

Can We Believe The Bible Today?

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Christians today find themselves with an increasingly uneasy conscience over the Bible. They desire to believe it. Indeed, as they read it devotionally, or as they preach it and hear it preached, they find themselves instinctively believing it. They know well that all those things in the Christian faith which speak to them most deeply, and all those Christians whose lives have left the deepest mark on their own lives, have been associated with a Christianity that is biblical through and through. And yet, alongside their desire to believe, they find themselves being told — and told increasingly — that they may not. Both the veracity of Scripture and its authority come under sustained attack, though not usually in so many words. Sometimes it is the truthfulness of the Bible as such that is discussed, more often it is the truthfulness of something which we accept on the credit of the Bible's teaching, such as — to take examples in current debate — the reliability of the traditional view of Jesus (controverted in the Channel 4 series, *Jesus: the Evidence*), and the predicating of "Motherhood" to the Father God (much debated in Church of Scotland circles in the last year).

It is, of course, no new thing for people to call in question the Christians' holy book. This has happened from the earliest days of the church, and it periodically takes on a major significance down the years of its history. What is distinctive and new about the current debate (a debate which has been in progress for a century or so now) is this. The attacks are not coming simply from outside the

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church, in the way in which, predictably, unbelievers have in all periods believed the Christians' Bible to be mistaken along with the rest of our faith. From *inside* the professing church, and in some degree from those who would wish to be known as evangelicals, we find more than an echo of what is being said outside. That is to say, the debate today is not as it once was, an argument for the Bible and those things to which it bears witness as one element in a general argument about the truthfulness of the Christian faith. It is nowhere suggested by those who urge us to take a lower view of the authenticity of Scripture and its authority that we need to abandon our Christian persuasion. Rather — and here lies the particular threat which they pose to evangelical faith today — they seek to assure us that, once the outmoded obsession with an infallible Bible has been laid to rest, a more mature and efficacious faith will emerge in which the spiritual kernel of Christianity remains intact despite the breaking of the old forms in which it was once contained. Such siren voices have been singing for a century and more, and many is the believer — and many the institution, indeed, — whose attentive ears have led them away in that direction in which siren voices always lie.

*This paper was given at the annual Open Day at Rutherford House in May of this year. In it Dr Cameron discusses the context in which Christians should assess challenges to their belief in the Bible, such as that of the recent Channel 4 series, **Jesus: the Evidence.***



So there are two questions involved in what seems to be one: can we believe the Bible today? The first relates, as it were, to the evidence for and against the truthfulness of the Bible, and to this we shall come. But the second needs to be recognised, since it determines very largely how evidence relating to the first question is assessed. It is the question of the significance of our response to the issue of truthfulness. Is it the case that the infallibility of Scripture is an isolable Christian belief like, say, our view of baptism or the Lord's Day? Or is the question of Scripture a fundamental issue which has implications for the coherence and integrity of Christian faith as such?

The case against the Bible

There are two main lines of attack on the traditional evangelical view of the Bible.

1. It is historically unreliable. This is the kind of case which has been made in the recent Channel 4 television series entitled *Jesus: the Evidence*, and which some years back in another area underlay the BBC series *BC*, which Magnus Magnusson presented. We need here to separate two distinct facts. Both of these series, in common with many broadcast treatments of the question, gave undue prominence to sceptical approaches to Scripture. In both cases eminent scholars who would have little sympathy with the evangelical view of Scripture have gone on record as regarding the impression of the facts given by the broadcasters as seriously misleading. In the Channel 4 series, for example, one or two theories which are regarded in the scholarly community as somewhat eccentric were presented as consensus views. This is most unfortunate, but should not obscure the fact that the consensus of scholarly opinion does not agree with us, either! While there are many moderate scholars who give a great deal of credence to the essential biblical view of the history of the Jews and the history of New Testament days, the consensus would certainly not share the evangelical view that these accounts are wholly reliable.

The consensus — insofar as there is one — would seek to treat the biblical documents in the same way as secular documents are treated, and would find in the biblical

documents as in others a blend of truth and error. The biblical documents, on this understanding, are about par for the course in their representation of the facts. There is a mix of error and of re-writing along with, in broad outline, a statement of the facts. This, we need to note, is the sort of view which is generally taught to divinity students, and which has been for a hundred years. It has been one of the major tasks of theology to attempt a reconciliation between this way of treating Scripture and the kind of statements *about* Scripture and its authority which all who profess the Christian faith would wish to make.

