

# The Bible

Authority

Professor Christopher Rowland

SCM

# Authority

To assert that the Bible is an authoritative book is shorthand. The majority of Christians in practice would not want to attribute the same kind of authority to all parts of it. The most obvious distinction is between the Old and the New Testament. Indeed, within the different parts, few would want to assert that the book of Esther or the books of Samuel, fascinating in themselves historically or as works of literature, have the same significance as the book of Genesis or the prophecy of Isaiah. Within the New Testament, historically more significance has been attached to the Gospel of John and the letter to the Romans rather than the Gospel of Mark and the book of Revelation. Luther put this succinctly in his 1520 Preface to the New Testament by using the criterion, 'Does a book preach Christ?' Those that did this best deserved most authority. In writing thus, Luther reminds us that there is a question of human judgement about the relative authority we give to what is after all a collection of books from many different hands, at different times. There is nothing 'God-given' about the canon of scripture, therefore. Historical scholarship has only confirmed this. There was nothing inevitable or demanding about the collection of books that ended up as the New Testament, and some books on the margins of the canon were much discussed down the centuries.

A Christian approach to the Bible, which is consistent with the New Testament itself, is going always to view the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament. It is self-evident that down the centuries Christians have not kept the Mosaic law, which according to Hebrews and the Pauline letters is largely redundant. The Old Testament, in Paul's words in Romans 15:4, is useful for the following reasons: 'Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.' The heart of Christianity resides in the fourfold story of Jesus, for which there are few parallels in antiquity. There has been much debate about their historicity, relationship and meaning, but no religion which can call itself Christian can exist without some reference to these tellings of the story of Jesus, the focus of Christianity. From a pragmatic point of view, therefore, this is why these texts are authoritative: they offer the description and justification why, and how, anyone should want to follow Jesus Christ.

Most Christians would attribute to the Bible some authority, but there are very different versions of that. On the one hand there are those who think that there is something intrinsic to these particular books and these words, which place them apart in some way as God-given and God-inspired. On the other hand are those who regard the Bible as authoritative because of the events and issues to which it bears witness, as without it there would not be any understanding of the past history of God's people or the messiah about whom the first Christians wrote. For this group there is a more complex understanding of the basis of authority, as it depends on the subtle interplay between the work of the Spirit in the lives of the biblical writers and the situations to which they bear witness, interacting with the work of the Spirit in our own situation, far removed as it is in time and circumstances.

The New Testament writings themselves suggest a form of Christian commitment which bids us regard texts from the past not as the prime, or only, source of understanding of the divine will. The prime source is instead Christ through the Spirit, pointing and guiding those who would consciously follow him, as well as those, inside and outside the church, who exemplify his pattern of life. In this view, the scriptures may be the vehicle of the divine spirit, but Christ is never exclusively bound to them. We read the New Testament because we want to engage with the witness of those who have sought to follow Jesus in the past, and did so, in the New Testament, at the start of the movement he initiated. We do it not because we want to imitate exactly what they said and did – rather, by engaging with their witness to Christian life, and by relating it to our own, we hope to illuminate our contemporary journey by discerning what it was like for them and in what sense their situation may have analogies to our own.

What was most important for the first Christians is true also for us: searching for, and in turn being found by, Christ. Like them we shall discover that Christ is just as often to be discovered outside, rather than inside, the pages of scripture. After all, the first Christians did not read the Jewish scriptures as their detailed guide. Far from it. Rather they resorted to those ancient texts from time to time (and by no means consistently) to enable them to back up what they were discovering about Christ in the world and in each other, and relate it to the story of God's people in the past (the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 10 are a

good example of this).

The authority of scripture, therefore, lies in the fact that it bears witness to the Word, which became flesh, Jesus Christ, who is the indwelling divine Word, who comes again and again, encouraging and challenging men and women. The Bible's authority is dependent upon the confirmation of the experience from within. From the very start of Christian history, mere appeal to 'what the Bible says' was never deemed to be an adequate ground for the Christian life. As Christianity sought to offer a message for those outside the bounds of Judaism, it rapidly became necessary to show how Christ might have been involved in the culture of society. Early Christian writers did this by stressing that the divine Word was already active in the lives of men and women centuries before, without their ever being part of the people of God.

