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Memory, Meaning & Faith

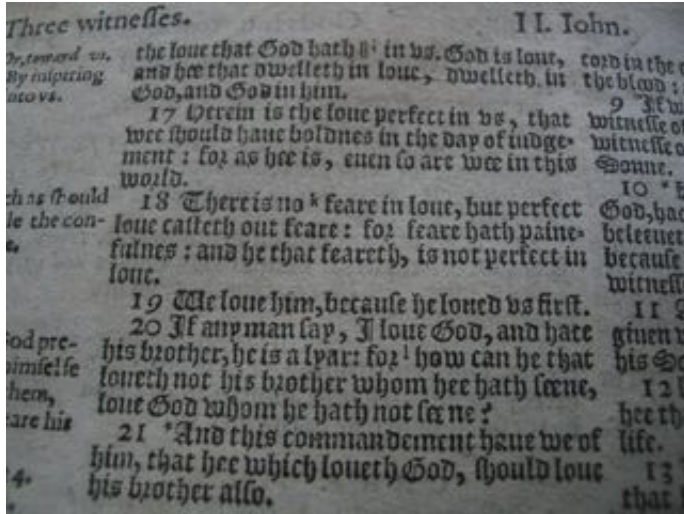
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March 26, 2010

Higher-Critical Thinking And Its Effects (Part I)



Many associate higher criticism of the Bible with the development of modern thought. But the truth is that for millennia people have sought to find ways to evade or deflate the broad and sweeping claim that, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17, NRSV; emphasis supplied). How much of the Bible is that? “All scripture.” Of course, many named and unnamed human authors and editors participated in producing the anthology we know as Bible. But according to the Bible, God directed the thoughts of these people, who were His co-workers (2 Pet 1:20-21).

This self-characterization of the Bible has always been under attack because it makes an enduring system of divine principles, rather than human ideas, the guide for belief and lifestyle. Divine principles are to be interpreted and applied within cultural contexts, but they are not to be revised or manipulated to accommodate human desires for control or comfort. As the word of God, the Bible is to edit our lives; we are not to edit the Bible. This is monumentally inconvenient for human compulsions, including pride and the desire to condone a huge array of sins.

Through the centuries, and today more than ever, people try in various ways to avoid scriptural messages and to make the Bible say what they want it to say. Their approach is characterized by what could be called “higher-critical thinking.” In the past, the term “higher-criticism” has been applied more narrowly to modes of scholarly “historical-critical” inquiry, such as source, form, and redaction criticism. But historical criticism is not an isolated phenomenon; its basic philosophy toward the Bible underlies other ways to neutralize the word of God. I am calling this common philosophy: “higher-critical thinking.” In this and the following posts, I will explore some manifestations of this kind of thinking in history and their effects on faith relationships with God.

Cut It Out

Thomas Jefferson had a simple solution to the problem of the Bible: He simply cut out everything he didn’t accept, especially miracles (see my [previous post](#)). His radically edited version was known as “Jefferson’s Bible.” That is accurate because it was his bible; it was no longer God’s Bible. By his own brilliant but finite human wisdom, which he valued above that of the infinite Creator of the universe, he fashioned his own authority and was happily in charge. He had neutered the transforming power of God’s word.

Supplement It

Others have ostensibly left the Bible as it is, but have added an overlay of extrabiblical interpretation that bends or obscures its meaning. Jesus opposed those who did this:

He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ But you say that whoever tells

father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God” ([Matt 15:3-6](#); NRSV).

According to Jesus, the whole Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is based on love for God and for our fellow human beings ([Matt 22:37-40](#)). This makes perfect sense because the purpose of the Bible is to reveal God, whose character is love ([1 Jn 4:8](#)). But human legalism, masquerading as piety, kidnaps biblical principles from their home of love and forces them to serve selfish human interests. In the case Jesus addressed in Matthew 15, temple functionaries appointed to receive offerings given to God ([Num 18](#)) profited from a human view of priorities that enabled or even encouraged adult children to withhold support from their parents, whether from misguided piety or from spite.

After the time of Jesus, the so-called “Christian era” has seen extrabiblical human supplements piled on one another. Reformers have escaped many of these, only to have their followers amass new systems of them. Human ideas and ways of doing things can be good, helpful, and necessary, but often even good ones take on a life of their own with overblown importance as defining characteristics of a group that eclipse more important values.

