

SCRIPTURE - MERE TEXT?

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ABSTRAK: Dalam artikel ini, penulis menanggapi secara kritis ungkapan Benjamin Jowett yang beranggapan bahwa Alkitab adalah buku biasa dan harus dibaca sebagai buku biasa. Dengan argumentasi teologi historis dan dialog dengan ketegangan iman-ilmu, penulis mempertahankan bahwa Alkitab adalah Firman Allah dan Roh Kudus bersaksi di dalamnya. Karena itu, Alkitab tidak dapat sepenuhnya dibaca seperti buku biasa.

KATA KUNCI: *Alkitab, kitab suci, teks, Benjamin Jowett, buku.*

ABSTRACT: In this article, the writer is responding critically the saying of Benjamin Jowett who assume that the Bible is an ordinary book and should be read as an ordinary book. With historical theological argumentation and dialogue between the tension of sciences, the writer defended that the bible is truly the Word of God and that the Holy Spirit witness within it. Therefore, the Bible cannot be read as an ordinary book.

KEYWORDS: *Bible, scripture, text, Benjamin Jowett, book.*

What is Truth?

It was in 1860 that Benjamin Jowett, penned his famous words to the effect that 'the Bible is a book which must be read like any other book'.¹ Jowett was writing in the collection of *Essays and reviews* which a group of liberal Oxford theologians had put together, and was hoping to get the wider church to accept the proposition that critical study of the Bible as a literary text was not only possible but necessary if its true meaning and rightful status were to be properly appreciated. As far as he was concerned, Biblical interpretation had little or nothing to do with theological conviction (or lack of it) and he believed that an objective understanding of the text was possible on scientific grounds alone:

...the interpretation of Scripture has nothing to do with any opinion respecting its origin. The meaning of Scripture is one thing; the interpretation of Scripture is another. It is conceivable that those who hold the most different views about the one, may be able to agree about the other. Rigid upholders of the verbal inspiration of Scripture, and those who deny inspiration altogether, may nevertheless meet on the common ground of the meaning of words.²

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since then, and few modern readers would be as shocked by Jowett's thesis as many mid-Victorians were. Popular opinion at that time had developed such a reverence for the Scriptures that they had come to be used as an authority in ways that had never been intended and that were alien to

¹ B. Jowett, "On the interpretation of Scripture", in *Essays and reviews* (London: John W. Parker, 1860), 330-433. See especially 337.

² *Ibid.*, 350-351.

the genius of the text itself. An obvious and well-known example of this was the widespread belief that the creation of the world had occurred on 26 October 4004 BC, according to the calculations made by Archbishop James Ussher of Armagh in the seventeenth century. Following the lead given by St Augustine, who was a firm believer in a young earth, Ussher assumed that all he had to do was add up the numbers to work out precisely how young it was. This example is particularly appropriate in that Jowett's hermeneutical claims coincided with the publication of Charles Darwin's *The origin of species* the year before, which had provoked a furious response from Samuel Wilberforce and other defenders of what they saw as the church's traditional beliefs. In contrast to them, Jowett was trying to find a way to read the Bible as a product of its time, with a worldview that cannot be harmonised with the findings of modern science. It might still be of great value for moral and spiritual purposes, but as a biological textbook it was less than useless.

The rise of the natural sciences after Ussher's time was bound to call the Augustinian view of creation into question, and it is unfortunate that it has continued to command support among modern so-called 'creationists'. To be fair to them, the 'creationists' are right to insist that if the Biblical data are true they must cohere with the findings of the natural sciences, but they are wrong to assume that Genesis speaks the same language. There is nothing sadder than to see intelligent and well-meaning people expend time and energy in a fruitless quest for a kind of coherence between the

Bible and science which is historically impossible. If the creation account had been couched in modern scientific terms none of the original readers of Genesis would have been able to understand it! Genesis is not invalidated because it approaches the subject of creation in a non-scientific way, but it is often discredited by well-meaning supporters who refuse to accept it for what it is and who try to read it in scientific terms. It is hardly surprising that these efforts fail to carry conviction among scientists and it is a tragedy that in some quarters reverence for the Bible has turned to scepticism and contempt because of this particular misunderstanding.

