



The Unity of the Scriptures

Author(s): S. Vernon McCasland

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (Mar., 1954), pp. 1-10

Published by: [The Society of Biblical Literature](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3261365>

Accessed: 09/04/2012 10:28

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Society of Biblical Literature is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Biblical Literature*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE UNITY OF THE SCRIPTURES*

S. VERNON McCASLAND

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

ONCE each year with undisguised premeditation the members of this Society subject themselves to an address of unpredictable length and quality by one of their own colleagues, and in advance they cast the mantle of charity about whatever may be brought forth. This annual venture of faith is nothing less than a demonstration of the impregnable optimism of the professional species to which we belong. But it has also probably grown out of the knowledge that such unbounded trust by one's friends is a good recipe for humility and serious effort.

It is the practice of this Society to authenticate its usual communications with weighty historical, literary and philological footnotes, but for the presidential address this custom is relaxed, and all the rites of academic ponderosity are discarded. This indicates a feeling, I think, that where the spirit of man is concerned, and the question of man's relation to God, the usual means of conventional documentation is forever finding itself unable to say the right word. The genial tradition of the presidential address indicates a persistent and lively conviction of things not seen. Unless I have failed to apprehend the deep and constant purpose which has motivated this professional community during the twenty-five years of my participation in it, you may consider yourselves personally, therefore, as the living documentation of my address on this occasion.

The primary interest which brings this company of scholars together from year to year is the study of the biblical writings. The fascination of this extraordinary collection of ancient documents never loses its hold upon us. Here before us lies the choicest literary production of more than a thousand years. It bears evidence of vastly different cultures. Vestigial remains of primitive, preliterate traditions and rites are absorbed into the highly cultured Hebrew prose and poetry, and all of this in turn is finally integrated into the sophisticated Hellenistic thought of the early Christians. At least three different languages were used in producing the originals. If we could penetrate with certainty into the

*The Presidential Address delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis on December 29, 1953, at the Garrett Biblical Institute, Evanston, Ill.

preliterate oral period and into the various cultural sources of the biblical materials, there is no telling how many more languages would turn up.

At first thought, it seems strange that writings of such diverse dates and cultural backgrounds should be considered as one book, or even brought together as a related library. Yet from ancient times there has been no doubt on the part of those who preserved and treasured these documents that they possessed not only real but also a very important unity. While it is clear that this feeling of the unity of their writings on the part of both Hebrews and Christians emerged slowly at first, it is evident, nevertheless, as soon as they began to make collections, that they were putting together documents which they felt had a vital inner kinship and belonged together. This inner unity as the Hebrews grasped it was the revelation of the will of God in the Torah, as supplemented by the Prophets and the Writings, centered primarily of course in the experience and hopes of their own people.

While it is obvious that the Jews had no idea of bequeathing their Scriptures as a legacy to Christians, and that they contested the possession and use made of their writings by the Church — protesting with all their power that the Christian exegesis was nothing less than falsification and misinterpretation — nothing could be clearer than that from the very beginning early Christianity considered the bible of the Hebrews as its own priceless treasure. That has been its unwavering view all through the centuries. Unshakable proof of this is the fact that by far the oldest complete copies of the Hebrew bible in existence are the copies which early Christians preserved in Greek. Nor was there ever any question on the part of early Christians as to the principle of unity which bound the books of this inherited bible together. It was testimony to the Messiah, which they found as the main theme from Genesis to Malachi, that caused “their hearts to burn within them” as they read the Scriptures. All else was inconsequential. Thus they found otherwise unknown biographical information about the Messiah, but especially the fully worked out concept of his personality and his redemptive mission to mankind. When the minds of early Christians had been “opened to the Scriptures,” there was no further question as to their unity or relevance.

Christians inherited this type of interpretation from the Jews themselves, but they soon went on to add highly significant refinements and elaborations of their own, so that any passage, in addition to what it literally said, might have several additional meanings, and the hidden, esoteric sense was usually far more important than the immediately obvious, literal significance. The Jewish interpretation of the lover in the Song of Songs as the Lord and the Christian view that he was Christ are examples; or one may note how Paul used the story of the wives of Abraham and their sons to outline his philosophy of the Christian gospel.

