

Eye-Opener Studies



Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

7: The Authority of Jesus

One of the obvious differences between men and animals is that animals have no concept of the meaning of the word 'ought'. They act purely on instinct, whether for good or ill. It is true that some domesticated animals can develop a sort of fond affection for their masters, and even pine away for them if they die, or defend them to the death if they see others attacking them, but there is no sense that they do so because they feel they ought to. They don't choose to do it in spite of any reservations they might have; it's pure instinct which drives them to it in that context.

The notion of authority

To have a sense of ought implies that we are subject to external conditions, or, to put it another way, that we recognise some sort of authority which is above and beyond us. Oftentimes the potency of that authority depends on some form of punishment which will be inflicted on us if we disobey, and that focuses our minds on obedience no matter what we might truly feel about it - I pay my taxes without a cheerful heart whilst doing so! We could not function effectively as individuals or as a society if we were not subject to an authority whose wishes guide our actions. As children we act under our parents' or guardians' authority at first, then teachers join in the mixture. As we grow up we develop our own choices of authorities to obey in certain contexts, and this can create conflicts within our social settings if these new authorities do not conform to those under which we were raised. How many exasperated parents have uttered the famous words, 'You weren't

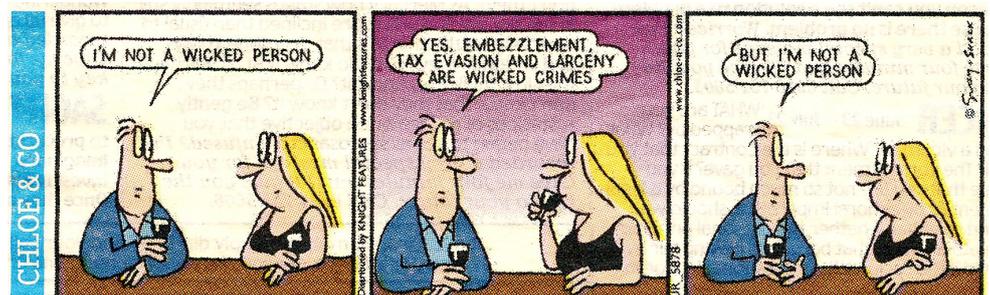
brought up to behave like that!' The Bible tells us we must honour our father and mother but if there is a conflict between our obedience to them and our obedience to God, it is God we must choose to follow. His authority trumps any other we may care to consider.

Right and wrong

The concept of ought implies an understanding of right, wrong, morality, immorality, what is allowable and what is forbidden. This was played out in Eden when our first parents rebelled. To eat fruit from a forbidden tree was hardly a massive crime in our terms and understanding today. It was not in the same league as murder, theft or adultery (a sin which neither Adam nor Eve could have committed in Eden, of course!) but it was just as wicked at base level for it defied the Lord and His authority. We humans are prone to grade sins, usually to salve our consciences and kid ourselves that we are not really THAT bad, but God does not grade sins as we do. The cartoon (below) from the *Daily Mail* gets brilliantly at the way so many people today look at themselves, but Paul tells us in Romans that

'it is written:

*"None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.*



Daily Mail 5.6.14

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (Ro 3:10-12)

It was written, in fact, in Psalms 14 and 53, verses 1-3 in both cases, and Paul summarizes the ideas here in this letter.

