

A Review of Adam Hamilton's *Making Sense of the Bible* (HarperOne, 2014)

Adam Hamilton's well-written and accessible book, *Making Sense of the Bible*, has had wide influence in the church. He helps lay people get an overall grasp of the Bible's content and addresses questions of Biblical authority and application. Unfortunately, since this attractive book is marred by several fundamental errors, it is more likely to lead people away from the truth.

Let's begin with his most serious error. Hamilton argues that only the Son of God, and not the Bible, is the pure and fully authoritative "Word of God."¹ He contends that neither Scripture nor Christians throughout history have claimed that the Bible was God's Word. The Bible is a human witness to the pure Word of God in the Son. Its writers were inspired by God in the same way that God inspires his preachers and teachers today.² However, the biblical authors were closer to the events they described and the Church throughout the ages has found their witness useful.³ Thus, the Bible contains some things that were God's will for all time, some things that were his will only for a season, and some things that were mistakenly thought to be, but never were, God's will.⁴

It is important before going further to clarify what we mean by calling the Bible "God's Word." When we say that the Bible is the Word of God we mean that it is God's true, authoritative revelation of himself. The question, then, is not the use of the term "God's Word." The question is whether Scripture gives evidence that it is God's true and authoritative self-revelation, and whether the church throughout history has considered it so.

First, we turn to Scripture. We will argue that the Old Testament claims divine authority; that the New Testament testifies to the authority of the Old; and that the New Testament bears witness to its own authority. Second, we will show that Christ and the Bible are so intimately connected that to deny the Bible's divine authority is to deny Christ's authority. Third, we will expose the fallacy of Hamilton's argument that the Church has not considered the Bible God's Word.

There are many indications within the Bible that it is God's self-revelation. The Old Testament begins by attributing the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) to Moses, with whom God

¹ Pages 129-152.

² Page 168, 173.

³ Pages 153-156, 173-174.

⁴ Pages 171-182.

spoke uniquely “face to face,” as a man speaks to his friend (Numbers 12:6-8). The attribution of the Psalter to David and the Wisdom books to Solomon, whom God especially chose to lead his people, is another indication that these books are God’s self-revelation. The prophets regularly claim to speak the very word of God (for instance, “the word of the Lord” occurs at least 81 times in Jeremiah and 62 times in Ezekiel). Their message called God’s people back to the covenant established through Moses, affirming its validity as God’s word. The fact that the Jewish canon calls Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings the “former prophets” assumes a similar authority for them.

The New Testament recognizes the Old as the word of God. In vain Hamilton attempts to explain away the significance of 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work*” (NRSV, italics added). His main error, however, is that he overlooks the way in which *every* New Testament book and *every* New Testament author quotes the Old Testament with complete confidence in its truthfulness and its authority as God’s revelation. “In is written” (more than 70 times in the New Testament), “God says” (used repeatedly in Hebrews to introduce Old Testament quotations), “the Scripture cannot be broken” (Jesus in John 10:25), “not one jot or one tittle will pass from the law until all is fulfilled” (Jesus in Matthew 5:18). etc. Furthermore, with the possible exception of Jude, no New Testament book quotes any book not in our Old Testament as authoritative divine revelation.⁵ Finally, from the New Testament it is clear that *Jesus* accepted the books of our Old Testament as the authoritative revelation of God that he fulfilled.⁶

The New Testament bears witness to its divine authority. The earliest Christians accepted the books of the New Testament *only* because they believed they were “Apostolic.”⁷ That is, they were the testimony of Jesus’ appointed and commissioned apostles to God’s self-revelation in the one who became incarnate, was crucified, rose from the dead, and took his seat at God’s right hand in fulfillment of the Old Testament. This was the testimony of those whom Jesus himself had appointed. This conviction is rooted in the New Testament. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record Jesus’ choosing his disciples (Mark 3:13-19), commissioning them as apostles and

⁵ Craig A. Evans, “The Scriptures of Jesus and His Earliest Followers,” *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

⁶ Craig Blomberg, “Reflections on Jesus’ View of the Old Testament,” *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans: 2016) 669-701.

