

Unveiling the Scriptures - Introduction

Some months ago it was arranged by the good people of the Russian Orthodox diocese of Souroz in Britain that I would give a talk at their diocesan conference at the end of this month entitled *Unveiling the Scriptures*. That plan came to grief with the coming of the COVID virus which resulted in our government cancelling flights to Britain and the cancellation of the conference itself. But the talk has long since been written, and I would like to serialize it here on this blog.

The topic and title for the talk that I was assigned was “Unveiling the Scriptures,” which presupposes that the Scriptures are to some degree veiled. That is true, in the sense that many people in the world and even many Christians do not have a good grasp of the nature of the Scriptures which they read and cite all the time. This deficit of understanding is rooted in a lack of historical knowledge of how the Scriptures came to be written and collected, with the result that many people assume that “the Bible” is a magic book. That is, they assume that the Church claims the Bible was written by God in the same way that Islam claims the Quran was written by “Allah”—that the various writers of the Biblical texts were merely passive instruments in the hands of God, who more or less dictated the text as is, so that the Bible’s authority is entirely rooted in this process of inspiration. The Bible thus becomes a kind of a-historical volume, something that descended in a lump from the sky, a source untouched by history and divorced from any historical development—and also divorced from any contemporary relevance.

Fortunately, few Christians today subscribe to such a mechanical view of inspiration-by-dictation, but many of them still regard inspiration as the sole category to be used when discussing Biblical authority. Bluntly put, they imagine that the Biblical texts are authoritative because God somehow turned the inspiration switch *on* when the human authors were writing, and then turned it *off* when they were finished. In this model of inspiration, St. Paul was simply a human author whom God used: he was inspired by God when he wrote his epistles, but was not inspired when he had finished writing them, and so was then no more authoritative in this uninspired state than anyone else. In this model, the concept of inspiration more or less swallows up the concept of apostolicity. Every part of the Bible is authoritative because every part was written after God had turned on an inspiration switch before the human authors began to write. The Bible thus becomes magical.

But the Bible is not the product of magic. Technically speaking, it is not even “the Bible” (a single book). The word “Bible” of course comes from the Greek *τα βιβλία* (*ta biblia*), — the books (in the plural), for it is not a single book (like, for example, *War and Peace*), but a collection of different books, an entire library. It represents a selection from the literature of an entire people, containing various literary genres, written over a long period of time. And it was written very long ago in the ancient Near East, and so shares with other literature of that time a common pre-scientific cosmology, a common way of using numbers, and a common way of writing history — all of which differ from our modern ways of doing science, using numbers, and writing history. A magic book would somehow bypass the culture of its time, but the Bible is not a magic book. It is rooted in the culture of its time, since in it God was speaking to the people of that time.

In a sense, the Bible was incarnated in the culture of its day in the same way that Jesus was incarnated in the world and culture of *His* day. An old document called (a bit misleadingly) “the Athanasian Creed” refers to the Incarnation of Jesus as accomplished “not by conversion of Godhead into flesh, but by taking of Manhood into God”. This provides a kind of analogy for the written Word of God as well: it also was accomplished by the taking up of human literature into God, so that it could be used for His divine purposes. Just as Christ was 100% human, so is the Bible 100% human, bearing all the characteristics of a

literature produced in the ancient Near East. Viewing the Bible as magical represents therefore a kind of literary Docetism.

Christians are people of the Scriptures or “people of the Book”, as even Muhammad knew in the seventh century, for all his lack of any real understanding of Christianity or Judaism. We see this in our icons. Arguably the bishops are the Church’s main leaders and pastors, and when a bishop appears in an icon, he is usually carrying a book — i.e. the Gospel. Both apologists and martyrs were forever quoting their Scriptures to outsiders, even if the *disciplina arcana* kept them from being too talkative about the Church’s inner traditions.

But the treasury of the Scriptures was a gift that came at the end of a long process of development taking centuries. It is perhaps rather jarring to be reminded that when that process began—i.e. when God called Abraham out of Chaldea to begin his long adventurous exile of wandering—there were no Scriptures. God spoke to Abraham, but He did not give him a written text. Nor did Abraham write anything down. Nor did his son Isaac, or his grandson Jacob. Nor did *his* son, Joseph. In fact, the early centuries of revelation all took place in a distinctly oral culture. It is important to ask why this was and what it means. Let us begin to find out. In the process, I hope the Scriptures can be unveiled for us enough to see their true significance and their true use.

The Patriarchal Period

It is crucial for us to understand what it was that was revealed when we speak of “Revelation”. As we see in the case of Abraham and the patriarchs, what was revealed was not “the Word of God” (in the sense of a text or even a verbal message), but God Himself. Abram was not given a message so much as he was treated to an encounter. In this encounter, of course, God spoke to him. God did not just show him a map of Palestine, with the city of Hebron circled on it as a way of telling him to go there. He spoke to him and sent him on his way, and continued to speak to him periodically after that. There is a verbal component to most human encounters. But the point remains that in Biblical revelation *presence* was primary, not *message*. God would occasionally come to Abraham in an encounter to continue his relationship with him. Sometimes the encounter involved giving directions (i.e. “leave Chaldea”), sometimes it involved giving promises (“I will make you the father of nations”), and sometimes it involved giving a test (“offer your son Isaac to Me as a human sacrifice”). Sometimes it involved what we might characterize as casual conversation between two friends, as when God said to Himself, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do to Sodom and Gomorrah?”, followed by a bit of typical Near Eastern haggling about it after He shared with Abraham what He was planning to do. But always the revelation consisted primarily of the gift of presence. Abraham did not write down what God said, any more than we write down what our friends tell us in our ongoing relationships. Abraham, after all, was called “the friend of God”, not the secretary of God.

Thus it was that during the patriarchal period and afterward, when Israel entered Egypt, they took with them no Scriptural records of their patriarchal history—just the oral traditions about them. They had no writings, and they didn’t need any. They were not the People of the Book, but the People of God. However, a written record of their dealings with God would come soon enough.

Next: The Scriptures in the Mosaic period