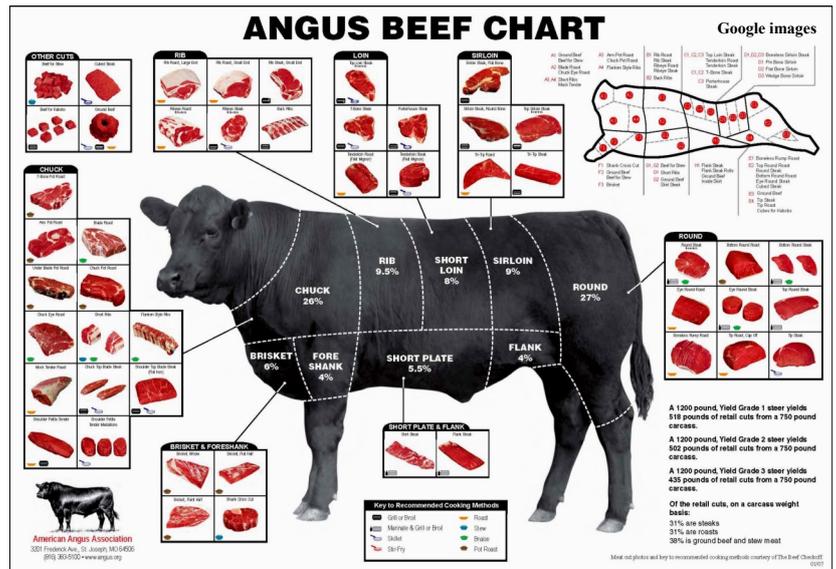
Drawing lines

What is right and proper, and therefore what one ought to do, is usually not viewed by our society, and other societies, in absolute terms. Even the Bible gives guidance at times which allows for people to have different opinions in certain areas of their spiritual lives. Paul again picks up on this famously in Romans 14:

‘As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

‘One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honour of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honour of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honour of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.’ (Ro 14:1-8). He concludes these thoughts by reminding us that ‘each of us will give an account of himself to God.’ (Rom 14:12).

I love using the notion that vegetarians are ‘weak in faith’ to pull the legs of some who follow this life-style today. I’m a carnivore and remember seeing a wonderful T-shirt on a youth in Texas, where T-bone steaks roam freely across their eating ranges everywhere: ‘I didn’t climb to the top of the food chain just to eat vegetables’. Amen! The Jewish religion may not allow for ham sandwiches, ba-



The carnivore’s ‘sacred cow’!

con butties, and full English breakfasts, but Jews were not vegetarians, and nor was Jesus. They consumed copious amounts of lamb as a part of their religious life, if nothing else. The biblical references made to abstaining totally from meat had little or nothing to do with diets and healthy eating in their day and everything to do with the fact that in Gentile cities the meat on sale had usually been offered as a sacrifice on pagan altars to pagan gods. Some Christians were uncomfortable about apparently being seen as complicit participants in paganism if they ate such meat. Paul indicated that they had no need to worry on that score but don’t let it bother the conscience. Hold your opinions for yourself, don’t judge others who disagree with you and then use those opinions to create division in the church. It’s very useful to keep this chapter of Romans in mind when considering issues such as Christmas, Easter and harvest festivals, etc. and how to handle them in a worshipping context in congregations today. Brethren may well differ - and they do - but making such opinions tests of faith and spirituality, and thus creating division, has no place or justification amongst the Lord’s people.

Drawing lines

Having said this, lines have to be drawn at times. Even the most liberal and anarchic members of our society, who seem to hate all authority, will draw them. Their lines may well not coincide with where we would draw ours, but they still draw them. To make what might seem like a silly point, no group believes that murder is part of a valid life-style option. The religious beliefs and life-style practices of



cannibals are not placed co-equally alongside other ethical systems, especially if it is ‘us’ whom they are going to throw into the pot, whether they have learned to say grace before doing so or not. Nobody would accept in our day that child sacrifice,

or any form of human sacrifice, should not be forbidden to any immigrant group who settle here and wish to worship as they used to back home. They have to leave such notions, if they ever had them, behind if they wish to stay here.

There are always those who want to push on the boundaries others have created because they won’t recognize the validity of where they were drawn, or who drew them. If we say that we are drawing them where the Bible tells us to, no matter how accurately we have done this, we will be challenged, because the majority today refuse to accept that the Bible is God’s Word, that He is in charge, therefore He makes the rules and that we simply can’t do just as we please. Well, maybe we can, but if we do, one day there will be a reckoning and every knee will bow to the authority of Jesus. Jesus tells us how we ought to live and the people who actually heard Him speak were astonished because *‘he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.’* (Mk 1:22).

Jesus’s claims

We’ve mentioned before about my friend and former colleague, Pete, who, as a young boy, contracted TB. On returning to his Roman Catholic school after two years, a nun asked him if he had thanked Jesus for making him better. (Study 4: ‘The nature of God’, page 7). Pete said to me that he saw through that at the tender age of 10. ‘If Jesus had loved me enough to make me better, why didn’t He love me enough not to let me get sick in the first place?’ he said. That was ‘Check’ and then ‘Checkmate’ as far as he was concerned about the world of religion and the claims made for, and about, Jesus. He was, and presumably still is, an atheist.

