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Biblical Authority

No one who wants to talk about the Bible and ethics can avoid talking about biblical authority. In fact, no one who reads the Bible at all can avoid the sticky question of biblical authority, although many try, pretending that the Bible's authority is self-evident when it is not. But when it comes to relating the Bible to ethics, questions about the Bible's authority become even more complex. This chapter will explore some of that complexity.

The Bible's role in ethics is both formative and normative; it shapes the people of God and functions as a resource in discerning how to live faithfully before God. The Bible's authority rests not in the book itself but in its power to enable life-giving encounter with the living God, the self, others, and all of creation. The Bible is authoritative to the extent that it allows people to "know" God as God has been active through cosmic history, and also as God is today creating, saving, and sustaining. That is, Scripture is authoritative in enabling us to recognize the saving and creating work of God in our midst today and to discern the ways of doing and being that enable us to participate in God's activity in the world. The Bible authorizes us to follow in those ways, in forming character consistent with those ways, and in nurturing relationship and conversation within the communities across the ages that have sought to live as people of this God. One could say the Bible is authoritative as it leads people to hear and be led by the Spirit of the Triune God.

THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Two things can be said about the role of the Bible in ethical reflection: (1) it is not the *only* source of ethical reflection for Christians, but (2) it does have a unique role in that reflection. We want to examine each of these claims in turn. Reading the Bible for Christian ethics does not mean expounding the ethics of ancient Israel or those implicit in NT texts. Rather, it means that Christians are wrestling with the deep ethical questions that emerge from their reading of the Scriptures, OT and NT.

What do we mean when we talk about the authority of Scripture? The word “authority” refers to that which an individual or a community acknowledges as a source of decisive influence in its life. An authority may be a document or a body of material (e.g., the Magna Carta), a person, or a community. Strictly speaking, an authority is what authorizes or empowers us. The matter of authority focuses not on some inherent quality in a source of authority but on the process of authorization that takes place as we, as individuals and communities, interact with that source.

The question of the authority of the Bible has long vexed Christianity. The Christian faith has had, and continues to have, many and varied expressions throughout the world over time, in part because of diverse understandings of the nature of biblical authority. All Christian traditions take the Bible, understood as Scripture, to be normative for Christian life and practice, but how that normative character is understood varies across the spectrum of Christian faith. Furthermore, how Scripture as an authority is understood in its relation to other authorities (tradition, experience, reason) also varies.

THE BIBLE AS “WORD OF GOD”

The “word of God,” according to Martin Luther, as well as other Reformers such as John Calvin, is not the Bible *per se*.¹ Luther insisted that the “word of God” is first and foremost Christ present with, in, and for creation. The Bible is the word of God in a secondary sense as it points to Jesus Christ. We turn to the Bible in order to know the

1. For a discussion of the Reformers’ understanding of the authority of Scripture, see Michael Joseph Brown, “Hearing the Master’s Voice,” in *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 13–15.

living Christ so intimately that we might discern what it means to live according to Christ's ways. As taught by Luther, the faithful are to wrestle with Scripture, guided by the Holy Spirit, and are to use faith, study, reason, and good judgment to discern how the voice of God speaks in particular texts to us in our time and place. Our interpretation of the Bible is to be guided by one norm: the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the living word of God for us, with us, and in us.

The Bible's authority is thus not a property inherent in the Bible itself. That authority derives from God, from the recognition of the Christian community over centuries of experience that Scripture is a primary source of empowerment for its life in the world. Authority derives from acknowledgment of a source's power to influence us, not from an absolute power that operates apart from the affirmation of the community. While some consider the actual pages of a Bible sacred, the Bible's authority does not lie in the paper or the book itself. Rather, the Bible gestures beyond itself to faith communities' experience with the character and activity of God, and the Bible's authority lies in its function as a unique witness to that activity. God called Israel and the church into covenantal relationships in the past, as attested in the Scriptures, and that same God continues to be graciously active and present in those relationships today.

THE DIVERSITY OF THE BIBLICAL WITNESS

Whether we choose to recognize it or not, our lives, including our moral lives, are shaped by many sources of authority. Our identities, both as individuals and within communities, have been shaped and guided by a complex matrix of authoritative influences, including family, education (both formal and informal), religious background, socioeconomic location, gender experience, nationality, ethnic identities, and significant life events, among others. Yet, if we are engaged in Christian ethics, we will see the Bible as normative in some way; otherwise the ethics we are talking about are not Christian ethics. With that said, the Bible is never the sole source of authority (despite claims to the contrary), though it has a unique authoritative function. The authoritative role of the Bible in Christian ethics binds all Christians together, through time and space, in a common tradition of seeking the word of God through Scripture.

