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# Alexander Campbell and the Relationship Between the Testaments

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R. Mark Shipp

When asked what the most profound difficulty was in biblical interpretation, one scholar has said "the relationship between the testaments: that's about everything." He was speaking of the difficulties which the church, biblical scholars, and theologians have always had in confessing a single canon and yet recognizing the problem of appropriating the Old Testament for the life of the church. The Restoration tradition has its own history of attempting to deal with this problem, beginning with Alexander Campbell and his "Sermon on the Law." Campbell's understanding of the role of the Old Testament in the Church is important because his views continue to exert a great deal of influence among Restoration churches down to the present.<sup>1</sup> This article, then, will explore Campbell's understanding of the relationship between the testaments in order that we in churches of Christ might benefit anew from his insights as well as learn from those areas of his thought which need revision.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>In my research, I have not discovered a single study relating to the early restorers' understanding of the relationship between the testaments. It is rather ironic that a topic this important should be so ignored; in general, Campbell's views on the Old Testament have been simply accepted without further comment. We have built upon their foundation, but have not been as critical or informed as our Restoration forebears were of the philosophical streams in which they waded.

<sup>2</sup>In this article I will draw heavily upon three of Campbell's writings: *The Christian System* (Pittsburgh: Forrester and Campbell, 1835); *Family Culture*, first appearing as a regular series in the *Millennial Harbinger* (London: Hall and Company, 1850); "Sermon on the Law," first delivered in 1816, in *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union* (Chicago: Christian Century, 1904).

Campbell was in every sense a child of his age.<sup>3</sup> To fault him for reflecting the general American ethos and philosophical milieu current on the American frontier in the early years of the nineteenth century would not only lack grace, but also the humility recommended to us by generations to come who will judge our blind spots from a clearer vantage point. On the other hand, to accept uncritically the Romanticism and Rationalism which inform his understanding is to freeze us 150 years in the past and not take into sufficient account the finite nature of all theological constructs.

I will present this paper in three sections: 1) Campbell's dispensationalism, or the discontinuity between the testaments; 2) Campbell and the continuity between the testaments; and 3) the tensions between what he thought he was doing and what he actually did.

### Campbell's Dispensationalism:

#### The Discontinuity Between the Testaments

Campbell's dispensationalism was extremely important in the development of his understanding of the restoration of the ancient order.<sup>4</sup> In a recent issue of *Restoration Quarterly*, Bill Howden has suggested the following format as reflective of Campbell's understanding of the extent and duration of the "dispensations": 1) the Patriarchal dispensation, ending with the giving of the 10 commandments on Sinai in Exodus 20; 2) the Mosaic dispensation, from Exodus 20 to Acts 2:38; and 3) the Christian dispensation, ending at the eschaton.<sup>5</sup> Illustrative of the importance this

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<sup>3</sup>Recently, a number of writers have placed Campbell within the philosophical framework of Baconian Empiricism, Scottish Common Sense Realism, and Romantic Primitivism. See, in particular, Hughes, Richard T. and Allen, C. Leonard, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988) 156-160.

<sup>4</sup>Campbell seemed to use the term "dispensation" in contradictory ways. He calls the various ages dispensations, but then rejects the term when applied to a viewpoint which accepted more than one dispensation of God's grace as currently having validity. He uses the term covenant much more often. Cf. *The Christian System*, 116. But cf. *Family Culture*, 168, in which he states that the two promises to Abraham prefigure the two testaments, dispensations, and wills of God for humanity. To Campbell, then, there were probably only two dispensations, but at least seven covenants.

