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This past February (2019), the General Conference of the United Methodist Church met in St. Louis. The primary item on the agenda was the existing language in "The Book of Discipline" regarding sexual ethics. After much debate and controversy, over 800 delegates cast their votes. Fifty-three percent favored retaining the language, and forty-seven percent voted against it, revealing how evenly divided the denomination is on this issue. At the time of this writing, it is unclear how the dissenters will proceed, but it is unlikely that the issue will go away or that unity will be the long-term result.

As many have observed, the identity crisis that the United Methodist Church and many other Christian fellowships seem to be facing is due, in large part, to a crisis of authority. Is Scripture the primary authority, and how is it brought to bear on the controversial issues of our day? This question is fundamental to the life and faith of the church and is pertinent to a wide range of topics. Because of the relevance of this question, this issue of *Christian Studies* is devoted to the theme of authority for Christian faith and practice. And this question is of utmost importance. Where does our authority for faith and practice lie? What are the proper sources for theology? What are the standards for evaluating different theologies? What should they be? What role does the greater historic tradition of the church play?

The contributors to this issue have emphasized different aspects of these questions, and various solutions are proposed in the following pages. In addition to biblical insights, these articles offer a range of theological, historical, and philosophical considerations regarding the authority and interpretation of Scripture. As always, our intent is to provide thoughtful reflection that will create dialogue about matters that are important to God's people.

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The Authority of Scripture Today? A Review Essay

Jeffrey Peterson

Joseph K. Gordon. *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Bible*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019. Pp. ix + 424. $65.00.[1]

This wide-ranging, informative, and readable study, originating as the author's doctoral dissertation at Marquette University, offers the reader "a systematic theology of the Christian Bible" (7 *et passim*), intended to assist contemporary Christians in the "perennial challenges" of "[d]etermining the function and role of Scripture in Christian life and thought and articulating the precise parameters of interpretation of the Bible" (1). At the outset of his inquiry, Gordon notes the "embarrassment of riches" for biblical study and interpretation that Roman Catholic theologian Robert Sokolowski has identified as an aspect of "our present postmodern situation" (1). Gordon identifies as the "most pressing challenge of our contemporary situation" coming to terms with the recognitions "that all human meanings [including those inscribed in the texts of Scripture] are nested in historical, cultural, social, and linguistic contexts," and that "the human readers of these texts always interpret them from somewhere and never from nowhere," perspectives he associates with "the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hans Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and various postmodern philosophers such as Stanley Fish and Jacques Derrida" (2).

Gordon's perspective on contemporary biblical interpretation is thus thoroughly situated within the academic humanities, outside which few wrestle with the significance of Wittgenstein, Ricoeur, or Derrida. This is

[1] Parenthetical citations in the text refer to this book.

understandable for a project that originated as a doctoral dissertation, and the questions raised are entirely legitimate and appropriate in that context. One might ask whether present social conditions in America and other "developed" countries and the situation of biblical interpreters therein may commend other challenges as more pressing than those on which Gordon focuses; this essay will suggest one possibility after surveying and assessing Gordon's work.

Gordon opens by situating his inquiry among three broad approaches to the study of Scripture on current offer. First, "historical criticism" is concerned with "understanding the texts [of Scripture] within their hypothetically reconstructed original settings of composition, redaction, interpretation, and use" so as to "avoid anachronism." According to Gordon, pursuit of this concern serves to "build 'an impenetrable wall' between the texts and contemporary people" and "threatens to take Scripture out of the hands of everyday Christian believers" (3). Such judgments are not uncommon among recent theological interpreters, though one might question whether the imposing edifice of historical commentary built up by interpreters since Spinoza is quite "impenetrable," and how the threat is realized when representative results of historical interpretation are made accessible to any reader of English in works such as the *HarperCollins Study Bible*.[2]

The second current perspective on interpretation, more briefly noted, consists of "so-called contextual approaches to the study of Scripture" which "focus on the concerns that culturally and socially located readers—especially those who have suffered from disenfranchisement and marginalization—bring to the texts from their own horizons of experience and meaning" (4). Gordon appears to regard such approaches as having undermined the "pretension of historical criticism to total neutrality" and exposed its practitioners as having "unreflectively endorsed androcentric and narrowly Western perspectives" (4), but he does not otherwise engage "contextual" interpretation closely.[3] As a third perspective on scriptural interpretation, Gordon identifies explicitly

[2] Harold W. Attridge, Wayne A. Meeks, et al., eds., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006).

