CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE VS. THE BIBLE

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Diterima : 15 Desember 2021

Direvisi : 19 Desember 2021

Disetujui : 20 Desember 2021

ABSTRACT

The acceptance and use of Christian Scripture occurs through a christological prism of paying attention to nuanced language in which grace is sincerely expressed. Without this prism, the Bible can quickly become a moral benchmark for Christian identity; moreover, the Bible can assume the status of a cultural catalog of sociological dynamics. As an inherently christological orientation, the Christian Scriptures are a source of special Christian imperatives that go beyond the text, their christological texture and nuances of interpretation are present in the midst of humanity. In particular, the Christian Scriptures have a central reference in Christ as the Word as witnessed by Scripture itself.

Key words: Scripture, interpretation

ABSTRAK

Penerimaan dan penggunaan Kitab Suci Kristen terjadi melalui prisma kristologis dalam memperhatikan bahasa bernuansa dimana kasih karunia diungkapkan dengan tulus. Tanpa adanya prisma ini, *Alkitab* dapat dengan cepat menjadi alat ukuran moral sebagai bentuk identitas Kristen; selain itu, *Alkitab* dapat mengasumsikan status katalog budaya dinamika sosiologis. Sebagai orientasi inheren kristologis, Kitab Suci Kristen adalah sumber imperatif Kristen khusus yang melampaui teks, bertekstur kristologis dan nuansa penafsirannya hadir di tengah kemanusiaan. Secara khusus *Kitab Suci Kristen* memiliki pusat referensi dalam Kristus sebagai *Firman* sebagaimana disaksikan oleh Kitab Suci itu sendiri.

Key words: Scripture, interpretation

INTRODUCTION

Christian Scripture consists of specifically Christian reception, use and interpretive weighing of two testaments in their relationship after *you have heard it said ... but I say to you*. Reference to *Bible* can occur independently of Christian valuations, either sociologically or reflecting expressions of legally cast morality with equal status to New Testament imperatives that are otherwise given within a christological focus. The distinction between *Scripture* and *Bible* is crucial within Christian theological sensibilities. Reception and use of Christian Scripture occurs through a christological prism in attending to the nuanced language by which its gracious overtures are expressed. In the absence of this prism, *The Bible* can quickly become a tool of moral circumscription as a form of Christian identity; similarly, *Bible* can assume the status of a cultural catalogue of sociological dynamics.

In the title *Scripture vs. (The) Bible*, the following presuppositions are made. *Scripture* here represents an enduring purpose as writings of living faith that are testimonial in texture.¹ Scripture is read and interpreted ultimately with reference to identity, meaning and relationality, through multiple modes of expression, in invocation of existential faith. Scripture is likely to be interpreted quite differently between cultural contexts, though as Christian Scripture, with consistent christological coherence. *(The) Bible* here represents two distinctly different strands of expression that are nevertheless closely related in seeking univocal sources of interpretive engagement—one, *The Bible*, with a definite article, as a sacred artifact and a virtual focus of belief; the other, *Bible*, without a definite article, as a collection of cultural artifacts that offer beneath their presenting texts, interpretive clues for decoding specific cultural beliefs and practices. Two modes of reference to *Bible*—one, as a divine missive untouched by materiality and so composition from numerous fragments, vernacular translation, and contemporary contextual reception; the other, as a collection of historical-cultural writings that tweak curiosity of ancient contexts, which nevertheless remain hypothetical reconstructions. Both suggest an

¹ Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony", *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, trans. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980, 1990).

absence of engagement with the hermeneutical phenomenon known as *Christian Scripture*, with its christological centre of reference in Christ as the *Word* to which these writings give testimony.

