

The Nature of Scripture



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Scripture has often been understood as an infallible conceptually true expression of religious experience and revelation. If this cannot be affirmed persons feel that somehow Scripture's value and authority has been lost. The very variety within Scripture makes it difficult to affirm conceptual coherence and infallibility. Here one only has to examine the variety within the Gospels where the sayings and stories of Jesus exist in different forms and to acknowledge Paul's recognition of a need to speak and write contextually to different audiences (I Cor. 9:19ff). It is intriguing to speculate as to whether Jesus might also have spoken contextually and that this might account for some of the differences in his sayings.

There are two major presuppositions about revelation in the NT that decidedly affect our approach. The first is that though Matthew presents Jesus as a teacher, with his transmitted teachings having special authority, the experience of and faith in the resurrected Jesus make Jesus more the focus of revelation than his teachings. Though some of the NT traditions see Jesus as ascending to heaven, after his ministry and resurrection, where he will remain until the end, some of the traditions see him as remaining within the world and continuing to be involved. In Mark he again leads his disciples in the world as a Shepherd leads his sheep (14:27-28. 16:7). Even in John with its Departure Discourses (14-17) which emphasize Jesus' departure and the sayings about the Spirit which would seem to indicate an alternative presence, the heart of Johannine spirituality is to invite to come, see, and stay with Jesus (John 1:39, 46) and in the late resurrection experience of John 21 Jesus is still in the midst of his disciples. In fact there seems to be debate in the early church as to the constitution of their post-resurrection spiritual experience. Luke is intriguing here. In Acts he describes the spiritual experience of the church as centered in the Spirit. In the Gospel the Spirit is mentioned through chapter 4 and then recedes in favor of the person of Jesus. [Acts, though the second volume in Luke's two volume series, is earlier than our present Gospel which is likely the second or a later edition. Thus Luke's earlier Spirit focused spirituality contained in Acts changes in his later revision of the Gospel into a Christ focused spirituality.] But even when Jesus resides in heaven and the Spirit (or the Father – see Heb. 10 and I Peter 4:10ff) acts on his behalf, he remains central and the claim to possession of the Spirit is rooted in a confession of him.

The involvement of Jesus in the ongoing life of the church then means that Jesus still has things to do and say with the church. This is to be presupposed unless it would be possible to think that Jesus in his brief ministry of 1 ½ years provided all that would be needed for all time. What he would say is not merely limited to what he once said. He is not the slave of his own historic words. The same should be said for the Spirit. Though the Spirit is clearly tied to the historic Jesus, the role of the gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues indicate that God will address contemporary issues in ways that contemporarily will give guidance and are not just tied to Scripture or the historic Jesus tradition (see I Cor. 14). Interestingly, the Jesus of Revelation is certainly not tied to the historic Jesus tradition. The eighteenth century Moravian understanding of Jesus as Chief Elder (in relationship to the governance of the Church), as Lord or "Housefather" (in relationship to the household and community of the Church), and as Savior (establishing the personal relationship with God), and the Spirit as Mother of the Church, stress the ongoing participation of the Triune God in the lives of individuals and Christian communities.

The second is that revelation is contextual and historical. Paul explicitly discusses speaking in different ways to Jew, Greek and the weak (I Cor. 9:19ff, Rom. 14). [Here "weak," a term used in Stoic philosophy, means someone whose understanding is limited and who still counts to be important what no longer is important. In Romans 14 Paul discusses how Christian converts have brought into their Christian communities dietary and worship practices which are not essential to the Christian faith.] The variety of approaches in the Jesus tradition, and the variety of early Christian communities, may be due to the fact that Jesus did the same, addressing the elements of his Jewish society in contextual and personal ways.

Jesus' teaching method also has an "openness" to it for often what he says is not stated as a final answer but an invitation to engage the meaning within his teaching. This is particularly true of his use of stories/parables. How much within a parable does he intend to be taken seriously (the point or points of the parable)? Contemporary scholars wrestle with the central meaning of a complex parable, distinguishing parable from allegory. His use of irony and hyperbole should also be considered, as should his use of teaching as a starting point or contribution to dialogue [as in Synagogue debate over interpretation of the Law], not as a completed argument no longer open to discussion.

