

Clement of Alexandria and His Doctrine of Scripture

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This article discusses Clement of Alexandria's doctrine of Scripture based on the terms "voice" of God, "first principle," and "demonstration" that he uses for Scripture. By studying the usage of these terms and the related passages, it will be made clear that Clement regards Scripture as a vessel of God's voice, favoring what is now called the theory of *verbal inspiration*. Moreover, the divine voice, like the voice of sirens, leaves no choice for the listeners but to submit and follow. This absolute submission is rational, because Scripture is a first principle, whose truth does not depend on any demonstrations. However, those who firmly believe in its truth will find abundant demonstrations in it that will guide them to a better and deeper understanding of its teachings.

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Introduction

Clement of Alexandria (c.150 – c.215)¹, a third-century Church Father and an important Christian philosopher, apologist, exegete, theologian, and mystic, uses three special words for Scripture, by means of which we can unveil his doctrine of Scripture: “voice” (φωνή), “demonstration” (ἀπόδειξις), and “first principle” (ἀρχή). In what follows, we will discuss what exactly the usage of these terms in Clement’s works tells us about his doctrine of Scripture, and especially about his understanding of biblical inspiration and authority.

Scripture as the Divine “Voice”

In several places, Clement refers to Scripture as the divine “voice”:

He who believes then the divine Scriptures with sure judgment, receives in the voice of God, who bestowed the Scripture, a demonstration that cannot be impugned. (Stromata II.2)

1. Clement, born in either Athens or Alexandria, converted to Christianity and traveled a lot to learn from famous Christian teachers. Eventually, he settled down in Alexandria and became a disciple of Pantaenus (d. c.190), who, according to Eusebius, was the head of the Catechetical School of Alexandria (Ecclesiastical History, V.10). Eusebius reports that after Pantaenus, Clement became the head of the Catechetical School and that Origen was among his disciples (VI.6), though these assumptions have come under question by the modern scholarship (Spanneut 2003, 797). In c.202, due to the persecution of Septimius Severus, Clement fled from Alexandria, and took refuge probably in Cappadocia. There is not much information about his life after this, but scholars maintain that he died in Palestine between 211 and 215.

Clement’s extant writings include *Protrepticus*, an “exhortation” to the Greeks and an apology for Christian faith; *Paedagogus*, instructing the believers about Christian morals and manners; and eight books of *Stromateis* or “Miscellanies,” which constitute the most important part of Clement’s writings. Clement, together with Origen, is a main representative of the early theological school of Alexandria, which, in contrast to the school of Antioch, is noted for its high Christology and its use of allegorical methods of exegesis. For more details on Clement’s life and thought, see Osborn (2005) and Spanneut (2003).

In this passage, Clement states the contingency of receiving the voice of God on believing in Scripture. According to him, in order to receive the divine voice, it is necessary to “believe . . . the divine Scriptures with sure judgment.” But what does Clement mean exactly by believing the divine Scriptures, and what is it that one has to believe about Scripture to be able to receive the divine voice? Is it enough, for instance, to believe that they are rich sources of wisdom and enlightenment?

Two points in this passage indicate that what Clement means by believing in Scripture is beyond merely regarding it as a good source of wisdom. The first indication is Clement’s use of the adjective “divine”, which suggests that Scripture is essentially different from human works. The second is his speaking of God as the one who “bestowed the Scriptures,” emphasizing again the divine origin of Scriptures. These two points imply that in Clement’s thought the belief that leads to receiving the “voice of God” is a firm belief in the divine origin or *inspiration* of Scripture.

Moreover, the dependence of receiving the voice of God on believing in Scripture points to understanding Scripture as the vessel of the divine voice. According to this image, the divine voice is not one and the same entity as Scripture but is contained in it, and whoever faithfully turns to Scripture will receive the voice of God through it.

Such understanding of Scripture does not appear to go in lines with *word-centered* theories of biblical inspiration, because the vessel or the container is different from what it contains. So, if Scripture *contains* the divine voice, there must be an aspect in it that is not divine in itself but functions as the container of the divine aspect. This container aspect is inevitably the verbal aspect of Scripture. However, as we will see in other passages, this initial interpretation of Clement’s words needs to be modified.

