

Scripture Reading for Sunday 1st September 2019

Proverbs 4:1-9; 1:7; 3:5-6 (NIV)

Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding. ²I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching. ³For I too was a son to my father, still tender, and cherished by my mother. ⁴Then he taught me, and he said to me, "Take hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands, and you will live. ⁵Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or turn away from them. ⁶Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. ⁷The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding. ⁸Cherish her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you. ⁹She will give you a garland to grace your head and present you with a glorious crown."

⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

James 3:13-18 (NIV)

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

Sermon: Does The Bible Tell Me So?

The Bible is *ancient, ambiguous* and *diverse*; but those features are part of why it's worth reading!¹ What those words mean may seem obvious, but I'll still clarify them in a moment. However, by *embracing* those three characteristics we find that (a) the Bible challenges and cheers us as we each walk our own difficult path of faith; (b) it doesn't close windows and lock doors to keep us in, but invites us to risk and venture beyond what is familiar to us, and to seek God directly; (c) and it encourages and helps us step out and discover *who* God is and *what* God is saying both then *and* for today.

To say that the Bible is "ancient" means that we are as distant in time from King David as we are from the year 5000 CE! In other words, David lived about 3000 years ago. And we need to go back another 1000 years for Abraham and the other patriarchs. The Bible can sometimes become so familiar that we forget those timescales and what that implies. The Bible is also "ambiguous," and I will give some examples shortly. It doesn't set out a *clear* roadmap or a set of *fixed* rules. Rather, it provides *wisdom* or *guidance* that helps us to work things out for ourselves, with the help of the Holy Spirit. And saying the Bible is "diverse" means that it does *not* speak with one voice on most subjects, but with conflicting and contradictory voices. I presented one example last week with the incompatibility of the two creation accounts in Genesis.² This diversity arises not only because there were various writers at different times, places, and circumstances, but they wrote for different purposes.³ Their writings clearly demonstrate they were *human beings* - like us - whose perceptions of God and their world were shaped by *who* they were and *when* they lived. In saying the Bible is *ancient, ambiguous* and *diverse* I am *not* saying these are problems that we must somehow overcome or minimize or even ignore. No, this is – I believe – part of the divine design for us to embrace positively and align our expectations accordingly. Reading the Bible is, then, an invitation to join in an ancient, well-travelled and sacred quest to know God, the world we live in, and our place within it. Because it is a *quest*, we must work at *studying* it.⁴

Let's consider a few examples of the Bible's ambiguity and diversity beginning with a simple one from Proverbs, a book of wisdom sayings traditionally associated with King Solomon himself: "Don't answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him." OK, but the *very* next verse says: "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes."⁵ Well that's great help! Which is it? I suggest the answer is *both*, but we have to figure out when to shut up and when to speak out.⁶

¹ This sermon is based on a good book I read this summer: Peter Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works*, (HarperOne, 2019).

² See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/In-The-Beginning.pdf>.

³ This is evident in the different biblical genres: history, songs, poetry, stories, prophetic and apocalyptic writings, wisdom literature, letters, and gospels. And even the "history" of events recorded in 1 & 2 Kings is different from the same events retold later in 1 & 2 Chronicles!

⁴ We need to be careful because the Bible can be so easily used to justify slavery *and* its abolition, to justify keeping women subordinate to men *and* fully emancipating them, to justify violence against one's enemies *and* condemning it, and it can also justify political power *and* denounce it! We need to see the (revelatory) biblical *trajectory*, not just isolated texts.

⁵ Prov 26:4-5.

⁶ Consider another random Proverb: "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish them with the rod, they will not die" (Prov 23:13). Those who look to the Bible for parenting advice take this as a mandate for corporal punishment, but they

Now let's consider the following two passages on freeing *Hebrew* slaves. In Exodus 21 it says that a male servant has the option of going free after 6 years of service – along with his wife, if he came into service married. However, female slaves *don't* have that right.⁷ However, in Deuteronomy 15 it says both male *and* female slaves must be set free after 6 full years of service. Moreover, it then says: “And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed. Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the LORD your God has blessed you.”⁸ So which is it, because they are *not* consistent? Remember these two slave laws were deemed to have come from the same divine source – when God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai. Just to make things more complicated, in Leviticus 25 it says: “If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to you, do *not* make them work *as slaves*. They are to be treated as hired workers or temporary residents among you . . .”⁹ Why the contradiction? Because God himself rescued them when they were slaves in Egypt and he does *not* want them to be treated as slaves again. Confusing isn't it?¹⁰

