

# *The Inspiration and Authority of Holy Scripture*

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WHEN speaking about the authority of the Scriptures, one must distinguish sharply from the beginning between this authority itself and our doctrine about Scripture, its authority, infallibility, and all qualifications and concepts concerning Holy Scripture that have proceeded from theological reflection and discussion over the years. The Bible itself gives no systematic doctrine of its attributes, of the relationship in it of the divine and human. Its point of view is other than that of theology.

This does not mean, of course, that the Bible has nothing to say about its authority and infallibility. The authority of the Scriptures is the great presupposition of the whole of the biblical preaching and doctrine. This appears most clearly in the way the New Testament speaks about the Old Testament. That which appears in the Old Testament is cited in the New Testament with formulas like “God says,” “the Holy Spirit says,” and so on (cf., for instance, Acts 3:24, 25; 2 Cor. 6:16; Acts 1:16). What “the Scripture says” and what “God says” is the same thing. The Scripture may be personified, as if it were God himself (Gal. 3:8; Rom. 9:17). This “indicates a certain confusion in current speech between ‘Scripture’ and ‘God,’ the outgrowth of a deep-seated conviction that the word of Scripture is the Word of God. It was not ‘Scripture’ that spoke to Pharaoh (Rom. 9:17), or gave his great promise to Abraham (Gal. 3:8), but God. But ‘Scripture’ and ‘God’ lay so close together in the minds of the writers of the New Testament that they could naturally speak of ‘Scripture’ doing what Scripture records God as doing” (B. B. Warfield). And this naturally implies *authority*. “It is written” (Greek, *gegraptai*) in the New Testament puts an end to all contradiction.

This authority of the Scriptures of the Old Testament is no other than that which the apostles ascribe to themselves, namely as heralds, witnesses, ambassadors of God and Christ (Rom. 1:1,5; 1 Tim. 2:7; Gal. 1:8,9; 1 Thess. 2:13). They attach that authority in the same manner to their writings as to their words (1 Cor. 15:1f.; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:14). In the New Testament the apostolic writings are already placed on a par with those of the Old Testament (2 Pet. 3:15,16; Rev.1:3). *Gegraptai* is already used of the writings of the New Testament (John 20:31). And the New Testament concept of faith is in accord with that: it is *obedience* to the apostolic witness (Rom. 1:5; 16:26; 10:3). This apostolic witness is fundamentally distinguished in this respect from other manifestations of the Spirit, which demand of the congregation (*ekklesia*) not only

obedience, but also a critical discernment between the true and the false (cf. 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 John 4:1). For this witness deserves unconditional faith and obedience, in its written as well as in its oral form.

Similarly for infallibility. Although, as far as I am aware, the equivalent of our word “infallibility” as attribute of the Scripture is not found in biblical terminology, yet in agreement with Scripture’s divine origin and content, great emphasis is repeatedly placed on its *trustworthiness*. The prophetic word is sure (*bebaios*) (2 Pet. 1:19). In the Pastoral Epistles Paul does not tire of assuring his readers that the word he has handed down is trustworthy (*pistos*) and worthy of full acceptance (1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8). In Hebrews 2:3 the author writes that salvation was declared at first by the Lord and it was attested (made *bebaios*) to us by those who heard him. While it must be said of man that “all flesh is grass,” it is true, of the word of God that “it abides forever.” And “that word is the good news, *which was preached to you*” (1 Pet. 1:24,25).

The abiding and trustworthy word of God has thus entered into the spoken and written word of the apostles. As Luke tells Theophilus, the tradition of what was heard and seen by those who were from the beginning eyewitnesses and ministers of the word has been written down so that he might recognize the trustworthiness (*asphaleia*) of that of which he has been informed (Luke 1:1-4). The whole of Scripture is full of declarations that the one who builds on the word and promise of God will not be ashamed (Isa. 28:16; Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:6); this applies to the spoken as well as to the written word of the apostles (John 19:35; 20:31; 1 John 1:1-3). The Scripture is infallible, so we may summarize, because it does not fail, because it has the significance of a foundation on which the *ekklesia* has been established and on which it must increasingly establish itself (Col. 2:6,7). The whole concept of *tradition*, as it is used by Paul, for example, has this connotation of authority, certainty, irrefutability. Protestants thus do well not to give up this concept out of reaction against its use in Roman Catholicism. The authority and infallibility of the Scriptures are thus two sides of the same coin: namely, that the Scripture is of God.