Treat It As Obsolete

Another strategy to change the Bible’s meaning is to treat at least some of it as obsolete. Thus many “New Testament Christians” treat the (Jewish) Old Testament as less valuable. For example, laws of Moses are routinely ignored because they are supposedly superseded by Jesus’ new (actually renewed) covenant of love ([Jn 13:34](#)), disregarding Jesus’ own statement that the whole Old Testament is based on love (see above). Also, the biblical seventh-day Sabbath is superseded by traditional “Christian” Sunday worship (not established by the New Testament) or by the everyday experience of entering into God’s rest ([Heb 4](#); actually an experience of faith also available in Old Testament times).

It is true that the Old Testament contains culturally conditioned elements (e.g., levirate marriage; [Deut 25:5-10](#)) and penalties applicable under direct divine rule (e.g., [Lev 24:13-23](#)) that we should not try to carry out today. But the laws of Moses encapsulate enduring and authoritative principles that benefit those who observe them in the right way and for the right reasons (see further in Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers* [NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004], especially on Leviticus 17, Contemporary Significance section).

The New Testament also contains time-and-place-specific elements for our instruction, such as the debate over circumcision and its resolution (especially [Acts 15](#)). We do not live in the Second Temple Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural world of the New Testament. But we can learn from the ways in which God led His people during that period, applying enduring principles within our own life contexts. We ignore divine teaching at our own peril. We need all the help we can get.

In the [following posts](#), I will explore some other strategies for attempting to change Scripture, such as treating it as merely human, and privileging science or political correctness over the Bible.


Questions

- If you did not respect God, what parts of the Bible would you wish to cut out? What would you wish to add? Why do you think the Bible does not completely agree with you?
- Do you or your church follow some human traditions (including policies, procedures, or organizational characteristics) that are out of harmony with the message and spirit of the Bible? If so, what can you do about this?
- Do you treat all Scripture as inspired by God and therefore valuable?
- How would blatantly or subtly treating the Bible as changed affect faith, hope, and the way we treat other people?

Read Roy Gane's assessment of historical-critical things in [Higher-Critical Thinking And Its Effects \(Part II\)](#).

Posted by [Roy Gane](#) on March 26, 2010 in [Biblical Backgrounds](#), [Historical Theology](#), [History of Interpretation](#) | [Permalink](#)
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I can take the Scriptures as inspired, or I can take them on my own terms, but not both. Does that make sense? Because if I'm the authority over the Scripture, then their inspiration is no higher than me-- in which case, might as well give up the whole thing and go get a hair cut or something.

Posted by: Kessia Reyne | [March 26, 2010 at 05:53 PM](#)

Roy, this really opens up many cans of worms. I have many questions that I am uncomfortable asking, but since that is what this site is for, I will ask them. Let me first say that I believe that All Scripture is inspired, I just don't understand the "plain reading" of Scripture in some cases.

If you did not respect God, what parts of the Bible would you wish to cut out?

1) Genocide. Right, I know you have waxed eloquent on this topic, but I still do not understand how a God of Love can tell soldiers to kill babies. It doesn't compute in my brain. God is far more sensitive than I'll ever be, yet He commands infanticide???? I have seen babies die. I have seen mother's hysteria.

2) Moses denied entrance into Canaan. This seems unbearably harsh. Yes, he was the leader, so his sin was a public disgrace and thus the level of accountability was much higher. If God was so strict back then when the "church" was 600,000+ in number, are not our leaders now even more accountable with the "church" membership in the 8 digits?

Posted by: CClark | [March 28, 2010 at 10:35 AM](#)

This is such an important discussion. I am glad you are addressing this subject. I have a question, though. How do we address the fact that there seems to be a dichotomy in the placement of responsibility in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21? How do we know that other events, such as genocide, are not the same situation? How do we know that it was God who commanded, when we obviously have a difference in opinion in the story of the census? What is the role of the Great Controversy in interpreting scripture? I am willing to accept that God, in His wisdom, did command such things. Because I believe the Bible to be true and God to be loving I must believe it. These are just questions.

Posted by: Sarah Gane | [March 28, 2010 at 02:30 PM](#)

Here's my question (in response to question 1): Is it even possible for us to avoid layering our thinking on top of scripture?

Concepts like the trinity or the Adventist great controversy theme are theological constructs not explicitly taught by scripture but rather extrapolated from it and then used as a lens through which to understand scripture. Is this not in a sense adding to the raw message of scripture? If so, can we condemn others who add to scripture out of equally pure motives? How do we know which extrapolations are justified and unjustified, true and untrue?

