THE ENDURING AUTHORITY OF THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES
The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures

Edited by

D. A. Carson

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Abbreviations

AAR  American Academy of Religion
AB   Anchor Bible
ABD  Anchor Bible Dictionary
ABH  Long, The Art of Biblical History
ACW  Ancient Christian Writers
adv. Marc.  Tertullian, Adversus Marcionem
AGJU  Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
A.H.  After Hegira = Anno Hegirae (Muslim calendar)
AH   Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses
AJT  Asia Journal of Theology
AnBib Analecta Biblica
ANF  Ante-Nicene Fathers
Ant. Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews
A of F  Articles of Faith (Mormon)
1 Apol. Justin Martyr, The First Apology
ARN  Avot of Rabbi Natan
Asc. Isa. The Ascension of Isaiah
ASNU Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis
ASV  American Standard Version
ATANT Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments
AThR Anglican Theological Review
BAR  Biblical Archaeology Review
B&C  Books & Culture
B&H  Broadman & Holman
Barn. Epistle of Barnabas
BBB  Bonner Biblische Beiträge
BBR  Bulletin for Biblical Research
BC   The Book of Concord
**ABBREVIATIONS**

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<td><em>Bible Speaks Today</em></td>
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<td><em>Cahiers de l’Association des Pasteurs de France</em></td>
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<td><em>Church Dogmatics</em></td>
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<td>Cairo Genizah copy of the <em>Damascus Document</em></td>
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<td><em>Damascus Document — Recension B</em></td>
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<td><em>Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II</em></td>
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<td>CivDei</td>
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<td><em>Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia</em></td>
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<td><em>Compendium rerum iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum</em></td>
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<td><em>Currents in Theology and Mission</em></td>
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<td><em>Dictionnaire de la Bible: Supplément</em></td>
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<td><em>Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils</em></td>
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<td>esp.</td>
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<td>English Standard Version</td>
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<td>English Translation</td>
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## Abbreviations

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<td>Ex Auditu</td>
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<td>The Expository Times</td>
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<td>Fathers of the Church Patristic Series</td>
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<td>Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments</td>
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<td>The Fathers of the Church</td>
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<td>G. Jud.</td>
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<td>Grundrisse zum Neuen Testament</td>
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<td>Greek Orthodox Theological Review</td>
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<td>Handkommentar zum Alten Testament</td>
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<td>Horizons in Biblical Theology</td>
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<td>HUCA</td>
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<td>IBC</td>
<td>Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching</td>
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<td>ICC</td>
<td>International Critical Commentary</td>
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<td>In Apoc.</td>
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<td>Int</td>
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<td>ISBE</td>
<td>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</td>
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<td>JBR</td>
<td>Journal of Bible and Religion</td>
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<td>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</td>
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<td>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</td>
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<td>JSTOT</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</td>
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<td>JSOTSS</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series</td>
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<td>JSP</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</td>
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<td>JSPSS</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series</td>
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<td>JSS</td>
<td><em>Journal of Semitic Studies</em></td>
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<td>JTS</td>
<td><em>Journal of Theological Studies</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>KEK</td>
<td>Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (Meyer-Kommentar)</td>
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<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version</td>
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<td>LCL</td>
<td>Loeb Classical Library</td>
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<td>Library of New Testament Studies</td>
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<td>LRB</td>
<td><em>London Review of Books</em></td>
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<td>LW</td>
<td>Luther’s Works</td>
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<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic Text</td>
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<td>NAB</td>
<td>New American Bible</td>
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<td>NAE</td>
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<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible</td>
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<td>NBCLC</td>
<td>National Biblical Confessional and Liturgical Centre (Bangalore)</td>
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<td><em>New Bible Dictionary</em></td>
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<td><em>New Testament Studies</em></td>
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<td>NTTSB</td>
<td>New Testament Tools, Studies and Documents</td>
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<td>OCD</td>
<td>Oxford Classical Dictionary</td>
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## Abbreviations

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<td>Oxford English Dictionary</td>
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<td>Oudtestamentische Studiën/Old Testament Studies</td>
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<td>P&amp;R</td>
<td>Presbyterian &amp; Reformed</td>
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<td>Pillar New Testament Commentary</td>
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<td>Revue Biblique</td>
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<td>Roman Catholic(ism)</td>
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### Abbreviations

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<td>H. L. Strack &amp; P. Billerbeck, <em>Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash</em></td>
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Preface

In the past, evangelicalism has often been said to turn on a formal principle and a material principle. The formal principle is the authority of the Bible, from which everything else derives. As necessary as the formal principle is, however, it is not sufficient to define evangelicalism. After all, many other groups and movements adhere to some sort of high view of Scripture: consider (to go no further) the Jehovah’s Witnesses. So coupled with the formal principle is the material principle — a right understanding of the gospel.