2. Its teaching is not authoritative. This is not, of course, a blanket claim, since the teaching of the Bible is appealed to by everyone with even a vague interest in the Christian religion. There is great power in a proof-text. But, we are told, in some measure we must lay aside thrusts of biblical teaching which cannot today be accepted. It is hardly surprising, of course, that those outside the churches should wish to argue in this way. But increasingly the argument comes from inside, as churches decide that they cannot go along with this or that aspect of the Bible's teaching. There are both theological and ethical elements in this refusal of biblical authority. For example, the widespread denial of the biblical prohibition of practising homosexuality is a striking evidence of the repudiation of biblical teaching. Another and more immediate illustration is, of course, the so-called "Motherhood" of God. In an attempt to placate feminists who wish to extend their campaign to God himself the Church is about to find itself enmeshed in this issue. Whether we like it or not (and some plainly do not) the Bible presents us with the inestimable privilege of addressing God as "Father". This is the only personal category in which he is presented to us, and it is allied with his relation to Jesus Christ, whom he has eternally begotten, and to earthly fatherhood, for which the divine fatherhood is the pattern. The Father has, of course, kindly qualities, like any father worth his salt; but to suggest that he is therefore "motherly" is either to resort to tautology (since in any proper notion of "father" there are some of the qualities also present in the notion of "mother"), or it is to challenge the biblical revelation head-on by suggesting that at this fundamental level of the revelation of the character of God we must supplement it by laying alongside an important category that which would appear to be its alternative or its opposite. That is to say, to call God a "motherly father" is *either* to say no more than that he is a kind and proper father (which, I think, we already knew), *or* it is to deny that he is properly a father and to suggest that he is rather, something else — though just what else is not plain.

But the essential point to grasp is this. Denials of this or that element in the biblical witness should not be seen as denials of "infallibility" or "inerrancy" or of some other esoteric theological quality which, today, only a minority of Christians would seem to wish to predicate of Scripture. They are denials, rather, of the Bible's *authority*; and to this we shall return. This becomes more evident, perhaps, when we confront a denial which is more straightforward in character, such as the very widespread denial of the wrath and judgement of God characteristic of much of the church-life (and of much of the evangelical church-life, it must be said) today.

These two main lines of attack upon the traditional evangelical belief in the Bible — a belief in the veracity of what it says happened and of the authority of theological and ethical statements — have worked their way deep into our Christian consciousness.

A context for assessment

One of the difficulties which Christian people face when they are confronted with, for example, a television series that seeks to undermine Christian confidence in the Bible is that most of us are in no position to answer back. We do not know — even those among us who are trained in theology — enough about whatever subject is being discussed to understand what may be wrong with the case being presented to us. So what we need is to have a context in which to set any and every claim that the Bible is not to be believed which will help us each time we face this sort of thing. We suggest three factors which should come into our minds each time our trust in Scripture is called into question.

They seek to assure us that, once the outmoded obsession with an infallible Bible has been laid to rest, a more mature and efficacious faith will emerge in which the spiritual kernel of Christianity remains intact despite the breaking of the old forms in which it was once contained. Such siren voices have been singing for a century and more.

1. The evangelical doctrine is the original and historic idea of Scripture.

Since conservative evangelicals today find themselves in a small minority, perhaps especially in their doctrine of Scripture, it is common to find it assumed that this had always been the case. A sectarian mentality, and an accompanying failure of confidence, are the result. In fact — and this can scarcely be disputed — the doctrine of plenary inspiration which Warfield defined and defended is nothing less than what he termed "the church-doctrine of inspiration": the common heritage of the Church Catholic. To say that is, of course, to raise several difficulties. In what sense can the doctrine of one age be said to be identical with that of the next, when the context in which it was once defined has been superseded by another? What are the characteristics of "authentic" doctrinal development, and "inauthentic"? How would particular defenders of plenary inspiration before the rise of Higher Criticism have responded had they written after its widespread acceptance? It is often argued that to call in testimony writers who did not themselves live against the back-cloth of critical historical study as witnesses against its method and conclusions is simply anachronistic.