The whole confrontation between science and the Bible, of which the creation narrative is the symbolic epicentre, is particularly unfortunate, given the fact that the Augustinian view was by no means dominant in the early church. Most of the Greek fathers believed that the world was far older, and interpreted the Genesis account in figurative and allegorical ways, regarding the numbers as symbolic of long periods of time rather than as precise mathematical measurements.

Already in the second-century, the pagan writer Celsus raised all the objections which we hear from modern rationalists, only to be brilliantly and imaginatively refuted by Origen, the greatest Christian scholar of antiquity. Origen understood that great mysteries had to be conveyed in simple terms if ordinary people were ever going to grasp them, and even today really great scientists often look for simple parallels which will help them get across what might otherwise be

highly complex and largely incomprehensible theories. Modern scientists who understand the importance of communication usually have little trouble with Genesis because their own experience tells them what the Biblical writers were trying to do. In his recent book entitled *The language of God*, Francis Collins, an Evangelical Christian and the head of the human genome project in Washington, makes this point very clearly and demonstrates that the supposed incompatibilities between science and faith are the result of a misunderstanding of how Genesis should be read.³ Collins' scientific knowledge is obviously far greater than Origen's was, but the conclusion he comes to about the nature of the Biblical text is remarkably similar to his.

The early Christians were so successful in their refutation of pagan scepticism that for a long time it faded from view almost completely. It did not make a comeback until the late seventeenth century, when it was popularised by John Toland, an Irish deist of Roman Catholic background, whose book *Christianity not mysterious* became its chief manifesto.⁴ But even then, Toland and those who thought like him were easily refuted by a number of divines, most of whom were Anglicans. By 1750 his views were out of favour in the British Isles, though they were still influential elsewhere – in France especially, but also in other European countries and in the American colonies, where they contributed to the outbreak of revolution later in

³ See F. S. Collins, *The language of God* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

⁴ See J. Toland, *Christianity not mysterious*, (London, 1696). Reprinted in facsimile, (New York: Garland, 1978).

the eighteenth century.

By then, Toland's scepticism had been thoroughly reworked in Germany, where men like Friedrich Schleiermacher married it to their own home grown pietism to produce a synthesis which continues to inform much modern opinion. Briefly stated, this synthesis claims that there are two different kinds of truth, one of which is congruent with the dictates of modern science and the other of which transcends it. The first kind of truth is dominant in academic life but the second also has an important place in the hearts and minds of those who are sensitive to intangible realities like beauty and love, which transcend the merely rational and cannot be reduced to mathematical analysis. Failure to understand the second kind of truth was a sign of robotic bestiality rather than of civilisation. It could produce a Frankenstein, who was in fact invented by Mary Shelley at about this time, but not a normal, well-rounded human being. By positing two different kinds of truth, Schleiermacher believed that he had carved out a permanent place for religion as the privileged interpreter of this non-rational dimension of human life. What he could not foresee was that his opponents would respond by developing human sciences like psychology, there by extending the principles of rationalism to areas of life that Schleiermacher had tried to reserve for religion. But whereas the earlier natural scientists could ignore religion and claim that it was irrelevant to their discipline, the newer human scientists had to find some explanation for it. As an almost universal social phenomenon it must have some meaning and the human scientists

set about trying to find it. After some initial fumbling, they generally decided that it was a complex set of symbols attempting to explain fundamental characteristics of our makeup which were otherwise too complex for pre-scientific people to understand. All religions do this, though some are more sophisticated than others and can therefore be regarded as 'higher' than more primitive expressions of the religious impulse. Of course, the closer religious symbols come to what can be demonstrated by science to be true, the more rational, and therefore more acceptable, that religion may be said to be. Given that most of these scientists were German Protestants, it is perhaps inevitable that they were inclined to believe that Christianity, and especially its German Protestant variety, was the highest form of religion. But its detractors could still argue that however close it may come, even the highest religion is only a caricature of scientific truth. It might serve as a comfort to the simple-minded, but those who had been educated in the tenets of rational inquiry could, and should, leave it behind.

