The Word of God versus Church tradition

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Other versions: See footnote 1.[1]

Privately interpreting the Scriptures?

The charge is often made that preterism is an innovation. Our approach supposedly involves "privately interpreting Scripture" — thinking we can come up with a fresh or independent interpretation of Scripture.
However, we must indeed believe God's Word, and we must do so (if need be) in defiance of church tradition.
The Scriptural declarations (or expectations) concerning Jesus' return are both clear and numerous.
Creeds and confessions ought always to be evaluated according to the Scriptures, but all too often the converse happens: Scripture is interpreted through the lens of one's own church tradition.
Recall the "noble" Bereans who examined Paul's novel claims (Ac 17:11); to be open-minded is a good trait.

The Protestant Reformers were similarly accused of teaching novelties; they were placing their own (private) interpretations of God's Word over and above the received wisdom of popes, councils, and the Fathers.
But the Reformers were right to affirm the priority of Scripture. They recovered vital, long-neglected doctrines.
And, in defiance of church and state authorities, they translated the Scriptures so that people everywhere could read and discern these things for themselves.

Moreover, that accusation itself reveals a misunderstanding of what "private interpretation" involves.
2 Peter 1:20 (KJV):
… *no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation*.

According to Roman Catholics, this verse forbids a person interpreting Scripture for himself.[2]
But that's not Peter's intent! The following verse shows precisely what he does mean:
2 Peter 1:21 (ESV):
For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The "for" (Greek: *gar*) at the start of vs. 21 introduces the basis for the truth expressed in vs. 20.
Peter's whole point is that the prophets of old did not invent (make up) their own prophecies; rather, their impulse for prophesying came from God.

[1] Other Bible versions employed:
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[2] Some Bible versions even promote this error through mistranslation (e.g., CEV, CJB, GNT).

We can say, then, that Peter's declaration has nothing to do with the reader's own take on a particular Bible passage; he is rather referring to the source of the original prophetic utterance.[3]

Johann von Eck's indictment of Martin Luther

The Diet of Worms was conducted from 28 January to 25 May 1521 at the Bischofshof palace in Worms, with the Emperor Charles V presiding. The Diet was not called specifically to deal with Luther; many other matters were also deliberated. Luther was summoned to the Diet in order to renounce or reaffirm his views in response to the papal bulls issued by Pope Leo X. Luther appeared before the assembly on 17th April.
Johann von Eck acted as Luther's interrogator at the Diet.[4]

The following exchange between von Eck and Luther took place on 18th April 1521.
We cite here from Roland H. Bainton's classic work: *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*.
Published by Abingdon Press (Nashville, TN) in 1950.
From page 185 of this work.

Von Eck:

> Your plea to be heard from Scripture is the one always made by heretics. You do nothing but renew the errors of Wyclif and Hus. How will the Jews, how will the Turks, exult to hear Christians discussing whether they have been wrong all these years! Martin, how can you assume that you are the only one to understand the sense of Scripture? Would you put your judgment above that of so many famous men and claim that you know more than they all? You have no right to call into question the most holy orthodox faith, instituted by Christ the perfect lawgiver, proclaimed throughout the world by the apostles, sealed by the red blood of the martyrs, confirmed by the sacred councils, defined by the Church in which all our fathers believed until death and gave to us an inheritance, and which now we are forbidden by the pope and the emperor to discuss lest there be no end of debate. I ask you, Martin … do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain.

Luther:

> … Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason — I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other — my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.

According to Bainton:

> The earliest printed version added the words, "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise."
> The words, though not recorded on the spot, may nevertheless be genuine, …

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[3] A number of Bible versions support this interpretation, including the following: CSB, ERV, Mounce, NCV, NET, NIV, NLT.
For vs. 20 these all have something along the lines of: "no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own understanding."
One of the NET's footnotes points out that 2 Peter 1:20-21 forms an *inclusio* with 1:16:
"The Christian's faith and hope are not based on cleverly concocted fables but on the sure Word of God" which came about as "the prophets, prompted by the Spirit of God, spoke."