The Bible is, of course, not one book but a library of books: a collection of texts written over hundreds of years in various contexts. Who we are as the people of God today is tied to the witness of the communities responsible for the authoring and reception of these texts. Within that diverse witness, the story of Jesus, told in the distinct voices of the four Gospels, stands out as centrally important. Yet, Jesus's story also looks back to Israel's story, as told in the Hebrew Scriptures, and forward to the story told in the early church. Pondering that larger biblical story helps us to discern God's presence and activity in our own stories.

It is worth pausing a moment to reflect on how stories are connected to ethical reflection. How do our minds and hearts encounter the Bible and the living God in it? How does the Bible open doors to these life-giving relationships and power? Human minds work, in part, through storytelling. We order the flood of data in the right hemispheres of our brains via the stories we tell. In moral matters, we cross the gap from "is" to "ought," from what is to what might and should be, by appealing to stories. Their insights and "lessons" help say where we ought to go from here and how we are to get there. So much of moral argument, including deep disagreement as well as agreement, is grounded in the narratives we live by. And much moral ambiguity is grounded in the fact that we internalize competing stories.

Because the biblical materials are themselves diverse, it necessarily follows that the ways in which those materials function as authoritative are also necessarily diverse. One of Paul's letters, written for a specific occasion to a specific group of people, is perhaps not authoritative in the same way that a poem from the psalter or one of Jesus's parables is. Genre is of critical importance when thinking about authority: how stories shape us morally is different from the way we engage the Ten Commandments, for example. This important point is often overlooked, for the different materials in the Bible are not, nor can they be, authoritative in one single way. One might rightly posit a moral imperative, a *normative* imperative, to care for those who have become impoverished based on one's exegesis of legal material, much of the prophetic corpus, or the teachings of Jesus, in contemporary ethical discussions of how to respond to poverty. The counterargument of the so-called "prosperity gospel," on the other hand, is not biblically tenable. One of the most important problems with

using the Bible to support a gospel of prosperity is that in those biblical texts where God wills the “prosperity” of the people, the meaning of “prosperity” is not exclusively or even predominantly about material wealth but rather is about God willing the *shalom*, the wholeness, the flourishing of the community. Such wholeness entails much more than financial prosperity. In fact, God’s *shalom* for the community is put at risk when the community possesses too much wealth. For example, the prophet Amos argues that the people’s accrual of wealth has caused them to thwart justice and care of the impoverished. In the NT, Jesus’s attention to the economically and socially marginal and his criticism of acquiring and hoarding wealth are apparent throughout the Gospels.

The authority of Scripture lies partly in how the Bible attests to the way that those who wrote and first received the Scriptures discerned and responded to the presence and activity of God. But it is more than this, for this process of discernment in turn invites our own discernment: we read the Scriptures in order to reflect on the presence and activity of God in our time. There is a dynamic relationship here between the content of Scripture (some of which raises concerns, e.g., slavery, the status of women) and the process of discernment. We will take up this complex dynamic in more detail below.

Yet, the most important authority that Scripture has for us is not its normative force in telling us to do this or not to do that but in the way that it shapes us as people and communities of faith, as it forms our very being. As Luke Timothy Johnson says, “[Scripture] reveals a world that is created, sustained, saved, and sanctified by the living God, and invites humans to enter the world that Scripture imagines and make it real in the empirical world through the way they live.”² For Scripture to shape us in this deeply powerful way, for it to reach our very bones so that we might enact the world it imagines in *our* world, we have to read and interpret the Bible as a whole, and regularly. This must be done in our homes, with our children (Deut 6:7), but also corporately in our communities of faith (Neh 8:1–3).

2. Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Bible’s Authority for and in the Church” in *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 69.

COLLAPSE OF TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Traditionally, biblical authority has been associated with the concept of inspiration. This began as early as the fixing of the written Torah during the period following the Babylonian exile. For Jews, the text itself became the locus of divine revelation, and within that text, in all of its variety and detail, could be found a divine word and guidance applicable to present and future generations. In the early church, as new documents appeared and became influential in the life of the church (e.g., the letters of Paul, Gospels), these texts also came to be regarded as divinely inspired. Using texts such as 2 Timothy 3:16, "All scripture is inspired by God," and 2 Peter 1:21, "men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God," Christians elaborated a concept of divine authorship through inspiration.

This way of thinking about the authority of Scripture as a "unique deposit of divine revelation" held sway in both Protestant and Catholic traditions until the Enlightenment,³ when its inherent weaknesses rose to the surface. One difficulty with this view of inspiration is that there is no agreement on what it means. It can range from inerrancy (see our critique below), to limited notions of inspired infallibility in matters of faith and practice, communicated through socially conditioned contexts, to locating inspiration in the authors or communities that gave us the biblical texts but regarding the texts themselves as human products (and, in fact, we will offer a more robust version of something like this ourselves below). "Inspiration" is too much of a Rorschach blot to be a meaningful category for discussion.