The sin of pride

We were talking about Jesus on our way to work and Pete mentioned that he had seen a film, or some such arts-type presentation about Jesus, demonstrating His sinfulness. Puzzled and offended by the suggestion, I asked him what this could possibly be about. ‘What sin was Jesus supposed to be guilty of?’, I asked him. He replied, ‘The oldest sin in the book: the sin of pride.’ Obviously I couldn’t, and didn’t, agree with him but I could see exactly where he was coming from, and the case could be made. There are many things Jesus said which could lend themselves to such an interpretation and understanding of His nature. Just let a few suffice here to make the point:

“All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Mt 11:27-30, emphasis added).

‘Jesus said to him [Thomas], “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”’ (Jn 14:6, emphasis ours).

‘Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”’ (Jn 14:8-9, emphasis added).

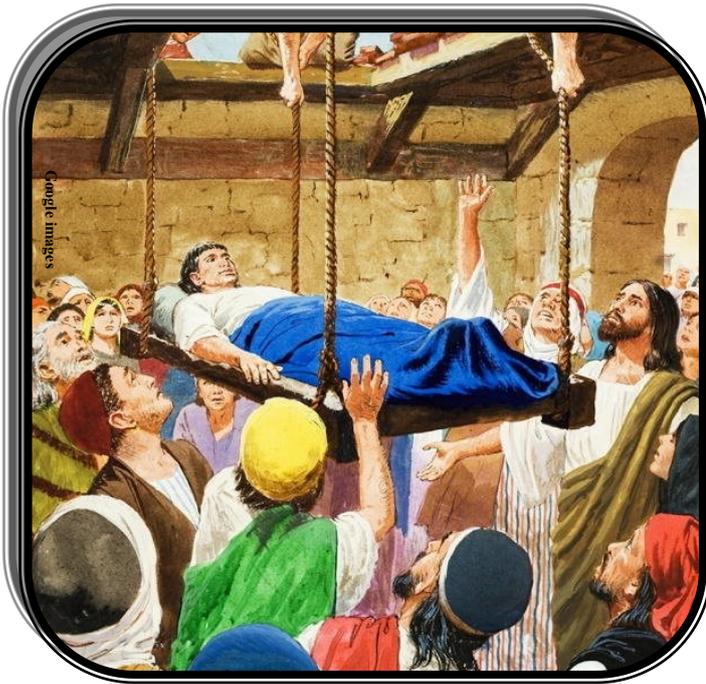
‘The Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”’ (Jn 8:57-58, emphasis ours). This is a claim to being God, and the Jews knew it. So add this to the following claims and it is easy to see why the Jews wanted to stone Him, and atheists today want to accuse Him of the sin of pride.

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life...”’ (Jn 10:27-28, our emphasis).

“I and the Father are one.”’ (Jn 10:30, our emphasis and a clear claim to being co-equal with God).

The first recorded clash

Remember the story told at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel about the cripple let down through the roof



Jesus forgives sins and heals the paralytic

of Jesus's house in Capernaum where He was preaching and teaching? *'When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven."* Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, *"Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"* And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, *"Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home."* (Mk 2:5-11).

How to sort them out

There is no doubt that the scribes were absolutely correct to question what Jesus had done. No man had the right to forgive sins. Jesus used their scepticism to demonstrate that whereas other men did not have this right, He did. He could only say and do the things He did, making claims which could be construed as being the sin of pride, if they were true. Anybody can come along claiming to be a messenger from God, or to have had a vision giving him powers and rights, and who can deny these claims? Many a charlatan, or a deluded mystic, or a fantasising young religiously-inclined young girl, can, and has claimed angelic visitations, or to have

powers not given to lesser mortals. Jesus could well have been a bogus claimant, just one in a long line of such hyper-spiritual prophets and mystics.

Jesus knew that the only way He could demonstrate that He was not a bogus claimant to the messianic crown would lie in proof-positive that He had supernatural powers: hence He healed the paralytic just to make this very point. However, from 2,000 years away, the only way we can demonstrate that He was not suffering from the sin of pride and that these claims were simply matters of fact, and therefore the truth, is to show that the resurrection really did occur and does authenticate His credentials. Atheists, of course, will not accept this evidence but it is the bedrock which authenticates such things and gives authority to the Lord. That is why our first study in this course had to be about the resurrection, for this truly is 'the horse which pulls the cart'. Every claim to authority and teaching stands or falls on this truth. If this fails to stand up, Jesus had, and has, no authority whatsoever, and His teaching is spurious. If it is true, everything we say about Him, which accords with the Scriptures, of course, is both true and authoritative. He is the Son of God, co-equal with the Father, and both Lord and Christ, as Peter told the Jews in the very first ever Gospel sermon on the Day of Pentecost. He preached the resurrection, in Jerusalem, where the empty tomb was located, known and could be visited and verified. *"Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."* (Ac 2:36).