This volume focuses on the formal principle. Few topics touch more issues than the topic of biblical authority: the nature of revelation, different ways of understanding truth, the locus of authority (located in the text or in the teaching office of the church), historical-critical considerations, continuity and discontinuity between the Testaments, the use of the Old Testament in the Old and in the New, the relationship between Scripture and canon, the formation of the canon, epistemology, the nature of inspiration, the notion of double authorship, the claims of Scriptural authority in an age dominated by a vision of science that widely presupposes philosophical materialism, Jesus’ own view of the authority of antecedent Scripture, assorted hermeneutical challenges, the impact of certain intellectual giants (e.g., Calvin, Barth), complex histories of the doctrine of Scripture, the Bible’s relation to history (and what “history” means), the coherence of certain shibboleth words like “inerrancy,” the Western cultural suspicion of all voices of authority in what Charles Taylor calls “the age of authenticity,” the perspicuity of Scripture, the way Scripture should and should not be used in the formation of doctrine, and, in an age of globalism, how the Christian doctrine of Scripture is and is not like the way other world religions view their sacred writings. To make matters still more complex, all of these related fields that bear on the nature and authority of the Bible have their own conceptual minefields. Not surprisingly, then, they too throw up challenging debates. Moreover, to survey the topics just listed is to remind oneself how the formal principle can never be completely isolated from the material principle: e.g., if one is wrestling with hermeneutical challenges, the discussion is bound to intrude into the territories of both principles.
About thirty years ago, some of the writers in this volume worked together and with others to produce a pair of volumes that is still in print: *Scripture and Truth* (1983) and *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (1986 — both edited by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, and both published by Zondervan). The two volumes played their parts in the then-current debates. Some of today’s topics are similar, even though the debates have moved on; others are new. Recognizing that Scripture and its authority are being challenged and defended with renewed vigor, a handful of us put our heads together and laid down the topics you will find in this volume. Funded by the Henry Center for Theological Understanding (one of three Centers operated by Trinity Evangelical Divinity School), the project took on life. Scholars agreed to write these essays, and then their papers were circulated among the contributors. In June 2010, thirty-three of the thirty-six contributors flew to Chicago from their various posts around the world, and spent an intense but hugely enjoyable week working through their essays. On every topic there were at least two or three people in the room who were competent on that subject, and sometimes more. This led to many debates, corrections, modifications, and to much subsequent rewriting. The hours were long, the discussions candid, but a rare camaraderie developed. Most of us went away, I think, holding to the opinion that we had never enjoyed theological discussion more. Not a few new friendships were forged.

For various reasons, rewriting (some of it major) and the writing of a couple of new essays that were not ready at the time of the conference took up three years. The final major revision showed up in January 2015. Probably I should have pushed harder; the blame for some of the delay must be placed squarely at my door. Nevertheless most of these papers are sufficiently weighty and robust that they will not quickly become dated.

It remains to thank the Henry Center for the funding that made this project possible, and for the logistical competence that smoothly and expertly arranged the details of the week of discussion, from transportation to food to acoustics. Special mention must be made of the skillful work of Hans Madueme, then a doctoral student at TEDS, who took detailed notes of these discussions and circulated them to all the participants, making it possible to follow up certain points with ongoing exchanges and clarifications. Warm thanks go to Eerdmans not only for taking on this project, but because (if I may resort to an expression now eclipsed), while they waited and encouraged, they composed their souls in peace. And abundant thanks to Daniel Ahn, Daniel Cole, and Wang Chi-Ying, who prepared the indexes, without which this volume would have been far less useful than it is.

“These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit and who tremble at my word” (Isa. 66:2).