There is some substance in this argument, but it is not as convincing as it may appear; for it begs the real question at issue. That is to say, *if* the doctrine of inspiration held by the older generations in fact essentially involved inerrancy in matters of history and so on, it is by no means illegitimate to cite their testimony against lesser views. On the other hand, *if* historical and literary inferences drawn from the essentials of the doctrine were to a degree arbitrary accretions of the general assumptions of the day, they may reasonably be disregarded. But that, of course, is the issue which today requires resolution.

What we may say with some definiteness is that, prior to the rise of what is commonly called historical criticism, what is today the minority preserve of James Barr's "Fundamentalism" was the common doctrine of the Christian Church. Perhaps the most striking admission of this was made at the height of the Fundamentalist Controversy

in the United States, by Kirsopp Lake, the New Testament scholar, who was a vigorous and indeed, extreme opponent of orthodoxy. He candidly writes in these terms:

It is a mistake, often made by educated men who happen to have but little knowledge of historical theology, to suppose that Fundamentalism is a new and strange form of thought. It is nothing of the kind: it is the partial and uneducated survival of a theology which was once universally held by all Christians. How many were there, for instance, in the Christian Churches, in the eighteenth century, who doubted the infallible inspiration of all Scripture? A few, perhaps, but very few. No, the Fundamentalist may be wrong; I think that he is. But it is we who have departed from the tradition, not he, and I am sorry for the fate of anyone who tries to argue with a Fundamentalist on the basis of authority. The Bible and the *corpus theologicum* of the church is [sic] on the Fundamentalist side.

That assessment could be illustrated at indefinite length. It could also be disputed, but not in its essentials. For even where isolated Christians have doubted this or that text, or have admitted difficulties in particular passages, the general assumption of Scripture's normative authority — an authority extending to the historical claims which it makes, which are indeed the warp of its theological woof — has been universal in the Church.

The Biblical documents, on this understanding, are about par for the course in their representation of the facts. There is a mix of error and of re-writing along with, in broad outline, a statement of the facts. This, we need to note, is the sort of view which is generally taught to divinity students, and which has been for a hundred years.

And why? For the elementary reason, which few would deny, that in its essentials what is today called the evangelical view of Scripture was, once upon a time, the view of Scripture held by our Lord Jesus Christ. It was his view, in a sense, because it was the orthodox view of the pious Jews of his day; but as to the fact that he saw his Bible, our Old Testament, as true and authoritative in the way in which evangelicals today see theirs, there can really be no dispute. As a matter of history, it was from our Lord and the first disciples that the church inherited its historic understanding of Holy Scripture.

2. What went wrong? How did the change come about which has turned a consensus view into that of a minority? The answer lies in the momentous significance of the nineteenth century for the Christian church. The century began, in Britain and north America at least, with what we have characterised as the original Christian view as the consensus. It ended with it the possession, in Britain at least, of a very small minority (the position in the US was healthier, though the same thing had been happening). And we seek the cause not in the early growth of biblical archaeology and of philology, as understanding of the ancient cultures and languages increased, but rather in something very different. The century saw the growth also of secularism in society at large, and of the final roosting of birds that had been coming home a long time — since the "Enlightenment", so-called, at least. In the determination of influential thinkers like Spinoza to

put the Bible and biblical Christianity firmly in its place, and the widespread feeling amongst the nineteenth-century intellectuals that the net result of biblical authority — biblical Christianity — had to be resisted, there lies the immediate context for the development of methods of biblical study which succeeded in undermining the traditional idea that the Bible was to be believed. The Bible was to be studied "like any other book", and — surprise, surprise — the experts all of a sudden discovered that it really was "like any other book". Insofar as its elevating and impressive content was nonetheless full of errors of history, exaggerations, contradictions, and the rest, together with a picture of God at times barbarous and in need of improvement.

This was a complicated process, and of course hand in hand with scepticism about Scripture went real advances in our knowledge of the ancient societies of biblical times. But the latter did not account for the former, and one small illustration, which in fact goes close to the heart of the whole debate, should make this plain.

