

The Authority of Scripture: An Historical Perspective

To love God with one's whole heart and soul and strength surely means to obey God's commandments and to give each equal weight, because they are God's commands; and not to engage in the human arrogance of presuming to see some commandments as more important than others. In fact, while such a stance is defensible, it is rarely practised and most, rightly, deem it appropriate to recognise greater and lesser commandments and so to discern priorities. Some might deem temple purity the priority which outweighs and might overrule all others; some might deem human need as such.

The Judaism with which I am most familiar, that of Jesus and his fellow Jews of the first century, and a few centuries before, reflected diversity, not least over such different sets of priorities. With very rare exceptions, exposition of Torah never entailed picking and choosing, let alone discarding. It was always about appropriate combinations. Even the Alexandrian Jew, Philo, who engaged extensively in allegory, always insisted that allegorical interpretation should never mean abandoning literal observance and severely criticised some contemporaries for doing so. Torah was inviolate, even if its halakhic interpretation could be contentious. The Jesus of history belongs firmly within the Judaism of his time in this respect and belonged with those whose focus was more strongly ethical than cultic, with good pedigree in the prophets and wisdom literature, but also in Torah itself which demanded circumcision of the heart as much as literal circumcision.

As the emerging messianic movement expanded following Jesus' death, its Jewish adherents faced a number of severe crises, not least over their handling of scripture and Torah. Before their claims about Jesus escalated to the point where they became offensive to their fellow Jews and laid them open to serious charges of blasphemy, they ran into conflict within the Jewish community and among themselves over their response to Gentiles who joined their movement. What were they to do? Very soon they were welcoming Gentiles as full members of God's people without requiring their circumcision. Apparently agreed to by most and claimed on an alleged divine mandate, it nearly tore the movement apart. So you had Paul conducting a mission in Galatia only to be followed by another insisting that all his converts be circumcised.

The flood of Gentiles soon raised new controversies: what did it mean for them to keep Torah? how could Jews and Gentiles co-exist, including close fellowship over meals, without some compromise? The writings of the New Testament still reflect some of these differences. One source preserving sayings of Jesus inspired the demand that not a stroke of Torah be abandoned, thus Matthew (5:18) and Luke (16:17), though the latter, at least, exempts circumcision. On the other hand, Paul and

Mark reflect tendencies already latent in diaspora Judaism of giving priority to the universal and ethical values of Torah, but go beyond them to declare circumcision of the heart as alone sufficient, and even to declare laws pertaining to ritual purity and to food as never having made any sense: not what enters a person but what comes out makes them unclean, in effect a radical dismissal of much of Torah.

Paul then claims to stand in a tradition of scripture reaching back to Abraham which can bypass Torah. These were Jewish solutions to dilemmas which would later even go so far as depicting Torah as predicting its own demise, except as witness to the new basis for ethics, namely Jesus and his authority, such as we find in the fourth gospel, in all sincerity and respect for Torah. Others, of course, saw this as sheer apostasy. Paul's radical solution was to declare that believers lived no longer under the Torah, but by the Spirit given through Christ which was to manifest itself in radical love and so more than fulfil what he claimed and honoured as Torah's intention.

Paul's career, as his letters reflect, was dogged by controversy, mostly with fellow Christian Jews, who challenged his approach to scripture's authority, but also with those who apparently recognised no authority and turned their religion into self-indulgence. Paul was a Jew seeking to be faithful to his people and his tradition and its scripture in the face of a radically changed situation. Arguably he took Jesus' halakhic priority in focussing on human need as overriding all other requirements of Torah where they came into conflict and developed it one step further: beginning along with others with a permanent overriding of circumcision and then an overriding of all other elements which were alleged to create barriers between Jews and Gentiles, virtually all non ethical aspects of Torah. It was a radical Jewish response to being in diaspora, which most of his fellow Jews could not own. Christian identity is thus grounded in what was a creative and controversial response to the issue: how far can you compromise in the interests of opening your faith to all humankind without risking its integrity?

I stand in a Christian tradition which sees itself as heir to this approach to scripture and Torah, one which respects its authority, but reads it in the light of its alleged core and applies it flexibly, taking into account both the cultural presuppositions which it embodies, which we no longer share, and the ongoing world of learning of our time into which it brings its message. I see similar conflicts acting themselves out 2000 years later. There are those who insist on keeping all the commandments, with or without priorities, and so forbid divorce and remarriage, block women from leadership in ministry, and declare people recognised as having homosexual orientation ineligible for leadership unless they deny their self-expression. I am among those who would take an opposite stance. I greatly respect the position which insists that all must be obeyed, but I would argue that this fails the spirit of what is at the core of the tradition, which calls for the discipline of flexibility and compassion.

While I can distinguish between two models, one that affirms all, sets priorities, and allows for one part to override another – the stance I think of the historical Jesus, and, at least of Matthew, and one that is prepared to go further, given new circumstances not faced by Jesus, and permanently override some elements and seek to identify the core values which drive such decisions, I do not think they are so easily distinguished.

In reality, most who espouse the former model go beyond it. That was already the case on circumcision. It is not hard to do so on slavery and on women, even on divorce, which Jesus explicitly prohibited. Increasingly evangelical scholarship, where such a stance is mostly at home, has been engaging, perhaps as safer and less controversial, the social world of the New Testament, and so is far more ready to recognise such cultural influences than before. At present there is a rather artificial rationalisation at play in such circles which argues that it is allowable to abandon some things if within scripture itself there is conflict about them. Unfortunately that will somewhat arbitrarily or by chance leave out some instructions where it is equally applicable.

I think this is so with homosexuality, where our biblical authors, on the basis of Genesis and the common experience of most, naturally assume that all people are heterosexual and so condemn any same sex relations between men or between women. That makes sense because it represents perversion. It does not make sense of those other people whose natural orientation is homosexual and who are not engaged in the perversions of the drunken parties which marked such behaviour in Paul's day where profligate men slept with whoever they could, usually both sexes. A careful and flexible interpretation of our tradition might affirm these people as they are and serve them better as fellow human beings by enabling them to develop their spiritual maturity and responsibility with the same seriousness and discipline as their heterosexual fellows.

Of course there are those who want to abandon scripture altogether. My argument is that we need to take it more seriously, but not artificially as though it is an ahistorical tractate, but in its world and its context, as a cross-cultural encounter in which we know we will be blessed. This is in fact not a modern approach, but one at the very beginnings of the movement when as a Jewish community it struggled to come to terms with a new situation. It was perhaps inevitable that some Jews might decide to open the blessings of their religious heritage to the wider world by dropping their own distinctive ethnic markers and trimming Torah to the largely ethical, combined with axioms derived from loyalty to their new messianic leader, but it is equally clear that others saw such strategies as both unnecessary even as betrayal. I am here because of such innovation in approaching scripture and tradition, but acknowledging also therefore my controversial roots and the pain which need not have followed.

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