<sup>5</sup>Howden, William, "The Kingdom of God in Alexander Campbell's Hermeneutics," *RQ* 32 (1990) 92-93.

scheme held for Campbell is the opening section of Campbell's magnum opus *The Christian System*, which begins not with a discussion of the Trinity but with a discussion of the status and interpretation of the Bible. He lists "establishing the correct dispensation" as rule no. 2 in his list of seven rules of biblical interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Howden suggests that this move is related to Campbell's understanding that each dispensation is a manifestation of the kingdom of God, and that a kingdom may not function without a statute book or constitution.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the constitution of the Mosaic age is the law. One might assume that the Christian dispensation would begin with Matthew and so forth, but not so: the ministry of Jesus to Campbell is reduced to a sort of ecclesiastical *preparatio*, setting the scene for the dispensation of the Church beginning with Acts 2:

These laws and usages of the apostles must be learned from what the apostles published to the world, after the ascension and coronation of the king, as they are recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles...They are not to be sought after in Genesis...Neither are the statutes and laws of the Christian kingdom to be sought for in the Jewish scriptures...<sup>8</sup>

When one considers that to Campbell the Bible in four-fifths of its contents is composed of factual, chronological history, it is not surprising that the final period of biblical history exercises authority over the church in a way that the preceding dispensations do not. This posture would have to be maintained even over the Gospels, as they are a part of a prior dispensation.

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<sup>6</sup>*The Christian System*, 4.

<sup>7</sup>Howden, 89, 101. Howden's argument for Campbell's use of the term "constitution" is no doubt correct. Campbell understood that the constitution of the kingdom of God existed before the world began. The New Testament makes allusion to this constitution, but the New Testament itself, or rather the epistles, are more aptly characterized as the "law book" of the kingdom (cf. *Christian System*, 128-133). Still, Campbell is inconsistent in his use of the term, often referring to the New Testament as the constitution of the Church. It seems to me that Howden is on the right track when he says that Campbell is inconsistent in his use of this term.

<sup>8</sup>*The Christian System*, 163-164.

It is important to clarify that, for Campbell, the Bible is a record of facts. He defines fact as a deed or an action, and distinguishes truth from fact on the grounds that truth is not acted out, but all facts are. In his view, the Bible is largely a compendium of facts, and not theological treatise or philosophical speculation. Note the following:

Men had better have a written, than an unwritten, standard of orthodoxy, if they will abandon speculation and abstract notions as any part of Christian faith or duty... With us revelation has nothing to do with opinions or abstract reasonings; for it is founded wholly and entirely upon facts. There is not one abstract opinion, not one speculative view, asserted or communicated in Old Testament or New... Facts are the Alpha and Omega of both Jewish and Christian revelations...<sup>9</sup>

It is necessary to view Campbell's comments in their context. He insists that scripture is predominantly a record of God's deeds within history, not primarily written to be grist for the speculative or systematic theologian's mill. But when one views the Old Testament as primarily a record of historical acts, superseded by a later dispensation, then its value for theology and ethics is greatly diminished.<sup>10</sup>

One must also raise the question of "historical facts" here: is the type of history which the Bible exhibits the sort of "textbook history" which Campbell seems to have supposed? If it is theological history, then Campbell's dichotomy between words and deeds breaks down. Theology is composed of exactly those words and definitions which Campbell eschews.

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<sup>9</sup>*The Christian System*, 89-90.

<sup>10</sup>The "facts" as Campbell understood them, however, were subject to historical and literary inquiry. They were not necessarily self-evident, nor were they "scientific facts," but rather historical (rule 1 of his "seven rules" *Christian System* 16) and literary facts (rules 5 and 6, *Christian System* 17). Rule 3 is particularly telling: in order to understand the Bible, it is important to use the same linguistic and philological principles one would use to interpret any writing. Thus he opens the door for historical and literary study and implies that biblical facts are not self-evident, but require interpretation. My only difficulty with this scheme is that he is not sufficiently cognizant of the theological nature of all of Scripture, which alters the way one reads history and literature, although he comes close to saying this in rule 7: that with respect to God, we must come within the "understanding distance." He means by this that only the true believer can understand the things of God (*Christian System* 17-18).

