

The Authority of Scripture

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, יְהִי אֹר; וַיְהִי-אֹר

And God said, “Let there be light and there was light.”

At the very beginning of the Bible we are introduced to the God who speaks and who has made men and women in His image as speaking beings.

Subsequently God is often described as speaking personally to individuals or to His people. He addresses Abraham with a command and a promise (Genesis 12: 1-3). He spoke both to Moses and to the people at Mt Sinai (Exodus 19-24; 25-40) and through the prophets that followed.

Some people think that a transcendent and infinite God cannot use finite human language to communicate effectively. However the God we meet in the Bible can use human, culture bound language without compromising his transcendence.

So when a reluctant Moses protests that he is too inarticulate to confront Pharaoh, the Lord replies, “Who makes man’s mouth...Is it not I, the Lord? (Exodus 4:11).

It would indeed be extraordinary if the God, who has made humans with the capacity to communicate by speaking, could not Himself convey meaningful and trustworthy words to humanity.

“I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have planned and I will do it” (Is.46:11). And again, “Who told you this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the Lord? (Is. 45:21)

God is able to communicate by non-verbal means but usually He communicates the meaning of His actions by His words and so establishes a relationship with those He addresses. There are some who would not want to deny that the Sovereign Creator can speak through chosen messengers, but they balk at the idea that these messages could be reliably recorded and transmitted.

Yet the concept of a trustworthy, holy scripture is not an ideological concept imposed on the text by certain theologians. It originated from the Hebrew Scriptures. Its first appearance is in Exodus 24 where Moses, after his encounter with God on Mt Sinai, wrote, “the words of the Law.” Moses produced a book, “the Book of the Covenant.” That “Book of the Covenant became the means of God’s revelation to Israel and a continuing test of Israel’s obedience to the covenant based on that revelation. It is the covenant origin of the Scriptures that reveals both their authority and nature. In fact it seems that in Exodus 24 we have the nucleus of the Bible as well as the first congregational service in which the lesson is read from the Book to which the people respond in a pledge of obedience.

It is noteworthy that in the same service Moses not only “read the Book of the Covenant in the hearing of the people,” he also took blood and threw half against the altar and half over the people.

The Book of the Covenant contained the words of God reminding Israel who God is, what He has done, who they are, what He asks of them and what He will do for them. The blood on the other hand recognises flawed human nature (soon to be demonstrated in the worship of the golden calf). It is by sacrifice that God’s judgment is to be averted and His gracious forgiveness experienced. (See the comments on Exodus 24 in Hebrews 9:18-22). Covenant book and covenant blood bind God and His people.

Another example of how holy scripture originated is found in Jeremiah chapter 36 where the Lord commanded the prophet to “write all the words that I have spoken to you in a book” i.e. all the words that God had spoken to him over many years so that there might be a continuing witness which might yet lead the people of Judah to repent and be saved. Sadly King Jehoiakim, the leader of God’s people, cuts up the scroll and burns it. Baruch, Jeremiah’s secretary, had to rerecord the oracles.

One cannot account for all of the scriptures by incidents such as those of Exodus 24 and Jeremiah 36. Nevertheless they clearly establish that words written by men may, if God so intends, be God’s word written.

Incidentally these two examples show the folly of the modern notion that Biblical writings are the product of “the community of faith”. Israel’s almost immediate apostasy in the creation of a (“culturally appropriate”) golden calf and the Davidic king’s shredding of Jeremiah’s scroll, underline that the Biblical documents come via prophets and apostles despite the unbelief of “the community of faith”.

The apostle Paul’s much quoted words in 2 Timothy 3:16 that all scripture is “God-breathed” (theopneustos), summarises the Biblical view of Holy Scripture. God’s Spirit not only moved the prophets to speak but speaks Himself through resultant writings.

My focus here is on the character of Scripture, as originally given, being God’s Word. There are other issues such as the limits of scripture (or Canon), transmission of the text translation and interpretation, issues for which time does not allow more than the briefest allusion. These issues are important but secondary and would be of little interest if in the first place no written word of God had been given. For instance the supreme authority of Holy Scripture in all matters of faith and conduct is not rendered ineffectual if we are slightly uncertain about the limits of scripture (i.e. the Canon) or about the original meaning of some obscure passage. That is because the story of the Bible has a definite coherence.