Today it seems that it is these sceptics who have the upper hand, as the success of men like Richard Dawkins indicates. Theologians find it difficult to use the traditional arguments to refute him, not least because in an ecumenical age like ours, nobody would dare to suggest that Christianity is superior to other religions. It is true that Martin Luther is occasionally held up as the apostle of the free conscience, but as the same thing is said of Thomas More, one of Luther's arch-opponents, we may wonder just exactly what this is supposed to mean. A decade ago the well-known theologian Alister

McGrath published a history of Protestantism, which he defined as a movement promoting freedom of thought and inquiry.⁵ This view would have surprised Luther, but it has been echoed by the historian Roy Foster, whose book, *Luck and the Irish*, maintains that Irish Catholics are now mostly Protestant because they have started thinking for themselves instead of relying on priests and the church.⁶ In fact, of course, these Catholics are not Protestants but liberal free-thinkers, and it is only because the main Protestant churches contain significant numbers of such people that Foster's identification sounds plausible. But if Schleiermacherian liberalism has fallen on hard times, its lingering effects can still be seen from time to time within the Protestant churches, particularly on the lips of men who were educated a generation or more ago. For example, on 22 July 2007 the archbishop of Armagh preached a sermon at Clonmacnoise in which he criticised members of his own church for what he called 'bibliolatry', a term which he then defined as 'the business of mistaking the Word of God for a mere text'. Warming to his theme, the archbishop then went on to say this:

The sublime evangelist St John makes clear from the very beginning of his testimony that the Word of God is incarnate and personified. The Word is He and not It. The words of the Scriptures describe and explore the experience of human witnesses in their attempts to set down what each has known and seen as the action of God in the world. Those written words include, pre-eminently, accounts of the

⁵ See Alister McGrath, *The intellectual origins of the European reformation*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

⁶ Robert Fitzroy Foster, *Luck and the Irish* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), 37-66.

experience and understanding of those who walked the roads of Palestine with Jesus himself.⁷

In these words we find ourselves back in the world of Schleiermacher's two truths, filtered through the prism of Benjamin Jowett. On the one hand, the Word of God is defined as a He and not an It, which means that it cannot be studied and analysed with the tools of objective reason. This is Schleiermacher. But the words of the Scriptures belong to the world of the It, and therefore cannot be equated with the Word of God. Because of that, they can be dissected and criticised as little more than the opinions and reminiscences of fallible human beings. This is Jowett. The archbishop recognises that the two truths co-exist and even overlap to some extent, but they do not coincide, and ultimately the knowable words of the text must give way to the knowable but unfathomable Word incarnate.

Is such an interpretation of the source material of Christianity defensible? Even on its own terms, it contains a serious flaw, which is that the Word incarnate can only be known in and through the words of the Biblical text. If these words are mistaken, then our knowledge of the Word made flesh is faulty, since we have no other witness to him. It should be noted here in passing that no-one is claiming that the Biblical witness to Christ is exhaustive. There is clearly much about him, and about God in general, that we do not know and that the Scriptures do not purport to tell us. The question at issue is not

⁷ Sermon Preached By The Archbishop Of Armagh The Most Revd Alan Harper At Clonmacnoise On The Feast Day Of St Mary Magdalene 2007, <http://ireland.anglican.org/news/2029> (accessed 20 February 2012).

whether their witness is comprehensive but whether it is accurate as far as it goes, which is something rather different. Some people may appeal to the sacraments and the existence of the church as the body of Christ as ways of knowing him apart from the Biblical text, but this does not work because the meaning of these things is expounded in the Scriptures and cannot be understood without them. It might be possible for the church and its rituals to exist without a written text to back them up, as they did in the first decades of Christianity, but no-one would know for sure what to make of them and there would be no way of telling whether they had remained essentially the same over the centuries. The apostles committed their teaching to writing so that it would continue to shape the structures and self-understanding of God's people here on earth. The simple fact of the matter is that if they were wrong then we are wrong and the beliefs we proclaim when we meet around the Lord's table are really no more than personal opinions handed down to us by well-informed but potentially misguided people. It is therefore not surprising to find liberal theologians and church leaders telling us that we can pick and choose what we want to believe, and even introduce new ideas that the apostles would have rejected or not understood, because they do not regard the apostolic testimony as definitive for all time. And the reason they do not do so is that they do not see it as being true in an ultimate or eternal sense. It may have served for the first Christian century and there is no need to supposed that the apostles were deliberately lying, but they were men of their time and so it is hardly

surprising if they are not always able to speak adequately to men – and especially to women – today.

