

Scripture as the Human Word of God: Why Faith Contradicts Inerrancy*

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Pop Quiz: If you believe that the Bible is inerrant, then you may be
(a) a Defender of the Faith.
(b) stuck in a Modernist rut.
(c) the Antichrist.

What do we mean when we refer to Scripture as the “word of God”? What does the title of this essay mean, “Scripture as the Human Word of God”? This sounds like an oxymoron or perhaps an attempt to poke holes in the idea of belief in the Bible. But I come to this topic not as a skeptic trying to point out how silly it is to take the Bible seriously. Rather, I come as committed Christian, a life-long member of the Church of Christ. I teach an adult Bible study class every Wednesday night in my home congregation, and I preach and teach in churches of all sorts when called upon.

I come also as an academic, having spent the past twenty-nine years either studying the Bible in various academic institutions or teaching it or both. For the past eleven years I have taught in a seminary where the majority of my students are preparing for ordination as parish ministers. My chief aim in teaching ministers to read the Bible, therefore, is not to destroy their faith (although some have accused me of that over the years) but to get them to put aside the theological assumptions they were taught in Sunday School and focus on what the biblical texts actually say. The object of this essay is to focus on what the Bible might say about how God has spoken, including what we might learn from the Bible about a biblical way to think about Scripture. What do we mean when we refer to Scripture as the “word of God?” The question is not *whether* God speaks but *how* God speaks.¹

In this essay, I shall not rehash old Fundamentalist-Modernist debates about whether scientific or historical analysis “proves” or “disproves” the Bible. The Fundamentalists made a basic error in the 20th century by thinking they could use Modern scientific tools to “prove” the truth of the Bible. Modern science is the best set of tools

available for exploring the physical or natural world. But questions about God are by definition metaphysical or supernatural. Science has no basis either to confirm or to deny questions about God. For that we need theological tools.

Nor do I plan to analyze specific instances of historical errors or contradictions in biblical texts, although if anyone wishes to raise such a question in the subsequent discussion, I'll be happy to entertain it. So if there are skeptics in the audience, I invite them to consider whether I offer a more coherent theological description of the Bible than they may have heard before. But, on the other hand, if there are believers in the audience who have confronted problems of imperfections in the Bible (scientific or historical errors or contradictions between texts), I invite them to consider whether acknowledging such problems means that they must abandon faith, whether Christianity must fall to the ground because the Bible is somehow not "true."

As a way of contemplating Scripture, let us examine a classic text about the Word of God, the prologue to the gospel according to John (John 1:1-18). I do not have space to discuss all the rich nuances that are reflected in this text, but I do wish to suggest three theses that bear on the Christian doctrine of the Word of God. And each of my points has a corollary that bears on our understanding of how God speaks through Scripture.

I. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:14).

My first thesis is that *God's clearest and definitive self-revelation is Jesus*. Key texts that support this thesis from John 1:14 include the following:

John 5:39-40—"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, but it is they that bear witness to me, and you do not come to me that you may have eternal life." Here Jesus, in the midst of a lengthy discussion with Jewish leaders, argues that the Scriptures of Israel (our OT) function in a secondary role to point to Jesus, who is the definitive source of life.

Hebrews 1:1-2—"In many and various ways, God spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he created the world." Here the author of Hebrews invites readers to consider all the ways God communicated to the ancestors of Israel. We might consider God's mighty acts, including creation, the Exodus, and so on. We might consider reports of dreams,

visions, oracles, performed messages, and so on. All these ways are reported in Scripture and are the sources of Scripture. But “in these last days,” at the dawning of the apocalyptic turn of the ages, God has spoken in a new, definitive way, through Jesus Christ.

Galatians 6:14-15—“Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world was crucified to me and I to the world. For neither circumcision is anything nor uncircumcision, but new creation. And those who conduct themselves according to this canon, peace be upon them and mercy upon God’s Israel.” At the end of his letter to the Galatians, Paul takes the pen from his secretary and writes a signature paragraph in his own hand (6:11-18). In order to authenticate the letter, he mentions a key issue from the body of the letter, namely circumcision. I am interested in Paul’s blessing upon those who conduct themselves “according to this canon.” What canon? “Canon” here cannot mean a collection of books that are recognized as authoritative, because most of the NT had not yet been written, much less collected, at the time Paul composed this letter. Christians would not come to a consensus on an official list of books called a “New Testament canon” until the end of the fourth century. Here Paul uses the word *kanon* in its ordinary sense of a measuring stick, what we might call a “yardstick.” Paul’s yardstick is the “cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,” which is itself an apocalyptic declaration of a “new creation.”² For Paul, the story of the cross (and resurrection) of Jesus imposes meaning on the written texts or, to use a modern metaphor unavailable before Copernicus, it is the interpretive lens through which he reads Scripture correctly.

