

Wednesday July 18, 2012

Heretical idea – the Bible can be wrong!

By Jim Taylor

Check your underwear! Seriously, take a look at it. Does it contain elastic or lycra? Are those materials paired with cotton, silk, or satin?

How about that shirt – does it mix cotton and polyester? Do you own a sweater that's a wool/acrylic blend?

If so, you're violating a divine instruction. The Bible (Leviticus 19:19, if you want to look it up) attributes directly to God the command, "You shall not... put on a garment made of two different materials."

Leviticus doesn't specify the punishment. But in 25 chapters of social regulations, the most frequent penalties involve death by stoning, burning, or banishing into the unforgiving desert.

Taking Leviticus 19:19 literally would probably reduce North America's population by about 90 per cent. Leviticus's range of sexual and dietary prohibitions would take care of the other 10 per cent.

So no, I don't take that verse literally. Nor, by your actions, do you.

Nor should you. Because the Bible can be wrong.

World-renowned scholar Marcus Borg said it during his lecture series here in Kelowna earlier this year. We should all say it, loud and strong -- the Bible...can...be...wrong!

(If you find that statement offensive, go read something else that doesn't upset your preconceptions.)

By its own words

Indeed, the Bible must be wrong, because in places it flatly contradicts itself.

Compare, for example, the peacemakers' mantra of Isaiah 2:4, repeated word for word in Micah 4:3 – "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks" – with Joel 3:10, "Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears."

They can't both be right. Unless they were intended for a particular audience – which, of course, they were – and never imagined that the words would still be considered as divine authority some 28 centuries later.

A critic assured me, once, that this was not really a contradiction. Because Joel spoke in the present tense; Isaiah referred to the future.

Except that ancient Hebrew had no tenses. So the holy name uttered by Moses' burning bush -- "I am what I am," -- might equally well have been, "I will be what I was," or "I am what I will be."

Freedom to read selectively

I don't say this to deny the Bible's worth. The verse immediately preceding the instruction about the kinds of fabric you may wear says: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge... you shall love your neighbour as yourself."

That's good advice for all time.

The Bible is not right just because it is the Bible. It is right when it identifies a truth or insight that transcends specific times and cultures. But it is wrong – no, WE are wrong -- when we try to turn the Bible into a one-size-fits-all answer for everything.

The Bible endorses slavery. Also genocide. Racism. Polygamy. Even incest. Whether or not those standards suited a specific situation, they no longer fit our context.

Shoehorning today's feet into yesterday's sandals won't work. We have to read the Bible selectively.

And the first step is to admit that the Bible can sometimes be wrong.

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YOUR TURN

For Mary-Margaret Boone, last week's lament for the loss of wild land brought to mind Joni Mitchell's song, "Big Yellow Taxi." You may remember Joni's lyrics:

They paved paradise

And put up a parking lot

They took all the trees

And put them in a tree museum

Then they charged the people

A dollar and a half just to see 'em

Mary-Margaret continued, "So this lament for our wild spaces has been around for a long time. We live in a unique area in southern Ontario where the township took measures by restricting severances over 30 years ago to make sure that farms didn't become mini rural subdivisions.

"It was a good move, but it also doesn't let the farmer enjoy the growth in equity from which others benefit. We live in a society that believes we are entitled and once we receive our entitlement, we are quite willing to restrict others with arguments about natural habitat, threatened species, endangered ecosystems. Although farming is a life breath away from wild spaces, I believe that we need to ensure that farmers should be compensated for lost revenue in the equity of their property by paying them decent money for what they produce and for the value of their land. If we don't do that we will end up importing all that we eat and wondering why we have become globally dependent on everything!"

Nancy Price wrote, "I'm most definitely with you on this one, Jim. And I wonder how my as yet unborn great grandchildren are going to be able to exist. We've so horrendously damaged the world..."

Diane Robinson also supported my view: "Your column strikes a deep chord within me. The wild places of the world (and how quickly they are disappearing!) speak to the wild places of my heart. With each instance of creation's taming (or perhaps more apropos, creation's despoiling) my wild heart weeps for creation, but also for myself and my/our species. I believe native wisdom says: What we do today affects seven generations hence. I wonder: What will seven generations hence be inheriting from today's generation?

"At my most glum, I think the words 'All nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres' should be rewritten to say: 'All nature groans and in me moans, a lament for God's beloved spheres'."

Of course we exploit wild land for development, Charles Hill suggested. "Isn't this also true of people? From the birth cry, we must pave them, shape them, make them fit society and eliminate them if they don't help meet our societal or personal goals. People (our children, spouses, workers, friends, etc.) are tools to meet our personal and/or societal perceived needs. They are alien and must be paved over.

"We should fear whoever has the power to decide who or what will be paved over," he concluded.