The significance of this becomes clear when we recall that the Apostle Paul understood the eucharist not as a fellowship meal but as a solemn remembering of the Lord's death until he comes again. The disciples of Jesus believed that he rose again from the dead and that he will return to earth at the end of time. Modern scholars are inclined to think that they also believed that Christ would return in their lifetimes, and so history has already proved them to be wrong, at least about that. Common sense tells us that bodily resurrections do not happen, so the apostles were also mistaken in believing this, however sincere they may have been. But the church is the community of the resurrection and its ceremonies bear witness to the ongoing presence of his body among us in spiritual form. If that resurrection never occurred, the church is built on a lie and has no right to exist. An atheist professor at Oxford will have no trouble drawing this conclusion, but matters are not so simple for a bishop, who might at least lose his job if this were the case. Nor can we retreat into the 'two-truth' solution and claim that as a miracle, the resurrection must be understood in a spiritual sense and not as a physical event. It is one thing to say that the creation of the world is explained in a symbolic and non-technical way but quite another to claim that the resurrection of Jesus is also more symbolic than historical. Nobody doubts that the world exists – the only question is how it got here, and the first chapters of Genesis explain this as

simply and as clearly as possible. Furthermore, the creation story is not an eye-witness account and nobody's credibility is at stake. In both these respects, the resurrection narrative is completely different. The body of Jesus is not available for anyone to see, and there are many who doubt whether it ever could have been. The truth of the resurrection depends on the credibility of the witnesses, and they speak to us now only in the pages of the New Testament. Without that we have nothing to go on, but how trustworthy is it? Is it reliable enough to change our lives and turn us into followers of Jesus Christ, or is it only an opinion expressed by fallible men whose worldview allowed them to believe something which is incredible for us today?

The Limitations of Modern Biblical Criticism

Following Jowett's assertion that the Bible is a book like any other book, modern Biblical critics have used of any number of techniques and theories to examine the text and determine how much of it is credible and therefore likely to be true. Scholars have relied on archaeology, literary criticism, comparative studies of different kinds and linguistic analysis in order to analyse the Gospels as we now have them and break them down into their various components. More importantly, they have also used such techniques to decide how far they may reflect the teaching of Jesus himself. It is often claimed that this so-called quest for the historical Jesus is based on scientific textual criticism but this is very questionable. Textual criticism is based on the texts as they now exist, and uses their peculiarities as

indicators of what their sources may have been and how they were subsequently edited. For example, we know that what appears as the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5-7 also appears in Luke, but in Luke the material is found scattered throughout the narrative. Most people find it easier to believe that it was originally fragmented in the Lucan fashion and that Matthew collected it in one place, but it is also possible that Luke started with something that looked more like Matthew and deliberately broke up the material and dispersed it throughout his Gospel. If Luke was written later than Matthew, as many scholars think, the second option gains in plausibility, but the truth is that we do not know either way. All that is certain is that some editing took place in both Gospels, but any attempt to establish the principles which governed it can only be speculative.