A more advanced type appears in the Letter to the Hebrews, on the one hand, and in Philo of Alexandria, on the other.

So both Jews and Christians found the unity of their Scriptures by recourse to a method which we now call the allegorical interpretation of Scripture. This must be carefully differentiated from true allegory, such as one encounters on all hands in both Jewish and Christian apocalypses, in myths like the Garden of Eden story, sagas like the story of Samson, and in the great parables, especially those in the Gospels. All of these appear to have been written deliberately as allegories. The ancients had a wonderful gift for symbolical writing. Let us make no mistake on that point. What we mean by the allegorical interpretation of Scripture is radically different from that well recognized form of literary composition known as allegory — a type which was eventually to produce *Gulliver's Travels* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, and such a modern classic as *Pogo*.

The allegorical interpretation of Scripture, as we now use the expression, means rather to treat as allegories passages which were not consciously written as allegories in the first place. This method may turn into allegory practically every word in the bible, whether it was originally written as a simple historical record, a law book, an edifying biography, a manual of worship, a short story, a proverb or a prayer. As the Christian writings came into existence and were cherished and finally canonized, their unity was regarded as the projection and fulfilment of that which had already been found in the Old Testament, and in time very similar methods of allegorical interpretation began to be applied also to the New.

The Unity Disintegrates

As we come down into the recent centuries, however, and the rise of the various forms of critical study, which have been gradually but inexorably applied to the bible, as well as to practically everything else, one can hardly fail to observe that this ancient view which held the bible together has now largely, if not entirely, disintegrated. The plaster has dissolved and fallen out. For biblical students familiar with critical methods of study, there is a question whether the temple can be kept standing. The bonding of the stones is exceedingly tenuous. For some indeed the stones have already fallen in a disorderly heap, and those who pass by view the mound as a cairn, whose origin and meaning are forgotten, or as a tell which one might dig up in search of a meaning.

That the ancient concept of the unity of Scripture, in critical circles such as the membership of this Society and the type of learning which they represent, has substantially collapsed, is a proposition which I believe you would not be inclined to contest. I venture the opinion

that our generation of scholars no longer is willing to accept or to practice the application of allegory to parts of the bible which were not intended by their authors to be allegory in the first place. We want to know what the writers themselves meant and nothing more. We reject the idea of hidden meanings in words which were not written to be esoteric. We refuse to impose allegory upon unallegorical passages of the ancient books. The irresponsible imposition of allegory where allegory was not intended is nothing less than the exercise of imaginative ingenuity. The interpreter who practices this fantastic art may be entirely sincere and honest as his vision for extraordinary things is sharpened by a dogmatic obsession which he carries with him into the Scriptures, but what he brings forth is an illegitimate interpretation. In this company, I doubt that there will be any essential disagreement on this point.

This rejection of the ancient method of interpretation is one of the most definite and decisive results of modern biblical study. But it lies before us as an objective fact which speaks for itself. We know that it is true. For two centuries or more our scholarly forebears have been engaged in the dismantling process, and their researches constitute a thrilling story. They were learning to allow the ancients to speak for themselves, and their discoveries were fascinating to behold. Instead of one clear voice speaking from the bible which ancient Jews on the one hand and Christians on the other heard, there suddenly broke upon scholarly ears the sound of a multitude. This rediscovery of the real people of the bible had transformed an apparent desert into a fertile land with a vigorous population. Scholars have delighted in hearing the individual voices.