The claim was being made that the Bible should be studied "like any other book", in other words, that the Christian scholar should put off his Christian hat when doing his academic study of Scripture. That sounds a fine idea, and insofar as it was intended to bring to bear the full intellect of the church and all the resources of research and learning it was. But there was more to it. It meant also bringing to bear the philosophical prejudices of an increasingly unbelieving age, which had in themselves nothing whatever to do with learning and discovery; and the major prejudice was that against miracle and the supernatural. Now this is generally speaking a healthy prejudice. When someone tells us that something apparently supernatural has occurred, it is reasonable that we should think twice before believing their report. When an historian reads a document which includes tales of miracles he should think more than twice. Many ancient peoples embroidered their histories in this way, and the sensible historian will try and get behind the miracle-stories to what, we would say, really happened. And yet, of course, not only is the Bible full of miracle-stories it is the story of a miracle: God speaking to men, God revealing himself to men, God becoming a man. The general assumption of the historian that history has its own logic, that one thing must flow organically from the last, and that any kind of interference with this process (whether through miraculous acts or supernatural revelation) must be discounted, will inevitably make heavy weather of a book like this one. Because either he behaves as an historian treating "any other" document, and all the material must be re-arranged according to the logical evolution (an idea much applied to historical development in the last century) that would be expected without the involvement of God, or else he will say "I must put off my historian's cap at this point, and while keeping my scholarly eyes keenly observant, I have no alternative than to submit to the version of events given in this book". Now that may seem to raise the question of how we can know that the Christian faith, contained in the Christian book, is true at all. But, you see, it is a *separate* point, a question of Christian evidences and apologetics, and not something for the Bible scholar to determine.

The upshot of all this is that when the scholars of the later decades of the nineteenth century said they were studying the Bible "like any other book" they were deceiving themselves. Most of them were churchmen, and stayed churchmen. They believed at least *some* of the supernatural in the Bible (if only the existence of God and his having communicated to man in history), and yet to believe even that undermined their claim to study the Bible with objective historical eyes. The problem is that you cannot

study the Christian book, any more than any other element in the faith, without being confronted with the need to decide: do I, or do I not, believe in a God like this God? If I do, then this book makes its own sense as his book. If I do not, then this is all confused and mistaken. Yet, since most of those who tried to study the Bible "like any other book" wanted to retain their Christian profession, they did not face this question. They considered that they could re-formulate the Christian faith without the need for an infallible authority, and that in the process they could discard those many elements in the Biblical faith (like wrath, judgement, election, hell, penal substitution, conversion, repentance, and all the rest) which they, and their increasingly secular and humanistic society, did not like. A Mark II Christianity resulted, and is our inheritance a century on.

Denials of this or that element in the Biblical witness should not be seen as denials of "infallibility" or "inerrancy" or of some other esoteric theological quality which, today, only a minority of Christians would seem to wish to predicate of Scripture. They are denials, rather, of the Bible's authority.

3. The orthodox position is the only reasonable one today. Again, I am not trying to argue for the truth of Christianity (though, of course, I could!). But if the truth of Christianity be assumed, there really is no doubt that the orthodox and evangelical doctrine of Scripture is the only one that makes any sense. This is why it is particularly galling for evangelicals to be written off as irrational and unreasonable. When we are given an opportunity to argue our case, and the illogic and arbitrariness of the other side begins to become clear, we are then accused of being rationalists, and told to leave room for mystery in the faith! We shall come back to this matter later on, but it needs to be underlined that, ever since the church began to lose confidence in the authority of the Bible, a major task for theologians has been to create a notion of Biblical authority which will keep the authority which we want in the Bible (in that the church continues to like many things that the Bible says) while permitting us to dispose of the rest. The fact that every ten years some items move from one list to the other has made it rather difficult.

That is to say, the evidence against the Bible may be weak or it may be strong. But *if* it is strong it is not evidence for the idea that we can have a looser notion of Biblical authority. It is evidence that the evangelical and historic view of the Bible is wrong, and thereby evidence against the truth of the Christian faith. And because it has that kind of significance, it is very reasonable that we should be circumspect about allowing it to convince us unless it is exceedingly well-grounded. The kind of allegations made in the Channel 4 series, mostly with very flimsy foundation, must be weighed against the faith as a whole. In the way in which you would look with some care at an accusation against a friend, since if it were proved true it would mean the end of your friendship.

