

The Hebrew Scriptures:
an inspired guide
for conscience



1

Saint Paul does not need my support for his assessment of the gift that the Hebrew Scriptures are to us, when he reminds Timothy: ‘how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus’.

He goes on to say: ‘All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work’(2Timothy 3:15-17).

2

1. Literary Form

‘In order to discover the sacred authors’ intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking, and narrating then current’(Catholic Catechism n.110).

Surely an inspired author can give expression to the insights given him in prayer by writing factual accounts, poetry, epic, myth, historical novels, comedy, etc etc. All these are ways of communicating truth.

3

2. Read through Jesus’ eyes

‘From childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus’ (2Timothy 3:15)

For Paul, the words ‘through faith in Christ Jesus’ are essential. He had treasured the Hebrew Scriptures before he came to know Jesus. It was when he came to know Jesus that he realised that he had read them without proper critique. He came to what is an essential insight to those who wish to learn from Jesus, for Jesus got to the heart of Judaism. In the words of his followers, he ‘brought these writings to their fulfilment’, their full flowering.

4

We hear Jesus saying: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you'(Matthew 5).

We hear him telling those whose responsibility it was to teach the sacred writings: 'Go and learn the meaning of the words'(Matthew 9:13).

- We read what was understood to be God's ruling in the treatment of lepers, then we watch Jesus embracing a leper.
- We read the psalmist promising never to eat with sinners, then we see Jesus doing just that.

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- We know how central the Sabbath was and is to Jews. It was important too to Jesus, but he did not allow the customs attached to it to stop him from loving people in their need. John tells us that it was because he expressed his healing love, even on the sabbath that they started persecuting him (see John 5:16).
- We read the strong condemnation and punishment of adultery, expressed as an injunction from God, then we hear Jesus say 'do not sin again', but prefacing it with 'I do not condemn you'(John 8).

Examples could be multiplied.

6

We suffer from personal blind spots. Groups of people can share blind spots. Whole cultures can as well.

May I suggest three key failures of insight that the culture that produced the Hebrew Scriptures suffered from. They concern their way of conceiving God, and affect morality and the formation of conscience.

1. Monotheism
2. Israel's enemies are God's enemies
3. God controls the world

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My point in stressing this is that when it comes to guidance for human behaviour, we should not expect the Hebrew Scriptures to provide a completely satisfactory answer.

They may not have asked the questions we have learned to ask.

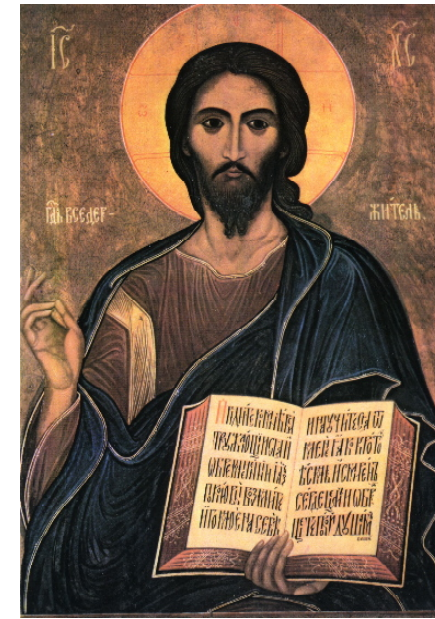
Their radar screen was necessarily less developed.

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If we go to the trouble to go and learn what it was that the authors were saying, and what it was that inspired the faithful community to treasure, preserve and hand on these inspired words, we will surely expect to be helped, but we must read these words with the eyes of Jesus, and in the light of the truths that the Spirit of Jesus, working through the seekers for truth in the last two thousand years, has brought us to.

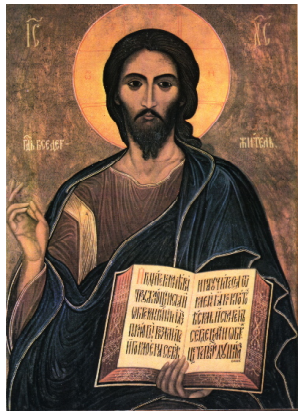
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The New Testament:
an inspired guide
for conscience