How about the details in preparing the meat for the Passover dinner? This was to be remembered annually thereafter¹¹ so you would think the divine instructions would be crystal clear; alas, no. In Exodus 12 we are told that they are to eat the meal *in their homes* with strict instructions on how to cook it: “Do *not* eat the meat raw *or* boiled in water, but roast it over a fire.”¹² Yet in Deuteronomy 16 we read, that they *can't* eat it in their homes, but *only* in the Temple in Jerusalem.¹³ Moreover, they are told to “*boil*” it!¹⁴ Again, which is it? The later writer of 2 Chronicles, realising the inconsistency, tries to be faithful to both accounts and makes it more confusing still: “They *roasted* the Passover animals over the fire as prescribed, and *boiled* the holy offerings in pots”!¹⁵ Now, because we don't have slaves or offer sacrifices, we gloss over these passages without a thought. But the presence of such ambiguity and diversity is disturbing, to say the least.

Now not everything in Exodus and Deuteronomy are at odds with each other; for example, they both agree on the 2nd commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”¹⁶ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God,

overlook the fact that children then were treated as slaves or property and – mercifully - we don't consider that to be the case today! If the Bible is *divinely* inspired, what are we to make of this command? Do we infer from this that God is punitive too? Not only must we be careful in uncritically transporting 3000-year-old texts into today's social context, we also need to reflect on what our belief in such texts implies, and what we then assume about the nature of the God we worship.

⁷ Exod 21:2-4, 7.

⁸ Deut 15:12-15. We would prefer this one as it seems more humane!

⁹ Lev 25:39-47.

¹⁰ Consider too the troubling (apparent) command for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac given that we are later told that God abhors child sacrifice—see Lev 18:21; 20:1–5; Deut 12:31; 18:10; Jer 7:30–34.

¹¹ Exod 12:24

¹² Exod 12:9.

¹³ Deut 16:1-8. Note: “The place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name” is code for Jerusalem.

¹⁴ Deut 16:7. The word translated “cook” is literally “boil,” translators put this in to soften the inconsistency! (cf. Lev 6:28; 8:31; Num 6:19.)

¹⁵ 2 Chron 25:13.

¹⁶ Remember to see this ancient view of the Earth in light of the image presented in last week's sermon on Gen 1; see [2].

punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”¹⁷ Sounds pretty harsh, doesn’t it? Much later, during the Babylonian exile, the question on people’s lips was: “How *long* will this banishment last?”¹⁸ And then someone asked, is it *really* justice for God to punish the children for the sins of their parents? And to the to the third and fourth generation? This perspective was so prevalent there was a proverb about it: “The *parents* eat sour grapes, and the *children’s* teeth are set on edge.”¹⁹ God responds through the prophet Ezekiel: “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. *The one who sins is the one who will die* . . . The child will *not* share the guilt of the parent, *nor* will the parent share the guilt of the child.”²⁰ God then elaborates on this new edict and concludes: “Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge *each of you* according to *your own* ways. . . Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. . . For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone,’ declares the Sovereign LORD.”²¹ And while this might still seem harsh, God has changed his view on the consequences for disobedience of the 2nd commandment and has introduced *limited, personal* accountability for our actions.²² And that is surely welcome news! However, we should pause for a moment and ask, “Does God’s oracle through the prophet Ezekiel trump the *Torah* – the word of God revealed to Moses?”²³ The Sadducees in Jesus’ day said “no,” whereas the Pharisees were much more open.²⁴ Furthermore, Jesus himself *reinterprets* the *Torah* – the Law of Moses – in the Sermon on the Mount,²⁵ with the underlying assumption that he had the *right* to do so – because throughout Jewish history that is precisely what prophets - like Ezekiel - did!²⁶ Because we Christians focus so much of our attention on the New Testament, we can overlook this ambiguity and diversity that is an inherent feature within the Old Testament. Nevertheless, the New Testament contains ambiguity and diversity too; just compare Paul’s emphasis on being “saved by grace”²⁷ with James’²⁸ and Matthew’s²⁹ emphasis on “works” or good deeds. And if we carefully

¹⁷ Deut 8:10; Exod 20:4-6.

¹⁸ The exiles understood their plight in the context of failing to keep the covenant; see Deut 28.