The attempt to forge a new version of Biblical authority in place of the old is doomed to failure, not because we await some bright new theory, but because it must somehow get round the rules of logic. To this we return soon.

How do we face challenges to Scripture?

We have identified two areas of conflict: the reliability of the Bible's version of things, and the authority of its

teaching (whether about God or about ethics and human behaviour). They are big subjects, but we mention them only in passing to lay down principles.

First, *historicity*. The first thing that we need to remember is that not everything in the Bible is meant to be taken literally. There are, for example, many poems in Scripture, and if something was plainly meant by the man who wrote it down to be taken in a certain way, there is no virtue in our trying to twist what he says and make it into something else. If he wrote a poem, or told a parable, then so be it. Some, at least, of our problems may be resolved like this: we must have in clear focus what the Bible intends us to believe.

Secondly, we must remember that there is always someone, somewhere who can answer what is alleged, and it need not be you or I. If on the screen, or in the pulpit, there were an evangelical scholar face to face with the man who suggested that the Bible is wrong, he would not be struck dumb. He would have faced the problem before, and he would have a way of interpreting the passage which would make sense of it in some other way. Let me give you a little example of what I mean. It seems to me that, whenever I have confronted a difficulty in Scripture, I have always been able to find someone very knowledgeable, in person or in a book, who has made sense of things. The example is this. In the Channel 4 series it was said that there were "remarkable discrepancies" in the resurrection narratives, and that a particularly blatant example was who met the women at the tomb. The Gospels say it was one man, two men, one angel, and two angels — four versions, and each was duly illustrated by a line drawing of men (looking very unangelic) and angels (looking like mermaids with wings) in appropriate quantity. Surely, we were left to feel, it was an open and shut case. Well, wait a minute. What if one Mary reported she had seen a man, and the other that she had noticed two, and thought they were angels (since angels are messengers from God, and do not need to look like large fairies)? If *two* men are present, it is true to say that *one* is also. If *men* are present supernaturally giving messages plainly from God, it is true also to describe them as *angels* (though also as men, since they are in the form of men). We give that as an example, since so did Channel 4. They gave it to illustrate how dreadfully contradictory the accounts are, but it rather seems to serve as a good example of the fact that there is always another side to the story.

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This brings us to a point of principle. Harmony — the fitting together of things that seem to be at odds — is all part of the historian's craft. His use of it, when he faces sources that, on the surface, tell different tales (and any independent accounts of a given event will do just that) will be in proportion to his confidence in their veracity. If he deals with sources that he suspects are unreliable, he will be happy to conclude that here, and also there, one (or both, or all) can be discounted, as dishonest or ill-informed, and the problem thereby solved. But if he has other reasons (perhaps from evidence of extreme reliability elsewhere, or from knowledge of the character or ability of the writers) — other reasons to give the sources a very high evaluation, then he will not adopt such a course of action readily, and may never do so, even if that leaves him with unresolved difficulties of some kind. And so it is with the

Christian in his use of Scripture. He comes to it with good reason to trust what it says, and to leave difficulties that are hard to resolve until further evidence or reflection resolves them. He need never — rightly, not wrongly — jump to the conclusion that the text is guilty of error.

Secondly, *authority*. We come here to the crux of the matter. This question, indeed, flows out of the last, since the peculiar quality of the Biblical history leaves us in the position of being unable to separate Biblical statements about what happened from the authority of the Bible to teach us about God and his will (theology and ethics). For the warp of Biblical history is interwoven with its theological woof. Who is God? We receive no systematic definition of him, but are told that he is the "God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob", in other words, the God whose being is evident in his dealings with these men: in other words, it is the history that defines him, and any alteration in the history, however slight, will alter the Biblical representation of God. This throws into sharp focus the kind of ill-informed criticism of the evangelical view of the Bible which would suggest that we are obsessed with details of the biblical history, for in the nature of the Biblical revelation unless the history be true then it presents a distorted picture of God.

