

An Introduction to Scriptural Reasoning: From Practice to Theory

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I write these words just after completing a two week visit to Beijing, where my wife, Prof. Vanessa Ochs, and I were hosted by Prof. You Bin of Minzu University and welcomed as well by Prof. Yang Huilen of Renmin University. It was a visit of blessings for us both, including the happy discovery that “Scriptural Reasoning” (SR) is studied and explored here in such insightful and refreshing ways. In this essay, I describe how we have practiced SR and theorized about it since 1994. I conclude by speculating about how Chinese scholars may expand and refashion SR in the future.

Scriptural Reasoning (SR) emerged in the late 20th century university, out of a dialogue among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars of scripture and philosophy.ⁱ Looking back, SR was influenced by three primary modes of study: (1) *Traditional text study in Judaism, in Christianity, and in Islam*. These are studies in the scriptural sources and in the long chains of commentaries and teachings that define the various denominations or sub-traditions in each of these religions; (2) *Historical, literary, hermeneutical, and philosophic approaches to scriptural studies in the modern University*; (3) *Three separate practices of Jewish Textual Reasoning (TR), Christian TR, and Muslim TR* – as labeled and refined in the 1980s and 1990s out of a heritage of two centuries of modern religious and scholarly practice. In the 1990’s the founding scholars in The Society for Scriptural Reasoning defined SR *in the broadest sense* as including two sub-practices: TR and what we now call “Formational SR” (to be distinguished from the longer list of complementary studies we now also include in our scriptural reasoning work).ⁱⁱ

“Textual Reasoning” (TR) and Scriptural Reasoning” (SR)

TR is an approach to small group study of scripture and commentary within any single Abrahamic tradition. Each “circle” of 6-30 TR scholars studied small selections from a single tradition of Scripture:

examining its language, grammar, syntax, and semantics; discussing and debating how this Scripture was read and interpreted from one historical period to the next. To deepen their understanding of how to interpret Scripture today, the scholars also discussed and debated their traditions' major scriptural commentaries, from the first community of readers until today. These discussions displayed the influence of the scholars' diverse academic disciplines, such as religious studies, biblical and Qur'anic studies, philosophy, theology, history, social theory, ethics, and literary theory. The discussions also displayed the influence of the scholars' various denominations and sub-traditions of religious belief. And, finally, the discussions displayed the scholars' shared concern to shape a new form of scriptural study: a study that contributed, at the same time, to the various disciplines of academic inquiry, to the dialogue between religion and contemporary society, and to serving the welfare of contemporary societies.

Beginning in 1994, a group of scholars of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity joined together to discover a way to conduct dialogue across the borders of these three Abrahamic scriptural traditions. Our goal was not to generate a theory of dialogue and then apply the theory to form a new practice, but to experiment with many practices of study until we discovered the best method for "studying across difference." Our theory of SR would then emerge from out of our descriptions and analyses of SR practice. We met for five years of biannual study until we discovered and refined the best method, which we called "Scriptural Reasoning" (SR). The basic elements of the method are this: a small group of scholars or students of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism (6-8 persons); a quiet place to meet for regular 2-hour sessions (weekly or monthly, or lengthy meetings less often); a small sample of scriptural texts from the three traditions. One member of the group serves as facilitator, to keep the discussion moving, so that everyone's voice is heard. Before meeting, participants may study the text selections as thoroughly as they choose, along with whatever background materials and commentaries the group recommends. However, during the formal sessions of SR, the only subjects of shared study are the small samples of scripture. No one holds authority during the session: no one scholar or religious leader, no one tradition or method of study. The only authorities at the study table are

the scriptural texts, each of which is treated with respect as sources of revelation, community, and guidance.ⁱⁱⁱ

Participants begin by examining the “plain sense” of a single text: how both traditional and academic scholars may understand each word and the grammar and syntax of each verse. All participants are then invited to comment on any text that seems challenging, problematic, or surprising. Any participant may attempt to answer such challenges, from any source of knowledge. Such answers do not close the discussion, however. Instead, they often give rise to other challenges and other answers. SR debate and discussion continues around the table. Guided gently by the facilitator, this discussion moves, without conclusion, from verse to verse and text to text. Often, the group begins to focus on one or two lines of discussion, eventually generating one, two, or more lines of what we call “scriptural reasoning,” *per se*. These are patterns of reasoning that everyone at the table has contributed to in some way and that, upon later reflection, cannot be attributed to any one voice at the table: no one scholar, or tradition, or academic discipline. These patterns of reasoning emerge, instead, from out of all of the voices and sources represented at the table. The overall goal of the reasoning is not to locate some final answer to these challenges. The goal is the reasoning itself.