METHOD

My thesis is that *demonstrative distinctions between Scripture and (The) Bible have significant implications for Christian identity and hermeneutics*. In terms of method, reference to *The Bible* here implies a mode of communication that is perfectly articulated and grammatically unambiguous in its expression, while *Bible* as a collection of cultural writings rejects this image. *Bible*, instead, becomes a mode of shorthand for the presumably real contextual stories behind these writings. By contrast to both approaches, *Christian Scripture's* interpretive engagement with precursor writings, diverse genres, nuanced vocabulary that is grammatically modulated, framed as a text rendered from various manuscript collations, interpreted within variegated theological and contextual reception, suggests another type of communication. With its grammatical idiosyncrasies and textual ambiguities that are evident in renditions of Hebrew and Greek texts of Scripture, *Christian Scripture* is a dynamic phenomenon that replicates the *Word becoming flesh*, an *event* exposed to ambiguous reception and misinterpretation, without allegories of presumed sociological contexts behind these pages. *Christian Scripture* is cast according to the presenting focus of its testimony, as neither transparent printed words unmediated by reception nor allegories of determinative contexts, for christological faith accompanies this testimonial mediation and its applied interpretations.

Reading words on a page

The materiality of writing—as ink on paper and printed words on a page—is mediated by intelligence to become individual reflection, speech, and actions.² This process is remarkable, even if it is assumed in reading and interpretation. What then does this imply for our engagement with Scripture? Two people can read the same printed words with different effects—for one,

² Compare the philosophical impetus of the *Three Dialogues* of George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues*, ed. & intro. Howard Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 103-208.

these words could invoke a decisive response; for the other, they might be ignored as incredulous. Volition is in play.

Magic words are presumed to cause a consistent effect, with their utterance being inexorably favourable to one or adverse to another. Words of Scripture, by contrast, do not function as magic incantations. Words on any page of Scripture can be assimilated or rejected. Incantations of Bible vocabulary would terminate meaningful engagement through intelligent interpretation and volitional activity.

The Bible has been used as if every word represents the same potency; any word only needs to be recited to be effective. Christian Scripture appeals to volitional intelligence by testimonial overture to faith and imperative response. We need *ears to hear* what might otherwise not be heard, weighed, and assimilated by attentive reflection, thoughtful speech, and intentional responsibilities. This is crucial to Christian identity and ethics.

Early Christian testimony engaged the writings of Israel in expounding the new that is variously expressed by yearnings within the old. Within one Protestant hermeneutic, the Old Testament is a source of *Christian law*, so legitimating its equal standing with New Testament writings concerning Christian ethics.³ In an alternative hermeneutic, the Old Testament represents a *prefacing* tradition that is engaged selectively and existentially within early Christian testimonials, rather than having an equal theological impetus with New Testament writings.⁴ With Christian discernment—following the Sermon’s *antitheses* (Matthew)—Old Testament phenomena were weighed and interpreted christologically through the prism of disciple formation.

³ Primarily after Calvin’s *third use of law*, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) II.7.12. Ebeling provides commentary on this post-Reformation phenomenon. Gerhard Ebeling, “On the Doctrine of the *Triplex Usus Legis* in the Theology of the Reformation”, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM, 1963) 62-78.

⁴ With reference to Ebeling, *Word and Faith; God and Word*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

Antiphonic Christian response installs within the precursor text a retrospective meaning. New Testament writings are antiphonic in response to First or Old Testament traditions—the interpretive centre for antiphonic response is christologically retrospective. Everything shifts by this antiphonic response, which changes the very notion of something having been written in the past to being virtually written in the present, which is now read from the present in interpretation of the past.⁵ We see this effect with typology.

A *type* anticipates what is disclosed in the *antitype* (Christ). The antitype surpasses the type. The antitype is given as the definitive reference that surpasses while answering to inklings suggested by variegated types (people, things and events). The antitype determines what any type signifies; details within a type do not determine what is to be sought in the antitype (contrary to allegories and conjectures generated from types); the antitype (Christology) interprets any type. Christian Scripture's testimony to the antitype encompasses everything the types are not; types are comprehended by reference to Christ, their antitype, to which variegated types only exhibit inklings.⁶ The antitype, Christ, interprets retrospectively as prospectively creative concerning Christian identity and expression.

