

We all have guilty pleasures. Mine is cheesy martial arts movies—the cheesier the better. One of my favorites is an obscure flick titled *Circle of Iron*. In it, a seeker named Cord meets a blind martial arts master and becomes his disciple, on the condition that he ask no questions until the master chooses to explain himself.

Cord's vow is soon tested: They cross a river on an old man's ferry—and upon landing, the master destroys the ferry, along with the old man's livelihood.

Next, mercenary soldiers chase Cord and the master through a farm, and in the process an old stone wall is knocked over. The master insists that they stop to repair the wall, even as the mercenaries pursue.

After they escape, the master visits a fisherman, his wife and their son, a beautiful young boy. The master smashes the boy across the nose, breaking it and mutilating his face.

Cord, convinced by now that his master is crazy, demands an explanation: Why is he so capricious, so senseless, so brutal?

The master replies that he heard the mercenaries coming, so he destroyed the ferry to keep them from stealing it, crossing the river and murdering the old man and his wife.

He stopped to repair the wall because there was a bag of coins hidden inside, the life savings of the widow who owned the farm. If the mercenaries had seen it, they would have stolen it as well.

And the beautiful boy was already a tyrant in his family; he would have grown up to be worse. By freeing him from his own beauty, the master freed him, his family and the world from the boy's growing vanity and cruelty.

“But you're *blind!*” Cord protests. “How could you possibly know all this?”

Simple, says the master: He already knew the ferry owner, the widow on the farm and the fisherman's family, because he had visited the area before. Cord, the master says, is the one who is blind—blinded by what he sees.

“Shut Up,” He Explained

I enjoy *Circle of Iron* because watching Cord stumble along after his blind master reminds me of the disciples following Jesus.

Have you ever thought of how frustrating and confusing the disciples' lives must have been? Jesus often went out of the way to suppress the truth about himself (Matthew 8:4; 17:9).

At times he seemed arbitrary, even cruel: When one of his best friends lay dying, he deliberately waited until he was two days too late (John 11:6); when a woman begged him for help, he at first ignored her, then helped her only after a few insults (Matthew 15:22-28).

In retrospect, or on those rare occasions when Jesus explained himself, everything he did made beautiful sense (John 12:16; 13:7; 16:18-31). But more often than not, he ignored direct questions or answered with a curt “None of your business” (Mark 13:4,32; Acts 1:7).

20/20 Hindsight

In many ways, we are caught in the same dilemma as the disciples: We follow a God of mystery who demands our obedience and trust, yet rarely explains himself. We have an obvious advantage, though: The disciples had to live through the story; we can flip ahead to the end.

Why, then, do we persist in making the same mistake they did? We approach Scripture the way the disciples communicated with Jesus: We get frustrated when the answers we want refuse to present themselves in black and white. Worse, we often misunderstand or distort the Word, in just the same way that the disciples so often misunderstood Jesus (Matthew 16:5-7).

We need to learn to appreciate a bigger picture of God, one painted with broad strokes on a very large canvas. A picture with many colors other than black and white, a tapestry with rich variety but soft focus.

by Greg Hartman

The Bible's testimony to us is historical, the account of a relationship between a living God and his people. It does not offer empirical evidence; it is neither a syllogism nor a formal proof. Even as history, the Bible is problematic for Westerners; it frequently deviates from any coherent chronology. As a book of theology it is equally confusing. It is not systematic; its most important doctrines are scattered about and buried beneath symbols so bizarre that professionals argue about their meaning to this day. The answers to some questions are tantalizingly, maddeningly hinted at; others simply are not there.

Soft Focus

Yet we persist in trying to force the Bible to do things it was never intended to do. We try to wrest empirical evidence from the Bible; we ignore its gray areas and pretend it gives us black-and-white answers. Worst of all, we ignore Scripture's clear warning not to go beyond what is written (1 Corinthians 4:6).

Our job, though, is to *listen* to Scripture—not interrogate it (John 5:39-40).

