

The Bible

Introduction

This is a huge topic, one people have been wrestling with at least since the Enlightenment of the 17th Century, even from the beginning of Christianity itself. There is no way in which we could possibly address this with any sort of thoroughness in an evening – it is a study for a lifetime, and I hope that some of us will use this opportunity to begin to engage in it more thoroughly.

All I can hope to do tonight is to suggest a few ideas, point out a few problems, outline a few possible lines for future thought.

Most of what I say tonight is taken from Migliore's introduction to Theology – Faith Seeking Understanding, which is worth reading. The other book I have consulted is N.T. Wright The Last Word, which I also recommend.

A Note on "Authority"

The term "Authority" is a problematic one in our society. It is generally used in sentences like "arbitrary authority", and contrasted with Reason. Authority is seen as something which closes down, infantilises, squashes debate where Reason opens us up to truth, and is adult and responsible.

I'm not really going to talk about Authority in the abstract tonight. It's too loaded, too difficult a term. Let's just use it as a short way for saying "trustworthy" for the time being, pending some further discussion on what it might mean to say that the Bible (or anything else) might be authoritative.

Knowledge and Truth

What is Knowledge?

Is the only possible sort of knowledge the scientific sort? Or are there other sorts of knowledge? In this section we will look at the way the knowledge debate has been conducted in our society, and question whether scientific truth is the only possible sort of truth.

The general history of thought in the West over the last two and a half thousand years – ever since Socrates started to ask "no, what does that *really* mean?" philosophy in has wrestled with the question of knowledge. What is it, exactly? How do you know anything? And how do you know that you know it?

This is known to the trade as Epistemology, and there is a (highly contested, but useful) definition of knowledge which is: Knowledge is justified true belief.

That is to say, if you believe something to be the case, and it is in fact the case, and you have good reasons for believing it, then it counts as knowledge.

Since the Enlightenment, the question of how one uncovers truth has more or less focussed in on the scientific method. If you can justify your beliefs “scientifically”, then it counts as justified, and you are seen to have reasonable grounds for believing it. On the other hand, the further you get from a scientific justification, the further you are from truth.

Another way of characterising this tendency is to contrast “subjective” and “objective” knowledge. If knowledge is in the public sphere, if it is publicly verifiable, then it has some chance of being “objective.” On the other hand, if it is not publicly verifiable, then it is “subjective”, where “subjective” is more about one’s feelings, one’s internal state, which is not a place for dealing with truth or falsity.

A good example of this is the concept of Beauty. The phrase “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” seems like a truism to us, but other societies have held that beauty is an objective quality, like mass, which is capable of being precisely measured. But in our society, beauty, it is held, is subjective – it is an internal response to purely private cues, and, that being the case, there can be no such thing as a “really existing” beauty – so Bach and Madonna, Michelangelo and Damien Hirst – are as good as one another. Whatever floats your boat, as the saying goes.

This can be contrasted with the truths of science: When science says that the atomic number of Hydrogen is 1, or that the acceleration due to gravity on Earth is 9 metres per second per second, that is objective truth. And objective truth is a lot truthier than subjective truth.

While I am not in any way decrying the achievements of the Enlightenment (imagine living without modern plumbing and general anaesthetic, let alone the internet), there is an effect on how we perceive truth which you can see in the “liberal” vs “conservative” debates around the “truth” of the Bible.

I will revisit this later, but the basic parameters of the argument are that if the Bible is true, then it is (all) as true as, and in the same way as, scientific truth. So that if Genesis appears to contradict science, that would imply that it is not a scientifically adequate document, and thus not true in the only way which matters. So either Genesis is completely untrue, or science is incorrect.

However, I would argue that, important as scientific truth is, it is not the only sort of truth that there is, and to defend the Bible on the grounds of its scientific truth is to ask questions of it which the original writers had no idea of. It is, to say the least an inadequate way of looking at things.

