

Engaging Biblical Authority

Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
BC	<i>Book of Confessions</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
DBI	<i>Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation</i> . Edited by John H. Hayes. 2 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1999.
IDB	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by G. A. Buttrick. 4 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
KJV	King James Version
NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
OTS	Old Testament Studies

Introduction

WILLIAM P. BROWN

It is claimed that as W. C. Fields was on his deathbed reading the Bible, his physician asked him, "What are you doing?" He answered, "I'm looking for loopholes." This apocryphal anecdote points to a serious topic. The rubric of authority as applied to the Bible has been and continues to be a divisive issue for people of faith. For some, the term "authority" smacks of legalism, forcing one to look for loopholes, and reflects the painful history of the church's abuse of the Bible. Others regard "authority" as an essential feature of Scripture that promotes life-sustaining obedience. Biblical authority, in short, means different things to different people from different contexts, *especially* among people of faith, for whom the rubric of authority is inescapable. The authority of Scripture remains a given, but its import and extent within the life of faith is a matter of significant debate.

The roots of the debate run deep. The formation of the Christian canon was met with its detractors almost at the outset, from the gnostic Marcion of Pontus of the second century CE, who considered the Old Testament and some of the New Testament Scriptures to be theologically and morally objectionable, to the pagan philosopher Celsus (also of the second century), who wrote extensively on the Bible's internal contradictions and dependencies on popular myths. Propelled by the development of scientific and historical inquiry, the Enlightenment of seventeenth-century Europe directly challenged the veracity of biblical revelation while, at the same time, setting the stage for the "scientific" study of the Bible. A mixed blessing by any measure, the rise of rationalism in Western history resulted, as coined by Hans Frei, in the "eclipse of biblical narrative."¹

More recently, the claim of biblical authority has suffered both the rise of biblical illiteracy within the church and the profusion of pluralistic claims to truth

entering the popular mainstream, all vying for attention. And there is, of course, the long history of abuse and exploitation committed by individuals, faith communities, and governments under the aegis of Scripture. In the face of such developments, many have found the rubric of authority no longer useful for appreciating the significance of Scripture and its life-shaping power. The aim of this volume is to offer constructive ways of speaking about biblical authority.

Although a number of recent works have developed particular views on biblical authority, this volume is markedly different. First, it is multi-authored and, as such, covers a spectrum of perspectives articulated by serious readers and teachers of Scripture. Each essay finds the rubric of authority to be useful, but in varying degrees and in diverse ways. Second, it is designed specifically as a resource for students who are encountering, perhaps for the first time, the critical study of Scripture at a seminary or divinity school. For many, an introductory course to the Old Testament in the first semester of theological study presents nothing short of a culture shock, if not a theological crisis, from first-time exposure to pentateuchal sources, literary genres, settings in life, historical contexts, and contextual hermeneutics, including perspectives informed by race, class, and gender. Together they present a bewildering array of approaches to the biblical text that any student would find confusing at best, and at worst deeply threatening. Consequently, the notion of biblical authority is either seriously called into question by students or staunchly (and defensively) defended. All too often, students fall into fierce resistance or intractable despair when it comes to biblical studies.

This volume is designed to mitigate the "shock" and help readers articulate an understanding of biblical authority in relation to the critical study of Scripture. Featured are contributions from those who have not only survived the passage of theological education but gained much from it (though not without some struggle), and now teach in a theological context. Moreover, they continue to find Scripture foundational to their lives, finding it inconceivable to think otherwise. In this volume, many share how their view of biblical authority has changed over the years while teaching (and learning) within their theological disciplines (e.g., Bible, theology, church history, philosophy, missions). On one level, each essay is a case study: behind each contribution stands someone firmly rooted in her or his faith community who has seriously struggled with this issue. One can simply read these essays as personal reflections. But they are more than that; they are offerings that articulate something of the Bible's efficacy and depth for persons of faith.

