SOME WRINKLES IN THE RELIGIOUS USES OF 'TO BELIEVE'

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Abstract:

The Kantian logic of science has shaped much of the critical-historical tradition of scripture analysis, partly by canonizing a specific set of limits defining the possible and, correspondingly, limits to what a human being may defensibly believe in the way of historical reports. Residual inexplicable incidents are regarded as mythical or unhistorical in that tradition. However, by training a Wittgensteinian lens on certain religious applications of the verb 'to believe' we can begin to notice a rainbow of diverse and finely shaded uses, none of them privileged. The fact that some of these make no connection with the canonical sense of 'to believe' puts in serious question the recent tendency to employ the category 'myth' in scripture scholarship.
Some contemporary theologians, speaking with utter assurance, declare this or that New Testament narrative to be mythological. This, they explain, is not necessarily an end of the matter, for a biblical episode may be mythological only in its uninterpreted form, or when taken as a straight report of what happened once on the Galilean littoral. Viewed in another light, they suggest, it may still yield a moral or existential elixir of meaning that a first-time reader would perhaps hardly have guessed was there. However that may be, the tendency to classify various biblical events as mythical raises, it seems to me, an important conceptual issue for philosophers of religion. The issue concerns the meaning(s) of the word 'believe.' The tendency to invoke the category of myth rests on the conviction that the texts are difficult to believe or accept at face value. Yet, for whatever reasons, not everyone finds them so, and this fact suggested to me a Copernican change of axis in the way those problem texts, the kind referred to as 'mythological' or 'unhistorical' in the critical-historical tradition of scripture analysis, might be approached.

In that tradition the custom is to start with a canonical and in fact Kantian conception of what is possible,¹ i.e. admissible into the body of beliefs held by someone with enough critical grit to wish to exclude the impossible. For Kant the possible, in the sense of what can happen in the world, is the understandable.² The inexplicable is not possible, cannot happen, and therefore reports which hopelessly resist the understanding are not admissible in a set of proper beliefs. The sense of 'belief' and 'believe' that goes with Kant's meaning of 'possible' does not apply to them. That this sense of 'possible' functions as a criterion for believability in the physical sciences and history goes without saying, and if we take Kant's Transcendental Analytic as a logic of empirical inquiry we can see very easily why


²Kant, B280.
he took it to be the only acceptable sense of the term. That is, in order for a report to qualify as a potential bit of history it must present no unsearchable dead ends to the understanding. Otherwise history would be the science of Anything Goes, and this holds for sacred history as well.

In a large number of instances, when a scripture scholar pronounces a certain biblical account mythical it is because the account fails to satisfy this criterion. Let us anchor further discussion on the familiar story in Matthew xvii: 24-27, part of which runs as follows: "(Jesus said to Peter) ...go down to the sea, and cast thy hook; take out the first fish thou drawest up, and when thou hast opened its mouth thou wilt find a silver coin there; with this make payment to them for me and for thyself." (Knox tr.) To be told that Matt. xvii is a myth or legend can of course trouble the meditations of a person who has never experienced any difficulty in believing the story. It implies that he has been believing a myth, and he may find little consolation in the thought that modern hermeneutics can save the appearances of believability by showing how the myth palpitates with moral import. The fact remains that having believed the text just for what it says, or as a record of something that happened, this person is caught with the berry-juice all over his fingers. Where this happens the older catechesis lets him brush the irritant aside, for example by remarking, "Matthew xvii a myth? Well, perhaps. But all things are possible with God, or so they tell me, including catching a fish with money in its"mouth." This may be an acceptable short-cut for someone to take when for one reason or another, and simply as a believer, he stands outside the forum where theologians and philosophers analyze such matters to a fare-thee-well. However, I would like to raise a question inside that forum, and therefore am not concerned with replies to the effect that the charge of mythology is a simple one to parry.

The question I want to ask is: What constitutes someone's believing precisely this biblical story? When a pastor reads from the gospels and expects Mr. Brown in the third pew to believe what he hears, exactly what is he expecting of Brown when the text is Matt. xvii? In what does Brown's believing that curious tale consist?

