



## RELISHING THE WORD

The Bible ought to be studied, but where do we begin? Not all are natural students. Imagine taking a friend to the local library and suggesting as many as sixty-six of the books to read and digest. Your friend might be a university professor or one of its undergraduates, or, alternatively, someone with little time or patience for reading and unused to study. However, when it comes to the Christian life, an examination of the Scriptures is essential to each believer and cannot be stressed too often.

### THE UNWILLING MULE?

First of all, the novice student of the Word, if regenerate, should realise that, contrary to the disinterested visitor to the library, he or she has within God the Spirit testifying of Jesus the Christ to the soul and warming the heart by divine grace. There is no reason, then, why he or she should be dragged to the Word of God like a stubborn mule. For the Christian the Scriptures possess an aura “Christ-less eyes” do not possess. To ignore them is indeed to ignore Christ.

Some, with admirable eagerness, begin the great adventure by attempting to plod their way through the text, from the first chapter of Genesis to the last verse of Revelation. This method has many advocates, but few successes. All is well until the way is obscured by lengthy genealogies or obscure technicalities. Then the mind wearies, the eyelids close, and the enthusiasm wanes.

### THE LIVING SCRIPTURES

Without doubt, before the contents of the sixty-six books can be fully appreciated they must first fascinate the reader; a fascination gleaned by observing the greatness of God, and tracing his activities through the historical accounts recorded in his Word.

How thrilling is the journey! From the armchair, one can “watch” Noah’s ark being built (Gen. 6-9), and understand the significance of the project; “escort” Abram (Abraham) and his family from Ur of the Chaldees to Canaan (Gen. 12-13), and appreciate the reasons for their going; or “accompany” Moses and the Hebrews out of Egypt (Exod. 13-14), and “share” their amazement at what they had witnessed of God’s judgments upon their enemy (Exod. 7-12).

The reader can “tremble” with the Hebrews before Sinai at the sight of God’s presence and the giving of the Law (Exod. 19-20). We can even “ascend” the Mount with Moses and his companions (Exod. 24)! Then again, why not “wander” the wilderness “observing” miracles along the way to the Promised Land (Exod.-Deut.), or “admire” it from the heights of Nebo (Deut. 34:1-4)?

Having done that, “rejoice” with Joshua and his people as they triumphantly enter the land (Josh. 3), then “watch on” as the tribes claim their inheritance (Josh. 13-21). Why not “fight” Goliath alongside David (1 Sam. 17), and “mingle” with his men in their flight from the aggressive Saul (1 Sam. 18-31)? Or perhaps the reader would prefer to “bask” in the glory of Solomon’s kingdom (1 Kings 4-5), “meeting” him in his writings (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, etc), and “marveling” at the temple he had built [1 Kings 6-8].

The reader is not done. Why not “feel” the oppressive atmosphere on Mount Carmel as Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal? “Join” him in his solitude (1 Kings 18-19), or “stand” in Ahab’s court with the faithful Micaiah (2 Chron. 18). Why not “Shudder” with those who first heard the prophets denouncing sin and demanding repentance in the sight of God (Ezek. 18:30, etc), impressed by their ability to foretell the coming of the Messiah (Is. 7:14, etc)?

It will take a long time to examine all 332 of the prophecies, but the conscience will be stirred and the appetite whetted for more. Wonder at them in Eden (Gen. 3:15), in the desert (Deut. 18:15), in David’s court (2 Sam. 7:16), and during the exile (Ezek. 34:23)—even from the enemy’s mouth (Numb. 24:15-17). Thrill to the way the divine finger had beckoned succeeding generations of God’s people towards the location from where the Messiah would arise; gradually the mystery (Deut. 29:29; Dan. 2:47), the “hidden wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:7), was unveiled (Rom. 16:25, 26). The finger pointed to the country of Canaan (Gen. 12:1-3), and in that land to the territory of Judah (Gen. 49:10). Centuries passed before the little town of Bethlehem came into the spotlight (Mic. 5:2). Therein stood a lodging house and alongside a stable, in which was found a squalid manger (Luke 2:15, 16).

