

# Battle for the Bible in the early church

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Is the Bible the reliable Word of God or a fallible collection of human religious ideas? The purpose of this article is to show that the conflict between secular science and the Bible is not new, but dates back to the days of the early church. Greek scientists like Porphyry and Celsus questioned the reliability of the contents of Genesis, Jonah, Daniel, as well as the factuality of Jesus' Virgin Birth and Resurrection. This paper will demonstrate how early Greek scholars alleged that the holy Christian Scriptures were unreliable productions of men and will consider the commitment of the early church to these writings as the voice of God.

Often research articles have the aim of stating something that is experienced as new and relevant for a limited group of colleagues with expert knowledge. This paper has a different purpose, namely to translate some of these results from the field of patristic studies<sup>1</sup> and make them available to fellow Christian scholars who are active in the natural sciences. This is likely to be encouraging, as the world of the early Christians was in many ways like the post-Christian Western world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What early Fathers embraced as Scripture is now usually also found in our printed Bibles. The fact that they took the Bible as the literal voice of God does not imply their interpretation was always right or that they were unaffected by the philosophies and pressures of their time and cultural surroundings. Likewise for Greek science in the late ancient era: although some philosophers preceded the modern 'unbelief' of the Continental Enlightenment Theology in many ways, this article does not claim that their worldview or motivation was identical, or deny that their work is inconsequential when it comes to considering the unusual or 'miraculous' in their own tradition.

This contribution is about the nature of Scripture in the eyes of prominent pagan scientists and early church leaders. It does not reflect on the history of the canon of the 66 books of the Bible as most Protestants know it, or the value of the deuterocanonical writings. 'Bible' is used in the sense of 'Scripture' as early Christians received portions of what they considered God's recorded revelation.

## Two views of Scripture

Initially Christianity was a minority religion that faced ridicule and animosity, from society at large but from some scientists in particular. There often was a difference in worldview. For instance, several Greek scholars believed that the earth was extremely old or, like Aristotle, that it had always been there.<sup>2</sup> In late antiquity the Christian and Jewish idea of a creation 'only' a few thousand years ago was frowned upon at least by some.

The alleged facts of the Bible were cause for ridicule. Like today, Christian teachings about the incarnation of God and Jesus' Resurrection from the dead were considered farfetched. The Greek scientists who opposed Christianity preferred naturalistic explanations: Jesus made up the story about his virgin birth and his disappointed friends invented the Resurrection. The Bible was a book of myths and fairy tales. Christians were criticized for relying on Jewish traditions.

Still, in this climate, the early church gave evidence of a commitment to a Christian worldview that finds its basis in revelation. This is clear from the earliest stage: Clement of Rome, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons and Clement of Alexandria. Their writings show an early and natural acknowledgment of, and commitment to, the authority of Holy Writ as lively oracles of God.<sup>3</sup>

## Modern tradition

Today much of the criticism and unbelief that was first voiced by pagan scientists, and then repeated in elitist circles by liberal theologians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is now presented as new and modern in popular media.<sup>4</sup> The general drift of this 'enlightened' criticism is that while two thousand years ago people had a primitive worldview, mankind has advanced so much since then that a reinterpretation of the Bible and its teachings is long overdue.<sup>5</sup>

More than half a century ago this approach had already become commonplace at most universities in the UK and the continent of Europe. In 1959 C.S. Lewis lectured in Cambridge on this subject:

"I find in these theologians a constant use of the principle that the miraculous does not occur. Thus any statement put into our Lord's mouth by the old texts, which, if he had really made it, would constitute a prediction of the future, is taken to have been put in after the occurrence which it seemed to predict. This is very sensible if we start by knowing that inspired prediction can never occur. Similarly in general,

the rejection as unhistorical of all passages which narrate miracles is sensible if we start by knowing that the miraculous in general never occurs. Now I do not here want to discuss whether the miraculous is possible. I only want to point out that this is a purely philosophical question. Scholars, as scholars, speak on it with no more authority than anyone else. The canon ‘If miraculous, then unhistorical’ is one they bring to their study of the texts, not one they have learned from it. If one is speaking of authority, the united authority of all the biblical critics in the world counts here for nothing. On this they speak simply as men; men obviously influenced by, and perhaps insufficiently critical of, the spirit of the age they grew up in.”<sup>6</sup>

A 21<sup>st</sup>-century poll<sup>7</sup> found that one third of Church of England clergy doubt or disbelieve in the physical Resurrection and only half are convinced of the truth of the Virgin Birth. The poll of nearly 2,000 of the church’s 10,000 clergy also found that only half believe that faith in Christ is the only route to salvation. Many doubt whether a naturalistic explanation for the Resurrection story is not to be preferred above the traditional teachings of the church. In the words of the famous quote from the creator of Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle, Sr (1859–1930): “Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.” Once the possibility of intervention or action by God is rejected as a theoretical impossibility, one is left with a revived body that did not really die or with an invented Resurrection. This train of thought is not new. One may be surprised to learn that this is more or less exactly what the Greek scientists were saying 1,800 years ago.