A second difficulty with inspiration as it has traditionally been understood (in its inerrancy formulas or inspiration-as-divine-deposit), is that it tends to invest undue authority in the text of the Bible, and thus advocates that Christians place their faith in a book and not in the God to whom the Bible witnesses. This has been a greater danger in Protestantism than in Roman Catholicism, where notions of inspiration have expanded to include church tradition as well. Such a sacralizing of the text tends to reduce the biblical authors

3. Edward Farley and Peter C. Hodgson, "Scripture and Tradition," in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 62.

and communities to the role of mere conduits and to obscure what we might learn from the Bible about genuine relationship to God.

A third problem emerges in that views that connect inspiration to authority tend, in practice, and in spite of all theory to the contrary, to elevate portions of Scripture to positions of authority that imply they are more inspired than the rest. This has often been the case with regard to the NT in relation to the OT, and even regarding the Gospels within the NT. Some of this may seem like commonsense observation: “You shall not sow your vineyard with a second kind of seed” (Deut 22:9) does not have the same status as the Ten Commandments. But if the authority of Scripture is rooted in inspiration-as-divine-deposit, then one is forced to come to the conclusion that God was more inspiring on some occasions than on others. A modified version of the inspiration model is recoverable (see our discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in chapter 4), but this inspiration-as-divine-deposit is not workable.

CHALLENGES TO THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

The first major challenge to the traditional view of inspiration-as-divine-deposit came from the rise of historical critical methods of studying the Bible. Beginning with the Enlightenment, but coming to full fruition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, methods of critical study were applied to the Bible, including text criticism, that sought to establish the most ancient and “authentic” text from among the many versions and manuscripts available. Of course, this had the effect of relativizing the text. If authority lay inherent in an “inspired” text, which textual tradition was the “inspired” and thus authoritative one? Or did authority only lie in some original, unrecoverable text? (That would be very problematic since one could not recover it.)⁴

Next came literary, or more aptly, source criticism,⁵ with its

4. Some fundamentalists distinguish between “original autographs” and “the original text” of the Bible. The former, some acknowledge, are not accessible, but they claim that “the original text” is nonetheless available to us because “even though a single surviving manuscript might not contain (all of) the original text, the original text could be accessible to us across a wide range of manuscripts” (Michael Kruger, “The Difference Between Original Autographs and Original Texts,” The Gospel Coalition, May 14, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/ycgr37fv>). But no reputable scholar has offered any credible criteria by which one might assess such “originality” as elements dispersed across multiple manuscripts; indeed, the proposal necessarily recognizes that textual variation has made the identification of a single “original” text impossible.

5. The use of the term “literary criticism” for “source criticism” has led to some confusion because the same terminology is used in more recent decades to talk about approaches

concerns for authorship and sources (as the name “source criticism” implies), closely followed by tradition history and its interest in tracing the development of traditions through generations of the biblical communities and their institutions. Careful study of Deuteronomy shows, for example, that it was not written all at once, but seems to have a core of material to which other sections were appended over time. Studies such as these made readily apparent that biblical materials were not the product of some momentary activity of divine deposit. They were the result of complex literary and historical development within the life of the biblical communities of faith as they witnessed to their experiences in relation to God. Stories were told and retold, combined and edited, preserved and embellished. Most inspiration models focus on the text itself, but critical study shifted some of that focus and attention to the processes behind the text and the communities where those processes unfolded.

Newer methods of literary criticism, borrowed from other disciplines in the humanities (literary theories of narrative, metaphor, semiotics, linguistics, narrative, and poetic ethics), have illumined biblical texts in new and exciting ways, showing that meaning lies not statically in the text itself but in the dynamic process of reading, a process that is always moving from behind the text (the context of production, the writers’ context in all its complexity) through the text itself (the words) to what is in front of the text (the context of the reader in all its complexity). This is not a linear movement but a dynamic back-and-forth movement that is going on all the time in the reading process.

Implied in this complex reading process are the social locations of both writers and readers, and the significant attention given to these aspects in the last several decades further undermines most models of inspiration. Real people in particular communities both wrote these texts and currently read them, and this shapes both what is contained in the texts and how they are read today. In the case of the production of the texts, the Bible is still the story of God’s graceful initiative, but the actual shaping of the biblical witness to that grace seems more clearly located in and affected by the human communities of biblical times than inspiration views of authority suggest. In the case of how

to reading Scripture that utilize the kinds of methods one uses when reading other kinds of literature (e.g., theories about metaphor, characterization, use of time). Especially in older scholarly publications on the Bible, “literary criticism” usually is equivalent to “source criticism”; only later does it take on the more commonly understood meaning as related to literary studies.

we read them now, there is a powerful sense that different readings are possible based on the social location of the ones doing the reading today.

