

Be Thou My Wisdom

How the Bible came to be and what it means to us now

Rev. Dr. Harry Eberts

First Presbyterian Church of Santa Fe

February 7, 2021

Mark 1:40-45

⁴⁰A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” ⁴¹Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” ⁴²Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. ⁴³After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, ⁴⁴saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” ⁴⁵But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Reading the Bible is complex

- 66 books
- Written over span of 1100 years, 1000 BC to 100 AD
- Even those written earliest were recording events that took place 750 years and more before the actual writing occurred
- Includes a multitude of forms of writing—poems, hymns, law codes, creeds, parables, folk tales about great people, histories, genealogies, diaries, liturgies for use in worship, letters written to church groups for study and instruction, personal letters dispatched to friends.
- Written by and about people who lived in a vast variety of cultural situations.

- Scripture was written in two basic languages, Hebrew and Greek, used chiefly by scholars and which are unfamiliar to the rest of us.
- The texts of the compositions used for reading and translating are not the original ones. Our earliest New Testament text dates from the middle of the second century AD.
- There are endless variations given for the spelling of words and for form of the various verb-endings , and alternate texts are offered for some passages.

- The various translations made into English also compounds the confusion.
- King James Version—probably the most literal and language is more suited for 17th century than our own. It also was translated by King James, and those in power, and reflects such a bias.
- The Revised Standard Version tried to update the King James Version and was successful in some places and not in others.
- The New Revised Standard Version tried to be inclusive and we lost some important distinctions (“brothers and sisters” when “brothers” was the name of a group who followed Jesus).

- The Good News Bible, The New English Bible, and the translations of J.B. Phillips attempted to catch the spirit of the Scripture rather than the literal meaning.
- The Message is a contemporary translation that brings scripture into our modern world but can lose some majesty and sacredness.
- The Living Bible chose the theologically most conservative position at every point.
- The New International Version is used widely by the evangelical church as it also chooses the more conservative translations.

Ordination Question:

Adopted in 1967

Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?

Implications

- The Word of God is Jesus Christ
- To know Christ we must know the Scriptures
- These writings are unique
- They are authoritative
- The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ
- No Christian tradition has all the truth about Jesus Christ

When we look at Scripture we ask:

1. Who wrote it, and why?
2. What was the intent and meaning of the words in the text in their original language and setting?
3. What were the issues that confronted those involved in the scriptural event before us and what were the answers they shaped in response to those issues?
4. What does this text tell us about the working in human life of the Holy Spirit of God in Jesus Christ?
5. What is the Holy Spirit of God in Jesus Christ saying to us today through this text?

Principles of reading Scripture

- Look for larger themes across Scripture
- Do not take words or phrases out of context
- Know the original definition of words in Hebrew and Greek
- Do not look for Scripture to verify a pre-conceived belief but let scripture inform you.
- Stories that do not back up the prevailing understanding of Jesus or of God, or seems out of place, may be more original.
- Beware of translations—they all have a bias.
- Other suggestions?



Confession of 1967

The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ.

The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men and women, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written.

They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current.

- The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding.
- As God has spoken God's word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that God will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world.

Mark 1:40-45

⁴⁰A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” ⁴¹Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” ⁴²Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. ⁴³After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, ⁴⁴saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” ⁴⁵But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

The Canon

- Standard by which certain books were judged acceptable or non-acceptable for inclusion into the Scriptures.
- Standard for faith itself. We turn to these books to become fully cognizant of the Christian way of life.
- Authoritative catalogue of books which in themselves constituted the standard for belief and practice.

Begins with the Book of Deuteronomy in 621 BC

- Up to this time there was no canon in Israel.
- Found by priests in the Temple, purported to be from Moses himself, and used by King Josiah as the basis for his reform of both the nation and the religion of Judah.
- It was the second definition of canon: a particular piece of writing became the standard for the way people should practice their faith and life.

Second step: compiled during the Exile

- Leaders taken to Babylon took Deuteronomy with them, re-edited it, and added other writings to it.
- Added Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, and I and II Kings
- Added some of the Prophets who supported their own positions or who were spiritual fathers of their group: Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah of Jerusalem.
- During this time, a good portion of the present Old Testament was brought together.

