

**“Our attitude to Scripture should be the same as Jesus’ attitude to it.” What was Jesus’ attitude to Scripture? To what extent can we adopt this as our own doctrine of Scripture?**

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## **1 Introduction**

For Jesus, the Scriptures were of course the Old Testament. We find that his attitude was one wherein the Scriptures are the Word of God, which informed entirely his mission on the earth, and which he used on all occasions for “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” in the words of 2 Timothy 3:16. We note too that he was a master in using Scripture as a weapon against Satan, and was an interpreter, freely criticising current views of the Law without questioning the Law itself. We contend that Jesus’ attitude to the scripture is one that should indeed inform us today, while bearing in mind that we are fallen and fallible while he is the incarnate Word of God, pure and sinless, and hence we need to be restrained in our interpretation.

## **2 Scripture as the infallible Word of God**

Jesus’ basic view of Scripture as divinely inspired is evident in the number of times he refers to it as the Word of God. A typical example is in Luke 11:27-28 “As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.” He replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” Note here that he is urging his hearers to follow Scripture in their lives – a direct response to the essay title, given that as Christians we regard Jesus as our ultimate source of authority.

The need for us to accept Jesus’ authority is a general point that applies throughout our analysis of his attitude to Scripture. As noted in Milne (1998), we should not assume that Jesus was in any way bound by contemporary norms and beliefs, as he was himself God’s Word and Wisdom “with God in the beginning.” (John 1:2) and also unfallen as John 8:46 “Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?”. Hence we cannot “dismiss his attitude to anything, least of all something so close to the centre of his thought and activity [as Scripture]”<sup>1</sup>

God himself is seen by Jesus as writing the Scripture by his Spirit through its human authors in Matthew 24:15 “as in when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel”. Furthermore, in John 10:35 Jesus asserts that “the Scripture cannot be broken”. This is suggestive of the Lord’s belief in the infallibility of Scripture, if not necessarily its inerrancy. We are well advised to believe similarly and accept Jesus’ authority.

## **3 Jesus and the Law**

An important aspect of Jesus’ attitude to Scripture is his view of the Law of Moses. A key quotation is Matthew 5:17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” Jesus argues frequently with the Scribes and Pharisees, not about the substance of the Law but the errors of their interpretation. We can distinguish areas where he considered them too lax and too strict.

On the one hand, Jesus’ focus in sharpening implementation of the Law is on the attitude of the heart as opposed to the outward act that could hide evil thought or intent. See Matthew 5:27-8 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” What Jesus is saying is that the Law of Moses is correct and to be followed but does not go far enough. There is notably a contradiction where Jesus overrules the Law of Moses in the case

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<sup>1</sup> Milne, 1998, p42

of divorce, arguing in Matthew 19:8 that “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning”

On the other hand, as regards easing the implementation of the Law, he alleviates the ritual aspects that were not intended by God, Mark 2:27 “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” This applies for example to healing on the Sabbath and lack of concern for ritual purity. In sum, Jesus is strict with morals but relaxed with outward purity and “religion”<sup>2</sup>. Here we can again follow Jesus’ interpretation of the Law but not seek to reinterpret it ourselves further in the way he did, given our fallenness.

#### **4 The Scripture and Jesus’ mission**

Jesus’ life and mission is clearly built on Scripture, particularly as he understood and integrated the doctrines of the Messiah, the Son of Man and the Suffering Servant. Each of these could take an essay alone to expound. I believe one key passage for him is Isaiah 53, which shows the Messianic servant who died and rose again following God’s plan to redeem the world, and is exalted to God’s right hand. Another is the portrayal of the heavenly Son of Man – Jesus’ preferred title – in Daniel 7:13-14 ““In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man....he was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him.”

Note that in accepting the call of Scripture Jesus defers to it, even to the cross, rather than asserting divine authority to change it, as in Matthew 26:24 “The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man!” This deference to Scripture is also evident on the cross itself where Jesus quotes from Psalms 22 and 69 in the Gospel accounts. This is despite the fact as in John 3:34 “the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.” In other words Jesus could rewrite the Scripture or disregard it, but chooses not to.

