

Doctrine of Scripture

Part Two

We are continuing this morning with our brief series on *the Doctrine of Scripture* which we began last week and in which we thought about two fundamental aspects of this very important doctrine. We looked, firstly, at the idea of *revelation* and talked about how God created us for relationship with himself and how He is actually *eager* for his people to *know* Him. And not just to know Him but also to *know about* Him and what He is doing and why. And so, in keeping with that desire, God has revealed himself to us, in various ways, but principally in and through his Son, Jesus Christ - and through the Scriptures which *anticipate, record* and then *reflect* on the coming of His Son.

Alongside the matter of *revelation* we looked at the idea of *inspiration*. In short, if God is going to reveal Himself to people who are both *finite* and *fallen*, then he will need to provide us with revelation that *transcends* our fallenness and our creatureliness - in terms of its accuracy and reliability. At the same time, however, the revelation He provides will still need to come to us in a form that we can relate to in our humanity.

This God has done in and through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments which are God-breathed, inspired, documents written by men “as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” - as Peter describes it. In other words, through the superintending work of the Holy Spirit, and through the agency of fallen men who were prophets and apostles, God made sure that *what was written* was, in fact, *exactly what He wanted written*. That’s what we mean by “inspired”.

Now, we want to try and make a little more progress this week by exploring some additional concepts as we continue to think about *the Doctrine of Scripture*. However, before we go any further let’s pray and ask for God’s blessing on this time.....

Great Father in Heaven, we thank you this morning for the fact that you are a God who is, indeed, eager to know us and who has gone to great lengths to reveal Himself to a people hardly deserving of such a thing. When we pause long enough to think about it, we are greatly humbled by this fact. And it is only because of YOU'RE faithfulness that we dare ask for even more grace this morning – the grace of your Spirit's presence among us, leading us into truth and guiding us into those things which you would have us know and be and do. Thank you for loving us so well. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

John Calvin has been credited with once describing the Scriptures as “God’s baby talk”. Now that is a *very* interesting statement, and it is worth pondering for a moment.....

I don’t know about you, but when I talk to children, especially very *young* children, I will typically try to use language and concepts that are simpler and which are an *approximation* of what I might say if I were talking about the same subject with an adult. I try to keep everything down on a lower shelf, so to speak, so that the children can grab on to it more easily.

Well, in a similar sort of fashion - the language God uses when talking to us is and must be an accommodation of what he might say in communicating with his Son, or with the Holy Spirit. His revelation of Himself to us is aimed at our “understanding level” - which isn’t terribly much, frankly. That doesn’t mean it isn’t accurate. It is. And it doesn’t mean it isn’t *true*. It is both accurate and true, as far as it goes. It just doesn’t go as far as it *could*. To put that another way: God never tells us *everything* about *anything*, both because he doesn’t need to and because we couldn’t deal with it anyway, if He did.

So, returning to the analogy of talking with children for a moment - if a five year old child were to ask me, “Where does the rain come from?” I would simply say “from the clouds”. However, if a 14 year old child asked me where the rain came from - I would try to give a more complex answer and talk about things like the sun’s role in the whole process, or I might talk about things like evaporation and condensation - things like that. Now my answer to the five year old would have been accurate and true - as far as it went. But the answer I gave didn’t go as far as it could go. But it *did* go as far as it needed to go.

And so it is that this idea of *accommodation* - that God speaks to us in a form and at a level that we can understand - is very closely tied to the idea of the *sufficiency* of Scripture - that what God has given us is exactly what we need, and is sufficient and perfectly capable of accomplishing God’s purposes in and through us. The Scriptures are *complete* and give us everything we need to know in order to both *embrace* the Gospel and then to *live in the light of the Gospel* and *for the glory of God’s kingdom*. The Scriptures don’t tell us everything that *could* be known. They simply provide us with what we, as fallen, sinful creatures *need* to know about living in a way that glorifies our Creator.

After talking about some of the *qualities* of Scripture such as revelation, inspiration, accommodation and sufficiency we turn now to the Scriptures themselves in order to think about just what it is that we hold in our hands when we grasp this thing we call the Bible.