### Scientist

Until a few centuries ago, the word ‘scientist’ did not really exist. Philosophy also included science. This is still visible when scientists earn a Ph.D., which translates as a doctorate in philosophy. The scientists of ancient Greco-Roman times were commonly known as philosophers. They concerned themselves both with matters of worldview and empiric science. Neo-Platonism was an influential school in late antiquity, a revival of some of the ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato. Otherwise it was an eclectic movement, which borrowed from other scholastic worldviews. Some combined this with Epicureanism (Acts 17:18), others with forms of Agnosticism.

### Apostate Christians

History would remember Celsus and Porphyry<sup>8</sup> as prominent scholars who launched vehement attacks on the Scriptures. Their worldview focused very much on the here and now, like Epicurus of Samos in his philosophy.

For Porphyry, the divine was a sphere that man was not able to pry into. The world of the gods was ‘unknowable’ in principle. In this respect the movement is not dissimilar to Agnosticism today.

Celsus and Porphyry came up with naturalistic explanations of what Christians received as special acts of God. Celsus published his *Real Truth* about Christianity and its teachings, while Porphyry wrote a series of fifteen books *Against the Christians*.

For historical context it should be realized that the founder of Neo-Platonism, Ammonius of Sakkas, was an apostate Christian. This is not unlike Professor Dawkins, who went through an intensely religious period in his teenage years and even made a profession of faith in the Church of England. His autobiography<sup>9</sup> does not describe any negative behaviour of Christians that triggered his conversion to atheism. On the contrary, he writes with a measure of respect about his former headmaster, who was at that stage an important religious influence on his life:

“While Sunday morning service was in St Mark’s, every weekday morning and every evening we had prayers in the school chapel. Gallows was extremely religious. I mean really religious, not token religious: he truly believed all that stuff, unlike many educators (and even clergymen) who pretend to do so out of duty... ”<sup>10</sup>

Porphyry, who was known as the greatest enemy of Christianity, initially took a serious interest in Christianity in his youth and was intrigued by Christian leaders, like Origen of Alexandria (and later Caesarea).<sup>11</sup> From what survives from his writings he knew his Bible better than many Christians today. It was only after bad experience with Christians in Caesarea that Porphyry rejected a religion that produced badly behaving people. How different history could have been if only Christians in Caesarea had behaved differently! Multiple factors may hide beneath the surface of an intellectual rejection of Christianity and its teachings.

Another important factor was that Jesus and his Apostles failed to live up to the ideals of the Greek shame culture. This is not unlike 21<sup>st</sup>-century neoliberalism, which esteems people and achievements largely on an economic basis. In modern terms Jesus and His Apostles were failures. They were neither respectable nor successful in Greek terms. Jesus’ disciples left steady jobs and positions in society for an uncertain future, following a master who lived off the support that rich women and others might provide. The crowds followed him for miracles but could not bear His teaching and deserted Him (cf. John 6). His enemies triumphed and Jesus died a shameful and cruel death. In the eyes of Porphyry and Celsus, Jesus had a profoundly unsuccessful life.<sup>12</sup>

## Old Testament

They devoted much of their attention to criticizing the Bible. Celsus rejected Christianity's claims that Jesus was the fulfilment of a long tradition of prophecies. "[You Christians] quote prophets as foretelling facts about Jesus' life before they happened, ... but those prophecies could be much better applied to thousands of other people" (*Contra Celsum* II.28).<sup>13</sup> For Celsus the Old Testament contained many implausible stories, like the barbaric folktale about Lot and his daughters (C.C.IV.45). Two millennia later Old Testament handbooks for Christians agree: an aetiological myth, an unhistorical folktale to discredit the origin of the nation of the Ammonites.<sup>14</sup> Jonah's adventures with the big fish were just preposterous fiction; as was Daniel and the lion's den (C.C.VI.53).

It was not by accident that the Greek scientists attacked the prophets Jonah and Daniel in particular. With Porphyry in particular, assaults on Old Testament prophets function as attacks on Christ. Jesus made direct comparisons between Himself and Jonah (Matt. 12:40). He also saw some of Daniel's prophecies as things yet to be fulfilled (Matt. 24:15). Chapters 8–12 of Daniel contain a lot of information that points to a future arrival of the Messiah in the time of Jesus. For this reason Porphyry came up with the idea that the whole book of Daniel was really a fake, produced by a



**Figure 1.** For early Christianity the Scriptures were literally inspired by God. Rembrandt (1606–1669), *The evangelist Matthew and the angel* (1661).

pseudo graphic author. It really described events that had already taken place in the second century BC, but portrayed these as alleged prophecies from the prophet Daniel who had passed away centuries before. Hieronymus (better known as Jerome) preserved much of Porphyry's criticism in his *Commentary on Daniel*. From his prologue:

"Porphyry wrote his twelfth book against the prophecy of Daniel, denying that it was composed by the person to whom it is ascribed in its title, but rather by some individual living in Judaea at the time of the Antiochus who was surnamed Epiphanes."