*Soli Deo gloria.*

D. A. Carson

xvi
Introduction
The last three decades or so have seen a plethora of books and articles on the nature of Scripture. Some of these, on both the confessional side and the more liberal side, have merely refreshed (rehashed?) old positions. That is not necessarily a bad thing, in exactly the same way that publishing more commentaries on biblical books is not necessarily a bad thing. We need new commentaries not only because new questions continue to be asked, and new audiences addressed, but also because we need a steady supply of new commentators — people who work carefully through the biblical texts and try to explain them to others. In exactly the same way, we constantly need a new supply of Christian scholars who think about the nature of Scripture, not only because new questions are raised from time to time, but also because we need a steady supply of new theologians who work through the fundamentals of every doctrine. Some of the many recent works on Scripture go beyond this, and, for better or for worse, break fresh ground. It is hard to keep up with all of it. This chapter is an attempt to survey and briefly evaluate some of it, while sometimes serving as an introduction to the rest of this volume.

One of my former students, Dr. Andy Naselli, found 337 items of new material on Scripture published between 1980 and 2010. A good deal of it is repetitive or not particularly significant. On the other hand, many more items could be added to the list if we included writings that do not directly address the doctrine of Scripture but that have a powerful (if unstated) bearing on our understanding of what Scripture is. I have not counted the number of new entries since 2010. In other words, this is fair warning that the survey that follows is far from exhaustive; I hope it is broadly representative.
The Diversity of Stances toward the Bible: A Sweeping Survey

Perhaps the place to begin is the insightful recent essay by Robert W. Yarbrough.¹ Yarbrough, who has made himself an expert on the history of (especially German) biblical criticism in the last two and a half centuries, briefly summarizes some of this terrain, and then surveys and interacts with three recent books that express their unease with the current situation. All three scholars sketch parts of the movement that progressively saw the Bible as text to be mastered and deployed to various social and academic ends, making it more and more difficult for the church to see it as the revelation of God, God’s Word to sinners to bring about their redemption.

The first of these books is by Michael Legaspi, a Harvard-trained Hebrew scholar.² In Legaspi’s take on the rise of biblical criticism, the figure on which he fastens is Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791), who with his contemporaries did not so much disown the Bible as co-opt it away from its own theological themes bound up with the gospel, to serve the social and political goals of progressive conservative Enlightenment interests. Biblical scholarship was incorporated into the humanities; the reconstruction of the history of ancient Israel was accomplished so as to be intelligible to and in line with contemporary vision rather than a God-given account to establish the knowledge of God. The newly created history made Moses an obsolete figure with little relevance to church life in the modern world. What might be called the academic Bible was progressively detached from the Bible of the church. The academic Bible became a domain where scholars exercised assorted methods to re-create its distant message; the scriptural Bible calls people to repentance and faith in the crucified and risen Christ. Legaspi finds space for both approaches. He holds that the modern critical approach may have some social and political usefulness, and he insists on the intellectual value of academic criticism, but concludes that such criticism cannot offer an intellectually compelling account of what such work serves. In the end, Legaspi is left with unresolved tension, but he is convinced that the academic Bible has been afforded much more authority in the church than it deserves.

The next two books that Yarbrough surveys were written by German New Testament scholars who, after a lifetime of critical study, in their senior years articulate their reservations over historical-critical methods. Ulrich Wilckens, emeritus at the University of Hamburg, offers a fairly tepid criticism of biblical criticism;³ the criticisms of Klaus Berger, emeritus at the University of Hei-

delberg, are angry and sweeping. Wilckens’s first hundred pages provide an engaging history of historical-critical exegesis, and Wilckens is fair and frank. In his outline of the eight moves that constitute the skeletal outline of the period, Wilckens candidly points out the flawed assumptions that drove so many of the critics (a bias against supernaturalism, the controlling commitment to German Idealist philosophy), and discusses the influence of several key figures, including F. C. Baur, David Friedrich Strauss, Immanuel Kant, F. D. E. Schleiermacher, Ernst Troeltsch, and Rudolf Bultmann. Wilckens argues that contemporary biblical exegesis is stuck in the liberal trajectory, and needs not reformation but to be overcome (Überwendung). After so broad an appeal, however, the rest of the book is rather timid. True, Wilckens insists that Jesus’ resurrection takes place in history, that the atonement saves men and women from their sins, that New Testament ethics are normative, and much more. Nevertheless he leaves in place most of the higher-critical consensus regarding the dating and authorship of the documents, doing nothing to tie eyewitness accounts to the New Testament documents, and when he asks how the historically interpreted New Testament can become Holy Scripture again, his answers are anemic and without force. By contrast, Berger’s volume — no mere tract but a sustained expostulation, for it is twice as long as Wilckens’s book — opens by arguing that two centuries of biblical research have decimated our churches. The universities provide the pastors for most German churches, and these pastors are systematically taught a “hermeneutic of mistrust.” Here Berger interacts forcefully with several of the most egregious examples of historical skepticism advanced by, among others, Rudolf Bultmann and Gerd Theissen. German exegesis is chained by the philosophical anthropology of Martin Heidegger, by psychology, sociology, religious theory, and politics, crushing theology with their entirely godless systems. The result is that scholars who identify as Catholics or Protestants feel entirely free to disavow any allegiance to historic Christian teaching even though the Bible teaches it. As an example, Berger refers to Rudolf Pesch, a Catholic scholar who denies the virgin birth. Today he could add the New Testament scholar Andrew T. Lincoln. Much of the rest of Berger’s book (pp. 43–296) is devoted to nine sections that outline how contemporary historical-critical liberal exegesis contributes to the destruction (Zerstörung) of the New Testament, and how he would respond to them. I list them using the Yarbrough translation:

