For the Brigidines—past and present

For James Robert (Bill) Mudge (d.1980) and Veronica Jane Mudge
and my ‘family in faith’

For Violet, June and Giovanna for gifts of faith and love

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**BIBLICAL TRUTH**

**Literal and figurative language**

Even our everyday speech contains different types of language. Usually, we mean exactly what we say—that is, our words are meant to be taken ‘literally’. We sometimes speak figuratively, which means that other people need to interpret what we say. Figurative speech like ‘I’m boiling!’ contains metaphors and images that communicate our meaning with greater effect. The Bible contains both literal and figurative speech.

Jesus often used figurative speech. In speaking about temptations to sin (which Jesus describes as ‘obstacles’) Jesus said ‘And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire’ (Mt 18:9). Jesus did not mean that his followers should literally pluck out their eyes: he used figurative language to make a point about the seriousness of sin. On another occasion, the Pharisee Nicodemus (Jn 3:3–21) came to Jesus at night seeking to understand his teachings about entering the kingdom of God. Jesus explained using the imagery of a baby being born into the world: ‘... no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ A puzzled Nicodemus, thinking Jesus was speaking literally, asked Jesus, ‘Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus used this image to explain that conversion involves starting over, becoming a new person. It is important to remember that literal does not mean ‘true’ and figurative ‘untrue’—rather, they are used to describe different ways we use language.

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**Did you know**

Origen, a father of the church, castrated himself rather than let his sexual desires cause him to sin. He took Mt 18:9 literally.

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**Activities**

1. Which of the following sayings of Jesus are examples of literal language and which are examples of figurative language?

- Lk 10:4–11
- Lk 17:3–4
- Mt 18:21–22
- Lk 10:2–3
- Mk 8:34
- Mt 5:14
- Lk 6:41–42
- Mk 11:22–23

2. Is Jesus speaking figuratively or literally in the following passages?

- Mt 5:38–42
- Jn 6:51–58

If Jesus is speaking figuratively, what point is he making? If Jesus is speaking literally, what are the implications of his teachings for Christians living today?
The four senses of scripture

A medieval couplet summarises the significance of the four senses:

The Letter speaks of deeds; Allegory to faith;
The Moral how to act; Anagogy our destiny.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, n.118

Different levels of understanding

George Orwell’s novel Animal Farm is, on the surface, a story about farm animals. Led by the pigs, the farm animals take over the farm only to be exploited even more cruelly by the pigs. Interpreted at a deeper level, the novel is a political commentary on the irony of human revolutions that produce new tyrants who oppress and exploit their people.

There are many levels of meaning to be discovered in the biblical texts. In addition to the literal meaning there are other meanings or spiritual senses including the allegorical, moral and anagogical. For example, the allegorical sense of the exodus account is an interpretation of the crossing of the Red Sea in the light of Jesus, the new Moses, freeing people from slavery to sin and leading them, through baptism, to new life in the reign of God. The moral sense of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) challenges our priorities and prejudices towards people of a different nationality or religion.

The truth of the Bible

How do we work out if the Bible is true? What sorts of questions does the Bible seek to respond to and provide insights into? The Bible reveals inspired insights into questions like: Is there a God? What is God like? What does God do? How should we relate to this God and to each other?

The anagogical sense of scripture is concerned with the eternal mystery of God’s creative and saving power in the world. In Rev 21:1–22:5, the church is imagined as the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. Through the church’s mission, God’s consolation and compassion are with people on earth.
The Bible is true for people of faith because it is the inspired Word of God. It is, of course, the Word of God in the words of human beings. The Bible contains different kinds of truth, which reflects the fact that there are different kinds of truth pursued by different disciplines of knowledge such as science and history.

**Historical truth:** Much of the history of the Hebrew people was passed down orally for generations before it was written down and edited. Because great importance was placed on the memorisation of history and tradition, and because texts were carefully copied, there is historical truth within the Bible and the Bible is a historical document of great value.

**Scientific truth:** The Bible reflects the primitive scientific understanding of the world that was held by Israelites two to three thousand years ago.

**Truth from experience:** The Bible also contains truth gained from inspired reflection upon life experience, intuition and common sense.

**Moral truth:** Biblical moral truth tells us what is right and wrong and how to live in relationship with God and other people. This covenant relationship demands compassion and justice for the poor.