The Question of Genre

To anyone who has ever read much of the Bible, it becomes clear quickly that it contains a lot of things. The term “Scriptures” (note the plural) used to be the more common way of describing it, and I think we have lost a lot by slipping into the singular. It is a lot of different writings, in a lot of different genres.

This is important when considering the “truth” of the Bible. It is not good enough to deal with it as one homogenous thing, so that if any one part of it fails to meet your

particular favourite test for truth you can point at it and say “there, it is false” and think that you have done anything more than throw missile words about.

The story contains myths, proverbs, stories with no real pretence to be factual (Job, the parables of Jesus), reportage, history, songs, and a famous love poem among other things.

Is Job “true”, for instance? If by that you mean “Was there a person called Job who God allowed to be tested by Satan, but who remained faithful and was then answered by – and compensated by – God?”, then the answer would have to be “no”. But if you mean “are there truths in Job”, then, yes, it is packed full of truths about how to live – and how not to, and a theological reflection on why there is suffering for good people, among other things.

It all depends what you mean by “true”. What sort of thing is the particular book of the Bible which you are looking at? What would it mean for it to be “true”? If you are asking scientific questions about books of poetry, then you are not going to get very satisfactory answers.

Models for Reading the Bible

Four Inadequate Ways of Reading The Bible

This section adapted from Migliore, with a few notes of my own.

1 - Supernatural Origins

The view which we might loosely characterise as “biblicist”, which holds that the Bible is literally true – that is to say, that it contains (only?) truths of an (in principle) scientifically verifiable nature. So, if the Bible says that the world was created in 7 days, then that is literally what happened. Obviously some of the events which took place can have had no human observers – the creation, Satan talking to God about Job, that sort of thing.

But why are we to trust what the Bible says? What makes it “authoritative”?

“...the Bible is authoritative by virtue of its supernatural origins... One theory of inspiration ... is that God dictated the words of Scripture to the biblical writers, who acted as secretaries.”¹

That is, since God dictated it, none of it can be doubted. To doubt one bit, is to doubt it all.

Angel Points

- It is conceptually simple
- It presents itself as the historical orthodoxy

Devil Points

- Why so many inconsistencies, internal contradictions?

¹ Migliore pp 47

- Migliore notes problems with this approach (besides the obvious one of: if God wrote the Bible Himself, then why do it with so many seeming contradictions?)

(1) The doctrine of inspiration becomes defence of certain theories of the miraculous origins of the Bible. “Missing in this interpretation of inspiration is an awareness that the Word of God is not directly accessible to us, not a possession under our control.... The Word of God is an act of God in which the God who has spoken speaks here and now... the same Spirit of God... must again be active in the preaching and hearing of their witnesses if what is spoken and heard is to be received as the Word of God.”²

(2) Requires infallibility in scripture “The defense of the Christian faith thus becomes the defense of the doctrine of infallibility.”³ So, if you can prove that any claims in the Bible (say the 7 day creation) are not in fact true, you have disproved the infallibility of the Bible – and hence of Christianity.

(3) Tends to flatten all distinctions within the Bible.

“..the Bible is taken as authority ... simply because its words are identified without qualification with God’s words. One result of this identification is that biblical texts are levelled in importance. When this happens, the account of the command of God to utterly destroy the Amalekites....[is] vested with the same authority as the proclamation that God was in Christ.”⁴

“In this way Biblicism turns the lifegiving authority of Scripture into a deadening authoritarianism.”⁵

2 - Historical Source

A second possibility is reading the Bible as a historical source. The Source Hypothesis of the Pentateuch is an example of this, as are the innumerable Quests for the Historical Jesuses. It moves the idea of authority away from the text, to the events which the text is about.

Angel Points

- There is a real historical context to be found, which can illuminate what is written, and help us to understand them better. 1st Century Palestine is a very different place to modern day Australia.
- It can get rid of fanciful readings.