Posted by: David Hamstra | [March 28, 2010 at 09:34 PM](#)

I am surprised at the very narrow view of Thomas Jefferson and Deism. Jefferson lived in a world in which miracles were in full retreat. A world and universe that had been full of miracles--good and evil--was now described in terms of natural laws. God was worshiped as the omniscient Designer who had created a universe so perfect it did not NEED constant miraculous intervention.

Think of two clock-makers. One designs and installs a clock in the town square. On the first day the clock breaks down and must be repaired. In fact the clock cannot run unless the clock-maker is up there in the tower holding things together. Then consider the second clock maker. He installs a clock that is so perfectly designed, so wonderfully executed, that from the day it is installed, it runs perfectly. It never needs repair, never needs a miracle.

The second clock-maker is the God of the Deists. Newton, Boyle, Galileo and others discovered the "perfect" handiwork of God in nature. Philosophers and Theologians took the next logical step and described a God so perfect that God didn't need constantly need to "jump in" and fix things--miracles.

Jefferson's dislike for miracles did not come from a desire to edit God's will out of his life. Jefferson was a revolutionary who envisioned a future free from superstition and religious tyranny.

Posted by: Kevin Page | [March 28, 2010 at 10:12 PM](#)

Great post and discussion!

While I certainly agree that there are several problems that have stemmed from higher-critical thinking, I also believe that it should not be ignored that there are an entire family of problems attached to a refusal to think about the Bible critically.

The attempt to arrive at a "plain reading," or to simply accept the texts of the Bible as "all inspired" and therefore all "completely true and authoritative" is problematic.

I believe that the Holy Spirit guides all Christians; I also believe that no two Christians totally agree, guided by the Spirit as they are. In the same way, I believe that the Bible is certainly inspired. But that does not mean that there is not real dialogue and debate within the pages of the Bible. To ignore the theological tensions in the Bible is to miss something vital. What if the church modeled its own unity after the unity of the Bible--united in our diversity, committed to the same God despite our various interpretations and points of view?

I appreciate the spirit behind the discussion, but I would like to see more persuasive evidence for why the Bible should be read as an infallible revelation of God that should be accepted as completely inspired, and therefore as completely binding in its theology and lifestyle demands.

Posted by: [Matt Burdette](#) | [March 28, 2010 at 11:41 PM](#)

Interesting insights on Jefferson, Kevin.

So what do you think about miracles in light of this? Does God work miracles because his creative skills were limited? Or does God not need to work miracles because his creativity is perfect?

Are these the only two options? Does God work miracles in order to reveal his character? Does God work miracles to redeem his creation from the results of a sinful misuse of freedom?

Posted by: [Martin Hanna](#) | [March 29, 2010 at 12:05 AM](#)

Matt, the issues you mention are important. It seems to me that some of the divisions among Christians on these issues are caused by conflicting definitions. As a result of this semantic complexity we sometimes misunderstand each other.

This leads me to share my own struggles with the issues you raised in terms of the following questions.

Is there a difference between "higher critical" thinking and "critical" thinking?

Can there be less than ideal statements or incidents recorded in the Bible without compromising its status as an inspired, true, and authoritative revelation from God?

Does the Bible model unity in diversity or unity in uniformity? Does unity in diversity mean that anything goes?

Is the Bible binding because it is the basis for our reflection on theology and lifestyle issues? Or is it binding in the sense that it prohibits us from reflecting on these issues?

Posted by: [Martin Hanna](#) | [March 29, 2010 at 12:41 AM](#)

Obviously the Bible itself portrays a rich variety of perspectives in the context of different kinds of situations and qualities of relationship with God. God addresses people where they are, not in a cultural or historical vacuum. So we need to recognize such factors in each passage we study and look for underlying enduring principles on a case by case basis. We encounter tough problems, such as genocide (only the first death, but pointing to eventual destruction of the wicked), Moses' punishment (if God let him off the hook, He would need to excuse everyone else), and the apparent complex causality involved in provoking David's disastrous census (2 Sam 24; 1 Chron 21; but cf. Job 1-2, where God allowed Satan to do something destructive). We must deal with such things, which are tough for us to understand. But the question is: Do we choose to approach the Bible from a position of humility, accepting it as God's word to which we are accountable? Or do we come to it with a superior/higher attitude, treating it as accountable to us and our reason, so that if it does not make sense to us, we must find a strategy to implicitly or explicitly change it?

