

The Chaos Ladder

Episode 9 - When inspiration is fully unleashed

[Podcast intro]

Hi, I'm Steve Flowers and you're listening to The Chaos Ladder-- a podcast that explores how the Bible is not a gaping pit waiting to swallow us but a ladder for us to climb.

[Episode intro]

An inspired Bible is not passive or stagnant anymore than God is. If biblical inspiration, as the simple definition states, is the in-breathing of God's Holy Spirit, then Christians must learn how to breath out the Spirit of God we find through it.

[Main content]

This episode is the third and last part of my answer to the question-- "What makes the Bible inspired?" Two episodes ago the first part of that answer talked about how we see the biblical authors reframing scripture when they found themselves between two different stories of how they were taught and experienced God. Last episode the second part of that answer showed that when Jesus, as the greatest revelation of God, reframed scripture, He was actually recentering it so it more accurately reflected who God is and what God desires. In this episode, the final part of the answer to "What makes the Bible inspired?" will have reframing scripture take on yet another facet as we add a new term that is key to this answer-- and that word is trajectory.

The journey of God's people reflected in the Bible is at times an incomplete one when it came to such issues as slavery, patriarchalism, archaic views of science, and full affirmation of all people. But their progressive path coupled with the person and work of Jesus create a trajectory for us to continue listening to where God is still speaking to us through the Bible along our own journeys today. Similar to the scripture within the Bible that its ancient writers reframed and akin to the scripture Jesus recentered, this trajectory affords Christians their opportunity to reframe the interpretation of scripture in response to our present experiences of God. When we reframe scripture this way through the lens of Jesus, it continues the story of God's people beyond the limits of the Bible's pages. The United Church of Christ states on their web site that "We believe in a God that is still speaking."¹ When we work to attune our current experiences to the trajectory I'm talking about then it allows us to hear where God's Spirit is still speaking today.

¹ <https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are-2/about/>

This trajectory calls us to identify when we, like those ancient believers in the Bible, find ourselves between two stories. We must always prayerfully consider whether how God was taught or promised by those who came before us matches with the story of how we are actually experiencing God for ourselves. Where the stories align, then the trajectory from the Bible through Jesus and God's Spirit is leading us on further in the same direction. But if our two stories don't align, then we use this trajectory to see where scripture might need to be reframed through the lens of Jesus so we can bring our current experiences of God's Spirit in harmony with who God is and what God desires.

It's about at this point that you could find yourself having any number of responses, such as:

I'm not sure I really understand all this reframing, re-centering, re-interpreting of scripture you keep talking about; or

This sounds like a slippery slope that can make the Bible mean whatever you want it to; or

Steve, this little theory of yours sounds good on paper but I'm not sure that it could work in the Church.

Well, to all of that, I say this-- Like it or not, understand it or not, it's too late because that toothpaste is not only out of the tube, but we've already all brushed our teeth with it.

Wittingly or unwittingly, we've all already accepted scripture being reframed well after it was written. There are a number of places in scripture where we've already accepted changes in moving the perspective from applying the literal, plain meaning of the text to instead aligning it with the direction we believe God desired all along.

Slavery is one of the most glaring examples of that. The Bible has a trajectory for slavery that had to be completed outside of its pages.

Even though slavery is never condemned in the Bible, we can see the trajectory of the beginnings of its complete abolishment. In the Bible slavery was largely a reflection of the culture in which it was written, as it first created laws attributed to God and would later reference it as a cultural norm during the time of the New Testament. But listen to the small voices from which a trajectory is forming within the Bible's pages when it comes to slavery--

A law in Exodus allows for fellow Hebrews to be owned as slaves but only allows the male Hebrews to earn their freedom.² That's changed in Deuteronomy to also allowing female Hebrew slaves to earn their freedom.³ But then Leviticus declares no fellow Hebrews can be enslaved at all, only foreigners.⁴ This might seem ambiguous until we note that the timeline for when each law was originally written is in the order I just presented. Now, it becomes a small progression. By the time the New Testament books were written slavery was still a cultural reality and its authors were under the rule of Rome so they had no control over the laws that

² Exodus 21:2

³ Deuteronomy 15:12

⁴ Leviticus 25:39-46

governed slavery. But the Bible still has pieces to add this trajectory. Paul had a radical-for-its-time spiritual metaphor that “there is no longer slave or free... for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”⁵ And there is also an important law in Deuteronomy that escaped slaves were not to be given back to their owners, were to be welcome to live anywhere in their towns, and were not to be oppressed.⁶

But the entire Bible is completely missing the one verse we wish that it had, the one that simply said slavery is wrong. It would take over 1700 years after the final book of the Bible was written, but most American Christians would come to agree with reframing the passages on slavery so the trajectory that started in scripture could be completed by seeing its complete abolishment as something God desired.