Devil Points

- Moves the focus away from the text back to “what really happened” – as reconstructed by the scholar. While “what really happened” is important (if Jesus did not rise, then our hope is in vain), there are problems:
 - “What really happened” itself is unrecoverable. All that is accessible is what the scholar judges to have happened – and if that scholar happens to believe that the miraculous is impossible, then they will produce a non-miraculous version of events, based on this *a priori* assumption.

² Ibid pp 48

³ Ibid pp 48

⁴ Ibid pp 48-49

⁵ Ibid pp 49

- The text itself is important – it contains the context – the community making sense of the events. If Jesus was just some guy who was raised from the dead, and that was all, then it might not mean all that much to us.

3 - Religious Classic

These days, most people have never read the Bible. In this situation, it is unsurprising that, in the US at least the Bible is taught as “great (or at least important) literature and its authority is seen as analogous to that of ‘classics’ in the literary tradition”⁶ (has anyone come across this in Australia?)

Angel Points

- At least people are reading the Bible. It is an important text for understanding a lot of other literature and ideas in the West, and people who have never read it will never really get a lot of what the West is, and how it came to be like it is.

Devil Points

The Bible has to be more than “great literature”. No-one doubts that Jesus rose again in the gospel story – but whether he rose again in real life is much more contested.

Yahweh is not just an interesting, enigmatic literary figure.

“The believing community approaches the Bible not only as literature, great or not so great, but as Scripture, as normative witness to the acts of the living God for our salvation.”⁷

4 - Private Devotional Text

Well, we might say, away with all that! The best way to read the Bible is as a letter written by God to me. All the questions of truth and falsity and the difficulties can be safely ignored, while I use the book to cultivate my spiritual state. “The Bible speaks to me and assures me of God’s forgiveness and mercy in Jesus Christ.”⁸

Angel

- There is an important, personally transformative aspect to Scripture. An important meaning to it is that Jesus died for you personally. And at least you’re reading it.

Devil

- This can lead to a very quietistic, individualistic faith, abandoning the public sphere
- “A reduction of Scripture occurs when it serves only to illumine my own experience and struggle as a pilgrim of faith. The individualistic interpretation of Scripture represents a retreat of the church and theology. The public realm is abandoned in favour of the private real of life, where faith can be secure from attack.”⁹

⁶ Ibid pp 49

⁷ Ibid pp 50

⁸ Ibid pp 50

⁹ Ibid pp 50

Some Ways Forward

What then is the authority of Scripture? How do we know what to make of it, how to read it?

Frank Rees, in his Introduction to Theology Course told us to always be asking: what does this say of God? That should be the key to how we interpret Scripture. How does our reading of any given passage fit in with our understanding of the God of Jesus Christ?

The first point is that it is not in the Bible we believe, but in God in Christ, and the Bible is the witness to Him¹⁰. That is possibly a good response to people who say “do you believe in the Bible?”

Secondly, the Scriptures have to be understood as being in a dialectical relationship with the community. They are the witness of God’s work, and of the community’s reflection on it. The authority of Scripture was not originally a doctrine which was dreamt up and then imposed on a set of otherwise inoffensive texts. Rather, the idea of its authority comes from the experience of hearing it, and living it. It is a descriptive term, rather than a proscriptive one.

N.T. Wright points to the narrative nature of the Bible¹¹. We are part of a story which goes something like this: Exodus-Kingdom-Exile-Return-Jesus-Pentecost (or perhaps Creation – New Creation). What is appropriate for the first act (what Wright calls the “foundation charter”) may not be appropriate for the act in which we live. That is how to value the Old Testament – as interpreted by Christ.

Thus the Bible has to be read both as being “about” Jesus (as the reformers said, it has to “Show forth Christ”), and also in terms of the big narrative. That is why, as Christians, we pay less attention to, say, the Leviticus rules than we do to the institution of the Lord’s Supper.

