

## Exploring the Authority of Scripture AA 2020

This topic is of increasing importance as culture changes and church denominations wrestle with big questions. This paper explores arguments for the authority of scripture, and will spell out what that means. It will include questions for you to respond to: to help make clear your own view.

### 1. WHAT DID JESUS BELIEVE ABOUT SCRIPTURE?

A very high number of Christians affirm their personal belief that Jesus Christ did indeed die for our sins. From this clarity of belief we can already draw a number of helpful conclusions. This wonderful confidence in our personal forgiveness through Christ must therefore naturally depend on the truthful testimony of those who first told the world about him. We therefore must have already decided that we regard the writings of the Apostles, concerning Jesus himself, to be trustworthy and a true account of God's revelation of his Son. This must also indicate that we are likely to have a 'high view' of the recording of Jesus' own words in scripture - regarding these written words as the faithful and authentic words and teachings of the Son of God. In other words; we really believe that this is what Jesus said.

In the light of these conclusions, one initial point to make regarding the authority of scripture concerns Christ's own view of the bible. If Jesus himself expressed a view and approach to scripture, and we regard his recorded words as trustworthy, then we can take a first step towards understanding the authority of the bible.

1. When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness (e.g Lk.4:1-13) he defends himself by quoting scripture repeatedly (Deuteronomy). So he regarded the written words of the Hebrew bible as having authority over evil influences.
2. In John 10: 22-38, Jesus is recorded in dialogue with his critics. In verse 35 he makes an aside, "And scripture cannot be broken (or *set aside*)". Jesus is assuming that, if you use scripture correctly, your argument is true.
3. In Matt. 22:29 Jesus is again being challenged by religious leaders (Sadducees in this instance) and he says 'You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.' After this exchange it records that no one dared ask him any more questions (v46). So we can already conclude that Jesus had a high view of Hebrew scripture - regarding it as the deciding word on all disputable matters.
4. In Matt. 5:19 Jesus said "Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." This was a sharp challenge to any inclination to alter or ignore any single command given in the Law and the Prophets.
5. In Mark 14:49 Jesus said, "Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled.' In Matt. 26:55-56 it says "In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, 'Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled.' Then all the disciples deserted him and fled." For Jesus, his life and ministry was shaped and designed to fulfil the teaching and narrative of the Hebrew bible. He lived in obedience to the directives of the scriptures.
6. In John 5:19 it says, "Jesus gave them this answer: 'Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.'" Jesus explicitly said that he ONLY does what he sees his Father doing. Therefore, given the previous verses about 'fulfilling scripture', to Jesus, 'doing what his Father was doing' was the same as 'fulfilling scripture'. He saw the Old Testament text as the same as his Father's voice.
7. In Luke 24:25-27 it says, "He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." He followed this up in v44-48, "He said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is

written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. “ Jesus criticised his followers for not understanding and believing the scriptures. He identified himself in ALL the books of the Hebrew bible. As they were so slow, Jesus graciously opened their minds to understand scripture. He expected his followers to have the same view of scripture as himself.

8. In John 16:12-15 Jesus said, “ ‘I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.’ J.I Packer comments on this by saying “He had promised the Twelve that the Spirit should come to teach them what in His own earthly ministry he had left unsaid, and He kept His promise; so that the apostolic teaching was in reality the complete and final version of His own.” If anyone regards Jesus’ words as utterly reliable, we can have great confidence that he actually fulfilled what he promised - by providing the text of the New Testament through the Spirit, given to his Apostles.

These above texts are extraordinarily clear in revealing Jesus Christ’s view of scripture. To him, the Hebrew bible and New Testament were the unchanging, unbreakable Word of God.