Implications

When we try to understand the implications of the authority of Jesus in our day, we have to develop an attitude, a view if you prefer, of some of the things we have already discussed in other studies. To claim He was God, yet somehow shed some of His 'Godness' to become human, as Paul puts it in Philippi-



Joseph Smith
founder of
the Mormons
(left)
Bernadette of
Lourdes
(right)
Both claimed
to have vi-
sions.



Google images

ans 2:6-8 that 'though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross,' the



Stonehenge - Did Jesus know about it?

(Photo by the author)

question arises as to what He actually shed, how much did it restrict Him, and how tied did He become to the ideas and attitudes of His day? In other words, did His teaching reflect eternal truths or was He merely speaking as a 'child of His time'? Since society and social attitudes have progressed over 2,000 years, should we be looking to a church which is firmly rooted in a context applicable to life 2,000 years ago, or should we move with the times, as they say? Also, what did He know about lands He never visited such as Australia, New Zealand, North and South America, and so on. What did He know, if anything, about Stonehenge, and did He need to know about these things?

Why this is important is because there are always people who wish to push on the boundaries, as we said earlier. The boundaries being challenged at the moment by Western society in general, and indeed by many who claim to be Christians and therefore living for Christ, are those to do with social attitudes to things like equality, particularly equality of the sexes (in church leadership especially), homosexuality with special reference to gay marriage and whether it matters as far as membership and office-bearing in a denominational hierarchy is concerned, marriage, divorce and remarriage, etc. Jesus did not pick any women to serve amongst the Twelve apostles. Was this a social construct for His times or was this making an eternal point about headship and leadership? Would the Son of God actually be bothered about overriding the ideas of His day and be concerned not to offend those who held rigorously to them? On our view of Jesus depends our answers. Conservative Christian believers, using the same Bible but viewing it through different lenses, can come up with different answers. Oftentimes it is not an allowable 'matter of opinion' which people of both viewpoints have to learn to live with and co-exist happily together, like eating meat or observing days, which we discussed earlier.

But often it becomes a 'matter of opinion' what actually is a 'matter of opinion' and not a basic, unquestionable principle.

The challenge of scientists

The most significant challenge to the Bible being made by atheistic Humanists is in the area of scientific understanding, which challenges the Bible and Genesis in particular. The Theory of Evolution placed a slow-burning fuse to a 'bomb' which would eat away at the foundations laid down in the first eleven chapters of the Bible. Charles Darwin brought out his famous book on *The Origin of Species* in 1859, and by 1959 books were being written claiming that *God is Dead*. His 'death' had taken 100 years. Adam was fatally wounded in 1859 and God died a century later! Now, 150 plus years later, Christians are being forbidden to witness to their faith in all sorts of contexts and the Creation model of origins cannot be taught in state schools even as an alternative way of considering the evidence. Wonderful television documentary programmes almost seem to go out of their way to proclaim millions of years of slow development bringing everything into being despite the fact that there is not a shred of hard evidence for any of it, and plenty of evidence that it defies their own proven scientific laws. You won't find the BBC, or any of the commercial channels, making a documentary, or covering a debate, where Evolution is challenged and placed under scientific scrutiny. They would not dare! Creationists are now making stronger challenges to these views hence the opposition is becoming more and more entrenched and intolerant of them, and in some cases actually persecutes those who hold them, especially in the academic fields. They will not let the facts get in the way of a good story. Objective scientific analysis, where unbiased views are considered, will not be tolerated by the very people who 'preach' the doctrine of toleration in all things! (We will consider these matters further

in our next study.)