Posted by: [Roy Gane](#) | [March 29, 2010 at 11:01 AM](#)

Roy:

I think your last statement gets to the heart of the issue, making sense of the Bible. Diversity is apparent in scripture, but also unity. The question for believers is how to go about reconciling the two in a way that makes sense.

I think that all but the most extreme would claim an attitude of humility towards the Bible. I think a better way to tease out our differences would be to discern whether we believe scripture can organize itself into a coherent whole, or whether we need to bring organization to scripture. In other words, can scripture account for itself, or does it need us to apply a hermeneutic principle that allows us to creatively ignore certain themes of the text.

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [March 29, 2010 at 08:10 PM](#)

Matt:

We've been around on this before, but anyway...

You say it's important not to miss or diminish the theological tensions within the Bible. I agree! (John Reeve's [trinity post](#) is about a basic example of this.)

But we must also not miss the theological unity of Scripture. Eden and the New Jerusalem, the 10 Commandments and the Law of Love, Election and Grace, Creation and Salvation, Incarnation and God's people, and others run throughout the Biblical texts. These and others are what form the non-negotiable core of the Christian (and Adventist) faith. So while theological tensions are necessary and healthy for productive power of the Bible, the major motifs are what bind the anthology together and set the tensions in proper perspective.

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [March 29, 2010 at 08:21 PM](#)

David and Roy,

I'm not trying to deny the unity of the Bible (while it is evident that you see more than I).

The question that Roy raised at the end of his comment magnifies the problem: "Do we choose to approach the Bible from a position of humility, accepting it as God's word to which we are accountable?"

I'd like to point out the cyclical reasoning that postulates the Bible as God's word because one of the documents in it says that the rest of the Bible is inspired. This belief seems to ignore the process of canonization--the early church didn't choose NT documents because they seemed to be inspired; to them, the authority of scripture was based on the fact that the authors were God's chosen apostles/witnesses. And not to open another can of worms, but I'll also say that ascribing divine authorship and authority to the Bible because of its inspiration leaves Adventists with no other choice but to see the inspired writings of Ellen White as equal to the Bible, which should be obviously problematic.

So, back to higher-criticism. Are we suggesting a "lower-criticism"? If it is considered a "superior/higher attitude" to think critically about what the Bible says (and not just about apparent contradictions or problem passages; I mean problematic theology), how are we supposed to believe? It seems to me that avoiding any level of criticism for fear of what it will do to faith is actually a reduction of faith to fideism or, worse, presumption.

Posted by: [Matt Burdette](#) | [March 29, 2010 at 08:49 PM](#)

So Matt, it seems that any authoritative system ultimately relies on cyclical reasoning. This is why authority rests on faith. In the system of biblical authority you propose the documents are authoritative because they are written by people who claimed to see Jesus and we know this because they wrote about it in those documents.

But if we assume that this is in fact the basis of scripture's authority (and I believe it is such a basis), would it not then presumably make one author's statement that scripture is authored by God and the authors inspired at least somewhat authoritative? After all, as Jesus' authoritative witness he saw enough consonance between Christ and the OT (and Peter, whose writings Paul referred to as *graphe*, "scripture") to recognize these writings were filled by the same Spirit that empowered Jesus. So it seems that at the very least we cannot dismiss this claim as purely circular, since we, at the least, believe it to be informed by the teaching of the risen Lord.

Now regarding "lower-criticism," that would be the position I advise believers take. By "lower" I would refer to the position we take vis a vis that authority of the Bible. It is higher, because we believe it to be God's Word incarnated in human words.

By "criticism" I mean the position of doubt we take towards our interpretations of the book. I also reject the "plain reading," so to speak, because it is camouflage for reading our own ideas into the text. But this tendency does not call for us to doubt scripture on account of our own problem and move to a position where we criticize scripture according to our own standards. Rather, I believe we should criticize our own ideas about scripture by the standards we find in the text itself.

Now this of course is an ideal that we can only approach. Which is why I think it's important for us to have these discussions. It forces us to think critically about the processes we use to understand scripture. So I look forward to your next response.

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [March 29, 2010 at 09:28 PM](#)

David, I think there is a logical problem in what you are saying. Let me try to clarify where you and I disagree, and then it may enable you to raise a more specific critique.