Trying to decide how much of the sermon on the mount comes from the lips of Jesus is also more difficult than it may seem. Leaving aside the obvious fact that Jesus spoke Aramaic and not the Greek in which his words have been transmitted to us, it is reasonable to suppose that the process of editing those words has shortened them considerably. It would not have taken Jesus very long to say the things recorded of him nor would the present form of his sayings have sounded very good as a sermon or address. Condensation therefore seems to have been inevitable, but beyond that we cannot go. To argue that Jesus could not have said this or that because it would have been anachronistic or out of character for him to have done so is to predetermine what he was like, an exercise which is

hazardous in the extreme. For example, many people have claimed that Jesus could not have uttered the words of the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel because they contain an injunction to baptise the nations in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a Trinitarian reference. The assumption is that these words cannot have been uttered by Jesus himself because Trinitarian beliefs were supposedly not structured in that way until much later. But the evidence of Acts 8, which tells the story of how some Samaritans had been baptised in the name of Jesus only and had not received the Holy Spirit shows that Trinitarian baptism was a very early practice, and where would that have come from, if not from Jesus himself? Recently Larry Hurtado of Edinburgh University has gone through the New Testament to demonstrate that worship of Jesus as God goes right back to the earliest days of the church. In his book *Lord Jesus Christ* he backs up this contention with a mass of evidence, which is all the more remarkable given that his views concerning the authorship and dating of his sources are not particularly conservative. But even with his relatively sceptical view of the sources which seriously limits the amount of evidence he is prepared to consider, Hurtado has managed to overturn the scholarly consensus of most of the twentieth century, which pictured a Jesus who called himself the 'Son of Man' but was unaware of any divine status, which his followers only gradually attributed to him after his death.

As Hurtado points out, the scholarly consensus he has overturned was based not on objective fact but on a subjective analysis which starts with the unproved assumption that any theological interpretation of Jesus in the New Testament must be of late provenance.⁸ Working on that premise, everything with theological tinge is systematically relegated to the second generation of the church or even later, which means that the Gospels, and particularly the Gospel of John, are assigned to a very late date and considered to be of little or no historical value. When this happens, textual criticism transmutes from being a scientific discipline which uses objective criteria into a pseudo-scientific form of speculation based on unproved and highly dubious presuppositions. Quite why anyone would transform the story of a failed revolutionary rabbi into a narrative of salvation through the death and resurrection of a divine God-man is never explained. How a Jew, of all people, could even begin to think in that way, let alone persuade any of his countrymen that he was telling the truth, remains an unresolved mystery. Even something non-miraculous, like the linking of the priestly office with the Davidic monarchy, was unprecedented in Israel and alien to traditional Jewish beliefs. How did anyone come to believe that Jesus was a priest-king when the only such person in the nation's past was Melchizedek, and he was not an Israelite? The disciples of Jesus understood that he was unique, and they were as surprised by what he did and what happened to him as any of us would have been.

⁸ See L. W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, (Michigan : Eerdmans, 2003).

Moreover, it is his very uniqueness which makes it impossible to prove the truth of what he said and did by the usual scientific means. Science relies on comparative analysis, which in the case of a unique person and events is impossible. The irony here is that although scientific reasoning is ill-equipped to deal with unique occurrences, to conclude that therefore nothing unique can ever occur is unscientific! What is unique can only be examined once it has happened, and failure to find parallels elsewhere is not enough to discredit the evidence offered in support of it. It is true that in the nature of the case, belief in the Christian version of events requires a personal decision based on probability rather than on absolute certainty, but that does not make such a decision irrational. I believe that Christopher Columbus discovered America on 12 October 1492, even though I have no evidence to prove it and Columbus himself did not believe it – he thought he had found some islands off the coast of India! My reasons for saying he discovered America are deduced by the same logical processes as my reasons for believing in the resurrection of Jesus. Of course I may be wrong about one or both of these conclusions, but if so, it will not be because of some mindless credulity on my part. The weight of the available evidence supports belief in these things and to deny them on the basis of some preconceived notion of what is and is not possible would amount to a form of mindless incredulity, which is just as irrational as its opposite.