When Andrew Wilson debated with Steve Chalke about the Word of God, he wrote in an article, “...Many of the biblical passages that people find the most troubling, and the most likely to be ‘mistaken’, are affirmed willy-nilly by Jesus and the apostles with complete disregard for any subsequent controversies that might emerge. Creation from nothing, the origin of death among humans, the murder of Abel by Cain, a cataclysmic flood of judgement, the righteous judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Mosaic origin of the Torah, manna from heaven, the reliability of Deuteronomy, the driving out of the Canaanites, Isaiah’s authorship of the servant songs, and so on – it’s almost as if Jesus and his followers went out of their way to validate all of the most awkward apologetic curveballs in the Old Testament just to make life difficult for post-Enlightenment Western interpreters. Read through the Gospels, and you won’t find even a hint that Jesus thought these events didn’t happen; quite the opposite, in fact.” (<https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2014/April-2014/Is-the-Bible-the-word-of-God>)

So, as a first point, IF we believe that Jesus died for our sins, and trust the accounts which say this, and consequently trust the recorded teachings of Jesus (given through the apostolic writers), then we MUST also harmonise our view with Jesus’ view of scripture. (Conversely, if we doubt that the bible is God’s authoritative word, then sadly we cannot be confident in Christ’s death for our sins.)

*Q: Do you agree or disagree that Jesus had a very clear view of scripture, regarding it as the Word of God?*

## **2. WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY ‘AUTHORITATIVE’?**

So is the bible a golden rule book that simply fell out of heaven? Clearly not. Is it written by ordinary humans? The bible says so. I refer you to the excellent lecture by Tim Mackie (of The Bible Project fame) which outlines the actual construction of the bible text over the centuries ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=j919UrCLbXI&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j919UrCLbXI&feature=youtu.be)). What exactly is the nature of the bible as a piece of literature? In simple summary, it records the story of God’s rescue of his people and his covenant (with commands) for those he saves. This is played out with Israel in the Hebrew bible, and then Jesus does the same, recorded in the New Testament. So it is both story AND teaching. The book is made up of many genres, but tends towards a rich mixture of narrative and teaching. The narrative contains authoritative insights about God and humanity (e.g. Exodus reveals that God is a rescuing God) and the teaching contains authoritative insights too (e.g. Matt.5-7 Sermon on the Mount).

MOSES, MATTHEW, JOHN & HEBREWS

We have many clear examples of scripture portrayed as the very words of God. Moses was the pre-eminent OT prophet, and his words to Israel were regarded as from God. All through the Exodus story the text records page after page of explicit commands and directions which it says God gave to Moses, and which the people of Israel received as from Almighty God. In Ex.20, it says, "And God said..." listing the commandments of God. Later in Deuteronomy 18:14-22 Moses gives details about a prophet 'like him' who will come later, but if any future prophet did not speak truly for God, or from other gods, he was to be killed. So the standards were very high indeed! In John 1:17 it says, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." The Apostolic writers continue the thread of authoritative writing by connecting Moses to Jesus. Likewise, Matthew's gospel is well known to be structured with a set of five discourses; the Sermon on the Mount, the Missionary Discourse, the Parabolic Discourse, the Discourse on the Church, and the Discourse on End Times. Like Moses, Jesus goes up on the mountain to preach - indicating the authority of his teaching. The content of Jesus' sermon includes the repeating phrase "But I say to you" (six times), revealing the new and higher level of authority claimed by Jesus himself, even over Moses. In Christ's commission at the end of Matthew's account, he says, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt. 28:19-20). Here Jesus clearly directs his apostles to pass on his authoritative teaching, calling future followers to obey (because he is now exalted above all). He expected this to happen. The letter to the Hebrews (Chapter 3) explicitly makes the claim that Jesus has a higher authority than Moses. In him God has most fully revealed himself, so we need to do as he says.

### **3. PROFOUND EVIDENCE FOR GOD'S AUTHORSHIP IN THE OT**

Throughout the Old Testament there are various and many predictive prophecies. They talk about tangible historic happenings - which definitely occurred. Only God knows the future. The most startling example is Isaiah 53, written 700 years before Christ:

Against the expectations of Isaiah's day, a Servant of God is described:

As having nothing special about him

Of no royal descent

Not looking particularly attractive

Rejected and despised by people

familiar with pain and suffering - someone we hide our faces from.

Presumed to be punished and stricken by God

Yet (against the usual beliefs of Isaiah's day), he was pierced for our transgressions.

- How could Isaiah know that the Messiah would be pierced?
- How could he know that he would die with the wicked and be buried with the rich?
- How could Isaiah know that a dead Messiah would see the light of life?

Clearly, the words of scripture are authored by the one who sees and knows everything.