Jesus: His pronouncements

Jesus naturally did not make any comments about knowledge of lands and peoples far distant from Palestine. There are many traditions about what He did from the age of 12, where He was found talking with Jewish leaders in the temple about matters of faith (Luke 2:41-52), to 30 when He began His ministry (Luke 3:23). There are eighteen spare years to fill and many have delighted in trying to fill them. Some think He visited England with His 'uncle', Joseph of Arimathea, whom the Bible nowhere tells



Glastonbury Thorn, Glastonbury Abbey - supposedly one of several cuttings from a tree which grew from the staff of Joseph of Arimathea when he visited Glastonbury with the Holy Grail at the start of Christianity. Legend has Joseph having links with southwest Britain as a merchant trader who took his nephew, Jesus, with him on one trip.

us was related! Joseph, supposedly, was a tin trader and came to the 'Tin Isles', as some called us. Tin, of course, is a necessary constituent of bronze, being mixed with copper to produce it. We've no idea at all what Joseph did to earn a living. So did Jesus know of these distant lands? We do not know, but one thing we do know is that such knowledge was not at all important to His earthly ministry so He didn't need to know, and if He did know He never mentioned it.

But Jesus did mention several people and events recorded in the Scriptures as being fact, not myth, and here is where our view of His Nature and authority has to come into play. We have already noted that He claimed to know Abraham. Since the existence and life of Abraham is not under attack,

this is not a subject for dispute - though Jesus knowing him might well be. However, He made reference to Adam and Noah, the reality of whom is hotly disputed, as being real people. He also referenced the Flood as being a true and literal event.

On being questioned about marriage and divorce, Jesus went right back to Eden for His pronouncement that *"from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."* (Mk 10:6-9). On answering questions about end times He went back to Noah and the Flood. *"But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man."* (Mt 24:36-39). Not only does He accept that the Flood was a real event, He also accepts that it was a global event sweeping all away with just Noah, and obviously his family too, safely in the ark. The end of the world will be a global event and all will be caught



All swept away, except those in the Ark

up in it; it won't be a local 'end of the world' as some try to teach about the Flood. That's nonsense and Jesus told us it was indirectly as He used Noah's Flood as a type, of which His returning will be the antitype.

Now, who do we believe?

Jesus was not just a child of His day

If all we had to go on to assess the claims made about Jesus were His teaching, such as is found in the Sermon of the Mount for example, that would be sufficient for us to claim that He was a great teacher. It would ensure that He could be placed alongside other great religious thinkers and teachers and we could assess His status compared to them as we do when we assess the merits of writers and their plays and novels. This is what many try to do today, so the merits of His teaching are placed equally alongside those of others and we select whichever we prefer, just as we would from a box of chocolates, but true religion is not a chocolate box choice of wrappings and centres. Where does real authority lie?

First of all we have to recognize that Jesus never wrote a thing for us follow. The records we have of what He said, taught and did were written by His followers many years after He died. Therefore the



The only time Jesus is recorded as writing (John 8:6)

claims made by Him could be construed by critics as claims made for Him by His devotees. This would automatically devalue them in the league-tables of authority ratings. Believers know all about the Holy Spirit and His inspiring Jesus's followers to remember what Jesus taught but that only bolsters faith from the already committed and convinced. So if Luke said it, or Paul wrote it, we have no problems accepting 'it', whatever the 'it' was we were considering, as being totally binding and as authoritative as if Jesus Himself had written it for us. Such would cut no ice with those on the outside be they atheists or believers in some other faith-system opposed to Christianity. His words are abso-

lute authority to believers but in the last analysis carry no weight at all for others. Even some believers feel free to pick and choose what to believe about what He is supposed to have taught because He was teaching against an educational, intellectual and social background which was very different to ours today. So, naturally, He believed in the first 11 chapters of Genesis as being literally true, with Adam, Eve, Eden, forbidden fruit and talking snakes, Noah and his floating menagerie in an ark, and the Tower of Babel as fact. They all did in Palestine 2,000 years ago so why should Jesus have thought differently? We now have modern science and know better, so the argument goes. But is this a valid argument?

As we have already mentioned, the resurrection of Jesus three days after His death on a Cross alters every perspective on the narrative. It is the 'proof' needed to lift His story above any competing stories, and thus we must build on it logically. Once we decide that, as the early Christians we are told used to affirm when they met, 'The Lord is risen', this alters everything. The writers of the New Testament narratives from Matthew to Revelation were indeed inspired to get the details correct, and where there are historical details which can be checked they did indeed get their details correct. Thus, in spite of liberal criticism that they were wrong at times - Luke's facts in Acts in particular have been placed under this exacting microscope but have always been shown to be correct once the true facts have been unearthed. It is almost embarrassing to note the amounts of intellectual egg such critics have collected on their faces down the years on this score. The amazing thing is that some still persist in doubting the accuracy of the Bible, probably because they do not want to believe in spite of the evidence.