Today Porphyry's theory in some form is embraced by nearly all prominent Old Testament scholars.<sup>15</sup> The technical device is called *vaticinium ex eventu*. This is Latin for a 'prediction from the event'. It means writing about events that have already happened as if the author were living before they took place. In other words, we say that Daniel prophesied about the "abomination that makes desolate" (Dan. 11:31; 12:11) as a future event, while in fact it was someone laying these words in Daniel's mouth hundreds of years later, at the time when the sanctuary was defiled by a Syrian king. The words were only attributed by Daniel to lend them credibility. As the actual desolation allegedly took place two hundred years before Christ, Jesus was wrong both in His reference to the prophet Daniel and in His view that the abomination as a still outstanding event (see Hieronymus, *Commentary on Matthew*, 24:16).

## Life of Jesus

After the Scriptures of the Old Testament, it was the life of Jesus that came under scrutiny. Celsus and Porphyry denied and discredited Jesus' incarnation, His teachings and His Resurrection.

To start with Jesus' incarnation—Christ taking on the body of an unborn baby, this was shameful and preposterous in the eyes of the Greek scientists. It was not appropriate for a god to enter this world as a baby.<sup>16</sup> Celsus thought the idea of a conception without visible involvement of a man was borrowed from the Greek myth about the god Zeus changing himself into golden rain to impregnate one of the beauties he fancied (C.C.I.37). The Virgin Birth was just a cleverly devised tale to mask Jesus' illegitimate birth as the result of a liaison between Mary and a Roman soldier. "The mother of Jesus was rejected by the carpenter to whom she was engaged, because she was found guilty of fornication, and had a child of a certain soldier called Panthera" (C.C.I.32). This name was probably a slur, as 'Panthera' translates as 'predator of all'.

Not surprisingly for Neo-Platonists, some of the better elements of Jesus' teachings were dependent on Plato—for instance, Jesus' teachings on riches and the parable

of the rich man and the needle (Matt. 19:24). Plato taught that it is “impossible for an extraordinary good man to be extraordinarily wealthy” (C.C.VI.16). But as for his prophecies and the Gospel portraying Jesus as someone who knew the future (Matt. 17:22, 20:18), this was all invented by the disciples and Gospel authors. Of course Jesus did not know the future. This was just a tribute in hindsight by his followers, who wanted the world to think about Jesus as a prophet. “Because the disciples couldn’t reconcile themselves to the facts, they made up this plan to say that He had known everything before” (C.C.II.15). No, this Jesus was a loser, who attracted low social class people from Galilee and never had a proper job or position in life (C.C.I.62), while his teachings were rejected by everyone who counted in society and religious life at the time.

That in His Passion Jesus took on Himself the sins of the world was just a way of His followers making sense of his disgraceful rejection by society. It was attributed and in the mind of the beholder, but the fact of the matter was that Jesus died a cruel and shameful death, and that His life wasn’t a success story. Celsus showed himself a real psychologist in explaining away the Resurrection of Jesus. This was a story invented by His disciples, who suffered from severe grief and hallucinations, finding it extremely hard to come to terms with the death of their master (C.C.II.55). Yes, they may have experienced profound spiritual impressions, but this should not be regarded real in any scientific sense (C.C.II.61).

Technically, according to Celsus (C.C.III.26), the Resurrection appearances of Jesus were dependent on Herodotus’ account of the life of the poet Aristéas (Ἀριστέας, *Histories IV*), from a Greek island, who reappeared on several occasions after his death. Celsus omits to say that according to Herodotus from day one of Aristéas’s alleged death, there was first-hand testimony that he had not died at all and that those who said he had died could not find the body. A final and third appearance was said to have taken place 350 years later, in Italy that, by that time, had started to take over Greek culture, with the message to put up an altar for Apollo and a statue for Aristéas himself ... . For Porphyry the Resurrection stories were part of a cover up. It was easy to allege that Jesus appeared to an inner circle of followers. As these followers of Jesus were biased, who was to say this really happened? If Jesus had really come back from the dead, he should have appeared to Pilate and the Jewish leaders (*Apokritikos* II.14).

