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Understanding the Phenomenon of Scripture

Religions tend to have numerous common qualities: many have ornate houses of worship, a clergy or priesthood, icons, and some form of meditation. Joining this list is scripture, a authoritative supernatural writing or group of writings. Many examples quickly come to our minds: The Koran, the Vedas, the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Book of Mormon. For some reason it appears that often, part of the generic human religious experience – cutting across various theological beliefs and practices – often causes people to generate and preserve scripture. Yet this does not happen all the time, and there are many important texts that one might think would become scripture that don't. Why, for instance, do many Protestants affirm that short and fairly unsubstantial letters like II and III John are scripture while the writings of Martin Luther and the other reformation leaders, which have a much more direct impact on Protestant theology and practice, aren't? Why does the Exodus and the Babylonian Exile figure prominently in the Jewish scriptures while the Holocaust does not? Such questions point to even more fundamental issues. What makes a religion add scripture or consider their canon closed? What triggers the formation of an entirely new Canon? What makes some traditions respect certain texts yet not make them canonical?

Such sweeping questions about scripture are of course impossible to answer in this short essay, but here we will hopefully gain some insight into a larger, theoretical understanding of scripture development by briefly examining specific religious communities. We will look at two: the Seventh-day Adventists and the Branch Davidians. I selected these for two reasons. First, both are relatively new traditions still in their development stages. They may still be

theologically evolving, and whether or not they will even survive is an open question (particularly for the Branch Davidians). They both either are or may be in the process of developing their canons, which gives us front row seats into a process that may strongly parallel much more famous canon developments, such as the New Testament formation during Christianity's first few hundred years of existence. Second, both groups come out of the American, Christian adventist tradition, which emphasizes that we are living in the end times. This means that they are more aware of themselves as living in special or supernatural times than other religious groups may be, and thus probably have a self-understanding that is more comparable to, say, the Christians after the end of the Apostolic Era and the Muslims in the years after of Muhammad's life. In other words, they view themselves as living in a time when revelation is occurring, and, logically, such revelation may tend to produce scripture. For these two reasons, let us now examine these faiths to see what there is to be learned about scripture development. We will look at each one in turn and then conclude by drawing generalizations from both.

Seventh-day Adventists

This movement very explicitly comes out of a supernatural revelation. One of its founders, Ellen G. White (1827-1915), claimed to be the recipient of direct revelation from God, receiving "hundreds of visions" throughout her life (Conkin 128). She incorporated these revelations into her very extensive writings, which include "80 books, 200 tracts and pamphlets, and 4600 periodical articles" plus about sixty thousands additional pages of text (Richards). She had a distinct self-understanding of herself as inspired, writing at one point: "In these letters which I write, in the testimonies I bear, I am presenting to you that which the Lord has presented

to me. I do not write one article in the paper expressing merely my own ideas. They are what God has opened before me in vision--the precious rays of light shining from the throne” (qtd. in Croft). From a theological perspective, the content of these revelations appear to be of medium significance – not rising to the level of throwing out Jesus or the afterlife or some other key doctrine but nonetheless certainly not devoid of new substance. For instance, her inspiration led her followers to reject closed door theology (Conkin 127-128), and she learned that people are still to follow the Sabbath (129). Perhaps most controversially, she affirmed in her writings the historicity of the seven-day creation and specifics about the Noahic flood (132-133).

These writings would appear to have a great potential for turning into scripture. However, although they greatly revere and respect her, Seventh-day Adventists have thus far fallen short of canonizing White’s writings, and today her authority is in dispute. From the beginning, SDA leaders focused on the Old and New Testaments as being of supreme authority. As Paul Conkin notes, “Very early, the leaders of the church stressed that all Adventist doctrines rested on the authority of scripture, not revelations given by Ellen G. White” (132). The “Dallas Statement” (an SDA doctrinal statement adopted in 1980) attempts to establish her both as distinct and authoritative but still subordinate to the Bible:

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifest in the ministry of Ellen G. White. As the Lord's messenger, her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth which provided for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested. (qtd. in Richards)

However, the exact degree to which the Bible and White’s writings are separate is a point that remains unsettled. In February, 2004, the SDA’s South Pacific Division held a summit about White’s role, which Dr. Arthur Patrick reports showcased the ongoing debate: “Ellen White

continues to evoke hostile attack, intense study, and spirited support in the South Pacific Division. A lively tradition of discussion about the prophet has thus evolved” (Patrick).