It is highly significant that one finds the quote cited above in the "Foundation of Christian Union" section of the *Christian System*.<sup>11</sup> Herein lies one of the greatest tensions in Campbell's understanding of the relationship between the testaments. Campbell does not suggest that the Old Testament is now without value for Christians. He was not a Marcionite. He believed strongly in a single canon and in the divine origin of both Testaments. His primary concern, however, was not for how Old Testament conceptions of God and the cosmos might be recovered for Christians, but rather with the question, "On what basis is it possible for the various Christian sects to unite?" Campbell states this priority clearly:

1st. The testimony of the apostles is the only and all-sufficient means of uniting all Christians.

2nd. The union of Christians with the Apostles' testimony is all-sufficient and alone sufficient to the conversion of the world.<sup>12</sup>

Implicit in these propositions is the assumption that only the Apostles' teachings may be admitted as evidence in the construction of the foundation of Christian unity. As a corollary to this, Christian unity based upon this conception of the Apostles' teaching is essential for the conversion of the world.

The point is this: for Campbell, the canon is one, and yet its oneness is such that the Apostles' teaching is the only basis for Christian unity and the conversion of the world. When one combines these propositions with Campbell's view that the Bible is a compendium of historical fact and not theological treatise, it is not difficult to perceive the outcome. First, the Old Testament is a record of acts, and acts of God prior to the dispensation of the Apostles (for this is, in effect, the Christian dispensation for Campbell) are historically interesting, but are not binding on Christians. Second, the Christian dispensation in which we find

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<sup>11</sup>*The Christian System*, 85-106.

<sup>12</sup>*The Christian System*, 87.

ourselves is constituted on the basis of the New Testament, more specifically the Acts and the Epistles. Tension is therefore apparent at the heart of Campbell's formulation: he advocated a single inspired canon, yet disallowed two-thirds of it for the formation of an assured theological minimum around which all believers could unite. For the purposes of establishing the bounds of the constitution of the "Kingdom of Heaven," therefore, Campbell had a very limited canon.

Campbell had another way of accounting for the discontinuity between the Testaments. In the *Christian System* he suggests that the "Constitution of Israel," the Mosaic dispensation, is discontinuous with the New Covenant, and that it was added to the Patriarchal dispensation of family worship for a limited time and for a specific people.<sup>13</sup> The Patriarchal dispensation Campbell felt conformed to the canons of nature and reason. It was instituted by God in the beginning and its system of hierarchy and family worship are still in effect. The Law of Moses for Campbell, on the other hand, was a temporary addition to the Patriarchal dispensation and was fatally flawed for these reasons: 1) it was too holy, in its expectation of radical obedience; 2) it was too weak and material, in its reliance upon outward form and ritual; and 3) it was too parochial, in its application to one particular people, as opposed to the universality of the Patriarchal and Christian dispensations.

Beyond question, Campbell has taken his cue from Paul in Romans 3: 19-31 and 7: 7-12 in assigning holiness and weakness to the law. Furthermore, from Romans 4 he has taken the notion that in every dispensation there have been faithful children of the promise who understood God's plans. These were children of the faith and Spirit, not of the law, who looked forward to the coming of the Messiah based upon the prophecy in Genesis 3. But this continuity of faith reflected in the Old Testament can only be understood through the lens of the New Testament.

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<sup>13</sup>See, in this regard, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 396.

In this sense, "testament" ought to be understood more in the sense of "dispensation" or "covenant":

The scriptures called the "Old Testament," said to be done away, is that described by Paul which came from Mt. Sinai in Arabia. That was the covenant of Jewish peculiarities. It was an episode or digression from the patriarchal institution.<sup>14</sup>

That part of the Abrahamic covenant which dealt strictly with family blessing, as well as the entire Mosaic dispensation, were discontinuous with, and superseded by, the new covenant. I must add here that I think Campbell softened his view somewhat between 1816 (the "Sermon on the Law") and the 1830's and 40's (*The Christian System*). In the Sermon on the Law, he unequivocally associates the Old Testament with "law" and the New Testament with "grace."<sup>15</sup> He says that the authority of the Law and the Prophets, or the entire Old Testament corpus, was necessarily terminated with the ministry of Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