The offerings are diverse. Various Christian denominations are "represented." In addition, two Jewish scholars have generously formulated their reflections for this volume. The contributors "represent" a variety of cultural

and ecclesial contexts: some are white males or females; others are African American, Asian, and Latino. I use the term "represent," however, with great reservation. The contributors were not asked to represent anything other than themselves as they discussed the promise and challenge of biblical authority. Specifically, each was asked to address three interrelated matters:

1. The author's personal engagement with the issue of biblical authority within his or her ecclesial and cultural context;
2. A view of biblical authority that proposes a statement, model, or metaphor (or combination thereof) of biblical authority that indicates how the author engages the Bible as Scripture;
3. Hermeneutical implications that demonstrate how the author's view of biblical authority works in practice.

It was left to each contributor to determine how much weight to be given for each part. Some gravitated toward the first, while others focused predominantly on the second or third.

Diverse as they are, the essays contained in this volume do not represent every possible position. They were not chosen to cover the entire theological spectrum. There is, for example, no essay that champions the inerrantist or fundamentalist position. Conversely, there is no essay that proposes doing away with the rubric of authority altogether (despite the opening of one essay). Most find themselves somewhere in the middle. But such a comparison is egregiously reductive, as if they could all be plotted on a horizontal axis in relation to some central point. The essays are simply different, some complementing and some conflicting with each other. Some are highly theological in orientation; others plumb the complexities of the biblical text. Some contributors speak from experiences of pain over how the Bible has been used oppressively; others have consistently found great comfort and empowerment from Scripture. All indicate sincere struggle with the issue of biblical authority. As the Bible, according to 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (see below), exercises authority specifically within the context of teaching, so it is only appropriate that the contributors invited for this volume are themselves experienced teachers.²

PROLEGOMENA TO BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

While the following essays speak for themselves, a brief preliminary orientation to biblical authority and to the issues raised by the essays is in order. First, the word "authority." Excerpts from two dictionary definitions are given below:

the power and a right to command, act, enforce obedience, or make final decisions; jurisdiction . . . authorization . . . the power derived from opinion, respect or esteem; influence of character or office.³

power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior
freedom granted . . . convincing force . . . grounds, warrant.⁴

One notes the wide semantic range spanned by the word "authority," but essential is the notion of *power*. Etymologically, the term is even more richly nuanced. The Latin origin connotes a creative sense. "Authority" comes from *autoritas*, meaning "origination," from which also the word "author" derives. The word is also related to the verb *autorare*, "to bind." But such richness is easily depleted in the most common uses of "authority" in contemporary discourse. The word frequently has its home in legal or academic discourse, particularly when a specific decision is sought. People, for example, seek an authoritative precedent or reason that results in a binding decision in a legal case. Journalists seek an authoritative or credible source for their research and reporting. Certain individuals assume authoritative status because they have become experts in their respective disciplines. Authority is domain specific.

When "authority" is applied to the Bible, certain questions naturally emerge: To what domain(s) does the Bible's authority pertain? Does it apply to scientific and legal matters as it does to matters of faith and moral conduct? That may be easy to answer, but what about murkier matters such as sexuality, climate change, and stem-cell research, where ethical and theological reflection needs to engage the natural and social sciences? To complicate matters further, whereas the recourse to authority frequently involves seeking specific decisions or answers for a specific issue, how does one seek such things from biblical storytelling or the lament psalms? How does one "squeeze" authority out of the love poetry of Canticles? Or is only the legal or instructive material of the Bible to be deemed authoritative? As a whole, the Bible is an altogether unique source of wisdom, quite different from things we usually regard as authoritative, such as legal texts and scientific reports.

Perhaps the best point of departure is to acknowledge first and foremost that Scripture is authoritative primarily with respect to its theological subject, God, who lies beyond the purview of scientific and historical inquiry. Nevertheless, because God is the creator of all things, respect for the authority of Scripture does not exclude but in fact requires respect for the authorities of the sciences. On the one hand, the Bible does not reveal everything about the world in which we live and move, and what it does reveal can be misleading. Is infertility a sign of divine affliction? Must we adopt a geocentric worldview because the sun "stood still" at Gibeon when Joshua defeated the Amorites (Josh. 10:12-13)? The so-called skydome model of the waters above and below separated by a

celestial firmament (Gen. 1:6-8) finds little correspondence with the structure of the cosmos as discerned by science. On the other hand, the Bible fully acknowledges that there are many aspects about our world that can be discerned only through empirical observation and that there are realities that remain unexplained. This is indeed the premise of the Old Testament's wisdom tradition, as represented by Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes.