⁷ Charles E. Hill, “‘The Truth Above All Demonstration’” Scripture in the Patristic Period to Augustine,” *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans: 2016) 43-88.

giving them unique authority (Mark 6:6-12, Matthew 10:1-8, 16:19, 18:18, 19:28), and then sending them out to teach all nations what he has taught them (Matthew 28:16-20). Luke claims that his narrative is based on “the eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (Luke 1:2). John 20 and 21 record Jesus giving his apostles authority (John 20:21-23) and claim that the Gospel of John is based on their testimony (John 20:30, 21:24). Paul, Peter, James, and John (in the Revelation) all claim to speak with apostolic authority. Hamilton claims that Paul did not think of himself as writing Scripture. When Paul begins his letters with “Paul an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God” he is claiming to speak for God just as certainly as the Old Testament prophets did when they said, “thus says the Lord.” When we delve into early Church history we have no record of a time when Paul’s letters were not considered Scripture.

Now we are in a position to see the deep fallacy in claiming that only Christ, but not the Bible, is God’s Word, his authoritative, true, self-revelation. First, we have no access to Christ except through the Scripture. Thus, if Christ alone and not the Bible is God’s self-revelation, then we have no sure and clear access to that revelation. There is something a bit too self-serving about putting the “Word of God” beyond our reach.⁸

But, in light of what we have said above, the problem is deeper still. We have seen that Christians received both the Old Testament and the New Testament as God’s word on *Jesus’* authority. The Old he claimed to fulfill. The New was the testimony of his authoritatively appointed witnesses and representatives. Thus, there is no escape. To deny the authority of Scripture as the authoritative Word of God is to deny Jesus’ authority.

If anything, Hamilton’s argument from church history is even more flawed. For instance, he cites Article 6 of the Thirty-Nine Anglican Articles of Religion, established in 1571 and later adapted by the Methodists, to show that the special inspiration of the Scripture was not important.⁹ He is correct that this article does not mention inspiration or call the Bible “God’s Word.” It lists the sixty-six books of our Bible and then claims that everything necessary for salvation is found within these books. However, at the time of the Reformation *everyone* believed in the unique inspiration and full

⁸ Hamilton attempts to escape “problems” in Scripture by attributing full divine authority not to the Biblical text but to Christ alone. Yet he criticizes evangelicals for attributing “inerrancy” to the original manuscripts of Scripture that we don’t have rather than to the ancient Greek and Hebrew copies that we possess. There seems to be an inconsistency here. We have no access to Christ except through the, according to Hamilton, flawed books of the New Testament. However, on the basis of textual criticism, we have a high degree of certainty concerning the original Scriptural autographs based on the copies that we do have.

⁹ Pages 141 (see note 8 from this page which is in the back of the book on page 319), 168-169.

trustworthiness of the Bible as God's Word or self-revelation. *Everyone*—Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Anabaptist. There was no need for the Thirty-Nine Articles to assert Scripture's truthfulness. The burning question of the day was not the truthfulness and authority of Scripture, but the relative authority of Scripture and Tradition. This is the question addressed by article 6. It lists the sixty-six books of the Bible (to define what the Bible is in contrast to Tradition). Then it asserts that this Bible has authority over extra-biblical church tradition in determining all that is necessary for salvation. Both the authors of this article and John Wesley who adapted it for the Methodists would have been appalled by its being used to minimize Scripture's unique inspiration or full trustworthiness. And, by the way, after the reading of Scripture in the Anglican services of morning and evening prayer, it is customary for the reader to say, "*The Word of the Lord.*" To which the congregation affirms its gratitude at receiving God's true self-revelation by replying, "Thanks be to God."

Now we are able to evaluate Hamilton's handy formula that the Bible contains some things that are God's will for all time, some that were his will for a limited time, and some that were never his will. On the surface, this simplistic formula seems to make sense. Why, those things we find objectionable were never God's will. Obviously, other things, such as the Old Testament sacrificial system, were his will until Christ came. The teaching about love for God and neighbor is, again obviously, always true.

There are a number of flaws in this over-simplistic approach. First, it ignores the New Testament's use of the Old. Hamilton has to argue that the "all Scripture" of 2 Tim 3:16 doesn't mean "all." As argued above, he overlooks the way in which the New Testament writers appeal to the Old Testament with complete confidence. His suggestion that Jesus should be the arbiter of what has continuing validity undercuts his own position, since Jesus claims not to negate but to fulfill the Old Testament.

