

Sooner or later it comes down to faith

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In one of my classes, after discussing a number of difficulties and issues related to the creation stories in Genesis, a student chimed in that sooner or later one simply has to have faith.

I didn't disagree, but instead asked: What sort of faith, and faith in what?

We had already read part of Paul Tillich's classic *The Dynamics of Faith*, and so students were aware of the possibility of other ways of thinking about faith.

If one says it comes down to faith, does that mean faith in the sense of simply believing that the stories in the Bible are historically/factually true? Or faith in the sense of believing that the stories are meaningful and significant even if not literal depictions of actual events? Or faith in God in the sense of trust in spite of not knowing quite what to do with the stories in question?

Often when someone gets to the point of talking about needing to "just have faith" in practice it means simply to accept a way of interpreting texts that one had previously been told to.

If we consider the story in Genesis 3, for instance, if "just having faith" is taken to mean "believing that a snake really talked even though I have never experienced such a thing today and would seek professional help if I did," what the person is actually doing is "just having faith" not in what the story says, but that those who told them that they must treat the story as a historical account in spite of knowing in all other cases what sort of literature they are dealing with if it includes an animal that talks.

And so "just having faith" in many instances turns out to be neither "just having faith *in God*" or "just having faith *in the Bible*" but *just having faith in other people's judgment about the appropriate way to interpret the Bible*.

People are free to "just have faith" in this sense, but I suspect that for many, it will be appropriate and helpful to point out to them what the actual object of their faith is in such cases. They may not have realized.

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