"Authority" in the biblical sense takes on a different nuance from its normal usage in contemporary legal discourse, for example. Solomon's decree to cut the infant in half was not in itself the right *legal* decision—indeed it would have been horrifically wrong had it been *literally* carried out (1 Kgs. 3:25)! Rather, it served to provoke a response from the contesting parties to resolve a particular conflict. The Bible's "authority" is, thus, more at home with the original sense of the term, one that connotes a generative, provocative power that elicits a response and, in so doing, shapes the conduct, indeed identity, of the reader or reading community. Simply put, biblical authority is reader responsive: through our genuine engagement of Scripture, God "authors" us. Scripture's authority is dynamic and life shaping; it provokes a response that carries with it the acknowledgment, if not the conferral, of the Bible's authority. Authority, after all, must be acknowledged in order to be authoritative.

One of the few places in which the Bible directly speaks about itself is found in 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

On the face of it, this passage makes a modest claim. Simply put, Scripture is a gift from God that functions to teach and equip the community of faith. Its inspiration is defined in terms of what it can do for the body of Christ ("every-one"). The Bible's authority is demonstrated by its usefulness, by Scripture's capacity to edify and sustain, to teach and equip people for the life of faith.

According to this brief epistle, the Bible's authority is fundamentally a *functional* authority or, more accurately, a *formative* authority. What makes the Bible the Word of God does not depend on any particular theory of inspiration so much as to testify to what the Bible has done and continues to do in people's lives. To talk about the Bible as a normative document is to say a lot about what is formative about the Bible, of what it can do for "training in righteousness" and equipping the community "for every good work." Put in contemporary terms, Scripture's authority denotes the Bible's capacity to shape and transform people into mature communities of faith, to command as well as to edify, to commission as well as to sustain. Biblical authority is evidenced

in practice as it is lived out by readers of Scripture. It is not something that adheres to the printed words of the text, like font size or the color of its letters (even if it is red).

As many of the essays point out, biblical authority does not entail blind submission. The difference between being authoritative and authoritarian is deep. The Bible gives reasons or warrants for its claims, for proper authority is *freely* acknowledged; it is not forced. This does not imply, however, that the Bible must be renegotiated on a day-to-day basis. The Bible is more than a friendly persuader; it mediates God's living presence.

To speak of biblical authority in a certain way is to view the nature of Scripture in a certain way. Of human and divine words, the Bible is complex and, as such, so is its authority. The Bible is not a systematic book of definitions and diagnoses, complete with a handy index. It is a book filled with narrative and polity, reflective musings and context-specific letters, songs of praise and protest as well as of love. More an anthology than a monograph, the Bible is a thoroughly mixed corpus by any measure: historically, literarily, and theologically. The literature spans nearly a millennium and a half of historical struggle and theological inquiry. The Bible does not claim kinship with the Book of Mormon, dropped from heaven on gold plates. Nor does it bear much resemblance to the Qur'an, transmitted to an illiterate prophet within a mere twenty-two years. The Bible, rather, reflects centuries upon centuries of communal struggle and theological discernment. It speaks in many voices, some harmonious, some dissonant.

Discerning the many voices of Scripture, cast in various rhetorical forms and rooted in diverse historical contexts, is the challenging task of interpretation. The Bible's authority is intimately wedded to its interpretation. Indeed, one cannot discuss the one without the other: the authority of the Bible is realized in its interpretation, and interpretation gives concrete expression to the Bible's authority. Because Scripture interprets itself as earlier traditions are reformulated for new generations and contexts, it corrects and counters itself dynamically. Scripture is dialogical; the Bible *debates* itself. "Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself" is an admonition in Proverbs that is followed immediately by opposing counsel: "Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes" (Prov. 26:4-5). To respond or not to respond, that is the question with regard to fools, and there is no one mind on the issue. Or take the example of John the Baptist's declaration, (mis)quoted from Isaiah: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Matt. 3:3). Ecclesiastes, however, observes: "Consider the work of God; who can make straight what he has made crooked?" (Eccl. 7:13).