This would mean that in each moment of revelation there is involved the Person (Revealer) who provides the revelation, the historical and cultural context, the personal character and style of both the recipients and the Revealer, and the process between the Revealer and the recipients. In regard to the latter, the attainment of understanding is usually something that takes time and needs discussion along the way, including preliminary stages of understanding, to arriving at a goal of understanding. One can clearly indicate process of understanding in Jesus' work with his disciples and in their spiritual and theological development. In both Paul and Peter it is possible to indicate this. With Peter this took years, beginning with his difficulty coming to terms with Jesus' teaching as presented in the Gospels, his differences with Paul recounted in Gal. 2:11ff, and his final acceptance of Jesus' perspective as presented in I Peter (written through his friend Silvanus/Silas). For Paul, one must remember that there is a period of "three" years after his conversion before Paul went to Jerusalem to speak with Peter and a period of "fourteen" years that he was in Tarsus before he returns to Palestine and before we have any correspondence from him (Gal. 1-2). There must have been some process in this. What we can imagine as Paul's process over these early years (of which we have little record) seems to have softened Paul's view on those who disagreed with him and brought over various elements from their background into Christianity (the weak in I Cor. 8 and following and Rom. 14), though he would not tolerate difference on the essential of the Gospel (Gal. 1).

The significance of historical context affirms that whatever God does, and God as Person is in the center of revelation, it is done in ways that would be meaningful and relevant to persons within their context and in their process. Thus each moment of revelation and each piece of revelatory literature is right for its time, but not *per se* completely right for the time of another, though the Person of God within the revelation is right for all time.

Related to cultural and human perception is the possibility that the personal and cultural elements of the perception will lead to misunderstanding as well as understanding. There is no way of purifying a moment of revelation so that all that is within the culture and within the human mind and psyche will not color and even distort the revelation. An interesting example here is the early church's perception of Jesus in the light of a number of eschatological schemes, particularly Jewish Apocalyptic, varying from Mark's portrayal of the coming end in his time (to coincide with the destruction of Jerusalem – see Mark 13) and the book of Revelation (much of which can be paralleled in Jewish Apocalyptic). And then there is the Gospel of John where futuristic expectations play little role because eternal life is possessed in the present. The different and contradictory views in NT literature on the end of the world and the kingdom of God indicate how the church struggled with the truth of Jesus in the light of contemporary expectations

for history. Thus discernment becomes important, discussed in the NT specifically in I Cor. 12-14 and I John 4. One needs to have standards by which to judge whether it is the Spirit of God speaking or another spirit (or the human unconscious). In John and Paul this included acknowledging the authority of Jesus, insisting that love validated and self-interest made revelations suspect, and that individual spiritual experience needs validation by the Christian community.

Though we often think of revelation as conceptual, God sends persons to embody it, enable it, and speak, it and it becomes difficult to separate the person from the revelation. God does not send a system of theology but Jesus and the Spirit and we bearing the Spirit. And we respond to God's revelation as persons -- besides seeking an understanding of it. Thus it is profoundly interpersonal and relational and becomes the occasion of interpersonal encounter. If relationship with God is established in the revelation, then one has everything in the Person who within Himself has everything and all possibilities. Then there is the possibility of living and working life out so that eventually one will understand the essence of what needs to be understood.

If revelation is primarily interpersonal and relational, then it is also true that all may have religion and revelation even though it may not be possible for some to understand (e.g. the infant, the retarded and the senile). Seeing revelation as primarily conceptual and capable of being systematized can exclude those who cannot conceptualize or do not conceptualize the way we think they should.

Although there were also those in the early church who thought that religious truth should assume certain forms, there is much evidence that, whether understood or not, there was a dynamic process at work in which persons and communities stood within "the stream of the interplay of humans, life, and God," and were struggling with and arriving at understandings which differed. But they had profound commonalities since they were engaged with the same spiritual reality.

