

Rethinking the Scriptures

by Joel McClure

Scripture as the Written Word of God

There has been a great deal of concern on the part of many Christians to talk about the scriptures as the “infallible and inerrant Word of God.” This concern has risen primarily in response to challenges of ‘rival’ claims to authoritative stories of reality. In our most recent history, the primary ‘rivals’ have been the authoritative claims of reason and science.

As these systems asserted themselves as authoritative over revelation—with some questioning the accuracy, and thus the authority, of the scriptures—Christians felt the need to defend the accuracy, and thus the authority, of the scriptures. In many parts of Western Christianity, this took the form of an adversarial relationship with scientific claims. In other parts of Western Christianity, the language and tools of science and reason were employed to defend the scriptures against what was perceived—sometimes fairly so—as atheistic science and reason; fighting fire with fire, so to speak. What is important to see, however, is that what was at stake was whether the scriptures were authoritative or not.

The language often used as a kind of ‘trump card’ in this struggle for authority is the phrase, “The Bible is the Word of God.” Phrases like, “The Bible says it; I believe it; That settles it!” are common ways for some Christians to respond to challenges. It is so common for people to simply refer to the scriptures as “The Word (of God)” that it seems strange to even point it out.

But what do we mean when we say that the Bible is the “Word of God?” It is certainly not the same thing we mean when we refer to Jesus as “The Word,” is it? Then in what sense are the scriptures the “Word of God?”

In the scriptures themselves, the “Word of God” was initially the creative, life-bringing power of Yahweh, bringing into existence things that did not previously exist by ‘speaking’ it into being (Genesis 1:3, 1:6-7, 1:11, 1:24, 1:26-27). Later, we see the “Word of Yahweh” coming to Abraham and his descendants—communicating to them what God wanted them to do and telling them what He was going to do to them, for them, and through them (Genesis 15:1, Numbers 3:16, First Samuel 3:1, First Kings 21:28, Psalm 18:30, Isaiah 38:4, Jeremiah 2:1, Ezekiel 12:1).

When the New Testament refers to the “Word of the Lord” (9 of the 10 occurrences are found in Acts, and the 10th is a quotation of Isaiah in 1 Peter 1:25), it is referring to the news about Messiah Jesus and the kingdom of God. The phrase never refers to scripture. When New Testament authors refer to scripture (which for them would have been the Hebrew scriptures, our ‘Old Testament’), they use the word ‘scriptures’ (Matthew 21:42, 22:29, 26:54, Mark 12:10, 14:49, Luke 24:27, John 2:22, 5:39, 7:38, Acts 8:32, 17:2, 18:24, Romans 1:2, 10:11, 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Galatians 3:8, First Timothy 4:13, 5:18, Second Timothy 3:15-16, James 2:8, First Peter 2:6, Second Peter 1:20).

What we may say about the scriptures, then is that they are the written record of God’s self-revelation through his Word and Spirit to human beings—specifically, through the poets, prophets, priests, and philosophers of ancient Israel, and through the Messiah Jesus and his apostles. These ‘records’ become ‘alive’ for us as we receive the Spirit who speaks with and through the scriptures. We become ‘alive’ to the scriptures as we receive and obey the creative, life-bringing, self-revealing Word of God through the Spirit.



We cannot understand the scriptures as the Word of God apart from the Spirit of God speaking to us through them. We cannot understand the scriptures as the Word of God apart from it being the self-revelation of God to us—for the purpose of joining in the long line of people who have received the 'word of Yahweh' and have responded to it with trust, obedience, and love. What we mean by all this is that scripture is not to be used as a 'club of authority' with which we may pummel all other claims to authority. It is a story—the True Story—into which we are called to participate with God.

Understanding the scriptures, then, as the Story of God calls us to hear the scriptures as a grand narrative of reality—history, future, and present understood within God's redemptive activity and desire for the creation He loves. This demands that we know the scriptures and how they tell the story of God's mission for the healing of the world. It demands that we understand how the stories fit together within the Whole Story, and how our own lives fit within the Whole Story.

To do this will demand that we hear the scriptures on their own terms—with respect to what particular kinds of texts are trying to say. We will need to do the hard work of hearing the historical contexts in which the texts were written, the type of literature they represent (and the particular expectations we can have for that particular type of literature), as well as how each particular text is to be understood in relationship to the rest of the scripture. It is disrespectful to the scriptures to run away from this hard work and to retreat into the kind of strict literalism that professes to take scripture 'at face value'.

This is not to say that it is impossible to understand the basic message of the scriptures (i.e., love God, love neighbor, don't steal, don't murder, don't covet, etc.). These kinds of things are not difficult to grasp. We are saying, however, that not all scripture is so easily and readily understandable (even the apostle Peter says as much in 2 Peter 3:16)—it takes effort and time, but it is worth our time and best efforts. Let us, therefore, give our time and attention to knowing the Story of God so we might more faithfully live in it.

The Authority of Scripture as Delegated or Mediated Authority

When we talk of the authority of Scripture, we would be shutting God up into the heavens if we did not understand it as God's authority somehow operating through the text. The modern approach to scripture as authority above reason, science, etc., may often fall into a very modern practice of dualism that kicks God upstairs, leaving us to take care of things downstairs on our own. At its worst, this practice has resulted in the twisting of the intention of the scriptures—turning the text into the proof-text for one's own agendas. In this way, the self or group (or ideology) becomes the authority, the text becomes the tool of those claiming authority over those who think differently.

