

The Authority of Scripture: Jesus and Elijah in Westeros

[1 Kings 18:20-40; Luke 7:1-10]

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The authority of scripture: what exactly does this mean?

To answer in full would simply take too long on this communion Sunday. Praise be to God. But essays and even books are available online if you're really interested. Praise be to God, again.

So how about a summary? Many Christians argue that *authority of scripture* generally implies that there is authority in scripture. Circular enough. But more fairly to the point, that God's authority/governance/intention/rule is made manifest in scripture and in scripture alone and thus, it should be held over and above every word and message that comes from outside and beyond its canon. Moreover, even if we are to agree that the books of the Bible were written in human hand, the very words of scripture were nonetheless authored under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit and thereby given ordinance. 2 Timothy drives it home: "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 and equipped for every good work."

Now let's for the sake of something-to-talk-about, examine these claims further. *All scripture is useful for teaching*. This I can agree with. *All scripture is useful for reproof and correction*. This I don't want to agree with. *All scripture is inspired by God and useful for training in righteousness so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient and equipped for every good work*. This I wouldn't know how to agree with.

It seems to me that people who would stand by this declaration in Timothy or the general argument for scripture's universal authority are rather like the people who also say that God is always in complete control. Ironically, it seems easier for people to say grand things when they are more narrow in experience. For instance, it's easier to say that God is in complete control when living in a place where Turkish police are not firing at you with tear gas and water cannons. Just as it's slightly more narrowly minded to thank God on Facebook for the beautiful weather we've had here this weekend, even though the skies darkened and the winds spiraled once more over the Midwest.

We are prone to make extreme generalizations when living in a vacuum and the same rings true when folks try to defend scripture's inerrancy and timeless authority. To me, there is simply no way to defend that position honestly, unless you are only narrowly looking at certain passages and not the Bible's totality. *All scripture is inspired by God and useful for training in righteousness so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient and equipped for every good work*. Please, someone then affirm that for me when reading our Old Testament text this morning.

For here we have Elijah, a biblical version of the red lady, Melisandre, from HBO's "Game of Thrones" (where we get the second half of the sermon title). Like her, he is as prophet and vessel of a new god, in this case Yahweh (Jesus' god, our god mind you), taunting the enemy followers and of an old god, Ba'al. And not only taunting them, but also hunting down and killing them. For you see, their old god Ba'al proved to be false because he failed to make fire out of the magical combination of bull's blood and wood cooked with some prayer. Yes, you heard that right the first time during the OT reading and here again in this sermon. This stuff is actually in our Bible, in our *authoritative* scripture. Bull's blood and prayer, pyres and murder. Just because we ignore it and choose not to pay much attention to it, or similar texts in Psalm 137 and Exodus 11 where our God is calling for the slaughter of children, smashing baby's heads against rocks, doesn't mean it isn't there for all eyes to see and the unadjusted to follow.

Nevertheless, it is written that "the traditional Christian view has been that the scripture (both Old and New Testaments) has highest authority for the beliefs and life of Christians. And furthermore, that Christians ought to change if they discover that their beliefs contradict those presented for acceptance by scripture or if they discover that their way of life does not conform with that directed by scripture."¹

So who then is ready to conform to the authority of this scripture? Show of hands. Who is ready to change their beliefs on murder if they contradict with the homicidal authority as it was given to the prophet Elijah, and thereby all of us who are followers and teachers of the same god? Who is ready to go into the Buddhist temple on East Chew Ave and taunt and kill all those who believe in their *false* version of the divine? No hands? And if we were to decide that we were ready, how

¹ <http://www.rc.net/wcc/readings/clark14.htm>

then would we reconcile and differentiate our faith from the extreme Muslim right whom we've loved to condemn for choosing to follow the equally violent and scattered sayings of their holy text?

Perhaps then this is why many Christians disregard the Old Testament. "It's too inconsistent," they say. "It's too violent and bizarre, and most certainly antiquated. After all, it is called the *Old* Testament for a reason, right? And it's not even our sacred text, but the Jews'. And so, we're only going to put stock and assign authority to the coherent and infallible New Testament. After all, that's where the red letters appear and we are Christians like Jesus his-last-name: Christ."