Three hermeneutical orientations, and the theological frameworks from which they come, have been particularly significant in making the social location of readers (and, to a certain extent, also the writers of the Bible, esp. in the case of feminist and postcolonial hermeneutics) a factor that cannot be ignored in the interpretation of the Bible: liberation, feminist/womanist, and most recently, postcolonial thought.⁶ These theologies and ways of thinking, from the perspective of marginalized peoples, have challenged the prevailing modes of Western, Anglo, male, unconsciously colonialist biblical interpretation as ideologically biased. They see clearly that biblical authority does not reside abstractly in texts. It only functions as texts are interpreted and used. When texts are interpreted predominantly from the social locations of the powerful, the rich, the white, the colonizing (and those who benefit from past colonization), and the male culture, then biblical authority is invoked, consciously or unconsciously, to authorize and empower that reigning cultural ideology.

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY: FOCUS AND LOCUS

If we have indeed experienced the collapse of biblical authority, as it has often been understood, then how are we to understand it? A beginning response suggests that questions of biblical authority properly focus not on the Bible itself (qualities inherent in the book) but on the presence and activity of God. The Scriptures themselves attest that it is the transformative power of God, not the text itself, that is to be the focus of our faith.

In the Gospel stories, Jesus speaks “with authority” (*exousia*), which

6. Representative works on liberation theology with attention to biblical hermeneutics include Juan Luís Segundo, *Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976); J. Severino Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981); and bridging from liberation theology to postcolonial criticism, Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000). From a feminist perspective, see Carol A. Newsom, Sharon Ringe, and Jacqueline Lapsley, eds., *A Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012). Womanist biblical interpretation is represented by the excellent work of Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015). For postcolonial criticism, a major figure in biblical studies has been R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

meant that he was speaking “out of his being,” evoking a power based on his experience, on who he was. The point here is that the Bible is, as a book, not the authority. It is Jesus who spoke with authority. *Through* the Scriptures, Jesus might yet speak with authority, but that does not substitute the Bible for Jesus. In fact, both Jesus and the Bible point to the Triune God, in whom we live and move and have our being, as the final source where both Jesus’s power and our own rests. The Bible is the unique and authoritative witness to the God of Jesus Christ, who is graciously active in the world and whose will is disclosed to people in and through that activity.

Exegesis, literally “drawing out” meaning from a biblical text, is the “practiced art” of interpreting a biblical passage with due respect for both the ancient context of production (writing) and the modern context of reading.⁷ The text records God’s self-disclosure to the communities of Israel and the early church in such a way that it illumines the church’s understanding of God’s activity and the revealing of the divine will for the present-day Christian community. Christian ethics, faced with questions of how Christians are to understand and conduct themselves in a complex and changing world, seeks to read the signs of God’s activity and to discern the divine will for the present, and in so doing calls on the resources of the historic Christian faith, including, in primary position, the Scriptures and their history of interpretation in the church. (The history of interpretation of Scripture is often rightly called the “history of consequences.”⁸) Exegesis begins with the text and ancient context but must consider present context as well. Christian ethics begins with a present demand to be and do but draws on the ancient texts. Both endeavors are the necessary activities of the same community, the church. As such, it is a travesty that the work of biblical study and that of ethics have been, and continue to be, so often compartmentalized from each other in the life of the church.

Theologically, the problem with locating biblical authority in a narrow concept of inspiration is the equally narrow view of God that results. It is as if God ceased to be active after the closing of the canon. The tendency is to speak as if God’s disclosure of the divine will is limited to the distant past, and as if it is only in the written record of

7. William P. Brown, *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), x.

8. On the significance of this change in terminology, see Choon-Leong Seow, *Job 1–21: Interpretation and Commentary*, Illuminations (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 110.

that past that God's presence and will can be known. At stake here is the freedom of God. It has always been the tendency of religious communities to attempt to limit and control the graceful activity of the God who says, "I will be merciful to whom I will be merciful" (Exod 33:19, cf. Rom 9:15). This dynamic was certainly already present in the biblical communities themselves. When the prophet of the exile announced Cyrus as God's Messiah, the instrument of God's deliverance for Israel (Isa 45:1), the people rejected the notion because for them Cyrus, a foreigner, was not a proper source of God's grace; this in turn called forth the prophet's rebuke (Isa 45:9–13).

God was not only active in relationship to Israel and the early church communities. God has continued to make the divine will known to the church in all succeeding ages, and is still present, disclosing the divine will for the church and the world. The job of Christian ethics, nurtured by disciplined yet artful exegesis of the biblical witness, is to aid the church in discerning that will. This wider understanding of God's activity greatly opens the range of possibilities for theological and ethical sources of insight. The history of the church and its understandings of the faith, secular ideologies, the course of contemporary events, data from nontheological disciplines such as the social and the natural sciences—all these and many more become possible avenues through which God may confront us or inspire us with knowledge of the divine will for all creation. Indeed, creation itself, understood as the very environment in which everything must coexist, is a witness both to God's originating activity and God's sustaining and revealing presence in all that surrounds us. In sum, then, a strict view of inspiration leaves no room for the ongoing activity of God and the possibility that God might be revealed through sources other than the Bible.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

