

# The Authority of Scripture in the Medieval Period

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The Medieval Period is also called the Dark Ages. This period which covers the years from 590 A.D. to 1517 A.D. seemed to be dark to classical scholars in many respects. They could not draw much light and inspiration from this period. The humanistic scholar would simply drop these centuries out of the world's history. As regards the concept of the authority of scripture also one has to grope in the dark.

Nevertheless the medieval civilization in general was Biblical at its base. St Jerome, who was a great admirer of classical literature, though he was a stern defender of pure Christianity too, tells an experience of his own in one of his letters. He used to read much of Vergil and Cicero and other non-Christian books. One night he was suddenly summoned before the Heavenly judge. 'Who are you?', he was questioned. 'I am a Christian', he replied. 'Thou liest, thou art a Ciceronian' was the judge's answer. He was immediately given over to the cruel constables who thrashed him severely until he promised never to touch a pagan book again. When he awoke in the morning he still felt the blows. By his letter he caused several others to dream such a dream. Many monks and nuns having dreamt like this have felt blows struck on them by invisible hands for having given themselves up to read classical books too much instead of the Bible. The leaders of monasteries have again and again insisted on the rule that the Bible must be read and not pagan books.

The Bible was recognised as the foundation of their beliefs. Its influence was to be seen in every department, such as the view of the world, the view of history, arts and sciences, social life and commerce. For everything in their life it was to the Bible that people referred. The Bible was the leading norm.

## *New Movements*

Reading the Bible led to some movements also. One of such movements was under the leadership of Peter Waldo, a merchant of Lyons. In 1176 Waldo, impressed by the song of a wandering minstrel recounting the sacrifices of St Alexis, asked a clergyman 'the best way to God'. The clergyman quoted the golden text of monasticism found in Mt. 19:21. 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me'. Waldo put this scriptural text literally into practice.

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Providing a little for his wife and daughters, he gave the rest to the poor. He thus determined to fulfil the directions of Christ to His disciples absolutely. He began to live the life of a poor man, living by what was given to him. His friends thought that this was true 'apostolic poverty'. Many followed him and took the gospel as law. They were called the Waldensians. They adhered to poverty, fasting, praying and so on, in order to fulfil the gospel's commands. Without becoming monks, they continued to live in the world carrying on their ordinary business. They made the ascetic ideal the rule of every Christian, based on the authority of the Bible.

Another movement spread in this period. The followers of that movement were called the Albigensians. They accepted the authority of the New Testament only, and interpreted it according to their dualistic theory. They praised exceedingly the fourth gospel. But they rejected the Old Testament, either the whole of it or the greater part of it. Some believed that the books of Job, Psalms, Solomon and of the prophets were inspired by the good god. The rest of the Old Testament, according to them, came from the devil. They criticised strongly the historical parts of the Old Testament. They were at heart opposed to everything in Christianity. They pretended to be the members of the Catholic church, but really they were adherents of another religion.

In order to do away with such non-conformist movements the Church decided to keep the Bible away from the people. Pope Innocent III in his reply to the Bishop of Metz said, 'The study of the Bible is to be encouraged among the clergy, but all laymen are to be kept from it, the Bible being so profound in its mysteries that even scholars sometimes get beyond their depth and are drowned'. While concluding, he refers to Ex. 19:12. 'Take heed to yourselves that ye go not up into the mount or touch the border of it; whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death: no hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned, or shot through; whether it be beast or man, it shall not live'. So the Pope said, 'If a layman touches the Bible he is guilty of sacrilege and ought to be stoned or shot through'. So there was a general prohibition of Bible reading for the laity. The church's ordinances were directed especially against the translations of the Bible into vernacular languages. In the later centuries of the Middle Ages the prohibition against Bible reading by the laity, against translating the Bible and against selling the Bible, became more frequent. But the prohibition was followed only with the intention of stopping heresy.

Through the instigation of the Friars, Bible study was favoured at the medieval universities. But the current tendency was towards scholasticism. Dogmatics, systematics and dialectics were what educated men wanted. The curriculum of a student of theology required first a training in Biblical studies before studying systematics. The professor also was bound to teach the Bible for 2 or 3 years before he could teach systematics.