### Apostles discredited

Both Celsus and Porphyry went to great length to discredit the Apostles and their teachings. Much of what they wrote in this regard comes under the header ‘character assassination’. Matthew was completely negligent in leaving his responsible

job as tax collector on the spot, to follow Jesus (Matt. 9:9). The Apostles were unlearned men, not able to recognize normal astronomical phenomena like a sun eclipse (Matt. 27:45, see Hieronymus *Commentary on Matthew*). They, like Jesus, did not have proper jobs, but shamefully lived off the wealth of women sympathizers (cf. Matt. 27:55–56, Luke 8:2–3). As with Jesus’ alleged prophetic giftedness, there is a huge difference between what His followers wrote down and what really happened. The Apostle Peter actually murdered Ananias and his wife Saphira for their money (*Apokritikos* 3.21). The story about God killing them for a white lie was just a cover up (Acts 5:1–11). Hieronymus (*Ep. 130 ad Demitrius*): “The apostle Peter did not wish the death of Ananias or Saffira; of which he is falsely accused by Porphyry.”

Otherwise the Apostles did not really know their Bible (*Apokritikos* III.33). Not only did they misapply prophecies to make them refer to Jesus, but they also wrongly ascribed quotes. Hieronymus (*On the beginning of Mark*):

“This passage that impious man Porphyry, who wrote against us and vomited out his madness in many books, discusses in his 14th book and says: ‘The evangelists were such unskilled men, not only in worldly matters, but also in the divine scriptures, that they attributed the testimony, which had been written elsewhere, to the wrong prophet.’ This he jeers at.”

Paul gives contradictory teachings on the circumcision (Acts 16:3, 1 Cor. 9:19) and also shares incompatible views on the Law of Moses as holy and good (Rom. 7:12) and as a curse (Gal. 3:10, cf. Rom. 3).

Christianity’s expectancy of a bodily resurrection after this life was incompatible with the worldview of the Greek science of the day. Porphyry said in so many words that this was a ridiculous and unwarranted expectation. To illustrate this, he gives the example of someone who drowns, is eaten by fish, which are, in their turn, consumed by fishermen. These men ultimately die a violent death themselves and are eaten by dogs or wolves, which, in their turn, are devoured by vultures (*Apokritikos* 4.24). ‘How can the original body be resurrected as it was part of so many different bodies?’, Porphyry sneered.

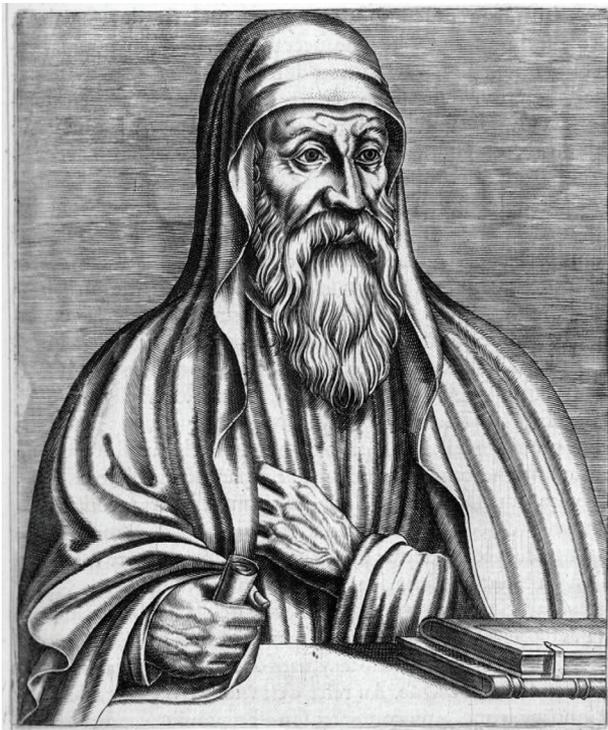
### The early church—Scripture as God’s voice

While much of the Greek scholarly objection against the Bible and its teachings is commonly shared by society and scholarship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is important to realize that the early church firmly rejected these views. Origen<sup>17</sup> (c. 184–254) wrote a lengthy apology against Celsus, which is the main reason why we still know about Celsus today. Among many other things, Origen confirmed the historicity of Genesis, including the episode of Lot and his daughters.

He put up an elaborate defence against most of the Greek scientific criticism as described in the first part of this article. Eusebius (c. 263–339), Hieronymus (c. 347–420), and Augustine (c. 353–430) all wrote against Porphyry and affirmed the authority of the Scriptures.

When one goes further back, to the second century, even to the generations that followed the Apostles, one can hardly miss two important church leaders who operated in different parts of the Roman Empire: Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–202 AD)<sup>18</sup> and Clement of Alexandria (150–215 AD).<sup>19</sup> Irenaeus worked in Gaulle, present day France. Clement was active in Egypt, in a city that was then the Greek cultural capital of the world. Both were recognized and influential bishops. Irenaeus helped settle the date for Easter when this became an issue for Christianity and wrote five books, *Against Heresies*. Not only are these books an important source for our knowledge of Gnosticism (mystical movements that were loosely based on Christianity), but they are also indicative of what the early church thought about Scripture.