However, there must be some conceptualization in Scripture which expresses what we need to know, even if the conceptualization at times differs. Paul's treatment of the impact of the Gospel upon persons argues that there is no other Gospel than the Gospel of Christ (Gal. 1) but that its effects may be understood and described differently in different cultures. In the Jewish culture it can be seen as freeing one from the Law and its judgement (Gal. 3) while in the Gentile culture it may be seen as freeing one from flesh and the cosmic powers (Col. 2). Thus one's old world comes to an end, whatever constituted that world with its struggles, and a new world comes into being which is constituted by God's grace.

In the Moravian Church 18th century tradition the primary conceptualization within Scripture was what Count von Zinzendorf called the Fundamental or Basic Truth.¹ God had cared for this in Scripture, in spite of Scripture's historical conditioning, in order that the matter of salvation be adequately clear to those who could read. However, Scripture's basic system was not ultimately conceptual but the person of Christ whom one could meet in Scripture. There were also Matters of Knowledge which needed the expertise of the scholar to understand and interpret. Then there were the Mysteries. One could live with their reality while their conceptualization would always remain varied and evasive, which variety needed to be respected. Here one has such matters as the understanding of the Lord's Supper and Eschatology. This is similar to the Ancient Moravian Church's division of truth into three categories: the Essential (God as Father, Son and Spirit responded to in faith, love and hope), Ministerials (that which served the Essential such as church, sacraments, Scripture, preaching, etc.) and then Incidentals (representing the

¹ Arthur Freeman, *An Ecumenical Theology of the Heart: The Theology of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf*, Bethlehem, Winston-Salem: Board of Communications, Moravian Church in America, 1998, pp. 139ff.

different ways various Christians did things – such as in the Lord's Supper). There was only one Essential, the relationship with the Triune God and the gifts of God's grace, responded to in a triune way (faith, love and hope).

Some will find the effect of history on Scripture to be disturbing, arguing that this means that God was not able to provide clear concepts and unambiguous truth. But Zinzendorf argued that the consequences of history were in the biblical materials not because God could not make things clear but because "in history" was where people were. God chose to disclose in personal, contextual and relevant ways, speaking to us in the language by which we could respond to the Essential or the Heart Truth of the Savior (Zinzendorf's description of the Essential). Scripture is the way it is for the sake of a humanity that is always historical. Because the ultimate truth of Scripture is the Savior, God Godself, in relationship to life, we need intentionally to stand within "the stream of the interplay of humans, life, and God" both within Scripture and within contemporary life. Within this stream or dynamic we experience life, God, and the directions in which God would move us. Especially because of conceptual uncertainty, as we try to describe this, ecumenism becomes important, for it is here that we discover the variety of response and varied richness of wisdom that we find in the biblical materials themselves (which also represented various communities and individuals). And there is this interesting correspondence between contemporary Christian communities and the various biblical traditions which they prefer. Thus each community can provide insight into the experience of the tradition which it prefers.

To briefly illustrate "the stream of the interplay of humans, life, and God," let us look at the NT portrayal of Jesus' baptism. There is sufficient evidence in the Gospel tradition to indicate that Jesus had a significant interaction with John the Baptist and that he was baptized by John. This encounter between Jesus and John occurs in all four Gospels. In the earliest, Mark (65) and Luke (ProtoLuce 62) the story of the baptism is simply told, without excuse, and it is Jesus private experience ("You are my beloved son" says the voice). But the communities and individuals who conveyed the tradition struggled with this story, pondering its relationship to their own experience and their developing theology. The Baptism was probably placed first in the tradition (except for Infancy Narratives which were not part of the earlier tradition) because the religious experience it represented was similar to their own and paradigmatic for it. Mark has no Infancy Narrative and it is likely that ProtoLuke did not (much of Luke's thought presupposes no story of the Virgin birth, for after the Baptism we have the genealogy and there is no apology for the Virgin Birth as in Matthew). In Matthew (3) and John (1) the Baptism of Jesus has become a problem. Baptism by John the Baptist was a Baptism of repentance. What did Jesus have to repent of? In Matthew there is a discussion as to who should baptize whom. Jesus argues that John should baptize him "to fulfill all righteousness." In other words, Jesus' Baptism fulfills all righteousness of the people of God required by the Law. Thus he did it not for himself, but for them.

