

The Various Ways of Scripture

Witness

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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: 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. Later, following, Babel, God continued to make Himself known to humans in their languages. Specifically, He spoke to the people of Israel in the languages of Hebrew and Aramaic.

And He didn’t just speak to them in one kind of speech. He made great pronouncements and gave Laws from the mountain top, but God also spoke His Word in books of history and wisdom and poetry, even love poetry! God speaks in ways that consist of “many parts or kinds” in order to bring all men and women into the fulness of relationship with Him. All of these words in Scripture are intended to prepare us to receive God’s final and decisive Word, which the author of Hebrews has now been spoken to us in the person of His Son.

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*, often translated “various ways”, while 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 circuitous. To understand what God is saying, you may have to struggle, like Jacob, to figure it out.

Now, what is interesting about this word is that the word *polutropos*, is not only found in the first verse of Hebrews but in fact it is also found in the first line of Homer’s *Odyssey*, one of the greatest works written in Greek (the language of the New Testament) and a work read by almost everyone who could read anything in Greek, including probably by the learned author of the Letter to the Hebrews! The book that we call *The Odyssey* begins: “Tell me, O Muse, of the crafty (*polutropos*) man, who wandered in so many ways after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy,” speaking about the hero of the story, Odysseus. (In fact, as we shall

learn in the first Gospel of Mark session, the original title of Hebrews was not “The Letter to the Hebrews” but rather “In many and crafty (*polutropos*) ways”, while the original title of *The Odyssey* was something like “Tell me, Muse, of that crafty (*polutropos*) man”).

But, 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, to follow the captain of our voyage to the completion of our voyage. Only the lazy think that by merely opening the text, they will understand everything written therein. According to the author of Hebrews, we will arrive at our port only if we keep our eyes on the author and finisher of our salvation, who is God’s own son. But, also according to that same author, when we do keep our eyes firmly fixed on him, we shall surely arrive, and when we do there will be 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. But, we are headed not toward Odysseus’s 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. And when we arrive, oh what joy!

So, even now, “rejoice, and again I say rejoice”.