

Re-Imagine the Truth of Scripture

Romans 15:8-12

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I like mashed potatoes or cream potatoes as I hear some refer to them. My mother made great mashed potatoes, and in my mind, that's the way they should taste. Now before I was born, in 1955 they started producing commercially instant mashed potatoes, who are they fooling? I didn't have these at 840 Delta Street that was anathema to our family. At some point, of course, someone served me instant potatoes, fortunately not Joann, she is solidly in the original-real potato family. But those others I knew immediately they were not the real thing when I tasted them, I was terribly disappointed, but I am a southern gentleman, so I said nothing and washed down the lump of processed whatever with some southern tea.

This little experiment was only called mashed potatoes, when you dehydrate something and months later add water or milk this is something entirely different than real-crushed- with- the- peel- on- mashed- potatoes. The only thing they shared in common was the same name; they had gutted the what made mashed potatoes so wonderful, mashed potatoes.

So after I got over this trauma, someone asked me if I wanted gravy on my mashed potatoes. Which I understand is quite common, but in our house, we didn't put gravy on mashed potatoes. I don't know why we put it on everything else. But anyway, I did not like the sound of that, it sounded like the instant potato issue all over again, and so I was hesitant. Jo Ann assured me that it wasn't as bad as I thought; she said to think of it like cheese on a hamburger, sure the hamburger is good but doesn't the cheese make it better. Can't argue with that logic, so I tried it, and she was correct. The gravy didn't take away from the mashed potato; it enhanced it.

There is no history that I can find on when cheese and garlic mashed potatoes originated, but for me, it was in the 90's that someone served me cheese and garlic mashed potatoes. When I first heard this, you can imagine my reaction. "Why are they messing with a good thing." Leave the mashed potatoes alone; you cannot improve perfection. Of course, Jo Ann reminded me that I said the same thing before I tried gravy on them. I argued that this was going too far. Due to peer pressure and other forces, I gave the cheesy garlic mashed potatoes a try, and I loved them.

Now I'm no foody like Sam, but the other day I was listening to a podcast from an economist from George Mason. He and his panel were discussing how businesses adapt to the changing landscape. One of the guests referenced how restaurants in the 1990's began to go beyond what could be fixed at home. He said it this way, "restaurants began to reimagine our dinner table." That's it. Garlic Chesy potatoes did not get rid of the classic, they did not throw out all that is holy, but they did re-imagine the mashed potato.

With this concept or idea of reimagining, how would it look to reimagine how we hear the Bible. The divine commands to commit genocide found in the Old Testament are some of the most difficult and disturbing parts of scripture. Consider God's decree against the Amalekites: "Totally destroy everything ... Do not spare them; put to death ... children and infants" (1 Samuel 15:2–3). Such passages have been used repeatedly to justify bloodshed in the name of God, beginning with the Crusades and continuing right up through U.S. history, where texts were used in sermons to justify the slaughter of American Indians. We look harshly at Islamic text that justifies killing in God's name. Should we not also reconsider biblical violence? In seeking to defend the Bible, many well-meaning commentators have become inadvertent advocates for these atrocities. But do we need to defend and justify violence in God's name to remain faithful to scripture? Is that what God desires of us? I'd like to propose that there is another way—a way found in learning to read our Bibles as the apostle Paul read his. Our re-imagining is a returning to the way the apostles read scripture. I'll admit it is such an old way to read scripture it may appear to be a new way. But it is not new; it has just been forgotten.

To understand how Paul read scripture, it is important to first understand his conversion to Christ, which Pauline scholar James Dunn describes as a conversion from a version of religion characterized by "zealous and violent hostility." In other words, Paul did not see himself as rejecting Israel's scriptures, but rather as rejecting his former violent interpretation of them. While Paul could boast that his observance of the Torah was "faultless" (Philippians 3:6), at the same time he describes himself as "the worst of all sinners" and "a violent man" (1 Timothy 1:13, 15). He confesses painfully, "I do not even deserve to be called an apostle

because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Corinthians 15:9). In other words, Paul’s great sin, as he came to see it, had been participating in what he understood as religiously justified acts of violence motivated by religious zeal. But now Paul was reading scripture in light of God’s walking epistle named Jesus. Paul was trading in a violent expression of faith. Paul after meeting Jesus could no longer hear Scripture as a call to violence, no matter what was recorded. Instead, he was pressing on toward the calling of following Jesus now, regarded as the prince of peace. Because of Christ, Paul had to reimagine a new way to be faithful to God.

His conversion included a conversion away from the religiously justified violence he had formally embraced. Paul’s conversion was a recognition that his former embrace of violence in God’s name was not, in fact, an act of faithfulness, but a grave sin. Before his conversion, Paul had read his Bible and concluded that he should commit violence in God’s name. After his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul ultimately reassessed how to understand scripture, leading him to a radically different understanding.

In Romans 15:8-12, for example, Paul quotes several Old Testament passages to illustrate how Gentiles “may glorify God for his mercy” because of the gospel (verse 9). Highly significant is what Paul omits from these passages:

The struck through words are in the original text Paul is using from Psalms and Deuteronomy, but they are omitted when he quotes the text in Romans. Paul has removed the references to violence against Gentiles and re-imagined these passages to instead declare God’s mercy in Christ for Gentiles.