1. The demolition of Christianity in the classroom and from the pulpit
2. The most important errors of liberal exegesis
3. The preliminary assumptions of the opponents [of Scripture’s truth]
4. Manipulation of the passion texts
5. Ruthless secularization
6. The domestication of the apostle Paul
7. The infancy narratives as a playground for radical biblical criticism (Jesus’
   childhood, like the passion narratives, is full of legends; Mary was not a
   virgin; Bethlehem was not Jesus’ birthplace; there was no fleeing to Egypt by
   the holy family)
8. Rewriting history at will (Jesus was married; no hell but universal redemp-
   tion; Jesus did not institute the Lord’s Supper; Jesus did not pray the Lord’s
   Prayer)
9. How did this exegesis ever get started?

Berger concludes by insisting that historical criticism in Germany has promoted
atheism, splintered churches, and converted no one to Christ. In the near term,
Berger finds little hope; the trajectories of acceptable scholarship are discourag-
ing. He quotes the [now former] Roman Catholic archbishop of Chicago, Francis
Cardinal George, who wrote: “I expect to die in bed, my successor will die in
prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square.”

Whether the bleak outlook envisaged by George and Berger will come to pass
or not, who can say? Two things are clear. First, many people perceive the impor-
tance of the doctrine of Scripture, and many voices insist that the well-being
of the church and faithfulness to the gospel are at stake. Second, there is a very wide
range of opinions as to the way ahead. It may be helpful to indicate a few of these.

Some voices are as destructive of Scripture as they are of the Christian faith.
They operate with the conviction that there is nothing unique or revelatory in
the New Testament documents. In addition to some work by Bart Ehrman to
be mentioned later, one might point to A New New Testament: A Bible for the
21st Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts. Produced by
the same people in the Jesus Seminar who wrote a volume on the gospels where
they decided which verses were authentic (and found very few of them), this
book adds the following to the traditional twenty-seven documents of the NT:
The Prayer of Thanksgiving; The Prayer of the Apostle Paul; The Thunder: Perfect

10. Die Bibelfälscher, 346. In his original address (2012), George adds: “His successor will
pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help rebuild civilization, as the church has
done so often in human history” (http://www.catholicnewworldcom/cnwonline/2012/1021/
The Many Facets of the Current Discussion

Mind; The Gospel of Thomas; The Gospel of Mary; The Gospel of Truth; The Acts of Paul and Thecla; The Letter of Peter to Philip; The Secret Revelation of John; The First, Second, Third, and Fourth Books of the Odes of Solomon. Remarkably, they include nothing from the Apostolic Fathers — Didache, for instance, or The Shepherd of Hermas, or First Clement. All the books chosen either support Gnosticism or promote women or both. It is hard not to detect an agenda when there is no serious discussion about claims to canonicity.

Then there is the book by Thom Stark, The Human Faces of God: What Scripture Reveals When It Gets God Wrong.12 Its thesis is that the biblical text, taken on its own terms, is “evil” and has a “devilish nature” that reveals God to be a “genocidal dictator.”13 The Bible’s usefulness is that it should be read as “condemned texts”:14 we condemn them in our encounter with them so that we can discover the dark side in our own lives.

