
HOW TRUE IS THE BIBLE?

FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH UNTIL WELL INTO THE EIGHTEENTH century the vast majority of Christians of all denominations acknowledged that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were uniquely the Word of God. In these books God speaks. And because God speaks in Scripture—as he does nowhere else in the same way—all who claimed to be Christians recognized the Bible as a divine authority binding upon all, a body of objective truth that transcends subjective understanding. In these books God’s saving acts in history are told to human beings so that we might believe. And the events of that history are divinely interpreted that men and women might understand the gospel and respond to it intelligently both in thought and action. The Bible is the written Word of God. Because the Bible is the Word of God, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are authoritative and inerrant.

The View of the First Sixteen Centuries

There are many statements to substantiate the existence of this high view of Scripture in the documents of the early church. Irenaeus, who lived and wrote in Lyons in the early years of the second century, wrote that we should be “most properly assured that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit.”¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, who lived in the fourth century, said, “Not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere

¹Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II, xxvii, 2. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, n.d.), p. 399.

probability and artifices of speech. . . . For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures."²

In a letter to Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgate, Augustine said, "I . . . believe most firmly that not one of those authors had erred in writing anything at all. If I do find anything in those books which seems contrary to truth, I decide that either the text is corrupt, or the translator did not follow what was really said, or that I failed to understand it. . . . The canonical books are entirely free of falsehood."³ And in his treatise "On the Trinity" he warns, "Do not be willing to yield to my writings as to the canonical Scriptures; but in these, when thou hast discovered even what thou didst not previously believe, believe it unhesitatingly."⁴

The same position holds for Luther. Some hold that Luther's reference to the Bible as "the cradle of Christ" proves that he believed in a revelation within the Bible (not one that was identical with it) and that he held the Scriptures in less esteem than the Christ they speak of. For some this means that not all the Bible is the Word of God. But this is not right.

Luther's phrase, the "cradle of Christ," occurs at the end of the third paragraph of his "Preface to the Old Testament." And there, as the late Lutheran scholar J. Theodore Mueller has demonstrated, Luther is actually defending the value of the Old Testament for Christians. Far from deprecating Scripture, Luther is actually concerned "to express his most reverent esteem of Holy Scripture, which offers to man the supreme blessing of eternal salvation in Christ."⁵ Luther himself says, "I beg and faithfully warn every pious Christian not to be offended by the simplicity of the language and the stories that will often meet him here [in the Old Testament]. Let him not doubt that, however simple they may seem, they are the very words, works, judgments, and deeds of the high majesty, power, and wisdom of God."⁶

²Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, IV, 17. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1893; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, n.d.), p. 23.

³Augustine, *Epistles*, 82. *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 12, "St. Augustine: Letters 1-82," trans. Wilfrid Parsons (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1951), pp. 392, 409.

⁴Augustine, "On the Trinity." Preface to chap. 3, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1887), p. 56.

⁵J. Theodore Mueller, "Luther's 'Cradle of Christ,'" *Christianity Today*, 24 October 1960, p. 11.

⁶Martin Luther, "Preface to the Old Testament," *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, ed. Ewald M. Plass, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), p. 71. The passage is quoted in a slightly different translation by Mueller, "Luther's 'Cradle of Christ.'"