

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Historical Nature of Biblical Faith

by Dan Trygg

“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,² in these last days has spoken to us in His Son...”
Hebrews 1:1-2

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us,² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,³ it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus;⁴ so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.”
Luke 1:1-4

“For from days of old they have not heard or perceived by ear, nor has the eye seen a God besides You, who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him.”
Isaiah 64:4

The very essence or foundation of the faith found in the Bible is based upon historical events. The Bible is not a story, or a series of myths. The bulk of it purports to be a record of God’s interactions with people in relationship with Him. It is more than just a compendium of one person’s experiences, or even the teachings of a religious person or a group. **The Bible recounts *God’s dealings*, ...not only with individual people, but also with nations. It was authored by over 40 people, from all walks of life, over a period of nearly two millennia, and on three continents. It is a *love story*, an historical drama that unfolds over centuries, as God has sought to redeem and obtain a people for Himself.**

Most religious systems are about how people can pacify an angry deity, ...or how they could live a good enough life to obtain positive attention from the god or goddess. People are given rules to follow, sacrifices or offerings to make, and duties or disciplines to perform in order to placate their god, or to gain favor. **These are the two general motivations for being religious: *to get something from the god*, ...usually power, prosperity, peace and blessing..., *or to placate and avoid the wrath of their deity.*** Religion is virtually always *a human endeavor*, ...an attempt to obtain something from the gods by performing religious rites, practices and services. Humankind seeks to pacify, curry favor with, or control the objects of their worship. Sadly, even many of those who have been associated with Biblical faith traditions are motivated by these same desires. They are either afraid of an angry God, ...or they want to please Him in order to gain His blessing. **In their purest form, Eastern religious philosophies are not interested in a personal god. Through their disciplines, they seek to escape the endless cycle of reincarnation, a key part of what they believe.** In practice, however, many of those associated with these philosophies are very syncretistic, and include religious elements, rituals, and will acknowledge many gods or spirits, which they appeal to, or attempt to control or assuage.

It is interesting, then, to realize that the Biblical account presents *God taking the initiative to seek us.* God is not waiting around for people to seek Him out. **From His grace, God created humans, and placed them in a garden of delight.** They did not have to do anything to earn that. It was “gifted” to them by His grace. They could simply “walk with Him” in free and open fellowship. Though they chose to betray His kindness, **from the earliest pages of human history, the Bible presents God as the One who speaks of a hope of redemption. A human child would one day defeat and crush the power of the deceiving Serpent** (Gen. 3:15). God had a plan, and *it was from His initiative that hope would arise*, but He would also use people to bring it about. **Throughout history, God has sought out people to work with Him to bring about His good purpose on the earth.**

God began with Abram. *Yahweh* approached *him*. He had grown up among pagan polytheists, but ***Yahweh called him to leave what was familiar*, ...his homeland, his culture, his family..., and follow Him** to a land that He would show him. God promised to make him a great nation, to bless him, and to make his name great, and to cause his life and lineage to be a source of blessing to all the families on earth. **Abram believed God, and did as He said.** Notice how different this was, compared with the typical religious mindset of the time. *This* was initiated by Yahweh. Abram had done nothing to “earn” this opportunity. He was not *seeking* it. He did not *know*, or *have any expectation of*, any such a possibility. **God showed Abram grace.** Yahweh presented him with this opportunity. **God offered to make him a significant person, a populous nation, and to benefit the entire world. All he had to do was follow Him.**

Abram was an imperfect person. He was fearful, and deceptive. He got himself into trouble, more than once, and God extricated him. ***His life is an example of many of our own.*** He made mistakes. He tried to “help God” by his own human strategies. But he was also a man of courage, graciousness, and growing faith. **As he journeyed on in life, he learned to trust more and more in God’s faithfulness, and Yahweh kept leading him in fulfilling His promises.** The covenant He made with Abram was expanded upon, deepened and extended to his son, grandson, and to his descendants, as Yahweh promised. **One thing that is noticeably *absent* from this part of the story is that there was**

very little religious activity. At this time, God did not put heavy requirements of sacrifice, rituals, or service. What Abraham, Isaac and Jacob offered to Yahweh came more out of response to God's grace than as a means to gain it.

