



“The Bible clearly says...”

by Rob Grayson

academic study of theology and the accompanying theological debate that has persisted through twenty centuries and shows little sign of abating even today.

Second, you can make the Bible stand up and dance a jig if you want to. In other words, the Bible contains enough seemingly contradictory statements that you can pluck out a verse here and there and use it to support pretty much any position you want to. For example, there’s no shortage of passages in the Old Testament that could be used to support the argument, “The Bible clearly says that ethnic cleansing is perfectly acceptable.” Need I say more?

Third, and perhaps most important, no text says anything without *some* degree of ambiguity. Whether we’re aware of it or not, we all interpret every single thing we read. Let me try to explain.

Suppose you open up a learn-to-read book for children, and read the first sentence: “The cat sat on the mat.” Simple enough at first reading, right? Not too much ambiguity here, is there?

Well...

What we can say with certainty after reading this sentence is that a cat sat on a mat. To conclude anything more than that requires interpretation. For example, we are told nothing about the color, gender, age or size of the cat. Similarly, the size, type, material and placement of the mat are left to our imagination. And did the cat just sit on the mat once, and if so, for how long? Or was it in the habit of doing so? Why did it sit there? And when did all of this feline mat occupation occur?

To answer any of these questions requires us to *interpret* the text. I’m sure most people would be able to grasp this without much difficulty. What’s harder to see is that we interpret all the time without even being aware that we’re doing it.

When you read the sentence “The cat sat on the mat,” chances are that you immediately form a mental image of a cat on a mat. The cat you imagine will be of a certain size, age, gender, color and disposition, and the mat will be in a certain more or less specific location. A number of factors determine how you imagine the scene, including but not limited to your personal

Over the past year or so, Facebook has become a place of wide-ranging theological discussion for me. Of course, as a medium for serious, in-depth discussion, it has its disadvantages and limitations; but thanks to others of like mind, I’ve found it to be predominantly a source of life and stimulation.

Being active in theological debate on Facebook has taught me a lot, especially about things like taking time to think before speaking, giving others the benefit of the doubt and working hard to communicate clearly and unambiguously. It’s also brought to my attention certain recurring arguments that many Christians regularly trot out in defense of whatever position they’re pushing, one of which I’d like to briefly highlight—and hopefully demolish.

If I had a dollar for every time in the last year that I’ve heard or seen someone say “But the Bible clearly says...” I’d be well on the way to funding a more generous pension for my later years.

I have a number of issues with arguments beginning “The Bible clearly says...”

First, it is not borne out by two thousand years of history. If the Bible *clearly* said anything much at all, surely the world would not now have some forty *thousand* Christian denominations, many of which claim to have the correct interpretation of Scripture. Similarly, if the Bible was anything like as clear as this statement claims, there would have been no need for the

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experience with and attitude toward cats, other books, pictures or TV shows in which you have seen cats sitting on mats, your favorite or least favorite types of cats and mats...and even the mood you happen to be in at the time.

You may feel that *a cat on a mat* is rather a simple example to use, but hopefully you can see the point I’m trying to make.

When we read any text, be it a novel, a newspaper, a blog post or the Bible, there’s a very small amount of information that is known and understood with absolute certainty. On the other hand, there’s a very large amount of information that is open to interpretation. It follows that our understanding of a text is based largely on our personal interpretation of that text.

As I’ve hinted already with my admittedly rather silly feline example, our interpretation of any given biblical text is shaped by many factors. These include, but are not limited to, age, socio-economic background, race, educational level, church background, personality type, personal experience, peer group influences and current life circumstances. All of these forces and more work together to form and guide our personal interpretation in ways that we are largely unaware of.

So when, in defense of your favorite theological hobby horse, you exclaim “But the Bible clearly says...” what you’re really saying is “But *my interpretation* of the Bible clearly says...!” To put it another way, it would be better to say, “For someone with my specific and

exact personal, socio-economic, political, emotional and religious history, and with the exact same personality type, memories and value system as me, the Bible *clearly* says....”

By now you hopefully realize that the only person who checks off all of those boxes is you. Your interpretation of the Bible is unique to you. It may coincide with the interpretation of lesser or greater numbers of other people, but ultimately it’s yours, shaped by your own unique set of formative influences.

It follows from all this (and my experience tends to bear this out) that people who routinely base their arguments on what the Bible “clearly” says often feel that they have a direct line to the Holy Spirit and have been given the one and only valid interpretation of Holy Scripture. To which my answer is, what about all the other good and holy men and women down through the centuries (many of whom have studied, meditated and

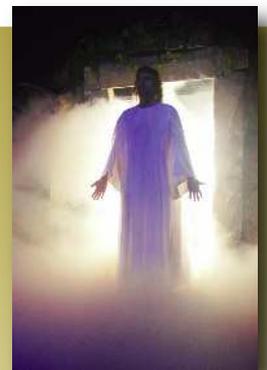
sacrificed much more than you or I in their quest to know God and understand the Bible) who have “received” an inspired interpretation that differs from yours?

In closing, then, let me issue a plea—if, in defending your particular theological understanding, you wish to draw on the Bible, please don’t preface your argument with “The Bible *clearly* says.” If you do, what you’re really saying is “I’m right and you’re wrong.” Instead, do me the courtesy of saying what you *think* the Bible means by what it says, and why you think what it says should be interpreted in that particular fashion. Perhaps then we can have a healthy conversation from which we might both learn something. □

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“Word of
God”
please
stand up!



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