

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Revelation and the Bible.

ANOTHER VIEW.

BY THE REV. W. M. F. SCOTT, M.A.

THIS article comes out of the conference at which the preceding paper by the Rev. C. F. D. Moule was read. Most of what he has written will find grateful acceptance. But there are certain criticisms and additions which suggest themselves, especially on the Old Testament. For it is there that Mr. Moule's virtual equation of the problem of authority with that of revelation is least adequate. My comments fall into two parts—first, on authority where they are mainly critical, and secondly, on revelation in general where they are mainly complementary to Mr. Moule's position.

I. AUTHORITY.

My first point concerns the Bible as a whole. While it is important to realise that the Bible was addressed to the Church and therefore can only be fully understood from within the Church, it is equally important to stress that it does not receive its authority from the Church's acceptance, but rather that the Church accepts it because she sees that it has an authority which she can not confer. The Apostles did not ask their hearers "to discern whether or not it (their message) was authoritative." They assured them that it was so. The hearer's acceptance or rejection of the message tested, not its validity, but the hearer's possession of the Spirit. Mr. Moule has quoted I Cor. xiv. 37 in a different sense, "If any man thinketh himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him take knowledge of the things that I write unto you, that they are the commandment of the Lord." I should dissent from Mr. Moule's comment that this verse shows "that an utterance delivered authoritatively as a revelation from God needs to be brought to the bar of the recipient's inspired judgment." On the contrary, St. Paul is telling the Corinthians that it is not for them to submit his ruling to their own judgment. They must accept it as authoritative and no claim to inspiration on their part can override it. This is made clear by the following verse which Moffatt rightly translates "If any man disregards this, he will be disregarded" (or if the imperative is read "let him be disregarded").

It is of course true that God does not force us into acceptance of His revelation. Its authority is moral and spiritual, and provides no substitute for spiritual insight. But the function of our spiritual insight is to receive the Christian revelation; it does not add one whit to its authority.

But coming to the Old Testament, it is clear that if by authority one means (as Mr. Moule appears to mean) that which guarantees the genuineness of revelation, then neither the Old Testament as a whole, still less isolated quotations from it are authoritative. There is nothing which can guarantee the genuineness of a revelation to a man

whose eyes are not enlightened by the Holy Spirit. It must also be admitted that even when New Testament writers quote an Old Testament passage as their authority for their message, they have clearly come to the Old Testament through Christ. He is their authority for their interpretation of the Old Testament just as much as, if not more than, the Old Testament is their authority for their interpretation of Him.

But is there no other sense in which the Old Testament was authoritative for the New Testament writers and especially for our Lord? In the light of the New Testament it seems to me quite inadequate to say merely that "the Old Testament brought Him closer to God." It is of course notoriously inconclusive to quote texts and counter-texts, but it is difficult to resist the conclusion that our Lord's understanding of His mission came out of His profound insight into the Old Testament Scriptures by which He re-interpreted messiahship in the light of the figure of the suffering servant. His acceptance of the title of Messiah (Mk. viii. 29) implies that the Messiah had rightly been expected. And He could have derived His own distinctive view of messiahship from no other source than the figure of the Lord's Servant. Only so can we explain His sense of the divine necessity of the Cross. "The Son of man must suffer." For our Lord made it clear many times that this was not merely an intuitive conviction but depended on His understanding of the Old Testament. "For the Son of man goeth, even as it is written of him" (Mk. xiv. 21, *cf.* Mk. ix. 12, Lk. xviii. 31, xxiv. 25-27, 44-46.) It would, of course, be quite wrong to imagine that anyone without the light of the Holy Spirit could have discovered beforehand from the Old Testament what our Lord would be like. The Bible never speaks to anyone except in so far as the Holy Spirit enlightens him. But this does not alter the fact that one of the great functions of the Spirit is to bring home the inherent authority of the Scripture. Our Lord's new and profound understanding of the Scripture was only possible because the Spirit dwelt in Him without measure. At the same time the Old Testament, as the Spirit illuminated it, had an authority which determined His whole understanding of His mission.

The same applies to the New Testament writers. Certainly they read the Old Testament in the light of their knowledge of our Lord. But they claimed that so far from undermining its authority, our Lord was the key to true understanding of the Old Testament and that no one had really understood it before. "For until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the Old Testament; which vail is done away in Christ" (II Cor. iii. 14). But at the same time the Old Testament, as read in the light of our Lord, gave them the authoritative categories by which they interpreted His person and work.¹

II. REVELATION.

All will, of course, agree that the New Testament cannot be understood apart from its Old Testament background. But it is now becoming clear that a knowledge of contemporary Greek papyri is also an indispensable aid to a full understanding of the New Testament. Have then the papyri and the Old Testament a value for the Christian

which differs only in degree? Or has the Old Testament a distinctive value as part of one continuous revelation with the New Testament?