The coherence of the Bible as the Book of the Covenant has a definite coherence may be sketched as follows:

- The Lord made covenant promises to Abraham
- The Lord fulfilled these promises in the history of Israel in the exodus and the Davidic Kingdom
- The Lord sent prophets who restated the promises as the Kingdom of David was collapsing. These prophets foreshadowed the deep fulfilment in the coming Messiah
- Finally God speaks by His Son the Messiah (Hebrews 1:1-13) in whom all God’s covenant promises are fulfilled for both Israel and Gentile believers (2 Corinthians 1:20).

God has revealed Himself to and through Israel. This means the modern reader (especially the Gentile reader) must recognise the immense historical and cultural distance to be bridged. Even in the New Testament documents one has to adjust to the alien world of first century Judaism where the Christian movement began. One has to see how the Gospel of Jesus appeared to a Jew whose worldview and assumptions were very different from those of an Australian. This “distance” from the original Text must, by the way, be respected in any Bible translation.

Nevertheless the coherence of the Bible’s story with its Old Testament pattern that finds fulfilment in the New Testament gospel of Jesus, the Messiah, provides controls or guidelines which govern our interpretation. Thus no practical difficulty arises from whether or not Esther was really part of the Hebrew Scriptures or whether Jude is a legitimate part of the New Testament Canon.

If the Scriptures are the Word of God does this mean that they are without error? So much depends on the frame of reference and purpose in the communication. In any passage of Scripture we must try to determine the purpose of the writer before assessing the degree of literary efficiency with which he has carried out that purpose. For example the writer of Judges solemnly informs us that Gideon faced a Midianite army whose camels were, “without number as the sands on the seashore for multitude”. You can regard this as gross mathematical distortion. It certainly would be in the report of the Midianite cavalry officer. But we could also recognise such hyperbole as effective for its purpose.

More seriously there are undoubted discrepancies in some figures and statistics between the respective accounts of Kings and Chronicles when describing the same incidents. The source of discrepancy could be an error in transmission. Or if the text is correct, one of the two accounts is wrong. But before we hasten to such a conclusion an assessment of the passage as a whole and its purpose must temper any conclusion as to apparent errors.

Finally we must recognise that the subject of our discussion tonight — The Authority of Scripture — is anathema in our culture. Scepticism about authority is deeply engrained in Western culture as those who have worked in other cultures well know. This interrogatory spirit, our love of freedom, tolerance, experimentation critical thinking and individual autonomy, has not been without benefits (and arguably was initiated by the impact of the Bible on our forefathers) but it has developed to the point where the subjective life of the individual has become the master and measure of the truth.

Unfortunately Biblical studies have been shaped by this ethos. It is one thing to acknowledge the role of the reader’s presuppositions in interpretation, it is another to proclaim “the reader is the author” as do some current “reader-response” proponents. Textual criticism of the Bible i.e. the activity of defining, classifying, analysing, interpreting and evaluating the Biblical corpus may help us to read it better, as with other human literature.

But the nature of the Bible’s authority means that we approach it with humility and reverence. The authority of the Bible is the authority of the Lord who has entered into a covenant with His people and rules them by His given word.

The literary critic must also recognise the unity of the Bible as the completed Book of the Covenant. This unity is not inconsistent with the evident diversity of time, place, language, genre and experience. If in the past this unity has been over emphasised at the expense of the diversity, the present mood in Biblical Studies is the opposite. The Bible is being treated as a diversity that cannot be reassembled.

At the very centre of the Bible’s authority and unity is Jesus the Messiah. Explaining the necessity of his death and resurrection for the salvation of God’s people, he said to his Jewish disciples: “everything written about me in the law of Moses, and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:44). As the apostle Paul says “for all God’s covenant promises find their Yes in him. That is why we utter our Amen to God for his glory” (2 Cor 1:20 cf. Jer 31:31-34; Heb 8:8-13).

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