What Jesus said about His words

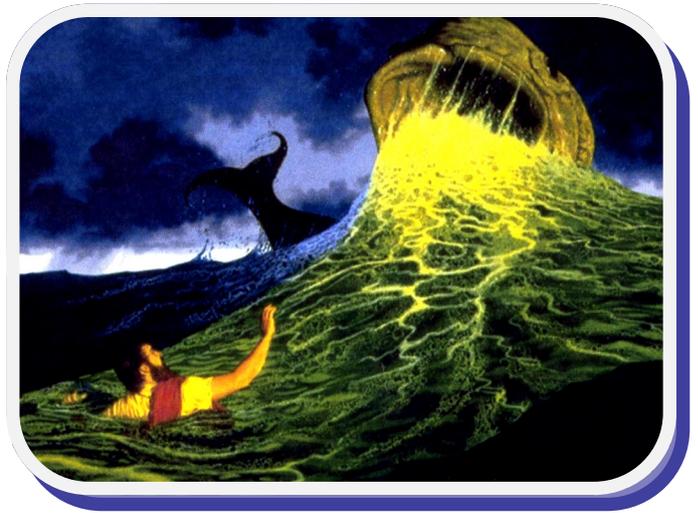
The compelling statements about authority come from the amazing statements of Jesus that He was not speaking His own words but those which the Father taught Him. John expresses this best in his Gospel after Phillip asked Jesus to "*show [them] the Father*": "*Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me,*

or else believe on account of the works themselves". (Jn 14:10-11). Later in that chapter Jesus told Judas (not Iscariot), "...the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me." (Jn 14:14). On being challenged about His teaching, Jesus replied: "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory, but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood." (Jn 7:16-18). Jesus made it very clear that He spoke only what the Father told Him to speak, so what He said transcends any danger of being construed as a reflection of the limitations of understanding of His day. One presumes that God the Father knew precisely what went on in the past and in situations above and beyond the parochial time/space settings in which the Saviour came and taught. Therefore to question Jesus along these lines is to question God and, when you strip it all down to the bare essentials, those who do so are, in fact 'saying' that God doesn't know what He's talking about because modern understanding supersedes even what God knows - or that God is deliberately lying to us about the past. Part of the temptation Satan hit Eve with was that eating the forbidden fruit would make her as wise as God. She fell for this lie and many, if not most, of her children have believed it ever since.

Jesus authenticates the past

Thus when Jesus refers to the beginning and the marriage of Adam and Eve as the exemplar for us to follow, and when He uses the story of Noah and the Flood to warn about the destruction of the world, as we noted a little earlier, this information comes from the Father Himself. Adam, Eve, the Fall, the Flood and Noah are real, and no matter what difficulties this might make for us in a world saturated by evolutionary notions and billions of years for the history of the Universe, God has said that His narrative is the true narrative not that of a Richard Dawkins, David Attenborough, Stephen Hawkins, Brian

Cox or Charles Darwin. And when Jesus tells us that the only sign which will be given to His generation will be that of Jonah, who was swallowed by



the great fish ('whale' being a translator's understanding of what He said), there really was a prophet called Jonah who really was swallowed and remained entombed for three days and three nights in its belly until the fish got sick of him! (Mt. 12:38-41). When modern detractors scoff at the story and declare it to be a religious myth - and by that they mean a story telling truths but not necessarily true (and what they really mean is a made-up story) - they are defying God and claiming to be more knowledgeable than the Saviour Himself.

The authority of Christ

The only way they can be right is if the resurrection never took place and is also just one of a string of 'religious myths'. Those who declare that 'Jesus is Lord' do not believe that Jesus was a deluded mystic, or a man full of the sin of pride, but that He was, and still is, the Lord of life, King of kings, the very Word of God by whom the Universe was both created and is now upheld. Thus we have to decide whose authority do we believe and follow; on which rock do we build our belief-systems, faith and hopes, and if that sometimes makes us look and feel silly in the eyes of the world we remember one day every knee will bow to Him, and then who will be looking silly for all eternity?

Task

Examine the use of the words 'ought' and 'authority' in relation to Jesus and how He used them. Compare and contrast Paul's use of them in his letters.