There were mystics also in this period. They were pious people who gave themselves up to thorough study of the Bible. Canticles was their favourite text book. They withdrew themselves from the

oversight of the Church. They read the Bible and the books of their spiritual fathers, and their mystical ideas were opposed to the doctrines of the Church.

### *Reason and Faith*

Dependence of reasoning upon the dictates of faith is central to medieval thinking. It meant that there was an ultimate yardstick by which to judge the validity of an argument. However impeccable its reasoning might be, it had to conform to the tenets of revelation. This exclusive allegiance to a definite body of dogmas did not however mean a uniformity of thought. As soon as there is a desire to supplement belief for reasoning, personal judgement comes into play and with it the search for convincing arguments and concepts. The effort to harmonise reason and faith was the motive force of medieval Christian thought. With the 14th century the fabric of scholasticism could no longer contain these rival pressures, and faith and reason began to fall apart. When they did so, the authority that faith had so long exercised over reason was rejected. It is against this background that we should set out to search for the nature of authority of scripture in the Middle Ages.

One of the striking features of the Carolingian Empire was the supreme importance of the Church. The Church had survived when Rome had fallen. The Church alone remained a cohesive force amid the shattering of tribes and kingdoms. The bishops became the most important men in the cities and in the dioceses. The Church held the monopoly of learning. Without the clergy's help even the simplest tasks of government could not be carried out. The monasteries were the only centres of organised education from the 6th century onwards and dominated intellectual life. In an age which had so few resources of its own, the Church offered comfort and protection, and leadership. Charlemagne became at the hands of the Pope the Holy Roman Emperor in 800. Papacy occupied the central place in Western Europe. The Emperor was a protector to the Pope and a partner in directing Christendom. This put imperial powers under the auspices of the Pope. The Pope alone was able to make his voice heard throughout Christendom. Within this framework, culture and learning developed. They were directed to a better comprehension of the scriptures. Learning became the handmaid of theology.

John the Scot (810-877) stands out as a great original thinker. Like the other medieval Latin thinkers he wanted to understand the scriptures, and in a very real sense his work was a commentary on the scriptures. He saw no distinction between faith and reason. John took their indissoluble unity for his starting point. 'If you will not believe you shall not understand'. Man, he held, in his present fallen state had lost his power of direct insight into truth; he was only able to know through the experience of his senses. To attain to true understanding, he was dependent upon the divine illumination brought by Christ. The Bible is authoritative in Christ. He is the key to the scriptures. In Him the Bible is authoritative because He is the word made flesh. So, according to John, for man's certitude rested upon faith, and reason could only try to grasp the truths contained in faith.

'Authority proceeds from true reason, but never reason from authority'. John regards all nature as the mirror of God Himself. The whole of creation is a process of divine revelation. So he calls nature a 'theophany'.

### *Scripture and Dialectic*

The intellectual history of the 11th century is dominated by the growing importance of dialectic. In one sense the conflicting claims of faith and reason were the motive force in medieval thought from this time on. There was a general desire among Church Reformers to shake the Church free to enable it to pursue its own spiritual mission. Peter Damian, for example, rejected the claims of reason to interpret revelation, as he denied the dependence of the Church upon the Emperor.

The Christian truths found in scripture were no less fundamental for Duns Scotus in the 14th century than they were for Augustine in the 4th century. Their differences were due to a new relationship between faith and reason as well as to new methods of discussion. Formerly reading and meditation on texts as appropriate to monastic life had provided the main means of expression. Now in the 11th century it was increasingly taking the form of disputation and discussion, whereby a problem was framed in the form of a question. By this method a question would be posed, the arguments for and against stated and a balance struck. The question became universal in medieval thought from the 12th until the 15th century. The scholastics were governed by the need to sift the conflicting arguments, drawn from authority, in order to arrive at the truth.

This attempt to arrive at the most probable interpretation, through the resolution of discordant opinions, had lain at the basis of all exegesis from the earliest days of Christianity. All the Fathers, St Augustine, St Jerome, St Ambrose, had been preoccupied with interpreting scripture, and in that sense the guiding aim of the question was firmly rooted in tradition. The difference lay in introducing logic to help in reaching a solution. Even when reason was at its height faith still had the last word.

