
What is it that elevates a text to the level of scripture? Does the term denote something universal, that is to ask, whether a text treated as scripture by an individual or a group, also possesses the same eminence for all human beings? And further, does the text so denoted mean the same to every individual or to all individuals within a certain group? Intriguing questions indeed. And their relevance is all the more marked by the fact that human life, as we have known it, has always been profoundly affected by scripture at all levels of individual and corporate dimensions.

For the faithful believer, the problems regarding the authenticity, origin or the nature of sources which provide sustenance to his or her faith never arise. Faith, working as a focusing force, provides a synchronized vision of the individual elements which combine to form the rich and ornate structure of the tradition which embodies the faith. But for the outsiders, sceptics, or non-believers, everything connected with faith, especially others’ faith, comes with myriad questions about the nature, authenticity and origin of the sources of faith.

One important element of faith (all faiths) is the “scripture” which, to a large extent, defines, controls and even determines the ingredients of individual as well as corporate lives. In *What is Scripture?* one finds an astonishing number of perspectives on this important issue, all presented with a sensitivity and inclusive approach which does not want to leave out anything (or anyone) in a prose full of parentheses and subclauses, yet not cumbersome or trite but rather lively and communicative to the point of giving the impression of a discourse. Smith’s relativistic-humanistic approach is heavily supported by a lifetime of study in comparative religions and a wealth of data. He reminds one of the man who has consciously decided to defer a final decision about subscribing to a faith until he has seen everything that is “available” and in his unsatiating journey has imbibed from all traditions yet, for the sake of objectivity, has decided to remain undecided about the final decision. This, no doubt, provides the requisite freedom to move in and out of a given tradition.
with remarkable ease. Yet, it does not, as the author is very conscious himself, provide "absolute" objectivity, for no such thing can exist. (After all one is born into a family, inheriting a certain biological makeup, as well as the conscious and unconscious, formal and informal effects of the religious/cultural milieu of one's family, schooling and society.)

The relativistic approach is actually functional at two levels: at the level of inquiry and in the mode of study itself. Apparently a simple question, "What is Scripture?" takes on myriad forms as Professor Smith revolves his prism to include various angles from which the subject can be approached. He moves forward to cover all major "religions" of the world in a study supported by extensive "notes" ("Notes" cover more than half the number of pages of the actual text) and supplemented by "alternate" opinions which the author, in all humility, seldom rejects, though often gives "clues" to his inclination and only in half a dozen cases we find him strongly disagreeing. He has even included "The Classics: Chinese and Western" in his study of scripture, though he has not given them the same status; not quite, but almost, one may say. Outrageous as it may seem to some, upon close scrutiny of the premises on which the definition (or shall one say definitions) of scripture is (are) based in this study, their exclusion would have been more difficult to support.

The study is based on the presumption, almost firm belief (perhaps the only "belief" one can find in author's work) that we, as human race, "are living in a new situation... which has arisen in the course of an historical process"—a situation marked by a new historical consciousness. This, in fact, is quite evident from the shift in the West from the use of singular "scripture" in the nineteenth century to the plural "scriptures" in the twentieth—a shift which has taken almost two thousand years to take roots in the West. But the author notes another interesting point: the shift to plural is, in fact, a reversal, not a forward one, for during the middle ages there was a "gradual movement from ta Biblia, a plural in Greek, to Biblia, a singular in Latin. That is, perception moved from 'the Books' to 'The Book'—not merely in grammatical sense but more substantially in the slow development from a collection of writings to a single volume bound between two covers...". So, in its long historical development, the Western scholarship has in fact returned to the original usage, but with the added difference of moving out of the exclusive Judaeo-Christian realm to include books of other faiths in its definition (and recognition) of "scripture".

To begin with, the author suggests a basic thesis: "Scripture" is a bilateral term, just like the word husband denotes a relationship, so does the word "Scripture" denote a relationship of a text with a person. "No person is a husband in and for himself; he is a husband in correlation with another person, in this case a wife. No one is a king except in relation to a certain society and form of government; no building is a temple except in relation to a given
community of persons. . . . No text is a scripture in itself and as such. People—a given community—make a text into scripture, or keep it scripture: by treating it in a certain way.

Thus according to the author, scripture exists only in relationship to humanity. Human involvement is central and without it the text would cease to be scripture. In other words, scripture is not "eternal", does not exist by itself and requires "another" who would accord that status to it. This would obviously mean that if no one holds a text as scripture, that text would cease to be so. In relation to the Qur'an this position seems to come close to the Mu'tzilah thesis, though not exactly like it. (The author's thesis seems to be a logical extension of the Mu'tzilah thesis that the Qur'an is created—a theory based on the concept of word as speech, presuming articulation and movement. This is opposed to the doctrine of Ibn Hanbal on the "uncreated Qur'an" which affirms that the consonants of the Qur'an were wholly uncreated, not only with respect to their emission by the human subject but as to the intention of their articulation, in composition, lafti bi'l-Qur'an ghayr makhlūq. These theological debates, which began in the first half of the second/eighth century in the Islamic polity, regarding the eternity or createdness of the Qur'an also had other, far reaching, elements attached to them.)

This concept of "relationship" or human involvement is central to the study of scripture under review. The author builds his whole edifice on this foundation. He does not explore the possibility of the existence of scripture for other beings; in fact all species other than human beings (Jinns, angels, and those about whom we may not know) are excluded from the study.

