

# **Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Revelation and Scripture, Session 20, D.A. Carson's FAQs from his book, The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures**

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This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson in his teaching on Revelation and Holy Scripture. This is session 20, D. A. Carson's FAQs from his book, *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scripture*.

I'm continuing with the frequently asked questions, the answers to the same, at the back of *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, edited by D. A. Carson, in order to share some of these riches with you.

Hopefully, some of you will buy and read the book, but in any case, you're getting the creme de la creme. You're getting the conclusions of some of these essays, and it is worthwhile. They are worthwhile.

14.1, many scholars demonstrated that in its origins, Christianity was highly diverse, theologically speaking and that unity of doctrine was gradually and rigidly enforced by the group that viewed itself alone as orthodox, a process that took three or four centuries. Answer: certainly, that stance has had vociferous proponents. It became popular owing to a book by Walter Bauer in the 1930s, and today its most prominent popularizer is doubtless Bart Ehrman, the former evangelical Christian. But the actual evidence runs in the other direction.

It is not that from many theological stances, one arose triumphant, but from one shared theological vision, many diverse heresies sprang up. So, the Bauer thesis, as it's called, said Paul's writings and Peter's. The Book of Acts reveals in Galatians that there was a Peter theology and a Paul theology, and they were against each other in different factions and so forth.

Carson says no, he's summarizing the writer of the 14th chapter of this book. No, there was substantial unity and diverse heresies, which were outlawed by the church, sprang up from within that unified vision.

14.2, what evidence supports this claim, overturning the work of Bauer and, more recently, Ehrman? First, within the pages of a New Testament, careful what Jesus shows, there was far more theological unity than is sometimes alleged.

It has been shown that the apostles were the people closest to Jesus, and they were stamped by him such that the differences in their stances, compared with second-century figures who had no immediate access to Jesus, were relatively small. Second,

all four of the New Testament Gospels had discernible connections with specific apostles. By contrast, later documents such as the Gospel of Judas and the Gospel of Mary have no traceable and credible connections with the apostles.

Third, it is possible to follow this theological trajectory, the trajectory of the proto-Orthodox who preserve the apostolic tradition, in marked contrast to the literature of other groups whose inspiration demonstrably does not connect with the apostolic tradition. How should we think of the relationship between God and his word? Although it is transparent that God and his word are not ontologically identical, nevertheless, scripture repeatedly and in highly diverse ways insists that to believe God's word is to believe God, to obey God's word is to obey God, to disobey God's word is to disobey him, and so forth. Scripture doesn't confuse God and his word, but it invests his word with the authority of God himself.

Isn't it possible, 16.2, to believe the Gospel without being too fussed about believing everything in the Bible? Certainly, it is possible; people do it all the time, but it's not possible to do it consistently. Or, to put the matter more dramatically, sooner or later, one wonders if it is the Gospel that is truly being believed. The consistent pattern of Old Testament witness, of apostolic witness, of the teaching of Jesus himself ties not only the Gospel but also the appropriate response to the Gospel to the shape of God's self-disclosure in his word.

So yes, we believe the Gospel to be saved, but the Christian life entails much more than simply believing the Gospel. And so, God has given teachers to the church to study and encourage us and share the fruit of their works, one of the purposes of which is to stimulate us to study at least the word of God itself. The notion of two authors, 17.1, one divine and one human, standing behind the scriptures is intrinsically difficult.

How should we begin to think about these things? The answer is that the challenge is to be faithful to the biblical language itself. If one pits the human author against the divine author, then if the importance of one is underscored and the other correspondingly diminished, and many proposed models have been guilty of that mistake, that is problematic, to be sure. Sometimes, the discussion has turned to words that have been misunderstood.

For example, across the centuries many spoke of scripture being dictated by God, which some might initially think reduces the human writer to a secretary taking dictation. But the best of those theologians who use the language of dictation, for example, Calvin, chose the Latin dictate not to describe the means of delivery but to stress the result; the words of scripture are indeed God's words. At the same time they were fully insistent on the contribution that the human authors made, way beyond mere transcription.