But of course, we of these pews can see how that too is wrong. For we know that Jesus was a Jew, not a Christian (a religion yet to form) and that Christ was not his last name but a title meaning the anointed one. Moreover, we certainly all know that the New Testament itself can be kind of batty, what with its texts like 1 Timothy 2:12 and its mandate on women not to speak or have authority over men; or Romans 1:28-32 where it is said that even gossips and unruly children are deserving of death; as well as Luke 8:32-33 where Jesus allows evil spirits to enter farmer's pigs such that they then run off a cliff and tumble down the mountainside to their demise; not to mention Galatians 1:8-9 where Paul says that even if a new gospel were to come down from an angel in Heaven, if it were to disagree with him and his teachings, may that angel be accursed; and of course, who can forget that bizarre one from Acts 5:1-10 where Peter, employing the fear of God, drives a husband and wife to imminent death.

Let me remind you of that one as it rivals our story of Elijah from before. Ananias and Sapphira, husband and wife, sell off all of their property and holdings at the bequest of the apostles for a more monastic life. But they only bring forth a portion of the revenue to lay at the apostles' feet, holding back whatever is remaining of their livelihood for themselves. Seems reasonable, and quite like how we are asked to do tithing here. Peter however, knowing that Ananias was holding back puts the fear of God into his heart and Ananias promptly drops dead. And only three hours later when his wife Sapphira comes home to find her husband's corpse, there Peter is waiting, only not to console her at her loss but to question why she conspired with her husband to give generously, but not generously enough. Astonishingly, our hero and rock of the church then tells this poor lady to stare at the feet of her husband as his body is being unceremoniously dragged out of their house, and then says that that too will be her fate. And immediately after that bit of kindness, she too drops dead. Shameful, really.

Now, if you are new to us today or if you haven't yet been to Theology on Tap with me, you might wonder why I'm wearing this robe and sermonizing from this pulpit. After all, what have I said this morning? As my preaching instructor at Seminary once famously said to a peer of mine, *where's the hope, preacher, where's the hope?*

Here it is: this book, these narratives, this particular faith in this particular god... it's not meant to always be authoritative or stagnant. Rather, it's meant to be dynamic and changing. There is not one gospel, but four. Not one creation story, but two. And throughout the entirety of the Old Testament and later crystallized in Jesus, God evolves. Neither God nor Christ are confined to papers or letters or traditions or doctrines or a particular moment in all of creation's history. Jesus proved that over and over again, and especially in our New Testament text from Luke this morning. For here is our God of Elijah, our God of vengeful wrath and murderous hate for false prophets and enemies, now arguing through the Son that the Kingdom of Heaven has room at the table even for centurions and their servants. Just as he did in the chapter before, when insisting that love is to be extended to the enemy, so here he is again in Luke 7:1-10, extending that same love even to a member of the Roman military force that occupied his homeland, and not only that, but amazingly even exalting this *enemy's* foreign faith above those native to Israel's.

My friends, scripture then is a good resource. It can be a great resource but it is not the only and authoritative resource. It is too inconsistent and can be plucked too easily here and there to make any desired point valid no matter how evil. God evolved in scripture and even just in our two texts this morning, so it would be foolish to assume that God is only beholden to such a time and a place where the world was still flat, when the sun still revolved around the earth. Therefore it is our duty to not only study these holy words, trying to understand their original intent in their original contexts, but also to jump off the pages and try to experience revelation wherever it may meet us. But not just in a vacuum, but in conjunction with the entire objective world and infinite cosmos which ever engulfs us.

For if God is confined to and only speaking through the 66 books of our Bible, as they were decided upon some 1,700 years ago by a small assembly of men, then perhaps Nietzsche was right in saying that our God is now dead. And so we trust that there is more authority than just that which is written on these pages. Just as we trust that God is not dead, but rather asking us to remember the sacrifice made and remembered at this table, so to then understand that both divinity and life is ever evolving and eternal.

Amen.