The things, then, that Hamilton considers "never God's will" and those that he considers "God's will for a time" must be evaluated not simply by *our* interpretation of the words and deeds of Jesus in the Gospels but in light of the entire Old and New Testaments. Let's take the Old Testament sacrificial system as an example of something valid only for a season. Yes, by his self-sacrifice Christ fulfilled this sacrificial system and brought the time for its practice to an end. However, the Scriptural record of this sacrificial system still remains valid as a necessary means for understanding the work of Christ. Like the sacrificial system, much that pertained to the Old Covenant continues to be valid but *in a different way* due to fulfillment in Christ. Circumcision, for

instance, has now become “circumcision of the heart.” It is, then, not merely the words and deeds of Jesus in the Gospels but the entire New Testament in conjunction with the Old Testament that help us to understand how everything is fulfilled in Christ. In him, just as the New Testament writers claimed, all of the Old Testament continues valid in its *fulfillment*. And indeed, if the New Testament is the authorized apostolic testimony to Jesus, and if Jesus claimed that he fulfilled the Old Testament, that is exactly what we should expect.

The two main issues that Hamilton and others would include among the things that were “never God’s will” are the divine approval of the Israelite conquest of Canaan and the biblical prohibitions against same-sex intercourse. They often use the conquest to argue that the Bible contains errors. Then they argue that the prohibition against same-sex intercourse is one of those errors. It appears that sexuality is their main concern.

The problem with this approach is that the Bible’s teaching about same-sex intercourse is an integral part of its teaching on marriage. All of the Bible’s sexual prohibitions are meant to foster marriage as the life-long union between a man and a woman, as pictured in the creation account and affirmed by Jesus. Thus, these biblical prohibitions cannot be separated from that whole and nullified without radically altering everything that the Bible says about what it means to be human, the significance of male and female, the nature of the family, and the character of society. For a thorough, honest, scholarly consideration of this issue see Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001). Thus, whatever one thinks about the conquest, denial of the Bible’s teaching on sexuality is a denial of its fundamental message.

There isn’t space within the scope of this brief (?) review to deal adequately with the issue of the conquest.¹⁰ There are, however, three things that we must remember. First, just as we must avoid isolating the Bible’s prohibition of same-sex intercourse from its larger context, so we must avoid isolating the conquest. God’s giving Israel this land as the place where they would dwell with him in holiness reflecting his character is integral to the narrative and theology of the whole Bible. This “promised” land is a renewal of Eden and a foreshadowing of the New Heaven and Earth to come. All evil must be excluded from this land because God dwells in it and because any evil diminishes the blessings of its inhabitants. Indeed, when God’s people are sent into exile they suffer the *same* judgment for sin suffered by the Canaanites

¹⁰ See Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2016).

before them. Thus, the facile solution that in reality God did not command and Israel did not carry out the conquest cuts, if not the heart, the liver out of the Biblical narrative and its message of divine revelation.

Second, it is crucial to remember that the Bible, as a whole, leaves no room for mistreatment or oppression. In both Old and New Testaments God is concerned for all the nations of the world. We are commanded to love our neighbors, even our enemies,¹¹ and to care for the needy and oppressed. Prohibition of mistreatment, however, does not negate God's judgment on sin or punishment of the unrepentant sinner. Jesus has more to say about judgment than any other person in Scripture.

Third, though the infinite God has revealed himself sufficiently for our reconciliation, he has not revealed himself exhaustively. In fact, the Christian tradition has long recognized that finite creatures cannot fully comprehend the infinite God. We should, then, never expect that his self-revelation will fully conform to our limited understanding. There is such a thing as *Making [too much] Sense of the Bible*. Compare the title of Christopher J. H. Wright's book, mentioned in the last footnote, *The God I don't Understand*.

It is far better, then, to accept, as Jesus and the New Testament writers did, the totality of God's self-revelation in Scripture. A simplistic elimination of some aspects of this revelation as never God's will ignores both the dynamic unity of the Bible and the fact that God is beyond our full comprehension. When human inclination, contemporary cultural prejudice, and sentiment become the final arbiter of what God has said: we are in danger of teaching "man-made ideas as commands from God" (Mark 7:7 NLT).

Gareth Lee Cockeril

Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology, Emeritus
Wesley Biblical Seminary

¹¹ On love of one's personal enemies in the Old Testament, see Exodus 23:4. Much of the time when the Old Testament uses the word "enemies" it is not talking about our personal enemies but the "enemies" of God and His people, those who do not believe in God and who would do harm to his people.