An authentic articulation of biblical authority must engage the complexities of biblical interpretation. The dialogical, self-interpretive quality of Scripture complicates the issue of biblical authority, for the task of interpretation requires the reader to find ways to mediate the contesting voices and claims about God and God's way in the world. Is there a center or focal point to the Bible, a coherence, an overarching framework or narrative, or at least certain theological highlights that should be privileged over other perspectives contained in the Bible? And, then, what about the voices and perspectives muted by Scripture that cry out for a hearing: the voice of the alien, that of the Canaanite slated for destruction, the cry of Hagar and other women marginalized by the patriarchal household? Every interpreter must mediate the plethora of voices that make up the great extended family called Scripture.

The contributions that shape this volume explore in greater depth the issues raised above, and then some. As a guide for the reader, I suggest the following interrelated questions to bear in mind for the purpose of formulating one's own understanding of biblical authority.

1. What is the author's concept of authority? What misconceptions about authority or abuses of authority does the author identify with respect to the Bible? How does the author's own ecclesial and cultural context shape his or her understanding of authority?
2. What is the extent of the Bible's authority? In what domains of life does the Bible speak most authoritatively and directly? How and when is it appropriate to rely on other authorities in conjunction with Scripture to resolve particular issues or questions?
3. How is the author's view of biblical authority reflected in her or his view of the Bible itself? How does the Bible, consisting of both Testaments, cohere theologically? Does a view of biblical authority rest on some notion of the Bible's coherence, and how is that coherence to be defined (e.g., through narrative, confessional statements about God, or underlying rhetorical structures)? What is the author's selective canon or "canon within the canon"?
4. What is the role of the faith community in relation to the Bible's authority? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in acknowledging Scripture's authority?
5. How are authority and interpretation to be related? Does a common view of the Bible's authority among readers necessarily result in identical interpretations? Conversely, to what extent do different interpretations of Scripture reflect differing views of biblical authority?
6. Does the Bible express timeless truths or timely truths? If both, how does one distinguish the two?
7. Where is the Bible's authority to be primarily found: in what the Bible *says* (e.g., about God and world); what the Bible *is* (e.g., holy, sacred, a place for encountering God); or what the Bible *does* (e.g., sanctify, shape character, form community)?

8. What reading strategies does the author stress? What role do the critical tools of exegesis play in ascertaining the biblical text's meaning and significance?

Such questions raise issues treated in this volume that every interpreter of Scripture must deal with to some degree, if only provisionally.

Biblical Authority

A Jewish Pluralistic View

MARC ZVI BRETTLER

I am an observant Jew: I pray each weekday morning while donning tefillin (phylacteries), abstain from work from Friday evening through Saturday night, and refrain from eating pork products or mixing milk and meat.¹ A mezuzah adorns each door of my house. I grew up in a traditional Conservative home, and through high school attended an Orthodox Jewish day school, where I learned traditional Jewish texts in their original Hebrew and Aramaic. Jewish observance has always been an important part of my life. Although currently a member of a modern Orthodox synagogue, I do not label myself as Orthodox, especially in terms of belief or opinion (*doxa*). Because different aspects of various Jewish denominations speak to me, I am in many ways postdenominational. I am not ordained and have never seriously considered ordination.

I began the academic study of biblical texts at age seventeen as a first-year student at Brandeis University, studying Psalms with Professor Nahum Sarna. It was a deeply enriching but somewhat traumatic experience, as I quickly realized that the traditional Jewish ascription of Psalms to David was wrong, that the Torah was not authoritative for the authors of Psalms, and that modern philology was often far superior to the insights of the classical rabbis and medieval exegetes such as Rashi. But by the time the course was over, I was convinced of the validity and conclusions of much of the historical-critical method, and I continued to study that method and ancient Near Eastern languages and literatures at Brandeis University and the Hebrew University at Jerusalem. As a student, I struggled to understand how I might reconcile the historical-critical method and my Jewish commitments, discussing such issues with friends and costudents. There was very little written on the topic.²