In another passage, Clement writes,

Moses, 'the servant who was faithful in all his house,' said to Him who uttered the oracles from the bush, 'Who am I, that You send me? I am slow of speech, and of a stammering tongue,' to minister the voice of God in human speech. And again: 'I am smoke from a pot.' For God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. (Stromata IV.17)

In this passage, Clement quotes Exodus 4:10, then adds a short but interesting comment: "to minister the voice of God in human speech." This short note shows that Clement thinks that Moses initially had a kind of *conceptual theory of inspiration* in mind, based on which God gives only the essence of His message and the concepts He wants to convey, without directing His messengers in the wordings they choose. So, according to Clement, Moses, having this idea in mind, thought that after receiving the divine voice, it was all up to him to convey it in human language. God, however, corrected Moses' misunderstanding: "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak" (Exodus 4:11-12).

This passage is important, because it reaffirms the idea of God's voice contained in the vessel of words. It shows that the divine voice is not in itself verbal and, to reach human beings, it needs to be put in human language. However, this passage and the verses surrounding it indicate that although the divine voice may not have a verbal nature, verbal inspiration of the Bible still has its grounds. True that Moses had received God's voice not in the form of human language, but God did not leave Moses on his own in conveying the divine voice in human words; God promised that He would be with Moses' mouth and teach him what he would speak.

This perception certainly goes with the idea of word-centered inspiration of the Bible, but could it give further information about which word-centered inspiration theory Clement had in mind? Was he a proponent of *instrumental* theory of inspiration, according to which God utilized biblical authors to communicate His words in Scripture just as a writer uses a pen to write? Or, was he an adherent of the *dictation* theory of inspiration, based on which the exact words of Scripture were communicated by God to the biblical authors? Or, did he adhere to the *verbal* theory of inspiration, maintaining that God created the conditions that led the biblical writers to express His message in the exact words that He had wanted? In his book, *Inspiration*, David R. Law sides with the latter viewpoint (Law 2001, 62). He refers to a passage from Clement where he comments on 2 Tim 3:15: “For truly holy are those letters that sanctify and deify; and the writings or volumes that consist of those holy letters and syllables, the same apostle consequently calls inspired of God” (Exhortation to the Heathen IX). As we will see below, there are other passages in Clement’s writings that more clearly show his inclination to the theory of verbal inspiration.

In another passage, widely cited, Clement writes:

He, then, who of himself believes the Scripture and voice of the Lord, which by the Lord acts to the benefiting of men, is rightly [regarded] faithful. Certainly, we use it as a criterion in the discovery of things. What is subjected to criticism is not believed till it is so subjected; so that what needs criticism cannot be a first principle. Therefore, as is reasonable, grasping by faith the indemonstrable first principle, and receiving in abundance, from the first principle itself, demonstrations in reference to the first principle, we are by the voice of the Lord trained up to the knowledge of the truth. (Stromata VII.16)

This passage indicates that Clement regards Scripture and the “voice of the Lord” as essentially one and the same thing. Although he establishes a conjunction between Scripture and the “voice of the Lord” at the beginning of the passage, which, at the first sight, implies that they are two different things, in a closer look, the conjunction seems to be a synonym repetition. This is evident from the use of singular verbs and pronouns in the subsequent sentences for “the Scripture and voice of the Lord,” which shows their unity in Clement’s mind.

Other more direct evidence is Clement’s use of the “voice of the Lord” at the end of this passage, where he says, “[G]rasping by faith the indemonstrable first principle, and receiving in abundance, from the first principle itself, demonstrations in reference to the first principle, we are by the *voice of the Lord* trained up to the knowledge of the truth.” Here, Clement is talking about the sufficiency of Scripture in interpreting Scripture; that, in order to understand Scripture, no external source is needed. In this context, Clement introduces the “voice of the Lord” as a source by which “we are . . . trained up to the knowledge of the truth.” It is clear that what Clement means by the voice of the Lord here is nothing but Scripture itself; otherwise, if the divine voice was a separate source, he would have been contradicting himself by introducing a source other than Scripture that can give us knowledge regarding it.

