

THE WORD MADE FLESH

**The book that Christians call
“Holy Scripture” is ever so much more
than one of many sacred texts.**

Today the Bible is popularly evaluated as Christianity’s best spiritual literature—and then equated with the writings of Buddha, the *Bagivad Gita* of Hinduism, or other such human documents. This implies that each religious tradition spawns a few very spiritual persons who express generally comparable reflections.

Why have Christians insisted on the absolute nature of the Holy Bible? In contemporary thinking, the primary “textbook” of the Christian faith needs to be reconsidered.

Of course, it isn’t a textbook by modern definition. But the biblical materials must be studied attentively, involving appraisal of the fun-

damental assumptions and parameters within which the many Bible writers work. Thankfully, these are often explicit.

None of the Bible writers ever attempts to prove God’s existence. Each one assumes He exists. Biblical prophets claimed to have real knowledge of an infinite God. And they were absolutely certain that God was speaking through them.

Moreover, all insist that God

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makes truthful claims. He declares that He can foretell the future, and that doing so indicated His divinity: “I am the Lord, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to carved images. Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them. . . . Indeed before the day was, I am He; and there is no one who can deliver out of My hand; I work, and who will reverse it?” (Isa. 42:8, 9; 43:13).¹

Through the prophets God announced time prophecies concerning the history of nations and the coming of the Messiah. Some modern minds assume that God could not be so precise, that such prophecies were written after the fact. This idea, however, appears nowhere in Scripture.

Furthermore, biblical writers were certain that God could and did communicate with human beings. They never argue that human language is any kind of barrier to direct communication from God. In fact, with great frequency God is referred to as the actual Person speaking through the prophet. Elijah’s words in 1 Kings 21:19 are referred to in 2 Kings 9:25 as the oracle that “the Lord uttered” (NRSV), and Elijah is not even mentioned.

The message of a prophet was considered equivalent to direct speech from God. And to disobey a prophet’s words was to disobey God.

In Deuteronomy 18:19, the Lord speaks through Moses of the coming prophet through Moses: ““Whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.”” When Saul disobeyed Samuel’s command at Gilgal, Samuel rebuked him: ““You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you. But now your kingdom shall not continue. . . because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you”” (1 Sam. 13:13, 14).

The biblical writers also recorded numerous incidents of God speaking directly to human beings: conversations with Adam and Eve after the Fall (Gen. 1:28-30; 3:9-19); the divine call of Abram (12:1-3); the interchange with Elijah at Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:9-18). The civil code in the Pentateuch is recorded as words spoken directly by God to Moses.

Old Testament prophets are pictured as sent by God to speak His words. The repeated use of the introductory formula “thus says the Lord”—or its equivalent—clinches the divine authority. In fact, a distinguishing characteristic of true prophets is that they do not speak their own words. God said to Moses: “I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say” (Ex. 4:12); to Jeremiah: “I have put My words in your mouth” (Jer. 1:9).

Extensive evidence suggests that

biblical prophets experienced something far more than a “divine encounter” that merely inspired their mystical conviction for God. God gives human beings actual information (Deut. 29:29). Indeed, it is striking that one Person of the Triune God is known as the “Word.”

Numerous times, prophets wrote down the words of God, which were then assumed fully authoritative: “Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God” (Joshua 24:26); “Samuel explained to the people the behavior of royalty, and wrote it in a book” (1 Sam. 10:25). Even the recording process is divinely controlled with the penman being “moved” (2 Peter 1:21).

Both Testaments consistently testify that the truth of God is not the end-product of diligent human search for the divine. It comes exclusively through God’s initiative. God speaks for Himself *through* His prophets. And human language is assumed to be capable of conveying divine communication.

The New Testament apostles write with the same absolute authority as the Old Testament prophets, insisting that they speak by the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 1:10-12), to whom they credit the content of their teaching (1 Cor. 2:12, 13). Significantly, the same Paul who urged that believers seek to work together peaceably, often used harsh language to defend the absolute truth of the

gospel he had preached (Gal. 1:6-9). Apostolic teaching is very “directive,” issuing commands with the strongest authority (1 Thess. 4:1, 2; 2 Thess. 3:6, 12).