*Q: Do you think you understand what is meant by the term 'authoritative' when applied to scripture?*

### **4. APOSTOLIC TEACHING**

In 1 Thessalonians 2: 3-7, Paul says, "For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed - God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. Instead, we were like young children among you." Paul knew his authority as an apostle; certified by God to speak on his behalf. Later he says in v13, "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe." Paul explicitly describes his words

as God's words, which the Thessalonian church received in like manner. This fits exactly with the posture of the earliest Christians, shown in Acts 2:42; "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." The Apostles of Jesus Christ spoke words that deserved devotion; because, like Moses, they spoke God's very word.

## NT SCRIPTURE'S OWN WITNESS

2 Tim.3:16 famously says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." 2 Peter 3:15-16 says, "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction." - The senior Apostle of the Twelve regarded Paul's letters as scripture.

NT texts were adopted as scripture over time. Through the resulting fruit of transformation, through scrutiny and repeated examination, these texts proved themselves to be from the Living God. In contrast to this, other texts were discarded or given lower status, not by a self-appointed committee, but through exposure to thousands of believers. Particularly with the NT, eyewitness accounts and true apostolic authorship became a litmus test.

Likewise, the Early Church Fathers (e.g Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement) regarded the Old Testament and New Testament as God's authoritative word (<https://christiantruth.com/scripture-and-church-fathers/>).

*Q: Do you understand that the Apostles believed their own recognised writings to be holy scripture?*

## 5. BUT HOW DO WE KNOW WHICH PARTS OF SCRIPTURE ARE BINDING ON US TODAY?

To is important to understand what scriptures Jesus Christ fulfilled through his life, death and resurrection, and to know what scriptural commands are still in force today.

The OT Law and the Prophets can be described in three categories: 1. The Moral Law, 2. The Sacrificial System and 3. Cultural distinctiveness for Israel. The Mosaic Law gave clear and explicit moral and ethical rules for life relating to Israel's relationship with God and each other. The sacrificial system was set up to allow a sinful nation to be in the presence of a holy God. The Culturally distinctive ways were created to mark Israel as clearly set apart for God.

Christ's death on the cross completely fulfilled the requirements of the sacrificial system; making such commands redundant today - though still useful for teaching. The universalising of Christ's gospel to the whole Gentile world (as well as to Jews) - through God's church, make Israel's distinctiveness irrelevant. So no more circumcision, no more food and clothing laws etc. Yet when it comes to the moral law of the OT, these **all** remain as continuing on into the church age, and are developed in the NT writings. We are still told to not steal. We are still obliged to love our neighbour as ourselves. This moral/ethical category of scripture is still active and binding, whereas the other two categories have been superseded by Jesus Christ and his gospel.

*Q: Do you agree or disagree with this way of explaining how scripture is still binding on believers today?*

## 6. ISN'T SCRIPTURE REALLY DIFFICULT TO PRECISELY INTERPRET?

It is fair to say that the study and understanding of scripture is demanding. Over the last 100 years or more there has been a very focussed commitment to attempt to understand the scriptures through a historical and cultural lens, being even more sensitive to linguistic matters and ancient worldviews. We are privileged to live in an age where we can be increasingly confident (thanks to the work of many scholars) in a deeper understanding of the bible. This does indeed mean that we have to be careful in our reading and interpreting. However, does this lead us to conclude that the bible is inevitably impenetrable?

Absolutely not. A very large amount of the scriptures, especially content that can be described as 'teaching' is often extremely clear. It is from these portions of text that we can confidently form 'doctrine' - core beliefs on which to base faith and life. An obvious example: The resurrection of Jesus is described plainly in the gospels, and is also expounded in more theological detail in the letters. Both sources are in clear and straightforward agreement. The whole of the NT regards Christ's resurrection as central and core to faith. Therefore we can conclude that this is a matter to affirm and teach as true. In this sense the bible is 'plainly authoritative' - in that it tells clear truths that we can declare to be 'from God'. In the same way, the clear teachings of Jesus, of the Apostles, of the Prophets (like the Ten Commandments), all give us solid and understandable truth to apply to life and conduct. The bible is therefore not an inscrutable text, with no agreed positions to glean. It is often very plain speaking on many areas of faith and life.

