

With all our minds

An approach to reading Scripture

by JANET ANSTEAD

AS LONG AS THERE HAVE BEEN HOLY SCRIPTURES, there have been attempts to explain its creation, its purpose and its special status as the Word of God. We somehow understand it to be an expression of the mind and will of God, but how? Is it God's dictated word right down to every word and syllable? Or is it divinely inspired messages mediated through flawed vessels (human authors) who in turn express the message through flawed vehicles (language)? Did the authors themselves ever dream their words would be immortalized in a sacred canon? How can something written thousands of years ago still speak afresh to us?

These are questions that Believers have struggled with for centuries and still struggle with. One classical interpretation of Scripture is that it is *inerrant*, that it contains no errors of any kind: grammatical, scientific, historical or theological; a view of Scripture hard to maintain in the face of present scholarship. Recent discoveries in various fields of human undertakings have revealed many inaccuracies within the Biblical texts. But we do not have to look outside to human discoveries to reveal errors in Scripture. For even within the sacred writings themselves we find proof of its own susceptibility to error. For instance how old was Ishmael when Abraham cast out him and his mother Hagar (Gen. 17:25 and 21:14-15)? We find misquotes by the Gospel writers of Old Testament prophets (Matt. 27:9-10, Mark 1:2). And we find inconsistencies on even some of the most significant aspects of the Jesus narrative, such as who first found the empty tomb on Easter morning?

These are just some examples of both external and internal proof of "errors" in the Scriptures. Certainly it is difficult to maintain the stance of biblical inerrancy given these mistakes and misquotes. But do any of these mistakes affect the message? Do any of these affect my faith? No! My faith is not based on a narrow understanding of Scripture as absolute and unassailably "correct" in every detail. Woe, indeed, to anyone whose faith is dependent on whether or not a hare chews its cud (Lev 11:6 and Deut 14:7)!

So what are we to do with these inaccurate and inconsistent Scriptures? Well, to begin with, let's focus on their intent and their purpose. The author of 2 Timothy writes that "All scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim 3:16, NRSV); the term here is not the English word "inspired" but rather the Greek *θεοπνευστος* – a word better translated as "God-breathed". Think about that for a moment: the scriptures as "God-breathed". What a beautiful way to express the relationship between God and Scripture. For Scripture is not dormant or dead but rather alive and dynamic – breathing!

This image calls us right back to those creation stories from Genesis where we learn of a God who breathes life into creation, breathes into the very nostrils of humanity to give us life. In Hebrew this is "ruach" – the spirit of God, the creative breath of life. Here we find that same powerful imagery used to describe the creation of these sacred writings. God breathed that creative, inspiring spirit into all the authors of this library of books, inspiring them to then interpret and present to future generations their experience of the divine. And when we, in turn, read these writings, we also feel the breath of God – we deeply inhale that creative spirit – opening ourselves to God's transforming power, equipping us so that these words may live in us.

Perhaps we have been given these inaccurate and inconsistent scriptures because we are not to treat them as something stagnant and dormant. Within the scriptures themselves we find examples of how the traditions and teaching found there were used and transformed by different authors to speak to their particular generation.

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The clearest example of this process is Jesus' transformation of the traditions and teachings of Mosaic laws. He sets aside the old Mosaic law of an "eye for an eye" (Matt. 5:38), the laws of divorce (Mark 10:2-9) and the laws concerning fasting (Luke 5:33-35). When we look at the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, we see that not only do the human authors of the Bible not feel constrained by the traditions of the past, but that God is also not so constrained.

Jesus of Nazareth was the Word made flesh, yet Jesus was also a specific person at a specific time in human history. The eternal Word of God was mediated through that specific person who travelled the roads, who ate the food, who wore the clothes and who spoke the language of that specific place and that specific time. As the Risen Christ, Jesus is with us still. The Holy Spirit, the Advocate sent on our behalf, continues to breathe into us that same Word of God, no longer enfleshed in the person of a first-century Jew, but free to speak to us within the experience and ethos of our own lives.

Once more, we can look to Scripture, specifically to the story of the nascent church: the book of the Acts of the Apostles. This book presents the triumphs and the challenges of the early, fractured Christian Church. The early Christians no longer had the presence of Jesus of Nazareth; they were struggling to find their place and message in a hostile world. Does this sound much different from the tension we as Believers feel in today's broken world?

Particularly helpful is the story of Peter's vision at Joppa (Acts 10:9-23). Peter had been a faithful Jew all his life and followed the Mosaic dietary laws. He has a vision in which he hears a voice three times commanding him to eat foods contrary to those strict dietary laws. The meaning of this vision is still puzzling Peter when the Holy Spirit tells him that he is about to be visited by three Gentiles. When the men arrive, Peter immediately takes them in and then returns with them to the house of the gentile Cornelius... even though this "fellowship" with Gentiles was a direct violation of Jewish law (Acts 10:28).