We need to learn to appreciate a bigger picture of God, one painted with broad strokes on a very large canvas. A picture with many colors other than black and white, a tapestry with rich variety but soft focus.

In short, we need less dogma and more fuzzy thinking.

Where Did We Come From?

One area in which pursuit of nonexistent dogmatic data hurts Christians' credibility is in the creation/evolution debate. I don't mean creation science—qualified people are pursuing that. I speak rather of the fruitless attempt to recruit the Bible as a witness in the debate.

The Bible states simply that God created the heavens and the Earth; it makes no attempt to prove it. Yet time and again we misuse Scripture in an attempt to find just that sort of proof.

In 1654, Archbishop James

You'll Understand When You're Older...Maybe

Kenneth Boa's excellent book, *God, I Don't Understand* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1975) examines the mysteries of God (1 Timothy 3:16), or *antinomies*.

An antinomy is a contradiction between two laws, or opposition between principles that are equally necessary and/or reasonable.

In simpler terms, an antinomy is a paradox. Scriptural antinomies are conflicting biblical descriptions of the nature and character of God. Boa's book studies several, including:

- **The hypostatic union:** How can Jesus be both human and divine?
- **The Trinity:** How can God be three distinct persons, yet one God?
- **Theodicy:** How can a loving, holy God allow so much sin and suffering in the universe he created?
- **Divine sovereignty vs. human responsibility:** How can God legitimately hold us accountable for sin when he is sovereign over all creation?
- **Omnipresence vs. localization:** How can God be everywhere, yet seated in heaven? How can he live in the heart of every believer all at the same time? How could Jesus come to earth and move from place to place when he created the universe?

Boa raises an interesting point: It's not enough to acknowledge that we can't understand certain things about God. Boa insists that Scripture communicates a clear "hands off!" on these issues, warning us not to attempt to answer certain questions about him—for in doing so we will certainly fall into error.

If we try to shoehorn an infinite God into a finite frame, Boa says, we will inevitably wind up with a damaged, distorted image. Boa notes that every biblical cult's errors can be traced to the attempt to define or discard an antinomy: The Gnostic heresy attempted to answer the mystery of the hypostatic union; Jehovah's Witnesses insist the Trinity is not reasonable or logical; Christian Science explains away the problem of sin and suffering.

Boa notes that most of the early creeds were not only in response to just such heresies—they also refused to define the very terms they claimed the heretics had gotten wrong. Instead, they described boundaries, beyond which lay error and somewhere within which was the truth. In other words, they did not claim to know the right answers—only the wrong answers.

Will we ever know the full truth behind such questions? Perhaps. The Bible does say we will gain in knowledge and understanding when we reach glory (1 Corinthians 13:12). But we don't know if the answers are hidden behind Paul's "poor reflection," as he put it, or if some things about God are so wonderful and awesome that we will never be able to fully grasp them—not even in heaven.

Ussher's *Annales Veteri Novi Testamenti* announced that God created the Earth in 4004 B.C., a figure Ussher derived by adding up the years in biblical genealogies.

Scholars note, however, that biblical genealogies serve to remind the reader of important historical events and people—not to provide a chronology or even an unbroken list of generations past. Indeed, in some genealogies the people are

listed not by birth order, but in order of importance. In others, years are clearly rounded off, or whole generations and dynasties collapsed or skipped to allow the genealogy to be rearranged into a convenient mnemonic device.¹

Does this mean the Bible's genealogies are incomplete or flawed? Not at all. Only when we misunderstand or misuse them do they lead us into error.

Scientists and theologians debate over whether Genesis' days are literal 24-hour periods or "ages" of indeterminate length.

Science can explore the *how* and *when* of creation, but only Genesis tells us *Who* and *why*. There is therefore no point in trying to harmonize the two—they aren't even talking about the same things!

While I'm interested in the fruits of such research, I don't see the church's primary responsibility as winning anyone over to young-Earth creation science theory—our responsibility is to share the gospel. The debate is undeniably important, but it's peripheral.