In some schools a very high place was given to dialectic. Berengarius, head of the school of Tours (d. 1088), applied dialectic to the sacrament of the Eucharist. By applying arguments taken from dialectic Berengarius was led to deny transubstantiation. He said that as long as the accidents remained the same, so did the substance. The bread and wine were only symbols of Christ. He was condemned at the Synod of Vercelli in 1050. The one who attacked dialecticians was Peter Damian (1007-1072). In his treatise on Divine Omnipotence, Damian threw doubt upon all knowledge, by evoking God's absolute power by which He had absolute freedom to act as He willed. God could do anything; accordingly there could be no certainty. His will was above all laws, unrestricted even by impossibility. Dialectic and reason, therefore, can have no place in discussing God or matters of faith.

To Anselm (1033-1109) faith is necessary for understanding. In line with St Augustine, 'he believed in order that he might understand'.

Reason was an instrument in demonstrating what was already believed. He held 'If you do not believe, you will not understand'. Abelard (1079-1142) was not a rationalist. He tried to make faith intelligible to reason. He wrote 'I do not want to be a philosopher, if it means restricting St Paul. I do not want to be Aristotle, if it must separate me from Christ'. Bernard (1091-1155) was the founder of medieval mysticism. His philosophy was to know Jesus and Jesus crucified. 'What do the apostles teach us? Not to read Plato nor to turn and return to the subtleties of Aristotle; not always to learn in order never to reach knowledge of truth; they have taught me to live'. St Thomas Aquinas as a natural theologian utilised reason to support revelation.

### *After Scholasticism*

Some theologians, following the teaching of St Augustine, departed from scholasticism and built their own systems on the basis of the Bible. Wycliffe and Huss were among them. The Wycliffe and the Hussite movements were based on the Bible. By producing translations, they aimed to provide the laity with the Bible which was the one true authority for them, and so to protect them against the adulteration of Christianity due to scholasticism. To John Wycliffe authority resides in the Bible. He did not think about the problem of varying interpretations. To him no interpreter is necessary, since its meaning is self-evident. William of Ockham, who lived from about 1290 to 1350, relied on the authority of the Bible. He said that councils and men can err. But since Christ said that the gates of hell should not prevail against the Church some part of the Church would be right. Historically there is much to be said for this position. When there were heretics, there were others who were right. He raised another point: If all the parts are not right and only one or some are right, how are we to know which is right? His answer was to appeal to the Bible. If there is no authoritative body to interpret the Bible, each individual must interpret it for himself.

One other special feature of the Medieval period is that tradition and scripture were clearly thought to exist in organic dependence on each other, while each had its own relative autonomy and its own particular authority. Tradition had its autonomy and authority, because of the continuity and authority of the Christian Church. Scripture had its autonomy and authority, because of the permanence of the written word, and the inspiration of the Bible. The thought that Scripture contains in clear and explicit form the necessary and essential truths of the faith was found in this period. They were convinced of the sufficiency of Scripture. One of the basic principles of the Reformation and later ecumenical thought, that Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation and that it affords the supreme and decisive standard of conduct, is now beginning to develop.

It is here that we find the authority of Scripture. The uniqueness of the authority of Scripture is that here we confront the living Person Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. As J. W. C. Wand states, 'The revelation consummated in Him is the clue by which alone we can find our way through the labyrinth of this world'.

(10) Jesus as *the Great Teacher of Liberalism* surely rates a place too. Much of the Old Quest followed precisely this line, and neither the Bultmann period, Neo-Orthodoxy, or the New Quest have ended it. Recent examples include lives published in the sixties by Morton S. Enslin and S. Vernon McCasland.<sup>60</sup>

(11) Something of a novelty is the *married Jesus* or at least the 'sexually involved Jesus'. Fictionalized lives have occasionally speculated on whether Jesus may not have had a love affair or even a wife and family, Mary Magdalene usually being chosen for the speculations about 'Mrs Jesus'. *The Last Temptation* by the Greek novelist and poet Kazantzakis is a recent case in point.<sup>61</sup> On a more serious level, William Phipps, in his somewhat unfortunately titled book, *Was Jesus Married?* (for his main intent is to show how celibacy was a later imposition upon early Christianity), argues, against the background of Jewish rabbinic practice, that he most likely was (an argument Jeremias has applied to Paul).<sup>62</sup> The traditional view, invoking the silence of the New Testament witness about any wife, can now appeal to the phenomenon of 'eschatological celibacy' at Qumran, though to do so is a step along the way to the 'Qumran Jesus' approach noted above, (5) so distasteful to some in other connections.