There came a time, however, when it began to be realized that although it was a simple matter to tune in on the conversations of plain people of antiquity like ourselves, as it were, we were nevertheless finding it difficult, if not impossible, to make contact with the one voice which we had set out to bring in in the first place. Moreover, although the small voices were always full of lively interest, it became apparent that it was only the one voice, not the many, which deep down in our hearts we really wanted to hear. All through the centuries Adam has been listening for the voice of the Eternal as he walked through the multitudinous Edens of the world. It is quite true that when he hears the unmistakable words he usually tries to hide in the trees, yet in spite of the awe, and sometimes terror, which the divine utterance inspires, Adam usually feels that it possesses just what he needs; it is good medicine for his soul; he knows that it is right; and he is glad to recover his sense of direction. Never is the pathos of human life more evident than when Adam walks in his garden unable to hear the voice. It gradually begins to dawn upon man that it takes more to make an Eden than the mere planting of shrubs and flowers.

Low Level Unities Discovered

As scholars trained in the new methods of critical study became fascinated by their discoveries, they were not slow to see the Scriptures in new perspectives. Principles of unity running through them were not difficult to find. They were as varied as the different specialized fields of research. The philologists had a wonderful time with the languages of the bible in the context of the languages of all the surrounding peoples of the ancient world. Unity of language was evident on every hand, and this type of approach to the bible still continues to inspire our specialists today. A similar interest developed in the study of the various forms of literary composition. Industrious persons of real insight have shown that the bible contains several types of literature which are common to other great cultures, and all such discoveries add to the interest of biblical studies. The historian approaches from the point of view of the biblical writings as historical source materials, and he is right, for the bible is beyond question a source of historical information of unquestionable and indispensable value. The folklorists have also had a field day. They have pooled their resources with those of historians, archaeologists, philologists, psychologists and even the sociologists, to add new light to the Scriptures, the principle of unity in each case varying according to the interest which carries the particular researcher to his task. And the theologians have had their turn. At one time the custom of writing biblical theologies flourished with considerable vigor. There was naturally no little divergence between the systems which this type of study produced, depending on the theological and dogmatic presuppositions with which each began, not to mention their philological assumptions. Today we are hearing again about biblical theology as the unifying principle which an earlier approach to the bible appeared to have lost, and there is no doubt an element of truth in this point of view. To say the least, it is clear evidence that Adam is concerned again about that lost voice. It appears unlikely, however, that in tangible, demonstrable, generally accepted results in terms of unified concepts of theology, the new theologians can be more successful than were their predecessors. It may be of interest to observe that the contemporary protagonists of this theological approach to the bible are often scholars whose training lies primarily in other fields. They are not theologians in the technical sense at all. Nor do they appear to be making an effort to expound the bible in terms of any sort of systematic theology or philosophy. Whether the new interest may eventuate in such an enterprise remains to be seen. For the present the purpose appears to be to call attention to the religious nature of the bible. Also it is to show that our most important interest in this body of literature is a religious interest. These writers give the impression that as they

formulate their ideas they are warmed by some inner fire. They are obviously saying that this warmth comes to them from the Scriptures, or at least through them. In this respect they are returning to a type of appreciation of the sacred writings which has been held by believers all through the centuries. Another way to put it is that there is an apparent return to a belief in the inspiration of the Scriptures. A concept of revelation is thus coming to be congenial to the thinking of a good many biblical scholars of the present time.

Orthodoxy Returns

The return to ideas of inspiration and revelation may be put down as one of the marked trends of our biblical scholarship of the last decade. This might be considered as being a result of the devastation wrought in the minds of Western man by the wars of our generation, or as the breaking out of pent up revolt against a machine age and its various mechanistic philosophies. One could with some success trace this religious tendency as an intellectual movement. There was the Dane Kierkegaard, whose elusive ideas smoldered for years like a deep-rumbling volcano under the ocean. At least there was a violent eruption which was felt around the world. Its tidal wave of religious fervor washed the shores of every sea. The first clear theological reflection of it was the booming voice of Karl Barth. To the generation between the two great wars he sounded like Jehovah from Sinai. In the intervening years a great number of other powerful voices in both Europe and America have taken up this stirring religious proclamation. There have been many keen minds and warm hearts. Good work has been done along lines of constructive theology, yet it appears to me that little has been produced beyond what the classical theologies had said in an earlier day. The main efforts have been to show men how they could believe what the ancients had said. Without in any way depreciating the achievements of the theologians of three decades, one would probably be justified in characterizing the movement as at least a partial rediscovery of religious values in ancient creeds. Certainly one is faced with a religious movement rather than with an intellectual awakening, although elements of the latter have not been lacking.

