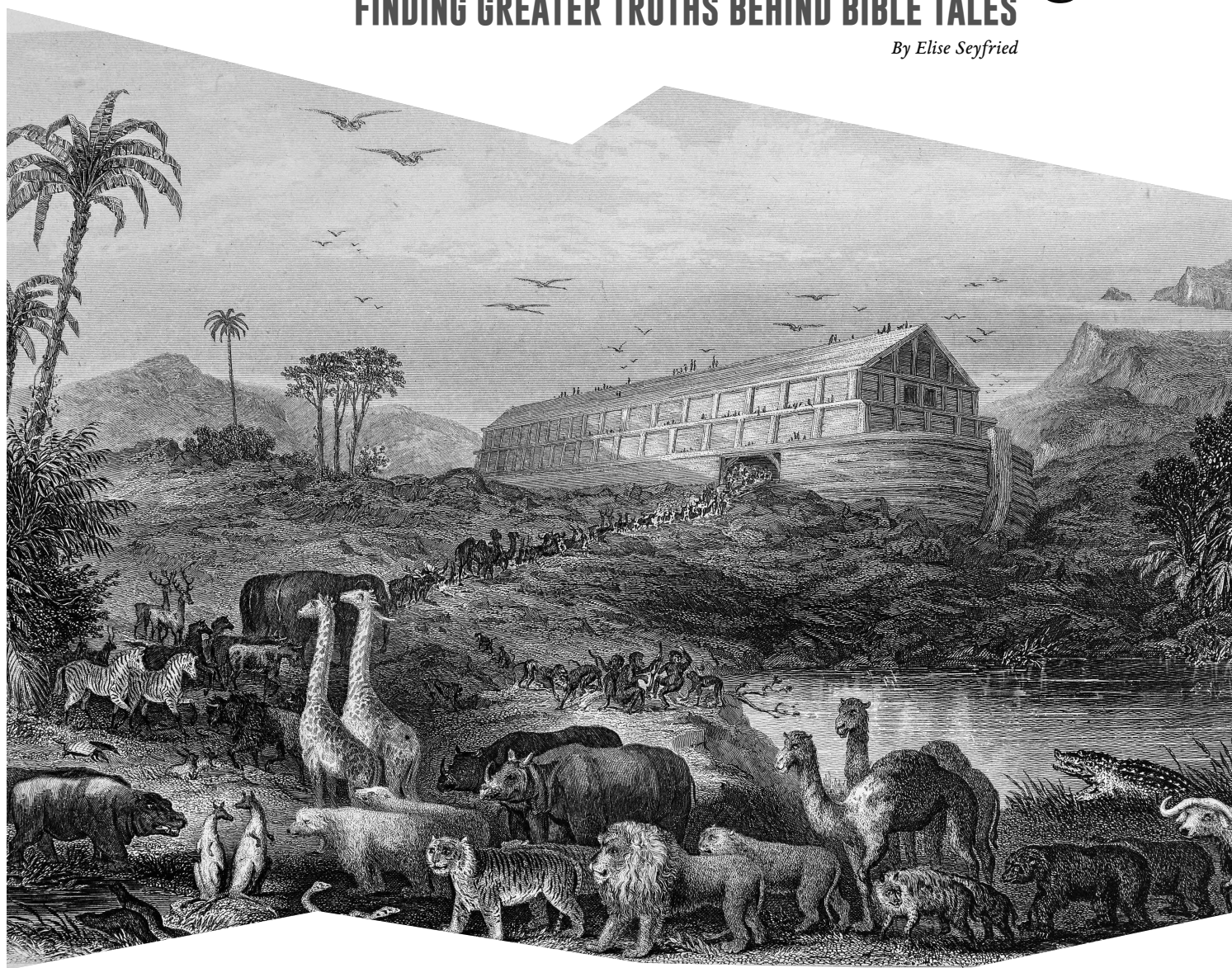
- Jesus said the greatest commandment is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). Might this also inform how we best encounter the Bible—with all our heart, soul and mind? What limitations might arise if we encounter the Bible with *only* our mind? *Only* our heart? *Only* our soul? How do these three gifts—mind, heart and soul—work together to complement and strengthen our appreciation for Scripture and wise discernment of how God wants us to live?
- Are you comfortable with the ELCA Lutheran “middle road” between biblical literalism on one side and secular rejection of the Bible on the other? Where do you position yourself? Has your understanding of the Bible’s truth and how it is true changed as you matured in the faith? Explain. How would you like to grow in faith? How can the Bible help you achieve that growth?
- The Bible is a complex book, and the different ways that Christians look at it is sometimes a source of controversy and conflict. How should the Bible be taught in order to help people use it as a tool of spiritual growth? What would you like to learn about the Bible? What questions do you have? How can your congregation help you (and others) deepen faith through the Bible?