For starters, as most of you likely know, the Bible that you and I read is a *translation*. We read the Bible in English. Germans read it in German. Brazilians read it in Portuguese. But the language we read it in is not the language that the Bible was *written* in. The Bible was written in a *different language* and, in fact, in *three* different languages. The Old Testament is mostly written in *Hebrew*, with a smattering of *Aramaic* (Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; Daniel 2:4-7:28; Jeremiah 10:11) and the NT was written in *Greek*.

The 66 books contained in the Bible were written over the space of about 1500 years - and necessarily so since God’s revelation of what He was doing and why came to us over a long period of time - in history - and through specific events. And since God determined to give us revelation through a long period of time, he made use of a number of different authors - roughly 40, or so.

And here’s where the plot thickens a little bit. We do not have *any* of the original writings of *any* book in the Bible. We don’t have Moses’ original manuscript of the Book of Genesis. We don’t have any of Isaiah’s original documents. We don’t have Luke’s original Gospel.

The earliest reference - that we know of so far - to any of the original documents is contained in the works of someone named Peter of Alexandria - who, in one of his writings, talks about the Church at Ephesus still having in their possession the original copy of John's Gospel. Now Peter of Alexandria died around 311 AD - roughly 280 years after Jesus' death. Another writer named Tertullian also makes a reference to the autographs. He died around 220 AD - but his reference is not as certain. But the point is, we know the originals existed and were, at one time, in the possession of God's people. But we do not, at this point, have any of them.

Now you might ask, "How do you know that we don't have any of the originals?" Well we know because the documents we *do* have are not as old as they would need to be in order to have been written by the people whose name they bear. When you piece together the history of the events recorded in Scripture, and then through that develop a timeline of when things would have happened and when different people - like Moses and Isaiah - would have lived, then you come up with a range of dates in which the books they authored would have to have been written.

And then you look at the manuscripts - the hand-written copies of the Bible - that we have at our disposal and determine the date of those manuscripts you see that there is a *gap* between the time when the original was written, and the date of the earliest copy or earliest *fragment* of a copy of that book.

So, for example, the Gospel of John would have to have been written somewhere around 90 AD - roughly 60 years after Jesus death and resurrection. The earliest manuscript *copy* we have of John's Gospel is not a complete manuscript. In fact, it is really only a fragment known as the "John Rylands - P52" fragment and it contains five partial verses from the Gospel and was likely written somewhere between 100 and 125 AD.

How many of these manuscripts do we have? Well, we have - in whole or in part - more than 7000 different manuscripts from which we draw the 66 books of the Bible. Some of these manuscripts - typically the newer ones - are a complete collection of the Old Testament, or the New Testament - or both. Many, many more, and typically more of the older ones might be a complete copy of a single book of the Bible, or a partial copy, or a copy of a chapter or a paragraph or - as we have just seen - a handful of verses.

Now unless you have studied ancient manuscripts, these numbers might not mean much to you. So let me just give you an idea of how the copies of the Bible compare to the manuscripts that we have of *other* ancient writings.

For example, take Caesar's *Gallic War*, which was written about 54 years before Christ's birth. For this ancient work we have a *handful* - literally - of manuscripts, but only 9 or 10 of them are of any use, and the *oldest* of them was written 900 years after Caesar died. So, for Caesar's *Gallic War*, there is a 900 year gap between the original, the oldest surviving copy. And there are only about 9 or 10 useful copies.

The *History of Thucydides*, written around 430 BC has only 8 surviving manuscripts, the earliest of which was written around 900 AD - a gap of more than 1400 years between original and copy. The *History of Herodotus*, written at nearly the same time, is in the same sort of situation - very few manuscripts and at least a 1300 year gap between the original and the oldest copy.

And yet, as Edward Goodrick, the scholar upon whose work I am depending heavily this morning, has pointed out, in spite of the great distance between originals and copies of originals in these *classic* works “no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt” because of the gap.