The latter can also be said about Clement of Alexandria. His main works are the *Pedagogue*, the *Exhortation against the Greeks* and a *Patchworks* collection (Στρωματεῖς). Clement was a cultured author and his books contain more than 360 quotes from classical sources. He died in exile in Cappadocia after he fled Alexandria from persecution.



**Figure 2.** Origen of Caesarea wrote *Against Celsus*, which preserves much early criticism against the Bible. Portrait by André Thévet (1584).

At this point, rather than running the risk of losing the reader in the detail of an inductive methodology, I have opted for a topical overview of the approach of Irenaeus and Clement, only linking with the primary sources in a general way. Specific reference to the (Latin and Greek) texts, and/or the philological methodology underlying this research, has been provided in my earlier contributions on this subject.<sup>20</sup>

### Natural reception of Scripture

Television documentaries and popular literature<sup>21</sup> sometimes give the impression that the Bible as we know it today was really the result of decisions that the church made centuries later. For instance, the canon of the Bible was supposedly decided in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when Emperor Constantine ruled it over church councils and forced the church to accept certain books and keep others out. This is a misconception. From the writings of the early Church Fathers it is clear that Scripture as we know it was recognized ages before the church made any canon decisions about what should be allowed in the Bible. The primary sources from the first centuries indicate that the early Christians didn't need official pronouncements to accept these books.

As a rule, one finds that wherever a Bible book is available to a Church Father, it is also recognized as such. These writings had an inherent authority that was received locally, disregarding vast differences in region and distance. These books were also so much part of Apostolic Christianity from the very start that they were a natural part of the Christian tradition. This is also generally true for the deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament, the *Wisdom of Jesus Sirach* in particular. Because the Apostles in the New Testament books often use the Greek Septuagint to refer to the Old Testament, the early church considered the Greek Septuagint as an 'inspired' translation. As it contains the Old Testament Apocrypha,<sup>22</sup> the Roman Catholic Church regards these as Scripture as well, while Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed Churches see these as a special category, distinct from normal books. Otherwise the numerous Scripture quotes by the Fathers of the second century show that, for all intents and purposes, they had the same Bible available as Christians today.

### Scripture as carrier

How did the early Christians see Scripture and what was its function? From the outset it is important to consider that they saw God as a reality who was involved in this world from the start. For them God existed and communicated, not as a mere person, but as the Creator who stood at the beginning of everything. He created mankind for His special purposes and continued to make these known and relate to

his creatures by means of Holy Scripture. In this context, Clement of Alexandria says (ANF02)<sup>23</sup> that through the Bible Christians are ‘*theodidaktōi*’ (*Stromateis* 1, cf. 1 Thes. 4:9); they are taught by God, who uses sacred letters: the Scriptures. God takes on the role of a heavenly educator who takes human beings by the hand, using the ‘Divine Scriptures’ and ‘Holy Scrolls’ to instruct them (cf. *Paed.*3).

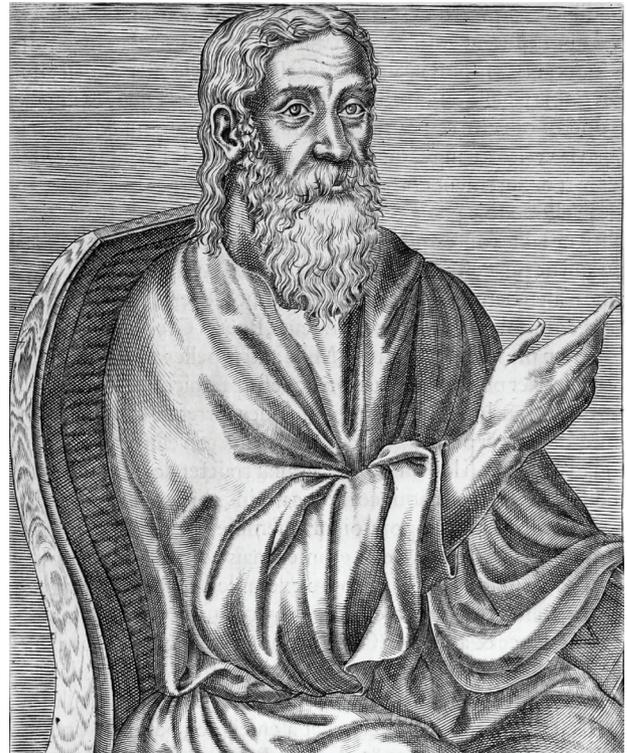
So the Scriptures have a vertical dimension as God uses them to maintain a relationship with mankind and sheds his light on earthly affairs. On the other hand, in the works of Irenaeus and Clement there is also a strong horizontal function as Scripture sets the standard for right teaching and should as such be used to distinguish right from wrong. As the reliable Word of God it was the source *par excellence* that was proof in itself, as God’s final say in the matter. The early church made extensive use of Scripture as proof of right teaching and as evidence to bring heresy to light.

