

The Authority of the Bible

TEXT: Revelation 22:18-21

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on November 13, 2022

I picked that particular Bible passage for this morning to highlight both a common mistake the Bible readers make as well as several of the issues we've talked about over the weeks of this series. First—a pet peeve of mine—the name of the last book of the Bible is “Revelation,” singular. It is also an example of a literary style called “apocalyptic,” a highly symbolic form of writing which we'll talk about down the road when we go more in-depth in the Old and New Testaments. The Greek word for “Revelation” is “Apocalypse,” so you'll see some translations of the Bible give the final book that name.

Remember that the books of the Bible are distinct writings that are arranged by category. Lots of people who read those final lines of the book of Revelation, forget that they are just that: the final lines of the book of Revelation. The fact that they are also the final lines of the Bible is merely a coincidence of the order. There is only one apocalyptic book in the New Testament, it's this one, and it comes last. Those verses warning of dire consequences if you change one word, do NOT apply to the whole Bible. They are meant to apply to the book of Revelation only.

When you remember that the symbols in apocalyptic literature constitute a kind of code, this makes perfect sense. Imagine someone coming to you with twenty pages of computer code that you are to distribute widely. One little change and nothing works anymore, so you'd have to warn every user—do not change anything. Whether it's computer code or literary code, details matter. One less horn on a beast in Revelation can make a difference in the code. Don't change it. That's the only message.

That passage is relevant to today's topic because there are some approaches to the Bible's authority which would insist that it was God who directed those assembling the Bible to put Revelation last with the intention that not changing a single word would be read back to apply to the entire Bible. I think that's totally misguided, but I want you to know what opinions are out there about the Bible's authority so that you can decide for yourself what you think. We've now had a whole series of sermons about the makeup and formation of the Bible as we have it. Today I want to help you think through the issues all of that present.

Behind all the arguing about the Bible are two central tensions: First, what role did God play in the creation of the Bible? And second, what authority or relevance does the Bible have for our lives today? If you approached twelve different people and asked them, “What role did God play in the creation of the Bible?” chances are you would get eleven different answers and one blank stare. The same holds true for the question of the Bible's authority. These are not yes or no questions for most people. The “answers” represent a continuum of belief with absolute positions on each end of the line, but with most people having a more nuanced approach, placing them in other locations along the spectrum.

The matter gets further complicated by the fact that the two questions overlap in significant ways. For instance, if I believe that God played an active role in the creation and preservation of the Bible, I am much more likely to see the Bible as having significant authority and relevance in daily life. But, to begin, let's look at the two questions separately, look at the absolute answers on both ends of each question, and see what defines the more populated middle ground for each. The purpose of this is to help you think through your own position.

Question 1: What role did God play in the creation of the Bible? On one end of this line is an answer I've called the “Sole Author,” the belief that God dictated the Bible word for word to human beings who were protected by God from introducing any error of any sort into the text. On opposite pole is a position I call the “Human Work,” which believes the Bible is subject to both human bias and error, and that God played no role in the Bible's creation or preservation at all, beyond being the subject about which people wrote.

So let's talk about those absolute positions first.

Those who see the Bible as devoid of any error of any type (a position often referred to as “inerrancy,”) tend to arrive at that conclusion because they believe God had a direct hand in crafting every moment of human history, including the writing and preservation of the writings that became our Bible. In this view, there is only one biblical author, and that is God. Those who put pen to paper had such a direct connection to the Divine that they became incapable of conveying any sort of error—religious, scientific, historical, social, or any other kind. God spoke and the writers wrote it down, just as God intended it. If the Bible said that 10,000 men marched into battle, then that’s how many there were. Not 10,0001 and not 9,999—there were 10,000.

This view believes God is speaking in literal terms, in every verse, for all time. There is no historical context that would make the text require interpretation, no personal bias of the author or the author’s community that would slip in. No part of the Bible truly contradicts any other; and if there should be seeming contradictions, it just highlights our need for more information. The plain meaning of the text is there for all to see. It is what it is and it says what it says, and that’s that. The Bible is completely and totally inerrant, even (for some) in translation.

