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## Can You Believe the Bible?

**The message and character of Jesus Christ would fail all the tests of humanitarian practice - if he were taken literally!**

by James McBride

That may shock some Bible students. For is not the Bible the very Word of God? Surely every word of the text of Scripture is divinely inspired? Dare we tamper with it? For we are warned not to add to the Scriptures, nor to take from it (Revelation 22:19). Otherwise our salvation is at stake.

Let's look at some examples in illustration. Your son is tempted to grab a watch from a display in a department store. Jesus said *"Cut off his hand"*. Your husband has an eye for the girls - Jesus says, *"Pluck out his eye"*. See Matthew 5:29-30. And what would happen to business and the economy if we literally took Jesus at his word when he commanded, *"Give to him that asks of you, and from anyone who would borrow from you turn not away"* (v.42)? Uncompromising words indeed. But how many handless, eyeless and shirtless Christians do you know?

Jesus also gave his approval, in "story" form, to the millionaire who ordered a servant to be *"delivered to the torturers"*, apparently on the man's first offence (Matthew 18:34). What happened to his very own statement that we ought to forgive *"until seventy times seven"* (v.22)? And why did he not simply forgive the money-changers whom he drove out of the Temple with a whip? Or Peter when the latter caused Jesus offence (Matthew 16:22-23)? *Double standards?*

We could also challenge Jesus on his understanding of physics. Didn't he know that a camel could not possibly pass through *"the eye of a needle"*? What, too, about his statement that a tiny bit of faith could move a mountain? Certainly there is no record of Jesus doing that - nor any of the apostles (who, with all believers, would do "greater works" than Jesus), nor anyone throughout the history of the church of God! And did Jesus not know that the throat - even of a Pharisee - was too small to swallow a camel (Matthew 23:24)?

We need to deal with such texts. Instinctively we cringe at the thought of taking them literally. But they are there in the divinely-inspired Word. So, surely they must be accepted if we are to *"live by every word of God"* (Matthew 4:4)?

### Literally Wrong

The short answer is *No*, we don't accept them at face value. We are here dealing with language. And a language that is far removed from English or indeed other Western languages. Not merely the sound of it nor the grammar nor word meanings. If we are to properly understand what God is telling us in His inspired Book then we must take note of the thought behind the language, the culture, in which it was written.

The languages of the Orient, of the Middle East, of Bible lands - of the Bible - expressed a different thought pattern to ours. Even the Greek of the New Testament expressed semitic thought patterns, for that was the way the writers' - mostly mid-eastern - own language was cradled. It was not "logical" or precise or always to be taken at face value. The speaker of Hebrew or Aramaic *spoke to convey an impression*. By piling metaphor upon metaphor, by gross exaggeration, by unconditional assertion, by a display of gestures and facial expression he made his hearers *feel* his meaning! The "imprecatory Psalms" are an example.

Another example is the role-play of the prophets of both Old and New Testament times. Their language and behaviour was dramatic, powerful, figurative - we would brand it as "over the top"! Read John the Baptist's denunciation of the Pharisees and Sadducees, for example (Matthew 3:7f), or what Jesus told the Pharisees (*ch 23*). But it was effective language.

To this day a visit to a mid-eastern market highlights this. There's what to a Western eye is wild gesticulation - the

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portrayal of thoughts and emotions by body movement. A hubub not known in the West in day-to-day life - at least outside a World Cup final!

### Read It Right

What a Westerner would call an exaggeration, even downright lies, was the normal currency of speech. But, of course, no-one took it literally! And that's an essential tool for understanding certain aspects of the Scriptures. Try to put yourself, when studying the Word of God, into the shoes of "a man from the east".

Of course, this does not mean we can play fast and loose with the text. There is much "technical" language in the Scriptures - historical, doctrinal *etc* - not addressed in this article. But for the rest we must go behind the words. Seek their real meaning, be aware of the cultural aspect of the language.

All languages use "figures of speech". That is, a "designed and legitimate departure from the laws of language in order to emphasize what is said". Bear in mind that in the Scriptures we are dealing with "words which the Holy Spirit teaches" (*eg* I Corinthians 2:13). God Himself uses this figurative language! The ancient classical languages described several hundred different forms of speech. And they are integral to the Scriptures both in Hebrew and in Greek. Well-known examples - also in English use - are *metaphor, allegory, simile, hyperbole, personification and idiom*.

Such a manner of thinking isn't entirely foreign to the Westerner. For example, we readily understand the expressions "a storm in a tea-cup" or "keep your hair on" or "take the shirt off your back" and would not normally think of taking them literally. The language of certain portions of Scripture more so. Yet questions on these matters do bother Bible students.

*faith moves mountains*: Jesus contrasts the minute mustard seed with a huge object - a mountain. In true eastern fashion he used the illustration to idealize faith. A favorite attack by atheists on the Bible, this, for no-one has ever done it!

*the eye of needle* is not a small gate in a city door - which was known as a "plum"! Jesus was using his own language in a normal way to express the impossibility of salvation for anyone besotted by material wealth - the largest animal and the smallest opening his hearers knew.

*"turn the other cheek"* does not prohibit self-defense or protection of property. It is the antidote for the ~~then~~ contemporary misinterpretation of the "law of revenge" (*lex talionis*).

The instruction (Matthew 5:39-41) to settle a legal action by *giving away coat and cloak* would leave the eastern man virtually naked. The words mean the under-garment and the over-garment - all, virtually, that he was wearing! Clearly the equivalent of "*going the extra mile*", or "*giving the shirt off your back*".

Serious study of the Word of God should take on board the existence of such speech forms. Awareness enables us to glean a clearer picture of what God is conveying to us in His Word.

Jesus' humorous exaggerations of a camel going through a literal needle's eye, or a hypocritical religious man swallowing a camel yet straining a tiny fly from his cocoa as a religious act of "purity" - these convey powerfully the message of false dependence on material wealth, and of hypocrisy. The fact of judgment to come, of hell-fire, was burned into the consciousness of the hearers of Jesus as they gazed over his shoulder at the curling smoke, noticed the breeding worms (Isaiah 66:24, Mark 9:44) and breathed the awesome stench arising from the nearby Valley of Hinnom (*ge-Henna*, translated *hell* in the *KJV*) - Jerusalem's city dump.

Just a second's thought, then, will convince any one of us that cutting off a hand or gouging an eye won't stop a person from the desire to steal or to lust - which was the whole point of Jesus' message. Nor is serial forgiveness appropriate in every situation - we do not extend it to murderers, thugs, fraudsters, perjurers. (At least, not always!) Yet such imagery drives home the vital importance of these weighty matters.

Let's give our study of the Word of God that second thought. All Scripture is indeed "*inspired by God*", but let's "*rightly handle the word of truth*" (II Timothy 2:15)!

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