

The transcendentalist
bible vs. the actual
bible: scriptural and
ideological para...



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American culture has a notoriously rapid pace and obvious state of exhaustion which accompanies an overexertion of the mind, body, and spirit of a person. In this hustle and bustle it becomes easy to lose sight of the ideals set for happiness and overall lifestyle. At some point in life the question of if it was all worth it for the end goal must be asked, and it is in this quest for purpose and meaning that many of the ideas presented in Thoreau's memoir *Walden* fall. While many of his views are in sync with the teachings of the Bible on how Christians should live a meaningful and fulfilling life, others are in complete contradiction. Thus, it becomes necessary to determine the differences between the values of Thoreau and biblical authors, as both works contain ideas still applicable in the constant race of modern society. While Thoreau and the biblical authors agree on some points such as the devaluation of material possessions, others such as the eternal value of the present and the presence of the success-granting hand of God are different between the two works.

The most prominent instance of similarity between the Bible and Thoreau is seen in the attitude towards worldly, material possessions. Stances on materialism and worldly possessions are all throughout the Bible, and are supported by Thoreau's own quest for a simplistic life. The most obvious example of a life void of materialism is that of Jesus Christ, who prioritized the mission of God over comfort and riches. Similarly, the biblical verse from Luke which says "[t]ake care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12: 15) reiterates the importance of life outside of worldly possessions. In Thoreau's *Walden*, he supports this passage from Luke when he writes "[t]he

town's poor seem to me often to live the most independent lives of any... cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not change, we change... God will see that you do not want society" (Thoreau 413). These two passages are similar in the significance placed on life itself compared to materialism. To live a truly meaningful life, the things which provide personal gain in place of eternal value must be disregarded and attention turned to independence in favor of materialism. Only by disregarding the tempting and indulging worldly items will a life of poverty and independence be achieved. Thoreau praises simplicity when he advises " let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand...keep your accounts in your thumbnail" (Thoreau 410). Overall, the idea of simplicity in all aspects of life is present in both the Bible and the writing of Thoreau, as material items and simply distract from the overall goal of a fulfilling life, complete with liberty from cultural norms in the place of materialistic conformity.

Despite the similarities between the lifestyles called for in the Bible and Thoreau's own writings, there exist differences as well. The first instance of contradiction between Thoreau and the Bible is in reference to living a meaningful life and how time it is spent on earth. The book of James addresses this when it says, "[c]ome now, you who say, ' Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'. Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time then vanishes" (James 4: 14). This verse indicates the fleeting nature of each person's time on earth,

an idea challenged by Thoreau when he writes that “[t]ime is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars” (Thoreau 411). While the author of James emphasizes the importance of living for the present instead of planning for the future, Thoreau’s metaphor of the sand and pond illustrates the idea that eternity is all that matters. It is in these contrasting viewpoints that the difference in priority between the authors is seen. Thoreau promotes eternal welfare over caring about the present, while James depicts the idea of a fleeting lifetime, calling for more attention to the value of momentary experiences. The final example of a difference between the viewpoints of the biblical writers and Thoreau is on the topic of success through God.

Sometimes faith can become dangerous when it infringes on the realm of chance instead of guaranteed success. An example of this paradox is seen in 1 Kings when it is written that people should “[o]bserve what the LORD your God requires: Walk in obedience to him, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and regulations, as written in the Law of Moses. Do this so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go” (1 Kings 2: 3). While faith in the plan and works of God is a healthy thing, Thoreau believes such a belief of guaranteed success is dangerous. He expresses this idea when he writes “[t]he life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even this may be the year which will drown out all or muskrats. It was not always dry land where we dwell...” (Thoreau 413-414). The metaphor of the

rising river portrays the reality of life which is that there will be good times as well as bad times. Included in this metaphor is the subtle guarantee that there will be times of struggle, which contradicts with the biblical ideal of faith will grant success in all things. The difference between the views of the biblical author and Thoreau for a successful life is essentially whether or not God will be present in all hardship and working to stop it or not. Thoreau maintains that natural life has its limits, while this pessimistic view is refuted by the optimistic and promising view from the Bible. In this, the two works disagree on whether adversity in pursuit of purpose in life is a lack of faith in God's omnipotence or simply as a fact of life.

Overall, the authors of the Bible and Thoreau share many ideas such as a view on worldly possessions, but contradict each other such on topics such as the importance of eternity and the presence of God in hardship. A quest for meaning must be tailored to an individual's personal needs, but such an experience as that which Thoreau had at Walden Pond is an invaluable asset to all people. The ability to find meaning while assuming a state of minimalism is beneficial to not only the intellectual side of an individual, but also the physical representations of living a meaningful life such as valuing eternity over momentary comfort found in material items. Overall, a soul searching adventure such as the one Thoreau engaged in is one of the best tools that can be utilized to find meaning in life, as the true meaning can only be discovered when the excess is peeled away.