In this group are what have been dubbed the “young-earth creationists,” who believe that the 7 days of creation in Genesis 1 refer to twenty-four-hour time periods and, when combined with the number of generations listed in the genealogies, calculate that the earth is a mere six thousand years old.

We learned in science class that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, so what lies at the opposite end of this spectrum about God’s role is no surprise. For the Human Work group, God had no part at all in the creation of the books that became our Bible. It is, in their eyes, a purely human creation and God didn’t provide so much as a cup of coffee for those who labored over its pages.

Of course atheists would fall into this view by definition, since they don’t believe that there is a God to create, inspire, or even offer editorial suggestions. But there are also people of faith who have simply decided that working in and through human authors in any way is simply not how God operates.

This position doesn’t necessarily imply that the Bible has no authority or relevance, however. Remember that while these questions about God’s role and the Bible’s authority have overlap, they are distinct questions. Many in this category recognize the impact of the Bible on culture and the arts or find the teachings of Jesus or the calls to justice made by the prophets to be worthy of consideration and even emulation. They simply believe that the source of such relevance and authority is solely human and therefore prone to errors, contradictions, primitive moral structures, and political self-justification.

While you can find people in those absolute positions, there are more who sit along a sliding scale in-between. Typically, those in the middle aren’t in the exact center—they may lean more one way or the other—but what they tend to share is at least a little bit of room for God’s influence and for the Bible to have relevance and at least some authority for Christians in daily life. The language often used for the views not at the polar ends of the spectrum is “inspiration.”

Those who speak of the Bible as “inspired” believe that human beings definitely wrote the Bible (i.e. it was not strict dictation from God), and those human authors might have included their own agendas, biases, and factual inaccuracies. The language of inspiration makes room for biblical contradiction and errors, both in the original writings and in translation. The assumed degree of those errors and biases would determine whether a person was closer to the Sole Author pole or the Human Work at the other end of the spectrum, but they’re all willing to admit that the 10,000 men in battle might not be an exact number.

For those who speak of inspiration as it relates to the Bible, God is present and active in its creation, but not *solely* responsible for its contents. In some indefinable way, and maybe in ways that differed one from one writer to another, God “inspired” the biblical writers to record events, stories, poetry, teaching, and all the rest to show us what faithfulness has looked like in a variety of times and places. From that, we can take what is applicable to our own lives and create our own version of faithfulness.

When people use the word “inspired” about the Bible, they mean that it is more than just any old book. It is sacred—perhaps in a way that can’t quite be defined, but sacred nonetheless. God is saying something in its pages—or at least in some of the pages.

Now for the other question. What authority does the Bible have in daily life? Like the question of God’s role, this one has an absolute at each pole. On one end is what I call the “Rulebook,” which says the Bible should be consulted and has a solution for every problem and circumstance in both private and public life. On the opposite end is what I call the “Ancient Relic” position, which holds that the Bible has no contemporary application or authority. Let’s dig deeper.

The Rulebook folks believe that the answer to every single question in life can be found somewhere in the Bible. It’s a rulebook that trumps every law of every nation or organization. Those who believe in God as Sole Author often overlap with this group, at least to some extent. After all, if it comes directly from God and contains no errors of any kind, the Rulebook position makes sense.

Apart from that, the Rulebook position also has a tendency to see every passage in the Bible through a legal lens. They would make no real distinction between actual religious laws and the stories, poems, songs, letters, and that final Apocalypse of Revelation. An example of that would not only be the words at the end of Revelation we looked at this morning, but also things like seeing Psalm 139:13b, “You knit me together in my mother’s womb” as guidance for the issue of abortion rather than the poetic prayer of a song writer.

But the Rulebook adherents face a question that those in the Sole Author camp do not. What do you do with things the Bible doesn’t mention? Some believe that if the Bible doesn’t specifically forbid something, it is permissible. Others believe the only things allowed are those things specifically permitted in the Bible. There are entire denominations that fall in one or the other of those camps.

