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F. E. Peters: The Voice, the Word, the Books

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Introduction

The Voice from Sinai



Jews, Christians, and Muslims, when ranged side by side, are more notable perhaps for their often violent differences than for their shared heritage as “Children of Abraham.” But they do agree on one enormously consequential point, and it is precisely that concurrence that makes them so contentious. It is that the Creator God has spoken directly to His Creation, and more, that those to whom He spoke have remembered His words, have recorded and preserved them, and have, over the long centuries—now looking reproachfully at one another—striven to fulfill the divine will expressed therein. God’s speech was in some large sense intended for all of humankind, but it was directed in the first instance to a privileged audience, themselves. And they, and they alone, have heard, faithfully preserved, and equally faithfully observed the Word of God.

This book is about the antecedents and consequences of the claims of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims to be in possession of the Word of God. It does not, of course, decide whether it was really God speaking, or whether God *can* speak, or indeed, whether there is a God to begin with. Rather, it investigates the extremely complex process of identifying and hearkening to that voice thought to have been first heard authoritatively from Sinai; of proclaiming those words believed to have been sent down from on high; and then of recording, collecting, and arranging them; and finally of preserving and transmitting them for the benefit of succeeding generations of believers.

The long history of monotheism begins with what was understood to be a communication of God—who already had a history—with an Bronze Age patriarch called Abraham. Their conversation had to do with a “covenant,” an agreement dictated by the Creator and assented to by Abraham. That

covenant promised God's favor to Abraham and his descendants, and it is here that the monotheists part company and begin to tell their own stories in their own Scriptures. Each group, whether we call it a tribe or a church or a community, identifies itself, and itself alone, with those favored descendants of Abraham, either by birthright (the Jews), or by transference from the firstborn (the Christians), or by an act of supersession (the Muslims). The fearsome implications of that difference have been played out over many centuries and continue to trouble the monotheists (and their nonbelieving neighbors) even today. Yet what concerns us here is not the inheritance of God's Promise but another issue.

The monotheists agree that before Abraham, Adam had heard the speech of God, as did Noah, with promises and warnings to each. But then, the commonly received story goes, the register changed. With Moses, a distant descendant of Abraham, God chose not a principal but a messenger, someone commissioned to carry the divine words, and the divine commands and prohibitions, to an increasingly specific audience, and more, to write them down.

On this the monotheists all agree. That agreement goes a little further: all recognize that there were other designated messengers—the preferred term is “prophet”—after Moses, though who and how many are the subject of fierce contention among the three. The Jews reckoned that the God-speech had ended with the last of their prophets, Daniel, while the Muslims maintained that revelation continued well past the point where the Jews ended it—certainly as far as Jesus, whom the Quran regards as a prophet, and preeminently, and finally, to Muhammad, who is characterized as the “Seal of the Prophets” (Quran 33:40), and so the end of revelation.

Abraham stands at the beginning of a long process; at its end are now three books or, rather more precisely, three collections of books or pieces. An impartial observer, if such ever existed, might call them edited books, which makes believers uneasy since the term “edited” calls attention, undue attention, it would seem, to the fact that if all these words had a Divine Author, they also had some very human editors whose errant thumbprints are all over Scripture. That issue will be addressed in detail, but in the meantime let us simply note that the Sacred Books called the Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran are all collections of pieces dating from the “sundry times and divers places” Paul referred to in the opening of the Letter to the Hebrews, times that stretched over many centuries

with the Bible, and over some decades in the cases of the New Testament and the Quran.

The books, then, that are called Scripture are complex, and so too is their history. That history was first written by believers who had what may be called the “workshop product” before them, God’s Words inscribed on paper or papyrus or parchment, written in an unmistakably human hand; the stories of how this came to be, when and where—less often how, which seems to bother us more than it did them. How God came to speak to humankind was sometimes told in the Scripture itself—the Bible is particularly helpful in this regard—but just as often in stories circulating orally just outside the Scriptural orbit. We can collect and unpack these stories and compose some relatively coherent account of revelation as the believers understood it. That is a modestly circumscribed goal, “as the believers understood it,” because the secular historian, with limited tools and a deliberately limited imagination, cannot, or perhaps need not, understand revelation at all.

There is no such easy escape from the rest of the process. The historian does have the tools, and the obligation, to attempt to explain the passage of the now safely “alleged” Words of God from the prophet who heard, or thought he heard, them to his earliest followers who recorded them in memory or symbol or script and then to the somewhat later followers who copied them and tidied them up into the form we have today. How? When? Why? These are all legitimate questions for the historian and the answers forthcoming in the pages that follow. But the answers are tentative, not out of inhibition or delicacy but because of the thinness of the evidence—the witnesses to these matters were far less interested in those questions of how and when and why than are we, and, perhaps more consequentially, because those same witnesses had, and their spiritual descendants continue to have, their own issues of inhibition and delicacy regarding Scripture, their own Scripture. The custodians of the Words of God, whether Jews or Christians or Muslims, are most reluctant to stand and deliver on the historians’ favorite topic, the Works of Man. To rule man into Scripture is, in that precise degree, to rule God out.

We do our best here to overcome their inhibitions and to elicit from these generally reluctant witnesses an answer to the historian’s questions. But first, some clarifications. This account begins, in the best Scriptural manner, in the beginning, on Sinai, in a manner of speaking. But it ends,

somewhat later than the Scripture itself but much earlier than a *Compleat Historie of Scripture*, at the age of printing. The reason is that, though this is a work of history, it is not a history of Scripture. It is rather what the Arabs would call a “Book of Beginnings.” Printing fixed Scripture, albeit mechanically, in a way that it had never been fixed before. And even though the history of Scripture translation was merely hitting its stride, and the history of Scriptural textual criticism was just beginning, the long and broad evolutionary phase of Scripture from word to fixed text was effectively complete. So this account ends there, with Gutenberg in Mainz and Luther and Cranach the Elder in Wittenberg, with Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros on one side of the divide, in Alcalá, and Desiderius Erasmus on the other, in Rotterdam.

This is, then, a book about both process and things. It is about the revelation, proclamation, and publication of God’s speech, but it is also about divine Words and tantalizing books both divine and human; it is about how the commands and instructions first heard in Eden or Sinai or on the shores of Galilee or in a cave near Mecca finally came to rest in script, and occasionally in pictures, produced in a masorete’s workshop in Iraq or in a committee room in a mud brick house in Medina, in an artist’s atelier in France or, somewhat later, in a print shop in Germany.



The reader will perhaps also notice that when I use the term “Bible,” I am referring exclusively to the Jewish Bible, what the Jews call Tanak and what the Christians call the Old Testament. Even though it is a widespread Christian custom to include their New Testament in the term “Bible,” I do not: I refer to the Jewish Scripture as the Bible and the Christian Scripture as the New Testament. The Old Testament, which is the Christian, and somewhat different, version of the Jewish Scripture, I call exactly that, the Old Testament. And since all three communities use a different religious calendar—and here I confess to some unwonted delicacy—I reduce all dates to CE, the “Common Era,” and BCE, “Before the Common Era.”