Moreover, in a few sentences later, Clement writes, “[W]e establish the matter that is in question by *the voice of the Lord*, which is the surest of all demonstrations,” introducing the “voice of the lord” as a demonstration with which the truth of a statement or an opinion is evaluated. It is obvious here also that Clement is referring to Scripture itself, rather than introducing a new source of knowledge.

This identification of Scripture with the divine voice in this passage lays further emphasis upon the divine origin of Scripture; however, it does not completely accord with the idea of Scripture as the vessel of God’s voice, because, as mentioned earlier, a vessel is not the same as

what it contains. However, this is not an inconsistency in Clement's thought; rather, it shows Clement's inclination to the theory of verbal inspiration of Scripture; for him, Scripture reveals God's message by the exact words and in the precise way that God wants; it is like a mirror that accurately reflects the image of what stands in front of it, so much so that whenever people look at the mirror, they usually do not see the mirror, but the images reflected by it. Similarly, just as one may refer to one's image in the mirror and say, "This is me," Clement can refer to Scripture, which he regards to be the perfect signifier of God's voice, as the "voice of the Lord."

The above passage is not only an affirmation of the verbal inspiration of Scripture but could also support the theory of *plenary inspiration* of the Bible: if Scripture reflects God's message so accurately, if it is simply the "voice of the Lord," it cannot contain parts or sections that do not belong to the Lord.

Another passage in Clement's writings reads,

And in general, Pythagoras, and Socrates, and Plato say that they hear God's voice while closely contemplating the fabric of the universe, made and preserved unceasingly by God. For they heard Moses say, He said, and it was done, describing the word of God as an act. (Stromata V.14)

The fact that, according to this passage, Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato have heard the voice of God indicates that Scripture is not the only vessel of God's voice, nor is inspiration the exclusive way of receiving it; philosophers have also heard that voice through contemplation. The passage shows that, in Clement's understanding, the divine voice is not only a set of ideas or messages to be communicated in human language; rather, it encompasses the entire creation, embedded in "the fabric of the universe."

The idea, moreover, works as a perfect explanation for Clement's positive attitude toward philosophy. In contrast to Church Fathers like Tertulian who believed in no affinity between philosophy and revelation and called for exclusion of philosophy from theological reflections, basing the latter solely on Scripture, Clement maintained that, though partially, philosophy contained God's truth and prepared the way for His final revelation. The above passage reveals the foundation of this claim: The divine voice is not confined to Scripture; rather, it can be found in the foundation of creation. Therefore, those who contemplate the universe and those who study the passages of Scripture are in fact searching for the same divine truth.

Clement further writes,

Theophrastus says that sensation is the root of faith. For from it the rudimentary principles extend to the reason that is in us, and the understanding. He who believeth then the divine Scriptures with sure judgment, receives in the voice of God, who bestowed the Scripture, a demonstration that cannot be impugned. Faith, then, is not established by demonstration. "Blessed therefore those who, not having seen, yet have believed." The Siren's songs, exhibiting a power above human, fascinated those that came near, conciliating them, almost against their will, to the reception of what was said. (Stromata II.2)

In this passage, Clement draws an analogy between Scripture and the song of the sirens, who, in Greek mythology, were bird-like women who lured sailors with their songs and bewitched everybody that approached them (Room 1990, 277).

The analogy between Scripture, which is the divine voice in Clement's thought, and the song of the sirens indicates the essential authority of Scripture that does not leave any choice for the hearers except for acceptance and submission. Just as the sufficient explanation

for why the sailors were attracted to the sirens is the latter's powerful attraction, the sufficient reason why people believe and follow the divine voice is its essential authority.