I said this previously in the lectures: to claim that the church has held to divine dictation is to confuse the use of that language with the result of the bible, to confuse that with a theory of inspiration, that is divine dictation of the word through mechanical authors functioning as mechanical secretaries, which is simply problematic.

18.2, does the creation account in Genesis sound very much like, for example, the Babylonian Enuma Elish and other ancient Near Eastern creation myths? Certainly, there are some interesting parallels, but responsible inferences drawn from these parallels demand that we evaluate not only the differences between Genesis and the Babylonian myths but also possible explanations of their ostensible similarities. Careful study discloses massive differences in worldview between Genesis and Enuma Elish.

In their treatments, 19.1, of biblical authority, haven't Christians paid too much attention to the bible's diverse literary genres? Yes, this is a fair comment. Most serious treatments of the bible's authority have developed in confessional and ecclesiastical settings. Many of the best treatments of the bible's literary genres developed in university settings.

In recent years, however, much more attention has been paid to some of the relationships between authority and literary genre, not least, and with somewhat different results, in the writings of Brevard Childs and Kevin J. Van Hooser. How is the authority of scripture related to scripture's diverse literary genres?

19.2, for example, the bible's ordering narratives, its storyline, its ordering narrative, its storyline, not only orders the rest of the biblical material but establishes what did, in fact happen, and how the narrative leads to the historical revelation of Jesus Christ. Where law makes demands, where prophecy exhorts, rebukes, threatens, and predicts, each genre not only has its own way of making its appeal but underscores the authority of God in making the demands or issuing the, for example, rebuke.

Careful study demonstrates not only how each genre works but also how each contributes to the whole to provide a unified revelation. So, yes, the study of literature in terms of the bible's different types of literature and its different genres is yielding fruit to those who believe the bible and pay attention to the genres because much more is communicated in scripture than we understood before we carefully studied those genres. Are there advantages,

19.3, bound up with the bible's highly diverse literary genres? Yes, certainly.

The Bible's diversity, as Barry Webb put it, quote, tells us that the authority of the bible, I'm quoting, is the kind of authority that fully engages with our humanity. It speaks to us from within our humanity and not just from outside, as in creation, for

example. It is not an authority of raw power but one that fully recognizes and engages with our weakness, struggle, and sinfulness.

In other words, it's a gracious, rather than a coercive authority. Close quote. In this respect, the bible is very different from the Quran.

The latter pictures a god who cannot participate in humanity without somehow threatening his own deity. The god of the bible not only interacts at many levels with human beings, reflected in diverse literary genres but also interacts supremely by becoming a human being himself. He is the god, quote, who not only gave us a book and prophet but gave us himself. Close quote.

20.1, what is meant by the clarity of scripture? After all, many people find the bible to be pretty obscure. It does not mean every part of scripture is equally easy to understand, or that there's no need for teachers, or that every opinion about what the text means is equally valuable.

Rather, it should be thought of, as Mark Thompson's title puts it, as the generous gift of a gracious father. Language itself is a gift from God, and God has chosen to lay out his redemptive purposes in a language he gave to his image-bearers. The incarnate son of God repeatedly presupposes the clarity of scripture, not least when he repeatedly asks the question, have you not read? And the Spirit himself is involved both in the provision of god's word and its reception.

In sum, quote, the clarity of scripture is that quality of scripture which, arising from the fact that it is ultimately god's effective communicative act, ensures the meaning of this text is accessible to all who come to it in faith. Close quote, Mark Thompson's essay. Number 20.

Isn't it a bit circular, 22.1, to try to establish Jesus' view of the scriptures by appealing to the gospels, which are part of the scriptures? Certainly, one wants to avoid vicious circularity, but there's a softer circularity that is unavoidable whenever one considers anything claiming supreme authority in any realm. If, to justify that supreme authority, one is forced to appeal to some external authority, then arguably, that external authority displaces the first, which calls for us to establish its authority with the same tension. One tumbles into an infinite regression.