A survey of articles in recent issues of *Adventist Today* also shows a variety of viewpoints on White’s role within the church. In one article, Randy Croft, a teacher at Walla Walla Adventist Academy, reports that there is great variety in the way local congregations regard her: “I’d visited scores of Adventist churches.... Some Adventist churches rarely used Ellen White in sermon and study. Others used her every week.” He himself argues that she should not be made into an essential doctrine: “I believe and hope that Ellen White's writings and authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church will become more publicly endorsed as “optional” in our preaching, teaching, and literature” (Croft). Dr. Frederick Hoyt, however, chides the SDA for not elevating White’s writings enough: “Why did the church neglect to capitalize on Ellen White's stature as the greatest prophet since St. Paul, by reason of the unparalleled visitations she enjoyed from Christ?” (Hoyt).

Part of the resistance to White’s authority within the SDA may come from objections to the historical claims in her writings and alleged inconsistencies in her message. The fundamentalist nature of the revelations may be difficult for some Adventists to accept. Specifically with Noah, Conkin notes that

She also accounted for present geological formations on the basis of the destruction wrought by Noah’s flood and by the erosive effects of a great wind that followed it. This gloss, if accepted as inspired, committed Seventh-day Adventists to one form of flood geology, or a position that so filled out scriptural accounts as to leave modern Adventists with almost no interpretive space. (133)

Such a position may be unacceptable to more educated members, who would thus push to subordinate her to prevent her inaccuracies from being locked in as inspired. Conkin goes on to observe “an increasing body of able Adventist scholars who have forced even the most loyal

White supporters to admit some faults or mistakes on her part” (143). For instance, Clifford Goldstein, an author and apologist for Adventist theology, argues that while she did have a special supernatural presence in her life, such an influence did not translate into her being perfectly accurate:

I can accept that Ellen White, even as a prophet, was fallible, both in her life and her writings. Her prophetic ministry, in my thinking, is not diminished if she made mistakes, grew in her understanding of doctrine and theology, changed her mind on doctrinal and theological issues.... Inspiration doesn't automatically include inerrancy. (qtd. in Taylor)

Thus we see that despite White’s self-understanding and general acceptance as an inspired figure, the perception of blatant error within her texts hampers their unreserved support among her followers.

Branch Davidians

This sect branched off from the Seventh-day Adventists in the early 20th Century. David Koresh (1959-1993) emerged as a leader in the movement in the aftermath of a profound supernatural experience in 1985, when he came to believe that he had become God’s final prophet on Earth (Tabor and Gallagher 62). Koresh taught that his role had been prophesied in the Bible, interpreting some of the passages traditionally understood to regard Jesus as actually referring to this final figure (55-56). This figure was to understand fully the Bible and reveal its hidden secrets. Not only that, but he would have the same divine spirit that had been in Jesus, making him not just perfectly understand God’s revelation but fully indwelling him with the power of God that had made that revelation. Thus, Tabor and Gallagher state that “one might even say that this Christ figure had written the Scriptures, in the sense that the Spirit that inspired the prophets of old would be working without restriction in a final chosen figure” (62). This

revelation came through ongoing communication from an explicit voice, which Koresh compared to the one Moses heard from the Burning Bush (61).

Koresh also believed that this figure was to be the biological father of the twenty-four elders spoken of in the Book of Revelation, who, Koresh argued, would rule in this world and then sit before God's throne in heaven. Thus, Koresh became sexually active with many of his female followers in order to reach the prescribed number of twenty-four children, and by the time of his death, had already fathered many (73-75). Importantly, there is evidence Koresh's theology was not merely conjured up to indulge his physical desires but was truly the result of his Biblical interpretation. For instance, when one of his wives was later interviewed, she explained that he had been quite sincere and had been very cautious about being overcome by lust in the process. She said, "He once apologized for lusting after me.... He said, "I lusted after you. Just the sheer feeling of a man wanting a woman." Then when asked if she believed that in having sex he was pursuing his self-understood divine calling and not his personal desires, she responded, "That was the feeling I got a lot of the times that he spent with me. It was that God made him do this" (qtd. in Tabor and Gallagher 74).