Types of TR and SR

Through the 1990’s and early 2000s, we applied the name “*Textual Reasoning*” (TR) to the kind of scriptural study we performed within the boundaries of any particular religious denomination and the name “*Scriptural Reasoning*” (SR) to our study of several scriptural traditions at the same time. We also used these terms, equivocally, to refer to several variations of each practice.

“TR” referred prototypically to the circles of strictly Muslim or Jewish or Christian textual study that many of us practiced before we began SR (see above) and which we continued to practice while we were also forming circles of SR study. We adopted the label “*textual*” reasoning, because each circle tended to examine Scripture by way of traditional and modern *texts* of commentary on the Scripture, rather than studying Scripture by itself alone. We also applied the term “TR,” secondarily, to our efforts to devote some time to

Muslim or Jewish or Christian TR during our week-long SR conferences. Sometimes we would separate into three separate groups to refresh our separate ways of practicing TR. Sometimes we would invite scholars of the other two religions to join a session devoted to a single tradition of TR. Finally, we observed that many interfaith groups favored a method of study we labeled “parallel TR”: inviting representatives of one tradition at a time to introduce its Scripture to the other. In this approach, participants listen politely to one another’s teachings about Scripture, asking questions without stepping over the borders of someone else’s text tradition.

“SR” referred prototypically to the “best method” of SR I described above. We consider this the best method for introducing participants to an interpersonal approach to study, where “reasoning” names a group activity rather than the province, alone, of the individual mind. We also applied the term SR, secondarily, to analogous forms of dialogic or relational study or inquiry. For example, some biblical scholars applied the term “SR” to their new, dialogic and inter-textual studies of the Bible; some historians of religion applied the term to their study of “dialogic encounters” between two religions (for example, missionary Catholicism and Chinese Confucianism); and some philosophers applied the term to the way they reason philosophically out of scriptural sources.

TR vs. Traditional Methods of Scriptural Study

Circles of TR differ from traditional circles of religious study. Both recognize that, when examined independently of a tradition of commentaries, a scriptural text (even a word or verse) may signify more than one possible meaning, usually several: that is, the texts may be *polysemic* or *multivalent* (“many-valued”). (Here, I employ the term “meaning” in a very general way, to include “significance,” “sense,” “reference,” and “illocution” or “performative significance.”) Traditional chains of commentary seek to reduce this broad range of possible meanings to very few, even to only one authorized meaning. Circles of TR—which welcome members of many denominations—discourage this reduction until its members have devoted time to discussing and debating a broad range of traditional interpretations.

It is difficult to nurture dialogue across the borders of different traditions of scriptural commentary. This is because each circle of traditional study tends to generate linear (or monovalent) readings of the scriptural commentaries, leaving little room for lively dialogue with other traditions of scriptural study.

Scholars from one tradition might introduce their readings and interpretations to the other scholars, but they are rarely prepared to invite these others to share in their process of study itself.

TR introduces difference into traditional patterns of study. Because they share a single canon of scripture, participants in TR are stimulated to seek a common understanding of scripture. At the same time, because they belong to different sub-traditions of scriptural study, they are also stimulated to defend conflicting understandings. *Unlike traditional circles of study, TR is designed to push its individual participants to pursue contradictory goals and, thereby, to experience either frustration or a desire to change the conditions of study.* The hope of SR is that, in the pursuit of change, many participants will stumble upon the pursuit of dialogue across difference as a new way to conduct ancient rituals of learning. I say “new ways” rather than “way,” because TR offers no single formula for conducting dialogue. To offer such a formula would be merely to establish a new sub-tradition for understanding scripture, competing with the other sub-traditions. *Instead, TR offers an environment where participants may, against their expectations, fall into patterns of simultaneously reasoning freely (individually) and cooperatively (inter-personally) and in ways that affirm each other’s different sub-traditions. As we will see, this “fall” is the source of both TR and SR’s capacity to introduce something otherwise unachievable within the hermeneutical and epistemological frameworks of the modern university: a mode of reasoning that simultaneously serves the interests of several different scriptural traditions and of the contemporary university.* The individual participant in TR or SR falls into this mode of reasoning the way one might fall asleep or “fall” into a dance step or a musical rhythm. Unlike reasonings that are limited to an individual’s neural system, this mode of reasoning belongs, at once, to a circle of reasoners and to the dimensions of their various traditions of belief and knowledge that are active during some particular session of study. Each individual participant’s reasoning is constrained by the interests, rules, and relationships that characterize such a circle of study, but no more or less than an individual is constrained by the settings and contexts of any other tradition- or discipline-specific project of reasoning.