The second thing we have to observe from the beginning is that all attributes which the Scripture ascribes to itself stand in close relationship to its purpose and nature. And so our way of thinking about Scripture and our theological definitions must also be related to this purpose.

It is obvious that Scripture is given us for a definite purpose. Paul says that it

“was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). The famous pronouncement of 2 Timothy 3:15-16 is to the same effect: the sacred writings “are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Not only is the nature and force of the Scriptures to be found in their providing instruction for salvation, so is the means and key for understanding them – faith in Jesus Christ. Only by the light of such faith is the treasure of wisdom and knowledge of the Scriptures unlocked.

This purpose of Scripture (of the Old Testament as well as the New) and the use which corresponds to it must always be borne in mind when framing a theological definition of the attributes of the Scripture. That is the thrust of Calvin’s comment on 2 Timothy 3:15: “In order that it may be profitable to salvation to us, we have to learn to make right use of it.

He has good reason to recall us to the faith of Christ, which is the center and sum of Scripture.” What follows in verse 16 is in complete accord with this: “All Scripture is inspired by God” – and the predicative significance of *theopuēstos* is not in my opinion disputable – “and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness.” The purpose and the nature of Scripture lie thus in that qualified sort of teaching and instruction which is able to make us wise to salvation, which gives God’s people this “completeness” and equips them for every good, work.

That we cannot speak about Scripture and its qualities apart from this scope, purpose, and nature, should also be the point of departure of every theological evaluation and definition of biblical authority. This authority is not to be separated from the content and purpose of Scripture thus qualified nor can it be recognized apart from this content and the specific character of the Scripture. No matter to what extent we reject the dualistic doctrine of inspiration, which holds that only the religious-ethical sections of Scripture are inspired and authoritative, this does not remove the fact that, in Herman Bavinck’s words, “Holy Scripture has a thoroughly religious-ethical purpose (designation, intention) and is not intended to be a handbook for the various sciences.” We may not apply to the Scripture standards which do not suit it. Not only does it give no exact knowledge of mathematics or biology, but it also presents no history of Israel or biography of Jesus that accords with the standards of historical science. Therefore, one must not transfer biblical authority.

God speaks to us through the Scriptures not in order to make us scholars, but to make us Christians. To be sure, to make us Christians in our science, too, but not in such a way as to make human science superfluous or to teach us in a supernatural way all sorts of things that could and would otherwise be learned by scientific training and research.

What Scripture does intend is to place us as humans in a right position to God, even in our scientific studies and efforts. Scripture is not concerned only with persons' *religious* needs in a pietistic or existentialistic sense of that word. On the contrary, its purpose and authority is that it teaches us to understand everything *sub specie Dei* – humanity, the world, nature, history, their origin and their destination, their past and their future.

Therefore the Bible is not only the book of conversion, but also the book of history and the book of creation. But it is the book of history of salvation; and it is this point of view that represents and defines the authority of Scripture.

But when one connects the theological definition of authority and infallibility as attributes of Scripture so closely with Scripture's purpose and nature, does one not run the danger of falling into a kind of subjectivism? Who will establish precisely the boundaries between that which does and that which does not pertain to the purpose of the Scripture? And is the way not thus opened for subjectivism and arbitrariness in the matter of the authority of the Scripture, as has been so detrimental to the authority of the Scripture in the history of the church? I should like in this connection to point out the following:

First, the misuse of the Scripture does not abolish the good and correct use. A Scripture is not a book of separate divine oracles, but is from Genesis to Revelation an organic unity, insofar as it is the book of the history of God's redeeming and judging acts, of which the advent and work of Christ is the all-dominating center and focus. The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (Rev. 19:10), and Scripture has the power to save by faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15). This is the center to which everything in Scripture stands in relationship and through which it is bound together – beginning and end, creation and recreation, humanity, the world, history, and the future, as all of these have a place in the Scripture. Therefore, there is also a correlation between Scripture and faith, namely, as faith in Jesus Christ. If you take that unity away from Scripture and this correlation of Scripture and faith, you denature Scripture and faith in it; and the authority and infallibility of the Scripture

also lose their theological-christological definition and become formal concepts, abstracted from the peculiar nature and content of Scripture.