When I say that scripture is authoritative because of the witness of the author, it does not necessarily follow that the statements are authored by God. I reject the idea that "writings were filled by the...Spirit." That doesn't make any sense to me. I will give you the benefit of the doubt, and assume that you used your words loosely. But this reveals the problematic nature of inspiration language, does it not?

That one could jump from a statement about the scriptures being "God-breathed" to propositions about divine authorship and (implicitly) infallibility is problematic; the one does not *necessarily* follow from the other.

The Bible itself *never* claims to be authoritative on the basis of its inspired nature; it *always* does on the basis of the unique experience of the author with God--God revealed something to this person that has not been revealed to others, and therefore this person's testimony serves as an "access point" to what they uniquely experienced. This is evident in the Bible itself; I am not making something up or just regurgitating Karl Barth (indeed, he would take issue with some of what I've written).

You wrote that "God's Word [is] incarnated in human words." Is God's Word to be found in every human word of the Bible? If not, how can we tell the which human words that the Word is incarnated in (and doesn't this make necessary higher criticism)? If the Word is found in every human word of the Bible, isn't this just verbal plenary inspiration, suggesting that human fallenness, bias, cultural conditioning and the limitations of language have evaporated? This would be to suggest that the human contribution to the Bible has drowned in the divine (which is self-evidently false).

Your position--that the Bible is itself the sole revelation of God to us living today--reduces the revelation of God to a complex of true propositions about God and reality that are true (and those propositions may take a variety of forms, like letters or narratives). Yet having a bunch of propositions about God does *not* mean that it provides knowledge of God, nor does this allow any way for the believer to test and see if the propositions made in the Bible are actually true. You have demanded faith in the authority of the Bible; yet the Bible speaks of faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. The Bible never asks its reader/hearer to believe in it.

To me, the reality of Christian experience demands that we conceive of revelation differently than what you have cornered it into being (the Word of God incarnated in the human words of the Bible). Believing in the Spirit as I do, I am committed to the idea that we know God in God's Spirit, who confirms to us the truthfulness of the gospel, as witnessed to in the Bible. I think that there is nothing to fear in "higher criticism."

To be honest, I am somewhat disturbed by the rejection of "higher criticism" for the effect that it has, and because it seems to challenge the biblical statement in 1 Timothy on inspiration. To assert the Bible's inspiration does not respond to higher criticism; it only magnifies the problem that higher critics are trying to point out. I am quite open to hearing a critique of higher criticism that considers its methodological weaknesses, but I am unconvinced by a challenge to higher criticism that is based upon a specific theology of what the Bible is. Sure, we all have some cyclical reasoning; but to begin with the premise that we cannot challenge the inspired documents of the Bible because they are inspired is a closed cycle that will only ensure that we never change our beliefs about anything. Of this I am deeply suspicious.

Posted by: [Matt Burdette](#) | [March 30, 2010 at 05:22 PM](#)

Matt, you've raised a number of issues in your response. Let me start first by addressing what you say is a logical problem in my reasoning: "That one could jump from a statement about the scriptures being "God-breathed" to propositions about divine authorship and (implicitly) infallibility is problematic..."

Leaving aside the question of infallibility (which is a term you have introduced to this conversation but that we haven't defined), I would like to first address divine authorship. It seems to me that Paul's portmanteau in 2 Tim 3:16, God-breathed/spirited is meant to indicate in a non-exclusive sense a divine origin to scriptures. The word alludes to Gen 2:7, where the breath/spirit of the Lord gives life to the body God formed first man. Paul's understanding of the scriptures seems to be that they are human formed but God-breathed. Would you agree?

I would liken this to the modern "ghost authorship," where the ideas come from one author, but are given form by another. The analogy breaks down in that the modern ghost author is the one who gives form but is unseen, where as the Holy Ghost as author of scripture gives the ideas but is unseen.

The other thing I want to clarify is that I do not believe that the Bible is the sole form of God's revelation available to us today. There is also general revelation in nature, history, the experiences of God's people, and in the council of the church. I also believe, along with most Seventh-day Adventists, that God has given us special revelation through the ministry of Ellen White. That being said, I do believe that the Bible is the normative form of revelation available to us today.

It seems to me that you do not take the scripture as normative, but rather the internal witness of the Holy Spirit to God, which is confirmed by Scripture. Is this correct.

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [April 02, 2010 at 10:01 PM](#)

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