This occurred at the Branch Davidians' compound in Waco, Texas, where Koresh, his wives, children, and other group members lived communally. Koresh also developed an understanding that this group, which never exceeded more than several dozen members, as a whole had a special place in salvation history that had been explicitly foretold in biblical prophecy (60). A significant part of this role was that they were the community from which Koresh's twenty-four children would come (68). Koresh also taught that the group was to rise to a higher moral and ethical standard and be faithful to God despite the widespread corruption of larger world.

This group came to national attention in 1993, when federal agents tried to raid the compound to investigate charges of arms violations. The event triggered an exchange of fire, resulting in the deaths of both agents and Branch Davidians with both sides claiming that the other had fired first (Tabor and Gallagher 1-2). A two-month standoff ensued, resulting in the now infamous subsequent assault by federal agents upon the building, during which the compound caught on fire and Koresh and seventy-three of his followers died.

What is significant about this event for our purposes is that a few days prior to his death, Koresh sent a letter to federal negotiators saying that God had told him to write out his revelation and that once it was completed, he and his followers would come out of the compound. The government ultimately ignored this and moved in anyway, but one of the survivors brought a copy of Koresh's manuscript with her when she escaped the fire. Thus, while Koresh was only able to begin his writing before he died, the entirety of what he did complete does survive (20). It is this manuscript that we must examine, for it clearly bares the earmarks of potential scripture.

The text clearly gives itself an elevated status. At one point Koresh seems to say that it is the greatest revelation of all time, even greater than the one brought through Jesus: "Truly Christ is our only Saviour, our only Mediator between man and God. Likewise, it is true the opening of the seven seals by Christ [brought about through this text] is as much or more so important for our salvation as any other former gospels" (qtd. in Tabor and Gallagher 196). He goes on to describe his revelation this way: "Gems of most sacred truth are to be uncovered, golden promises never before seen are to be brought to view, for when has grace ever been needed more than now in the time of which we live?" (197). Such language clearly shows that Koresh held the manuscript very highly, and while he does not explicitly discuss its canonicity *per se*, one is left

with the impression that he might not have objected had the canon been amended to include the text.

Of course, what makes the question of the text's canonicity interesting is that we may never know how his followers would have reacted to it. With the group mostly wiped out in the fire in 1993, there are very few people still alive who revere him and would thus have to grapple with the issue of how to relate to his writings. However, had the fire never occurred, it seems likely that the text would have attained a scriptural or at least near-scriptural status. Koresh would likely have completed his manuscript, and it presumably would have stood as the full and complete revelation of God to man. He also still would have had an organized group of followers devoted to him who would have revered the text. (He might have even been jailed for his role in the standoff, and maybe could then have enjoyed wider popularity today as a living martyr.) However, regardless of the overall movement's longevity, it seems hard to believe that the manuscript would not have acquired a very elevated status – especially if there were still believers who lived after Koresh's natural death in, say, the early to mid-21st Century.

This is evidenced by the fact that even after Koresh's death, those few followers who survived still elevated him. A year later, one member, Janet Kendrick, affirmed that "There isn't anybody in the group who has lost faith in David" (qtd. in Tabor and Gallagher 79). This belief was also apparent in a short book written in the months after the fire by Livingston Fagan, a trained theologian and Branch Davidian whom Koresh had sent out of the compound before the fire to be his representative to the world. Writing from jail (where he is serving a forty-year sentence for his role in the standoff (116)), Fagan maintains that after he died, Koresh assumed a very special place in heaven: "Our God is known to us and we to him. He sits on a throne with a book in His hand, sealed with Seven Seals. So too is our brother, otherwise known as the Lamb,

the only one accounted worthy to take the book and loose the seals of it” (“Unseen,” part 4). In fact, despite the fact that the surviving Branch Davidians expected Koresh to return in 1996 (Tabor and Gallagher 79), Fagan was still affirming Koresh’s elevated status as recently as 2001, writing that “there would be another revelation of Christ before his coming in glory.... This was made manifest in the person of David Koresh” (“Revelation,” part 2). Thus, if even the group’s shattering in 1993 did not shake the remaining followers’ beliefs in him, certainly Koresh’s continued life and work would have confirmed it even more. This would indicate that had the standoff ended peacefully, his manuscript would quite possibly have attained an elevated status within the community. His followers – particularly after his natural death later on – might very well have canonized it.