These texts, then, lead us to the corollary that, according to the Bible, *the Word of God is a living person, not a written text.*

II. “There came a man sent from God...that he might bear witness...” (1:6-8).

My second thesis is that *the Bible distinguishes between God’s Word (Jesus) and human witnesses to the Word.* Here John the Baptist is the paradigmatic figure of a human being sent from God. The text stresses that “he himself was *not* the light” (1:8). The Baptist’s confession is, “I am *not* the messiah” (1:20). He points to Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29). Later, when his disciples point out that Jesus is attracting larger crowds than he is, the Baptist responds, “He must increase, and I must decrease” (3:30).

Karl Barth saw clearly the distinction between the Word and the Baptist as human witness to the Word. Commenting on the altarpiece of the church in Isenheim, Germany, painted by Matthias Grünewald in 1515, he said:

In this connexion one might recall John the Baptist in Grünewald's Crucifixion, especially his prodigious index finger. Could anyone point away from himself more impressively and completely (*illum oportet crescere me autem minui*)? And could anyone point more impressively and realistically than here to what is indicated? This is what the Fourth Evangelist wanted to say about this John, and therefore about another John, and therefore quite unmistakably about every "John."³

A copy of this painting hung above Barth's desk, where he could contemplate the figure of John the Baptist with a "prodigious index finger" pointing to Jesus on the cross, and the inscription above John's outstretched hand, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

But one can become transfixed looking at John and fail to notice the one to whom John is pointing. Likewise, some Christians become transfixed looking at the printed words of John the Evangelist rather than the one to whom *he* is pointing. They remind me of how George Carlin used to talk about watching television with your dog. The routine, with appropriate gesticulations, went something like this: You're watching television with your dog. An Alpo commercial comes on, and you point to the screen and say to your dog, "Look! Look! Look at the doggie!" And your dog looks at your hand. "No, look at the doggie." The dog just looks at your hand.

Barth observes the gospel's distinction between eternal Word made flesh and the human witness to the Word, and he extends that also to the author of the gospel, who is also traditionally identified by the name of John, and then to any human being who bears witness to what God has said definitively in Jesus Christ. Thus, human witnesses to the Word include the authors of Scripture and preachers of the Church in every generation. In a similar vein, Luther commented on John the Baptist that,

...we parsons and preachers are in our time what John Baptist was in his time. We let John Baptist's finger point and his voice sound: 'Behold, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world': we deliver John Baptist's sermon, point to Christ and say: This is the one true Saviour whom you should worship and to whom you should cleave. Such preaching must endure to the last day, even though it abide not in all places, all the time, alike, yet must it abide."⁴

Paul could make just such a claim about himself in 2 Corinthians 4:7, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing power might be from God and not from us.” Here Paul comments on his own human limitations as a preacher who faces constant persecution (4:7-15), and in the larger context of the letter as a preacher who has disappointed the Corinthians by his failure to visit them (1:15-23; 7:5-8), who has failed to move them with a tearful letter (2:1-4), who has grieved them with a painful letter (7:9-13), and who has provoked them to mock him: “his letters are weighty and powerful,” they said, “but his personal presence is weak and his speech is no-count” (10:1, 9-10). Against all this, Paul points out that he is a mere human being, an “earthen vessel,” cracked to be sure, but nevertheless the container of a treasure. He urges his readers to distinguish between him as an imperfect messenger and Jesus Christ who is his message, his treasure. The treasure is not worth any less because it is contained in an imperfect vessel.

Paul confronts the Corinthians as a preacher, but the same Paul confronts us through his letters, and we must recognize that his letters, too, are earthen vessels.

To assume that the gospels are flawless just because they tell us about Jesus is to ignore that they sometimes contradict one another in details (was Jesus crucified on Passover, as according to Matthew, Mark and Luke, or the day before Passover, as according to John?), that they sometimes manipulate OT references in order to make their own theological points (Matthew’s manipulation of the genealogy of Jesus), that they are sometimes contradicted by historical sources outside the Bible (Luke’s dating of the census under Quirinius), and so on. Likewise, to assume that Paul’s letters are flawless, just because they are in the Bible, is to ignore that his grammar is occasionally awkward (Gal 2:4-5), that he can misquote an OT story (1 Cor 10:8; cf. Num 25:9), or that in discussing a pastoral question he can admit, “I do not have a command of the Lord, but I am giving my opinion” (1 Cor 7:25). If we ignore all these details, then we risk confusing the vessel with the treasure that the vessel contains.