### BOLD BRUSH STROKES!

Readers of Scripture will find themselves entranced by the magnetic quality of divine activity, God moving magnificently through each generation. History is truly his-story: Before Christ and *Anno Domini* (in the year of our Lord) , not BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era).



Nothing, and no man, can thwart God's purposes (Ps. 2:7-11). He reigns supreme over the universe (Ps. 148:5, 6); he raises up (Exod. 9:16), casts down (Rom. 9:17, 18), and shows mercy upon whom he desires (Exod. 33:19). The reader may not like what he or she discovers, and the unregenerate will grind their teeth (John 6:65, 66), but fairness will admit to the grandeur of what is read (Ps. 139).

The Old Testament is a remarkable canvas. It reveals, not only God's power, but his compassion (Hos. 11:1-4). For Israel, he is the Commander in the field of battle (Exod. 15:1). When his people sin he is seen handing them over to the enemy (Judg. 6:1, 2), yet the divine punishment enhances the confidence of Israel's leaders in their God (Jer. 25:8-11). He may be powerful to punish, but equally, he is sovereign to save (Ezek. 37:1-14)!

When the prophets blew the trumpets and rolled the drums heralding the glory of God they did so from the standpoint of what had been revealed to them from heaven, they were not concerned with platitudes, nor were they interested in merely mouthing the dictates of dogma. For them the essence of preaching was not *I think*, but *I know*; not *I feel*, but "Thus saith the Lord" (Ezek. 7:1, 2). Nobody can doubt, for instance, Jeremiah's confidence in God: "But the Lord is the true God, he is the living God, and an everlasting King: at his wrath the earth shall tremble, and the nations shall not be able to abide his indignation. [Jer. 10:10]"

Were Jeremiah to walk the streets of modern times he would be greeted with the ribaldry invariably meted out to text-bearing sandwich-board men. Most of our contemporaries find such "intolerance" intolerable! Jeremiah's declaration that God actually exists is enough to make them smirk, but when his messengers insist he is unique, and does not tolerate rivals (Is. 42:8), it is enough to make them squeal! Unperturbed, the prophets unfurled their banners for all to see. God is ALIVE, a King ruling his creatures, and he SPEAKS; nobody can speak louder than he (Jer. 10:5).

In today's climate, one fears most pulpits would be barred to the prophets (the apostles too). Equally, chairs of theology in the world's leading universities would not be offered to them, their CV's would not be adequate enough to impress, for their only claim is that they had heard God speak!

## INSPIRATION OR EXPIRATION ?

The prophets' conviction, and their apparent "intolerance", stemmed from their experiences of the living God. An understanding of this is essential if the authority and relevance of the Scriptures is to be appreciated. Scholarship has always gone astray when it treats God's Word as merely the words of men. Stated John Calvin, "Whoever . . . wishes to profit in the Scriptures, let him first of all lay down as a settled point, that the Law and the Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men, but dictated by the Holy Spirit. [Commentary: 2 Tim. 3:16]"

In this context, the word "dictated" is nowadays much misunderstood and has to be defined. The human authors of the sixty-six books were not robots sitting impassively waiting for instructions, a concept foreign to the evangelical view of inspiration, nor did Calvin intend this meaning. By "dictation" they meant "that the authors wrote word for word what God intended" [J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, 79]. Great man though he undoubtedly was, Calvin had no idea how to use a typewriter ne'er alone a computer!

We speak of the prophets and the New Testament writers as being "inspired"; indeed, Calvin was expounding Paul's well known phrase, "All scripture is given by *inspiration* of God" (2 Tim. 3:16). The word used is *theopneustos* ("God breathed"). Here lies the difference between the "inspiration" of the prophets and apostles, and the "inspiration" of the artist.