(12) Last of all, I point to *the Jesus of tradition history* found in several recent works. Here, in line with the New Quest, no attempt is made to write a 'life', but it is assumed something can be said about the man as we view him through the Christian tradition, and specifically as he is depicted at each stage of that developing tradition. Thus for example Howard Kee portrays something of Jesus in Q, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, as well as he must have been historically.<sup>63</sup> A recent survey by the French scholar Etienne Trocmé pictures Jesus as he is reflected in material from each of the form-critical categories.<sup>64</sup> Eduard Schweizer, in *Jesus*, a book written while he was teaching in Japan with a minimum of library resources but time to contemplate his Greek testament, depicts first historically 'the man who fits no formula', and then the pictures that emerged christologically of the Jesus soon to return, the Jesus reigning in heaven, the crucified Lord, and the earthly Jesus found in each gospel.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> M.S. Enslin, *The Prophet from Nazareth* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961; paperback ed., New York: Schocken Books, 1968). S.V. McCasland, *The Pioneer of Our Faith: A New Life of Jesus* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

<sup>61</sup> Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, trans. by P. A. Bien (New York: Bantam Books, 1971).

<sup>62</sup> W. E. Phipps, *Was Jesus Married? The Distortion of Sexuality in the Christian Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

<sup>63</sup> Howard Clark Kee, *Jesus in History: An Approach to the Study of the Gospels* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970).

<sup>64</sup> Etienne Trocmé, *Jesus and His Contemporaries*, trans. from the French (1972) by R. A. Wilson (London: SCM, 1973).

<sup>65</sup> E. Schweizer, *Jesus*, trans. by David E. Green (Richmond: John Knox, 1971). The German (1968) is more aptly titled, *Jesus Christus im vielfältigen Zeugnis des Neuen Testaments*.

Anyone can pick from these dozen approaches some that seem destined to survive, others which will disappear, and some that will stage comebacks from time to time as future lives of Jesus are written. I hazard the guesses, first (a quite safe prediction) that most of the existing approaches will continue, good, bad, and indifferent, for some time to come, and that when even a bad interpretation is stamped out at one point, it will reappear later elsewhere. Because we do not always know enough about the past, we are doomed to repeat in new forms the mistakes of the past. Second, and here one must be less sure, but I think it probable: the tradition-history approach is the way of the future. The old sort of psychologizing biography has no place (a) because there are, on this basis, too many contradictory interpretations, and (b) it can endure only if we forget any sort of historical-critical sense such has developed over recent decades. But the bare Bultmannian *dass*, affirming merely the existence of Jesus, is too stark; faith and common sense will seek to say more about Jesus of Nazareth. But they will do so with more reserve than many have been accustomed to regarding his career, and with growing attention to the history of how the Jesus story has been told and retold.

Whether in the tradition-history or some other form, the historical Jesus surely does have a future. That is the thrust of a recent book by Leander E. Keck,<sup>66</sup> who has also been editor for the 'Lives of Jesus Series' which is making available reprints or in some instances the first English translation of pivotal works from the Old Quest. Keck's book is an attempt to explore and map out, as the subtitle implies, a programme for church use (preaching) and theology (university)—a rather dangerous dichotomy, by the way, yet growing on the American scene, emulating the German situation, assuming theology is done in the university rather than in church (schools). Professor Keck, after recounting something of the history of Jesus studies in recent theology, points up the thesis that while the 'historian's Jesus' differs from the gospels' Jesus (so Kaehler), the New Quest, for all its uncertainties, lets us know enough 'important things solidly' about Jesus to preach and do theology. For preaching, the crucial thing is how shall we present the historical Jesus in sermons so that men trust Him, and in theology how shall we see the significance of the historical Jesus for understanding God? When it is added that the answer to the latter question is given in terms of 'trust'—'Jesus trusted God'—then the central emphasis of the book is clear: trust is the key, for how Jesus acted, for the salvation which resulted from His trusting God, and for men today. Jesus functions as a catalytic question, moving hearers to trust.