This point was made clearly by St. Augustine, when he began a series of sermons of the Gospel according to John in the year 416,

(2) I dare to say, my brothers, that perhaps not even John himself said it as it is; but even he spoke as far as he could. For he spoke about God, he, a human being, inspired by God, to be sure, but still a human being. Because he was inspired, he said something; if he had not been inspired, he would have said nothing. Now since he was an inspired human being, he

did not express the entire reality, but said what a human being was capable of saying...⁵

Augustine recognized that, just because John wrote about God, it did not make him omniscient. He was still a human being. This, then, is my second corollary: *whenever we confuse the human writers of the Bible with the Word of God, we risk committing the sin of idolatry* along with all those who, in Paul's words, "exchange the truth of God for a lie and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed forever, amen" (Romans 1:25).⁶

III. "In the beginning was the Word..." (1:1-5).

My third thesis is that *there is more than one way to talk about Jesus*. In this regard, it is instructive to look at how various NT writers tell the Jesus story.

The earliest texts in our NT are the letters of Paul, written in the decades of the 50s and 60s. It is interesting to contemplate that Paul never writes about any miracles of Jesus, nor any parables. He records almost no teachings of Jesus. Nor does he say anything about a miraculous birth. Indeed, he writes to the Romans that the gospel of God is "concerning his son, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead" (1:3-4). What Paul emphasizes repeatedly and consistently is the story of the cross and resurrection. That was what was important about Jesus and the point at which Jesus was declared "Son of God."

Okay, so Jesus was crucified and resurrected. But who was he, and what led up to his crucifixion? The fourth-century historian Eusebius records a tradition going back to the early second century about the origins of the Gospel according to Mark.⁷ When it became apparent that the first generation, the eyewitnesses of Jesus, were growing old, that Peter's stories about Jesus could soon die with him, then around AD 70 (give or take) some Christians in Rome approached his assistant, Mark, who composed for them a notebook of Peter's stories about Jesus. For Mark, the death and resurrection was still the main story, taking up nine of his sixteen chapters and predicted in the earlier chapters. But Mark tells a lot of stories about things Jesus did, plus a few parables, beginning—and this is the significant point for us—with his baptism.

As Mark tells it, the story opens with John the Baptist preaching a revival meeting out in the wilderness, preaching repentance and going on about someone who would come after him. Jesus was a

guy from Galilee who showed up one day to be baptized by John. As he came up out of the water, Jesus had an epiphany, a vision of the Holy Spirit descending upon him like a dove, and he heard a voice from heaven, "You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." For Mark, then, Jesus was special long before his resurrection. At his baptism he was filled with the Holy Spirit and was claimed by God as God's own son.

Mark's way of telling the Jesus story soon became the most common way of telling it. But more could be said. In the 80s two different writers, working independently of one another, each took up Mark's gospel and used it as the basis for expanded versions of the story. Matthew does not say that he used written sources, but about 90% of Mark shows up in Matthew, mostly the same stories told in the same order and often verbatim. Luke is explicit that he used prior written and oral sources for his gospel (1:1-4). Both Matthew and Luke add stories of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, plus a lot of teachings of Jesus that are not recorded in Mark. And both of them add stories about Jesus' amazing birth. Their two birth stories are very different from one another, but they both show that Jesus' special relationship with God did not begin at his baptism. They both want their readers to understand that the Holy Spirit was already involved from Jesus' birth.

And then we come to the 90s and the Gospel according to John. "In the beginning was the Word." Like Mark, John begins the story of Jesus with his baptism by John the Baptist. He tells nothing about a miraculous birth. But for John, the story really begins well before Jesus' birth, for Jesus is the pre-existent, divine Word of God, already operating in the creation of the world.

So we have in the NT at least four different ways to tell the Jesus story. Jesus was in a special relationship with God from the time of his (a) resurrection, (b) baptism, (c) birth, or (d) from all eternity. And if we put these in chronological order, we notice a trend running through the first century. As Christians tell and retell the story of Jesus, they tend toward a higher and higher Christology. That is, they tend to place more and more emphasis on the divinity of Jesus.

Furthermore, as we move into the second century, this trend continues. Early in the second century, when Christianity was still not recognized as a legal religion, the Emperor Trajan had a "don't ask / don't tell" policy that administrators should not hunt out Christians. Any Christian who was turned in should be given three chances to renounce Christianity and to offer incense on an altar to the divine emperor. Any Christian who refused to renounce the faith should be executed for stubbornness.⁸ Then around the year 115 or so, the Empire

decided to arrest a prominent bishop for a public execution as an example and warning. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was taken into custody and escorted under armed guard to Rome, to be thrown to wild animals.