Through our first decade of work in SR, we observed that successful participants pursued two goals simultaneously during SR study: (a) they participated in SR sessions for the joy of “study for its own sake,” without worrying about the ultimate truth-or-falsity of participants’ individual comments; (b) they articulated and tested their own truth-claims about individual words and verses of scripture, but they did not worry if others interpreted those texts differently. We also observed that successful participants displayed virtues that were at times like and at times unlike the virtues most valued in the university and in traditional circles of study:

- SR participants sought to understand the plain sense of each scriptural text as illumined by all available resources: from scientific studies of history and language to traditional commentaries to new hypotheses raised within the SR study circle. They were prepared to discover that there might be only one convincing meaning of a given text or that the evidence pointed to a range of possible meanings. They were eager, moreover, to examine several dimensions of "meaning," both semantic and performative. They sought to extend their own understandings of the texts and to enjoy hearing the varieties of opinions and insights brought by the study circle.
- They valued the results of intense individual thought and of group dialogue.
- They studied with scholarly discipline and with a deep sense of humor: pursuing laughter as well as insight, celebrating the fruits of individual reflection while also acknowledging the finitude of each person’s and each tradition’s truth claims. They recognized that finitude is not a liability but a mark of all worldly truths. Just as the biblical prophet declares to God *hineni*, “Here I am,” so too each verse of Scripture may declare to each reader at a given moment: “Here I am. This is my meaning here and now. This meaning is how I truly show myself to you at this moment. This truth is a mark of my intimate relationship with you here and now. But it is therefore also a reminder that I may, in another moment, appear to show myself differently to you or to another. This is how I retain my intimacy and thus my truth at each moment that I am carefully read.”

As I note in the next section, I expect that the work of Chinese scholars will have a powerful impact on the direction of SR practice and theory. In this section, I sample some of what I consider the most important directions in SR theory over our first 18 years of work. In the next section, I will speculate on how this theory may be transformed by current and future interactions between scholars of Abrahamic and of Chinese philosophies, religions and literatures.

- *Semiotics of Scripture in TR*

Over more than 20 years, our theoretical work in TR has focused primarily on matters of interpretation (hermeneutics or semiotics) and epistemology (how TR influences our theories of knowledge). While different TR scholars have brought a variety of academic disciplines to this task (from the German hermeneutical tradition to French phenomenology to other philosophic and literary accounts of language, tradition, and signification), the discipline of semiotics (the linguistic and philosophic theory of signs) has been the most influential. We have drawn, in particular, on the semiotics of the American mathematician and pragmatist Charles Peirce, rather than on the discipline of semiology that can be traced to the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. For Saussure, meaning can most often be diagrammed in terms of a two-part relation between a sign (*signe*) and what is signified (*signifié*). Peirce criticized such "binary" models, because they disembodied the activity of human knowing, as if signification occurred independently of any particular worldly context. Peirce argued that most activities of signification are served by a three- rather than two-part model: a *sign* (a word or gesture) displays its *meaning* (signification or reference) *with respect to some context of meaning* (which he labeled its "interpretant").

Peirce's model enabled us to identify the first hermeneutical rule of TR: a scriptural text displays its truth-values only *to some particular community of readers or hearers*. In other words, a scriptural text may be diagrammed as a *sign* that displays its *meanings* only *to some particular readers*. I do not mean that there is only one such community of readers (!), but that each historically specific community must discern anew what scripture signifies.

I find it helpful to identify a second hermeneutical rule of TR through terms introduced by Judaism's rabbinic sages: The *plain sense of scripture* [in Hebrew, the *peshat*] *displays the will of the Absolute but*

displays it indeterminately: in other words, no human readers can discern, once and for all, what truth-values are signified by the words of scripture. Scripture displays its determinate meanings only by way of its interpretation and performance within some historically specific community of readers. These interpretive meanings [in Hebrew, the *derash*] have truth-values, but only for that time and place. Scripture must be examined and interpreted again to identify its determinate meaning for any other or subsequent time and place. Stated in the terms of Peirce's semiotic, *the plain sense* identifies the sign-vehicle of TR, and the set of all possible meanings or objects of that sign. The plain sense *abstracts from any particular interpretant of the sign (context of meaning) and, therefore, from any particular true-or-false meaning of the sign*. The plain sense is usually examined through the following methods of study:

- (a) The sign-vehicle is examined by the academic sciences of linguistics (including philology, grammar, poetics) and text-history (including archaeology and comparative religion) and traditional plain-sense commentaries;
- (b) The sets of possible meanings are examined by the previous methods plus semantics and what Peirce labeled speculative grammar and ontology (academic and traditional methods of imagining the range and limits of scriptural semantics).