A book can sometimes be measured in terms of 'against whom' it is written, and by the allies it invokes. At one point or another, *A Future for the Historical Jesus* speaks against Kaehler, Lessing, Kierkegaard, Bultmann (and his Lutheran leanings), and James Robinson, as well as against Jeremias (for simplism over 'ipsissima vox'). Keck wants more of a role for the historical Jesus than Kaehler

<sup>66</sup> *A Future for the Historical Jesus: The Place of Jesus in Preaching and Theology* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1971).

allowed; less of a gap between historical facts and the certitude of faith than Lessing saw; no Kierkegaardian 'leap of faith'; and not such a kerygmatic emphasis as in Bultmann-Robinson and the New Hermeneutic.<sup>67</sup> What, then, does he favour? Gerhard Ebeling's stress on the intention of Jesus to awaken faith; Fuchs's emphasis on Jesus' trust; and above all Wilhelm Herrmann's warm insistence on faith as life.<sup>68</sup> (It is no accident that Keck's 'Lives of Jesus Series' includes Herrmann's *The Communion of the Christian with God*, surely no *Leben Jesu* but an almost pietistic analysis of what constitutes genuine religion (in light of Luther's teachings!); Herrmann was a teacher influential on Bultmann in his student days. Keck argues eloquently for 'trust' as the link today between Jesus and us, and as the motif which makes the historical Jesus meaningful. Advantages of the term are that it is universal (and not just Christian), and social (not just individualistic).

There is much that is good in this programme, for church and the scientific study of religion. My fear is that in stressing (to use classical terms) *fiducia* ('trust'), this approach (1) tends to emphasize not so much the *fides quae* (content of faith, 'the faith which is believed') but *fides qua* ('the faith by which one believes'); and (2) runs the danger of making Jesus a model of 'how to believe'—a threat which some see in certain essays of Fuchs, and therewith a return to the old psychologizing quest, Jesus as paradigm for how we are to trust.

Keck's book has many other important features (which in turn for some reviewers and readers, including this one, raise further questions). For example, he again and again stresses the 'Jewishness of Jesus', but one must ask *which kind* of Judaism of the day, for Jesus has been placed in just about every variety of it save Sadduceism. Or again, he sees Jesus affirming roots in both Jewish apocalyptic (e.g. the emphasis on sin and the fall) and Jewish wisdom (stress on the creation as God's). But even these could be more tightly pulled together, for recent biblical study tends to see apocalyptic as closely connected with the wisdom movement.<sup>69</sup> Or, a final example, there seems a new stress on the 'social environment emphasis' of the 'Chicago School'. All of which leads one to see that, in thus affirming a future for the historical Jesus, we are thrown back on some of the problems with which the nineteenth century wrestled, for then too there was interest, subjectively, in Jesus' attitude of trust, in his Jewishness, and great debate over Jesus as teacher of wisdom versus Jesus as apocalyptic, eschatological prophet.

In these pages, we have by no means been able to deal with all facets of 'the quest'. Roman Catholic study of Jesus is a chapter in itself: the Modernist attempt to apply radical critical methods; the spate of traditional lives, interpreting the man of Galilee by Chalcedonian categories or stressing the place of Mary; the anti-clerical 'lives' by

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48ff.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, especially pp. 162ff.

<sup>69</sup> Toward a possible solution, cf. Richard Jeske, 'Wisdom and the Future in the Teaching of Jesus', *Dialog* 11 (Spring, 1972): 108-17.



Italians like Papini or Craveri;<sup>70</sup> and the new mood since the encyclical of 1943, 'Divine Afflante Spiritu'. But enough has been said to show the breadth, vitality, and fascination which the quest exhibits.

No one can avoid paying some attention to such studies, for we all have (and need) a view of Jesus. To know where authors we read fit into the quests, old, new, or negative, helps us to understand books on Jesus. No commentary on the gospels, no study of any gospel pericope comes fully alive if it deals with Jesus, unless we place it within that life as men have understood it. Above all, some knowledge of the quest will help us evaluate future 'lives' to come, some of them probably still more shocking, many of them indebted to the past. For such writings we shall always have as long as Christianity endures, and 'by their lives of Jesus ye shall know them'.

<sup>70</sup> Giovanni Papini, *Life of Christ*, trans. from Italian by Dorothy Canfield Fisher (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1923). Marcello Craveri, *The Life of Jesus*, trans. from Italian by Charles Lam Markham (New York: Grove Press; London: Secker and Warburg, 1967).