



THE DANGER OF READING THE BIBLE LITERALLY

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Deuteronomy 1:1-2, 39-40; Matthew 23:23-24

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The two men met in a park on the Upper West Side of New York City. One of them, a young man named A.J. Jacobs, was wearing a white robe tinted only by the dirt that is so much a part of the air in that city. The other man, probably in his seventies, immediately inquired of A.J. why he was dressed so oddly. “I’m trying to live by the rules of the Bible,” the young man explained, “stoning adulterers” and that kind of thing. Speaking with a bit of defiant pride, the older man responded, “I’m an adulterer.” “You’re currently an adulterer?” A.J. asked, surprised and sensing a potential problem. “Yeah,” the older man continued, “You gonna stone me?” “If I could, yes,” A.J. said, evidencing a growing excitement, “That would be great for me!” The older man was not excited, “I’ll punch you in the face. I’ll send you to the cemetery,” he barked. As A.J. took some small pebbles out of a pocket hidden by his robe, he explained, “I wouldn’t stone you with big stones, just these little guys.” At that the older man lunged at A.J., grabbed one of the pebbles, and threw it into the young man’s face. Now A.J. was emboldened; he was free—the Old Testament commends an-eye-for-an-eye kind of retaliatory justice. So before the older man walked away, A.J. lightly tossed a small pebble against the man’s chest and fulfilled his obligation to obey the Bible literally.

Now, let me explain. A.J. Jacobs is a thoroughly secular Jew who describes himself as a person who is “Jewish in the same way the Olive Garden is an Italian restaurant.” A delightful and insightful young man, A.J. Jacobs is an agnostic spiritually and a writer for *Esquire* magazine professionally who decided to spend one whole year trying to obey the Bible literally, aspiring to living as “the ultimate fundamentalist.”

Now let me be clear, A.J. wanted to engage in this project as an experiment that would inform a book on the Bible that he wanted to write, and subsequently did. His intent, though, was, and is, no laughing matter. It is, in fact, the commitment, or obsession, of scores of people who are not experimenting with mixed motives but, following a singular focus, seriously attempting to obey the Bible literally so as to live a life that makes them pleasing and acceptable to God.

According to a recent Gallup poll, 33 % of the American people say they interpret the Bible literally; *Newsweek* put that number at 55%. More than most people know, a literal

interpretation of the Bible shapes American foreign policy, influences congressional votes on stem cell research, abortion, and education, and impacts individual's views on marriage, homosexuality, and even philosophies of child rearing.

Make no mistake about it, living a life that pleases God and exhibits devotion to God is a worthy goal, maybe the highest goal possible. But, here is the question: Does attempting to live by the Bible literally actually distract a person from living the kind of life that most pleases God?

No sooner had A.J. Jacobs embarked upon his quest than he ran into problems. Which version of the Bible should he use (there are 3000 versions of the whole Bible or part of the Bible in English)? The same words have different meanings in various translations. How can one obey the Bible literally not really knowing what the Bible says? A.J. discovered that in the mid-1800's literalists protested the use of anesthesia in child birth because it violated the Genesis statement that a woman should experience pain in childbearing. Eventually Jacobs decided to do what many before him have done—find the original intent of a passage and seek to be true to that. Soon, though, to his dismay, the author found that he could not do anything without breaking some biblical law. Most frustrating of all was the fact that often keeping one law required breaking another one. Literalism is fraught with problems.

Some laws were difficult, as you would expect, and many were outright problematic. Heeding the prohibition against wearing clothing made of mixed fibers (no wool and linen intertwined in the same garment, for example) led to endless challenges. Eventually, Jacobs asked what surely anyone of us would ask, “What does it matter? Why does God care if we wear clothes made of different fibers?” But he was committed to literal obedience and spent days having a robe made in conformity with the biblical command.