### Nature of Scripture and its authority

What can be said about the nature of Scripture as the early Christians experienced it?

Firstly, they did not see the Scriptures as a mere collection of inspiring religious views and experiences. To focus on each Bible writer with his own religious perspective, preference, and ‘theology’ is a post-Enlightenment development. The decisive factor with Holy Writ for Irenaeus and Clement was that God was its ultimate author. Scripture was literally ‘God-breathed’, like the human voice is carried by breath. They did not mean this in the sense that it was stimulating and that in some way they believed God to have been involved in its coming to into being. ‘Breathed’ does not refer to a human production that was ‘touched’ or ‘used’ by God. It means that it was spoken by God, who also creates by means of speaking. God spoke and it was; the Bible starts with this refrain in Genesis 1. Irenaeus and Clement saw God as the ultimate author of Scripture. Yes, He used Moses and other prophets to pass on His message, but in the end those men were mere servants of the Word of God. For this reason the Church Fathers refer to the Holy Spirit as the ‘mouth of God’.

Secondly, the early church considered Scripture literally as words from heaven or ‘Word of God’. They saw Scripture as the result of an oracular process. They refer to it with the same word that the Greek religion used for literal messages from heaven, ‘*logia*’, divine words at special sites where people came to enquire about the will of the gods. The early Christians applied this word, meaning a message that came straight from heaven, also to Bible books and to Scripture as a collection.<sup>24</sup> Where the Greeks often had to be satisfied with one-liners or very short messages from the ‘gods’, early Christianity was adamant that all Scripture, from Moses and



**Figure 3.** Clement of Alexandria saw Scripture as “holy Letters and Syllables” which carried the voice of God. Portrait by André Thévet (1584).

the prophets to the Apostles and Evangelists, had oracular, and therefore authoritative, status.

Thirdly, while human authors were taken into God’s service to pass on His Word, the vehicle of language that contained and preserved his precious message was also considered with special reverence. The end result of the ‘inspiration process’ that was committed to parchment or papyrus was literally regarded as “holy letters and syllables”, because of the special use that God made of these to speak to his creation.

### Clement of Alexandria

Fourthly, because of this strong emphasis on God as the author of Holy Writ, the early church did not experience tensions between Bible books. While heretics, like Marcion, and Gnosticism had difficulty with the Old Testament and the notion of God as Creator, this presented no problem for Irenaeus. Jesus spoke through Moses and Leviticus as much as through the Sermon on the Mount, and it was the Holy Spirit who sang the Psalms of David. Clement (*Protreptikos/Exhortation* 1) has similar expressions: the Saviour sings in Psalms, speaks through a burning bush, speaks through Isaiah, Elijah and the mouth of the prophets.

All provided facets of God’s truth and continued to reflect the mind of God. This also disciplined the theology of the

early church and her thinking about God. While heretics had the luxury of cutting and pasting as they pleased, the church had to do justice to all of Scripture, both in her thinking and practice.

Fifthly, the overall message of Irenaeus and Clement was that Scripture equalled truth and reliability. Whether they write about the Bible in a descriptive way or refer to Scripture in countless quotations, they regard this as the voice of God and the highest court of appeal. This was not only the case for moral principles or ‘untestable’ doctrinal ideas about God, but it also extended to factual and historical truth. In this the early church shows a consistent pattern, from very early Fathers, like Theophilus of Antioch, to Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen, to later Fathers like Eusebius, Hieronymus, and Augustine. Scripture is the voice of God and therefore morally, theologically, and factually authoritative. Because of this notion of Scripture as the reliable voice of God, indiscriminate of its place in human theological constructions, the early church was able to affirm the historicity of Genesis, Jonah, Daniel, the Virginal Conception and the bodily Resurrection of Christ alike. The early church was ‘voice of God’-oriented, while Western Christianity has progressively become man-oriented. The history of several 19<sup>th</sup>-century theologians shows that there are no intellectually tenable halfway stations.<sup>25</sup>

### Application—the whole counsel of God

It is evident from their writings that Scripture is used by the Church Fathers to direct lives and to learn more about God. However, the main application in the books of Irenaeus and Clement is providing proof from the premise that all Scripture is the Word of God.