The prophets and apostles do not describe how they recognized the “word of God” when it came, but they were clearly certain that God had spoken. Sometimes He spoke in ways that they did not understand and on occasion even objected to, yet they never questioned the divine origin of the message.

The Bible, however, was not verbally dictated by God. The human messenger was divinely guided in the selection of apt words to express divine revelation, and thus the prophetic words are called the Word of God. The individuality of each writer is evident, yet the human and divine elements are virtually inseparable.

“The Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that ‘the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.’”ⁱⁱ

Careful reading of Scripture also reveals a basic continuity and unity of both Testaments. The extensive New Testament citations of the Old Testament indicate that the earlier writings were considered by New Testament writers to be divine reve-

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lation. Isaiah’s words in Isaiah 7:14 are cited as “what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet” (Matt. 1:22, NRSV); Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24 as words that God said (Matt. 19:5).

Words of Scripture are said to be spoken by the Holy Spirit: in quoting the prophet Joel, Peter inserts the words, “says God” (Acts 2:17). Paul and Barnabas quote Isaiah 49:6 as something that “the Lord commanded us” (Acts 13:47, KJV), contending that an Old Testament prophecy placed moral obligation on them also.

New Testament writers also knew it was possible for God to speak directly to people in human language: the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:17); the Transfiguration (17:5; 2 Peter 1:17, 18); instructions to Ananias (vss. 11-16); and the revelation to John (Rev. 1:11–3:22).

Jesus Himself asserts numerous times that He speaks the words of God: “The Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say

and what I should speak” (John 12:49). Paul claims revelation from God in 1 Corinthians 14:37.

Jesus Christ Himself confirmed the Old Testament as foundational in His teaching and ethics. Old Testament prophecy was the pattern for His life, as He declared often: “it must be fulfilled” or “as it is written.” He rebuked the Jewish theologians of His time for permitting human tradition to cloud and even falsify God’s written word in the Old Testament (Mark 7:1-13).

Jesus expected others to accept the Old Testament as authoritative: “Have you not read” (Matt. 12:5; 21:16; Mark 12:10). In response to a lawyer’s question about salvation, Jesus asked: “What is written in the law?” (Luke 10:26). The lawyer answered with a direct quotation from the Ten Commandments, and Jesus declared: “You have answered rightly.”

The apostle Paul similarly refers to the authority of the Old Testament. In the Book of Romans he

builds a powerful argument for the gospel built upon the Old Testament, and in the process demonstrates the paramount principle of listening to what Scripture says about itself.

Moreover, Jesus and the New Testament authors accepted the historicity of the Old Testament. In fact, the New Testament writers relied on the historical narratives of the Old Testament to predict the certainty of future actions of God.

The Bible is impressively self-authenticated. Yet it appears to some as an enigmatic collection of seemingly unrelated materials: narratives, poetry, legal codes, sermons, letters, prophecies, parables, royal annals, and genealogies. Scripture itself clearly instructs that it is possible to misread and misinterpret Scripture. Many of the biblical writers, along with Christ, warned against false teachers and false teaching.

Thankfully, the Lord Jesus provides a vital interpretive key: “The Scriptures . . . testify of Me” (John 5:39). The apostle Paul testifies that when seeing Jesus in Scripture, a veil is taken away from the eyes (2 Cor. 3:14-16). The two disciples traveling to Emmaus had an authenticating experience in the correct understanding of Scripture through the risen Lord’s interpretation of the Old Testament (Luke 24:32).

Today some suggest that different portions of Scripture are of ques-

tionable value. No modern writer addresses this issue more straightforwardly than Ellen G. White: “Never let mortal man sit in judgment upon the Word of God or pass sentence as to how much of this is inspired and how much is not inspired, and that this is more inspired than some other portions. God warns him off that ground. God has not given him any such work to do.”

God Himself expresses the same sentiment: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist,’ says the Lord. ‘But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word’” (Isa. 66:1, 2).

The Christian doctrine of Scripture is about a Book—but truly, more than a Book. Through its many writers we are confronted with a God who yearns for His children, who is in earnest to communicate His love to them, and who loves them more than He loved His own life. □

REFERENCES

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from *The New King James Version of the Bible*.

² *The Great Controversy*, p. vi.

³ *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 919.