[3] Gordon notes the formidable volume of the relevant literature (271 n. 15) and suggests that Lonergan's idea of "[i]ntellectual conversion provides a basis for both affirming and critiquing the differentiated achievements of … contextual or advocacy approaches to Scripture," as well as the other two approaches surveyed (164), also previewing a future exploration of Lonergan's idea (369 n. 179).

"theological approaches" (4), including the retrieval of "premodern approaches to the function and role of Scripture in the day-to-day lives of Christian communities" (5). Gordon's contribution has most in common with the latter group of studies, with historical criticism serving largely as a foil and contextual approaches as a warning against "the pursuit of a totalizing discourse" (14).

In developing his proposal, Gordon draws on an array of authorities spanning the centuries from the ancient church to the modern. His second chapter presents Irenaeus, Origen, and Augustine as representative exponents of the ancient "rule of faith" or "rule of truth" (33–67), taking inspiration from them for his contention that "an adequate statement of the economic work of the Triune God provides the broadest necessary context for responsible and faithful Christian engagement with Scripture" (66–67). Gordon employs the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed "as the ecclesially received rule of faith for the present account of the nature and purpose of Christian Scripture" (81).

Gordon makes judicious use of the work of modern interlocutors, as well. He draws extensively on the work of Bernard Lonergan (cf. 9–11, 14–31), in whose account of "the normative structures of human cognition and understanding throughout history" he finds the key to "identifying and affirming actual historical developments within Christian theological reflection that should be retrieved, appropriated, and, if necessary, reframed in contemporary theological reflection" (18). In the work of Henri de Lubac, he finds a helpful guide to premodern exegesis (cf. 12–13) and to the understanding of "authentic human subjectivity," or in traditional terms "the soul, its transformation and purification" (116, quoting Lewis Ayres; cf. 116–24). Gordon refers more briefly to the work of Robert Sokolowski (cf. 85–88), but Sokolowski's account of "the Christian distinction between God and the world" (86) is perhaps even more crucial to the cogency of Gordon's project than other authors on whom he draws. It is only if God and creatures are recognized as fundamentally different kinds of beings, the one necessary and the others contingent, that we may "speak intelligibly about divine and human causation in a noncompetitive,

nondualistic way" (85), in respect of Scripture as of any contingent medium of divine revelation.[4]

While I am in sympathy with the appeal to ancient theologians and symbols, it seems curious to adopt a creed of the fourth century AD as an apparently unproblematic (or at worst, minimally problematic) summary of Christian convictions, able to provide us significant and clear interpretive guidance, whereas the Christian Scriptures, including the New Testament composed in the first century AD, are taken to confront the interpreter with tortuous difficulties. No less than the authors of the New Testament, the bishops at Nicaea and Constantinople wrote prior to the work of Lorenzo Valla, Nicolaus Copernicus, Isaac Newton, and Charles Darwin, among others whose researches have served to complicate contemporary biblical interpretation and theology.[5] More broadly, if "*Scripture is not a speaking and acting agent*" (28, italics original), neither are Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, the Nicene signatories, Aquinas, Lonergan, de Lubac, or (in print) Gordon. Yet our access to all the latter also comes only via "inanimate … marks on pages that are artifacts of human technology" (216; cf. 28, 109, 135–6, 208). In Gordon's account, however, it is only Scripture whose interpretation appears uniquely problematic in consequence of this.[6]

In his fourth chapter, Gordon offers his contribution toward "a Christian notion of the human person that is grounded in the tradition of Christian reflection but that simultaneously has a place for more recent advances in human understanding of the constitution of human nature" (119–20), an undertaking he regards as "in an important sense … foundational for the whole work" (15). Gordon's fifth chapter, unusually for a work of systematic theology, surveys the *realia* of Scripture (for example, the adoption of the codex as a medium for the transmission of Scripture among Christians, their use of *nomina sacra*, and

[4] See Sokolowski's outstanding introduction to theology, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995 [1982]).

[5] See Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology: Origins and Problems of Biblical Criticism in the Seventeenth Century* (London: SCM, 2013).