Compare these sorts of figures with the Bible and you see that there is a *remarkable* difference. The number of manuscripts that we have to work with, when it comes to the Bible, is over 7000. Take any other piece of literature of the same age - from anywhere in the world - and what you discover is that the number of manuscripts we have of the Bible exceeds even the most *well* attested ancient manuscripts by a factor of *a hundred to one*. There are 100 times more Bible manuscripts than there are of *any* other literature of similar age.

And the range of the Bibles manuscripts varies from things like the John Rylands fragment - which is within 10-20 years of the original - to manuscripts like the Codex Vaticanus or Sinaiticus, written around 350 AD - to other manuscripts dating from the 1400's. And we are finding new manuscripts all the time. In short, the Bible is *extremely* well attested in its documentation.

Well, what do you do with all these manuscripts - some of them small, some of them extensive? How do you get a Bible out of *that*? Well it's *sort of* like what happens when you are doing a jigsaw puzzle. On the cover of the puzzle box, you have a completed picture and inside you have the picture broken into fragments. If you have done enough puzzles you will know that when you open the box, not all the fragments are the same size. Sometimes you are fortunate to discover that there are three or four pieces still stuck together - and sometimes more - and these larger fragments can be really helpful and can give you a headstart. And all the while that you are assembling these fragments, the cover on the box functions sort of like a “map” to guide you in the assembly process.

Well, it's not a perfect analogy, but that is something like what goes on when scholars work with the ancient manuscripts of the Bible. This is the science of what is called “textual criticism” - which sounds like a bad thing but which, in fact, is a good and very helpful thing. It is the reason why the Bible you hold in your hand today is as coherent and readable as it is.

Text critical scholars makes use of both more recent complete manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments - which function like the top of the puzzle box - and they also make use of older and smaller fragments - which are more like the pieces inside the box - to assembly the various books of the Bible. Where the puzzle analogy breaks down a bit is that - with a puzzle - when you open the box you find that there is only one piece of each kind. With the Scriptures, there are numerous copies of every passage.

Which raises its own question, namely this: When we compare these various manuscripts and these similar copies of the same “piece” what do we discover? What do we find when we compare, for example, the five verses contained on the John Rylands fragment with the same five verses contained in a manuscript 250 years later, or even 1000 years later.

Well, what we discover is that occasionally there are *differences*. One manuscript will have an extra word in a verse while another manuscript, with the same verse, will not contain that word. One manuscript will use one form of a word while another might use a slightly different form - but with a similar meaning. The text critical scholar’s job is to compare these various manuscripts and to try and determine what the *original manuscript* - the autographa - would have said, based upon what the copies are saying.

Now, you might wonder, *how* different are these manuscripts? Is there a *lot* of this going on? Are the differences substantial? Well, without going into more detail, let me try and put your mind at ease. First of all, the differences are not substantial. None of them have any bearing on any significant or core doctrine of the Scriptures.

Further, if you took all the words about which there is some uncertainty in the manuscripts of the New Testament, and you put them on the same page, they would take up one regular sized piece of paper. To put it in other terms, the amount of the New Testament that is un-settled and disputed - in terms of the science of textual criticism - is *one-half, of one percent*.

When you turn to the Old Testament, you discover a similar reality. Although, until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls the textual criticism of the OT was about 200 years behind that of the NT. For a long while, the earliest copies we had of any of the Old Testament books were more than a 1000 years older than the original manuscripts.

But then, in 1947, a boy was playing around some caves in the Middle East and was throwing rocks into one of them when he heard something that sounded like glass breaking. When he went in the cave to see what his rock had hit, he discovered these large pieces of pottery which contained scrolls - manuscripts - of the Old Testament. The remarkable thing about these scrolls was that, on the one hand, some of them were 1000 years closer to the original than the best manuscripts we had at that point. On the other hand, even more remarkable than their age was their *accuracy* or rather, what they revealed about the accuracy of the Old Testament. When scholars starting comparing these new, much earlier copies of the old Testament books - like Isaiah - with the later ones we had been working with, they discovered that they were virtually identical.