The Theological Imperative

The Bible challenges us to believe in a transcendent God, who is the creator and preserver of the universe. It claims that he made the laws of science and can transcend them when necessary because he is in no way bound by them. If such a God exists, there is no logical reason why the supernatural acts which it ascribes to him should not have taken place. Nor will it do to dismiss this claim by saying that the Bible was written by believers, making the evidence it offers subjective and unreliable. People who write books testifying to their experiences of unusual events obviously do so because they believe that those events occurred, and it would be absurd to discredit their claims merely because of that. We would hardly expect someone to write a detailed account of the resurrection of Jesus if he did not believe it had happened! Even on Jowett's premiss that the Bible is a book like any other book, it does not follow that its claims must be rejected merely on the basis of philosophical presuppositions which contradict them. The true scientist will always be open to the possibility that it is the presuppositions that are wrong and not the Biblical witness. The history of science is full of instances where universally held beliefs have been overturned on the basis of further evidence and research, so there is nothing sacrosanct about the presupposition that resurrection from the dead is impossible. If it can be shown that such a resurrection has occurred, it is the presupposition which has to be discarded, not the fact which has disproved it.

Thus far we have sought to argue the case for taking the claims of Christianity seriously even within the parameters of Benjamin Jowett's critical dictum. Now it is time to go one step further, and ask whether Jowett was right to regard the Bible in the way that he did. Can a scholar really read the Bible in exactly the same way as he would read any other text? Should he try to do so? Surely even a brief consideration of the question will show that he cannot, and that to attempt to do so is to misunderstand the nature of the text itself. Why were the sacred texts of the Christian church composed in the first place? What were they for?

When the archbishop of Armagh said that: 'The words of the Scriptures describe and explore the experience of human witnesses in their attempts to set down what each has known and seen as the action of God in the world', he was expressing a view which is commonly held and which at first sight appears to be unexceptional. Surely a human author will inevitably describe whatever he is writing about in terms that reflect his own perspectives and prejudices. These may not be serious enough to falsify his account, but they will certainly give it a distinctive colouring. We all know this from reading different versions of our own history. For example, was the introduction of Islam into southeast Asia a good thing or a bad thing? Did Christian missionaries represent progress and development, or were they tools of European imperialism? Much depends on who is writing the story, and we often learn more about them than about the subject they are supposed to be describing. Is

this the sort of thing that has happened in the Bible? Are we now reading about people and events through a theological lens imposed on them for religious reasons, which may not go to the point of inventing the past from scratch, but which gives it a flavour which it would not otherwise possess?

The only way to answer this question is to look at the texts themselves. What we now call the Old Testament is the legacy of ancient Israel that was put together by a long line of redactors, almost all of whom are unknown to us. Even the prophetic books, which come closest to having an identifiable author in the modern sense, are probably collections made after the prophet's death by people who are now largely unidentifiable. All that we can say for sure is that by the time of Jesus the Old Testament books were recognised by everyone as authoritative for Israel's religion. Even Jesus said that he had come not to overturn them, but to expound their inner meaning and fulfil their intentions. He often disputed the meaning of the Scriptures with the scribes and Pharisees and deplored their legalism, but he never accused them of Bibliolatry. On the contrary, he affirmed the validity of every jot and tittle that had been handed down to them, stating only that if the Jews had read the text properly they would have understood that it spoke about him. In other words, knowing Jesus was not a matter of abandoning an abstract and inadequate text in favour of a living, breathing human being, but of understanding that text in the right spirit.

The reason for this is that writing had formed an essential part of God's revelation to his people from the time that God wrote the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone and gave them to Moses. Moses was the messenger and authorised interpreter of those words, but they did not originate with him, nor can they be regarded as his considered reflection on his encounter with God. What he conveyed to the people was what God had told him to say, and this note of transmission is a constant refrain in the Old Testament literature. Those who edited the texts and preserved them for future generations were guided by the belief that what they were transmitting was the Word of God, which he intended to be a law for his people. The editors did not record everything that every prophet said, and their approach to history was much more complex than it might appear at first sight. For example, the history of the Davidic monarchy is recounted twice, once from what we would now call a layman's perspective and once from the priestly point of view. The two accounts overlap but are not identical, although both narratives emphasise the significance that particular events had for Israel's faith. Because of that, the great king Omri gets only seven verses while his less able son Ahab takes up several chapters, because Omri did nothing to undermine Israelite religion whereas Ahab was responsible for introducing widespread idolatry and for persecuting the prophets. Working with different criteria, the secular historian today would probably devote much more attention to Omri and treat Ahab as a less important figure. The compilers of the kingly narrative