Many of the Old Testament’s kill commandments are another example of the formation of a trajectory that had to be completed by believers outside of scripture. In the last episode I noted how Jesus reframed one of the kill commandments regarding people caught in adultery. He re-centered it as a call for self-introspection on our own sins. As far as I know, Christianity across the board neither practices nor calls for the public stoning of those who have committed adultery so I guess we accepted Jesus’ recentering.

But the Old Testament is choked full of kill commandments. Here’s some of the offenses for which the only penalty the scripture lists is death, often by public execution-- you were to be killed for serving other gods, for being a medium or wizard, for “showing contempt or a lack of reverence for God,”⁷ for any work on the sabbath including (and I kid you not) “gathering sticks,” for a woman who is not a virgin on her wedding night, and (every teenage parent’s favorite) for rebellious children who don’t obey their parents.⁸ The only penalty for all of these is death. Again, as far as I know, Christianity across the board neither practices nor calls for the public stoning of those who have done any of these things.

Christianity today already lives out that an inspired Bible can include rules and cultural constructs from ancient societies that are outside of God’s intended message, even though they are things that are affirmed in the Bible.

- An inspired Bible is not an invitation to embrace only its warm and fuzzy parts but also to understand the place of its archaic, grotesque, unfathomable, and ambiguous parts.
- The Bible is not inspired because it closed the book on God’s story. God didn’t dictate the Bible, declare “That is all I have to say,” dropped the mic, and then walked away.
- The Bible wasn’t left for us as some manual of immutable divine rules. If it was, then we’re left to rationalize the abhorrent things it includes such as the law in Deuteronomy

⁵ Galatians 3:28

⁶ Deuteronomy 23:15-16

⁷ Definition of blasphemy as used in Leviticus 24:16 from Mark Allan Powell, *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*.

⁸ Exodus 31:15; Leviticus 20:27 and 24:16; Numbers 15:32-36; Deuteronomy 17:2-5, 21:18-21, and 22:20-21.

that requires a rape victim to be even further grotesquely victimized by forcing her to marry her rapist.⁹

- An inspired Bible is not about imitating the past, it's about figuring out our present and giving direction to the future.

So, I spent these last three episodes answering “What makes the Bible inspired?” Let me end by summing it all up together:

The Bible is inspired because it shows the series of times ancient believers found themselves between two stories-- the first story is the one of how God was taught to them and the second was the different way they were experiencing God. This caused them to reassess how they viewed God which led them to reframe the scripture they had at the time. We can see this cycle happen repeatedly across the breadth of the Bible in a variety of ways.

Second, the Bible is inspired because it shows Jesus is the greatest revelation of God, and, as such, where we find Jesus interpreting scripture is essentially God re-centering it to reflect how God had always intended to reveal God's self and what God desires.

Third, those first two traits create a trajectory such that when we find ourselves between two stories Christians are to further the direction of that trajectory by reframing scripture for our present as led to do so. Christianity has been reframing scripture ever since the books of the Bible were finished. We reframe scripture today when we look at it through the lens of Jesus in a new or different way to change the focus or perspective of what scripture has to say regarding our current circumstances.

The Bible is inspired because it offers us a foundation, a direction, a Savior, and a sacred opportunity to participate in furthering God's purposes today. As such, we're left to confirm those places where our experience of God today is the same as the way it was given to us while also having the courage to call out where it is different just as those recorded in the Bible did. This is what unleashes the full inspiration of the Bible.

I would be unwise to speculate on or assume I know everywhere God's Spirit is moving today to change the hearts and minds of people. That is primarily an exercise for the larger community of believers to take up. However, I will end by sharing one very personal example of where I found myself between two stories and then reframed scripture through a Jesus lens. It's an issue that directly contradicts a traditional and predominant view of scripture by the Church. But I have reframed my own biblical journey to account for the trajectory I see in scripture. For me, this issue has been like the blind man in Mark who needed a second healing by Jesus to fully see.¹⁰ I believe God is speaking to us all today about the plight the majority of Christianity has created for LGBTQ persons by continuing to denounce, marginalize, alienate, and cast them out. I believe God's Spirit is speaking as part of that same inspired trajectory that began in the ancient writers of the Bible and continues through the lens of Jesus. I believe it's calling Christianity to repent and fully affirm all people as part of the reign of God which Jesus came to establish.

⁹ Deuteronomy 22:28

¹⁰ Mark 8:22-25

Just a quick reminder that the specific citations for scripture and other sources I've referenced can be found in the footnotes of the essay version of this episode located on StoriesFromAVillage.org.

Thanks for listening to The Chaos Ladder. Hope you'll join me next time which will be the last episode for this first season. Take care.

[Outro statement]

The Chaos Ladder is part of StoriesFromAVillage.org, a podcast and essay ministry of Stone Village Church in Columbus, Ohio. You can find a transcript of this podcast on the web site.