**Religious truth:** The Bible is primarily concerned with the fundamental questions of human existence and destiny. The Bible is the record of God's relationship with his people, which reaches its climax in Christ's life, death and resurrection.

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**Activities**

1. Draw a mind-map of the various fields of knowledge and their areas of specialisation.

2. What do you think is meant by the statement 'God's law is written on every person's heart'? How could you test the truth of this belief statement?

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**The Bible as science**

Humanity enters the third millennium with an understanding of the universe that is very different from that held by the ancient Hebrews. The scientific understanding is that of a dynamic, evolving universe of vast size and unimaginable age in which life has evolved on earth over the past two or three billion years from simple cells.
Creation science (Creationism) is supported by those Christians called ‘fundamentalists’ who believe that what is written in the Bible about the creation of the world is literally true. It is based on a literal reading of the Bible and is rejected by the major Christian churches. Creation science implants the false idea that a choice must be made between science and religion.

Scientists are mainly interested in how the universe came into being and how it has evolved. The biblical accounts of creation seek insights into different kinds of questions such as ‘Is the world God created basically good or evil?’ and ‘How should we relate to God and the rest of creation?’

Today, people of faith are no longer faced with a choice between science and the Bible because they understand the relationship between faith and reason and the fact that science and religion have different criteria for determining the truth of a proposition. As Galileo said: ‘The Bible teaches us the way to go to heaven, not the way the heavens go.’

Activities

1. Compare and contrast creation myths from other cultures, including Australian Aboriginal myths, with the creation accounts of the book of Genesis (Gen 1–2). First identify the basic elements of each story in terms of its setting in time, the nature of the world in which the action takes place, the performers who interact in the story, and the actions or events that are central to the story.

2. Historical artefacts are objects made by people in the past that give us insights into their society and history. If you could travel back in time, name six artefacts you would carry back to the present day and six photographs you would take for an exhibition entitled ‘Biblical History’.

3. In small groups, compare and contrast your primary school memories with those of other students who went to the same primary school. Why do we remember different events and people from the past?

4. Imagine you are a parent reading your child the bible story of Noah’s ark. After you have finished reading the story, your child asks ‘Is that a true story?’ How would you answer?

Pottery in the Sebenberg House, Jerusalem.

- Research the discoveries of the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei. What was the church’s response to his scientific claims?

Refer to Chapter 5, page 126, for the relationship between religion and science.

- What might such historical artefacts reveal about life in ancient times?
The Bible as history

The Bible is a partial record of the history of the Israelites. For many hundreds of years their history was preserved in stories that were told generation after generation. Some of these stories were eventually written down. Some writings were preserved, others edited, many lost. Eventually they were assembled in their present form.

The Bible is also religious history. Its writers, inspired by God, gave a religious interpretation of their history, explaining the meaning of historical events in terms of God’s actions. They believed that nothing happened that God had not directed or allowed. In writing their history they expressed their belief that their god was the one true God, all powerful, jealously protective and yet merciful in the love shown for them.

The biblical writers used the literary forms of their particular time and culture to express their religious interpretation of historical events. For example, studying letters dating from the first century CE (Christian Era) assists the interpretation of the letters found in the Christian Scriptures.

Excavations at the mound of Bet Shean located in the Plain of Jezreel in Israel. There is evidence of eighteen different levels of occupation.

- What might such an archaeological site reveal about life in ancient times?

Did you know

In this book, the terms ‘Hebrew Scriptures’ and ‘Christian Scriptures’ are used rather than the older terms ‘Old Testament’ and ‘New Testament’. In your research, you might sometimes read the term ‘Jewish Bible’ or ‘New Covenant’. The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962–65) was sensitive to the fact that the term ‘Old’ might imply that the Hebrew Scriptures had passed their ‘use-by date’, which is not true. The Hebrew Scriptures, sometimes called the ‘First Testament’, are an integral part of the Scriptures for all Christians. It is impossible to understand the Christian Scriptures unless one appreciates that the Hebrew Scriptures are part of this revelation of God to God’s people.

Refer to Chapter 2, pages 34–35, for a detailed timeline of biblical history

THE HISTORY OF GOD’S COVENANT LOVE

The history of the Jewish people can be divided into the following three periods.

The first period of biblical history is recorded in the first five books of the Bible—The Pentateuch. It begins with the mythic pre-history of humanity. It includes the epic stories of the Hebrew patriarchs and the story of Moses and the exodus from Egypt culminating in the covenant agreement with God at Mt Sinai.