In other words, you're never done establishing an authority to establish, to find an authority that establishes that authority. Many scholars acknowledge the inevitability of some kind of soft circularity. Indeed, it's desirability.

Chapter 22 of the book. First question. Tell me about the Old Testament, New Testament use of the old 23.2. The New Testament's use of the Old is variegated and complex.

Sometimes, the New Testament writers simply use Old Testament language without intending to claim anything more than a linguistic connection to the Old Testament passage. Where connection is intended, it may belong to several kinds. For instance, direct fulfillment of a specific prediction, a subtle contextual echo, some kind of carefully defined census plenior, fuller sense, a typological connection of some kind and more.

When these sorts of connections are carefully explored, the way the New Testament writers use the Old Testament is a great deal more credible than the use of the Old Testament in some of the parallel Judaism of the first century. The New Testament does use the Old Testament responsibly, Carson argues, citing the 23rd chapter of this book. But it's not a simple matter.

It is done. He says it's variegated. It's diverse and sometimes complex.

But how should we move from scripture to theology? 24.2. Many suggestions have been put forward, for example, merely add up all that the scripture teaches. Principle. Principles from concrete examples to universal abstract principles.

Follow the trajectories of scripture rather than what scripture explicitly says, and many more. In each case, whatever the merits of the proposal, there are dangers to avoid. For example, if one follows the principalizing option, it's easy to make the abstract principles, which are possible inferences from the text, more authoritative than the concrete particulars of the text.

What we must see is that whereas scripture has supreme authority, God has also given us teachers the long history of the church the spirit himself, not to mention our minds and hearts, not so much to work out principles by which we master the text, but that we might be mastered by the text, living under it, breathing it, living it out as we seek faithfulness to the counsel of God. What are we to say, 25.1, of the widespread cynicism over the ability to know anything about God? Epistemology, the study of knowledge and how we know or think we know, is a perennially challenging subject. It lurks not only behind the most sophisticated discussion of what we mean by the knowledge of God, but also behind Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

Because the topic is currently in such disarray, it is helpful to read a survey of some of the key aspects that are currently being debated or ignored. Tell me more. What is the value of epistemology, 25.2? There are many.

Among them is the focus on what constitutes justified or warranted belief. I may believe the moon is made of green cheese, but is the belief warranted? I may believe Jesus is the only way to God, but is that belief justified? One soon learns the wide

range of questions, cognitive, moral, human, finiteness, and sinfulness, evidence, reason, the senses divinitatis, the sense of divinity that God built into human beings, revelation, faith, that are bound up with the discipline. In other words, epistemology is worthy of study, but it is a complicated matter indeed.

Doesn't a word such as inerrancy, 28.1, lose its attractiveness and utility if it has to be buttressed by endless qualifications, distinctions, and definitions, as in the Chicago Statement? Answer: such qualifications and distinctions surround almost every weighty term used in theological discourse, including, for example, God, justification, truth, spirit, grace, and so on. In each case, one can provide a simple definition, but in the cut and thrust of subsequent exchanges, it is unsurprising that detailed and sometimes technical distinctions must be made. So, what simple definition of inerrancy might be advanced? He cites the British philosopher and evangelical Christian Paul Helm.

In Paul Helm's words, quote, an expression, an assertion, a sentence, a formula, a document, a part of a document may be said to be inerrant if it is wholly true without error, close quote. Oh boy. Today, there's increasing talk of interpretive communities.

What does it mean? Individualism realm reigns in the West, so interpretive communities are groups of Christians studying the Bible together. Such thing must be, may be intentional, a denomination, or there may be planned discussions. The willingness to listen to diverse interpretations across interpretive communities becomes ever more attractive at a time when Christians are becoming more and more aware of global Christianity.

Then an important question follows up, 29.2. So then, are all interpretations by diverse communities equally valid and equally faithful? You just put your finger on the danger. On the one hand, it is an act of both realism and humility to recognize that no individual, no single community, has all the truth about any individual biblical passage or theme. Listening to one another is bound to result in a richer interpretation than would otherwise be the case.