Soon this young author found that he was so busy obsessing over rules—many of which seemed insane—that he could not even think about what he was doing. Orthodox Jews follow a list of 613 rules. A.J. decided that he could live a year without boiling a young goat in the milk of its mother as forbidden in Exodus 23:19, but he saw a year without lying as terribly problematic. Though awkward for him and provocative in public, the author managed to wear a copy of the Ten Commandments tied to his forehead and another copy bound around his wrist as instructed by Exodus 13:9. He actually came to look forward to obeying the Bible's command to blow a trumpet on the first day of every month, why, I don't even own a trumpet and, after studying the Bible's 247 references to alcohol, he felt better than ever about drinking wine.

It did not take long for this intrepid biblical literalist to discover the kind of insane casuistry (or interpretation of the law and its application to a specific circumstance) that accompanies biblical literalism. For example, obedience to the commandment to rest on the Sabbath required familiarity with the 39 types of work that rabbis have determined must be avoided if one is to be able to claim to rest on a Sabbath. A faithful Sabbath observer cannot play Scrabble because that involves making words—a forbidden activity. *However*, a very smart rabbi figured out that you can play Deluxe Scrabble on the Sabbath because the squares on which the letters are printed have ridges on them sufficiently large enough to separate the letters when placed side by side so that they don't actually make words. How religious is that! Even players of Deluxe Scrabble,

though, have to pre-rip toilet paper before the Sabbath because on the Sabbath itself nothing can be torn—the Bible considers tearing as work.

Are you beginning to see a danger in literalism? If not, consider the fact that biblical literalists are obligated to engage in some activities that are anti-social and some that are unlawful.

Breaking a cow's neck at the scene of an unsolved murder as demanded by Deuteronomy 21:4 is not viewed as acceptable behavior today. Neither is killing a rebellious son or executing a neighbor for breaking the Sabbath, perjury, adultery, or witchcraft. I must tell you, though, that Christians known as Dominionists, a growing movement in this country, advocate the reinstatement of federal laws that require capital punishment for people guilty of all of these sins.

The Bible instructed A.J. to write words from the Bible on the door post of his apartment using the feather of a kosher bird like a goose or a turkey but, though there are 4,649 instructions on how to write the text that goes on a doorpost, A.J. could not write it at all because of the rules of the owner of his apartment. When it came to preparing for Passover, though, the writer risked a violation of his apartment-owner's rules and coated his door post with animal blood. This time protest came from his neighbors who could not stand the odor.

All too often, it is really difficult to be good. Admirably, A.J. sought to obey the biblical command to give away money. But, a man in line at Starbucks got really angry when he learned that A.J. had paid for his coffee. Then, when the rigid literalist decided simply to drop money on the street for someone else to pick up, a woman who saw A.J. drop some bills so vigorously tried to give the money back to him that he finally had to tell her the money was not his only to realize that he did not know which was worse—lying or failing to give away money.

With a good sense of humor the author pondered how to obey the Numbers 19 mandate for personal purification that required finding a red cow—one that was unblemished and had never plowed a field. According to this passage in the Bible, true spiritual cleanliness—would result from killing the cow, burning its body, mixing the ashes with water and then having someone holding hyssop sprinkle that potion on him. To his amazement A.J. discovered the massive search for breeding red cows that is going on in the world among biblical literalists. A major initiative of this nature is underway here by in Mississippi. Indeed, an alliance has developed between ultra-fundamentalist Christians and ultra-Orthodox Jews cooperating in an effort to breed red cows because both groups see this practice as essential for the arrival of the end times.

Alright, alright; enough; what's the point? Am I making fun of the Bible? No. Am I trying to diminish reverence for the Bible? No. As I have told you before, I have profound respect for the Bible and look to the Bible for guidance in my personal life and for the church. However, to follow the Bible responsibly requires interpreting the Bible responsibly—not literally, responsibly. It's the difference between becoming a legalist preoccupied with legalism and becoming a Christian filled with compassion.

Everything I have told you about A.J. is true. It's all recorded in his book entitled *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*. And, his experience is instructive, resonating with reality.

First, there is no such thing as a real biblical literalist, a person who consistently interprets the Bible literally. Everybody comes upon a passage, a principle, or a commandment, that they, of necessity, interpret rather than simply implement.