And so, if you had to put a figure on what the amount of variation is between the various Old Testament manuscripts, it would be slightly higher than the NT, but not by much, and in any case, still less than one percent. So, while we do not have any of the original manuscripts, we can nevertheless see God’s providential hand in the fact that over centuries of transmission the copies we *do* possess have remained faithful to those originals.

While our time is almost gone, let me try and deal with two more questions that you might be asking yourself, and then we'll call it a day.....

One question that may have occurred to some of you is this: Why has God given us his revelation in *this* way? Surely he could have, if he wanted to, just dropped this heavenly book out of the sky, rather than giving it to us over the course of many centuries and then entrusting the preservation and transmission of that revelation into the hands of sinful, fallible men. Surely God *could* have done that, couldn't he?

And, of course, God certainly *could* have done something like that. But he didn't. As for *why* He didn't, I cannot tell you. Nor do the Scriptures tell us - at least not directly - although there are some hints. When you look at the commandments given to Moses in the Old Testament, right there among the first couple of them is God's command that his people are not to worship other gods or to make images by which they worshiped Him.

And part of the reason for that, and perhaps the main reason for that prohibition, is that God knows the human heart and He knows that, in our sinfulness, we are very prone to making idols of other things. We are very given to objectifying our faith, and taking it from Him and placing it, instead, in things *other* than Him. And this can happen with almost anything, including the good things that God gives us.

One Bible example of this is found in the Old Testament. At one point, as an act of judgment upon his people, God brought poisonous snakes in among them. This occurred in Moses' day. The people, up to that point, had once again been rebelling and complaining against God, and against his chosen servant Moses, in spite of God's repeated mercies to them.

And so God sends this judgment upon them but, at the same time, he sends the *remedy* for the judgment. He instructs Moses to fashion a bronze snake and place it on a pole so that the people could see it. If they did so, and they had been bitten by the snakes, they would live. The point of all this was to show them, again, that - in spite of their feelings to the contrary - they remained fully dependent upon God and, apart from that, there was no life and no hope. There was only tragedy going any other way.

Well, if you fast forward a few hundred years, you come to the account of King Hezekiah in 2nd Kings and you discover that this same bronze serpent - which was a good thing given to them by God and was a symbol of both his judgment and his mercy - this same bronzed serpent was now being worshiped and people were making sacrifices to it - like it was some sort of God.

And I think about that incident and I wonder if, given our tendencies to make idols and to chase after other things, and to forget that Christianity is about being in relationship with God - and not merely about thinking correctly - I wonder if because of those sorts of things it would not have served us as well to have been handed some amazing manuscript straight from heaven. I wonder whether, if that *was* how the Bible had come to us, we would have eventually made the Bible itself an object of worship and lost sight of the fact that behind these words is a *person* - God - who is revealing Himself, through them.

That's one question you might be wondering about. A final question for our time this morning is this: If we do not actually have any of the original writings of the Bible but merely copies, can we really be confident that *the Bible in our hands* is the inspired Word of God? Can we trust that *this Bible* is authoritative and sufficient and trustworthy for his people?

And the short answer to that is: YES, WE CAN. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes this,

2 Timothy 3:16-17 ¹⁶ *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,* ¹⁷ *that the man of God¹ may be competent, equipped for every good work.*

Now we looked at this verse last week and when we did we focused on the Greek word for "breathed out". This week I want to draw your attention to a *different* word. It is the word "Scripture" which, in the Greek is *graphe*. And what you need to know about this word is this. This is the typical word that is used in the NT to refer to the Old Testament Scriptures. So, for example, when Jesus in Luke 4:21, stands up to read the Scriptures in the synagogue at Nazareth, the text says he read from the *graphe*. Likewise when Paul reads the Scriptures in Thessalonica, in Acts 17:2.

And the thing to note is this - the Scriptures to which Paul was referring and the Scriptures which Jesus stood up to read *were not autographa* - they were not originals. They were copies. Copies of the originals are all that they had available to them - and not very many at that. And yet Paul, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, thinking of these same *copies* of the originals, says that they are inspired by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

Jesus had full confidence in them. Paul had full confidence in them. So can we have full confidence in the Scriptures which we hold in our hand today.