

‘WHAT TO DO WITH SCRIPTURE’¹

A sermon preached by Michael Horsburgh AM in St James’ Church, King Street, Sydney, at Choral Matins on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity) 26 October 2025

The opening verses of our reading from Romans are not the only place where Paul praises scripture. In his second letter to Timothy, he says that “All scripture is inspired by God” and he gives a list of things for which it is “useful”: teaching, training in righteousness and proficiency.² Today’s reading says that things written in the past were for our instruction, giving us steadfastness leading to hope and, in particular, harmony.

Given that none of the gospels were written in Paul’s time, he refers to the Hebrew scriptures. For most of his converts those scriptures were to be found in their Greek translation, the Septuagint, dating from the third century BC. The composition of the Hebrew scriptures was not fixed and the translation itself raised problems. Nevertheless, that must have been what Paul referred to. Then comes the question of who had access to those writings, either in their original Hebrew or in Greek. Without printing, manuscripts were not everyday possessions, assuming that people were literate, which we cannot do. Ordinary Christians relied on what they were told, so they had a second or third hand version of whatever their teacher thought important.

Leaving all that aside, a cursory look at the scriptures that we now have might persuade us that they contain much that we should not follow, many wicked acts, murder, warfare, betrayal and lack of harmony. The picture is complicated because some of the high-ranking figures present as both evil and good: Jacob, both a deceiver and thief, yet the one who wrestled with God; David, a rapist and murderer and yet the great king. Then there is the foreign pagan king, Cyrus, who appears to act on God’s commands. We could go on, but you get the message; be careful.

Some things to be careful about are apparently quite simple. Do not think that everything that appears in the scriptures is necessarily approved by God. Do not think that everything said to be done at God’s command or by God is how it happened. Do not think that everything in the scriptures must be literally true. Do not think that God dictated the scriptures word for word to his human amanuenses. Do not think that everything that appears as an instruction to someone is a rule intended to last forever. That goes for the New Testament as well as the Hebrew scriptures.

It ought to be obvious to us that the Bible is not a single book. It is not a Koran, purporting to be written by one person. It has many authors, writing over centuries. Some of them are named, others not, although it is often wrong to assume that the names of the books correctly identify their authors. The ancient world did not have our rules about such things.

Given all those qualifications, why bother about the scriptures at all? Let’s start again. Why have these writings survived and why do they have such power? None of the qualifications I have made are new; they are in the writings themselves. They have all been argued for over history. This is the history of an ongoing encounter with God, despite the qualifications everyone has known about, not just we moderns with our superior wisdom.

¹ Readings: Romans 15:4-13; Luke 14:1-14

² 2 Timothy 3:16-17

We will do better if we think about the scriptures, both Hebrew and Christian, as a journey. Like all journeys, this one involves different modes of transport, different locations and different perspectives. Like all journeys, the road is not straight. Travel often requires us to go backwards as the terrain and the available routes change. Sometimes we make a mistake, misread the map, and must retrace our footsteps.

You may have heard the phrase attributed to the American, Ralph Waldo Emerson, “It’s the not the Destination, It’s the Journey”. I say attributed, because I can’t find the quote in its alleged source.³ Whether Emerson said it or not, I think that it creates a false dichotomy. The journey is necessary. Without it there is no destination. Nevertheless, the destination validates the effort necessary for the journey. As Rowan Williams says, the destination of the scriptures is to hear what God is saying to us and the experience of the journey is how we can hear.⁴

The terrain of our journey includes myth, history, poetry, law, visions and letters. Genesis begins with the vision of a God unlike any of the ancient gods. This is a God who creates out of love. That part of the journey is told through narrative, narrative that we hear for its essential message, a message of truth independent of the mode of its communication. As I have said before from this pulpit, these are true stories that never happened.

As with myth, so with the other forms, poetry, history, law and letters. Everything has its own context, and we must journey through them experiencing the different perspectives that they offer, discerning within them what is the voice that we are to hear.

Ultimately, however, the voice that we are to hear is that of Jesus. Today’s gospel brings us a story, from which we might take a step in our journey. We hear of the man with dropsy. Dropsy is the biblical term for what we know as oedema, the retention of fluid in bodily tissues, causing swelling. Oedema is a condition with multiple possible causes. We can assume that this man’s condition was obvious to all bystanders and may have inhibited his mobility. Some commentators note that Rabbinic tradition associated this condition with sexually transmitted infection. If this was the case, this man was in double jeopardy, his medical problems and his alleged immorality.

It was the Sabbath and “they”, the lawyers and the Pharisees, were watching Jesus closely. Jesus knew this and asked a question about whether what he knew that he was about to do was lawful. He received no answer, so he went ahead, healed the man and asked another question about the priority of rules. Jesus did not deny the Sabbath; he did not say that the rules about it were wrong. He asked about what should be done if one rule conflicted with another.

Again, Jesus received no answer, not because there was no answer, but because they could not say it. They knew, and Jesus brought it home to them, that the purpose of the law was to honour God and that the honour would come better through love than through legalism. In this, Jesus took them back to the beginning of their story, to the place where the journey is to end, the primacy of love. Then he told them that they would not reach their destination if they pretended to have done so already.

³ The quote is said to have originated in Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” in his *Essays; First Series*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1876, pp. 45-88, but it’s not there. [Essays : first and second series](#) This source agrees with me: [Quote Origin: Life Is a Journey, Not a Destination – Quote Investigator®](#)

⁴ “Bible” in Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer*, London, SPCK, 2014, pp. 21-40. Tom Wright gives an evangelical perspective here: [How Can the Bible Be Authoritative? - NTWrightPage](#)



Illustrator of Petrus Comestor's 'Bible Historiale', France, *Healing of the Man with Dropsy*, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, 1372