What we find in this story is Peter struggling to discern (his puzzlement) the meaning of God's Word (the voice) within the context of Peter's own experience (a newborn church which will ultimately attract more Gentiles than Jews). And in that process of discernment, Peter has released some of his old understanding of God's Word (the Mosaic laws) and

refocused on aspects that speak more to his situation (the God of all nations).

We are called as Christians to use our critical faculties when loving God and when discerning the meaning of God's Word in our lives: the Great Commandment includes the command to love God with all our minds. That is the challenge we all face: how to draw life and breath and meaning from these words written so long ago, and allow God to speak to us in the specifics of our own place and time.

Every Sunday, as a preacher, a minister of the Word, I am called to find within the readings meaning and truth that I can convey to my congregation. In this process – in the weekly grappling with these texts which speak in gender-specific pronouns, which address God in predominately male language, which seem to support hierarchies and patriarchies that are abhorrent to me, which in their worst instances support violence and genocide – I find each week within these texts a truth that speaks to the presence of the living, loving God. The texts are flawed, and I do not hesitate to breathe into them the truth of my experience as a 21st century Canadian woman. The texts may be flawed but the message they mediate despite their flaws is true. And that message, every week, is the continued presence of that Gracious God in my life – breathing that creative, transformative spirit on me still, speaking afresh in our time, and in our lives.

This is God's Word for our time, when language of exclusion is understood as a detriment to community; our time, when power structures of ages past are suspect and are slowly being dismantled; our time, when modern communication has redefined our understanding of neighbour to a diversity and plurality unknown before; our time, which is fractured and frightened, and desperately needs to hear that good news of great joy – the creative transformative God-breathed Word.

So this is not a message on *how* to interpret scripture but rather a reminder that we are all called to do so. We are called to love God with all our minds, to discern God's Word as it speaks to us in our lives, and to engage fully in that dynamic transformative process that is our love for God and God's love for us.

Following this article are ideas for Bible Studies to which, I trust, you will bring an openness to God expressing God's self through the Word as it continues to live in you, breathing new life and new inspiration.

For further reading:

Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, *Women's Bible Commentary* (1998: Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville).

Putting Paul in context

by JANET ANSTEAD

For centuries, Paul's infamous statement that women should not speak in church has been used to support a general prohibition against women in leadership positions. In this Bible study, we will examine that passage, then compare it to statements in other letters attributed to Paul. Finally we will compare the statements of Paul to some of Jesus' statements in the Gospels.

1. Read 1 Corinthians 14: 34-40. *

- ◆ What is your emotional response to these words?
- ◆ Do they reflect your understanding or your experience of church?

2. Read Galatians 3:27-29.

- ◆ What is your emotional response to these words?
- ◆ Do they reflect your understanding or your experience of church?

3. Compare the two passages.

- ◆ Do you see these two statements as contradictory? Do you think that Paul expected that they would be understood and applied differently?
- ◆ What do these two statements tell us about the society or social expectations of Paul's time?
- ◆ Do you see them as practical advice or theological statements? Would you be comfortable classifying the Corinthian passage as reflecting Paul's societal norm while the Galatians passage reflects a more general theological statement?
- ◆ From these passages, identify ways our society is ordered similar to Paul's society. What differences are there between the norms of his day and ours?

4. Read Ephesians 6:5,6.

- ◆ Do we accept this statement by Paul as a legitimate ordering of society?
- ◆ Can we reconcile the theological statement in Galatians with the Corinthian and Ephesians passages, remembering that they are all written by the same author?
- ◆ Do either the Ephesians or the 1 Corinthians statements still speak to our society? How?
- ◆ Does the theological statement in Galatians still speak to our understanding of God and Christ?

5. Read the passages where the Risen Christ appears to the women at the Tomb: Matthew 28:7, Mark 16:7, Luke 24:5-11, John 20:11-18.

- ◆ Paul commands women to be silent but the Risen Christ (or angels) command women to "go and tell". Which speaker has more authority for you?
- ◆ Do the resurrection appearance passages support the societal statement of Corinthians?
- ◆ Do they support the theological statement of Galatians?
- ◆ Which of the passages we have studied from Paul's letters instructs us the most about the nature, the will, and the love of God in Christ?
- ◆ Which of all these passages speaks most loudly to you in your life?

This Bible study has, we trust, illustrated the challenges we face when we look closely at our Scriptures and find conflicts and inconsistencies. This process offers you the opportunity to discern the meaning of these texts in your own context, and find a deeper understanding of the many ways that Scripture can be read, as responses to social norms or theological statements, for example. Through this process, we hope that you will find new meaning, vitality and significance in these God-breathed words.



** Background Note: We have no original copy of the first letter to the Corinthians (or for any Biblical writing, for that matter) but rather thousands of copies. A significant number of those ancient copies reverse the order of the verses as follows: 36-40, 34-35.*