In attempting to answer this question we should notice that every line of the New Testament presupposes the fact of one living and true God which it derived from the Old Testament and the Old Testament alone. Was this Old Testament belief the result of the natural development of the Semitic genius for religion? Was it due to the exile? Was it the outcome of philosophical or scientific discovery? Or, is it to be ascribed to God's revelation? If it is said that monotheism is simply the spiritual evolution of a desert faith, we have to ask why none of the surrounding nations followed Israel in this. It is a significant fact that the world's only monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all derive their monotheism from the Old Testament. Why, again, was Israel always slipping back into idolatry, polytheism, and submoral views of God? The theme of so much Old Testament history is that a man of God is sent to deliver apostate Israel from idolatry and oppression but that after a brief period they fall back and serve Baalim. Israel's natural tendencies and environment, so far from favouring monotheism, seemed to undermine it.

Some would say that Israel owed her monotheism to the exile, that they went into exile with a belief in Jehovah as one of many national gods operative only in local territory. But, finding that they could still realise His presence in Babylon, they concluded that He was the God of the whole earth. But the natural conclusion, which some Jews actually drew (Jer. xliv. 17), was that their national God had been defeated by the Babylonian gods and that it would be politic to worship them instead. Therefore some Jews at least must have taken into exile a belief in a God who was far more than a local or tribal deity. Otherwise they would never have thought of worshipping Him, after utter defeat, in what others regarded as the territory of the victorious gods.

It is certainly true that the Greek philosophers had an idea of one God which they reached by human discovery. They discovered that the principle of causation was universal. Therefore it was no longer necessary to have one God to explain rain, another fire and so on—one god to each natural function. This belief had been almost inevitable as long as they believed only in direct and personal causation without any idea of secondary causes. But their growing realisation of the rule of cause and effect gradually put the old gods out of a job, making them unnecessary hypotheses. In their place the discovery of one universal principle made the Greeks speak of God or of the Divine. But they knew nothing of this God. They thought that He was probably ignorant of the existence of this world.² He was not a God to whom men could pray. He could not be identified with any known God. The Old Testament on the other hand said that Jehovah, one of the many gods worshipped in the world, was the only God. Clearly the Hebrews were not driven to their belief by any similar process of discovery of an over-ruling principle of cause and effect. For the Old Testament shows no trace of any idea of secondary causes. It traces everything to the immediate intervention of a personal will, an idea which fits polytheism but creates difficulties for monotheism. (Consider such problems as the hardening of Pharaoh's heart). Israelite

natural science or philosophy (if either phrase is appropriate), so far from being the source of Old Testament monotheism, was almost an embarrassment to it.

We must therefore fall back on the Old Testament's own account of the matter and we find that Israel's prophets and leaders so often go back to a call—Moses at the burning bush, Isaiah in the Temple, Ezekiel by the river Chebar, etc.—when Jehovah opened their eyes to His action in history and revealed Himself to them as a living, righteous, and saving God, so commanding, holy, and exalted that there was room for no other. He was Jehovah their God, but in His presence their eyes were opened to see that He had not only brought up Israel from Egypt but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir (Amos ix. 7). It came to them by revelation. No other hypothesis is adequate to explain the facts.

But the Old Testament is not merely an independent revelation which the New Testament assumes. The Old Testament and New Testament together are the record of one continuous action of God coming to its climax in our Lord. For revelation comes when God acts in history and illuminates the mind of a prophet to see the meaning of His action. "The Lord God will do nothing but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets" (Amos iii. 7). His message then brings into existence a people who will be the witness and keeper of the message.

The action of God creates the Gospel of God, and the Gospel creates the people of God. Both the Gospel of God and the people of God look forward at each stage to a further hope—but at the same time in both there is continuity. This might be expressed in the form of a table.

<i>Era</i>	<i>Divine Action</i>	<i>People</i>	<i>Hope</i>
Abraham	God's call and promise	Family	Blessing of all nations
Exodus	Deliverance and redemption	Nation	Giving of the land for an inheritance
David	Rest from enemies	Kingdom	Everlasting kingdom
Prophets	Exile and deliverance	Righteous remnant	i. King of house of David ii. Suffering servant iii. New covenant
Our Lord	Incarnation, Cross Resurrection, Gift of the Spirit	The Church, the new Israel	Our Lord's coming in glory, the summing up of all things in Him

Each stage looks back to the last and forward to the next. We can see this in the way the exodus-theme provides the clue for the interpretations of each successive stage. The Redemption from Egypt (Exodus xv. 13) is seen by Deutero-Isaiah as a shadow of the deliverance from Babylon. "Fear not, I have redeemed thee . . ." (Isa. xliii. 1-7).³ Again it provides the category in which the New Testament can speak of the historic "redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. iii. 24), which in its turn looks forward to a greater redemption.