Instead, we suggest that authority belongs ultimately to God who is beyond systematics and ideology—whose politics calls into question all other politics (as well as invites alternative politics to be exchanged for the politics of the Beyond). Any cooperative authority that operates is to be understood in a delegated or mediated sense.



OBJECTIFIED AUTHORITY OF THE TEXT

Authority of self/ideology



Bible



to prevail over others

The self or group (or ideology) becomes the authority, the text becomes the tool of those claiming authority over those who think differently. Certainty here is necessary to claim the 'right' position.

MEDIATED AUTHORITY OF THE TEXT

Authority of God



Bible



for the sake of others

Authority of God places us in position 'below' the text (motives and positions of the self are under examination), listening and shaping for the sake of God's agenda. There is here a call for fidelity rather than certainty.



In what way, then, do the scriptures function as a mediated authority over the faith and practice of the disciples of Jesus?

First, the scriptures act as a 'norming norm'-the rule by which we measure any and all ways of talking about the One True God and the Messiah. We might be able to disagree, for instance, on the particular means of creation (i.e., billions of years or six thousand), but we all start with "In the beginning, God..." Scripture does not permit us to speak of a creation without a Creator. The scriptures set the pattern for our talk about God and His purposes for creation—and any new ways of talking about God will be consistent with the scriptures.

The story of God's relationship with one particular extended family sets those who would identify themselves as part of that family along a particular trajectory. We are part of this people who have been given this responsibility, which means we are unlike other people. This distinction does not necessarily follow the path of protestant closed communities, but it does follow the path of peculiarity—a peculiarity that is open to the other (loving both neighbor and 'enemy') and sent for the benefit of the other (to be a blessing, so all peoples might be blessed through you).

Second, the scriptures will set the pattern for the way we relate to each other. The scriptures are the 'norming norm,' not just for theology, but for how we live. The teaching of Jesus, which was consistent with Israel's Torah (Matthew 5:17-20), is to be obeyed—not because 'those are the rules,' but because they are how human life best 'works'. To live as truly human people means being conformed to the pattern of the 'age to come' under the rule and reign of God,

and not to the pattern of this present age (Romans 12:1-2).

As we place ourselves under the direction of the Spirit, we must spend time listening to the Spirit in the Text. The scriptures become functionally authoritative as we submit our lives to the Spirit's (the authority to which the scriptures themselves point) direction and calling in light of the revelation of God throughout history.

The scriptures set the shape for life as the people of God. The Torah, the teachings of God for Israel, was the formational document for the corporate life of Israel—it taught them how they were to treat each other and care for each other. All through the scriptures, we see a consistent concern for life in community to reflect the love, justice, and peace of God (Leviticus 19:1-37, Deuteronomy 23:15-25, Amos 2:6-12, John 15:1-17; Romans 12:9-13, Galatians 5:16-26).

Third, we also see in the scriptures that the people who are called together by God are there for each others' benefit—not for their own (Ephesians 4:1-16, Philippians 2:1-11). The Spirit gives specific 'gifts' (charismata) to each member of the Body. Some of these giftings serve in the function of ongoing responsibilities (such as servants, diakonos, and caregivers, episkopoi and presbuteroi). We see some of these roles as necessary in all cultural contexts, and they are understood in light of passages such as First Timothy 3:1-16 and Titus 1:6-9. All roles and functions within the community, whether they are situational or ongoing, are to be carried out for the benefit of others, and not for personal aggrandizement (Matthew 20:20-28, Mark 10:35-37).

Finally, the bible is a witness calling for witnesses. In the Bible, we have the 'record' of people who bore witness to the One True God, and their witness is an invitation for us to join them as the people who bear witness to the One True God (Hebrews 11:1-40). We should see our lives as a continuation of that long line of God-explorers, God-listeners, God-watchers, God-reporters. This means that we must understand and tell our stories in terms of what God is like and what God is doing in the world in our time-and to invite those around us (and after us) to bear witness to God's love, justice, and peace (Hebrews 12:1-3).

The Scriptures Deserve Our Attention

If scripture is to be authoritative for us, it deserves our utmost attention. It is not enough to simply read the scriptures, though for many it would be a good first step to read scripture together. We must spend time studying the scriptures, listening for the voice of the Spirit in the text, identifying what obedience to the Spirit in the text looks like in our context, and correcting our thinking and behavior where the Spirit, through the scripture, calls for correction.

We spend time studying the scriptures together so we can discern what is consistent with the character and nature of God, and to guard ourselves against deceptive ideas in this present age (Colossians 2:8, 2 Corinthians 10:5). We study the scriptures so we can more clearly understand our calling in this world and how we might please God (Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 1:8, Romans 12:1-2, 1 Thessalonians 4:1).

The nature of our study must be more than asking each other, "What does this mean to you?" We must approach our study with a humble openness to challenge, critique, and a confidence that the Spirit will guide us in all truth (John 14:26).

We will study the scriptures with an ear for where the Spirit is calling us to go and to grow. We will practice discernment together so that we can be faithful to the mission of God. We will submit our ideas to each other in the Spirit so that we will be operating under the direction of the Spirit of God. We will study the scriptures with a willingness to make corrections in our thinking and behavior so that they are 'in step with the Spirit'. This may likely take the shape of allowing other disciples to challenge us when our thinking and behavior is reflecting the image of something other than that of the Messiah. We might think of this of "Letting the scriptures read us." Instead of placing the scriptures under the microscope to dissect, investigate and exploit, here we are placing our lives under the lens of the scriptures and the light of the Spirit to see where we need to be straightened-out. It is only as we approach the scriptures in such a way that we can truly speak of the scriptures (or more properly, God) having authority in our lives.

