
Using the Bible

STUDIES IN THE PASTORAL EPISTLES (7)

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As originally given

In all that is said in the Pastoral Epistles, or anywhere else in the New Testament, about the scriptures, no distinction is made between the scriptures 'as originally given' and the scriptures as commonly known and used. No special appeal is made to the 'autographs' over against copies, or to the 'Hebrew verity' over against an Aramaic paraphrase or a Greek translation. Paul himself, while he usually quotes from the current Greek version of the Old Testament, is quite ready to appeal to the Hebrew text or to an Aramaic targum when it suits his purpose; and if he had been asked about 'autographs', he would probably have reflected that he did not go in much for autographs himself, preferring to dictate his letters to amanuenses. Why should not other biblical authors have done the same? Jeremiah was probably not the only prophet to dictate his oracles to a secretary, so that we need not envisage an autographic text of the works of Jeremiah. This should be borne in mind when too glib appeal is made to the unique authority of the autographs.

Using the scriptures

This may suggest that questions of the original text or the most reliable manuscript tradition, interesting and important as they are for the textual study of the biblical documents, are less relevant to the practical purposes of Christian living. Certainly instruction 'for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' can be readily derived from any edition of the Bible. God's way of life so pervades the whole volume that the most tendentious translation of the most corrupt text cannot obscure it. Similarly, whichever edition one reads (provided it is intelligible), the truth of *2 Tim.* 3:16, 17 can be experienced: 'Every part of those writings is divinely inspired and useful for teaching the truth and refuting error, for correcting the line of one's life and training one in righteousness. By those writings the

man or woman of God may be completely fitted out, equipped for every good work.' (For the sake of those who are sensitive to such matters, let it be said that the rendering 'man or woman' is adopted because the Greek word is *anthrōpos*, which embraces both sexes. I know that any intelligent reader of an English version which says simply 'the man of God' here will understand that what applies to the man is equally

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applicable to the woman, but nowadays it is as well to spell it out expressly.)

Some of these ways of using the scriptures profitably can be illustrated from the Pastoral Epistles themselves. We have looked in an earlier paper at the two seal-inscriptions on 'God's firm foundation' (*2 Tim.* 2:19), both drawn from the story of Korah's rebellion: 'The Lord knows those who are his' (cf. *Num.* 16:5) and 'Let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity' (cf. *Num.* 16:26). There we have scriptures used for 'refuting error' and 'correcting the line of one's life'.

'According to my gospel'

Again, in one of the short credal summaries which are so characteristic of these three epistles, we read: 'Remember Jesus Christ, risen from

the dead, descended from David, according to my gospel' (*2 Tim.* 2:8). It was in accordance with the scriptures that Christ was preached as 'risen from the dead' (cf. *1 Cor.* 15:4, 12); it was also in accordance with the scriptures that he was proclaimed as 'descended from David' (literally, 'of the seed of David'). In the brief epitome of Christ's identity in *Rom.* 1:3, 4, he is said to be 'of the seed of David according to the flesh' (i.e. according to human descent); the language is common to Paul and the other early preachers of the gospel. When Peter, on the day of Pentecost, told his hearers in Jerusalem how David knew that 'God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants (lit. of his seed) upon his throne' (*Acts* 2:30), he alluded to the oracle of *Ps.* 132:11, where the Lord swore to David, 'one of the sons of your body I will set on your throne'. Paul, in his synagogue address at Pisidian Antioch, made reference to the same oracle when, after outlining the course of Israel's history from the Exodus to David, he passed straight from David to his greater Son: 'Of this man's posterity God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, according to promise' (*Acts* 13:23). 'According to promise' in Acts corresponds to 'according to my gospel' in 2 Timothy, and both are synonymous with 'according to the scriptures' in 1 Corinthians, because the promise is recorded in the scriptures and Paul's gospel is based on the scriptures, as fulfilled in the work of Christ and personally validated in Paul's experience. Those who wished to probe the truth of Paul's gospel needed only to follow the example of the Jews of Berea and to examine the scriptures 'to see if these things were so' (*Acts* 17:11).