In what sense is the Bible primary but not self-sufficient with regard to ethical matters? First of all, it is the document that establishes the particular identity of the historic community called the church. The Bible is the record of the origins of the church and of the faith tradition it bears. It is the only full witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ, who stands as the focusing center for the Christian faith and for the Christian moral life. But these are not the

most important reasons for the Bible's primary authority in the life of the church. For it is also the church's experience that the Bible continues to be a source of empowerment in every generation. That this has taken different forms and emphases does not negate the importance of the consistent testimony to the Bible as a source of such authority (*exousia*). Christian ethics is free to choose among the many sources of ethical wisdom available, but it is not free to ignore the Bible unless it wishes to end the continuity of historic identity in which the church stands.⁹

Second, not only does the Bible serve to establish the historic identity of the church, it also provides a chief influence in shaping the perception and action of the church on current moral issues. One of the most significant issues, for example, upon which the Bible reflects again and again in law, prophetic exhortation, story, and the teachings of Jesus, is the plight of those who are impoverished; the consistent emphasis on this matter in the biblical witness does and should inform the church's moral witness. Through the liturgy, proclamation, and teaching of the church, the Bible influences the way in which the Christian community discerns God's will in the world and acts on it. The Bible is already present and functioning to shape Christian moral agency in the life of the church. Only as the church comes to know God in its own historic traditions can the work of discerning the divine activity in the present be completed.

Thus, the Bible's unique relationship to the church makes it the constant source to which the church refers in the shaping of moral character and in the making of moral decisions. When Scripture has shaped us so powerfully because we have drunk so deeply of it that it has reached our very bones, then its shaping power is hardly noticeable to us anymore—the ways in which it shapes the moral character of the church and of ourselves as individuals may not be entirely visible to us, but they are no less powerful and effective at creating ethos in us and in our communities.¹⁰ For Christians, no other source of moral wisdom can claim this kind of shaping power. The primacy

9. Similarly, if a person or a group chooses to open the Christian canon to admit other texts as canonical, one is free to do so, but one ceases to be in continuity with historic Christianity. One chooses a new, non-Christian identity in the way, for example, the Mormons did in the nineteenth century.

10. According to Brent Strawn's (*The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017]) analysis, the church now faces serious consequences because, in fact, Christians no longer read or understand the OT (and the NT is likely not far behind).

of the Bible as an authority for Christian ethics indicates its position as the single necessary reference point. It is to be taken seriously in all ethical reflection within the church.

OTHER SOURCES OF ETHICAL REFLECTION

Although the Bible may be the primary authority, it alone is not a sufficiently broad base of authority for Christian ethics in the modern church. While a necessary source, the Bible must be in constant dialogue with the many other sources of knowledge and insight through which God might be disclosed. Such nonbiblical sources are, first of all, necessary simply for data in understanding the issues of modern times and our lives in such times. Many issues could not be foreseen at all in the biblical communities, while others have form, complexity, and context that were not anticipated.

One may well ask what the relationship of biblical authority is to the authority of nonbiblical sources within Christian ethics. While it would be a mistake to attempt a hierarchical ordering of authorities among sources, biblical and nonbiblical, it is possible to suggest that the relationship among sources is dynamic and dialogical.¹¹ Most views of biblical authority, traditional in orientation, have been too rigid to allow this kind of relationship. Such traditional views have collapsed in the face of developments in modern theology and biblical studies, and this collapse creates a new context in which questions of authority must be raised.

Biblical authority may, however, function to help us claim the authority of nonbiblical sources. It is from the Bible that we have drawn models of the transforming power of encounter with God. As we come to understand the images, symbols, and metaphors used to describe that encounter in the biblical communities, we become sensitized to the possibilities for such encounters with God and their transforming power in our own world. It is our knowledge of God mediated through Scripture that helps us to discern God acting in the present. Since our God is radically free, divine presence and action will not be limited to official understanding, describing, and proclaiming of divine activity. The presence and power of God is potentially discernible everywhere. The Bible authorizes our efforts

11. The idea of relationality in biblical authority can be traced to James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

to couple biblical insight with insight drawn from our own time and place to create models appropriate to proclaim God's "new thing" (Isa 42:9) in continuity with God's graceful presence in our past.

