

GROWING *Together*

12th Series

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

Are you a griot? Very likely you are but don't know it! A griot, a word used in West Africa of a storyteller, faithfully passes on the oral tradition of a family or village.

Behind the Bible are such griots: persons who kept alive traditions, passed on stories from one generation to the next, brought the word from community to community. Eventually these stories or traditions were written down in the Bible. These storytellers tried honestly and faithfully to tell of the activities of God. The stories express human thoughts and feelings inspired by God's Spirit. This does not mean, however, that everything happened exactly as we read it.

The Bible should not be read as if it were a single book, as if every page contained the same kind of literature. Some stories may be completely historical (Paul being shipwrecked off the coast of Malta is an illustration). In some instances an actual event occurred, but what we read is a romanticized or theological interpretation of that event (the flood story/ies may be an example). Some stories are fictional, but not in a fairytale sense. They may be "mythical" — meaning they convey religious truth while appearing to be historical fact (Jonah and the great fish may be an example).

Other stories are obviously fictional. In Luke's Gospel when we read of the man whom thugs robbed and left half-dead, we are not inclined to worry whether such an attack is recorded on the computer file of the Royal Jerusalem Mounted Camel Patrol. When we read in the opening chapters of Genesis of animals speaking or of people living for centuries, we have to learn that this is not history as we know it, but a poetic picture of pre-historical reality.

The stories in the Hebrew Bible are there for a purpose. The New Testament writers saw them as a way of understanding what Jesus did in his life. Jesus not only told stories to illustrate God's way of doing things, but he also used them to explain his own actions. Not all of his stories or sayings originate with him. Some, we now know, were also told by other rabbis of that era. Others of Jesus' sayings were based upon Old Testament sources.

We trust the Bible because we trust the God about whom it tells us. But trust is circular. We also trust God because of what we read in the Bible. You can no more find a single point on which to base this trust than you can find a specific reason that caused you to fall in love with another person.

Are we being faithful to the God about whom these stories are told? Yes, when we don't try to make them more than they were intended to be: guideposts in the maze of life's journey to show God's love and concern. Have you faithfully told these stories in your family and church? If so, you too are a griot!

Questions for discussion:

1. Who is the storyteller in your family? What stories are really important in the life of your family? What would you miss in your family life if you did not have those stories?
2. Which Bible stories most help you to understand God's love for you?
3. Does something being true mean that it must actually have happened?

The 1996 Growing Together Series was written cooperatively by: Dr. Chris Lind (Anglican), Rev. Dr. Ken Peterson (Lutheran), Rita Gillies (Roman Catholic), Nicholas Jesson (Roman Catholic) and Rev. Betty Lynn Schwab (United). Special thanks to Frank Roy, our editor.

GROWING TOGETHER is a series of five monthly Sunday bulletin inserts for the ecumenical education of Christ's faithful.



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