

11 July 2020

Is the Bible Holy? (Ephesians 6. 5-9)

© Sarah Bachelard

‘You Can’t Ask That’ is an original ABC television series now in its 5th year. As some of you may know, each episode engages a minority group in Australia – including, for example, people of short stature, Muslims, sex workers, people living with disabilities, people convicted of crime, and more. The show aims to offer insight into the lives of marginalised communities and to break down stereotypes by giving people an opportunity to pose questions that normally we’re afraid to say out loud – because – well, maybe it feels rude, or maybe we fear our question will expose our own ignorance or prejudice.

Well, tonight we’re embarking on our own Benedictus series of ‘You Can’t Ask That’, and we’re inviting awkward questions to do with our faith tradition – questions you might not really have felt free to ask in church before. Maybe there are aspects of Christianity you’re troubled by, doctrines you can’t make sense of or don’t agree with, or questions you have about prayer; maybe you struggle with particular biblical texts, and wonder if you’re a heretic! Over the next few weeks, we’ll be exploring questions that some of you have sent in. In no sense do I suggest I have the final ‘answers’. But I hope that taking our questions seriously and wrestling with them together will be fruitful for our life and faith.

I’ve received quite a number of submissions, and you’ll probably not be surprised to hear that questions to do with the bible have surfaced early! To kick us off, then, I want to invite Callum to share his question:

Is the bible, itself, holy?

The reason I ask this is because the most common response I hear to the question of why slavery is not unequivocally condemned in the New Testament, is because it was such an ingrained part of the economic structure at the time. Condemning slavery wholesale would

have been like condemning electricity today. I agree with this approach, placing the biblical passages within their proper historical context. It draws out the true radicality of the Pauline assertion that both slave and free are equal in Christ. Yet, I cannot help but notice that those who make this assertion on its own, risk 'normalizing' the presence of slavery within the New Testament, as if it were not a completely repugnant moral evil. Slavery was normal back then, it was part of the authors' context. But does this excuse the biblical author from viewing it as normal? Is the author not committing sin by participating in a society that supports this evil structure, even as he committed God's Word to paper? So is the bible, itself, holy?

Well, as Callum suggests, one of the prime ways preachers like myself try to deal with problematic passages – such as ones that normalize slavery – is by trying to contextualise them and make them more palatable. I think this can help and that it does matter for an intelligent reading of the bible. But in the case of morally abhorrent social practices, this very process of contextualising raises a larger question to do with the status of the biblical text as a whole. We might be able to 'explain' why certain social structures (slavery, patriarchy) are just assumed by biblical authors and left relatively unchallenged, but to the extent that they are, how does this affect our sense of the authority or sanctity of the whole of Scripture? Put in more general terms, how does Christianity conceive of the bible's spiritual authority? Callum asked: 'In the Christian tradition is the bible considered to be 'holy' in and of itself? And if not, how do we conceive of the relationship between the bible and holiness?'

Well, as you know, there are profound differences between Christians on this issue. At one extreme, are those who purport to understand every word of the bible to be inerrant, infallible and sacrosanct – the words of the text said to be the inspired utterance of God. On this understanding, it's the identity between the word of the text and the Word of God that establishes the bible's holiness. At the other end of the spectrum, are those who see the biblical text as more like an 'earthen vessel' or a 'clay jar' containing treasure. The human words of Scripture point to or contain the treasure of God's self-communication, but the treasure cannot be wholly identified with or reduced to the words of the text. On this view, the bible is holy in the same kind of way that certain human beings, saints, are said to be holy. Insofar as its words

are shot through and illumined by the divine light, and help communicate that light to others, they are 'holy writ'. But there remain parts of the text that are unenlightened and untransformed, just as even the saints have their limits and frailties. Where that is so, there are words in the bible that can be said to fail to communicate the fullness of God's truth. My sympathies are much closer to this view, though there are complexities even here. For example, sometimes even what might be construed as the failure of parts of the text to witness adequately to God's truth may paradoxically contribute to that truth becoming more visible elsewhere. So let's try to unpack some of this a bit more.

On Christian understanding, the bible witnesses to God at work in the world and so helps to make God known, to reveal God's character and purpose. This is different to the Islamic understanding of the Qu'ran which is understood to be a *message* dictated directly by God to the prophet Mohammed for delivery to humankind.¹ For Muslims, the words of the Qu'ran are God's own words; for Christians, the words of the bible don't so much hand on a message *from* God as tell *of* God as God is experienced by particular people in particular times and places, and as God inspires human understanding and insight. God calling, anointing, judging, comforting, restoring; God sometimes silent, absent, inscrutable, punishing. The bible testifies to the unfolding (and sometimes the thwarting) of what are discerned to be God's purposes – in creation, in the long history of Israel, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and in the fledgling church. Significantly, as Protestant theologian Karl Barth insisted, a witness 'is not identical with that to which it witnesses'; an authentic witness 'directs our attention to some other reality'.² The bible points beyond itself to testify to the God who is involved in particular ways in history and in the life of the world.