[4] This Johann von Eck (ca. 1480-1524) is not the same person as the theologian Johann Eck (1486-1543) who debated Martin Luther at the Leipzig Disputation of 1519 and helped draft the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* of June 1520.
See the following article by John Marcus in *The Standard Bearer*: "Johannes Eck and Johannes von Eck: Enemies of the Reformation." https://sb.rfpa.org/johannes-eck-and-johannes-von-eck-enemies-of-the-reformation/.

There are obvious lessons here for modern preterists. The accusations made by von Eck are remarkably similar to those made against preterists. The fundamental issue is the same:
Do we believe what Scripture plainly declares, or do we blindly follow Church tradition?
God's Word comes directly to each one of us as we read the Scriptures.
Obviously, we need divine help in our understanding, and we will take careful note of how others both past and present have understood them too. Nevertheless, God's Word comes to each person, and we are individually responsible for believing and obeying that Word (Col 3:16).
Churches that demand submission to their views need to be seen for what they are: Cults.

Consider the following Scriptures:
Isaiah 66:2 (my translation):
"… but to this one I will look: to him who is humble and contrite in spirit, and who trembles at my word."

Mark 7:5-9 (HCSB):
5 *Then the Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why don't Your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders, instead of eating bread with ritually unclean hands?"*
6 *He answered them, "Isaiah prophesied correctly about you hypocrites, as it is written:*
These people honor Me with their lips,
but their heart is far from Me.
7 *They worship Me in vain,*
teaching as doctrines the commands of men.

8 *Disregarding the command of God, you keep the tradition of men."*
9 *He also said to them, "You completely invalidate God's command in order to maintain your tradition!"*

Jesus scolded the religious leaders of his day. They sat in "Moses' seat" (Mt 23:2) — they were the official, authoritative teachers of the Law handed down from Moses.
But they were blind and useless guides (Mt 15:14; 23:16, 24).

Galatians 1:8-10 (ESV):
8 *But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.*
9 *As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.*

10 *For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.*

1 John 2:26-27 (ESV):
26 *I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you.*
27 *But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie— just as it has taught you, abide in him.*

The importance of believing and obeying God's word, as it comes to us, can be ascertained from the following story from 1 Kings 13.

Lessons from 1 Kings 13

(my translation)

[1] *A man of God went from Judah **by the word of Yahweh** into Bethel, just as Jeroboam was standing near the altar to burn incense.*
[2] *And he cried out against the altar **by the word of Yahweh** and said, "Altar! Altar! Thus says Yahweh, 'A son will be born to the house of David, Josiah by name. On you he will sacrifice the priests of the high places who burn incense on you, and on you they will burn men's bones.'"*
[3] *And he gave a sign that same day, saying, "This is the sign which Yahweh has spoken: The altar will be split apart, and the ashes that are on it will be poured out."*

[4] *When the king heard what the man of God said, which he cried against the altar in Bethel, Jeroboam put out his hand from the altar, saying, "Seize him!" His hand, which he put out against him, dried up, so that he could not draw it back again to himself.*
[5] *The altar was also split apart, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign that the man of God had given **by the word of Yahweh**.*
[6] *The king answered and said to the man of God, "Entreat now the favor of Yahweh your God, and pray for me, that my hand may be restored to me." So the man of God entreated Yahweh, and the king's hand was restored to him and became as it was before.*

[7] *The king said to the man of God, "Come home with me and refresh yourself, and I will give you a reward."*
[8] *But the man of God said to the king, "Even if you were to give me half of your house, I would not go in with you, neither would I eat bread nor drink water in this place;* [9] *for thus was it commanded me **by the word of Yahweh**, 'You shall not eat bread or drink water, or return by the way that you came.'"*
[10] *So he went another way, and did not return by the way he had come to Bethel.*

[11] *Now an old prophet lived in Bethel, and his sons came and told him everything that the man of God had done that day in Bethel. And they told him the words that he had spoken to the king.*
[12] *Their father said to them, "Which way did he go?" For his sons had seen which way the man of God went, who had come from Judah.*
[13] *And he said to his sons, "Saddle the donkey for me." So they saddled the donkey for him, and he rode on it.*
[14] *He went after the man of God, and found him sitting under an oak tree. He said to him, "Are you the man of God who came from Judah?"*
He replied, "I am."
[15] *Then he said to him, "Come home with me, and eat bread."*
[16] *But he said, "I cannot return with you, or go in with you; neither can I eat bread nor drink water with you in this place.*