Let us take a little time to clear the ground for this question. In the first place, by believing the story I mean accepting it as it stands, as the barefaced, uninterpreted report of a command Peter presumably carried out to pay the temple tax. I do not mean sifting it and finding covert hints about one's existential predicament. Further, I would like to avoid fideistic accounts of believing Matt. xvii, for example that it consists in Brown's letting the Holy Spirit help him swallow a report which in any secular context would stick halfway down. Psychologistic accounts are also to be avoided, such as the idea that childhood training conditioned Brown to shut down all his critical apparatus while listening to Bible stories. Neither of these kinds of reply, whatever their merits may be in other connections, speaks to our conceptual question about the use of the verb 'to believe.'

It is important for our purposes that Matt. xvii presents no difficulty to the average Christian. When it is read out at Sunday services the ordinary thing is simply to hear it through and move on to the next part of the service, letting the gospel passage salt one's devotional thoughts in whatever ways it can. Here it is tempting to add, "Yes, but for this to be an instance of believing, Brown must hear the story through in a believing way." Just at this point, however, arises the question I want to ask: What does 'believe' mean as applied to that bit of the New Testament? --Here 'believing' might mean no more than just not flirting with doubts.

It would seem reasonable to assume we already possess whatever it takes to answer this question. The average Christian may know little of the psychology of conditioning, the doctrine of grace, or hermeneutics, since these are specialisms, but as one who believes Matt. xvii he may be expected to know (though it may take some reminding) what believing Matt. xvii consists in.

In order to ask our question at all it is plain we must already have parted company with the idea that 'believe' always means the same thing, no matter which biblical text we are talking about. In asking how the word applies to a particular

*Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York, 1953), Part I, #383. Along with this reference to Wittgenstein I should point out that this paper is not concerned with distinguishing the mental act of believing the Matt. xvii text from the mental act of believing some other text. It has not been established that Brown's believing Matt. xvii involves a mental or any other kind of act.*
text we have broken also with the practice of working from a
definition of 'believe' presumed to be good for any instance.
If someone protests that all applications of the word must
have something in common, the common element is at any rate
not the thing we are asking about here, when we ask how 'believe'
applies specifically to Matt. xvii. Notice that it does not
advance our purpose to say, "What distinguishes believing
this text from believing some other one is the particular
propositional content of Matt. xvii." We are not assuming
that Brown's believing has to be something different for each
bit of propositional content in the New Testament. That would
be just as a priori as assuming that it has to be the same
for all. Still open, therefore, is the possibility of finding
numerous texts for which believing consists in nothing more
or less than what it consists in for Matt. xvii.

To determine how the word functions it is necessary "to
look at its use and learn from that." To this end I want to
imagine an example that parallels Matt. xvii in certain
respects. Suppose the parapsychology department at Duke
University gets reports about a man who claims to have a special
psychic thing going with fishes. He can take people to a
tROUT pool and ask one of them to point to a particular fish.
Then he dangles a baited hook in the water and tosses a shiny
ring into the pool. The selected fish picks up the ring,
then goes to the hook and takes the bait, and the man retrieves
his ring. He can repeat the performance with a fish chosen
by somebody else.

Faced with these reports it would be appropriate for a Duke
investigator to stop right there and set the wheels of possible
explanation turning. In the Duke situation, the process of
coming to believe such extraordinary hearsay requires those
wheels. Has the subject planted miniscule sonar gear in these
tROUT? Could he be signalling them with faint pings from a
device on his person? Is it possible to train a fish to pick
up shiny objects and race to be the first one caught? How
are other fishes in the vicinity deterred from striking at
ring or bait? Could an accomplice figure in trickery here?

Compare now the situation in church, where the pastor reads
out Matt. xvii and Brown hears it through. The pastor doubt-
less assumes that most of his listeners believe the story as
it stands, and if it should ever come to a question whether
Brown does or not, he would say yes. Now when we ask what
his believing Matt. xvii consists in, or what counts as his
believing that story, the answer seems to refer us to something

exceedingly minimal and not attended with any sort of difficulty. His believing Matt. xvii does not lay upon him the concomitant task of penetrating a reported phenomenon with theory. There is no process here analogous to the Duke researcher's coming to believe. In short, Brown's believing Matt. xvii consists in his hearing the passage through attentively whenever it comes up, without vexing himself or neighbours by raising Duke University kinds of question.