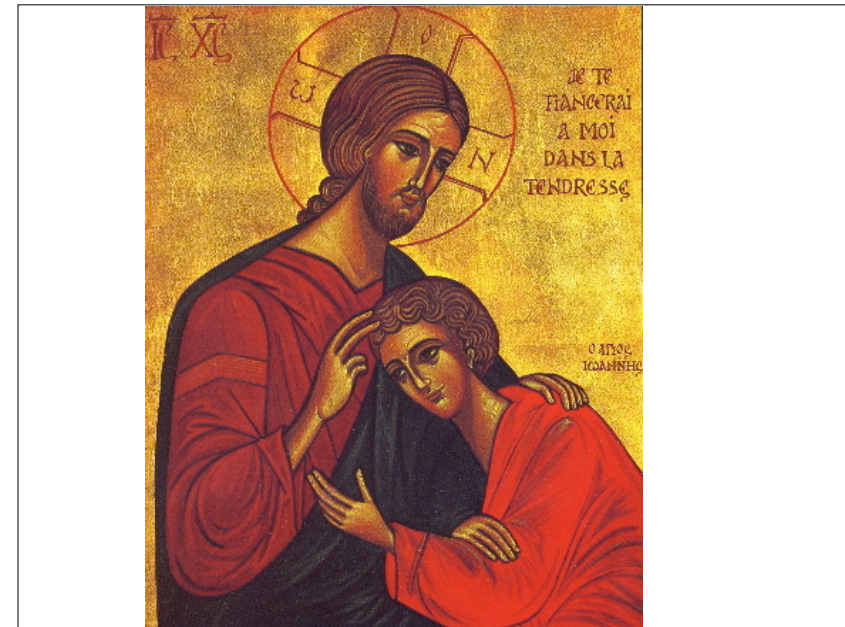
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The New Testament has its origins in the religious experience of Jesus' disciples.



'We declare to you what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life ... We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.' (1 John 1:1).

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Hans Urs von Balthasar

‘While for an older theology Scripture was seen to be God’s Word to the Church, for more recent theology it is primarily the expression of faith’s reflection on historical revelation. It is possible to see both things in their unity.’

‘The Bible is a word from the ineffable ... so one must not pay attention one-sidedly to the form of the Bible as word, but rather above all to the ‘approach-roads’ to God indicated by the Bible.’

14

Raymond Brown (Theological Studies 1981)

‘The Bible is the literary objectification of a faith that is a response to revelation’(page 9).

He goes on to define Scripture as: ‘divine revelation to which human beings have given expression in words’(page 13).

15

Ray Collins (NJBC, 1033)

‘Though canonised by long usage, “word of God” should not be used of the Scriptures without further hermeneutical reflection ...

A distance is to be maintained conceptually between the scriptural expression and the self-communication of God in itself ...

Theologically it is less confusing to state that the Scriptures witness to the word of God.’

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For those of us who have come to see Jesus of Nazareth as God's 'Word-made-flesh' – the human incarnation of God, the revelation of what God is really like and what God wants to reveal to us of how we are to live so as to be open to God's grace and 'live to the full' (John 10:10), the New Testament is, of course, a treasure, for it expresses how those who knew Jesus saw him, in words that the community recognised as true and continued to want to hear when they assembled, because they found them inspiring.

17

Marriage

Paul's wonderful words on marriage in his Letter to the Ephesians were addressing marriage as it was then lived. Speaking of marriage in the light of Jesus' love, Paul's words had the capacity to revolutionise the institution of marriage and the relationships and values that were customary then. We do Paul, and the truth, and married people today, a major injustice to presume that he would say exactly the same things about marriage today in a world in which male-female relationships are, in some aspects, very different.

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Often we have to work hard to know what they understood by the words they used. The New Testament is constantly being quoted out of context and without the necessary study. But even though inspired by the person, life and words of Jesus, and even when we know what was being said, the words are still human words written from within the world-view of the First Century, answering the questions they were asking and connecting, obviously very successfully, with their experiences.

18

Homosexuality

Paul has some strong things to say about homosexual behaviour. In 1Corinthians 6:9 and 1Timothy 1:10 he mentions it without any discussion or background context. Only in Romans 1 and then only in three short verses does he dwell on the matter as an example of the general human condition from which Jesus redeems us. To grasp Paul's point it is necessary to discover exactly what behaviour he was condemning. This is not an easy assignment, nor does it absolve us from examining this matter in the light of all that modern psychology has revealed to us.

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Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993)

‘The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church’

‘The exegete need not put absolute value in something which simply reflects limited human understanding’(page 94).

21

Fundamentalism

‘The basic problem with fundamentalist interpretation is that, refusing to take into account the historical character of biblical revelation, it makes itself incapable of accepting the full truth of the Incarnation itself ... It refuses to admit that the inspired Word of God has been expressed in human language and that this Word has been expressed, under divine inspiration, by human authors possessed of limited capacities and resources’(1993, page 73).

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