Wright also argues that a church is a history of interpretations of the Bible. The idea of a “rule of faith” (of which the Nicene and Apostolic creeds are two good, if later, examples) grew up at around the same time as the text. This seems to me to be a fairly important concept. If you doubt the importance of this - if you think that it is possible to “just read the Bible”, I invite you to go an talk to a Jehovah’s Witness, a Seventh Day Adventist, or a Mormon.

Anyone who has read The Year of Living Biblically (as recommended by Brooke) knows, no-one actually does take the Bible absolutely literally anyway, no matter how vociferously they protest. Everyone brings their own readings of the Bible to bear – their own “canon within the canon”. It is simply that not everyone is sufficiently aware of their own presuppositions (from which ever of the wings one argues from.)

I want to challenge the assertion of some churches that they (only?) “take the Bible seriously.” I would want to argue that to take it “literally”, in the Biblicist sense of the

¹⁰ Ibid pp 50-51

¹¹ See especially

word, is not to take it seriously at all: rather, it is to try to cram it into a conceptual framework which did not exist when it was written. To take it seriously is to wrestle with it, and to take it as it was originally written, with due respect to the different context.

To take the Bible seriously is to accept the flawed, idiosyncratic writers. Incarnational means taken flesh, and the Bible is just that. “The various literary forms of the biblical witness are irreducible media of revelation and mutually complement and correct each other. ... The scriptural witness is extraordinarily rich and diverse.”¹² This is a good thing.

The authority of scripture should be a lived thing. I asked Andy Hamilton, a Jesuit lecturer at UFT if he had one thing he could say about the Bible in this sort of context. He told me to enjoy it, let your imagination go in it, rather than worry about proving or disproving it. Live your way into the stories.

Migliore’s Principles for Interpreting Scripture¹³

In Faith Seeking Understanding Migliore suggests four guidelines for Biblical interpretation.

1 – *Scripture should be interpreted with historical and literary sensitivity; yet Scripture’s unique witness to the living God resists its imprisonment in the past or its reduction to pious fiction:*

- Historical criticism of the Bible is important – uncovering the context of God’s actions, respecting the particularity of events, and that the narrative refers to things outside the text.
- Reminds us that the biblical writers were fallible human beings. The grace of God does not destroy human freedom but renews and empowers it.
- It needs to be read with an eye to its future unfolding – “we should not be surprised that the full meaning of the new freedom in Christ was not perfectly comprehended and actualized in the early church”¹⁴ – e.g. some of Paul’s statements about women.
- “In the dynamic interpretative process within Scripture, there are “layers and layers of fresh reading” in new circumstances and old teachings are sometimes seen to be problematic.”¹⁵

2 – *Scripture must be interpreted Theocentrically; however the identity of God is radically redescribed in the overarching narrative of Scripture as the triune God”*

- The central actor in Scriptures is God. The content of the Biblical stories is God’s action in judgement and mercy on Israel and in the history of Jesus.
- “...all of the strands of the witness of Scripture to the identity and purpose of God converge in Jesus Christ”¹⁶

¹² Migliore pp 51

¹³ Migliore pp 53

¹⁴ Ibid pp 55

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid pp 57

3 – *Scripture must be interpreted ecclesially; that is, in the context of the life and witness of the church; however an ecclesial reading of cScripture differs not only from an individualistic reading but also from the control of Scriptures by church doctrine or hierarchy.*

- “The church is a community of interpretation and it has certain rules of sound understanding of its sacred texts. These rules are not arbitrary. They are rooted in Scripture itself.”¹⁷

4 – *Scripture must be interpreted contextually; however, the context of our interpretation must not be confined to our personal history or to that of our immediate locality*

- We need to listen to the voices of the poor and marginalised.
- “The hermeneutic privilege of the poor” is that the experience of suffering and poverty provides an opportunity for understanding the message of the Bible that frequently remains hidden to those who insulate themselves from the suffering of others and their own suffering.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid pp 59

¹⁸ Ibid pp 62