The rest of the book examines individual "scriptures" to explore various dimensions of human involvement in this process. For instance, taking a specific example in chapter two (The Song of Songs), the author has poignantly demonstrated how a given text can mean different things to two different individuals or communities (Jews and Christians in this case, though the author later adds a third group, the philosophers). The case in point is particularly rewarding and is further elaborated in chapter five of the book. If the scripture is a human activity (though the author does not exclude the divine element at this stage), then it would mean that different people, at different times in history, have read into a given text, and that they have read into it and others have done the same in earlier or later times and that they have not necessarily read the same thing (or meaning) in a given text. This makes the scripture, or a given text, "relative"—its meaning being determined in a relative fashion, according to the capacity of the reader. The case under examination in chapter two of the book (The Song of Songs) is a clear proof of this position. Not only the meaning but also the importance accorded to the text at different times in history by the Jews and Christians varies remarkably. Treated as a "Love Song" by all three groups, "The Song of Songs" (from its opening line:
‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine’ to the ardent finish: ‘Make haste, O my love. . .’. is different for all three in the nature of love and the subjects of this love. For the Jews, it meant love of God for the Jewish community, for the Christians, it meant love of Christ for the Church, or for the soul of the individual member of the Church and for the medieval philosophers it meant the love of the active for the passive intellect. Relating historical data to the three interpretations, the author builds his case with minute care and shows how, at different times, the three communities explained various verses of The Song in their own fashion. Thus not only human element, but also historical process is demonstrated to be a part of an understanding of scripture. This is treated separately in chapter three (‘Scripture as Form and Concept: Historical Bakground’).

The chapter on the Qurʾān (‘The True Meaning of Scripture: The Qurʾān as an Example’) follows the historical survey (chapter three), which provides an historical context to the study by giving a brief account of the emergence of various ‘scriptures’ in history; it concludes with the observation that the ‘concept’ of scripture has not seriously developed since the Qurʾān in the seventh century CE, and the assertion that ‘our world needs a new concept of scripture’. This chapter is devoid of the gross misconceptions and wilful distortions one often finds in western scholarship on the subject. On the contrary, Smith is very critical of the West’s irresponsible and negative attitude towards the Qurʾān and the Muslims. (This is evident throughout the chapter and in particular in the section dealing with western scholarship and the Qurʾān (pp. 77-90), which gives a brief survey of the attitudes of western scholars towards Muslims and the Qurʾān.) However, for his own purposes, the author tries to establish the human element (human relationship and interaction with the Qurʾān). What one passage of the Qurʾān means to one reader at a particular time and place may be (and often is) different from what it has meant to others at different times and places—a simple fact which further supports the author’s main thesis. In this connection he gives the example of Miʿrāj or the Prophet’s Night Journey and Ascension which has been variously interpreted by various Mufassirs (Interpreters of the Qurʾān) as being physical, spiritual, both spiritual or physical, a dream, a vision, etc.

The most significant chapter for the author’s thesis is, however, the one in which he expands his particular case of The Song to include the whole of the Bible (‘The Bible in Jewish Life?’). Rich in historical data, analytic insight and synthesis, this chapter brings out a convincing proof about the human-historical elements in scriptural matters. The fascinating history of how the Bible, as it is known today, became what it has become, and what the various books meant to the earlier Christians and Jews at various times, how various translations of the Bible attained the status of ‘scripture’ and many other details present in this chapter are like the revolving prism and the reader is invited to look through the changing panorama. For Christians and Jews, their so-called shared ‘Old
The author demonstrates, does not mean the same thing. In discussion on the New Testament, however, one misses the mention of gospels other than those codified four which hold an acclaimed and sanctioned status in today's New Testament, for example the Gospels of Barnabas, Hugh and Thomas which were, at times, given the same status by a considerable number of people over a length of time.

Chapters six to nine of the book enlarge the subject, not in a conceptual sense, but in an historical sense by examination of Hindu, Buddhist and Chinese “scriptures” and a brief consideration of the Classics, both Western and Chinese. The study concludes with a well-articulated final chapter (“Conclusion”) which sums up the arguments. The index is helpful in locating various thematic and conceptual references in the book.

It is an intriguing study by an exceptional western thinker who has, throughout his long career, presented an outsider’s view in the general scholarship prevalent in the West. His long and varied life (association with Universities of the Panjab, Toronto, Dalhousie, McGill, Harvard...), familiarity with western classical as well oriental languages, sound historical data and, above all, a sensitive approach, are remarkably obvious in the style, diction, concept and presentation of the main thesis.

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This is a selection of papers from the 1992 conference of the Nordic Society for Middle Eastern Studies. The Society, formed in 1989, is an association of scholars working on the Middle East in humanist and social sciences in universities and research institutions in Finland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. It has so far held two conferences: 1989 (Uppsala), and 1992 (Copenhagen). Papers from the first conference were published under the title: The Middle East Viewed from the North (Bergen: Alma Mater Forlag AS, 1989. 211 pages, price NOK 165). A common theme of the first conference was the dialogue between the "Islamic" and the "Modern".

The general theme of the second conference was diversity and unity in the Middle East and Islam. Generally, variations and differences found in the