Marguerite Irvine wrote that Saskatoon has made an effort to preserve some wild land: "We have an un-touched area of land that is 'true native prairie' swale in Saskatoon's north east. It will be eventually surrounded by housing, and will have a road run through it...but it will largely remain as it is, 'a 26 km stretch of swampy river-bed.'"

"Our river bank through the city is a very busy place. People of all ages, walkers, runners, families all use the trails along on both sides of the river. Some of the bank has been 'park-ed', but a lot is trail through the bush and prairie – a wonderful peaceful place to spend a weekend afternoon. And very, very valued."

Cambridge, in Ontario, has also done some preserving of wild land, writes Jean Skilling: “Where I live in Cambridge an organization bought 900 acres of river flats, woods, and cliffs with the help of philanthropists large and small and the Nature Conservancy. This area is going wild again and serves educational and research objectives. I use the area for recreation, a great word that denotes the healing that you spoke of. I recreate something good in myself in this wilder place in the city. Someone saw a cougar there last year and although I personally don't wish a cougar encounter for myself, I felt a surge of pleasure to know that there is a place for that animal in southern Ontario. A highway was planned to move across the river; nesting bald eagles delayed or changed that plan. People do value wild land but leadership is key to realizing wild values.”

On the other hand, Steve Roney considers “nature” and wild land “an abstraction, a social construct that really exists only in Western European civilization, and only since the Romantic movement, 18th-19th C. To sacrifice human needs to it is therefore an inversion of values, a smaller manifestation of human sacrifice to an idol.

“I can see the argument for some rights for the more sentient animals, mind you. That's why I'm a vegetarian. But not for “species”--another abstraction.

“There is a value to wild lands—the value you derive from aesthetic satisfaction in walking your trails. But there is a contradiction here. The minute you walk into it, it is no longer wild. So, by your own logic, if the value is in the land itself, you should be barred. Nobody gets to use it, or see it. Nobody. And that includes scientists or naturalists of any sort.

“So the only question becomes, should it be reserved for the use of only a small number; or for many? Necessarily, the more people who get the benefit, the less wild it becomes. At the same time, the greater benefit they acquire, the less wild it becomes. People need food and shelter before they need the specific aesthetic appeal of a nature walk.

“So, on balance, the more intensively any given stretch of land is developed, the better, on the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. That said, there is some value to preserving some lands for the aesthetic appeal of the nature walk, assuming that everyone is already more or less fully fed and sheltered. This is why it is in the most developed countries that there is the least pollution and the greatest access to such walks.”

Isabel Gibson also wondered why we're so unwilling to let wild land remain wild: “I wonder whether our dismissal of it stems from our inability to control it. Indeed, if we do control it, it stops being wild.

“I consider myself inestimably lucky to have had even limited exposure to undeveloped land. To be out in the desert or Prairie or on a beach, with no one else in sight or sound. To float quietly down a stream in a kayak. Something in me 'settles' when faced, finally, with wildness.”

Wayne Irwin got thinking about the implications of re-incarnation. I had said I was almost glad I wouldn't be around to see “my” ridge paved. Wayne replied, “Maybe we all have to come back and deal with the challenges we created. If the Astronomer Royal can assert there to be no proof that multiple universes do not exist, then I dare assert there to be no proof that we do not have many lives.”

“I like to think there are still lots of people who know the value of unexploited land,” Christa Bedwin commented. “Unfortunately, it does rather seem that sometimes those who have the money to buy land want to exercise their egos by ‘playing God’ with it. But there are plenty of people who value the land. They're just not usually the ones who own it.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The suggested Psalm (Psalm 89:20-37) for this coming Sunday, July 18, is a long panegyric to King David. I'm not impressed. It makes me think of a coach gushing over his latest protégé.

20 That's my boy!
I picked him; I gave him his start.
I taught him everything he knows.
The kid can count on me.
22 No one's going to push my boy around--

no matter how big and tough they get.
 23 He's like my own son;
 anybody who hassles him has to deal with me first.
 24 I won't let him down;
 he won't ever let me down.
 25 This kid is good!
 Anything he sets his hand to, he can do!
 26 He thinks of me as his father.
 He owes it all to me, and he knows it.
 27 I'm going to make him number one;
 He's going to be a superstar.
 28 But he's more than just a bright prospect;
 I won't trade him for any other hotshot--
 we have a binding non-cancellable covenant.
 29 You're going to see this kid around for a long time;
 he could be the greatest thing for years.
 30 If he falls in with a bad crowd,
 if his buddies lead him astray and he breaks the rules,
 31 I'll come down on him hard.
 32 I'll fine him, I'll suspend him,
 I'll make him do extra push-ups.
 33 But I won't trade him.
 He's my boy.
 34 I signed the contract
 and I'm as good as my word.
 35 When I make a promise, I keep it.
 36 This kid has a great future ahead of him;
 37 They'll still be talking about this kid years from now.
 He's going to be a living legend!

For this and other paraphrases from *Everyday Psalms*, you can order the book through Wood Lake Publications,
info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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