Analysis

We have now looked at the makings of two scripture traditions, the writings of Ellen G. White and that of David Koresh. What do these examples tell us about the phenomenon of scripture development? While a much more extensive study of these movements and others would be needed to assert any hypotheses strongly, the discussion this far seems to point out two factors: (1) for scripture to develop, its content cannot be clouded by questions of factual error or internal inconsistency, regardless of the author’s general acceptance as an elevated figure; and (2) scripture tends to develop in light of the author’s already elevated state.

Looking at the first, one of the reasons that White’s writings have not emerged as canonical may be because some of her followers believe there to be both blatant problems with some of her scientific and historical claims and inconsistencies in her message. It would be difficult for people simultaneously to canonize a text while objecting to some of its particular

claims – especially claims that run contrary to widely held academic and scholarly beliefs. Importantly, such disputes are occurring within a context that generally respects White as a prophetic figure.

This may indicate that as education becomes more common in the world, scripture will be harder to form. For example, Paul's writings might not have emerged with such strong support had he written in America today. The example of White would indicate that Paul's arguments based in part on claims about the historical Adam, Abraham, and Moses (Rom. 4, 5:12-14) might not have flourished as well in America's more critical and historically and scientifically more knowledgeable society – even if his apostolic status was completely accepted. More broadly, one would suspect that the Bible would have been different both in content and in degree of elevation if there had been, say, numerous highly analytical, college-trained evolutionists who were members of the Jewish and Christian communities overseeing the canonization process.

Second, a text is more likely to become elevated when the author is already revered. The reason that Koresh's text was such a major part of his own self-understanding was that it was the culmination of his own divine calling. Because the full meaning of the Bible had been revealed to him, constituting a major and prophesied moment in salvation history, the recording of that revelation into a specific text was automatically a very significant event. Thus, Koresh understood the text to be intrinsically very powerful. In the letter that he sent out right before he began the manuscript, Koresh stated that he thought that the text would have a major impact on the world and indicated a strong urgency to get it completed as soon as possible:

I want the people of this generation to be saved. I am working night and day to complete my final work of the writing out of the Seals.

I thank my Father, He has finally granted me the chance to do this. It will bring New Light and hope for many.... (qtd. in Tabor and Gallagher 15).

While we do not know what would have happened had the fire not taken place, it seems plausible that his followers would have retained this idea of the text's great significance and would have held it up very highly. However, they would not have done so simply because they liked its content or found it inspirational. They would have revered it because it was the written words of a major figure in Salvation History, a person who carried inside of him the spirit of God and the full knowledge of God's revelation to man. In other words, they would have revered the text not for its own sake but because it was a summary of God's will and plan revealed through the life and teaching of David Koresh.

Conclusion

Scripture, as we have already discussed, is a widespread phenomenon in human religious expression. Understanding when and why it happens is not easy, and requires an examination of various scriptural traditions. By looking at two religious movements that currently have the potential to but may or may not eventually produce scripture, we get a glimpse into some of the issues and dynamics in the development phase of scripture. Both the Seventh-day Adventists and the Branch Davidians possess revered texts that may eventually (and perhaps in other circumstances would have already) become scripture. From looking at these groups, we have been able to propose two theories about the development of scripture: (1) development of scripture is impaired when there is ongoing dispute within the community about the factuality of the texts' claims and the consistency of its message, even despite an acceptance of the author's special status; and (2) a text's elevation tends to occur as a result of the author's already

understood elevated status. There will of course be exceptions to both of these, but they hopefully help to indicate when and why scripture develops, which are important building blocks to understanding the more general human religious experience.

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