

# THE ALEPH COURSE.

## 5 : SOURCES.

ALL RIGHT, SO THERE'S NO EVIDENCE.

BUT THERE'S LOTS OF STUFF. WHERE DOES IT COME FROM ?

There are three traditional sources :

The BIBLE - writings from a span of several hundred years, ending around 1900 years ago;

the CHURCH - traditions and teachings handed down for centuries;

the THEOLOGIANS - results of scholarship applied to finding out about God.

- and there's another, curiously neglected in many circles :

GOD - who we believe guides and teaches us.

That's an ENORMOUS amount of material. ( A lot more than our simple hypotheses ! ) What are we supposed to do with it ? How do we use it ? How reliable is it ? ( Will it mess up our assumptions ? )

THE BIBLE :

Exhaustively studied for centuries in all imaginable ways.

It seems to be fairly well established that the text we have is reliable, in the sense that it's pretty close to how it was when originally written. That's nice.

But is it true ? How do we know it was right when it was written down ?

There are two common answers to that question :

- BECAUSE THE BIBLE IS THE INSPIRED MESSAGE GIVEN BY GOD.

Many people believe that; some denominations require their members to accept it.

One can raise a number of objections :

How do we know ?

Why are there inconsistencies ?

If God took care to give us the Bible, why didn't He also take care that the meaning was preserved in all the translations ?

There are answers to these, and other such, questions.

From our point of view, to accept that the Bible is - in effect - authorised by God and therefore to be accepted lock, stock, and barrel, is an extraordinarily big assumption, and one which I don't feel able to make.

- WE DON'T.

We believe that the Bible is exactly what it appears to be : a collection of works by different authors writing about their religious beliefs and experiences in different circumstances over a period of several centuries.

An extreme response to that is : Then how can we believe anything in the Bible ?

An answer is : In just the same way that we believe ( or don't believe ) other literature of human origin. We don't throw away all our books because they were written by fallible people; we accept the fallibility, and make allowances for it, and almost all the time it works out well enough to be useful.

Another part of the answer is : If we accept that THE AUTHORS WERE WRITING IN GOOD FAITH - and there's no obvious reason to think otherwise - then we have something like a record of how the Jewish religion developed over the period of the writing, and how the Christian revelation fitted into it.

Those answers also bear on another question - is the Bible **INSPIRED BY GOD, OR A HUMAN CREATION** ? There are arguments in favour of divine inspiration :

- The **CONSISTENCY** of the Bible, despite its widely scattered authorship - but one can reply that the authors were, after all, writing about basically the same subject - and also that there has quite probably been a ( not necessarily deliberate ) selection process during that time, during which writing deemed to be unhelpful or heretical might be suppressed.
- The **BIBLICAL PROPHECIES**, and particularly the prophecies of Jesus - but if they're so good, why didn't the Jews, who were not fools, recognise Jesus when He came ? Prophecies which only work in hindsight are not too convincing.

I believe that the answer might be "both".

I have, on a small number of occasions, felt myself strongly urged to write down an account of some insight I've had, or some view I hold, in order that other Christians might read it. Rightly or wrongly, I have come to believe that these "urges" are messages from God.

Whether or not that is true, I have striven to present as clear and precise a view of the matter as I can, feeling that it is particularly important to do so. It is my view which I present, but in the process of writing I have sometimes seen errors which I have then corrected. Usually, I revise what I have written at least once, until I come to a point where I am somehow aware that the text has reached a satisfactory form.

But is the Bible **AUTHORITATIVE** ?

Do you want it to be ? Do you want a set of rules ? I don't think that's Christianity. There is a real danger of people raising the Bible to such a high position that they begin to worship that, and not God. That's idolatry. Or Bibolatry.

There's a text about the Bible having been given to us for instruction ( *2 Timothy 3.16* ). Leaving aside questions of whether you can use that as a circular argument to justify relying on the Bible, it is important that for good instruction you need both examples of doing it right and examples of doing it wrong.

But is it **TRUE** ? I'm happy to believe that it's as true as its authors could manage.

The Bible does give us an enormously significant historical view of people's faith in God. It has much the same function as an **ANCHOR** : whatever your view of God, it must take into account that wise and intelligent people from two and more millennia ago saw God in probably rather different ways, and your view must make sense of that, not just your own preferences.

That's a lot about the Bible. That's because it's the source people most commonly think of for Christian material, and many Christians rely on it to a degree which seems to me to be unwise.

**THE CHURCH** :

To people who know nothing about Christianity, the church might be the obvious place to look for evidence. Opinions of bishops, moderators, cardinals, heads of conferences, and other holders of impressive offices in various parts of the church are reported as authoritative; reverend people frequently express their views in newspaper articles.

The results are a mixed bag. Some of it isn't too bad, and perhaps it is only the stronger impression left by bad news that makes me wish they'd keep quiet. We have enough trouble with the apparently endemic press misreporting of church affairs ( one has no real evidence to support a claim that it's deliberate, but it seems very common ) without the embarrassing pronouncements of people who should know better.

Then there is the correspondence from irate Christians ....

The theory is that the church is the repository of ancient traditions, and - if you can get back far enough - a source which could tell us something of the practices of the early church, rather

few of which appear in any Biblical or other literary record. In addition, it is the repository of the wisdom of ages of Christian practice.