Along the way, Ignatius wrote letters to several churches, including the church in Smyrna. He warned the Smyrnaeans in the strongest possible language about a new heresy that he saw threatening the churches. Here is what Ignatius says about Jesus:

...he was truly from the family of David according to the flesh (Romans 1:3)... truly born from a virgin... truly nailed for us in the flesh (1)

...he truly suffered..., not, as certain unbelievers say, that he suffered only in appearance (*to dokein*)... (2)

...that he was in the flesh even after the resurrection,... And after his resurrection he ate and drank with them (Luke 24:39), as a fleshly being... (3)

... [anyone] blasphemes my Lord, not confessing that he bore flesh... (5)

Judgment is prepared even for the heavenly beings, for the glory of the angels, and for the rulers both visible and invisible, if they do not believe in the blood of Christ. (6)⁹

Ignatius was worried, because it seemed to him that the trend was going to far. Apparently, some Christians were so committed to the divinity of Jesus that they had begun to lose sight of his humanity. Ignatius thought there was something terribly wrong with their Christology.

Ignatius's fears were well founded, but this super-high Christology persisted.¹⁰ By the late second century, Clement of Alexandria was opposing a heretic named Valentinus, who preached a more elaborate version of the same super-high Christology. Clement quoted from a letter that Valentinus had written to one Agathopous:

He was continent, enduring all things. Jesus digested divinity. He ate and drank in his own way, not excreting food. He had such a great capacity for continence that even the nourishment within him was not corrupted, for 'He did not experience corruption.'¹¹

Valentinus believed that Jesus was divine. Fully divine. He could not think of Jesus as a human being, and he cited Scripture to support his case, "He himself did not experience corruption" (Psalm 16:10). In its original context, this was an expression of David's trust that God would not let him die. But in his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, Peter quoted this verse as a way of thinking about Jesus, who did die but whose body did not decay in the tomb: "He did not experience

corruption.” Then along came Valentinus, who applied the same verse to his understanding of Christ, but for him the verse took on another meaning altogether. Valentinus simply could not conjure up a mental image of Jesus in an outhouse. He could not imagine Jesus wiping his backside like a real human being. “He did not experience corruption.” In the third century, the author Apocalypse of Peter imagined Peter being guided a mystical tour of heaven, when they come to a scene that Peter recognizes but finds perplexing:

When he had said those things, I saw him *seemingly* being seized by them. And I said, “What do I see, O Lord, that it is you yourself whom they take, and that you are grasping me? Or who is this one, glad and laughing on the tree? And is it another one whose feet and hands they are striking?”

The Savior said to me, “He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But this one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame, the one who came into being in his likeness. But look at him and me.¹²

The key words in this description of the crucifixion are “seemingly” and “substitute.” The Greek verb *dokein* meant “to seem,” and this verb gave a name to the heresy we have been describing: Docetism. Docetists were very pious. They believed that Jesus was divine. They worshipped Jesus as divine. For them, to admit that Jesus was a human being would have been to disrespect his divinity. How could anyone crucify God? So they said he only “seemed” to be human. He had a people suit that he wore while on earth, but when he was arrested, he abandoned it, so that the Romans nailed an empty people suit to the cross, never touching Christ.

I have been discussing texts from the second and third centuries, but we can see evidence even in the NT that this heresy of Docetism is already looming on the horizon. Sometime near the end of the first century, the leader of a network of Christian churches, who called himself simply “the Elder,” wrote three letters that have come down to us under the name 1, 2, & 3 John. The one we know as 3 John was a private note to a Christian brother named Gaius, acknowledging awareness of a schism within the community and expressing a desire to meet and discuss the problem face to face. The other two letters are addressed to churches and give some indication of a doctrinal point in dispute:

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming *in the flesh*. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. (2 John 7)

Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come *in the flesh* is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist. (1 John 4:3-4)

Here we have already in the NT a warning against the same heresy that will soon agitate Ignatius and Clement. What we find, then, is that the trend toward an ever higher Christology crossed a line beyond which it was no longer authentic Christianity. As we have seen, it is possible to tell the Jesus story in different ways. Some NT writers have a relatively low Christology with more emphasis on Jesus' humanity. Others have a relatively high Christology with more emphasis on Jesus' divinity. But all the NT writers find ways to affirm both propositions: that Jesus is fully divine *and* that Jesus is fully human. Even the Gospel according to John with its transcendent, pre-existent Word of God still insists that the Word became *flesh*. And this is the gospel that reports how a Roman soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear while he hung on the cross. Out came blood and water (19:34). He was real flesh and blood.