may well have shared that assessment of the two men in some respects, but their purpose in writing was completely different from that of a modern secular historian. In spiritual terms Ahab was a more significant figure than his father, and the Biblical text reflects that fact. The end result is that we have an interpretation of events which might be called biased, but which cannot be regarded as a falsification. Its bias, if that is a fair term to use, may even be defended on the ground that Israel's longer-term historical significance has been spiritual rather than political or economic in nature, so giving preference to that aspect of the nation's life is entirely justified.

This becomes even more apparent when we look at the non-historical parts of the Old Testament, the psalms for example, and the wisdom literature. They are in the canon because of their spiritual function in the life of the covenant community. It is important to understand this when we read things like the imprecatory psalms, which appear on the surface to be incompatible with the Christian teaching about a God of love. How could such a God encourage the psalmist to pray that the little children of Babylon might be dashed against the stones and destroyed before reaching adulthood? This goes against the grain for most modern readers, but that is because we read such things out of context. Israel was surrounded by enemies who were determined to destroy her and younger generations were expected to avenge the defeats of their elders. From that perspective the destruction of Babylon's children was a necessary measure of self-

defence, since to allow them to grow up was to invite destruction on oneself. The modern equivalent would be the need for nations to go to war from time to time in order to prevent greater evils from flourishing. We do not believe that it is right to kill other human beings, but in the context of warfare such killing becomes inevitable and so we accept it as a regrettable necessity. To individualise the psalmist's sentiments and condemn them as an inappropriate attitude for a modern believer to adopt with respect to his personal enemies is to falsify the text's meaning by removing it from its context and then misapplying it. Those who are appalled by texts like these have usually done just that, with the result that what is an appropriate reaction in their context gets extended to the Bible and discredits its authority by reason of a category mistake.

What we see here is that the Old Testament was put together as a witness to the voice of God speaking to his people. Parts of it functioned in the civil government as law and in religious worship as praise and thanksgiving. It taught wisdom to young and old alike and reminded the people of their unique calling in the world. The effects of this can be seen by looking around us – more than 2000 years later, the Assyrians and Babylonians have disappeared but Israel, the Jewish people, is still with us and still as influential in world affairs as ever. There can be little doubt that Judaism owes its strength and survival to its adherence to its sacred book. That alone would be enough to disprove Jowett's thesis that the Bible is a book like any other, for what other book has achieved a comparable result

in such adverse circumstances?

When we come to the New Testament we find a somewhat different situation, though the underlying principles are the same. The New Testament was not put together over many centuries by largely unknown groups of people, but was produced in a single generation by men who are for the most part identifiable, even if it is not always clear which James or John is the author of the books ascribed to men of those names. Somehow or other, all the New Testament books are connected to the apostles of Jesus, whose teaching they contain. As the epistles of Paul demonstrate, they were never meant to stand in isolation from the life of the church; from the beginning, they were used in Christian congregations to determine the content of the apostolic preaching and to correct those who had strayed from it. Not everything in them was clear to everybody, but this did not matter too much as long as there were people who could teach the apostolic message faithfully. As we know from the texts themselves, false teachers abounded, which is not altogether surprising when we think of the great sophistication of the Graeco-Roman world at that time, and it appears that the apostles committed their teaching to writing largely in order to refute their errors and to prevent them from corrupting the church.

The authority they claimed for their teaching had been given to them by Jesus himself. This is why the Apostle Paul had to insist that he had met with the risen Lord, since otherwise he could not have claimed the teaching authority of an apostle. It is this teaching