There is something in the theory, but it doesn't cover everything. There is a lot of practical wisdom and goodness in the church's practices, most of which carry on unnoticed. Unfortunately, it doesn't always spread to the more visible public activities and pronouncements.

Words which come up in this context include the crusades, the inquisition, Galileo, evolution. Well, we all make mistakes. The particularly unfortunate fact about these mistakes is that they're made by the church, which might be expected to speak with the voice of God, and has sometimes claimed to do so.

So we change our minds. But that gives the impression that we're not reliable - or that our eternal values change from time to time. Not too long ago, everyone knew that it was the will of God that women couldn't be priests. Now exactly the same view is roundly denounced in some parts of the church - but persists in others.

It becomes self-evident that the church's claim to speak for God is arrogant rubbish. It should be added that the Roman Catholics do at least give the impression of worrying about it; they thought they were speaking for God, and stick to it until they are quite sure that there's been a mistake. Some other denominations give the impression of being only too eager to replace a solemn principle by its exact opposite at the slightest shift of fashionable public opinion. This is fairly contemptible. We are, after all, supposed to have some insight into what is right and what is wrong beyond current fads; shouldn't we be leading, not following ?

But there's another way in which the church is a source of evidence about Christianity. The church is composed of Christians - and some of them are rather convincing.

Not all of us are convincing. I find Christians who condemn other Christians hard to take - orthodox and catholic, Roman catholic and protestant, mainstream, charismatic, and fundamentalist. Other examples of Christians who don't ( or appear not to ) practise what they preach are not hard to find - but they're not alone in that. At least, we have some high standards to preach.

And some of us attain these high standards. Those are they who come to be regarded as Saints, which is an old word for role models.

All in all, though, the church's record for reliable guidance is mixed.

The church is not a database, but a FAMILY. Like most families, it has its good bits and its bad bits. The good bits can be very, very good - but when it's bad, it's horrid.

( More about the church later. )

#### THEOLOGY :

Sounds like a good idea : it works elsewhere - if you don't know enough about something, study it and all related evidence, and you'll get to know more.

In practice, there are libraries full of more which we've got to know, but it has a way of being rather less useful in practice than we might have hoped. There are one or two awkward features :

- It seems to be curiously malleable. That's why the church seems to keep changing its mind. It's claimed that theologians must keep on reinterpreting Christianity as society changes, and maybe that's right, but how do you know who's the currently right theologian ? And there are conservative theologians, and liberal theologians, and liberation theologians, and so on, and they don't necessarily agree.
- And once you get a firm statement it leads to schism. Might we be better off without the firm statement ? - and when it's about whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, or from the Father alone, do we need it at all ?
- To most "ordinary" Christians, the theologians are not convincing, and probably not accessible.

Some years ago, I had heard much debate about a new theological movement. ( It was the "death of God" theology, which dates it, and me, if that's of interest. ) This was clearly of concern to many people, so I thought I should find out about it.

So I bought a book, which was a collection of essays by theologians. I couldn't understand much of it, because the arguments mostly depended on references to other theologians. And the bits I could understand were sometimes simply silly - a phrase which turned up a few times was "We can no longer believe <something>", where <something> was some proposition which I had no difficulty at all in believing.

You could answer the first point by observing that any advanced study is likely to call on the appropriate technical literature, and there's something in that - but what they were discussing was what I should believe in order to run my life, and I need more than the authority of a few theologians for that. And you could answer the second by saying that if I'd only listened to the theologians of the first point then I'd know what to believe.

And I would answer that if my faith, and my life, is to depend either on taking a degree in theology or on putting my trust in some theologians ( who probably disagree with others ), then I'll find some other way. That is not entirely rational; but I think it is rational to require that my faith should be linked back to my axioms, and I can do that for myself.

#### HOLY SPIRIT :

Christians, like the Jews before them, traditionally believe in the possibility of communication with a personal God. Much of the Bible is about such communications - people's prayers to God, and God's answers to prayer, revelations, and instructions to His people.

In the doctrine of the Trinity ( which we might or might not address in detail some time ), the Holy Spirit is the "person" of God specifically concerned with this communication between God and the people, and there are several indications in the Bible that the Holy Spirit will lead us to deeper understanding of the nature of God and our relationship with Him - which is to say that Christians are led to expect personal experience of communication with God ( *John 14.26* ).

Why not ? If God is personal, if He loves His people, if He in some way "made" the universe ( which we haven't considered, and won't, because that involves other assumptions ), then why shouldn't He be able to communicate with us ?

I believe that He does; I believe that He has, with me. I believe that God communicates with me, and it is certainly true that what believe that I receive from God has extended and deepened my faith most wonderfully, clarifying things I didn't understand, pointing out mistakes in my understanding, showing relationships between things, and so on, always building on what I had to make it better.

And this source, at least, must be AUTHORITATIVE.

BUT there are still some difficulties. Other people claim to hear God's voice in other ways, sometimes with messages which seem to me to be very surprising. I cannot assert that they're wrong. ( There have been occasions when they have been less charitable towards me. ) I would like to be able to talk to them about it, but practically that isn't usually possible. I don't know the answer to the difficulties, but I don't think it's to deny that God can communicate with people.