But in the second place, that does not mean we are permitted to apply all sorts of dualistic operations on Scripture and make distinctions between what is and what is not inspired, what is and what is not from God – to say, for instance, that the content but not the form, or the essence but not the word was subject to the might and inspiration and authority of God. God gave us the Scripture in this concrete form, in these words and languages. The confession applies to this, and not to specific sections or thoughts, that it is the inspired word of God, that it is given to us as the infallible guide to life, God's light on our path, God's lamp for our feet. But divine inspiration does not necessarily mean that the men who spoke and wrote under inspiration were temporarily stripped of their limitations in knowledge, memory, language, and capability of expressing themselves, as specific human beings in a certain period of history.

We have to be very careful, I think, not to operate as though we know ahead of time to what extent divine inspiration does or does not go together with the human limitations mentioned above. Inspiration does not mean deification. We cannot say everything of Scripture that we say of the word of God, nor can we identify the apostles and prophets during their writing with the Holy Spirit. The Word of God exists in eternity, is perfect. But Scripture is neither eternal nor perfect. Inspiration consists in this, that God makes the words of men the instrument of his word, that he uses human words for his divine purposes. As such the human words stand in the service of God and participate in the authority and infallibility of the Word of God, answer perfectly God's purpose, in short, function as the Word of God and therefore can be so called. But this remains a human instrument in the hands of God. And it is not up to us, it is up to the free pleasure of God to decide what kind of effect divine inspiration should have in the mind, knowledge, memory, accuracy of those whom he has used in his service, in order that their word really can be accepted and trusted as the inspired word of God. If we deny or ignore this, we dispose of the very nature of the Scriptures as the Word of God, and also of the nature of his authority and infallibility. The best way not to fall into such a danger is to study Scripture itself from this point of view.

In order not to get bogged down in generalities and abstractions I will demonstrate what I mean with a number of examples from the Bible itself.

One of the proofs that the authority and infallibility of Scripture are to be understood in a qualified sense is the way the synoptic gospels present the same material with several different arrangements, sequences, and expressions. Undoubtedly the total picture that these evangelists draw of Jesus is entirely the same, not only in its totality but also in many details. Therefore, when we read the gospels one after another (in the manner and with the intention with which the church may and must read them) nobody will have for even an instant the impression that the Christ of the one gospel is a different one in comparison with the image of Christ in another gospel.

Yet this does not mean that there are no differences in historical details, or in the tendency of two or three evangelists' telling the same story, or in the reproduction of the same words and deeds of Jesus, or in the presentation and interpretation of the good news as a whole. Nor are those differences limited to little details, which one can easily neglect or dismiss. Compare, for instance, the Lord's Prayer in Matthew and Luke. It is apparent that Luke, in addition to recording a shorter address of God, lacks the third petition entirely and for the last petition has only: "Lead us not into temptation."

Now, one might suggest that Jesus gave his disciples the Lord's Prayer on two different occasions in two different formulations, thus tracing differences between Matthew and Luke back to Jesus himself and not to the recording of the evangelists. No one can prove that this is impossible. But it is quite another thing to assert that Jesus himself *must* have given the Lord's Prayer twice, in two different forms; or that otherwise the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture have failed. One must be able to realize that on one and the same occasion spoken words of Jesus were recorded in different ways and that often it cannot possibly be established which is the historically exact reproduction. For even if you hesitate about whether the Lord's Prayer was given on one or two occasions (a matter, Calvin says, "about which I will be at odds with no one"), nevertheless, you cannot do this with regard to certain other words of Jesus. The beatitudes of Matthew differ considerably from those of Luke, although surely no one any longer would be willing to accept two Sermons on the Mount. And the record of the institution of the Lord's supper, while in the substance of the matter much the same, displays, in the tradition of Matthew and Mark on the one side and that of Luke and Paul on the other, various more or less interesting and important differences.

All this has yet nothing to do with *essential* trustworthiness or infallibility. For the gospels, as the basis on which Christ builds his *ekklesia*, all these differences in tradition regarding the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, the words of the Lord's supper, constitute no problem. But if one attempts to design a doctrine concerning Holy Scripture, he must surely not lose sight of this freedom and difference of presentation. One cannot postulate on the basis that the books of the New Testament are God-breathed that "every word then must precisely reproduce the historical situation, for otherwise the Scripture would not be 'infallible.'" The fact is that the infallibility of Scripture has in many respects a character other than that which a theoretical concept of inspiration or infallibility, detached from its purpose and empirical reality, would like to demand. One must be careful when reasoning about what is and what is not possible under inspiration by God. Here too the freedom of the Spirit must be honored; and we shall first have to trace the courses of the Spirit in reverence, rather than come at once to overconfident pronouncements, however proper our intentions.