It would appear to be this general increase in respect for religion in the whole realm of culture that we have sensed also in our biblical studies. It is not unusual in these days for scientists from the most diverse fields to arrive at a religious view of the world; and business men, poets, statesmen and philosophers have often followed in their train. All of us professors know that religion encounters less hostility around the colleges now. But that is not to say that we have experienced anything like a general religious awakening, or that one is on the way.

That unmasked atheism stalks abroad on every campus is known well enough. Not in confident and truculent communism, which is essentially discredited in our hemisphere, but in the far more dangerous secular naturalism. This is the pernicious anemia of our time, and the malady has by no means been routed from our intellectual life, but it is not so virulent as it once was. There is now more searching of conscience for moral values, and an increasing appreciation of the various art forms which express life as mysteries which may be felt but not fully understood. One would probably not go far wrong in interpreting the return to a more religious appreciation of the bible along this line.

The Return of Humility

One senses in this recent movement something more in the nature of humility too. We do not so often hear the old challenges of orthodoxy now, although there are differences of opinion. Scholars from different communions collaborate freely, and there is little hesitation to admire great persons of other faiths. While it may at first be shocking to the sensibilities of some of us to say it, the great Bahai temple has somehow caught the spirit which now moves upon our souls. It has nine doors — one for each of the world's great religions. Most of us are either Christians or Jews, and we could never be anything else, yet that temple expresses something of the unity of the bible — but also of the unity of all religions of every kind and in every land and culture — which we can understand, and there is surely a common quality which binds together all the sacred literatures of the world. We are less inclined to feel that God has revealed himself only to the Western world. Everywhere he is forever creating men in his image.

Another noteworthy feature of this new religious interest in the bible is the absence of concern about the various problems of literalism. On all hands we find a willingness to recognize that a good many stories of the bible are myths and should be so interpreted. We would not dream of trying to verify the story of Adam and Eve by excavating some ancient tell. Once we see that the story is a myth, it becomes evident that Adam and Eve are every man and every woman that ever lived or ever will live. They are ourselves and they live again in us. As soon as we discover that it is ourselves walking in the Garden and hearing the voices, no further commentary or verification is necessary, and the uncanny hold of the story upon us never wears off. In this simple way we find ourselves able to enter into the meaning which the amazing author of this gorgeous piece of writing meant to convey. Much of the bible is like this, although it assumes the greatest variety of literary forms. As soon as we penetrate through the form of writing we suddenly realize that there has been no essential change in the world, or in human

nature, or in God, or in the possibilities of religious experience, from that ancient day to this. We stand today where the Adams of every age and all the world and every religion have stood.

There was a time when religious interest was nourished especially by the stories of miracles in the bible, but the contemporary mood of which we are speaking appears to draw its strength from a more immediate source. We would not deny the possibilities of miracles, but our experience with the application of reason to historical evidence indicates that such stories could at best be only fragile support for a faith that is remote from the reality in which it believes. There is little hesitation now to recognize that the bible contains ideas of a scientific nature relative to many aspects of the physical and biological worlds which are the outmoded concepts of ancient peoples, but this seems normal to us and we are not shocked by it. Nor does there appear to be much interest now in using the bible as a source of predictions of things to come. The bible was once treated by Christians and Jews very much as the Romans used the Sibylline Books, but this type of interpretation is scarcely heard in our time.