The latter "breathes" his natural gift *into* his work, but the writers of the Scriptures did not possess any genius through which God so "breathed" that their authorship *became* his Word. Rather, in *theopneustos* God "breathed" *out* the Scriptures so that they are his Word. For this reason, the Bible is called the Word of God [Matt. 4:4], coming to us through the generations from his "mouth" (Deut. 8:3). He spoke, and in doing so, communicated his mind and heart, or as much of it as he desired to reveal (Deut. 29: 29).

The manner of this communication is enshrouded in glorious mystery. This Alan M. Stibbs seeks to explain:

It seems in harmony with the revealed truth of God to suggest that a similarity in principle prevails between the manner of the birth of the incarnate Word of God and the method of the composition of the written Word of God. Scripture is obviously the work of human writers, and yet it is still more the product and result of a special and super-normal activity of the



Spirit. So we may rightly believe it to possess a corresponding perfection.  
(*The Witness of Scripture to its Inspiration*, 111).

Revelation then, as opposed to mere opinion, is the key that unlocks the door to the understanding of the Bible. Treat the sixty-six books as merely the result of human effort, forgetting the word *theopneustos*, and the Scriptures cease to possess any more relevance than the works of Shakespeare or Dickens.

### THE NEW TESTAMENT REQUIRING THE OLD

When Jesus and the apostles referred to the Scriptures they were of course referring to what is called the Old Testament (John 10:35; 17:17; 1 Peter 1:10-12). The modern practice, therefore, of publishing the New Testament by itself is not a good idea. Although one appreciates the economic reasons for doing so, it creates the impression that the New Testament can stand without reference to the Old. Nothing could be further from the truth; the two stand back-to-back like bookends, the one arising from the other.

There can be no understanding of the Gospels and Epistles without constantly referring to the Old Testament. As scholar F. F. Bruce states: "The Old Testament is to the New as the root is to the fruit. It is a grave mistake to think that the fruit of the Spirit in Christianity will grow and ripen better if the plant is severed from its roots in the Old Covenant" (*The Books and the Parchments*, 81).

There is a wonderful unity running through the Scriptures. The sixty-six books were written within a span of many centuries, with the writers invariably separated geographically, chronologically, linguistically and even socially. For example: royalty (David, Isaiah, Daniel, and possibly Zephaniah), priests (Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Zechariah, Habakkuk, Paul), and working men (Amos, the apostles and Luke the doctor). Yet they all had a common message to proclaim, the great plan of salvation. It was formed in the mind of God and not in a committee!

### THE GLORIOUS MESSAGE

In the Old Testament, God is revealed as the Redeemer of his chosen people and, within the framework of the covenant he made with them (Exod. 24:8), as merciful (Josh. 24:1) and protective (Exod. 7-14). Throughout the old

covenant, via a progressive revelation, signposts were erected pointing to the eventual arrival of the Messiah (Is. 11:1-12), who would enter this world in order to save God's elect (Ezek. 36:25-27). A new covenant was to be established (Jer. 31:31-34) with the elect from both the Jew and Gentile ethnicities. They were to be gathered like wheat into the "garner" of the everlasting kingdom of God (Ephes. 2:11-17).

It happened. All 332 of the Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled. The Messiah (Hebrew), or Christ (Greek), entered the world through a virgin's womb (Matt. 1:22-25). He lived the perfect life in obedience to the just demands of the law of God (Exod. 20:1-17; Gal. 4:4, 5). He was the sin-bearer (2 Cor. 5:19-21 for the "sheep." For them he died (John 10:1-18) and arose from the dead. In doing so, he illustrated that they had truly been justified in the sight of God (Rom. 4:25). Thereafter, he ascended back to the Father to receive the glory due to him (Luke 24:50, 51; John 17:24). He is yet to return to this world at the close of the age (Matt. 25:31).