In his first book, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus presents his main argument against the Gnostics. What is wrong with their teachings? Their primary mistake, according to the Church Father, is that they distort the Scriptures to support what Irenaeus considered “their fiction”. In other words, the Gnostics err in their wrong methodology. Instead, eagerness to do justice to Scripture and its message, they use it selectively to bolster preconceived ideas. In their reference they seem to be building on the Bible, but what they are saying is really out of context. There is no genuine desire to embrace Scripture as the Word of God, but only to use it for their own purposes. Irenaeus perceives a profound lack of integrity in this approach.

Clement of Alexandria has a similar message (*Stromateis/Patchworks* 7). Heretics go wrong because they do not consider all Scripture. They do not compare what God has to say on a topic in several places and contemplate this with reverence to get the full picture. Or they err because their reference is either incomplete or out of context.

The early church heresy constituted a failure to recognize and respectfully treat all Scripture as the voice of God. Irenaeus ends (fifth book, *Against Heresies*) his argument with an invitation. He draws a parallel between Adam and Eve with the tree of life in Paradise and the church that gathers around the Holy Scriptures now. While initially Adam and Eve were allowed to eat from the tree of life, this privilege was lost after the Fall. In the New Testament situation the church is like the Garden of Eden, where a new tree of life is central: the Scriptures, the life-giving voice of God. Adam, where are you?

### Conclusion—the voice of God

In this article we have met with two ancient views: the Scriptures as a fallible manmade invention (Greek scientists) and the Bible as the voice of God (early church). Despite the onslaught of Greek science and scholarship, the church was able to appreciate the Bible as the reliable Word of God from a very early stage. Their response was not the ‘god of the gaps’, or a vastly reduced Bible, but an intellectually integrated Scriptural worldview. This took a lot of work and meeting of minds, often in unfavourable circumstances. Persecution and discrimination were at least as commonplace then as they are today. Early church leaders embraced God’s revelation; not in a selective and utilitarian way, but with an intellectually balanced and comprehensive approach. They did so as children of their time and with their own imperfections, but they did so nonetheless. In this sense they set an example for Christian scholars with similar commitments today. For them Scripture was essentially the vehicle for the voice of God and his truth. Consequently the church aimed at listening to God and find enduring intent behind the words of Holy Writ, the voice of the God who continues to speak.