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: ~~"I destroyed my foes. They cried for help, but there was no one to save them—to the LORD, but he did not answer ... He is the God who avenges me, who puts the Gentiles under me ... Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name."~~ [quoting Psalm 18:41–49] Again, it says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people, ~~for he will avenge the blood of his servants; he will take vengeance on his enemies and make atonement for his land and people.~~" [Deuteronomy 32:43]

Paul refuses to pass on this violent understanding of God. Due to Christ, all our welcome, all rejoice, all glorify God. This constitutes a major redefinition of how salvation is conceived: Instead of salvation meaning God "delivering" the ancient Israelites from the hands of their enemies through military victory (as described in Psalm 18, above), Paul now understands salvation to mean the restoration and salvation of people in Christ, including those same "enemy" Gentiles.

This is only one example of how Paul re-imagined scripture as less violent and more welcoming, or how he updated the material in light of Christ.

But not everyone wants to read scripture in light of Jesus. Consider Pope Urban II using scripture and a theology of "God will deliver us from his enemies" called Christians to take back Jerusalem from Muslims. On their way to the Holy Land, the Christian soldiers killed Jews, thousands of them in the name of God. Then they did the same to Muslims. Even Paul did not believe God to be vengeful or to be a warrior God. It's not that the scripture is wrong—it's that our understanding

of it is short-sighted, re-affirming our wishes, not God's. If we read scripture and it continues to agree with us, then maybe we are reading it wrong.

The problem is in our ears. If we hear scripture confirming our hopes and desires then maybe we are not hearing God, but an echo of our self. If you are considering an action that is not the loving thing to do or one that does not treat others as you want to be treated, chances are this is not God's direction either. It's likely our theology disguised as God's voice.

Paul provided us a new way to hear scripture, yet so many reject it. Preferring to ignore the revelation, light, and grace of Jesus because it does not coincide with our desires for vengeance to be delivered to others. You can bet God is going to always be against greed, hate, and fear. So if you read scripture and you think it is encouraging any of the above, please shut your Bible.

I propose we also study our Bible as "an inspired library" where "stories quarrel with stories" and thus we witness debate, evolution, and reinterpretation in Scripture itself. We see books with opposing views, engaged in moral arguments with each other. So what I would want to point out here is, it is the debate that is inspired. What is inspired is the vigorous questioning and debate we can observe in Scripture of humanity struggling to figure out who God is and what faithfulness looks like. The questioning is inspired, the dialog is inspired.

Here contradictions are not mistakes. They are intended. After all, that's what a disagreement looks like. If there's a debate and someone objected, "but what this one person says contradicts what the other one did" you'd answer "Of course. That's what a debate is." The Old Testament is a catalog of debate, a record of opposing perspectives. So we find in it one story upholding interracial marriage

which maintains that a foreign woman can be good and moral and that Yahweh will recognize her faithfulness and "shelter her under his wing" (the book of Ruth), and along side of that we find other stories that instead maintain that all foreign women are immoral and corrupting and command the Israelite men to cast their foreign wives along with their children into the night (Ezra & Nehemiah).

Now since Ruth contradicts Ezra & Nehemiah, we can't say that the Bible says it and that settles it. The scripture says two things; we get the great privilege of taking each seriously and hearing each in the light of Christ.

Now, if you are not aware of the fact that the Bible contains these opposing perspectives, and instead expect it to all fit together -- free from contradiction -- you will be confused. To make the puzzle fit people go through all sorts of mental gymnastics trying to harmonize it all. The library of faith may have books that provide opposing ideas, but that is the beauty of a library. ---But once we recognize scripture is a choir, not a solo, the scripture makes sense. As we understand scripture as a library of people speaking to and for God and to each other then we can hear it better.

Scripture is the distillation of a conversation with the Divine. We can arrive at our opinions if we like without the aid of scripture. We can use a bestseller or a news program, or a religious book to inform and guide our thoughts. When we do this we will not be challenged; we will put the book on a shelf and confirm that we now have the truth. But with scripture, there is a lot more tossing and turning. Ancient books rarely confirm the insights from more modern sources. Ancient books, like our scripture, confront our logic, our status quo. Remarkable it speaks to the issues of our day louder than today's headlines. How valued should life be?

How much should a CEO be paid? Is it enough to protect children before they are born or should they be protected after they are born? Should the earth be protected or used?

The big picture here is scripture has many voices which present different and opposing views. The writer of Genesis includes two creation stories. Chapter 1 and chapter 2. The writer or the editor feels no need to remove either. They both are inspired, let the people read both, find inspiration in both, neither is right or wrong, yet both are a snapshot telling us something about the Almighty. Again there are many voices which present different and opposing views. Scripture is doing its job by presenting opposing perspectives for it calls us to make moral choices.

To re-imagine the way we read scripture and read it like Paul, we need to always compare the ancient words with the sacred Spirit, read it not being confounded by the contradictions but inspired by them, stop defending it and reimagine it as a library calling us into God's story.