When Christians become a *book people*, the reality of God invariably ceases to be focused on present anticipation of a pending future. Focus is orientated to past texts and their veracity—either as an apologetic or critical impetus—with construction of contextual dioramas of ancient writings. Yet Scripture exhibits a dynamic relationship between God and time. For Israel, the first hearers, memory is articulated continually by anticipation. When Christian faith is exhibited

⁵ With reference to Georg W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part 1: Science of Logic*, trans. & ed. Klaus Brinkmann & Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) § 153.

⁶ With reference to Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1974) 17-37.

beyond a book identity, God of times past is disclosed and anticipated in the present, in *Christ the Word*⁷, while Scripture's living interface with any time is accentuated.

Between written and read

We often witness and lament a conflict over Scripture verses between opposing Christian positions. Cited verses are linked to networks of meaning; a singular citation invokes a constellation of implicit theological perceptions. For example, *give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's* can be cited from different theological constellations. Citation of Scripture verses can function as shorthand for theological dogma, social ideology, or generosity. Theological positions behind common citation can be very different. The imperative *not to resist evil* will generate different responses. It is therefore necessary to engage the informing hermeneutics behind any citation of Scripture verses within Christian differences. The dynamics are present in the most familiar expressions of Scripture.

The Good Samaritan is prefaced by a hermeneutical exchange between Jesus and a lawyer who poses a question concerning *eternal life*. Jesus responds with two questions concerning the law: *What is written? How do you read it?* The second suggests that slippage can occur between text and interpretation. A literalist might be adamant in asserting what is written, yet be tone-deaf in hearing what can be read. What is *written* to be *read* suggests attending to a text with a willingness to hear and to respond—neither only registering words on a page nor reading any inclination into a text.

Scripture invokes the issue of literal–nonliteral interpretation, though not by opting for either literal or nonliteral, but by soliciting interpretive balance in reading. Reading can be either literal as cramped or nonliteral as laissez-faire. As neither literal nor nonliteral but as *metonymic*,

⁷ With reference to Rudolph Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R.H. Fuller (London: Collins, 1956) 70-72.

Scripture texts reflect *imaginative* possibilities with *tangible* expression.⁸ Does this imply an absence of rules for interpretation?

Rules are signposts. If they are meant to convey an unequivocal direction, they give scope for interpretation. Wittgenstein suggests that a signpost might point in a certain direction but not indicate whether to follow a meandering pathway or to go directly across difficult terrain; the first may be pleasant, the second, a compelling challenge. A signpost next to a pathway implies one possible means of how its specific direction can be pursued.⁹ Rules are like this. They are generally unequivocal in what they convey; they have scope for additional interpretation in what is not conveyed, yet without contradicting the rule.

There are no definitive rules for how rules are to be applied.¹⁰ There are many approaches to interpretation but no definitive rules for their deployment in interpretation. Any linguistic expression of faith and its imperatives, whether doctrinally cast or articulated poetically, requires engagement that weighs language-use as to figuration, nuance and imperative—for example, the imperative not to *throw one's pearls before swine*. The gospels are punctuated with such sayings.

Textual engagement invokes contemporary contextual discernment and degrees of risk as the veracity of a particular interpretation is tested within life and among others. Scripture's aphoristic impetus—for example, *give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's*—summons active engagement that weighs our allegiances. A mere thirteen words opens onto a history of diverse interpretations, beyond a gospel's textual framing, in seeking integral Christian perspective on the relationship between faith imperatives and civic obligations. This

⁸ Metonymy oscillates between specific reference and figurative reference. The signified (what is referred to) is always in a position of becoming a signifier (referring to something else). Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, 1976) 7. Metonymy is turning part of the signified into a signifier. Derrida, "White Mythology", *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 227, Fn. 32.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953, 1986) § 85.

¹⁰ Stanley Rosen, *Metaphysics in Ordinary Language* (South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 2010) 246.

hermeneutical phenomenon, which is generated from the aphoristic texture of Scripture, invokes Christian maturity in interpretive discernment within responsibilities that cannot be circumscribed merely by interpretive rules.