Notice also that the Elder refers to a heretic who denies the humanity of Jesus as the Antichrist. Let that sink in a moment. Whatever you may have heard about the Antichrist, you should know that the only place that the Antichrist is actually mentioned in the Bible is in 1-2 John, and the Antichrist is defined as one who denies the humanity of Jesus. To be sure, the Antichrist is a pious believer in Jesus who acknowledges him as fully divine. So the Antichrist is half right, but that makes him all wrong from a biblical perspective.

This is what the Bible says about the Word of God, that it is both divine and human. And this brings us to a corollary about Scripture. If we think of Scripture as in some sense the word of God, then we should think of it as analogous to the Word made flesh. That is, we must affirm both the Bible's divinity *and* the Bible's humanity. Many pious Christians are anxious to affirm the Bible's divinity. They mean well. They worry that acknowledging human imperfections in the Bible will disrespect it. But if the Bible affirms that Jesus is *both* divine *and* human, how can we think that the Bible is less human than Jesus?

The question, again, is not *whether* God speaks through the Bible but *how* God speaks.¹³ God's clearest and definitive Word is in the divine-human Jesus Christ. That is, the incarnation is essential to a Christian understanding of how God speaks. And so an incarnational understanding of Scripture should lead us to avoid a Docetic view of Scripture, denying that God has spoken through fragile and flawed human beings.¹⁴ As God said to Paul when he prayed about his thorn in the flesh, "My strength is made perfect in weakness."

Peter Enns asks, “The human dimension of Scripture is essential to its being Scripture...How *else* would you have expected God to speak?”¹⁵ And he presses the point:

And to those who fear the human stamp as somehow dirtying the Bible, marring its perfect divine quality, I say, “If you wouldn’t say that about Jesus (and you shouldn’t), don’t think that way about the Bible. Both Christ and his word are human through and through.” In fact, it is precisely by having the Son become human that God demonstrates his great love. Is it so much of a stretch, then, to say that the human nature of Scripture is likewise a gift rather than a problem?¹⁶

Ultimately, the best apologetic for the authority of the Bible will be ethics. If we try to defend the Bible on scientific/historical grounds, we cede the home turf to Modernists. Or if we try to deny that the Bible has any human flaws, we run aground on the heresy of Docetism. We should, rather show outsiders how the Bible makes a difference in our lives. “Be an example for the believers in word, faith...” (1 Tim 4:12).

End Notes

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¹ Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 108, 169. I have been developing the arguments presented in this essay over the past decade in my seminary classes and only recently discovered Enns’s theologically perceptive book, developing a similar approach with particular reference to the OT. I find many of his arguments helpful for those who may be struggling to articulate a doctrine of Scripture that recognizes human flaws in it.

² Christopher R. Hutson, “The Cross as Canon: Galatians 6:16.” *Leaven* 12.1 (2004), 49-53.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.1, trans. Geoffrey W.

Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1932), 112. Interested readers may view the painting by entering <Grunewald, Crucifixion> into any internet search engine.

⁴ Martin Luther, Sermon on Matthew 11, quoted in Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.1, p. 102

⁵ Augustine, "On the Gospel according to St. John," Tractate 1, in *NPNF*, vol. 7, edited by Philip Schaff (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1888), 7. Available online at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf107.iii.ii.html>.

⁶ Terence E. Fretheim, in Part II of Fretheim and Karlfried Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 117.

⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.15-16; 3.39.

⁸ Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96-97.

⁹ Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans* 1-6, trans. Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers* (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ E.g., Ignatius, *To the Trallians* 10; Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 7.1; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.16-18.

¹¹ Valentinus, *Letter to Agathopous* (Clement, *Stromata* 3.7.59.3), trans., Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1987), 238-239), modified.

¹² Apocalypse of Peter 81.3-24, trans. J. Brashler & R. Bullard in J. M. Robinson, editor, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (3rd ed.; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 377.

¹³ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 85, asks, "if even the law shows clear marks of diversity, what does this tell us about the nature of Scripture and the nature of the God who reveals himself there?"

¹⁴ On this point, in addition to Enns, see N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 129-130; Fretheim, *Bible as Word of God*, 86; Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Old Testament as Word of God: Its Significance for a Living Christian Faith*, trans. Reidar B. Bjornard (Nashville: Abingdon, 1959), 78-85.

¹⁵ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 20-21.

¹⁶ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 21.