It is precisely the Bible itself that anticipates and makes this point. It has become clear that in the growth of the biblical material, Israel and the early church did not hesitate to draw on sources already in existence outside their communities of faith if those materials served to communicate more clearly their understanding of the relationship to God and the divine will for the people of God. The early parts of Genesis show many affinities with texts and traditions from other ancient Near Eastern cultures, but they are carefully shaped by Israel's theological concerns: Genesis highlights the power and sovereignty of Israel's God, Yahweh, over the cosmos, in contrast to the depiction of the gods in many of the similar ancient Near Eastern materials. Many elements of Israelite law and covenant seem to rely on well-known international legal traditions. It has been known for decades, for example, that the basic form for the covenant between God and Israel found in the Pentateuch has predecessors in ancient Near Eastern treaty formulations. Yet Israel adapted these treaties with considerable theological creativity to suit their theological ends, their experience of God in their community. Wisdom literature is now widely understood as a secular genre characteristic of royal courts in the ancient Near East that Israel borrowed and used to its own purposes. This is clear in Proverbs but also in the affinity between Job and other similar accounts of innocent sufferers found in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. The author of the Gospel of John used a whole range of philosophical categories current in the Hellenistic world of his day to present his unique witness to the life of Jesus. The list could easily be extended. It is sufficient to say that the Bible itself makes clear that the sources of theological and ethical insight are not narrowly limited to those materials that arise only from within the community of faith itself. The community is constantly "finding" God in its wider world and appropriating materials from that world to express faith.

This has continued to be true throughout the history of the church. Saint Augustine's theology and ethics were profoundly influenced by Neoplatonism, and Saint Thomas Aquinas utilized the "pagan" philosophy of Aristotle. It is no less true for our present day. The church cannot do ethics on the basis of the Bible alone. If the Bible is not

the only source of ethical reflection for Christians, what are the other sources? We suggest there are two: The first is tradition, understood broadly as the traditions of the church, moral and theological, which includes the history of the interpretation of Scripture. The second is experience, which may be understood broadly to include knowledge of the sociopolitical and cultural contexts in which the church seeks to shape moral character and discharge its mission to the world, and knowledge of the world that comes from secular disciplines (and its attendant categories of discourse for communicating the church's moral concerns to the secular world).¹² There are more specific categories of "experience" available to the church as potential sources in its exercise of ethical judgment than we could list here, but below, we will give a few concrete examples by way of illustration.

TRADITION, INCLUDING THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

Protestants, in particular, are sometimes tempted to believe interpreting Scripture is simply a matter of a believer sitting down to read the Bible, and that whatever emerges from that individual encounter is authoritative. In reality, the Bible has been interpreted for over two millennia within faithful communities, and to ignore that long history of interpretation is both theological malpractice and also impossible. No one sits down to read not having been shaped by certain streams of interpretation. Instead, the history of the Bible's interpretation and the early creeds of the church serve as important sources of authority alongside our present engagement with biblical texts. Luke Timothy Johnson offers a helpful definition of tradition as encompassing

all the authentic realizations of Christian life based in Scripture and all the profound interpretations of Christian life by theologians grounded in the interpretation of Scripture. And, in the most proper sense, tradition ought to include as well all the saints through the ages whose lives have embodied the vision of God found in Scripture.¹³

12. "Experience," on this formulation, encompasses the "reason" and "experience" categories of the traditional Wesleyan formulation of Scripture, tradition, reason, experience. Likewise, "experience" here encompasses the version of the formulation that will be discussed in chapter 7 in which "reason" is articulated as "other bodies of knowledge."

13. L. T. Johnson, "Bible's Authority," 65–66.

What constitutes “authentic realizations of Christian life” and “profound interpretations of Christian life” may be a matter of some debate, but the underlying idea is sound for Protestants as well as Roman Catholics and Orthodox: the Christian tradition is an important resource for moral and ethical reflection.

An illustrative example comes from the history of interpretation of the Ten Commandments. Many prominent interpreters within Judaism and Christianity have understood the Ten Commandments as a summation of the moral law. As early as the first century CE, the Jewish interpreter Philo of Alexandria understood the Torah, that is, all the laws in the Jewish Scriptures, to be an elaboration of the Ten Commandments. In the Christian tradition, both Martin Luther and John Calvin understood the commandments broadly, interpreting the “negative” commandments positively. Thus, the commandment against killing, for example, is appropriately understood as a command to promote the neighbor’s well-being. Calvin observes that the commandment “contains . . . the requirements that we give our neighbor’s life all the help we can.”¹⁴ More recently, Patrick Miller has extended this Reformation idea by suggesting that a moral “trajectory” emerges from each commandment, thus indicating the broad swath of the moral life that the commandments encompass.¹⁵

Yet, the history of biblical interpretation has not all been salutary, and this painful history is also important for ethical reflection. The history of anti-Semitic readings of biblical texts, as well as interpretations that have been used to oppress women, people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQ people, and others who did or do not conform to certain conventional social norms, is painfully long. These elements in the history of Christian interpretation alert us to the dangers of ways of reading that impede the flourishing of others.

EXPERIENCE

The role of experience may seem obvious but needs to be stated. In general, when we speak of experience as an authority for Christian ethics, we do not mean personal, private experience, but the corporate, shared experience of how God seems to be at work in human

14. Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 264.

15. *Ibid.*, 4–9.

lives in particular times and places. We say “seems to be at work” because discerning God’s work in the world is a task that must be approached with the utmost humility, recognizing that one’s judgments are always subject to correction. Yet, that discernment is a necessary task for Christian ethics and should be approached with humble reliance upon God’s grace, for God will have God’s way with the world in the end.