[6] This might be justified by reference to the observation that, prior to any hermeneutical or theological reflection, many (most?) Christians are "committed to Scripture and its authority" (7), but Gordon leaves largely unexplored the special status of Scripture vis-à-vis other texts.

the presence or absence of works in extant manuscripts as evidence for canonical development) and argues that "even under the most restrictive and exclusivistic understandings of what the boundaries of the church are, the Christian community has not fixed and preserved exactly the same text" (169). The sixth chapter seeks to locate this variable Scripture within the redemptive work of the economic Trinity, maintaining that "Christian Scripture is an instrument of the Holy Spirit and Son of God, and its purpose is to facilitate the transformation of its readers for their participation in the recapitulation of all things in Christ"; this "location" of Scripture within the transformative purpose of the Triune God means that to use Scripture as an "instrument of violence and oppression … is to reject the authority of the Son of God Incarnate, Jesus Christ, to whom Scripture testifies" (258).

No book can do everything, of course, nor can any study of Scripture address every relevant subject of merit. Since Gordon holds that "[t]he most pressing concerns [of contemporary readers of Scripture] are moral in nature" (6), and that "Scripture is inspired and … mediates divine revelation in the very particularity of its words" (28), one topic that might be thought to deserve more attention could be labeled the "moral phenomenology of Scripture." Pursuing this topic, one would ask how and in what role(s) Scripture appears (or should appear) in the moral formation, decision-making, and life-construction of Christian communities and individuals today.[7]

Contemporary Americans, including American Christians, inhabit an "opt-in" society. Once we have attained adulthood, we choose our associations, from the most casual to the most intimate, selecting as we think best our friends and vocations and marital partners, along with the churches we attend (or, increasingly, don't) and the sports teams and charities and political parties we support. We organize our lives on the voluntary principle, and there is no door we enter that we do not reserve the right to exit if the association ceases to meet our needs. (The marital association is the last holdout against that principle one can find, in some shrinking precincts of American life.) I mention

[7] The moral concerns of Scripture's contemporary readers that Gordon identifies have to do not so much with the Scriptures' "reading" of us and our mores as with our reading of problematic moral judgments in Scripture: "What are Christians to do with an authoritative Scripture that seems to depict God as not only condoning, but even sanctioning slavery, wanton violence, genocide, patriarchy, and racism?" (6).

these social realities not in order to celebrate our situation or to commend the American way of life as presently configured, but merely so as to see clearly the ground on which we in fact stand when we consider any question of the church's life or of our Christian discipleship as it must be lived out in the circumstances in which we find our individual and communal lives embedded.

It is related to this setting that the typical American Christian encounters the word "authority" or the concept that it represents at work or school, perhaps, but seldom at church or in connection with the practice of religion. Even for the Christian who regularly attends church meetings, religion is typically a matter not of recognizing authority and submitting ourselves to it, but of exercising individual taste and choice and seeking individual meaning and significance: What do I make of the new minister or worship leader or teacher? How did the sermon or the song service leave me feeling? What sort of devotional regime feeds my soul? It may scarcely occur to us to ask "by what authority" religious practices or doctrines are embraced or rejected.

That puts the religious experience of current American churchgoers deeply at odds with that of previous generations, for whom authority in religion was a question of vital concern.[8] We are some distance from eras when anathemas might be pronounced and wars declared over such issues as whether, for example, the Bible or the pope is the authority on which Christians should rely for what to believe about God or how to live to please him. There are of course obvious benefits to living in such a time and place, notably decreased hostility and unpleasantness between the members of different churches. But there are also disadvantages to living out one's discipleship in such an era, even if they may require more care to discern.

To take one unhappy example: Few subjects are treated with greater perspicacity or forcefulness in the Christian Bible than the binding character of marriage and the disallowance of divorce as a practice among Jesus' disciples. The rigorous teaching attributed to Jesus on this subject by Paul, Mark, and Luke—no remarriage following divorce for Jesus' disciples—holds up

[8] Our contemporary situation represents the latest equilibrium point between techniques for mass evangelism and the adjustment of standards for community membership, the dynamic which Franklin H. Littell proposes as the guiding thread of American religious history (*From State Church to Pluralism: A Protestant Interpretation of Religion in American History*[Garden State, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1962]).

impressively under historical-critical scrutiny.[9] And while the instructions in Paul and Matthew admit certain exceptions to Jesus' prohibition of divorce, they by no means normalize divorce-and-remarriage as a practice for committed Christians. This remains the case even if the exceptions admitted in Scripture open up consideration of other exceptional circumstances in which divorce might be permitted among those who seek to be guided by the spirit of Jesus' teaching.[10] Divorce is the rare exception for followers of Jesus guided by Scripture, by no means the rule.

