

Society for Ecumenical Studies webinar: 14 October 2020

Scripture – a Uniting Gift?

Each of the speakers in this evening's presentation has been asked to present the attitude to the Bible characteristic of their own tradition. I can only present my own attitude to the Bible, which is, I think, in accord with the Roman Catholic understanding of the Word of God.

To begin with, it should be stated that the Roman Catholic attitude to the Bible has altered considerably since Vatican II. At that Council the discussion and the resulting decree on the Bible changed attitudes radically. At the Reformation a divergence was firmly established that the Bible was for Protestants and the sacraments were for Catholics. A symbol of this division was perhaps on the one hand the family Bible as a token of fidelity for Protestants and for Catholics attendance at Mass. Even the Bible itself was a source of disunity. The English Puritan exiles in Geneva issued their own edition with annotations, and it was to some extent to get rid of these that King James set afoot the preparation of the King James Version. Catholics had their own version, the Rheims-Douai version, though this was consulted by the final revising committee of the KJV, and adopted in certain passages. Even the numbering of verses was introduced for purposes of exact reference in controversy.

From the Roman Catholic point of view the situation was made worse at the beginning of the twentieth century by the Modernist Movement, by which certain Roman Catholic scholars, led by the French priest Alfred Loisy, adopted positions with regard to the new discoveries about the Bible which were stamped on so hard by papal authority that Roman Catholic biblical studies were stifled for half a century.

All this was changed by the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*, which opened the way to a renewal of biblical studies, particularly in the study of inspiration itself. A new Lectionary was introduced, by which a far wider range of biblical passages was prescribed for use at the Eucharist; this lectionary was soon adopted by other Churches, including the Anglican communion. This led on in German-speaking lands to the *Einheitsuebersetzung* and in the French sphere to the *Traduction Oecumenique de la Bible (TOB)*. Fear of non-Catholic biblical scholarship disappeared; Catholics were encouraged to use and learn from the full range of biblical scholarship, making accessible to Catholics the great Anglican tradition of scholarship, the Congregationalist C.H. Dodd, the Presbyterian Bruce Metzger, the Manchester school of the John Rylands Library and Professorship, Methodists such as Frances Young; from each of these I myself have learnt a great deal. For public prayer biblical services began to be encouraged, the Prayer of the Church (formerly almost only a priestly and monastic prayer) returned to a position in parish worship, and in private prayer the monastic practice of *lectio divina* (the reflective reading of scripture as individuals or in groups) became widespread. The adoption of such widespread Christian practices makes it difficult to speak of a specifically Catholic use of or attitude to the Bible.

If there is anything specific about the Catholic stance it is the awareness that interpretation of the Bible stands in a tradition. The Bible establishes the tradition and the tradition establishes the Bible. This is well illustrated by the establishment of the Canon of Scripture. The Roman Church rejected the attempt by Marcion to get rid of the Old Testament and restrict the Gospels to that of Luke (even returning to him a fat cheque). In the second century Bishop Serapion forbade the reading of the Gospel of Peter at Rhossos because of its unorthodox

Christology. Finally the canon of scripture was established by the Festal Letter of Athanasius of Alexandria in 367. More widely, a whole host of gospels claiming apostolic origin simply stopped being copied and disappeared until they were rediscovered (e.g. at Nag Hammadi) by excavators in the sands of Egypt. They were simply felt by the Christian community not to express the Christian message.

At the Reformation the same phenomenon occurred when Luther rejected the books of the Old Testament written in Greek. Though I have not examined this question closely, I would be inclined to say that he picked up a hint from Jerome's preference for the *Hebraica veritas* in order to reject the Books of Maccabees, which teach prayer for the dead. However, his real reason was theological, namely his rejection of the widespread and abused Catholic practice of Masses for the dead.

This awareness of standing within a tradition is important not only in establishing which books are part of the biblical canon (or rule of life), but also in the matter of interpretation. What does 'standing within a tradition' mean? Apart from the crisis of Catholic Modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century papal or even Vatican official pronouncements on the interpretation of passages of scripture have been rare. It is more that the tradition of interpretation is passed on by a million occasions of teaching, discussion and instruction in skills and methods as well as individual snippets of knowledge. I could name with pleasure dozens of teachers, Catholic and more widely Christian, logical and literary, who have contributed to my stance in tradition.

I would like to refer to two different aspects of this, firstly how literally we should understand the Bible, and secondly how some biblical attitudes may be regarded as outmoded. In both of these the awareness of standing in a tradition, though not unique to Roman Catholicism, is characteristic of the Catholic stance. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit comes to the author as a human being, standing in a tradition. The Spirit does not dictate, sitting on the shoulder of the writer. The writer is a real author, using the methods and vocabulary of his time, but the Spirit presides over this process of authorship. Ancient images of the Spirit 'playing' the author as a musician plays a flute (sometimes a twisted flute) will not do.