We have isolated a specific application of the verb 'to believe' which does not have the same linkages to other areas of language as the Duke application. The concept of a procedure of inquiry issuing in a state of belief, so essential to the Duke application, makes no connection with it. One can merely note the difference and leave it at that. However, if instead a person persuades himself that the Duke use of 'to believe' is in some way privileged or superior, and that it ought to be made normative, he will naturally see room for a corresponding procedure of inquiry as a prelude to believing Matt. xvii. Then, in the absence of any experimental procedure by which he can bring about repetitions of that phenomenon, he may find himself powerfully tempted to fall back on the category of myth or folk-tale as a pigeonhole for Matt. xvii.

There are further non-linkages. Confronted with a report of odd happenings the Duke researcher sets the wheels of imagination going. When Matt. xvii is read to Brown in church, on the other hand, or when he reads it on his own, he is not asked to imagine anything, for instance a possible circumstance that would explain how Jesus happened to possess a knowledge from which ordinary humans are cut off. He is not asked, as a condition for his believing Matt. xvii, to do anything at all of an inward sort when he hears the text except, as mentioned earlier, to be attentive. With the Easter texts, by way of comparison, he is commanded and expected to rejoice. His believing those texts will consist in hearing them through attentively, again without raising pointless questions, plus the elements of rejoicing and celebration which play no part in his believing Matt. xvii.

Isn't there, though, something more to my believing Matt. xvii? Am I not expected to understand the passage? Yes, in the sense of understanding English. But this is not to be confused with understanding the phenomenon, or even trying to. For that would entail raising the Duke sort of suspicions and doubts, but those serve no point where Duke methods of allaying them have no application. In other words, the grammar of the word 'believe' as applied to Matt. xvii does not involve anyone's using, or having used, investigative procedures to convince himself, while in the Duke example
experiment and controlled repetitions of the phenomenon figure crucially in applying the word. Does this fact of grammar make it a matter of indifference to the believer whether the event in Galilee happened or not? Far from it. The text says it happened, and in believing the text as it stands he believes it happened, which is just the opposite of regarding it as mythical. The point I am noticing is that the use of 'believe' in this instance does not involve the believer's going through a probative procedure that takes something out of him, or consulting one that took something out of some other investigator.

To express more positively this response to our conceptual question, I suggest that believing Matt. xvii involves nothing beyond attending to the sound English sentences of the story, unvexed by kinds of question that go with an entirely distinct and different use of the word 'believe'. This is what 'believe' means in relation to that text. We observed in passing that in relation to the Easter texts it involves something more, celebration and inward rejoicing. Its applications to an assortment of other texts may be expected to reveal a rainbow of further differences. If this is correct, the believer does not have to thank God for a special impouring of faith or grace to help him over the difficulty, for in Matt. xvii there was no difficulty, although for many New Testament teachings where 'believe' does not apply in the same undemanding way, the difficulty in believing can be extreme. Similarly, he does not owe thanks to any theologian for a hermeneutical retouching of Matt. xvii to help him over the difficulty, since, again, there was no difficulty. On the question whether Matt. xvii is myth or something else, our line of inquiry suggests nothing more final than a conditional remark: if classifying the text as a myth implies in any way that Matt. xvii as it stands presents an impediment to belief, then by the most rudimentary valid inference it is no myth, for the impediment is not there.

By way of anticipating objections, to say that this paper presents a seriously emaciated analysis of the concept 'believe' would be off the mark. The paper does not set out to deliver a definition of 'believing', but merely an account of what believing Matt. xvii means. Nor would it be damaging to object that someone reading a fairy tale, his mind untroubled

If I believe, for example, that Jesus is Saviour, and carry the belief beyond lip-service, this seems to require my giving him carte blanche to reshape my life and treating whatever then befalls me, no matter how shattering, as part of the saving operation.
by evidential questions and hypotheses, would by our account be believing the tale. In the first place comparison is reckless between the New Testament and writings in which unheard of events happen as a matter of course. Secondly it is not at all clear whether and how the word 'believe' functions in relation to fairy tales. Those are not proposed for our belief as the New Testament is, which is to say by preaching. If we should ever find occasion to speak of believing that the frog became a handsome prince, one would have to stop and ask, 'What counts as believing that?' before one could compare it with believing Matt. xvii.

To some readers the most glaring fault in this approach to religious applications of the word 'believe' will be its apparent toleration of even the most far-fetched biblical wonders. "Surely some stories in that book are beyond belief!" Very likely so, but which use of 'believe' are you leaning on? For if you mean episodes which ask no more of me than Matt. xvii asks in order to be believed, in what sense are those beyond belief?

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