We can follow Jesus in using the Bible as our guide to actions in life. However, wisdom is required. In my view we may not fulfil the role of the Son of Man as portrayed here, which belongs to Christ himself (although in Daniel 7:18 it is also applied to suffering saints). On the other hand the suffering servant is clearly a position Jesus’ followers are summoned to, as in his injunction in Matthew 16:24 that “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

#### **5 Jesus and Old Testament Prophecy**

Belief in prophecy more generally and in its fulfilment by himself is another aspect of Jesus’ attitude to Scripture. From Psalm 118 Jesus quotes “Haven’t you read this scripture: “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone””. As Jesus talks of the uncomprehending crowds in Matthew 13:14 we learn that “In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.” Jesus identifies his death and resurrection directly with Jonah in Matthew 12:40 “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” Luke 24:44 is the most general of these texts, which besides showing Jesus’ conviction of his fulfilment of prophecy indicates acceptance of the whole of the Old Testament “He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.””

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<sup>2</sup> Evans, 1992, p. 581

We are of course not set to fulfil Scripture directly in the way Jesus did. Rather, it is in understanding how many prophecies Jesus fulfilled that our reverence for Scripture as the word of God - and in Jesus himself as Saviour - is increased.

## **6 Jesus' teachings and the Scriptures**

Many of Jesus' teachings have Old Testament roots, which should further increase our reverence for it and use in our preaching. The parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, reflects the story in 2 Chronicles 28:8-15 in terms of the assistance to Jews by the men of Samaria.

An important aspect is that Jesus views the Old Testament as pointing to the resurrection of the dead – although passages which are explicit on this subject are rare (Daniel 12:13, possibly Isaiah 53:11). See Matthew 22:31-32 “But about the resurrection of the dead--have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” We must here adopt Jesus view, taking him as a source of authority on the afterlife and not accept the concept of Sheol – a form of limbo for the dead - from the Old Testament (as Psalm 115:17 “It is not the dead who praise the Lord, those who go down to silence”).

## **7 Scripture as a sword**

The Scripture is to Jesus a weapon against Satan. This we observe in the temptations in the desert, where Satan offers enticements to the Son of God on four occasions, but each time Jesus responds with Scripture to justify refusing to give in to temptation. A particularly relevant response for the current subject is Matthew 4:4 “Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” In other words, besides using Deuteronomy 8:3 to counter the temptation to break his fast, Jesus shows us that obedience to God’s word is more important to our well-being than food itself.

In applying the Scripture as a weapon in our lives, a helpful passage is Ephesians 6 where Paul describes the armour of God which we need to protect us against Satan. The key phrase in 6:17 is “Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” The Scripture is seen as an offensive weapon in the hands of the believer, albeit effective to the degree that the Holy Spirit’s inspiration – from which Jesus also benefited – is with us.

## **8 Conclusion**

There is no basis for Christians to regard the Old Testament as less authoritative than Jesus did. Jesus clearly stated that He is "the way, the truth and the life and no one comes to God except by Him" (John 14:6) and hence we need to accept his judgements. Like him, we must for example see the Scriptures as the infallible word of God, conveying the law (as interpreted by him), use the Scriptures to interpret our own mission for God, and also use the Old Testament Scriptures as a sword against Satan. The main exceptions to the need for us to simply align our attitude with him is cases where his judgement is involved (where we must defer to him and not rely on our fallenness) and where passages strictly apply to him alone (as for example in Daniel’s Son of Man and various prophecies). In the former case we must for example follow his view that the dead are resurrected and do not simply pass into limbo, or that the law should be viewed as presented by him in the Sermon on the Mount. In the latter we benefit rather from a greater appreciation for the authority of Scripture and for the proofs

they offer that God had planned Christ's mission long before, as indeed foreshadowed by the prophets.

### **References**

Evans, Craig (1992) "Old Testament in the Gospels," Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, InterVarsity

Milne, Bruce (1998) "Know the truth, second edition", Inter Varsity Press