This is important for the understanding of the writing. In what sense is the writing true, and in what sense is it inspired? The early histories of the Patriarchs are not modern researched histories, but are like family traditional stories, in which details change from one ancestor to another, and the scientific approach is that of the time. So the same story may be told of Abraham (in Egypt and at Geraar) and Isaac. The poetic celebration of Joshua's victory (Joshua 10.13) can say that the sun stood still, as a way of pointing out that there was plenty of time to slaughter the defeated enemy. Indeed, in Luke's account of the Ascension of Jesus the Risen Christ was taken up into heaven, so that the disciples stood there gazing up into the sky. This is a fitting transition from the gospel period to the apostolic. Luke markedly depicts Jesus as a prophet (Lk 7.16), and here as Elijah: just as Elijah was taken up in a fiery chariot, leaving a double share of his spirit to Elisha, so Jesus is taken up into a divine cloud and will give an ample share of his Spirit to his disciples at Pentecost.

In none of these cases is the account true in the sense that a modern piece of historical writing is expected to be true. *Lumen Gentium* puts it succinctly, 'Scripture teaches without error that truth which God wanted put into these Books for the sake of salvation'. In the last instance, the Ascension, the truth taught is that under the guidance of the Spirit the Church

carries on the same prophetic and messianic role as Jesus had. I would like to give two other examples of similar teaching. Firstly the early stories of Adam and Eve in Genesis; these are not historical stories somehow remembered from the dawn of humanity. They are an inspired analysis of the relationship of human beings to one another and to the world around them and ultimately to the creative force outside the world around them. Their vocabulary comes from the local Mesopotamian myths, though their theology and anthropology is wholly different. Secondly, many of the stories of the gospels are recounted in terms of Old Testament stories which show the meaning of Jesus. At the wonderful feeding of 5,000 men (not counting women and children) Jesus is the messianic shepherd, feeding his sheep on pastures green beside the restful water of Lake Galilee. The numbers are symbolic: twelve baskets for the twelve tribes of the New Israel, groups of hundreds and fifties for the messianic army (as in the War Scroll of the Dead Sea Scrolls), the huge crowd in a sparsely populated area for the messianic plenty, the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples echoing that between Elisha and his disciples in a similar wonderful feeding in 2 Kings 4.42-44. What actually happened in the modern sense of 'what happened' I don't know. Or again, are we to suppose that in the hubbub of the crucifixion someone heard Jesus's prayer, 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do'? In Luke's gospel, where forgiveness is so important ('Be merciful as your Father is merciful' 6.36) Jesus *must have* forgiven his executioners. If the scriptures are to be understood in this way, it is reassuring to have the tradition of the Church as a back-up to understanding.

A second way in which the inspiration of the scriptures must be understood concerns the primitive morality of early parts of the Old Testament. Many believers are shocked by the ferocity of the slaughters perpetrated in God's name. Whether the *herem* or ban of destruction actually took place is disputed, but there are other occasions, such as Samuel's slaughter of the captive Agag 'before the Lord' (1 Samuel 15.34), or the children of Babylon to be shattered against the rock (Ps 137 [136].9). How can an inspired text glory in such crime? Attempts have been made to explain these away by literary means, that victory inscriptions of the period are habitually boastful and exaggerated about the bloodshed inflicted on a defeated enemy. Such attempts do not seem to me successful, and I think the texts must be taken at face-value as literally true. In that case it seems to me that the only solution is the development of doctrine. Morality and the moral sense develop. For centuries Christians accepted slavery as not incompatible with Christian respect for human dignity. Killing in war for mere self-aggrandisement of the monarch was widely tolerated. Even up to the present day there are Christians who tolerate the death penalty as a due punishment for crimes. The limited vengeance of 'An eye for an eye' (in the Old Testament and the Codex of Hammurabi) gave some restraint, but a total ban on vengeance was not introduced until the Sermon on the Mount. We must accept that the Israelites were a rough and primitive people, whose conception of God was developing only gradually. Similarly the parity of responsibility between man and woman in sexual matters was not fully appreciated – to put it mildly. If inspiration works only through the thought-processes of the human author it is understandable that such anoptic occurs also in holy scripture.

It seems to me that in these two matters of a robust Catholic interpretation of the inspiration of scripture there may be differences of interpretation which limit the unifying force of the gift of scripture. The gift of Scripture, however, remains a unifying factor, perhaps the sphere

of the most treasured agreement between our different traditions, which may still have greater force for Church unity.

Outline

1. Historical

Reformation: Bible for Protestants, Mass for Catholics.

Roman Catholic Modernist movement

Reforms of Vatican II: *Lumen Gentium*

2. Tradition and Interpretation

Canon of Scripture

Marcion

Serapion

Athanasius

Luther

The Nature of Tradition

3. Two problems of Inspiration

Methods of Writing – Literalism?

Ascension

Adam and Eve

Use of OT in Gospels

Development of revelation

God's approval of slaughter

Sexual equality

Henry Wansborough