Campbell, therefore, seems to have had two different approaches to the notion of discontinuity between the testaments which I will label constitutional and theological. On the one hand he draws his line in Acts 2, allowing nothing prior to this to contaminate the Church's constitutional ordinances. On the other, he suggests that there has always been a principle of faith operative throughout biblical history, allowing for theological continuity and expanding the usable limits of the canon. He discounts the Old Testament and much of the New procedurally for the purpose of addressing the question, "What shall we restore of the outward manifestations of the Church, which all believers can, or should, agree on?" In other words, if we are discussing the Church, let us limit ourselves to that body of literature which treats the Church, the New Testament. However, that part of the Old Testament which was of universal applicability (Gen. 1-

<sup>14</sup>*Family Culture*, 136.

<sup>15</sup>"Sermon on the Law," 250.

<sup>16</sup>"Sermon on the Law," 247.

11) had not been superseded, nor had the spiritual promise to Abraham of "blessing to all nations," based upon his faith. This literature was of paramount importance for all humanity, whether in the Church or not, and for family culture and worship.

### Nature, Prophecy, Typology, and Example:

#### The Continuity Between the Testaments

I have already mentioned something about Campbell's understanding of the continuity between the Testaments. I will now address this issue in four parts: Nature and Old Testament faith; Old Testament prophecy and the New Testament; and typology and example, or what you do with what's left over.

In their book *Illusions of Innocence*, Richard Hughes and Leonard Allen have suggested that to Campbell the Old Testament might be understood as continuous with the New only as far as it conforms to the universal standards of Nature and Reason or is brought over, and therefore "baptized," into the New.<sup>17</sup> While their characterization is essentially correct, Campbell's understanding of the relationship between the Testaments was more subtle than this would suggest.

To Campbell, there was a reciprocal relationship between the Testaments which I find difficult to square with his rule no. 2, "determining the correct dispensation." Note the following from *The Christian System*:

Every one...who would accurately understand the Christian must approach it through the Mosaic; and he who would be a proficient in the Jewish must make Paul his commentator... All the leading words and phrases of the New Testament are to be explained and understood by the history of the Jewish nation and God's government of them.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence*, 117, 164, and Allen and Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots: the Ancestry of Churches of Christ* (Abilene: ACU, 1988) 77-78. See also Allen, *The Cruciform Church* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University, 1990) 52-57.

<sup>18</sup>*The Christian System*, 146-147.

If the Old can only be understood in light of the New, the reverse is also true, that the New in all of its particulars can only be understood in light of the Old. This at least allows for the theoretical possibility that the Old Testament can inform our understanding of the New quite as much as the reverse.

Besides this literary relationship, however, to Campbell there are definite lines of continuity. As Hughes and Allen have suggested, the chief of these lines of continuity is provided by the "Book of Nature" (natural law perceived by reason) which is in harmony with the "Book of Scripture." The Patriarchal Age provides the clearest example of the continuity provided by Nature. To Campbell it was as clear as it could be that both Nature and Scripture attested to the Patriarchal family arrangement:

Family worship was, then, the first social worship....Though other institutions have since been added, this has never been superseded. Having its foundation in the matrimonial compact, the most ancient of all religious and political institutions, and this being founded on nature itself, it can never be superseded.<sup>19</sup>

In this arrangement, the *pater familias* is the benevolent dictator who is also the High Priest at the family altar.<sup>20</sup> He grounds his understanding of this family arrangement in Adam, the first priest at the family altar and head of the first family.<sup>21</sup> This arrangement to Campbell would proceed uninterrupted until the restoration of all things in the last day.

There are other aspects of the Old Testament which might also be classified as continuous with the Book of Nature and the New Testament. Of particular interest in this regard is his study of Genesis in the "Family

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<sup>19</sup>*The Christian System*, 133-134.

<sup>20</sup>*The Christian System*, 123. Campbell suggests that monarchy is the natural form of government. The Republican form of government, he says, is horrendously inefficient, but for want of benevolent monarchs is necessary for the time being. He disagrees on this point with John Calvin, who said that an aristocracy, "pure or modified by popular government," "greatly surpassed" other forms of government (Calvin, *Institutes*, 656-657).

