

WITNESS



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THE VARIOUS WAYS OF SCRIPTURE

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With the passing of the name “St. George’s Anglican Church Ottawa”, so, too, the name “St. George’s Scholar” must pass.

The editor of *Witness*, however, has expressed a desire that I as the author of the column continue to write something. So, in discussion with the editor, I suggested that I continue to author a column that would focus primarily on themes of Biblical interest, since that is indeed my specialty.

And so, for the title of my new column – a final goodbye to “Ask the Saint George’s Scholar” – I have chosen the following title: “The various ways of Scripture”.

Whence and why this title? In this first column, let me explain the title, and why it seemed to me appropriate.

The title is derived from the opening three words of the letter to the Hebrews (1:1), translated in the RSV as “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers.”

A few months ago Pastor Don (Akitt) wrote to me – providentially for this column, I believe – with a query. He was wondering about the best way to translate the Greek found in this verse from Hebrews. In particular he was wondering about the first words of that verse: “In many and various ways”.

I responded that the phrase, often translated “in many and various ways” was actually comprised of two Greek words, *polumerēs* and *polutropos*.

The first word (*polumerēs*) means ‘consisting of many parts or kinds’. It suggests that in Scripture God speaks in a variety of different ways, in different contexts – both oral and written and with many words.

What is the significance of this? Quite simply this: rather than just overwhelming humans with a single mental image that will blind them to all else or simply humbling humans with the divine weight of His inspiration, God deigns to use human language and imagery to speak His Word to us. He spoke to Adam and Eve before there were any other humans with languages and He continued to speak to the people of Israel in both later developed languages of Hebrew and Aramaic. He spoke not just in the form of pronouncements and Laws from the mountain top, but in books of history and poetry (even love poetry!) and wisdom.

But, God does not limit His Word to our words simply to talk to people. God uses words intelligible to humans to bring His Word to people with a view to bringing those people into the fullness of relationship with Him. The author of the letter to the Hebrews says that this is how God spoke to Israel through the prophets, by using a variety of images and words to bring them back to the truth. The author of Hebrews will go on to say: ‘And now God has spoken perfectly to humans [all humans, and in their own words!] through His own Son. Listen to him, because in Him, you will find the fullness of God’s word for the fullness of that relationship with Him.’

The second word, *polutropos*, is also very interesting. And it adds a degree of mystery and excitement to how God speaks using our words!

For the word *polutropos*, though a kind of synonym for the first word, also has a twist to it. It suggests not only that God speaks in many ways and in various forms but also that God speaks in ways that are not always clear and may sometimes even be confusing or circu-

itous. You may have to struggle, like Jacob, to figure out what God is saying.

Now, remember. When the author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote, he wrote in Greek, like all the New Testament authors. And they were all writing for people who read Greek. The people who read the New Testament, even Jews by the first century, didn’t just read the New Testament in Greek. No, before the New Testament even existed they read many other things in Greek. This included the Old Testament in Greek, but also included a lot of other non-Jewish material.

And, in the first century, one of the most well-known texts in Greek, read by everyone, including the rabbis of Israel and their children, were the two great volumes by Homer, books that we now call the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Now, what is interesting about this is that the word *polutropos* is not only found in Hebrews 1:1 but in fact it is one of the first words of Homer’s *Odyssey*! The book that we call The *Odyssey* begins: “Tell me, O Muse, of the crafty man, who wandered in so many ways after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy.” In other words, ‘help me sing,’ Homer requests of his poetic muse, ‘about that crafty (*polutropos*) man Odysseus’. Yes, that’s the same word that occurs in Hebrews 1:1 talking about God’s Word in Scripture!

Why does the writer to the Hebrews describe God’s Word in Scripture – for him, our Old Testament – as “confusing”, “circuitous”, even “crafty”, like Odysseus? Because Scripture – especially the Old Testament! – is not easy to understand, and no one, least of all orthodox Christians, should think that it is. If it were, for example, the Messiah Jesus would have been readily

welcomed by all who knew Scripture so well, namely, the Pharisees. Yet, they proved to be implacable opponents for the most part. Scripture is not easy to understand: it takes work, spiritual work, and only the lazy think that by merely opening the text, they will understand everything written therein. Why? Because God has worked hard at making His Word known to a stiff-necked and stubborn and slow-to-understand people. He has used everything at His disposal to make Himself understood and to get His message across. And yet God's own people still didn't always understand. We shouldn't be surprised that we don't always understand. We are in good company!

But, we need to do better than they did. And we have a key to do so! By God's grace, we have been given the golden key for understanding His Word: His own Son, who continues to lead us in our attempts at understanding by the gracious Holy Spirit.

Secondly, and because God's Word is hard to get at, when we do "get it," there is great joy, great feasting, great insight. When Odysseus, having used every means at his disposal to return home, finally does get home, there is great joy, especially from his wife, Penelope. It's a little bit like the joy when a student in school suddenly

"gets" a math problem, or a science problem, or sees the connection between two ideas: Oh, wow, I get it now! And this joy gives a kind of energetic pulse that pushes the student on to learn even more. If it were easy, the student would become lazy; if the problem were insoluble, the student would become paralyzed.

Scripture is neither easy nor is it impenetrable... even the Old Testament! And so, in my column, I will humbly address, by God's grace, issues of understanding and interpretation of Scripture that will bring those "aha" or "oh, wow!" moments and that will spur us all on to even greater joy in learning of our God and of His good purposes for us.

Because, rather than just headed toward Odysseus' Greek island of Ithaca after many years of war and sailing, we are on a course toward a much more incredible city than any of Ithaca's or the world's greatest cities, one whose foundations were set before time and space themselves, where joy is made perfect in the perfect light of the Son. And Scripture will be our map. The journey may be arduous, the course not always clear, but we are disciples in the boat, and our Lord, the one through whom all things came into being, is there with us. Oh, wow! So, "rejoice, and again I say rejoice."