The Priestly Movement

- Accepted the Deuteronomistic school but edited Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy and put them as a frontispiece to the work of the Deuteronomist.
- Began editing the song book of Israel into the Book of Psalms
- By the time Judah left Babylon to return to their homeland, they took with them the major books of law and history, the book for their worship, and some of the prophecies of pre-exilic and exilic times.

The Prophets

- Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah were drawn from the Deuteronomic underground.
- Ezekiel was one of the leading priests
- Haggai and Zechariah represented the intense desire of later priests to rebuild the Temple when the people returned to Jerusalem and were a bridge between the priestly movement and the subsequent work of the Chronicler.

Jeremiah

- A different strand of prophetic thought.
- Stood in determined opposition to the Deuteronomistic movement—it was too mechanical in its approach to faith, a “covenant written on stone.”
- His prophecies were the possession of the Jewish community that had remained in Jerusalem while its leadership had gone into exile, and the poems of Lamentations, the possessions of the same group, became attached to Jeremiah’s work.

The work of the Chronicler

- After the exile the work of the Chronicler brought the history of Israel up-to-date.
- These books—First and Second Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah—seemed to round out the Deuteronomic-Priestly collection and were soon added to the standard history.

Other writings were added

- Job and Ecclesiastes, one life-affirming and the other life-denying, each in its own way was representative of philosophic changes taking place in the scribal schools of the Mideast.
- Ruth spoke against the exclusiveness of the post-exilic community by pointing out that this ancestress of David was not herself a pure Jew.
- Jonah also underscored God's care for those who were not of the Jewish faith.
- Esther took another position, showing how God confounded the enemies of the Jews in the feast of Purim.

Apocalyptic Literature

- Daniel began a whole new genre of literature in the canon: it was an apocalyptic book—“revealing what is hidden”—and its odd imagery proved an acceptable methodology for presenting besieged peoples a coded message which, if spoken plainly, would have been unacceptable to the powers then ruling the land of Judah.

- This explosion of literary production, reaching out to include many kinds of literature and many lines of thought, caused a problem: which writings should be normative for Jewish faith and which not.

To learn more . . .

“Gateway to God’s Word”—on our website

“For the Bible Tells Me So”—begins February 17th, 10:30 am, for seven weeks.

The debate over what writings are sacred and inspired, in Jesus' day

- Samaritans claimed only the five books of the Law were authoritative for faith and practice.
- Sadducees accepted only the first five books of Moses—the Torah, the Law—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy--as sacred and inspired.
- Pharisees were broader and added the Prophets (they included the histories under this label) and the Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Esther, and Ruth).
- Scribes of the Qumran community agreed with the Pharisees.
- Jesus agreed. He read and studied the broadest portions of the inspired writings in the deepest possible way. Broad and Deep.

New Testament

- Marcion in Rome (150 AD) declared that only Luke and the Letters of Paul that did not mention Jewish practices should be read.
- Tatian, in Syria (160 AD) chose four gospels
- Origen (244), only these four, because no one disputes them
- Eusebius put a list of books together that was confirmed by Alexander of Alexandria (367), Augustine (419), and the Catholic Church in 1443 after the Synod of Florence.
- Luther accepted all except James and possibly Revelation
- Presbyterians accepted these books in the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1647.

Final thoughts

Ignatius of Antioch, d. 110 ad: “The gospel took priority over the Prophets” (he meant by this the Old Testament). The prophets were holy but they were subordinate to the gospel.

Calvin sought the original meaning of the text and set out to reform all of life in accord with that meaning.

Barmen Declaration: “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, which we must hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.”

Final words and phrases to guide us

- Salvation—Latin *salus*, which means *health, wholeness, integrity*
- Glory to God—*a human being fully alive* (Ignatius)
- Believe—*What we give our heart to*
- Church—*to be called out to an assembly in response to a crisis in the community and the cosmos*

Mark 1:40-45

⁴⁰A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” ⁴¹Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” ⁴²Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. ⁴³After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, ⁴⁴saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” ⁴⁵But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.