Seeming transparent rules, even for ascertaining textual contexts, require intelligent contemporary engagement that is variously expressed and interpreted. Translation too is another site of interpretation.

The quest for a perfect translation of Scripture replicates the babelian quest for a universal language. This quest is questionable, for translation is never perfect. Vernacular languages are dynamic and changing; they are also exposed to slippage in meaning. Continual translation is essential to communicating *good news* in mother tongues. We are born into a context in which we learn a mother tongue (even if deprived of education in that tongue). We do not protest that we wanted another language and not this language. We are comfortable within language, as if it is our skin. Pentecost is always encountered indigenously. The prism of vernacular translation, even as a qualitatively assessed as a better or worse translation, or yet read in close consultation of Hebrew and Greek, is a natural lens through which a text is engaged. Yet this contingency has been resisted in quest of a pure transmission of information.

Seventeenth-eighteenth century Enlightenment knowledge, like nature, exhibited presumed clockwork regularity. Human sociality too, was referenced to the image of a divine watchmaker (Deism), reflecting a society of clockwork or pendulum-like equilibriums. These mechanical interpretations of life and sociality influenced biblical interpretation. Within one particular theological trajectory, mechanistic models were appropriated in depicting the process of inspiration as a mechanical procedure (like a telex printer), without subjective human *interference* and so intrusion of any ambiguity. Instead of Scripture reflecting the vibrant testimony of faithful witnesses to the reality of grace, people were depicted merely as conduits who wrote mechanistically dictated words.

Concomitant with the proposal of mechanised inspiration, in aiming to communicate without ambiguity, Bible translations oriented to paraphrasing seek to avoid wrinkly readings that

can be generated through closer translation of each word. Paraphrasing conveys an approximate sense of each sentence rather than a more accurate rendition of concepts represented by specific words. Smoothing out the wrinkles of any textual idiosyncrasies, paraphrasing offers general and easy assimilation. Yet in the stubborn idiomatic character of singular words and different grammatical impetuses, language retains a reservoir of sense, causing us to wrestle with meaning and to reflect also on strange provocations that are invoked by Christian Scripture's overture to humanity.

Attending to language

Words seem like handles on reality, though language is not merely a utility device for manipulating things. While words are easily regarded as handles, a handle can be applied in a range of different ways—turning and tightening, pumping and applying pressure, moving by ratcheting, rotating by twisting or merely alternating between on and off.¹¹ Similarly, words have multiple uses, even when they look as deceptively simple as a handle. The variegated feel of words as nuanced *handles* with various possibilities is not a linguistic luxury. Such use of words is already prevalent within complex layers of human communication.

Within conventional language-use a word or phrase (signifier) signifies an object or meaning (signified). A familiar relationship between words and their meanings facilitates stable comprehension. With irony, the relationship between language and meaning is destabilised; an apparently literal expression conveys an implicit figurative meaning, such as an old computer described as *state-of-the-art technology*.

In regular signification, fluid and unnoticed transitions occur from signifying things to commonly accepted meanings. Signification is potentially unstable when there is an unclear relationship between signifier and signified.

¹¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 12.

Within parabolic hyperbole, a figurative signifier is meant to convey something literal. *Turning the other cheek* is essentially hyperbolic, signifying a range of interpretive possibilities for a tangible counter-intuitive response to some form of aggression. *Plucking out an eye* is not to be heard literally, but as hyperbole, which may have significant literal impetus within its scope for interpretive discretion. What precisely is to be *plucked out* and how does this occur as a real and significant change that is nevertheless not self-destructive?

Parabolic sayings that have become very familiar with use can cease to destabilise language and unsettle perspective. Recast as strange sayings, they invoke a challenging though engaging reality, otherwise than the ever-potential instability of seemingly familiar life.

