

A MOST REMARKABLE BOOK

Consider the records the Bible holds. It was the first of billions of books to be printed on a movable printing press and is still reputed to be the world's best seller. At the last count, it could be read in its entirety in 795 languages, and the New Testament alone in 1,815. There is no way to estimate the number of books scholars and amateurs like me have written, or the number of plays, poems, and movies based on parts of it have been produced—or to estimate the number of lives it has influenced.

To many, the Bible is a theological treatise; to others, a history book, a book of spiritual recipes, a guide to life, or directions of how to get in touch with the Divine. At one time, I would have agreed with all those. Yet its most dominant theme is not on that list.

What is this mystery, and why is it seldom discussed? I am pleased to pull back the curtain, and unlike the magician, to reveal the secret, to point out what has been under our noses since day one, a fact that will shock the best of clergy and laity, Catholic and Protestant, believers and atheists, all who ever bragged they have read the Bible through one or more times. I am alarmed that no one has caught this obvious point.



The point in this revelation is the genre in which Bible stories fit. The most appropriate category for the stories in the Bible is *children's literature*. Bible stories and children's literature share these characteristics. Both have

- a. heroes and heroines, (Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, Prince, Fairy Godmother),
- b. villains (a talking snake, Pharoah, heathens, witches, ogres),

c. a required suspension of disbelief (a river turns red, Moses brings etched stones down a mountain, a boy kills a giant, an apple puts a princess in a coma),

d. a free imagination, childlike simplicity,

e. divine intervention,

f. "happily-ever-after" endings.

Think of the story of Sleeping Beauty. An apple supplied by an evil witch (villain) puts her in a coma that is not fatal. She does not die, nor does she age (suspension of disbelief). The kiss of a handsome prince (hero) reanimates her. She is restored and weds the handsome hero (divine intervention; happy ever after).

Consider the Bible story of Elijah in his conflict with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel over their incompatible religions: Judaism and Baalism. The climax comes when the priests of Baal fail in their attempt to awaken their god, and Elijah's god sends fire from heaven, affirming Elijah's authenticity. True religion prevails and lots of priests of Baal die. Divine intervention; hero and villains.

Bible stories repeat the plot countless times as does children's lit. The characters change but predictable endings never do. Details vary, but outcomes are never in doubt.

In fairy stories, heroes save the day; in the Bible, God is the hero. Though his name changes from story to story, God is always a deciding factor. Yet the Bible stories, like fairy tales, do not encourage readers to repeat the incidents that triggered them. Adam starts an uproar but does not recommend that we all eat an apple. Noah is saved from a flood but does not urge everyone to build a boat. Moses performs amazing feats and wins the freedom of the Hebrews but does not encourage others to attempt such deeds. Elijah defeats the priest of Baal, but he does not say others should engage in a contest to show off their influence with God. Paul's life changes after he hears a voice from the sky. But he does not recommend that others listen for a voice from the sky.

Each tale is unique and stands alone. No act repeated will produce a similar happy outcome. There is no pattern, no formulae, only good stories.