¹⁹ Ezek 18:2.

²⁰ Ezek 18:3-4,20

²¹ Ezek 18:30-32.

²² There can still be long-term consequences for sin, including *communal* consequences (pollution, the effects of war, etc.). However, the exiles can’t resort to fatalism as an excuse but must take responsibility for their own actions and their future.

²³ This also raises the questions: “Does God *change* his mind?” and/or “Does God *learn* through time, i.e. through *relating* with us?” Traditionally the answer is “no,” (God is “impassible”) but recent (respectable) theologies respond “yes.” That change is *not* in his character or nature, but in knowledge and as an inevitable consequence of loving relationships.

²⁴ In the context of divine punishment for one’s own sin, consider then the question the disciples asked of Jesus in John 9:2, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus – thus rejecting those human punitive connections, and who then proceeded to heal him!

²⁵ Matt 5-7. Jesus as a new Moses figure is a key theme in Matthew, beginning in 2:13-23 with the “Slaughter of the Innocents” and the escape and return from Egypt; see also Matt 15. Indeed, Matthew’s genealogy (Matt 1:1-17) sets Jesus’ identity in *continuity* with the history of the people of Israel and the *fulfillment* of it - *and* of Scripture.

²⁶ Indeed, the ‘honour and shame’ arguments Jesus had with the religious leaders was to establish his authority.

²⁷ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/What-Makes-You-OK-with-God.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Saved-by-Faith-through-God%E2%80%99s-Grace.pdf>

²⁸ James 2:14-26.

²⁹ Matt 25:31-46.

compare and contrast the four gospels themselves, we will discover the same thing there as well. Even *within* one gospel too; for example, in Matthew 5:17, Jesus says: “Do *not* think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have *not* come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Then later in Matthew 12 Jesus says *he* is Lord of the Sabbath and so you *can* break those Sabbath laws because, as the prophet Hosea put it, “God desires mercy not sacrifice.”³⁰ So, what are we to make of all this?³¹

The diversity found in the Bible reflects the inevitable changing circumstances of the biblical writers across the many centuries as they grappled with their sacred-yet-ancient tradition. The Bible exhibits this strange characteristic of the sacred past being changed, adapted, rethought, and reshaped by people of faith *not* because they disrespected the past, but because they respected it so much that it had to be tied in with their present. And that is precisely what the New Testament writers were doing in light of the advent of Jesus the Messiah.³²

Why is all this important? First, we Christians have a tendency to filter out the inconsistencies because we believe God is, in effect, the primary author of Scripture - since we claim the Bible to be *divinely* inspired.³³ If that is the case - and I hasten to add that I believe it is - then why does the Bible exhibit this ambiguity and diversity? In other words, what does “*inspiration*” mean? Well, it *doesn't* mean systematic, divine dictation to the biblical authors! No, the various prophets gave oracles that were deemed *by the people* to be inspired by God. That is why they were preserved.³⁴ Later, instead of a human agent being inspired, the notion of divine inspiration was transferred to an entire *book*. Over time, that inspiration became applied to the whole Bible,³⁵ which is a *library* of books. A community sees a certain text as inspired because its contents resonates with their own experience of God in such profound ways that the community itself recognizes that the author's text goes beyond *his* immediate audience.³⁶ It is in this sense that we assert that God must have inspired the original author because his message is still timely and insightful to other generations of believers - including ourselves. We can't, of course, *prove* divine inspiration, it is a part of our *confession* of faith. Yet even in all this, we must additionally remember the *humanness* of the authors is *also* preserved in these texts.³⁷ For this reason, and precisely because the Bible *is* a library of books, we will inevitably have diversity and we have to embrace that fact. Moreover, God even *intended* it that way!³⁸

³⁰ Hosea 6:6.

³¹ Another example is that in the bulk of the Old Testament God is understood to be the source of good *and* evil; see Isa 30:19–20; 45:5–7; Lam 3:37–38; Job 1:21; 2:10; 42:11. However, by the New Testament times, evil - opposition to God and his reign - was attributed to Satan, see Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13; 1 Pet 5:8; Eph 6:12–13; Rev 12:7–8; 20:2 (see also James 1:13). Regardless of our understanding of evil and Satan today, this was a remarkable *shift* in thinking.

³² While Christians categorise Scripture into two Testaments, there is vitally important *continuity* between them!