And it would certainly not hurt us to swallow our pride and say "I don't know" rather than misuse Scripture.

Who Are We?

If you like provoking fights, start a discussion of Romans 5 in a Bible study group. Be sure to distribute the following talking points:

- Sin and death entered the world through Adam (v. 12).
- Therefore, death came to us all, because we all sinned (v. 12).
- Sin is not taken into account when there is no law (v. 13).
- But death reigned anyway from Adam until Moses, even over those who didn't actually break any commandments (v. 14).
- Even though we all sinned (v. 12), we were made sinners through Adam's trespass, yet we are condemned because of Adam's sin (v. 17-18).
- And don't forget that God gave us the Law so that sin would increase, but also so grace could *increase* even more (v. 20).
- But if you go around sinning just to experience grace, you're in big trouble (6:1).

Passages like this are why most professional theologians are bald. I said earlier that the Bible says nothing to contribute to the creation/evolution debate. When it comes to sin, free will and God's sovereignty, though, the Bible has plenty to say, and much of it seems quite contradictory.

Whose fault is "original" sin—

ours or Adam's? If children are not responsible for the sins of their fathers (Jeremiah 31:29-30), how can we be guilty for something Adam did thousands of years ago? Why did God bring the Law when he knew we could never keep it?

Many volumes have been written on these questions by people much smarter than me; I don't presume to answer them here. Suffice to say this:

We do well to pursue obedience in what we do understand from Scripture, accept by faith what we don't, and remember that not only is God not subject to our limited understanding, we can endanger ourselves if we pursue black-and-white answers to God's mysteries (see "You'll Understand When You're Older—Maybe," page 26).

Where Are We Going?

It has been well said that an expert is someone who has read one book on a subject. This certainly held true for me when I enrolled in Bible college: I already knew everything. I was just attending to get my diploma. I'd read Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, so I had my eschatology nailed, along with all the rest of my theology.

By the time I graduated, though, I realized I knew almost nothing about eschatology—or anything else.

The Late Great Planet Earth is written with a premillennial approach to the Bible. Unlike my eschatology professor, Lindsey does not mention other major interpretative models. He also ignores those who think the entire concept of the Rapture isn't scriptural at all.

Instead, Lindsey presents his interpretation as the *only* message of Scripture, rather than explain why his interpretation should be considered most accurate.

Far too many writers, teachers and preachers make the same mistake. Furthermore, very few take a step back for a broader look at the Bible's apocalyptic literature: What is it for? How does God want us to use it?

Jesus himself tells us how to respond to end-times prophecy: To

be on our guard; to avoid going astray in the face of mounting deception; to take heart and increase our faith, seeing as history unfolds that he holds it in his hand, and knowing that although we may suffer in this world, He has overcome it (John 14:29; 16:1,33).²

Jesus practically rubbed the disciples' noses in the fact that only God knows the time and order of these events (Mark 13:4,32; Acts 1:7). Why, then, does the church persist in producing oceans of eschatological charts, calendars and timelines?

Completing the Circle

At the end of *Circle of Iron*, an enlightened Cord meets his former master again; they laugh together, not only over Cord's former impatience and immaturity, but also for joy at the enlightenment they now share.

Unlike Cord, we will never become equals with our own Master. Yet I can't help thinking that when we arrive in glory, we'll be shaking our heads in rueful amusement at our foolish attempts to define an infinite Lord in our finite terms. □

¹ Kenneth A. Kitchen. *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1966), p. 38. Cf. J. N. Oswalt. "Chronology of the Old Testament." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised edition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), I, p. 674.

² Vanderkam, James C.; Adler, William. *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity* (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum Ad Novum Testamentum. Sec 3, Jewish Traditions in Early Christianity), Vol. 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1997), p. 3.

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Living in the End Times?

Many believe we are—and that the book of Revelation tells us exactly when and what to expect. But does it? Find out what the book of Revelation *really* says in Greg Albrecht's new book, *Revelation Revolution*—to be released this fall. Watch *The Plain Truth* for more details!