Scripture as "First Principle"

In several places, Clement uses the term "first principle" for Scripture:

He, then, who of himself believes the Scripture and voice of the Lord, which by the Lord acts to the benefiting of men, is rightly [regarded] faithful. Certainly, we use it as a criterion in the discovery of things. What is subjected to criticism is not believed till it is so subjected; so that what needs criticism cannot be a first principle. Therefore, as is reasonable, grasping by faith the indemonstrable first principle, and receiving in abundance, from the first principle itself, demonstrations in reference to the first principle, we are by the voice of the Lord trained up to the knowledge of the truth. (Stromata VII.16)

First principle is a technical term in Greek philosophy and especially in the Aristotelian tradition. Aristotle divides all sciences into theoretical, practical, and productive. The goal of theoretical sciences—unlike practical and productive sciences—is knowing the truth for its own sake, and to achieve this goal *demonstration* is to be used. Demonstration is a kind of syllogism that leads to apodictic knowledge; it is based on premises that are "true, primary, immediate, better known than, and prior to the conclusion, which is further related to them as effect to cause" (Posterior Analytics 1.2).

However, if everything should be known by demonstration, we would be entrapped in an infinite regress, because nothing can be demonstrated unless there are true premises on which the demonstration can be based. But to know the truth of those premises, further demonstrations are needed, which themselves are based on premises that need to be demonstrated, and so on.

Aristotle himself is aware of this problem. He writes, “It is impossible that there should be demonstration of absolutely everything; there would be an infinite regress, so that there would still be no demonstration” (Metaphysics 4.4). This forms the basis of Aristotle’s theory of indemonstrable “first principles,” which are self-evident and need no further explanation.

But what is the nature of the knowledge that reaches the first principles if it is not demonstrative knowledge? Aristotle’s response to this question is *intuition*: “[T]here will be no scientific knowledge of the primary premises, and since except intuition nothing can be truer than scientific knowledge, it will be intuition that apprehends the primary premises” (Posterior Analytics 2.19). Intuition is not an outcome of any demonstration or syllogism; it is a simple grasp of a form or an idea, whether that idea is outside the material world or is embedded in the primary substances (Guila 2009, 8-9).

Clement incorporates these philosophical concepts to his doctrine of Scripture, but in order to better understand why he resorts to these concepts in the first place and what exactly he means by them, it is necessary to take into account his historical setting. In Clement’s time, proto-orthodox Christianity was faced with challenges from two major opponents: Pagan thinkers, who criticized the supremacy that Christians had given to faith over reason; and Valentinian Gnostics, who distinguished between faith and *gnosis* and maintained that the former is for the common people whereas the latter is reserved for the elite. Moreover, there were simple Christian believers who held that faith alone is sufficient and rejected any further philosophical or mystical endeavors for deeper understanding of the truth (Lilla 2005, 118-19).

Having this background in mind, it becomes clear why Clement refers to Scripture as a “first principle”: He seeks to respond to pagan thinkers, who regard Christian faith in Scripture as irrational. In

response to them, Clement introduces Scripture as a first principle and faith as the intuition which is the means for knowing first principles.¹ Employing these concepts, Clement claims that Christians' adherence to Scripture is not abandoning rationality in favor of revelation; rather, it is completely in accordance with the basic standards of any rational belief system where there are first principles grasped by intuition and further truths derived from those principles by means of demonstration. The only difference is that Christians' intuition or faith has been able to grasp a transcendent first principle, which others have failed to grasp. Thus, Clement believes that "grasping by faith the indemonstrable first principle" is "reasonable" (Stromata VII.16).

Moreover, based on the same idea of Scripture as the first principle, Clement is able to meet the Gnostic challenge. If Scripture is the first principle, then believing in it is the first step in the way of acquiring further knowledge of the truth. Therefore, gnosis is not extraneous to the faith of simple believers; rather, it is the fruit of that faith, and it is from that simple assent to the authority of Scripture that any deeper understanding of the truth starts. Only those who start from this basic faith in Scripture and follow the abundant "demonstrations" that they receive from it will be "trained up to the knowledge of the truth" (Stromata VII.16).