Two examples make the case more clearly. Long, painful experience has ended chattel slavery (though other forms of slavery are actively practiced today all over the world, such as sex trafficking), and the status of women has changed dramatically over the last one hundred years alone. As a result, many Christians read the Bible in ways starkly different from the way they did even seventy-five to a hundred years ago, to say nothing of the early church period. The significance of Genesis 1:26 (“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’”) and Galatians 3:28 (“There is no longer . . . slave or free, . . . no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”) come to the foreground, and other texts that had been used to oppress women and minorities are pushed to the background, or are interpreted with new eyes.

In these cases, it is possible to see human experience—the horrors of chattel slavery, the oppression of women—as giving rise to new biblical interpretations, and to see that God was at work in the stirrings of conscience that led to these new interpretations. But experience is not always a positive shaping force in biblical interpretation. Consider Augustine, the great fourth- and fifth-century theologian of the church, who decided in his reading of the garden story in Genesis 3 that the purpose of sexuality must be purely for procreation. Why? For Augustine, had the purpose of sexuality been for companionship, God would certainly have given Adam a *man* as a partner because he thought men were much better company!¹⁶ In Augustine’s world, in which women were not thought worth educating and so were largely uneducated, it was, not surprisingly, difficult for him to imagine a companionate marriage with a woman with whom he could converse on quasi-equal terms.

What is important to recognize is that we are always making

16. See Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler, eds., *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 150–52.

our corporate experience a source of authority in Christian ethics, whether we know it or not. It is, in fact, impossible to interpret Scripture (or any text) without drawing on one's experience. And this is not inherently to be lamented; on the contrary, there is much to be gained. The key is to make conscious how our experience influences our interpretation of Scripture, so we are not blind to the shaping power of that experience in the way we read, and to be alert in our discernment process to how God is at work. Is the Holy Spirit at work in our corporate experience, leading us to new insights about ourselves and the world? Or does our experience pinch us and narrow our view of what is around us, so that our view of God's world and ourselves is constricted and confined? Does our corporate experience lead us to readings of Scripture that help all of creation and humanity to flourish?

We now have considerable knowledge of the world that previous generations did not have when interpreting Scripture—for example, knowledge that comes from advances in science. If God is the God of all truth (and surely that is the case), then God is the God of scientific truth as well. And science that has been subject to the rigors of the scientific method and peer review is worth our acceptance (albeit provisionally, due to its evolving nature) alongside other truths. Science tells us about how the Earth and the universe were formed (4.5 billion years ago in some kind of “big bang”), and science is beginning to tell us about human sexual identities, about the connections between morality and neuroscience, and about how human activity is damaging our climate, and so the health of our planet. The activity of God is not confined to Scripture but is all around us, including in the intellectual tasks of understanding our world.

Accepting science as one voice of experience and allowing it to enter into our ethical deliberations with Scripture and the Holy Spirit does not mean we allow the latest specific scientific theory to guide our thinking without due deliberation, including rigorous peer review; all hypotheses must provide reproducible results according to the scientific method. So, time and discernment are required when reflecting on the role that experience should play in making ethical judgments. Nor does it mean that the Bible is subordinate to science in any overarching way; we are not to submit ourselves, or Scripture, to an uncritical embrace of the Enlightenment project of rationality. On the contrary, there has been a historical temptation to deify the

outcomes of science, with disastrous results—this is a hubris that neither humanity nor the rest of creation can afford. But the truths of scientific inquiry, as one voice of experience with Scripture and the Holy Spirit (see chapter 4), can be revelatory of what God is doing in the world.

Dennis Olson, a biblical theologian and pastor, has observed: “Good science and good theology both share a certain epistemological humility, a confession of ignorance that drives our questions and motivates a blend of creativity and rigor as we face unresolved problems.”¹⁷ Careful, thoughtful scientists recognize the vital role of consciousness of ignorance in scientific inquiry, as Stuart Firestein, chair of the biological sciences department at Columbia University, has argued. He notes that science is not, at its core,

the *Scientific Method*, an immutable set of precepts for devising experiments that churn out the cold hard facts. . . . [Science is] not facts and rules. It’s black cats in dark rooms. As the Princeton mathematician Andrew Wiles describes it: It’s groping and probing and poking, and some bumbling and bungling, and then a switch is discovered, often by accident, and the light is lit, and everyone says, “Oh, wow, so that’s how it looks,” and then it’s off into the next dark room, looking for the next mysterious feline.¹⁸

Olson suggests that theology, when done well, also acknowledges the role of ignorance in its endeavors. Both seek God’s truth, in different ways and according to the methodologies of their respective disciplines. The postulates of rigorous scientific inquiry, as one voice of experience, with Scripture and the Holy Spirit, can be revelatory of what God is doing in the world.