"Ye were sealed unto the day of redemption." Eph. iv. 30). Each adumbrates a future redemption which is to recapitulate and transcend its predecessor. In the same way the Church is reconstituted by the successive unfolding of the acts of God. The family comes out of the individual, the nation out of the family, the kingdom out of the nation, the remnant out of the kingdom. The remnant is narrowed down to one as our Lord hung upon the Cross, and the Church is reconstituted in Him as His body. The Gospel of God and the people of God, which the Gospel creates and successively recreates, run through the Old Testament and New Testament and bind them together. It is the same God who saw the affliction of His people and came down to deliver them from Egypt, who saw the affliction of His people and came down to save them from sin. Moreover the saving from Egypt was a step on the way to saving from sin. St. Paul says that the events of the Exodus happened to Israel $\tau\omicron\pi\iota\kappa\acute{\omega}\varsigma$ —by way of type (I Cor. x. 11). They were a rough draft or model of the Gospel that was to come. Israel was saved, not by law, but by grace, by Jehovah's mighty hand and stretched out arm. She was separated from Egypt by passing through the baptismal waters of the Red Sea, fed with spiritual food and drink. Only after their deliverance was the demand made that "the ordinance of the law should be fulfilled in them." A recent writer has summed the matter up in a reference to "the metaphor of Brunner that the Old Testament is like the first part, and the New Testament like the closing words of a sentence. One sentence, neither part fully intelligible without the other, the final part decisive (particularly in the instance of the German which of course, was in Brunner's mind) of the total meaning—such is the Bible as a whole."⁴ We may find the Gospel in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament and we should read the Old Testament, not in the light of the primitive savagery which went before it, but of the great things which came out of it.

This raises the problem of the Christian use of the Old Testament. Biblical criticism has done the Church a valuable service in its efforts to recover the original meaning of the Old Testament. But there has been a tendency to confine the meaning of any passage to its original meaning. This tendency Mr. Moule evidently shares, judging from his illustration from *Psa. cxvi. 12-13*. But he has not disposed of the question by quoting an example of Christian re-interpretation of the Old Testament which is clearly based on a misunderstanding. A true understanding of the Old Testament original would lead to a different mystical interpretation. Is such interpretation justified at all? Mr. Moule's has evaded the issue partly by giving a bad example, and partly by his concentration on authority to the neglect of other aspects of the problem of revelation.

Further examination of the Old Testament will show that it is often impossible to confine its meaning to the original meaning. Consider *Psalm xlv*. Oesterley's agrees with most scholars in regarding it as "purely secular in origin," written without Messianic significance, for the wedding of a king. The original meaning of the words addressed to the king in verse 6 "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever" is that "in ancient Israel the king was regarded as divine." But surely this Psalm was incorporated into the Canon, not because of its original

meaning but because post-exilic Judaism found a new meaning, applying it to the relation of the Messiah to Israel. In fact we may say that it is canonical Scripture on condition that it has that meaning. Which, then, is the true meaning for the Christian? The original meaning? the meaning which secured the passage its place in the Old Testament? or a further meaning that the passage has in the light of our Lord (Heb. i. 8-9)? Mr. Moule insists that the New Testament writers interpret the Old Testament by the authority of our Lord. Were they wrong to have done so? And, may not we do the same?

The principle found in this one example could be developed over the whole range of the Old Testament. Take such ideas as sacrifice, priesthood, holiness, salvation. How different is their original meaning, rooted in primitive superstition, from the meaning which they came to bear in the context of Old Testament revelation. But what God meant by any of these ideas was always more than the writer could grasp at the time, and the full revelation of what God means by them is only to be found in Christ. So in the light of Christ the Old Testament records become charged with a new meaning for the Christian.

It may be said that this opens the door to all the extravagances by which mystical interpretation has sometimes overlaid the message of Scripture. But equally the concentration on the original meaning of the Bible has sometimes been used to impoverish us of much of its meaning. These abuses do not therefore justify us in excluding the mystical interpretation any more than the literal interpretation. Both are needed; neither can set aside the other; and the mystical must always be checked by the literal interpretation.

The basic difficulty, perhaps, is that people are prepared to see God's hand in the facts which the Bible records but not in the Bible record of the facts. This, however, seems to be contrary to St. Paul's claim for his own inspiration. "Which things also we speak not in words which man's wisdom teacheth but in words which the Spirit teacheth." (1 Cor. ii. 13). One need not be a fundamentalist to see that there is a sense in which the inspiration of the Bible is verbal, extending not merely to content but to the language.⁶ This will not imply that the writers had an inerrant perception of either. For both form and content came by inspiration not by dictation. But if we believe in that inspiration we need not be surprised if the Bible language has a divinely intended meaning greater than the writer could realise.⁷

¹ For a fuller statement of the argument of the last two paragraphs see *The Old Testament in the World Church* by G. E. Phillips, pp.55-73.

² See Ross *Aristotle*, p.183.

³ For the exodus theme in Isaiah see Phythian-Adams in *Church Quarterly Review*, Vol. cxxxiii. pp.28-29.

⁴ G. E. Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.82.

⁵ The Psalms, vol. I, p.250.

⁶ H. L. Goudge, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, says ad loc., "From the Spirit comes not only the substance of the message, but the language in which it is proclaimed. . . . As Dr. Lightfoot has said, 'The notion of verbal inspiration in a certain sense is involved in the very conception of any inspiration at all. . . .'"

⁷ Cf. C. Gore, *Reconstruction of Belief*, p. 313, n. 3. "We must always distinguish the original sense of the prophecies from that which Christian teachers saw in them. But it is, of course, quite credible that the sense later assigned to them may have lain in the intention of the inspiring Spirit. In some cases I should find it difficult to doubt this."