In John 1 there is an encounter between Jesus and John the Baptist, but no Baptism. John, who here appears quite different than in the Synoptics (without camel's hair garb and strange diet of locusts and wild honey) understands Jesus' identity from the descent of the Spirit upon him, but there is no heavenly voice or Baptism. Later in 4:1-6 it is said that though John baptized and Jesus' disciples baptized, Jesus himself did not baptize. Thus according to the Gospel of John Jesus was not baptized nor did he baptize. The closest thing to Baptism in John's Gospel is the story in chapter 4 of the woman by the well to whom Jesus would give living water, as the closest thing to Eucharist in John is the Feeding Miracle in chapter 6 which has within it Eucharistic language. The Gospel of John has no account of Jesus' Baptism as it has no account of the Lord's Supper, the place of which is taken by the Footwashing in John 13. It can be argued that the Johannine community did not use sacraments and therefore did not record the specific stories which substantiated them. They did not use sacraments because all in Jesus' life was a sign (a favorite term in John to describe what Jesus does) of spiritual meaning.

What happens then is not only the possibility of the story of Jesus' Baptism being transmitted differently in different lines of traditions, but the portrayal of different reactions to the event and to the actions and experience of Jesus in the event. Such reactions are certainly to be seen as reactions in the context of developing community theologies. But they may also be reactions which stem back to the time of the disciples. The Gospel of John argues that it got its information from a written source produced by the Beloved Disciple who was an intimate of Jesus (see John 21:24). It is interesting that all but Matthew preserve the encounter with the Baptist as a paradigmatic spiritual experience, while Matthew must excuse the event and portrays this as not a private experience for Jesus but a time of public announcement of who he is to those who stand by and seek John's Baptism. The voice says, "*this* is my beloved son."

The event stays within "the stream of the interplay of humans, life, and God," and the richness of reaction and interaction teaches us much more than if the early church merely adopted this narrative in a single traditional form. Thus from this complex we have not one meaning but many centering around a foundational spiritual reality and experience, preserving both the reality of Christ as living and dynamic and the possibilities of varied meanings for varied persons and contexts. The possibilities for faith and life inherent in this variety are why the early church decided for four Gospels instead of one.

We may and should conceptualize for the sake of understanding and gaining a cohesive wisdom. We may and must conceptualize for the sake of preaching and teaching. But in faithfulness to the reality conceptualized we should remember that concepts and logical systems are secondary. We have to be careful that concepts do not build walls between us and the reality of God and even the reality of our own life. We need God more than concepts about God. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke expresses in his *Book of Hours*, the light which flames within us can be wasted on the frames of our images. If only we were not so often distracted, then we would bear the reality of God in our blood and possess this reality (if only as long as a smile) to gift it back to life in thankfulness.

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As names your images present you.
And if once that light within me flames,
with which my deeps perceive you,
it wastes itself upon their frames.
And my senses, which soon grow lame,
bereft of you are homeless.²

Then could I in thousand thoughts
think you, to your being's edge,
and posses you (only as long as a
smile),
to gift you back to all of life
in thankfulness.³

If only for a moment stillness
were complete.
If the accidental and imprecise
were stilled -- and the nearby
laughing,
if the clamor of my senses
did not so much hinder my
attention --

Extinguish my eyes: I can see you,
make me deaf: I can hear you;
without feet can I approach you,
without mouth can I implore you.
Break my arms, I will hold you
with my heart as with a hand,
stop my heart, my brain will beat,
and if a burning brand into my brain you
cast,
still in my blood I'll bear you.⁴

² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Das Stunden-Buch enthaltend die drei Bücher: Vom mönchischen Leben, Von der Pilgerschaft, Von der Armuth und vom Tode* (Leipzig, Insel-Verlag, 1931). The poems are translated by the author, p. 9.

³ p. 9.

⁴ Ibid. p. 58.