[17] *For I have been told **by the word of Yahweh**, 'You shall not eat bread or drink water there, or return by the way that you came.'"*

[18] *But he said to him, "I, too, am a prophet just as you are; and an angel spoke to me **by the word of Yahweh**, saying, 'Bring him back with you to your house, that he may eat bread and drink water.'"*
But he was lying to him.
[19] *So he went back with him and ate bread in his house and drank water.*

[20] *Then, as they sat at the table, **the word of Yahweh** came to the prophet who had brought him back;*
[21] *and he cried out to the man of God who had come from Judah, saying, "Thus says Yahweh, 'Because you have disobeyed **the mouth of Yahweh**, and have not kept the commandment which Yahweh your God commanded you, [22] but you came back and ate bread and drank water in the place of which he said to you: "Eat no bread, and drink no water;" your corpse will not come to the tomb of your fathers.'"*

[23] *And so it happened, after he had eaten bread and after he had drunk, he saddled the donkey for the prophet whom he had brought back.*
[24] *When [the man of God] had gone, a lion met him on the road and killed him. His body was thrown on the road, and the donkey stood beside it. The lion also stood next to the body.*
[25] *Then, men passed by and saw the body thrown on the road, and the lion standing by it, and they went and spoke about it in the city where the old prophet lived.*

[26] *When the prophet who brought him back from the way heard of it, he said, "It is the man of God who was disobedient to **the mouth of Yahweh**. Yahweh has therefore handed him over to the lion, which has torn him and killed him, according to **the word which Yahweh had spoken** to him."*
[27] *He spoke to his sons, saying, "Saddle the donkey for me," and they saddled it.*
[28] *He went and found his body thrown on the road, with the donkey and the lion standing by the body; the lion had neither eaten the body nor torn the donkey.*
[29] *The prophet lifted the body of the man of God and laid it on the donkey and brought it back to the city to mourn and to bury him.*
[30] *And he laid the body in his own tomb; and they mourned for him, saying, "Alas, my brother!"*

[31] *After he had buried him, he spoke to his sons, saying, "When I am dead, bury me in the tomb where the man of God is buried. Lay my bones beside his bones.*
[32] *For surely the word will come to pass which he cried out **by the word of Yahweh** against the altar in Bethel, and against all the shrines on the high places which are in the cities of Samaria."*

[33] *After this event, Jeroboam did not turn back from his evil way, but again he made priests for the high places from among all the people. Whoever desired, he consecrated him; such a man became one of the priests of the high places.*
[34] *This matter became the sin of the house of Jeroboam, so as to cut it off and to destroy it from the face of the earth.*

A Strange Tale

One cannot help but notice the repetition of the phrase "by the word of Yahweh" (or similar) throughout this account. The prophet's mauling, so obviously a divine judgment, served as a graphic warning to Jeroboam and the northern kingdom for their flagrant violation of God's law — a warning Jeroboam failed to heed (vs. 33).[5]
The point of course is that God's word is what must be obeyed, and not what we deem to be right.
The old prophet's offer of refreshment seemed reasonable enough.
But the man of God disobeyed Yahweh's explicit command. He should have challenged the old prophet's claim to angelic revelation. He was naïve and far too trusting.

The importance of Yahweh's word is emphasized throughout First Kings, not just in this 13th chapter.
The focus is on obedience to, and the fulfillment of, that word.[6]

[5] Jeroboam's flagrant disregard for God's law is related in 1 Kings 12:28-33. He made golden calves for the people to worship, set up his own priesthood, and instituted a festival of his own making.
[6] See 1 Kings 2:4, 27; 12:15, 24; 14:18; 15:29; 16:1, 7, 12, 34; 17:5, 16, 24; 18:31, 36; 22:5, 19, 38.