To mention another, slightly different example which casts light on this so-called organic character: we see occasionally that one evangelist purposely introduces changes into what another has written, sometimes, apparently, in order to correct him. Though there is no absolute certainty about the mutual relationship of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there is a probability bordering on certainty that Mark was the first to write his gospel and that Matthew and Luke constructed theirs on the basis of Mark's. In Matthew, in any case, we observe a clear systematizing of material which in Mark lies scattered far apart. This indicates a different design and development of common material. It does not necessarily imply that the one is "better" than the other, but does indeed point again to the elbow-room allowed the evangelists in their presentation of the same message.

Occasionally, this leads to remarkable results. In the story of the rich young ruler Jesus says, according to Mark 10:18, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." In Matthew 19:17, however, we read the same material (from Mark) this way: "Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good." It is possible that there are two traditions here, but one must also take into account the possibility that Matthew expressed in somewhat different words the material used by Mark to avoid the implication that Jesus should not have considered himself "good." This is not to say that Mark indeed meant that, only that Matthew wished to

safeguard against a misunderstanding of the version which we meet in Mark.

This remarkable difference between the two furnishes no difficulty whatever for the essential authority of the gospel, but it does enable us to see that a doctrine of “verbal inspiration” which aims at closing off discussion of the historical precision and accuracy of every word in the Bible is exceeding its area of competence. That is not to say that therefore there is inspiration only in respect of the matter and not the word: such a distinction is much too mechanical. But it is indeed to say that inspiration is something other than an elimination of human freedom and human limitation. The Spirit certainly takes care that the church not suffer deficiency and that it may believe and preach on the basis of the *written* word. But the way down which the Spirit travels and the liberty he grants himself and the writers of the Bible are not capable of being expressed in one neat dogmatic formula. It is the liberty of the Spirit; we must approach it with respect and discuss it in our theological statements with caution.

That we must not form an abstract theological concept of the inspiration and authority of the Scripture, but instead pay heed to how the writers of the Bible went about their work, also appears from another phenomenon that strikes us again and again in the study of the Bible. Although the biblical writers were equipped by the Holy Spirit for the task they had to fulfill in the service of God’s special revelation for all times and generations, they were nevertheless in many respects entirely children of their own time; and to this extent they thought and wrote and narrated just as their contemporaries thought and wrote and narrated. This is true not only of the languages in which they wrote, which have become dead languages, but also of their concepts, their ideas, their manner of expression, their methods of communication. All these were in a sense conditioned in various ways by the time and milieu in which they lived. And it cannot be said of all these concepts and ideas that, because they have received a place in the Bible, they have also received the significance of infallible revelation.

However difficult – even dangerous – it may be to operate with this form-content schema, no one must be under the illusion that he can avoid it in the theological exegesis and explanation of the message of the Bible. Everything depends on how and why such a schema is used. Whenever it is used in the service of a naturalistic and evolutionary worldview, it is a destructive instrument, a dissecting knife, which cuts the Scripture off from the roots that give it life and makes it just

another remnant of the ancient Near Eastern or hellenistic spirit. More than once it has been treated precisely that way; so it is no wonder that the evangelical view of Scripture listens with extreme suspicion, raised eyebrows, and heightened vigilance when modern scholars apply this form-content schema, these accommodation-theories, to the Bible.

But there is another side to the matter. From the standpoint of faith, the nature of the Scripture and its authority can surely be more sharply, clearly, and precisely distinguished when we see the Bible against the background and in the light of the time in which it was written. Then we come to see on the one hand the incomparable otherness of Scripture, and on the other that which is bound up with and limited to the time.

In this connection mention is often made of the influence the ancient Near Eastern conception of the universe had on how the biblical writers thought and expressed themselves. Some have wanted to deny this influence by saying that these authors spoke of such things just as we do in everyday life when we speak of “sunrise” and the like. But it is surely difficult to maintain this. If there are said to be three stories in the universe, as for example in Exodus 20 and still in Philippians 2 (heaven, earth, and that which is under the earth), this is positively not a scientific, but still a traditional, generally current representation of the structure of the universe. We can hardly think in such terms anymore. We can no longer think so “massively” of heaven and so spatially of the ascension as was possible in the representations of the biblical writers. It is clear that the “translation” of *this* confronts us with much greater problems than does the translation of the Old and New Testaments into a modern language, but this does not take away the fact that in this respect the Scripture speaks in images and concepts, exhibiting the stamp and also the relativity of the time in which they were current.