MY TAKE

The Story Behind the Story

FINDING GREATER TRUTHS BEHIND BIBLE TALES

By Elise Seyfried



As a little girl, I loved mermaids. I recall being crushed to discover that they didn't exist in real life. I'd look at pictures of "The Little Mermaid," Edvard Eriksen's bronze statue based on the Hans Christian Andersen story, at Langelinie Pier in Copenhagen, feeling so sad that mermaids weren't truly swimming in the ocean.

Then I learned about the *haenyo*, the sea divers of Jeju Island, South Korea. These women are trained to dive down and harvest conch, abalone, sea urchins and other creatures. They can stay in the water up to six hours at a time and hold their breath for up to three minutes (they carry no oxygen with them). Mermaids! How wonderful! So they do exist—just in a different way than I'd imagined.

We might easily read certain Bible stories and write them off as fiction, especially as we grow older and "wiser." But I've come to believe that our real mission as people of faith is to find the greater truth of these tales.

Every ancient culture had its own creation story, for example. The Navajo told of four seas and of four clouds that joined together to form the first man and woman. Hawaiian natives believed that a cavern (male) and a moonless night (female) united to give birth to the creatures in the sea. The aborigine creation story involves the Father of Spirits awakening the Sun Mother; in Japan, a shoot springing up from the muddy sea entered the sky and became a god.

Do these stories sound strange and unbelievable to modern ears? Of course. Any stranger than the six days of creation in Genesis? All these tales are different, yet they share common elements: a creative force and an original event that set everything in motion. I can appreciate the beauty and poetry of these mythical details without taking them literally—and still worship the glorious Force that created the universe in ways I still don't understand.

God loves us

Many ancient civilizations had flood stories similar to the Genesis story of Noah's ark, but that doesn't take away from the core message: God loves us and will not let us be extinguished. God's word, God's promise of protection, can be trusted. So in a profound way that story is true.

The spectacular Exodus story of Moses parting the Red Sea is another for which modern information leads to a possible scientific explanation. Scientists in recent years have pointed to the "wind set-down effect,"

when a strong wind blowing for many hours can cause the sea level to drop. If this occurred in Exodus, it might have exposed an underwater ridge, which the Israelites might have crossed as if it were dry land. But what is the real message here? Is it not that we are delivered, saved, by listening to and following God (in this case God's messenger, Moses)?

Even the dramatic encounter between the little shepherd boy David and the giant Philistine Goliath may be misunderstood, says author Malcolm Gladwell. If it did actually occur, an over-armored hulk might easily have been bested by a nimble youth expertly using the slingshot and stones he used to protect his flock. Does this interpretation negate the moral of the story (with God on our side, we can defeat the forces of evil)? I think not.

Jesus turning water into wine and walking on the sea? Modern physicists hoping to prove or disprove the first story have written scholarly papers breaking down the chemical elements of both wine and H₂O. Critics of the second posit that Jesus might have been treading on a thin sheet of ice. To me both miracles beautifully symbolize Jesus' care for us, however they came to be.

Search for treasured lessons

The lived experiences of the writers of Scripture are far removed from ours in the scientifically advanced world of today. I would imagine that 2,000 years in the future, our efforts to understand the workings of the universe and the nature of God will seem quite primitive as well. I don't believe for a second, though, that the deep truths at the heart of the Bible will be any less relevant millennia from now.

What Bible stories do you question? Which have strained credulity and even been stumbling blocks to belief? Why not let go of a desire to force these old, old stories into a rigid mold they may never have been meant to fit? We shouldn't fear new information or let it shake our faith. Instead we can search for the treasured lessons within the Bible. Faith. Hope. Love. God's amazing grace and endless mercy.

Maybe, like my mermaids, our new understanding may be quite different from what we've always imagined. But maybe it will be infinitely more meaningful. †

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