

Morning Coffee: Four Hundred Years of Silence?



(It is possible that only bibliophiles will be edified by this post)

It is poor form to embrace an “argument” solely because it serves a partisan/sectarian purpose. It may not be true but it sure makes the home crowd happy and may even win a debate in our own eyes.

The example of Alexander Campbell is notable when he embraced a critical reading of a textual variant, in his Living Oracles version of the NT. Campbell was chastised because the other variant was “*useful in proving the deity of Christ.*” Campbell responded, “*though I am as convinced of the proper divinity of the Saviour ... as ever John Calvin was, I would not do as this ‘Friend of Truth’ insinuates I ought to have done, made the text bend to suit my views.*”

False information (fake news), honestly, simply serves the useful purpose of furthering partisan and sectarian agendas. Truth is not the objective rather the rejection of “them” is.

Three times over the recent Christmas holidays, I was asked about the “Four Hundred Years of Silence” that supposedly lie between Malachi and Matthew. God supposedly withdrew from the world, took prophecy (inspiration) away and the like.

Interestingly, the “four hundred years of silence” is *not* a historic Christian doctrine but a position forged in the Protestant-Roman Catholic debates in the 16th-17th centuries. To my knowledge it is not found in the Church Fathers at all. It has now become a staple of conservative Evangelical identity. The argument was crucial for rejection of books in the Apocrypha. *I have not found this argument among the Reformers themselves.* I do not claim to be a Reformation expert so I may have simply not read enough.

But today, scholars of all persuasions (Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish, even Atheist) recognize this simply will not stand up to critical evaluation.

The notion that Malachi (because it is the last book in our modern “Old Testaments”) is the last book of the “Old Testament” is simply incorrect. I pulled down one of the most conservative *Introductions to the Old Testament* around, Roland Kenneth Harrison (Eerdmans 1969, I got my copy in 1989). Here are some dates this famous *conservative* scholar recognizes for books in the Hebrew Bible ...

Ecclesiastes, 444-328 BC

Esther no later than 350 BC

Daniel scholars are all over the place but most put it around 180 BC

Jonah final form possibly as late as 200 BC but probably earlier (Jonah has so many allusions to the rest of the biblical corpus that it is universally seen as one of the last books of the “Old Testament”)

Psalms has a loooooooooooooooooong compositional history with some dating back to David and some down into the third century BC

Chronicles forth to third century BC

There was no 400 years of silence.

Protestants in the 16th-17th to present centuries often have claimed that Jews themselves thought prophecy had ceased. (The Talmud preserves some Rabbinic debate on the matter but these are later than the biblical period.). Protestants go to 1 Maccabees 9.27, which reads “*since the time prophets ceased to appear among the people.*” The text does indicate there was no prophet among the people at the time.

But context matters even when quoting the Apocrypha. This same kind of phrase occurs in the Protestant Old Testament and no Protestants imagine they indicate God withdrew prophecy as such. For example,

“*there is no longer any prophet*” (Ps 74.9)

“*her prophets obtain no vision from the LORD*” (Lam 2.9).

But First Maccabees certainly *expects a prophet will in fact appear*. Thus Simon is elected leader of Israel “*until a trustworthy prophet should appear*” (1 Mac 14.41). The author clearly believes a prophet *will* appear soon and say whether this course of action is the right one or not.

But if the Apocrypha is to be appealed to, incorrectly, that prophecy ceased, then what do we do with the myriad of texts that indicate it had not.

Judah the Maccabee himself certainly receives what can only be called a *prophetic* vision in 2 Maccabees 15.11-16. The divine manifestation of the rider on the horse to protect the temple from the pagan Heliodorus (2 Mac 3) clearly shows the author believed God was currently miraculously involved in life.

Tobit tells the story of Raphael coming to travel with Tobias and is revealed as the angel that stands in the presence of the Lord and he ascends “*to him who sent me*” (Tobit 12.6-22). Ezra, in 2 Esdras, certainly receives a number of divine revelations (2 Esdras is a composite work and dates to after the fall of Jerusalem).

In the Gospels, *Anna is a prophet* the better part of a century before John and Jesus were born (Lk 2.36ff). Simeon is filled with the Spirit and prophecies (Lk 2.26-35). Elizabeth is also a prophet and the Spirit fills her (Lk 1.42-43). John recognizes that even the High Priest *sometimes* was a prophet (Jn 11.51).

Josephus is often appealed to by those who claim there was “400 years of silence.” Josephus believes no such thing. There were both genuine and false prophets that Josephus mentions (some folks cite him who have never read him). So one such prophet is Jesus b. Chananiah. He was a prophet in Jerusalem

through the AD 60s and prophesied the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. Josephus quotes from this Jesus (who in this instance also prophesied the fall of the Temple).

*A voice from the East,
A voice from the West,
A voice from the four winds;
A voice against Jerusalem and the sanctuary,
A voice against the bridegroom and the bride,
A voice against all the people. (War 6.301)*

Josephus even mentions there was a group of Pharisaic prophets in Herod's court (Antiquities 17.43ff). There are numerous other figures we could mention.

Recognizing a poor argument, and the partisan/sectarian motivation, for it however, does not mean that any or all of the books of the Apocrypha were divinely inspired. It is the case that *some* Jews apparently, and after the dawn of the Christian era, and Christians did believe in the divine origin of these books. It may be the case that no one will "win" such a debate.

Do not be afraid of truth.

Recognizing the complexity of reality simply means we live in the real world. Recognizing the truth does not make any book in the Bible less significant or less important.

But we should not misrepresent anyone ... *we cannot represent the truth if we are "lying" about the truth.* Do not embrace something simply because "it suits my views."

Shalom ... Time for a refill of Coffee

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