In these terms, *the interpretive meaning* identifies *the interpretants or contexts for receiving the sign and ; particular true-or-false meanings of the sign*. Interpretive meanings are usually examined by academic sciences of reception history, ethnography (identifying cultural contexts of reading), ritual and poetic theory, and pragmatics (sciences of performed meaning, as recommended by Austin, Wittgenstein, Peirce and others). They are examined, as well, by all the traditional commentaries (including legal interpretation, ethics, homiletics, theology).

- *Complementary differences: contraries versus contradictories*

As a project in both peacemaking and understanding within any single Abrahamic religion, TR provides a way to transform conflict into constructive dialogue across difference. TR begins by recognizing non-constructive differences within a single tradition of study. In the 1980s, for example, founders of the Society for Jewish Textual Reasoning observed irresolvable competition among various sub-disciplines of

Jewish Studies: text-historical vs. literary vs. philosophic studies, and all the academic studies vs. traditional or synagogue-based study. We labeled this a “competition among logical contradictories,” and we designed TR as a way to preserve competitive differences while “transforming contradictories into contraries.” By “contradictory,” we meant a difference that is irresolvable because it assumes a “zero-sum (either/or) game.” That is, if, for example, text-historical and philosophic approaches are different, then this means that to affirm (undertake and fund) one approach is to deny the other one. Our goal was to provide an environment for transforming “either/or” differences into “both/and” differences. We concluded that the way to achieve this is *not* to ask each individual scholar to learn many differences (this approach reduces excellence and overemphasizes the study of broad generalities), but to supplement the University's individualized model of scholarship with an additional, team-work model. While maintaining our individualized research, we would also join circles of TR study, in which members of the various disciplines would study together (often adding traditional rabbinic scholars as well). Before each meeting we would all do preparatory studies in a given set of scriptural texts plus rabbinic and medieval commentaries. Before our meetings, we shared brief essays on these texts, each of us writing from the perspective of our primary discipline. We then devoted our meetings entirely to group study of the scriptural and commentarial texts. We each spoke freely from out of our own intellectual perspectives, but we also listened with interest to all the other perspectives. We allowed heated argument as well as more gentle discussion, as we gradually learned new habits for achieving what previously seemed impossible: circles of study that allowed each individual person and discipline full self-expression while we also formed new bonds of interpersonal and interdisciplinary inquiry. After a few years of this practice, we observed that we maintained our different disciplines of study, but that we each practiced our disciplines in a somewhat new way. I began to write Jewish philosophy, for example, in a way that also prompted my readers to do supplementary work in historical and literary studies. I did not try to perform all these studies myself, but I began to consult regularly with scholars of history and literature when I plotted out my philosophic projects. In logical terms, my philosophic discipline differed from their disciplines, but not in contradictory ways.^{iv}

- *Beyond the binaries of subjects and objects: the relational ecologies of knowledge*

After many years of practice, we concluded that TR transformed our study of Judaism (or any other Abrahamic religion) into a relational ecology of knowing: a study that inter-relates many disciplines and ways of knowing, each of which is finite but all of which operate in relation to one another, so that "Judaism" (or another religion) can be comprehended only through an entire network or "ecology" of knowledge. Each individual discipline of knowing retains its legitimacy as a *finite* way of knowing: one whose claims have truth-value with respect to some finite context of study and interpretation (each claim is a *sign* whose *meaning* is specific to some finite *interpretant*).

- *Semiotics of Scripture in SR*

SR theory reiterates most of the previously mentioned elements of TR theory, except for the following modifications and additions:

- *Plain Sense and Interpretive Meaning, but no shared "truths"*

As discussed earlier, SR study focuses on scriptural texts, alone, without the commentarial texts that tend to determine the conditions of truth and falsity within each tradition of religious belief and practice. As in TR, SR study begins with discussion of the plain sense of a scriptural text. Participants then voice problematic or challenging aspects of the plain sense. These challenges stimulate efforts to reread or reinterpret the plain sense and, thereby, to propose interpretive meanings that might respond to what some the disciplines found problematic in the plain sense. The indeterminacy of the plain sense is one source of the power of SR, enabling participants from one tradition to comment, without offense, on the sacred sources of another tradition. One can contradict (and thus "offend") a determinate meaning, which must be either "a" or "not-a," but one cannot contradict a meaning that is not yet either one or the other. Another source of the power of SR is the freedom of each individual participant to propose ways of determining the meaning of any given text, even if these proposals serve the religious convictions of only that one participant. Unlike the plain sense, which all participants share, such proposals display the unique properties of an individual interpretation: one that displays the determinate meaning (a) of the plain sense (b) *for* a single interpreter (c). If another interpreter (d) proposes a different meaning (e), this proposal would not contradict the first one, but simply differ from it.^v According to the theory of SR, contradiction generates conflict across the borders of