The idea of Scripture as the first principle, moreover, has a message for those simpleton believers who regarded the basic faith in Scripture as sufficient: Scripture is the first principle and we must have faith in it, but first principles are to be the foundations of the truths that are to be further discovered. Those who regard their simple faith in Scripture as

1. It should be noted here that apart from this meaning for "faith," Clement uses this term for two other meanings as well: (1) the firm conviction of mind about the conclusion of a scientific demonstration, and (2) the inclination of some believers to simply accept the teachings of Scripture without further attempts to acquire a deeper understanding. See Lilla (2005, 119).

sufficient, will be deprived of the deeper knowledge of the truth—the *gnosis*.

Scripture as “Demonstration”

Another term used by Clement for Scripture, which is apparently inconsistent with the use of “first principle” for it, is “demonstration”:

For we may not give our adhesion to men on a bare statement by them, who might equally state the opposite. But if it is not enough merely to state the opinion, but if what is stated must be confirmed, we do not wait for the testimony of men, but we establish the matter that is in question by the voice of the Lord, which is the surest of all demonstrations, or rather is the only demonstration; ... so, consequently, we also, giving a complete exhibition of the Scriptures from the Scriptures themselves, from faith persuaded by demonstration. (Stromata VII.16)

As a solution for this apparent inconsistency, some scholars have suggested that Scripture being the first principle means that what Scripture says is self-evidently true and there is no need for any demonstration to prove it. However, knowing that the sayings of Scripture are true does not necessarily mean knowing the true meanings of those sayings. Thus, there needs to be an exegetical investigation based on the accepted truth of Scripture to find the true and deep meaning of Scripture through demonstrations that are based on, and provided by, Scripture itself as the first principle of this study (Lilla 2005, 137-38).

Other scholars believe that the discrepancy cannot be resolved unless “demonstration” is understood not in its technical Aristotelian sense but in its original meaning in Greek language. Thus, they suggest that in these contexts the meaning of demonstration should be understood as close to “manifestation” (Guila 2009, 198-99). In this sense, demonstrations provided by Scripture are the divine

manifestations contained in Scripture, and, coming from God, they are self-evident truths—first principles that need no technical “demonstrations.” In this way, calling Scripture a first principle and speaking of it as a demonstration basically denotes the same idea.

It seems, however, that the former explanation is more fitting to the context of the above passage, in which Clement is trying to explain the right theory of interpretation. Clement criticizes those “heretics” who “will not make use of all the Scriptures, and then they will not quote them entire, nor as the body and texture of prophecy prescribe. But, selecting ambiguous expressions, they wrest them to their own opinions” (Stromata VII.16). Clement believes that the right interpretation of Scripture is rather “in establishing each one of the points demonstrated in the Scriptures again from similar Scriptures” (Stromata VII.16). Seen in this context, it appears that the demonstrations Clement speaks of in the above passage and in the previous one (where he writes, “Therefore, as is reasonable, grasping by faith the indemonstrable first principle, and receiving in abundance, from the first principle itself, demonstrations in reference to the first principle”) are not so much the self-evident divine manifestations, but the different Scriptural passages that can provide the premises and exegetical “demonstrations” used to shed light on the ambiguous passages of Scripture and reveal its deeper meaning.

Conclusion

In this article, we tried to extract Clement of Alexandria’s doctrine of Scripture based on three special terms that he has used for Scripture: “voice” of God, “first principle,” and “demonstration.” Through studying the usage of these terms, we showed that Clement regards Scripture as inspired by God and a vessel of His voice. Although the divine voice contained in Scripture is not in itself of a verbal nature, God oversees the choice of the words in such a way that what becomes Scripture would convey God’s voice precisely as He wants. As such, the divine voice

contained in Scripture has such authority that, like the voice of sirens, leaves no choice for the listeners but to submit and follow.

This absolute submission and adherence is far from being irrational, because Scripture is self-evidently true; it is a first principle that calls for faith. Those who firmly believe in its truth will find abundant demonstrations in it that will guide them to a better and deeper understanding of its truth.

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