Sometimes, it issues straightforward corrections. But on the other hand, one cannot help but recall the many warnings in the Bible regarding false doctrine, false Christ, and false gospels. Not all interpretations are created equal.

And just because some interpretation or other is espoused and protected by a particular community, it does not follow, it is faithful to scripture. And so we return to carefully listening to others, to a rereading of the Bible, eager to be corrected, if that means greater fidelity, and eager too not to stand over scripture as if we are the final judges when, in reality, scripture must stand over us and be our judge. When science and the Bible seem to be in conflict, 30.2, how should Christians proceed?

How should they think things through? Scripture has final authority, but it does not follow that the particular interpretation of scripture that we favor on this or that point has final authority.

So, we distinguish between scripture and our interpretation of scripture. So, it is important to walk with humility and listen well. The history of science also reminds us that scientific theories are not only revisable in theory, that's how science works, but have often been revised in fact.

So, it's important for Christians, however deeply they are enmeshed in current scientific commitments, not to become intimidated by every theory that claims to be scientific. Meanwhile, we must let both scripture and the various sciences speak in their own terms and avoid adding to the hermeneutical muddle by forcing scripture to address the science of the day. At a deep level, aren't the holy books of scripture and various world religions, aren't the holy books of scriptures of various world religions really saying the same thing? Although that view is very common in the Western world, owing not least to the West's commitment to certain forms of pluralism, it really cannot be responsibly defended.

These various scriptures say so many mutually contradictory things, not only at the level of detail but on the most profound conceptual matters, that it makes no sense to claim that they're really saying the same thing. Christ is a son of God, or he is not, or we are all sons of God in the same sense. There's one God, or there are many gods.

There's one God, simplex Islam, or is there one God, complex Trinitarianism of Christianity? There's an unbridgeable gulf between the creator and the creature, or we humans are on the way to becoming gods ourselves. We're saved by our works and by sheer grace, and so on and so on.

Moreover, those who claim that all these holy books are really saying the same thing are not only insulting the intelligence of devout believers in the various traditions, but they make it impossible to engage in serious conversation across religious lines. Serious conversation refuses to paper over differences but instead engages them respectfully and kindly, but without sacrificing Christian belief from our perspective. Could it be the last question? Aren't the Bible self-attesting claims, 31.2, a form of circular argument that is initially self-defeating? We're back to that circular business again.

They are circular but not viciously circular. Some degree of circularity is inevitable when establishing belief in an ultimate authority. Instead, when establishing the authority of the Bible on the basis of a greater authority external to the Bible, the Bible itself would not be the supreme authority.

So, he's repeating the old one. Do Christians view the Quran, their holy book, in so much the same ways that Christians view the Bible, their holy book? The similarities are superficial. Transparently, each of the two religions has a book taken to be holy and authoritative by their respective adherents.

Nevertheless, the differences are more pervasive and more important than the similarities. For example, the Bible was written by many human authors in three languages over a period of a millennium and a half. Although it's made up of many literary genres, collectively, the biblical books trace out an arc of history from creation to the consummation.

Christians hold that the human authors were so borne along by the Holy Spirit that the resulting text is truly God-breathed. By contrast, Muslims hold that the words of the Quran, all in Arabic, are the very words of God without human mediation. Muhammad is not viewed as inspired or contributing a distinctive vocabulary or the like.

No notion of double authorship exists. The words of the Quran are the words of God. Muhammad was simply God's instrument over an approximately 22-year period to memorize and write down what God gave him through the angel Gabriel.

Structurally, the Quran, far from tracing out an arc of history through the many experiences of men and women, presents itself in 114 surahs, chapters, a broadly descending length, the large majority of the material made up of God's direct address to human beings, commonly in commanding and exhortatory focus. I commend you on this good book, and I thank you for listening to this course wherein we have studied the great and gracious God manifesting himself to all human beings at all times in all places in general revelation and to some human beings that sometimes in some places in special revelation in many ways, but especially in the incarnation of his son and in the Holy Scriptures. Thank you for watching and listening.

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