

The Bible: Myth or History?

From the book *Yes or No: Straight Answers to Tough Questions about Christianity*, by Peter Kreeft

Sal: Chris, I've got to ask you something personal.

Chris: Go ahead.

Sal: We're friends, aren't we? How do you know so much about God? Are you a theological brain?

Chris: No, not at all. I'm just an ordinary person.

Sal: You must have taken some high level religion courses somewhere.

Chris: No ...

Sal: Then you must have read hundreds of books.

Chris: No, Sal. Actually, what I know about God for sure comes from just one book. In fact, what the whole human race knows about God for sure, and not just as a matter of speculation and guesswork, comes from just one book.

Sal: The Bible, you mean?

Chris: Yes.

Sal: You really believe that one book gives you all the facts about God?

Chris: All the facts? Of course not. How could we ever have all the facts about the Infinite One? None of us can have complete knowledge of God, any more than a clam could have complete knowledge of us. Less so, in fact, because the difference between us and clams is only finite, but the difference between us and God is infinite.

Sal: Some facts, then?

Chris: Yes, what he told us.

Sal: So you think you've got some hard facts there in the Bible, eh?

Chris: I don't know what you mean by "hard facts."

Sal: Like the stuff science gives us.

Chris: No. Science measures things. We can't measure God.

Sal: So it's just myth, then.

Chris: No, it's truth.

Sal: You mean you really think God sits up there in the sky on a golden throne and has a strong right hand, and gets angry?

Chris: No. That's poetic language. But you can tell the truth in poetic language, you know. God really is exalted — though not physically, in space, in the sky. God really does rule the universe, though not from a physical golden throne. God really does have all power, though he doesn't have the same kind of strength as Muhammad Ali had in his right hand. And God really does want us to do good and not evil, though he doesn't get hysterical and red in the face.

Sal: So it's just symbolism.

Chris: But true symbolism. Not just a made-up story, like Santa Claus.

Sal: So you admit the whole Bible is poetic symbolism, not literal history.

Chris: No, I didn't say that. I said that the language it uses to describe God has to be symbolic. God can't be described literally because we can't see him. He doesn't have a physical body. But there are a lot of things in the Bible that are described literally -things we can see.

Sal: How can you tell what parts of the Bible to interpret symbolically and what parts to interpret literally? Isn't it just your personal preference?

Chris: No, there's an objective standard.

Sal: Well, what is it?

Chris: It's quite simple, really. Language about visible things is meant literally, language about invisible things is meant symbolically.

Sal: So the story of the creation of the world in Genesis is meant literally? It is about visible things, the universe.

Chris: But before the creation of Adam and Eve there was no human eye around to see it. So the account isn't an eyewitness account. It's true, but not literal. The "6 days" of creation, for instance, don't have to be 24 hour days.

Sal: And the last book in the Bible, the book of Revelation — all that stuff about the end of the world, horses and burning mountains going through the sky and angels blowing trumpets — that's not literal either, right?

Chris: Right. That's symbolism. But it's true. It'll happen, just as the creation happened.

Sal: But it's not literal because nobody's there to see it yet. It's future.

Chris: Well, prophecies of the future can be literal. You could predict something literally. Some passages in the Bible do. For instance, the Old Testament predicts dozens of specific details about the Messiah that happened, literally, to Jesus, like being sold for 30 pieces of silver, and having his clothes gambled for.

Sal: I guess I'm really concerned with whether you interpret the miracle stories literally or not.

Chris: If they're meant literally, yes.

Sal: Like Noah's flood and the ten plagues in Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea? And all Jesus' miracles? And the literal Resurrection?

Chris: Yes.

Sal: Well, I don't.

Chris: Don't what?

Sal: Believe the miracle stories. So I don't interpret them literally, I interpret them symbolically.

Chris: You're confused, Sal.

Sal: You mean you think I'm wrong. But I'm not confused. I know what I believe and what I don't believe.

Chris: No, I mean you're confused. You're confusing two different questions: interpretation and belief.

Sal: What do you mean?

Chris: The question of interpretation is: What did the writer mean? The question of belief is: Do you agree with him? The question of interpretation is: What does the Bible claim to be true? The question of belief is: What do you believe really is true?

Sal: Well, I interpret the Bible according to my beliefs.

Chris: But that's your confusion. Suppose I read a speech by Hitler that said we should create a super-race of Germans and kill all the Jews. Suppose I didn't believe that, so I interpreted the speech according to my beliefs and I said that what the speech really meant was that all races were equal and we should love one another. Do you see how I would be confused?