In another respect, too, it is clear that the writers of the Bible associated themselves with what, by virtue of education or tradition, pertained to the manner of speaking and thinking of their contemporaries, without enabling one thus to say that since this or that idea or expression finds a place in the Bible, it thereby becomes “revelation.” This is the more obvious because the content of the Bible doubtless signals a radical breakthrough into all sorts of contemporary convictions and traditions. To take one prominent example, Paul’s preaching is a continuous antithesis to the Jewish synagogical schema of redemption. In this fundamental sense

Paul is the apostle of Christ and one inspired by the Spirit. But this does not remove the fact that this same apostle still betrays some traces of his rabbinical education, for example in the manner in which he debates, uses rabbinical argumentation and traditional materials, cites the Old Testament.

Certainly even in this “formal” sense the difference between Paul and the synagogue is greater than the conformity between them; and the message of Christ signifies in his disciples, too, a clearing away and purging of all kinds of subtle and casuistical rabbinical lore. But in some respects the Jewishness and the rabbinical background of New Testament writings are clear enough. If the second letter to Timothy speaks of Jannes and Jambres as men who withstood Moses, we cannot recognize in them the Egyptian magicians of the court of Pharaoh, until we come across these same names in certain late Jewish writings with a plain reference to those magicians. Elsewhere, when Paul speaks of the mediation of angels in giving the law on Sinai (Gal. 3:19), or when, wishing to indicate Christ’s exaltation above all other spiritual powers, he lists a whole series of kinds of angels (Col. 1:16); or says that the promise was given 430 years before the law (Gal. 3:17) – these are all expressions whose background we are not able to find in the Old Testament or elsewhere in the New Testament, but which only become clear to us from the late Jewish writings. How must we now view this? Must we say that because Paul, the apostle of Christ, who was led by the Spirit, calls the magicians of Pharaoh Jannes and Jambres, these must have been their real names? Although there may have been those in times past who would have answered this affirmatively, it would not be easy to mention anyone who takes this standpoint today, at least among those aware of the way these names were probably brought into vogue in Jewish literature.

Now, of course, the concrete significance of this last example is particularly slight. From the point of view of faith no one is interested in the names of Pharaoh’s magicians. Nevertheless, as an example, this case of Jannes and Jambres is not without importance. It lets us see that inspiration can also mean connection with certain Jewish or non-Christian elements, without these elements at the same time being brought under the sanction of inspiration and thus belonging to the normative character of the Scripture.

More is at stake here than a name or a number, as anyone realizes who has been confronted by these things in his investigation of the Scripture. The non-scholarly reader of the Bible can understand this, too. This has to do with literary

genres, with methods of writing history, with the sometimes fluid boundaries of a parabolic narrative and a historical narrative. When in the book of Job a marvelous dialogue between Job and his friends is presented in artistic language, everyone can grasp that this is not a stenographic transcription of a number of improvised speeches which an afflicted man and his friends, who had been sitting in ashes silently for seven days and nights, uttered one after another; but rather that here the problem of theodicy, of “justifying God’s ways to man,” is posed and treated in a dramatic fashion. And when Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus is formulated in a series of three sets of fourteen names, one can by comparing this with the data of the Old Testament, which include more names in the same line of descent, come to no other conclusion than that the evangelist has either deliberately “stylized” this himself or has used an already existing stylizing. It will not do to say, “It does not tally,” or something like that. One must come to appreciate that there is a difference between our exact Western spirit and the spirit of someone two thousand years ago who, in other circumstances and with other objects in view, recorded his vision of history.

In this same genealogy of Matthew there are more proofs of this. However, our concern here is not with further details but with an overall approach to these things which does as much justice as possible to the particular nature of Scripture and its authority. In this approach we must always be aware that we are dealing with the Scripture as the Word of God. So, it would be a denial of the very nature of Scripture if, in view of what we have been discussing here, we were to acknowledge Scripture as only a human attempt to give expression to and interpretation of what some human writers long ago might, by way of their belief, have understood of the word of God; and, in addition, we would consider that our engagement to the Bible would consist only in having to do the same thing as they did: staying in the line of their tradition and passing on what they understood of the word of God, in our language, way of thinking, and by our means of interpretation.