Every major event in our Lord's ministry was foretold centuries in advance. Jesus himself recognised this fact and expounded on the theme in what was a remarkable Bible study following his resurrection (Luke 24:45). He covered a wide expanse of divine revelation: "Moses and *all* the prophets" [Luke 24:27]; that is, the books of Genesis to Deuteronomy, as well as the prophetic ministry from the various periods of Jewish history:

- *The period of the monarchy*: An overview of the books of Samuel, Nathan, Gad, Elijah, Elisha, etc; 1 and 2 Samuel to 1 Kings 11; 1 Chronicles to 2 Chronicles 11.
- *The Assyrian invasion (BC 722)*: Inclusion of the books of Jonah, Amos, Hosea (to Israel); Joel, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum (to Judah); 1 Kings 12 to 2 Kings 19, 2 Chronicles 12 to 30.
- *The Babylonian invasion (BC 605)*: The books of Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Obadiah (or earlier); 2 Kings 20 to 25; 2 Chronicles 32 to 36.
- *The post-exilic period*: Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

Yes, Jesus delved into "*all* the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Even if not all the Old Testament Scriptures without exception, certainly all without distinction, bringing to light "the things concerning himself". Namely, that he was (and is!):



- *Emmanuel*: Is. 7:14; 9:6.
- *The Suffering Servant*: Is. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.
- *The Branch*: Is. 4:2; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12.
- *The Son of Man*: Ps. 8:4; Ezek. 2:1, etc; Dan. 7:13, 14.
- *The Son of David*: 2 Sam. 7:12, 13; Ps. 2:7, 8.
- *The Star and Sceptre*: Gen. 49:10; Numb. 24:15-17; Ps. 45:6; Is. 14:12; Amos 1:5, 8.
- *Shiloh*: Gen. 49:10; Josh. 18:1; Is. 9:6.
- *The Royal Bridegroom*: Ps. 45:2, 6-8, 11, 13-15; Cant. 4:10.
- *The Cornerstone*: Ps. 118:22, 23; Is. 28:16; Dan. 2:34-44.
- *The Angel of Jehovah/Yahweh*: Gen. 16:7-13; 18:1-16; 19:1; 22:15; Exod. 3:1-6; Josh. 5:13-15; Judg. 6:11-24; 13:1-22)

Equally, how enthralled the amazed apostles must have been when Jesus in all likelihood examined the messianic role from three different angles.

- *The divine*: “Lord” (Is. 40:3; Mal. 4:5, 6), “Mighty God” (Is. 9:6, 7), “Immanuel” (Is. 7:14), “Eternal Son” (Ps. 2:7), “Eternal King” (Ps. 45:1, 6), “Unchanging Creator” (Ps. 102:25-27), “Divine Ruler” (Ps. 110:1), “Ascended Lord” (Ps. 68:18).
- *The human (“The Seed . . .”)*: “. . . of the Woman” (Gen. 3:15), “. . . of Abraham” (Gen. 12:1, 3; 22:18; 26:4), “. . . of Isaac” (Gen. 21:12; 26:24), “. . . of Jacob” (Gen. 28:14), “. . . of Judah” (Gen. 49:10), “. . . of Jesse” [Is.11:1], “. . . of David” (2 Sam. 7:12, 13; 1 Kings 9:5; Ps. 89:3, 4, 35-37)—the birth (Is. 7:14), and the birthplace (Mic. 5:2).
- *The vicarious suffering*: Jesus’ infamous betrayal (Ps. 41:9; Zech. 13:6), unusual silence (Is. 53:7), cruel scourging (Is. 50:6; 53:5), crowning of thorns (Is. 53:14), anticipated crucifixion (Ps. 22:16; Zech. 12:10), humiliation at Calvary (Ps. 22:1, 7, 8, 18; 69:21).

Clearly, God has spoken. Who can speak more vividly or louder than he?

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