<sup>21</sup>*The Christian System*, 135. This family altar dispensation corresponds to the inception of the practice of religion, unneeded before the Fall. The Patriarchal arrangement, therefore, is not grounded in creation, but rather in human sin.

Culture" section of the *Millennial Harbinger*. Campbell sets forth in Socratic style the first twenty-two chapters of Genesis, in which details of every narrative are shown to be in harmony with science, nature, and the New Testament. Concerning the ark, he says,

Our most accomplished mathematical calculators say, that no vessel could have been more rationally and scientifically arranged and constructed...Can any one then doubt the capacity of a vessel of 42,500 tons, to stow away the live stock of the earth, and provisions for one year!!<sup>22</sup>

For Campbell it would be unthinkable for Scripture and the Book of Nature to be in discord, because both were creations of the same perfect and rational deity.

Campbell accepted much of the Old Testament as prophetic on the basis of what the New Testament writings considered to be Messianic prophecy. Continuity between the testaments would in this sense be provided by a "prophecy/fulfillment" scheme. There is no question that to the writer of Matthew much of the prophetic literature in the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Campbell, likewise, sees Old Testament prophecy functioning in this manner, regardless of the original intent of the prophet. The "Sermon on the Law" is unequivocal about the temporary and prophetic nature of the *whole* of the Old Testament: "'The Law and the Prophets prophesied until John' -- then they give place to a greater Prophet and a more glorious Law."<sup>23</sup> Again, this is a case of the Old Testament being filtered through the New. To Campbell, Old Testament prophecy is continuous with its New Testament fulfillment in the sense that the fulfillment cannot be understood without its prophetic counterpart. That Old Testament books might make their own theological claims which present-day churches would do well to hear, however, is a concept not explored by Campbell.

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<sup>22</sup>*Family Culture*, 87-88.

<sup>23</sup>"Sermon on the Law," 247-248.

Similar to the prophecy/fulfillment scheme is typology. Much of the Mosaic dispensation for Campbell is only recoverable for Christians as types for which the New Testament provides the anti type. In fact, a good deal of the Old Testament exists primarily in order to provide types for the New:

Another object [of the Jewish Institution] was, to picture out in appropriate types the spiritual worship of the kingdom of heaven...by picturesque images, ingeniously devised to adumbrate the whole doctrine of reconciliation and sanctification to God...The Jewish institution is not to be regarded only in its political, moral, and religious aspects, but especially in its figurative and prospective character.<sup>24</sup>

Typology therefore provides continuity between the testaments to Campbell. The type is necessarily deficient and partial, however. As Christ's is the true sacrifice for which animal sacrifices in the Old Testament were but poor shadows, so Old Testament types were fulfilled and explained by their New Testament antitypes. Note, for example, the typological recovery of the tabernacle and its cult, derived from Hebrews 9:

The same great commentator on this institution not only presents the history of its subjects as instructive to the citizens of the new institution, but of the tabernacle he says, "it was a figurative representation for the time then present," and the furniture thereof "the patterns of things in the heavens."<sup>25</sup>

To Campbell, typology is the means whereby Old testament ordinances and institutions may be recovered for the Christian. These are filtered through the lens of the New Testament antitypes, intended to provide the controlling interpretation of the earlier literature.

There is one more sense in which the Old Testament may be recovered for Campbell: that of analogy or example. Besides the history of

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<sup>24</sup>*The Christian System*, 117.

<sup>25</sup>*The Christian System*, 118.

Israel existing for our instruction, he cites numerous Old Testament passages which are instructive for us in analogous settings, or are examples for us to emulate or avoid:

[The Hebrews] confessed that they were pilgrims...in the land of promise. By dwelling in tents in their own land, they lived as foreigners or as persons on a journey. So ought Christians to live as pilgrims here.<sup>26</sup>

Notice that here also the controlling aspect of the example is provided by a New Testament reference, in this case Hebrews 11.