It is safe to say that the critical study of the last two centuries has at last effectively and permanently undercut these earlier ways of comprehending inspiration and revelation and the ways in which the bible was thought to support faith. On the other hand, at the same time, there is a recovery of feeling that these early ideas still have a meaning. We do not base our faith on an inerrant bible, or on its esoteric meanings, its predictions, or even its miracles. It is clear to us that while these aspects of the bible were in their time the expressions of genuine faith, they are not susceptible of historical verification, and they may have been a shaping of the account of external events to correspond with what was essentially an inner experience within the authors' own souls. Nevertheless, the bible is becoming a living book again.

One key to our present position would seem to be that biblical scholars for one reason or another have come to feel that they themselves are in strange but certain ways involved in the religious drama. Once they thought they were only spectators observing the play from a comfortable distance. Something has startled them with the realization that they are themselves actors on the stage. It is a question of the basic and radical conditions of their own existence which they face. Concern for historical, literary and textual matters will always be a goal of good biblical scholarship. There must be no doubt on that point. Relaxing of the standards of exactitude along these lines can never be tolerated. Yet they are not the ultimate objectives. We now realize that very clearly.

The attitude of contemporary scholars is emerging from a new under-

standing of religion itself. Basic in this respect is the view now widely held that objective reason which has naturally played the leading role in our critical, biblical scholarship is itself hedged about with very definite limitations. It is therefore unable to grasp or to include within its legitimate scope the full range of all the important issues of life. We do not hesitate now to admit that the very possibility of the rational enterprises of philosophy and science rests upon certain postulates and assumptions which are themselves not established by objective reason. This realization forces us to face the question of the very nature of our own existence again.

Faith itself the Deepest Unity

On all sides are indications of things invisible which support the complicated enterprise of human life. We find ourselves rediscovering the major role which intuition of things not seen plays in both theoretical achievements of the mind and in the most practical affairs of the world. Here we find not only the source of the postulates of philosophy and science, but also the roots of art and love and religion. Thus we are able to understand what St. Paul meant when he said that we walk by faith, not by sight. No man in all history has ever uttered a more profound truth. While it was the great Apostle who gave this epigram to the world, the idea was the common possession of the people of the bible. From Genesis to Revelation, they all knew it, and they did not hesitate to live by it. It was this evidence of things not seen which inspired the religion of the bible, and it is the chain of gold which binds the individual pearls of the bible together into an indissoluble unity. All other unities which may be traced through the Scriptures become trivialities beside this one, which is incomparable. This faith of biblical men was at times naïvely projected into strange distortions of historical facts. It is quite possible that a great many legendary elements have thus crept into the bible. But this is of no consequence to us. Neither the bible nor anything else can ever be used to give objective, infallible validation of the "things not seen." Man's faith must always be in invisible things, of which there can be no rational proof because they are beyond the scope of reason. There is thus no rational certainty in faith.

As a result of the desperate need for certainty, man has ever and again all through the ages sought to validate his faith by means of objective, tangible, historical things. These range all the way from sacred persons and miraculous events to a literally inspired bible and an infallible Church. But once it is seen that all of these external things in which men believe have their infallibilities only as affirmations of faith itself, man comes back to his original dilemma. There is no way

in which faith can ever be changed into something else. Our quest for certainty can not change that fact.

The essence of faith is that it is an immediate intuition of things not seen. The heart of a religious man is cheered by the sense of a divine presence. But this certainty of the invisible never becomes objective knowledge, although it is itself the foundation of such knowledge and inevitably transcends it. In this experience lies the deepest and most abiding unity of the Scriptures.¹

¹ Persons who would like to read other treatments of this theme are referred to seven essays on the subject by Filson, Dentan, Davies, Grant, Glen, Langford and Denbeaux, which appeared in *Interpretation* (Richmond, Virginia) in 1951; articles by Wright, Corwin, Hutchison, McCasland, and Pfeiffer in the *Journal of Bible and Religion*, July 1952, pp. 194 ff.; *ibid.*, C.W. Quimby, January 1953, pp. 30 ff.; a summary of several articles in *Internationale Zeitschriftenschau für Bibelwissenschaft und Grenzgebiete*, Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart, 1951-52, Heft 1, pp. 12-14.