DON’T OTHER SOURCES RELATIVIZE THE BIBLE?

One may well ask whether, in stressing the universal activity of God in all realms of life, one runs the danger of relativizing the Bible by accepting the authority of other sources. There are, indeed, those who regard the Bible as just one among many expressions of religious experience in the human community: all are to be regarded as

17. Dennis Olson, “Revenge, Forgiveness, and Sibling Rivalry: A Theological Dialogue between Scripture and Science,” *Ex Auditu* 28 (2012): 96.

18. Stuart Firestein, *Ignorance: How It Drives Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2, cited in Olson, “Revenge, Forgiveness,” 96.

authoritative in the same sense. Such a view takes seriously the ongoing activity of God but does not take seriously the uniqueness of the Bible's witness to that God. We argue here that this uniqueness is not inherent in the Bible, as one piece amidst the corpus of the world's literature. Rather, its uniqueness appears only when the location for the shaping of moral character and conduct is the church. It is the faith community that claims a special place for the Bible as part of the confession of its own identity. And that means that the church claims a role for the Holy Spirit in working with and among tradition, experience, reason, and the uniquely authoritative role of Scripture in shaping and forming the church's identity (more on the role of the Holy Spirit in chapter 4). We may say that the Bible has a unique and primary role in ethical matters, but it is not self-sufficient for ethical discernment.

The authority of the Bible for Christian ethics rests as much in its modeling of process as in its mediation of content. The Bible is composed of the collected testimony of persons and communities to the transforming and redemptive activity of God. To be called by God through the text to the remembrance of this testimony is not for the sake of the ancient events in themselves. That is the interest of the historian of antiquity. God calls us to remember for the sake of our own redemption, to enable us to discern the redemptive activity of God in the events of our lives. Attention to biblical authority as it mediates a process does not mean there is no continuity of biblical content to be claimed.¹⁹ Our identity as the church is obviously shaped by images, concepts, and metaphors that are part of the Bible's content and not just its witness to a process. But these cannot be regarded as revelatory deposits functioning as divinely sanctioned doctrine. The content must constantly be tested by the process. Which stories and images continue to manifest the redeeming power of God for us in our particular contexts?

Some matters of content are reassessed by the church, such as the biblical acceptance of slavery or the Pauline admonition for women to keep silent in church. Some matters of content are reasserted, such as God's preferential option for persons who have become impoverished and those who are oppressed. Some matters of content remain central although our interactions with them may change, such as the

19. See Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), for an example of constructive theology that works with both process and content.

Gospel story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In all cases, one's particular reading context plays a crucial role. A seminary class, for example, was discussing the biblical image of "God the Warrior" (found, e.g., in Exod 15:3) and most of the American students were expressing discomfort with this violent image of God, but one student from Latin America observed that this image was incredibly important in her home church, which was subject to state-supported violence. As she put it, "For us, if God does not fight for us, then who will?" Some texts may seem irredeemable in one context, but in another context they can speak a word of hope. A posture of humility about our own limited perspective serves us well as we read and interpret Scripture, even as we are bold to claim our convictions on core matters, such as God's desire that all parts of creation, including all people, flourish.

Even as we bring our own questions and concerns to the Bible, the Bible must be allowed to speak back into our contexts. On what grounds may a person declare one moral model or mandate wrong but another binding? The most apparent criterion—if it seems outdated or wrong, then it must not apply to our lives—may be appealing, but it is dangerous. This criterion allows us to pick and choose among biblical themes and texts, adopting what confirms our standing assumptions and tossing out what does not. Disarmed is the Bible's power to challenge the normative behavior and assumptions of a society or a person. This criterion betrays Jesus's startling proclivity to challenge commonsense assumptions about what actions cohere with the reign of God.

Finally, as we will explore more fully in the next chapter, any view of biblical authority adequate for Christian ethics must be cognizant of the diversity within the biblical tradition. As noted earlier, different genres require different types of interpretation, to say nothing of different approaches to ethical engagement. The problem with some discussions of biblical authority is that they seem to imply a monolithic view of the Bible and its use. There is no single way in which the Bible is authoritative in ethical matters. We suggest that biblical authority operates differently depending on the nature of the biblical materials that speak to a given issue and the contexts in which they are read. Further, we wish to argue that such a multifaceted view of biblical authority is necessary if the totality of the Bible's resources is to be made available to Christian ethics. It is a narrow definition

of authority, implying a prescriptive use of inspired materials, that has led to a narrowing of the biblical resources available to Christian ethics so that only passages explicitly addressing moral matters are often consulted.

Our treatment of biblical authority as primary is intended to allow for a more flexible and functional view of biblical authority and, at the same time, to stress the necessary biblical frame of reference within which ethical inquiry must take place if it is to be Christian. It remains next to discuss the actual processes involved in making available and interpreting the biblical witness for the Christian moral life.