different traditions; mere difference (“contrariety”) provides the occasion for lively but peaceful discussion and debate. This peace comes with one cost: unlike TR study, SR study is not about truth-or-falsity. For SR, truth-or-falsity is a characteristic only of determinate claims about the interpretive/performative meaning of Scripture, and such claims are available only within traditional circles of scriptural study or, in a moderated sense, within tradition-specific circles of TR. The Bible identifies a second species of “truth” that *can* apply to SR study. This is truth as *emet*, a Hebrew term derived from the root *amn*, connoting “faithfulness.” SR is deeply concerned with this species of truth: the faithfulness that joins each SR reader to the plain sense of Scripture and that, we hope, joins each SR scholar to every other.

SR, Abrahamic Religions, and China

Chinese scholars have begun to expand and enrich our practices of SR, drawing TR and SR practices beyond the Abrahamic religions into the philosophies and religions of China, broadening the subject matters of SR study, and laying the groundwork for a global SR theory. At Minzu University, Prof. You Bin writes and teaches about SR as a paradigm for his department’s work in comparative scriptural studies, comparative theology, and the history of religions. Here, SR names the dynamic process through which religions encounter and influence one another, exchanging vocabularies and values. His writings introduce scholars of SR to new resources for understanding scripture: for example, in the work of the Confucian sage Zhu Xi, whose account of the nature and uses of Scripture should have a significant impact on the theory of SR. At Rinmen University, Prof. Yang Huilen writes and teaches about SR as a hermeneutical and philosophic resource for his department's work in comparative literature. Through several essays, he has expanded the horizons of SR theory. Placing SR in dialogue with postmodern theorists, from Levinas to Agamben, he extends SR into a global theory of epistemology and ontology as well as textual hermeneutics. He has demonstrated how a product of inter-Abrahamic study can, at once, contribute to, and be refined through, the wisdoms of Chinese religion and philosophy. These and other Chinese scholars and their students have initiated a new dialogue between Abrahamic and Chinese traditions of scripture and theories of scriptural reasoning. I believe this

dialogue will significantly expand and enrich the practice and theory of TR and SR, adding such new forms of study as:

- *Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist and other forms of TR*: Several new directions in TR practice and theory may emerge out of Chinese universities and, with them, new ways of describing the semiotics of scriptural reading, commentary, and interpretation.
- *New varieties of SR study*: for example, circles of Abrahamic-Confucian SR and, more broadly, of Muslim-Jewish-Christian-Confucian-Taoist-Buddhist SR.
- *New forms of SR theory*: influenced, for example, by Confucian models of scripture (*like those of Zhu Xi*) and by encounters between recent Chinese and Western theories of language, literature, and knowledge.
- *New subjects of SR study*: for example, “comparative literature, epistemology and ontology after modernity,” and “*comparative theology and the dialogue of religions*.”
- *Global projects on* “SR and world literatures,” “SR and world theologies,” and “SR and world philosophies.”

After this brief visit to Beijing, and after only a few months of exposure to Chinese scholarship in SR, my understanding of the project of SR has already been radically transformed. I cannot now imagine engaging in the practice of SR without the contribution of Chinese philosophies and religions, and I cannot imagine further work on the theory of SR without the partnership of Chinese scholars.

ⁱⁱ For information on The Society for Scriptural Reasoning, see the following websites:
etext.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/; etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/;
<http://artsandsciences.virginia.edu/religiousstudies/graduate/areas/sip/comparative.html>;
<http://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/en/resources/papers>

ⁱⁱ I hope that a new group of Chinese and Abrahamic scholars of SR might re-examine the various types of TR and SR practice and then recommend a new and improved set of names for each of the different types!

ⁱⁱⁱ This paragraph is adapted from Steven Kepnes, *A Handbook of Scriptural Reasoning*, Journal of Scriptural Reasoning Forum: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/writings/KepHand.html>.

^{iv} They differ as “contraries” (a vs. b) or different members of a universe of many members (a, b, c,...n), rather than “contradictories” (a= -b) or competing members of a universe that allows only one or the other (a V b).

^v In semiotic terms, the two proposals may be diagrammed as abc and ade; these two are logical contraries, but not contradictories. This distinction is central to the success of SR in inviting non-conflictual discussion and disagreement across difference.