And, against the charge that we are obsessed not merely with the history but with the detail of the whole of Scripture (and therefore unable to come to an accommodation with more secular notions when it comes to sexual morality, or church order, or whatever else happens to be in dispute), the problem is that in the nature of the case any religious authority must be total or it ceases to serve as a religious authority at all.

That is, we have no independent means of verifying anything religious that the Bible says. We have no independent means of attaining religious truth elsewhere. When it says that God is x, or y, we cannot confirm or deny this. When it says that God forbids z, we have no means of checking up on it. Either what the Bible says is *because the Bible says it* to be received, or the fact that the Bible says something does not attach to that thing any special authority at all. When someone makes appeal to a Biblical text (like "love your neighbour") it is intended to carry special force with us — not just the force of advice from the writer or speaker concerned. But what force? The force and authority that derive from the presence of the text in the Bible, in this case on the lips of Jesus. But that is true only so long as it is equally true that every statement in the Bible carries the same authority. And it will not do to allow that *most*, or even, at the end of the day, *all but one*, of the statements are authoritative, but one is not. Just as it will not do for a child normally, or almost always, to do what his parent says. If his doing what he is told depends in the last analysis not upon the fact that it is on the authority of the parent that the statement comes, but on his assessment of the reasonableness or wisdom of the statement, then it is not true that the authority of the parent has been limited or curtailed. The authority of the parent has been abandoned, and in its place he has been permitted to make proposals which will then be evaluated by the child, with whom it resides whether or not they shall be accepted.

This is the precise position in which the church finds itself today. There is a high regard for the Bible, and for its assertions about God and man, many or most of which are believed (though in different permutations, depending ever upon the predilections of the believer). But the decision whether or not a given statement about God or about man is to be accepted does not lie with the Bible and therefore the statements which are believed, just as those which are not, do not derive their authoritative status from their presence in the Bible. Any authoritative status is

conferred upon them or denied to them by the believing church or the believing individual. The presence or absence of the statements in Scripture, the nominal authority still of any and every church and any and every professed Christian, has become (from a logical point of view) incidental. The fact that something is in the Bible does not confer authority on it unless authority is conferred by the believer.

Drawing things out in this way, albeit rather tediously, highlights the dilemma of the church today. The question it faces is not, Can we believe the Bible today? It is, do we have any choice other than to believe the *whole* Bible, if we desire, or feel it necessary (because of those other things which we wish to believe, for example, that God is love, that he forgives sinners, that he will raise the dead) to believe any part of it? For the credit of any statement and its claim to our belief is no different from the credit of any other and its own claim.

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For, of course, the Bible is not one among many things that Christians believe. Its inspiration and authority are not on a par with beliefs about the Sabbath and about baptism, and other controverted questions. Our beliefs about the Bible are the foundation-stone of all our other beliefs. If in any particular the Bible misleads us, then every Christian conviction founded upon its testimony must also be held suspect. And yet if the Bible is to be taken as a whole, and its religion accepted without reservation, there is no option to that which we call the evangelical one, and the rest of the world "Fundamentalism". For this is the religion taught by the book, and, above all else, the reason that for a century and more churchmen of every hue have laboured to sunder our notion of the revealed religion of God and this book with which historically the church has identified that revelation. For if the two can be forced apart, if somehow we can have a revealed religion without the propositions of the Scripture, then the believing subject and the believing community — the individual, his church, the committees and working parties of the church — to them can devolve the authority to divine what is true and what is not.

So, we conclude, if we would be Christians, we have no option. The Bible is the starting-point of all that we believe, and the reason why in the church at large there is not *one* theology but *a hundred* is plain. The Bible, given to mediate the will of God and through which the rule of God is exercised over the minds of men, has been set aside. In pleading for its restoration at the heart of the life of the church we plead not merely for what was original, not merely for what we have proved in experience to be the chief point of contact between God and us, but for it to be accorded that status which alone will make sense of the way in which we all of us, evangelical and other, make use of and make appeal to the Scriptures. For the logic of Biblical authority, or the logic of its subordination to the authority of the individual or the church, will not leave us alone, but assert itself the more in the passage of time. We have no option, if we would be Christians, than to believe the Bible today; but neither, as they must be told, have all who claim the name of Christian. Our doctrine of Scripture is no evangelical oddity, it is the doctrine which alone can underpin the use of Scripture by the whole church.