I say this would be a perversion of the nature of Scripture. For what we are confronted with in Scripture is not just human beings in their human faith and human efforts to witness to what they understood of God’s revelation; it is God himself, addressing himself to us by men. This is a real and essential difference, for it is the difference of the real subject and author of Scripture. But at the same time we must always be aware that it is God’s speaking in his condescension to men, wonderfully adjusting himself to human language and human possibilities of

understanding. Therefore what is presented to us in Scripture will always be a matter for listening to in submission to God's divine authority. It may never become a matter of "one's own interpretation" (new in every age), because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (2 Pet. 1:20, 21). And at the same time listening to Scripture is listening to a human language, human concepts, human images, which we have to translate, in more than one respect, in order to understand what God is saying to us in and by means of Scripture.

Let us try to come to a conclusion.

To attempt a theological definition of the Scripture is no easy matter. This results from its unique origin and character. All Scripture is God-breathed. Therefore all our human definitions will remain inadequate. Just because it is divine, it arises above our knowledge, and we shall never fully realize "what is the breadth and length and height and depth" (Eph. 3:18). This applies also to its authority and infallibility. Its authority is much greater than we are able to express in human words. But at the same time we have to acknowledge that this Word of God has entered so very much into the human and has so identified itself with it that we shall always again stand before the question as to what the unassailably divine and what the relativity of the human in Scripture mean concretely.

We stand before a very deep and mysterious task, transferring thoughts from the life and the world of persons of two thousand years ago and more to the world of today. Here lies the great question of hermeneutics, with which many today are engaged very intensively.

Nevertheless, it remains true that Scripture and its authority, in the most profound and central sense of the word, is not obscure but clear, namely, in the manner in which it teaches persons to understand themselves, the world, history, and the future in the light of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. It is on account of this clarity of the Scripture that it is an ever-flowing well of knowledge and life and that it teaches wisdom to the simple. And it is on account of this clarity and this purpose of the Scripture that it can be identified with the Word of God, that it has unconditional authority, and that it is the infallible foundation for faith.

Finally I should like to say a couple things in response to the claim that the intricate way theology speaks about the authority and infallibility of the Scripture lacks the power and simplicity of a less complicated, more "naive" approach. First,

when new light is cast on the Scripture, also through the investigations of historical science, the church has to rejoice, even though this may compel it at the same time to be ready to reconsider and redefine theological concepts related to Scripture.

In the second place, remember that just those who have occasion to come to a more historical approach to the Bible and its authority will be able along the way to understand the unique and incomparable significance of Scripture. The world of the ancient Near East is being increasingly opened to us. We are discovering very ancient “literature” in which the religious feelings of people who were contemporaries of the biblical writers are expressed. There is increasing Jewish background through the Talmud and through insights into the radical movements in the Judaism of Jesus’ time through the discovery of the Qumran writings. Of more recent date still is the discovery in Egypt of an entire library of gnostic literature from the second century.

All of this teaches us more strongly than ever to be mindful of the relationship between Scripture and the world out of which it arose. At once we see a striking establishment of the historical correctness of the biblical data and then again are placed before questions in which we cannot always see a priori that “the Bible is right.” But something else is far more important: namely, that there is nothing that more clearly brings to the light the unique character of the Scriptures than the qualitative comparison between that which here and that which there steps out to meet us. That difference does not lie in a more advanced human development, or greater accuracy, or another manner of tradition. It inheres in what we have again and again described as the purpose and the qualitative content of the Scripture. On the one side we find legalistic scrupulousness, flight into the speculative, invincible fear of death. On the other side, in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, we see a qualitatively different knowledge of God and of nature, faith in forgiveness, the conquest of death, dying with Christ to that which Paul describes as the weak and poor principles of the world.

The difference is not easy to put into words. The expression in one of the Reformation confessions from the sixteenth century is not too strong or too naive: the Scriptures “carry the evidence in themselves” of their divinity and authority (Belgic Confession, Art. V). For where the testimony of Christ appears, there not only does the light arise, but also the darkness is illuminated; as it is said of Jesus, he spoke with authority and not as the scribes did. This is not to imply that the *doctrine concerning* the Holy Scriptures has become a simple matter. But in the light of *this*

authority, we can overcome the fear that we may be on a dangerous pathway if we view the ways of the Spirit in recording the word of God more historically, more critically, as more shaded, than along the way of an exclusively dogmatic reasoning.

We shall come to stand before more questions, perhaps before more questions without answers. That is the lot of everyone who will gather science to himself: he gathers grief, too. But at the same time, the light that shines in the darkness is so clear and so bright that not only the prophet but even the far more skeptical theologian has to confess: “I have seen a limit to all perfection, but thy commandment is exceedingly broad” (Ps. 119:96).



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