³³ Because we believe the Bible is authoritative or normative for Christians, we can become defensive about it to critics making unnecessary claims (like “inerrancy”) to bolster our belief.

³⁴ This collecting of material included selecting and editing too. This process in the NT began with Marcion and Paul's letters.

³⁵ The Bible is referred to as the *canon* of Scripture; the Greek *canon* means “measuring stick,” i.e., a reference standard. The debate over *which* books should be in the canon is something that is decided by the believing community itself.

³⁶ There is an essential principle here: a (religious) *community* asserts the inspiration of the biblical text. And there is an important corollary: if you're not part of that community you will not find it inspired!

³⁷ Just as we believe Jesus was both human *and* divine, so we can claim the Bible to be humanly *and* divinely inspired.

³⁸ We believe this to be true because we also affirm the Holy Spirit inspired the editors and compilers of Scripture.

Second, all this is why we need to be careful in saying what the “Bible *clearly* teaches. . .” on this or that topic, or what we might do in a particular situation. There is biblical support on both sides of many issues - often with divine-sounding mandates - and that’s why it can be confusing. The Bible *isn’t* a book of simple “answers” that we can look up when perplexed; it isn’t an encyclopedia of information, nor is it an inflexible rule book. That’s why we need to be careful *not* to seek the odd verse here and there to prove a point. The Bible is a book of *wisdom* and wisdom is a gift from God. As I said earlier, the Bible is a source of ancient, yet timely, *guidance* that helps us to work things out for ourselves – with the ongoing help of the Holy Spirit. Rulebooks provide certainty and finality; wisdom embraces mystery.³⁹ Wisdom gives us the space to grow; rules don’t. Yes, rule-book answers can provide comfort and stability, but wisdom asks us to risk letting go of what is familiar for God’s surprises. Ultimately, as Christians, we believe God himself became wisdom for us – embodied as Jesus Christ, as Paul puts it.⁴⁰

Third, the obvious danger with over-venerating the Bible as “God’s Word” is the sin of idolatry.⁴¹ As Christians we proclaim Jesus to be the *living* Word [of God, the *logos*], to whom the Scriptures bear witness.⁴² Jesus not only *reinterpreted* the ancient texts, he *embodied* their meaning. He also spoke wisdom and, according to John, said these words to his disciples shortly before his crucifixion: “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.”⁴³ The Holy Spirit not only inspired the writers of old, he is present with us today as our guide as we seek discernment both in studying the Bible and in recognising divine wisdom for our times in terms of ethics, politics, and in addressing all sorts of “-isms.” We have seen this in past centuries in the matter of slavery,⁴⁴ and in recent decades as the church applied wisdom to female ordination and remarrying divorcees. We need that same wisdom today in addressing LGBTQ inclusion, genetic engineering, environmental concerns, the use of unmanned drones, and all kinds of other issues that go beyond the radar of biblical times. And it is wise to seek that wisdom together, with patience and humility.⁴⁵ God’s Spirit is creative, life-giving, adaptive to new situations and goes ahead of us, as well as the one who brings the Scriptures alive to us. Abandoning wisdom is never an option!

As I said at the beginning, by embracing the fact that the Bible is *ancient, ambiguous* and *diverse* means, in part, that its wisdom *doesn’t* close windows and lock doors to keep us in, but invites us *by faith*⁴⁶ to risk and venture beyond what is familiar to us and discover *who* God is and *what* God is saying both in the past *and* for today. And that’s exciting! Let us pray.

³⁹ Rule book answers are always immediate, but wisdom arises from experience, or from trial and error over time.

⁴⁰ 1 Cor 1:24,30; Col 2:2-3.

⁴¹ Which, of course, the 2nd commandment condemns!

⁴² See John 1:1,14; Heb 1:1–2. This itself is a *confessional* statement – not a “proof” text!

⁴³ John 16:12-13.

⁴⁴ The matter is slavery is a good case study. The Bible *assumes* the practice of slavery and you will be hard pushed to find (m)any texts that downright condemns it. Abolitionists saw the *trajectory* of scripture towards justice and equality and so applied wisdom in going *beyond* the Bible to make their case. (The same can be said concerning the ordination of women.)

⁴⁵ See also James 1:5; the book of James is often categorised as a book of wisdom, in the spirit of the OT Wisdom Tradition.

⁴⁶ As I often say, the opposite of faith is *not* doubt but *certainty*; “We walk by faith, not by sight,” says Paul (2 Cor 5:7).