An example of scripture plainly speaking into conduct: From the OT ( Ex.20:14) to the NT (Matt. 5:27-30), adultery has been consistently described as sinful. There are 23 references to adultery in the OT and 22 references in the NT. When the bible speaks with one voice on a matter, we can confidently know what we should do (and not do) to live in step with God's word.

Additionally, the authority of the bible is found in every nook and cranny of the text, with millions of Christians testifying to the ring of God's truth in line after line, even in matters that aren't core beliefs. So when we say that the bible is 'authoritative', it is through and through inspired and trustworthy, but different parts will inevitably be clearer and carry more doctrinal weight than others.

*Q: Do you feel confident that core bible teaching (doctrine) can be properly understood and explained?*

## **7. CAN WE TRUST THE SOURCES AND TRANSLATIONS WE HAVE?**

God in his grace has chosen to embed his reliable word in the writings of real history, through the phrases of real people. So you will find various styles in the text, and the bible is richer for it. What is remarkable is the internal coherence of the scriptures, despite being written by so many different authors. In 2 Peter 1:20-21 it says, "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Despite the different human authors, the heart, story and teaching of scripture makes for a reliable, harmonious whole, with clearly divine words written centuries apart ringing true together. This is indeed a feature of 'beauty' in the bible, and underlines the miraculous, authoritative nature of scripture.

The Tim Mackie video will provide background on what we mean by 'trustworthy'. The bible we have today is drawn from thousands of manuscripts. It is the most reliable ancient text in the world, because of the abundance of fragments and scrolls. However, some small variants do exist from one manuscript to another. In the vast majority of cases the differences are simply grammatical variants, which make absolutely no difference to the meaning or content. There are some rarer passages with bigger differences, but it must be emphasised that, incredibly, across literally thousands of copies, the core text and core teaching is all the same. The variants have no bearing on teaching or beliefs. By comparing many multiple texts scholars can be very confident that what we have is what the original authors wrote down. So we can genuinely say that, over many thousands of years, God in his mercy and grace has preserved his word from doctrinal error, through the extremely faithful copying of the early scribes. Additionally, a growing body of archeological discoveries (as with the Dead Sea scrolls) has consistently supported the authenticity of the texts we have.

The bible has been translated and revised in English many times, with 'word for word' versions (like the RSV) through to paraphrased versions (like 'The Message'). We can use different versions confidently for different purposes, but with regard to doctrine and core beliefs, we need translations that are as faithful to the original Hebrew and Greek as possible. Once again, we are benefitting from small revisions every decade or so, but this has never affected existing core teaching.

*Q: Does the origins and scholarly organisation of multiple ancient bible texts, translated carefully, help you to trust the scriptures? Or do you have a different view?*

## **8. CONCLUSION**

If we are sure that Christ died for us, we simply cannot ignore what Christ said about scripture. Christ clearly regarded scripture as his Father's words. The ordinary authors of scripture faithfully spoke for God; through both story and clear teaching. The extraordinary predictions of scripture prove beyond doubt that the author is God. The particular cultures, idioms and languages of the original authors do not prevent us from truly understanding scripture - much of it is plain and clear. We can clearly see what scripture continues to be binding on us, in the light of Christ's work on the cross. Despite being written over centuries, scripture miraculously speaks with one voice about many core things. The origins of the text and the preservation of the many early copies demonstrate that we can have great confidence in the bible we read.

*Q: Are you at a point where you believe that the bible is our authoritative revelation of God; describing in understandable ways what God's saving plan and guiding will is for humanity? Do you agree with this statement:*

### **The authority of scripture**

*"Though written by people, we believe scripture to be inspired by God, and stands above all other writings, above all human understanding and experience. We believe the story and teaching of scripture to be without doctrinal error, and therefore is the final word on matters of truth, faith and conduct. Where scripture speaks clearly, and where by good and necessary inference we are able to discern its teaching, we must humbly follow and obey out of reverence for what God has said."*

## **9. Additional resources:**

### **5 common arguments against the bible (and how to respond to them)**

<https://biologos.org/articles/5-common-arguments-against-the-bible-and-how-to-respond-to-them>

### **The Authority of Scripture**

<https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/the-authority-of-scripture.html>