Second, the Bible was not meant to be taken literally. Different authors wrote different types of literature. To interpret poetry in the same manner as you interpret history is to do a grave injustice to the truth of the Bible. To take biblical metaphors as biblical facts is to ignore grammar and to compromise truth.

Likely the first beneficiaries of the Bible did not take it literally. They admired metaphors and laughed at similes. Likely, literalism emerged after the invention of the Gutenberg Press. Once people saw the words of the Bible on paper, they began to revere those words as printed and to take the words literally. Honestly, though, such a mistaken reverence led more to disobedience or the spirit of the Bible than to actual obedience to specific texts in the Bible.

I grew up among people who considered themselves biblical literalists. They made me promise never to attend a movie on a Sunday because they mistakenly associated Sunday with the Sabbath, which it is not, and demanded strict Sabbath observance but they never insisted that I denounce racial bigotry because, in their minds, that was a social issue involving an inferior race rather than a spiritual mandate elaborated in the Bible. Jesus called such people “hypocrites” and chided them for straining at gnats and swallowing camels—neglecting the weightier matters in the scriptures while stringently obeying less important concerns. An idiocy about righteousness must not be mistaken for a spirituality rich in grace and justice. We should never be able to blame the Bible for causing us to engage in judgmental, loveless, and graceless behavior. That is an abomination.

Should anything in the Bible be interpreted literally? Yes; at least that is my belief. Jesus’ command for us to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind merits literal obedience. After all, this is the way for us to be fully human in our own lives and to be responsible members of society. When Jesus said that we should love others as God loves us, he laid down a principle sufficient to change the world—if truly embraced and literally practiced.

Several weeks ago, I interviewed A.J. Jacobs. I found him deeply respectful of what he had experienced. Though still agnostic in many ways, A.J. was drawn to the ordered wisdom and organized counsel of the Bible. Like many other people, he liked the fact that the Bible gave him a pattern for life. In retrospect, A.J. found that even the strangest acts of obedience cultivated within him an appreciation for discipline. To my great fascination, he compared his year of attempting to live by the Bible literally with a not-so-good person who wears the mask of a saint and acts like a saint for so long that by the time the mask is removed and the person is totally honest about self-identity, the person has become somewhat saint-like.

Most important to me, I found in A.J. a freedom that would have been libertinism rather than liberty had he not been influenced by the discipline of the Bible. One day after the project was concluded, a situation arose in which A.J. felt like he wanted to pray. It surprised him and shocked his wife. He was no longer obligated to obey the rule to pray, rather sensitive to a desire for communion with transcendence. The literalist had become a realist. His life was no longer

about obeying the letter of commandments, rather about experiencing the wonder of communion.

Oh, go in search of a red cow if you like, but please know that real forgiveness and acceptance are gifts to be received from God never accomplishments predicated on our ability or goodness to earn them. Please remember that living biblically means avoiding a literalism that preempts attention to loving other people and building an inclusive community. Living biblically means living the way Jesus lived—sharing love, insisting on justice, extending grace, and walking humbly with God.

Allow the Bible itself to move you beyond literalism to a dynamic engagement with truth that enables you to experience the ecstatic joy derived from knowing that you are loved infinitely and feeling the assurance of having a home in which you are welcome immediately and in which you can abide in love forever. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, we are a bit confused. So many messages are coming at us with such rapidity and weighty authority that we hardly know to which ones we should pay attention. Frankly, God, many of the advertisements presented by image-makers and mind-shapers on Madison Avenue strike our fancy and woo our loyalty more than ancient texts handed down to us from places like Sinai and Jerusalem even if the latter come through contributors to the Bible. If driving the right car or using a particular deodorant will make us successful, why would we not choose that path over one that involves struggle, conscience, and discipline?

God, we pray for the gift of discernment lest we settle for too little in life, never experience the courage to change life, and fail to realize that the great commendations of your word point us to fulfillment not superficiality, to joy not ease, and to durable love not sporadic gratification. O God, deliver us from devotion to messages shaped by the best interest of others that we may live by words intended for the betterment of our lives, the nurture of our hopes, and the strength of our love—your words, God, your words. Amen.