Yet in the half-century since no-fault divorce began to be adopted in American family law (beginning in California under Ronald Reagan), divorce has proliferated among professed Christians, and churches—including churches that profess a "high view of biblical authority"—have offered little effective resistance.[11] As adults have been freed to "follow their bliss" out of old marital relationships into new ones, the social and personal costs of the "divorce revolution" have fallen especially on the children of dissolved unions.[12] Surveying this question, it is difficult to see how Scripture can be said to have functioned or been consulted as an "authority" in the Christian communities concerned, unless "authority" is taken to mean "a text we consult in preparation for evading its clear provisions." Nor is it immediately clear how a community that wished to order its life under the authority of Scripture would proceed to do so effectively; the physical and social mobility of

[9] See E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity, 1989), 324–28; Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 185–228; William Loader, *Sexuality in the Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), esp. 112–20; and John P. Meier, *Law and Love*, A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, vol. 4; (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 95–128.

[10] See Craig Keener, *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), esp. 28–37, 50–66, 104–10.

[11] This is true even if the divorce rate among Christians, and evangelical Christians, has been exaggerated, as is argued by Glenn Stanton, "FactChecker: Divorce Rate Among Christians" (https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-divorce-rate-among-christians/, accessed 15 April 2019). Determining the facts on this and related questions is complicated by the circumstance that virtually every position taken reflects apologetic or polemical interests.

[12] See Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 46–79, 263–78; R. R. Reno, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2016), esp. chap. 2.

American life is such that even members of a "covenanted" community no longer willing to be bound by marital or other obligations need only relocate to another church fellowship to feel both their religious and their personal needs met.

Perhaps a first step toward the recovery of biblical authority in this domain and others is offered by Christopher Bryan's distinction between "coercive authority" and "appellative authority."[13] Coercive authority is wielded by the parent who restrains us during a childhood tantrum or consigns us to our room "for our own good"; in adulthood it is signified by the red and blue lights that strobe in the rearview mirror when we let our foot rest too heavily on the gas pedal, intimating the force that can be used to compel our compliance with the speed limit or exact the prescribed penalty. Appellative authority, in contrast, is the sort that makes an appeal, as when a friend kindly and patiently makes a case that leads us to abandon a destructive course of action, or when a fund-raising or patriotic appeal moves us to contribute or enlist, or when a painting or a piece of music "compels" us to stop and attend to it.

It is an exaggeration to maintain, as Bryan does, that God's authority "is presented in the Bible as invariably appellatory."[14] The law God decrees for Israel imposes penalties for disobedience (cf. Exod 21:1–23:33), and Christ's apostle orders the expulsion and shunning of seriously wayward members of his mission churches (cf. 1 Cor 5:1–13; 2 Thess 3:6–15). Yet it is helpful to recognize that God's authority as expressed in Scripture is *initially* and *primarily* appellative; Scripture first appeals to us with a vision of transformed life and community and invites us into a fellowship devoted to pursuing this, before it imposes discipline if we seek to evade its requirements (cf. Exod 20:2; 1 Cor 1:4–9, 21–25, 30–31; 2:1–5; 2 Thess 1:3–4, 11–12; 2:13–3:5). It is difficult to see how the Bible functions as an authority in any sense in a community that fails even to articulate the fundamental moral appeals of Scripture.

As an analogy to the ongoing life of the church and the authority of Scripture within it, Tom Wright has proposed a company of actors who undertake to stage a production of a play left unfinished by Shakespeare. The players proceed by studying the four completed acts left on paper within the

[13] Christopher Bryan, *And God Spoke: The Authority of the Bible for the Church Today* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 2002), 85–90.

[14] Bryan, *And God Spoke*, 88.

Shakespearean and Elizabethan milieu and, rather than committing a fifth act to writing themselves and so presuming to place their work on a level with the Bard's, collaborate in improvising the conclusion on the basis of their immersion in the work and the spirit of the master.[15] I have no better parable to offer contemporary Christians as a guide through our interpretive and communal difficulties.

Joseph Gordon directs our attention to issues that must be considered by any troupe of disciples that seeks to act out its improvisation in awareness of the full range of options for understanding the biblical "script" that have been attempted by companies that have preceded us in this endeavor, including some gifted and notable "directors," and with a fuller understanding of the options and limits involved in mounting our own production. For his work in this regard, he merits the gratitude of everyone who shares his commitment to the effort.

[15] N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 140.

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