According to the gospels we must *look and listen* attentively, because there is textual opacity wherein *seeing but not seeing* and *hearing but not hearing* can occur. Like a glass door with imprinted motifs, there are opaque elements within texts that give their visible transparency.¹² The transparency of a text can be assumed by ignoring presumably superfluous and seemingly incongruous features. Yet disregarding awkward details in reading, by levelling the linguistic undulations of a textual surface to achieve transparency, only obscures meaning.

Our use of language is comparable. By engaging irony literally, transparently, it becomes unreadable. By receiving language as textured, imprinted, and slightly opaque—so nuanced meaning, diverse genres, hyperbole, and metonymy, which is at once figurative and material—language communicates transparently. We *get* ironic meaning, understand gradated figuration, and interpret variegated nuances.

Scriptural writings offer a certain opacity that invokes seeing and hearing within grappling that attends to these hermeneutical considerations. In their very transparency, texts offer degrees of resistance to interpretation; this is exhibited by gospels, with their enduring conundrums across a synoptic purview, consistent with christological resistance to casual curiosity. An ideal of pure transparency is, paradoxically, resistant to *seeing* for lack of *hearing*

¹² *Pure transparency is, according to Žižek, darkness.* Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge & London: MIT Press, 2009) 214, 220-221.

actively wrought through attentive engagement. Attending to language and weighing words—with what resources are we to do this?

Because of its size and expense, most people do not have access to a dictionary; they must ascertain the meaning of words by interaction, dispute and agreement in their common use. Locke makes this observation in the seventeenth century.¹³ By contrast, we have at our fingertips, ever-expanding digital means of ascertaining the nuanced meaning of words. But do we understand and use words better? Frequent social media storms over the meaning and use of particular words suggest that we might be less supple in our word-use than Locke's contemporaries. Our contemporary conflicts over language and meaning are often orientated toward ambit condemnation of a particular person or community. Within this propensity, a vocabulary is shaped by what is eliminated, instead of being extended as a nuanced thesaurus of possibilities. This propensity is not conducive to developing a linguistic capacity for weighing words toward finely tuned understanding, expression, and communication across a range of human perspectives and ideas. A thesaurus is *treasure*—from the Greek *thēsauros*. One parable concludes the use of parables as the capacity to *draw on treasure* or a *thesaurus of new and old*. Becoming language rich is here intrinsic to *formation in discipleship (mathēteutheis)*—which for Christians is defined ultimately, christologically, by the *word-rich* reality depicted in John's Prologue.

CONCLUSION

Specifically Christian Scripture

This article exhibits two complementary and inseparable modes of engaging Christian Scripture—one, as a scene of disclosure and recognition that is necessary to Christian identity, which is inherently christological in orientation; and the other, as a source of specifically Christian

¹³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, abridged with intro & notes, Pauline Phemister (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) § III.11.25.

imperative that transcends text, so christologically textured and interpretively nuanced amid humanity.

First, on a road to Emmaus, Jesus remains a stranger to two companions, even as his exposition of Scripture becomes a source of *burning joy*, as retrospectively, veiled texts become clear. This scene exhibits a striking differential between Scripture and text—the composite event of disclosure and recognition. Here, the crucial hinge is *breaking bread* through hospitality and its ensuing consolidation in narrating to others. What Christians call *Scripture*, in distinction from Bible text, is dynamic, consisting of a composite eventfulness that is christological, hospitable, communal and infused with meaning through recognition, purpose and interaction between sojourning companions.

Second, christological orientation offers a hermeneutic whereby we can engage contemporary life without quoting the Bible to give our actions legitimacy or our voice public influence amid social issues. By christologically textured *generosity and veracity*, Christians can trust their intentions and intelligence in responding to newly emerging dilemmas with *grace and truth*, exhibiting and articulating with consistency, what correlates with an implicit sense of integrity within human hearts and minds. By reference to christological identity amid humanity, interpretive pitch that is expressed through specifically Christian engagement with contemporary challenges can occur with confidence in the soundness of our initiatives and voice.

Specifically *Christian Scripture* has its centre of reference in Christ as the *Word* to which Christian Scripture gives testimony.

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