¹ F.E. Peters, *The Voice, the Word, the Books: The Sacred Scripture of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.29.

² Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), p.51.

But if we understand the bible in this way – as a text which is not so much a ‘message’ as a ‘testimony’, and one that’s composed over centuries, then it becomes possible to imagine that over the course of this long history there might be growth in human understanding of how God is present and active in the world. It becomes possible also to conceive of there being disagreement among both writers and readers of Scripture as to where and how God is actually showing up – in the world and in the text. And that possibility of disagreement is in fact explicitly allowed by the tradition.

There are parts of the bible, Rowan Williams has pointed out, that are ‘a quite explicit response to or rebuttal of some other position within’ the biblical text; ‘the meaning of one portion of scriptural text is constructed in opposition to another’.³ The clearest example of this in Christian scripture is the relation between the writings we call the ‘old’ and ‘new’ testaments. Says Williams, ‘To read the New Testament with any understanding at all is to see it as in part an attempt to claim and re-order the existing texts and traditions of [the Jewish] community from which the producers of these new texts seek to distance themselves even as they seek to present themselves as its true heirs’.⁴

The same contestation is visible even *within* both Old and New Testament writings. For example, in the Old Testament, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, forbid mixed marriages and enjoin radical racial purity for the Israelites as part of the re-establishment of the covenant. But these texts are juxtaposed with the books of Ruth and Jonah, each of which makes an elaborate point about God’s favour to and involvement of foreigners in the working out of God’s purposes.⁵ Similarly, in the New Testament, the existence of four versions of the fundamental story of Jesus ‘reflects not only the fact of pluralism, but the fact of engagement *between* theologies: the story (says Williams) is rewritten in the conviction that previous tellings are unbalanced or inadequate; yet the rewriting has the same risk and

³ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.53.

⁴ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p.53.

⁵ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p.54.

provisionality'.⁶ These tensions and movements within and between biblical texts, which have not been smoothed over or edited out, suggest that human beings need to 'learn' to know God, and the bible may be seen as an instance of this very learning – a collection of texts that both individually and together are learning to know and reveal God, where that process of learning is never finished.

But this doesn't mean that just anything goes. For all this biblical plurality, there are overarching themes and threads that give Scripture an integrity and that shape the commitments of the communities that take these texts as authoritative. Themes of covenant and promise, of liberation and renewal, of divine grace and mercy. For Christians, these threads culminate in the event of the person and work, the death and resurrection of Jesus. In him, our faith professes, God's Word or God's meaning, becomes flesh. For Christians, he is thus the fullest revelation of God's truth (the living Word) and the centre from which all Scripture must now be interpreted and evaluated. Martin Luther said that 'Christ is King and Lord of Scripture',⁷ which suggests not only that the whole of Scripture is to be read in his light but also that he exceeds all the words that are written therein.

So for Christians, the authority of the Bible, its holiness (if you like) is connected to its capacity, through the Holy Spirit, to draw readers into a living relationship with this living Word, with Christ. The holiness of the bible is not a fixed possession of the text in and of itself, but is a function of its power 'to enable readers to get hold of the story [of God] and to live their way into it'⁸ with transforming effect.

On this account, the fact that we disagree with, or even find abhorrent, particular passages within the biblical text may often be function of our faithful reading of the text and the relationship with God into which it draws us. For it is in the light of what Christ teaches about God and humanity, that slavery comes to be recognized as a terrible evil, though it took both writers and readers of Scripture

⁶ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p.55.

⁷ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p.57.

⁸ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p.52.

centuries fully to learn his lesson. We will be coming back to some of these themes next week, but for now I'll give the last word to Callum, who wrote:

The most convincing answer I've heard to my question is that, "God writes straight with crooked lines." This essentially means that the Holy Spirit can teach, even through flawed words born of sin. The lesson might be that sin can even permeate scriptural teachings, and we should be critical in our reading. This is why we should read the bible through the lens of Christ's teachings about compassion and love. Christ's teachings provide us with a means of identifying potentially sinful passages in the bible, since they seem so counter to his command to love thy neighbour. The conclusion here is that the bible is not holy alone, only Christ is holy. It is through the bible that we encounter Christ, and it is through Christ that we read the bible.

And to that, I say, Amen.