An example of the latter can be found in the area of music in the Church of Christ denomination. (This is NOT the United Church of Christ—UCC.) The Church of Christ does not allow for instrumental music in worship, but does allow the singing of hymns, which they do acapella. Why? Two reasons. First, they see only the New Testament as authoritative. That eliminates all the harps and lyres, tambourines and trumpets of the Old Testament. The second is their belief that if the New Testament doesn’t mention a given practice, it is forbidden. After the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples are recorded as having sung a hymn before they left. That allows for singing. However, there are no musical instruments mentioned in New Testament worship, so they are excluded.

On the opposite pole are those who believe the Bible is an Ancient Relic with no relevance or authority for us today. Some in that camp look on it with the love and curiosity of an archaeologist while others look with disdain and anger at everything it stands for. Either way, they share a belief that whatever the Bible is, it is not to be used as an authority either in private or public life and has nothing helpful to say to contemporary ears.

As with the Sole Author and Rulebook positions, there is often overlap between those who view the Bible as a solely Human Work and those who believe it is an Ancient Relic, but there are distinctions to be made.

There are those who view the Bible as containing divine inspiration of some kind, or even a Sole-Author type of authority, but for a different era in time or for a different group of people. There are those who believe it has authority for those who choose to accept it, but not for themselves. Still others believe that God is always doing something new and that the old is, therefore, to be discarded or only viewed as a relic of a past faith, even if the originals came from the very mouth of God.

While many might associate this pole with the progressive wing of Christianity, there is a large contingent in the white evangelical movement who adhere to a philosophy called Dispensationalism, a system that divides human history into a number of distinct ages or dispensations (typically seven), each with its own set of expectations and promises. While the distinction of different eras or ages of God’s activity was present in antiquity, dispensationalism was systematized in nineteenth century Britain by a Plymouth Brethren minister

named John Nelson Darby, and it is his system that provided the foundation for the scenarios of the end of the world so prevalent in books and films like the Left Behind series.

Because in Darby's system the "age" of the church doesn't begin until Pentecost (50 days after Easter), all the teachings of Jesus fall into a prior age and only had authority for that age. I have had Bible debates with people who literally tell me that Jesus' teachings are no longer relevant for us, because that was a prior age. Those who rely more deeply on the teachings of Paul than on the teachings of Jesus are often dispensationalists.

Like with the first question, however, most Christians don't appear on the two absolute ends. Again, there's a sliding scale along the broad middle, with many leaning more toward one pole than another, but not fully embracing either. The language most frequently heard from this, much larger, group talks about the Bible as having guiding principles. As you move away from the poles, people begin to look at many biblical specifics as being bound to the time or culture in which they were written but still see in them a general moral code that should have authority for contemporary life.

For example, take the law from Deuteronomy 25:4, which reads, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." For the absolute position, this means nothing if you don't have an ox. It is about muzzling an ox and only an ox and only if it is treading grain. If your ox is treading grapes or if your donkey is treading grain, you can muzzle away.

But for those who believe that it is acceptable to adapt the text to new situations or who want to extract general principles of ethics, there are all sorts of opportunities that flow along a continuum. Some might only move to include other animals that tread grain. Some go further into the realm of principle and apply the law to address broader concerns of animal welfare, humane farming, or even human labor laws.

For most people it is not all or nothing. But the question for each of you is, what do you think? The assumptions we make about biblical authority affect every single word we read or hear from its pages. But often those assumptions are never conscious for us. We've absorbed what someone else has told us, or what we hear in the public square without even realizing there are other ways to view it. In my Bible Society job, the thing that shocked me the most was seeing how many on the progressive side of the ledger put the Bible in the Ancient Relic category just because the loudest voices about the Bible insisted that the only other option was the Rulebook and God as Sole Author.

Our view of the Bible can, and I believe should, be nuanced. The question for each of you, before you read a single page, is...what do you think? Sole Author, Human Work, Inspiration? Rulebook, Ancient Relic, Guiding Principles? Wherever you are, you may not stay there. I certainly have changed my view across my life. But knowing your assumptions will make you a better Bible reader, and will make room for God to speak through its pages. Amen.