Sal: Not about race, or love.

Chris: But about what Hitler meant.

Sal: Oh. Yes. I see. But wouldn't it be good to improve on such a terrible speech?

Chris: If you want to make a speech yourself, yes. If you want to choose what to believe in, yes. But if you want to know what Hitler meant, no. That's your confusion. You think the Bible's stories of miracles are false. Why not just say so, clearly? The miracle stories are either lies or true history. They're not myth. They're not meant mythically, or poetically, or symbolically.

Sal: But I think they are. What could be more poetic and symbolic than life coming out of death — Jesus' Resurrection is just like spring. And Moses' crossing the Red Sea is a perfect symbol for overcoming death, or any obstacle. There are all sorts of poetic, symbolic meanings in the miracles.

Chris: I agree. But that doesn't mean they aren't literal too. They're signs. But if a sign isn't really there — if there's no literal piece of wood on a pole — then it can't symbolize anything, can it? So if Moses didn't really cross the Red Sea, it's not a real sign of anything. I believe the miracles are signs and symbols, all right. But I also believe they really happened. They're not just stories, myths. You think that's all they are, right?

Sal: Right.

Chris: So you agree with the demythologizers.

Sal: What's that?

Chris: The word was made popular by a German theologian named Rudolf Bultmann. It means that the miracle stories are only myths, and that we should believe the rest of the Bible, but not the myths. A lot of theologians believe that. Many rabbis and priests and ministers do too. Some writers of catechism textbooks too.

Sal: So I'm in good company.

Chris: No, in numerous company. Truth isn't found by counting noses. I'd rather agree with God even if only a few human beings agreed with me, than agree with millions of humans but disagree with God.

Sal: Well, doesn't the clergy teach demythologizing? You said a lot of rabbis and ministers and priests believe it. Are they heretics?

Chris: Technically, yes. If they disagree with essential teachings of the Bible. But the word heretic isn't used much any more.

Sal: I'm glad to hear that. Because I guess I'm a heretic. I think for myself I don't just swallow whatever line the Church

gives me.

Chris: Then you have your reasons for disagreeing?

Sal: Certainly.

Chris: I think you can guess what my next question is going to be.

Sal: We went over those reasons in that conversation we had about miracles.

Chris: Yes. You see, everything is connected. If there's no supernatural God with the power to work miracles, then miracles can't happen. If miracles can't happen, then Christ didn't really rise from the dead. If Christ didn't really rise from the dead, the story is only a myth, and the demythologizers are right. (Though they're still confusing the two questions of interpretation and belief; they should say the story is a lie, not a myth.) Do you have any other reasons, any new reasons for being a demythologizer of the Bible?

Sal: Yes, I do. I've been reading some books about this, and I think I've found at least four good reasons for being skeptical about the Bible.

Chris: Go ahead. What are they?

Sal: For one thing, there's what they call "form criticism". That means you should interpret a text not absolutely but relative to its literary form. If the form is poetry or myth or parable, you just don't take the story literally.

Chris: That's a good principle. So apply it to eyewitness descriptions too, and historical narratives, and interpret them literally, just as you interpret symbolism symbolically. The miracle stories have the form of history, not myth.

Sal: No they don't. And that's my second point: the resemblances between the Bible's miracle stories and myth. They're both full of magic. And things like magic numbers: ten plagues, forty days of fasting, three days in the tomb.

Chris: Do you mean to say no one ever really fasts forty days, and plagues can really come in any number but ten? Or that if Jesus had spent four days in the tomb you'd be more likely to believe it?

Sal: Well, no. But mustn't we distinguish two different questions, the question of belief and the question of history? That's my third point. Whether Moses really crossed the Red Sea or not is not important; that's the question of history. The important thing is whether or not God was there; the point of the Bible is religion, not history.

Chris: But the Bible's religion depends on history. Its God works in history. Your distinction between history and religion fits Oriental religions, but not Western religions. It's not important whether Buddha ever really lived; the only important thing is meditation and practicing Buddha's way. But Christianity is different: it's about Christ. If he never lived, or never died and rose again, then Christianity is simply a lie. Aren't you honest enough to call it that, if that's what you believe?

Sal: But it has so much good stuff to say about ethics and love and neighborliness.

Chris: Everybody knows that already, even though they don't practice it. Remember our first conversation? If ethics is all that Christianity means, forget it.