When seeking to discern what may be of God and what not, early Christian writers used a complex mix of appeal to tradition, to recognised bearers of the way, and to what they termed 'a rule of faith', a simple formula, probably the forerunner of the Christian creeds, which offered a benchmark for those who would select true teaching from false. Such a mix did not solely involve a simple appeal to the past. From the very start such an appeal had never been at the heart of Christianity, whose origins lay in a radically new reading of received wisdom, claiming a degree of continuity with them but never allowing what had been written in the past to determine what God's Spirit was calling people to in the present. The Spirit opens up the meaning of the letters of scripture to the eye of faith (see 2 Corinthians 3:6).

In discerning what the Spirit is now saying to the churches, the words and character of Jesus have always remained fundamental for Christian living, and to this extent the scriptures are a necessary component in providing the way of attending to the words of the Word become flesh. Christianity has never been a religion of the book. However comforting appeal to precedent or a written text might be, there is in Christianity's own foundation texts the story of a movement which, when it came to the crunch, was prepared to sit loose to ancestral custom and to prefer patterns of life which seemed to be in conformity with something fundamental to the Christ they experienced. To engage with scripture is to try to get at what

the Bible might point to about conformity to Christ, rather than to be preoccupied with what its literal demands are.

The great divide in Christianity is between those who think that God requires of humanity submission to a book which has been given divine approval, and those who regard the Bible as a book whose authority has been given as a result of human use over centuries and which has been shown in different ways to be a text which is indispensable to the Christian religion. Does the Bible compel assent because of its intrinsic authority, therefore, or because of an authority bestowed on it by use and its effects? Among that last group there is going to be a wide variety of opinions, ranging from those who would want to assert that the meaning of the Bible is dependent on what is loosely referred to as 'tradition'. By that is meant the particular section of Christian opinion down the centuries which is deemed to be the authoritative selection of interpretations of the tradition. In addition, there are those who are more open to what contemporary life and culture might offer in terms of theological insight.

The consequences of these different understanding of authority are everywhere to be seen in the contemporary churches. What is clear is that there is nothing compelling about the Bible which demands that one would take it as divine revelation as a whole in the way, say, that a Muslim would regard the Qur'an. There are parts of it which assert this kind of authority as the result of direct communication from God: parts of the book of Exodus, and the prophetic words in both the Old and New Testaments. For example, the book of Revelation's authority is stated particularly in Revelation 22:18 (echoing the words of Deuteronomy) – though, ironically, that book has been the most suspected by Christians! Most Christians down the centuries, however, have been content to muddle through, recognising that there is a mixed mode of authority in which past and present, text and experience mingle in discerning the meaning of the divine in human affairs. It is the balance of that mix that is the heart of many contemporary debates in Christianity.

If the authority of the Bible is in the witness it offers to Jesus Christ as the Word made flesh, being addressed by and meeting Christ is not just about delving into the meaning of Scripture, on the assumption that if only one had more intellectual insight one would somehow get closer to God.

'The Word is very near you' writes the author of the letter to the Hebrews (Hebrews 4:14). Finding this Word who is near, or, better, being discovered by God, not least in the lives of others, is how Christians describe the activity of the Spirit. It is through reading and hearing the writings, interpreting them, living them and learning from the different ways in which people live (and have lived) the Bible that one is put in touch with the Word of God, who is beyond the word of the Bible or for that matter of any other book. It is that insight which Jesus shares with his disciples in his evocation of the last judgement in Matthew 25:31–45. Meeting with Christ turns out not be in specifically religious ceremonies or even in the holy scriptures, but in the person of the poor and vulnerable. No amount of authority or holiness granted to a book, therefore, can compare with the fundamental theological truth of service to, and solidarity with, the vulnerable: 'just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me' (Matthew 25:40, 45). The Bible's authority is discovered in the way it encourages men and women to perform its words in very practical, Christ-like, ways. It is in the practical application and exploration of that Christ-like way that those who follow and also act can read scripture and discover insights into new ways of behaving. They affirm what many have discovered down the centuries, namely, that the Bible offers weighty testimony to what constitutes Christian discipleship

*Christopher Charles Rowland is the Dean Ireland's Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture at the University of Oxford.*