### References

1. Those who wish to familiarize themselves more intimately with this theme are referred to the author’s following contributions to theological and patristic journals:
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2. See Aristotle, *Meteorology* 2.3. Other Greek scholars considered a young age for the earth, but by the 4<sup>th</sup> century the predominant view that confronted Christianity was that of an old earth, cf. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 12.10–12 where Augustine rejects the Greek old earth view of Apuleius, and subsequently the idea that this world (as possibly one of many) regenerates itself over long periods of time, and where he specifically answers those who have a problem with the biblical account of the creation of man because it could not have happened less than six thousand years ago (reckoned from 4<sup>th</sup> century).
  3. For a detailed treatment, see: Zuiddam, B.A., New perspectives on Irenaeus: Scripture as oracular standard, *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 93(22):288–308, 2011; Early orthodoxy: the Scriptures in Clement of Alexandria, *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 21(2): 257–268, 2010.
  4. E.g. in the 2011 BBC TV series *Bible's Buried Secrets*, Dr Francesca Stavrakopoulou questioned whether King David's kingdom, as described in Samuel, did in fact ever exist. See: [www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/texts/bible.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/texts/bible.shtml).
  5. One of the most explicit proponents of this view is Spong, J.S., *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying and How a New Faith is Being Born*, Harper One, San Francisco, CA, 2002. The tendency to filter out the miraculous from the Bible had become a general one in the UK by 1950, as is witnessed by C.S. Lewis's lecture in Cambridge on *Modern Theology and Bible Criticism* (Essay from *Christian Reflections*, edited by Walter Hooper), which may also be found as an appendix in McDowell, J., *Evidence that Demands a Verdict, vol.2*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, p. 375–379, 1992.
  6. McDowell, ref. 5, p. 377.
  7. *The Telegraph*, 31 July 2002: [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1403106/One-third-of-clergy-do-not-believe-in-the-Resurrection.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1403106/One-third-of-clergy-do-not-believe-in-the-Resurrection.html).
  8. Benko, ref. 1, p.158: "The end of the second century was a period of serious clashes between paganism and Christianity ... But at the same time, on a different plateau, a meeting of the minds began to occur."
  9. Dawkins, R., *An Appetite For Wonder: The Making of a Scientist*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, CA, 2013.
  10. Dawkins, ref. 9, p. 100.
  11. Porphyry's criticism of the Scriptures was collected by Adolf von Harnack, *Porphyrius, "Gegen die Christen", 15 Bücher: Zeugnisse, Fragmente und Referate*, Abhandlungen der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: Jahrgang 1916: philosoph.-hist. Klasse: Nr. 1, Berlin, 1916. Can also be found online at: [archive.org/details/HarnackPorphyrius-GegenDieChristen](http://archive.org/details/HarnackPorphyrius-GegenDieChristen). Porphyrian material is also found with the Church Father Macarius Magnes in his book *Apokritikos* (edn used Fougart, P., *Apokritikos*, Blondel, Paris, 1876). English readers are referred to the edition of Crafer, T.W., McMillan, London, 1919: [www.tertullian.org/fathers/macarius\\_apocriticus.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/macarius_apocriticus.htm). R.J. Hoffmann published an updated translation in Porphyry's *Against the Christians: The Literary Remains*, Prometheus Books, 1994.
  12. Hoffmann, ref. 1, p. 171: "The truth seems to be that Porphyry regarded Jesus as a criminal, justly punished for his crimes by the power of the Roman state, and hence undeserving of the status of hero or of the divinity conferred upon him by his misguided followers." Celsus regarded him as "a pestilent fellow who told great lies and was guilty of profane acts ... Jesus collected around him a group of tax collectors and boatmen, wicked men, from the lowest level of society", Benko, ref. 1, p.150.
  13. Chadwick, H., *Origen: Contra Celsum*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980. In 1873 Th. Keim reconstructed Celsus' book on the basis of materials found with Origen: *Celsus' wahres Wort*, Orell, Zürich.
  14. E.g. van Seters, J., *Prologue to history: the Yahwist as historian in Genesis*, John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1992. See also Sutskover, T., Lot and his Daughters (Gen. 19:30–38), further literary and stylistic Examinations, *J. Hebrew Scriptures* 11: 1–11, 2011.
  15. For a detailed treatment, see: Zuiddam, B.A., The shock factor of Divine Revelation: a philological approach to Daniel 8 and 9, *Scandinavian J. the Old Testament: An International J. Nordic Theology* 27(2): 247–267, 2013. Since the 1820's OT scholars (Bleek, Von Gall, Wellhausen, etc.) generally opt for a Maccabean date for Daniel, three centuries after its alleged authorship. Hill, A.E. and Walton, J.H., *A Survey of the Old Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 571, 2009: "It seems that the presuppositional rejection of supernaturalism is often partly responsible for the rejection of a sixth-century date for the book."
  16. The idea of shame culture in Greek antiquity is worked out in Dodds, E.R., *The Greeks and the Irrational*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, p. 26, 2004: "The application to conduct of the terms καλὸν and αἰσχρὸν seems also to be typical of a shame-culture. These words denote, not that the act is beneficial or hurtful to the agent, or that it is right or wrong in the eyes of a deity, but that it looks 'handsome' or 'ugly' in the eyes of public opinion."
  17. Greek: Ὠριγένης (*Origenes*).
  18. Migne, P.G., for an English translation, e.g. Grant, R.M., *Irenaeus of Lyons*, Routledge, Oxford, 1997.
  19. Migne, P.G., translation in the Ante Nicene Fathers (ANF02).
  20. See Zuiddam, B.A., New perspectives on Irenaeus: Scripture as oracular standard, *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 93(22):288–308, 2011; Early Orthodoxy: the Scriptures in Clement of Alexandria, *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 21(2):257–268, 2010; Holy letters and syllables: The function and character of Biblical authority in the second century, *Dutch Reformed Theological J. XXXVIII*(3):180–191, September 1997. Also: Heilige Letters en Lettergrepen. *De functie en het karakter van Schriftgezag in de tweede eeuw, zoals dit naar voren komt in de werken van Ignatius van Antiochië, Irenaeus van Lyon en Clemens van Alexandrië* (Holy Letters and Syllables. The function and authority of Scripture in the second century, as represented by Ignatius, Irenaeus and Clemens of Alexandria), Importancia, Dordrecht, p. 432, 2007.
  21. E.g. Brown, D., *The Da Vinci Code*, Corgi Books, London, p. 231, 2003.
  22. 'Apocrypha' refers to the hidden and less obvious visibility of God's truth in these writings. In case of the Old Testament Apocrypha this was never intended to mean forbidden books that Christians should somehow stay away from. The meaning became confused as it was also applied to heretical and dubious pseudonymous Gospels and epistles from the New Testament era, like the Gnostic Thomas Gospel and Peter's Apocalypse.
  23. ANF = Ante Nicene Fathers, online: [www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf02.toc.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf02.toc.html).
  24. See Zuiddam, B.A., Jordaans, P.J. and van Rensburg, F.J., Λόγιον in Biblical Literature and its implications for Christian Scholarship, *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 19:379–394, 2008.
  25. See Zuiddam, B.A., Reason's dead end in David Faure: Why the Cape's earliest liberal minister embraced Spiritualism, *Luce verbi/In die Skriflig* 43(2):271–289, 2009.

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