Four hundred years after Abraham, God appointed Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. They had become a very large nation, during the time of their sojourn there. They had multiplied to become over two million people. The Egyptians had become afraid of them, and had enslaved them. In fulfillment of His covenant promises, Yahweh delivered the Israelites from their bondage. He brought them out through mighty plagues that revealed His power, and exposed the deities of Egypt as empty and impotent. **Once again, God came to the people. He took the initiative.** He did the work to give them a way out, ...and they took it. **Like Abraham, God extended the covenant offer to them.** He had shown them His grace, and what He is like. **He asked *them* if they would be willing to be a people for Him,** ...a people set apart for Him, ones who would honor Him, follow His commandments, and do His will. **He would bring *them* to a land they did not know. He would make *their* name great, and bless *them*. He would bring blessing to all nations *through them*, ...if *they* would follow Him. They agreed to embrace that covenant, choose to live for Him, serve Him, love Him and keep His commandments.** They were to be a society characterized by respect for others, fairness and justice for all. **He gave them the Torah, or "instructions", so they could carry out His will and be a holy people, set apart by their actions and way of living, to honor Him and to be a light to other nations.** If they would follow His Torah, He would dwell among them and continue to bless them, ...but if they would *not* obey His directions, they would experience the consequences of their actions. Ultimately, they would defile the land by their sin, and He would withdraw both His Presence and His blessings. If they persisted, He would remove them from the land, and scatter them among the nations. ***The remainder of the OT is the outworking of these principles.*** They continued to rebel, to disregard His instructions, turn to other gods, and throw aside the distinctives that were meant to reveal God's wisdom to the nations. **He sent many prophets to warn them of the consequences, and attempted to call them back, but they continued in their waywardness,** until finally they were defeated by their enemies and expelled from the land. **This process of decline, repentance, restoration, further disobedience and waywardness took place over a period of nearly a thousand years!** Truly, **"Yahweh is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and truth, who keeps steadfast love to thousands, but will not leave the guilty unpunished"** (Ex. 34:6,7).

Through all of these interactions and events, God was revealing Himself, His nature, His character, His expectations and His purposes. He is the Almighty, but He is also a covenant keeper. **He is *gracious*, but His grace is a calling to follow. He is *holy*, and He calls His people to be holy like He is.** His ways are wise and good, but people could not seem to follow them because of a waywardness endemic to their hearts. **Throughout these centuries of dealing with the unfaithfulness of the Israelites, Yahweh continued to reveal His larger plan and purpose:** Out from the roots of the devastated lineage of David, **God would raise up a Messiah** (Isa. 11). He would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). He would appear 483 years after a decree to rebuild the devastated city of Jerusalem (Dan. 9:25,26; Neh. 2:1 – 455 B.C.). Then, however, He would be "cut off". This "shoot out of parched ground" will come to be a Suffering Servant, to bear our iniquities and bear the death stroke we deserved for our sin. He would be taken away by injustice, and His grave assigned to be with the wicked, yet He would end up in a rich man's tomb. Though He came to be slain as a guilt offering, He will live to see the fruit of the agony of His soul (Isa. 53). The grave would not hold Him. His body would not see decay (Psa. 16:10). He will rise on the third day (Hos. 6:1,2), ...on the day after the Sabbath following the Passover, the day of first fruits (Lev 23:5-11; cf. 1 Cor. 15:20-23). **What this Messiah came to do was establish a *new covenant*, not like the one that the people could not keep. This covenant would change their hearts.** Their hearts would *be made new*, and the Torah of God would *be written upon them*, so that they *could* and *would* keep His commandments (Jer. 31:31-35; Ezk. 11;19,29; Heb. 8:6-13). **This will be for the vindication of God's name.** Although the people of Israel had failed to keep His covenant, **Yahweh will still be faithful to His word. He will restore them to their land, cleanse and transform their hearts. They will be His people, and He will be their God** (Ezek. 36:17-36).

Of all the religious beliefs and traditions in world history, there is *nothing* like what Yahweh, the God of the Bible, has done to reveal Himself, His purpose, His plan, His provision and His power for living. No other god or philosophy can claim such a patient, consistent and extensive revelation in history. Many religious systems are based upon mere ideas, human in origin, that have no way to show that they are valid. They are just the thoughts or observations of someone who seemed to be wise. Others are based upon so-called encounters with an angel, spirit or other supernatural entity, but are only that, ...subjective experiences. **There is no external evidence of these beings, ...no historical track record to follow.** Usually, the initiators of religious movements like this are convincing, charismatic individuals, who can gather a following, but the reality of what they claim as their experience is not reproduced in their followers. It dies with them. **However, God has taken the long approach. He has painstakingly revealed Himself over centuries of history, leaving a track record.** He has communicated His love-initiative, His grace, His standards, His holiness, and prophetically pointed the way to the Messiah, who gives us life and changes hearts.