Sal: Why?

Chris: Because then it's just copying all the other good philosophies and moralities. It claims to be different; it claims to be history, "good news", Gospel: that God came to earth and died on the cross and rose again to save us from sin and death and Hell.

Sal: That's what you say it is.

Chris: That's simply what Christianity is, and always was from the beginning. If you don't believe that, you're not a Christian. Just agreeing with Jesus' ethics doesn't make you a Christian, any more than agreeing with Buddha's ethics makes you a Buddhist.

Sal: Well, I guess I'll have to say I'm not a Christian, then.

Chris: Good! That's the first step to becoming one.

Sal: But I still have another reason for not believing in the stories in the Bible. We haven't finished my four points, remember?

Chris: Sorry. What's the fourth one?

Sal: There are contradictions in the Bible, internal inconsistencies in the stories. They can't all be true.

Chris: Name one.

Sal: Did Jesus speak the Sermon on the Mount all at once, as Matthew reports, or on different occasions, as Luke reports?

Chris: Why couldn't it be both? In any case Matthew didn't say Jesus said it all at once, he just said Jesus said it.

Sal: Well, what about the sign on the cross? How many words were on it? Each of the four Gospels has a different version.

Chris: Why couldn't they all be right, but some are condensed, sort of Reader's Digest versions, so to speak? If the sign really read, "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews", then the account that says simply "Jesus, King of the Jews" isn't false, just condensed. The essential point is the same. Show me a single contradiction about an essential point of substance, not just a matter of verbal style.

Sal: Well, they're different, anyway.

Chris: The very fact that the four Gospels tell the same story in different ways is strong evidence that the story is true — like four witnesses in court telling the story in four different ways. If they agreed word for word, you'd think they had made it up and collaborated beforehand. The differences don't amount to contradictions. And the four Gospels agree remarkably — more so, much more so, than any other set of ancient documents about any other ancient event.

Sal: But an event so long ago — isn't it likely that the telling of it got garbled, like the party game where you sit in a circle and tell a message around? — by the time it gets to the tenth person it's a completely different message.

Chris: That's why the Church wrote it down in the Bible, and preserved this book with infinite care.

Sal: Well, even so, no matter how carefully the book is preserved, it's just a book. Written by human beings. Their ideas about God.

Chris: That's the essential question about the Bible: Is it our ideas about God or is it God's ideas about us? Is it God's Word to us or our words about God?

Sal: Yes, that's the essential question all right. It's like the question about God: Did he create us in his image or do we create him in our image?

Chris: Yes, and that's like the essential question about the Christian story too: Is it the story of our search for God or the story of God's search for us? Is it God coming down in Christ, the "one way" down, or is it us trying to get up to God, with Christ just one of the many human ways up, one of many manmade religions?

Sal: At least we've got the questions straight. And I see that all these questions are parts of one question: the question about the Bible being God's Word or ours, the question about God being Creator or created by us, the question about Christ being God's way down or our way up, and the question about the Christian religion being the one divine way or just one of many human ways. It all fits together.

Chris: Did I fail to answer any of your reasons for not believing the Bible?

Sal: Well, no, not really.

Chris: Then your reason for not believing it must be something else than what we've talked about. We've clarified the question, but not your real motive for answering it "no".

Sal: What do you think my real motive is? Are you going to psychoanalyze me?

Chris: No, but I have a good guess, and I can only ask you to honestly ask yourself whether this guess is accurate or not. You want to believe the demythologizers, right?

Sal: Right.

Chris: Why? Because you don't believe in miracles, right?

Sal: Right.

Chris: And why don't you believe in miracles? Because if miracles happen, then Christ really did rise from the dead, and then he is not just a human ideal but he is really God — everyone's God, your God too, Sal. Then he has claims on your soul and on your life, right here and now. Then you have to face him and repent, turn around, beg forgiveness, let him be your Lord rather than you being your own lord. That's not an easy or comfortable thing to do, and I'm not trying to put you down for not doing it. I'm just trying to help you be honest with yourself and know yourself. Only you can answer the question: Is that really your motive for not believing? The reason I suspect it is, is because none of your arguments seems to stand up. The house of your beliefs doesn't stand on rational foundations. All your arguments can be answered. You just choose to believe there's no God, or no miracles, or no Resurrection, or no salvation.

Sal: Maybe I choose to believe that, maybe I don't. I just don't know.

Chris: That's being honest, to say that you don't know. Socrates said that's the beginning of wisdom.