authority which has given us the New Testament and which justifies us in calling it the Word of God. What it does not say about Jesus we cannot know, and what it does say we must follow if we are going to be his disciples. The Bible is infallible in this respect and inerrant in the same way that the law of the land is inerrant. We may not like the law, but we are obliged to obey it as it stands and those appointed to interpret it cannot twist its meaning or improvise as they go along. No lawyer would claim that the law is a perfect representation of justice, but most of them would probably insist that justice cannot be obtained, or even imagined, without it. The law is a means to an end rather than the end in itself, but it is a means which in practice is indispensable. Great confusion is caused when the concepts of infallibility and inerrancy are taken out of their legal context and turned into philosophical principles instead. It is perfectly possible for a mathematical table or a telephone directory to be inerrant, and anyone who writes a DIY manual will claim that it is infallible, so neither of these concepts is an exclusive property of divinity. That God has spoken correctly we may infer from his nature, but we must also remember that the reason he spoke was to draw us closer to himself, not to impress us with his uncommon brilliance.

The Witness of the Holy Spirit

The Bible is not a book like any other book because it talks about God in a way which assumes that its message can only properly be understood by those who submit to its authority, and that

such submission will not occur unless and until the person concerned has come to a knowledge of the God of whom the text speaks. Where is such knowledge going to come from? We Christians claim that the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit, working in and through the prophets and apostles, and we also claim that we have received that same Holy Spirit in our hearts. As the Apostle Paul said to the Romans: 'The Spirit of God bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God' (Romans 8:16) and to the Galatians: 'Because you are sons, God has put the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying Abba, Father' (Galatians 4:6). Many people think that everyone who has been baptised has received the Holy Spirit and can therefore resonate with the Spirit's voice in the Bible, but this is obviously untrue. There are many people who were baptised at some point in their lives who now openly renounce any form of Christianity. Adolf Hitler was baptised, but who would claim that he was filled with the Spirit of God? Josef Stalin was not only baptised, he was a seminarian – but that hardly qualifies him to be considered an interpreter of God's Word! The gift of the Spirit is symbolised in baptism but the Spirit blows where he wills and cannot be tied down to an outward ceremony, even one which was appointed by Christ himself, and so it must be if the Spirit is to remain sovereign over the church which he has brought into being.

How do we know whether a person is filled with the Spirit or not? There are two main criteria by which we perceive and measure this. The first is faithfulness to the Scriptures and recognition of them

as the divinely inspired Word of God. Anyone who rejects this is not filled with God's Spirit, since God's Spirit will recognise and confirm His own words. The other criterion is Paul's famous statement that 'by their fruits you will know them'. If a person's life is not consistent with his message, then we must suppose that he is not filled with the Spirit of God either – deeds must accompany words, because faith without works is dead. The underlying principle is coherence – in the first instance, between God's Spirit and our spirit, and in the second instance between our spirit and our behaviour.

The Bible has never been isolated from the life of the church or treated as an object of veneration for its own sake. Those who have submitted themselves to its authority have combed it for every jot and tittle of meaning. They have preached it, taught it, translated it and applied it to every aspect of the church's life. For those who believe in Christ, the Biblical text is a working document, the living witness of His presence among us. It is not an idol or a sacred talisman which cannot to be touched or disturbed in any way. The authority of the Bible is the authority of the God who gave it to us by means of messengers who composed and transmitted the text as we now have it. The proof lies in the pudding – only if we taste and see can we discover that the Lord is good to those who seek him. There is no other way. If it is true that the Bible was not given to the church in order to become an object of veneration, it was not meant to become an object of criticism either. Those who attack it and who pass judgement on it will get no closer to understanding it than those who

attacked Jesus got to becoming his followers. The Bible yields its secrets only to those who submit to its authority and learn from it in a spirit of humble obedience. Benjamin Jowett's assertion that it must be read as a book like any other book has some validity at the level of grammatical analysis, but it is wide of the mark in every other respect. From the beginning, the Bible has been the vehicle of the church's proclamation of the Gospel, the substance of the message of salvation, the key to understanding the God we worship. It would not exist otherwise. Furthermore, no other book performs these functions or even pretends to. The universal witness of the church throughout the ages is that the message it contains brings us face to face with God. It is this which matters in the end and which obliges us to say that the Bible is most definitely not a book like any other book. As generations of Christians have discovered, it is the Word of eternal life, given to us by God so that we might know and worship him and his Son Jesus Christ, our only Saviour and Lord.