One may question justifiably to what extent the various continuities I have mentioned function authoritatively for the Church in Campbell's thought. Particularly in the case of prophecy and typology, the prophetic utterance and the type are in a sense superseded by the fulfillment/anti type. In this sense, Hughes' and Allen's assessment is correct: only that which has been baptized in the New Testament remains authoritative for the Christian. When one speaks of binding authority for Christian ordinances, very little remains of the Old Testament, except that which has been reinterpreted in the New and that which still has authority by virtue of reason and universal application. When one speaks of what may be of moral and theological value for the Christian, Campbell's writings are replete with various ways in which the bulk of Old Testament writings may be recovered.

### **Tensions in Campbell's Understanding of the Relationship Between the Testaments**

I return now to the question of the tension between Campbell's strong dispensationalism and his equally strong desire to recover the Old Testament for the Church. Is there an inherent contradiction here? What Campbell says is that only the New Testament, and specifically the

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<sup>26</sup>*Family Culture*, 126.

Epistles and Acts, have authority to bind doctrine and practice on the Church. What he actually does is to provide many--and often subtle--ways in which the Old Testament is recoverable for the Christian, if not authoritative for Church government and Christian ordinances.

But is it legitimate to distinguish between what is authoritative as a constitution for the Church and what is appropriatable ethically and theologically for the individual Christian? To Campbell, a kingdom without a constitution was impossible. The Acts and the Epistles provided just such a constitution for Campbell, but in identifying it as such he made certain elements of the New Testament writings which he understood to be *constitutive* of the New Testament Church the new canon within the canon.

### Conclusion

Campbell reflects a complex array of ways in which the Testaments are both continuous and discontinuous with each other. They are discontinuous in that he saw definite and clear ways in which the three main economies were distinguished. The Mosaic dispensation in particular was discontinuous with the Christian on the basis of its temporary nature and that it was both too mundane and too holy to provide salvation. They are continuous in those elements which Reason and the Book of Nature demonstrate to be true of all people everywhere in every time, in prophecy leading to fulfillment, and in types which are fully understood only in their antitypes. Even Old Testament passages which might not be recoverable on the basis of these principles might be used as positive or negative examples for us in analogous circumstances.

Perhaps the greatest weakness in Campbell's understanding is that he greatly diminished the importance of the Old Testament's own theological witness to God and his relationship to His people as creator, redeemer, and Lord. To Campbell, even those passages which are true of all people everywhere and conform to the canons of reason are limited primarily to the Patriarchal narratives in Genesis and the primeval history of

Genesis 1-11. The vast bulk of the Old Testament is recoverable only through the interpretive grid which the New Testament provides: prophecy, typology, and example. I would insist that the Old Testament contains unfathomable depths in its conceptions of the nature of God, humanity, creation, and redemption, by no means fully incorporated or appropriated in the New Testament. Campbell diminishes the theological witness of the Old Testament to the detriment of both testaments.

On the other hand, I am hard put to come up with a better rule of thumb for structuring the Church than an appeal to that body of literature which deals most specifically with the Church, the Acts and the Epistles. Furthermore, while an appeal to Reason or the Book of Nature may seem quaint now, the Primeval History in Genesis does make claims of universal applicability. I am convinced that an appeal to Reason, common sense, empirical evidence, and scriptural authority is better than an appeal to personal taste and subjective opinion.

To return to my comments at the beginning, perhaps once the philosophical presuppositions of Common Sense Rationalism, Romantic Primitivism, and Baconian Empiricism have been bracketed, we can more easily appreciate some of the true value of his work: the strong belief in the reciprocal relationship between the testaments, a high regard for the historical basis of Scripture and historical inquiry, a nuanced understanding of the recoverability of Old Testament texts for Christians, and an insistence upon scientific rigor in biblical exegesis. Perhaps the greatest legacy he has bequeathed to us in the Restoration Movement is his conviction that all scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for the Christian. I think Campbell would say a hearty "amen" to the proposition in Hebrews 1: 1: "God, who in times past spoke to our fathers through the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us through a Son."

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