Scriptural authority and church order

For practical questions of church order as well as for evangelical doctrine the scriptures constitute a court of appeal. The primaevial narratives of Genesis are invoked as authority for the relative roles of men

and women in church services, setting forth as they do the priority of Adam in creation and the priority of Eve in the fall (*1 Tim. 2:11-14*). If we fail to appreciate the cogency with which the practical conclusions are drawn from the scriptural premises, we can at least appreciate the writer's concern to establish his directions on scriptural foundations.

In *2 Tim. 3:8* certain false teachers are denounced for opposing the truth 'as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses'. The reference is probably to the magicians at Pharaoh's court who imitated the signs by which Moses confirmed his divine mission and produced counterfeit signs of their own. But the names Jannes and Jambres are not found in canonical scripture. They occur (in a variety of forms) in some strands of Jewish and (later) Christian tradition. For example, the *Zadokite Work* (a treatise of the first century B.C. closely associated with the Qunran community), says that, when Moses and Aaron were divinely raised up, 'Belial raised Jannes and his brother by his evil device' in order to counter their wise guidance and lead the people astray. The men themselves are canonical, if their names are derived from another source. As the false teachers denounced by Jude have their Old Testament exemplars in Cain, Balaam and Korah (*Jude 11*), so those exposed by Paul have theirs in Pharaoh's magicians, and like Pharaoh's magicians they will be shown up for the shams they are.

The Law and the Lord

In *1 Tim. 5:18* there is a scriptural quotation which appears in one of Paul's earlier letters (*1 Cor. 9:9*): 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain' (*Deut. 25:4*). The lesson derived from that scripture here is the same as that which it was found to teach in the earlier letter: the person who preaches the gospel or undertakes similar forms of Christian service ought to be provided with the temporal necessities of life, should be able to 'live by the gospel' (*1 Cor. 9:14*)—a more scriptural expression than 'living by faith', which is the prerogative of every believer. Those last words of *1 Cor. 9:14* come from a reference to the Lord's commission to his disciples when he sent them out to preach the gospel during his Galilaean ministry; his commission is seen to confirm the principle laid down in the law. The Lord's actual utterance is not quoted *verbatim* in *1 Cor. 9:14*, but it is quoted *verbatim* here *1 Tim. 5:18*: 'The scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain", and, "The labourer deserves his wages".' This last statement is a saying known to us from its occurrence in *Luke 10:7*, in the Lord's charge to the seventy (or seventy-two). Here, then, in *1 Tim. 5:18* we have the first instance of what was to become an increasing tendency in early Christian literature: the citation of the words of Christ as 'scripture' alongside words from the Old Testament, as bearing

the same supreme authority. It would be going too far to say with confidence that Luke's Gospel as such is here given the status of 'scripture': the relation in time of Luke's Gospel to the Pastoral Epistles is not an easy matter to decide. It is evident from *1 Cor. 9:14* and other passages in Paul's early letters that sayings of Christ were known and quoted as authoritative quite apart from the documents in which they have been transmitted to us. Yet here we have the beginnings of what was in due course to grow into the complete Christian canon: the words of the old covenant fulfilled and interpreted by those of the new. The importance of *1 Tim. 5:18* for the history and doctrine of Holy Writ is very great, but the words of the law and the gospel are brought together here for a very practical purpose, to reinforce the right of church elders to have their material needs supplied—those who 'labour in preaching and teaching' being singled out as 'worthy of double honour' (*1 Tim. 5:17*), which in this context can mean only a double honorarium. Paul could emphasize such people's rights the more freely because of his refusal to take personal advantage of them (*1 Cor. 9:12*).

Questions for group study

1. Is it important which version of the Bible we use to show an inquirer the way of salvation? Is it important which version we use for detailed and accurate study of the inspired text?

2. Consider how some popular forms of false teaching make the headway they do because too many Christians are not sufficiently familiar with the Bible to use it to refute error.

3. Think of some other ways in which the Christian who knows the Bible is 'completely fitted out, equipped for every good work'.