A somewhat different contribution, but one that steers its slightly snide condescension in a different direction, is the recent essay by Stephen L. Young.15 Young “examines how Evangelical Christian inerrantist scholars theorize their biblical scholarship.” He highlights “their self-representation as true academics” and “the ways they modulate historical methods” to generate the answers they want, deploying “protective strategies” and “privileging” insider claims. These “characteristics of inerrantist religiosity” he then explores from the vantage point of “Practice Theory.”16 I confess I was sorely tempted to draft a response that examined how anti-evangelical scholars display their self-representation as academics, highlighting how instead of engaging with the issues themselves they modulate their sociological analyses and exercise Practice Theory so as to cast up protective strategies that privilege the characteristics of liberal religiosity. Mercifully, however, I decided that the target was too easy.

Nominally less destructive and certainly less constrained by an assumed antisupernaturalism than the scholars connected with the Jesus Seminar are works like those represented by A. E. Harvey, Is Scripture Still Holy? Coming of Age with the New Testament.17 Here the unbelief is more selective. Harvey recognizes that the Bible’s authority is irrefragably tied to its holiness, but argues that we need a new approach to what is “holy,” one that can be accepted by modern readers. If we rethink the Bible as a holy text, decoupling what is “holy” from notions like

inspiration and inerrancy, we may begin to perceive that the Bible offers a weak model of authority constantly in need of being reassessed, in much the same way that democratic societies keep assessing their leaders. In this way the Bible shows itself to be “holy.” Harvey argues that this new model of authority has seven requirements:¹⁸ (1) alignment with modern principles of equality, altruism, and compassion; (2) coherence with good moral character; (3) adherence to notions of historical accuracy appropriate to its time; (4) “a necessary intelligibility and consistency”; (5) “linguistic and imaginative depth”; (6) “its stance on moral questions must continue to be found relevant”; (7) “it reliably relates [its adherents] to their past and points them toward a credible and inspiring future.” For Harvey, this works out in his wrestling with how we can speak of the reliability of the Gospels despite their contradictions. He presents Jesus as a prophet who announced the kingdom but who never claimed that its dawning was imminent. Paul is inconsistent in what he says, and in any case must be read through the lens of the new perspective. Early Christian eschatological expectations he fineses by treating them as if they are “as if” statements. In other words, Harvey is in line with the many critics who find they cannot accept what the Bible says, but who want to preserve some sort of inner meaning after the historically unacceptable has been stripped away. Exactly how this generates a new and authoritative “holiness” in Scripture is less than transparently obvious.

Somewhat similarly, David Crump, Encountering Jesus, Encountering Scripture: Reading the Bible Critically in Faith,¹⁹ observing how many divinity students abandon the faith entirely once they are exposed to mainstream historical criticism, does not find something suspiciously wrong with such criticism, but calls for a Kierkegaardian leap of faith. He wants believers, including these students, to have a personal encounter with Jesus that has no fundamental biblical support, indeed no support except the act of faith itself: “ultimately every individual stands alone.”²⁰ Textually speaking, nothing in the messianic expectation of the Old Testament is genuinely fulfilled in Jesus, but when people have an encounter with Jesus they are justified seeing the good news found in Jesus. Paul is converted through his Damascus Road experience, and only subsequently works out how he will henceforth read the old covenant texts. This, of course, is to confuse the psychological steps by which at least some people (like Paul) come to grips with the good news of Jesus the Messiah, and the manner in which that good news is tied to antecedent Scripture. Once converted, Paul is convinced that before his conversion he misunderstood Scripture. That is why in his evangelistic efforts with Jews he does not say, in effect, “What you really need is your own private

Damascus Road experience; otherwise you can never understand,” but rather, “Let’s read these texts together. Don’t you see? Rightly understood, they really do point us to Jesus and his cross and resurrection.” Even when Paul appeals to the work of the Spirit in conversion (e.g., 1 Cor. 2:10b-16), he does not envisage the Spirit’s work as establishing a text-free revelatory insight, but as enabling sin-blinded sinners to see what is actually there in the text. Failure to understand this is why Crump avows that Bultmann is one of the heroes, precisely because Bultmann’s appeal to faith is so dramatically cut off from substantive content — from everything except the forlorn “dass.”

Another volume that maintains something of a hiatus between historical-critical exegesis and the actual object of faith, but in a considerably more conservative fashion than the book by Crump, is the recent work edited by Christopher R. Seitz and Kent Harold Richards, *The Bible as Christian Scripture: The Work of Brevard S. Childs.* It contains an interesting mix of essays. Some directly interact with the work of Childs, especially his understanding of biblical theology and his uneasy interaction with historical-critical issues; others are meant to be independent pieces that are in line with Childs’s heritage.

Diametrically opposed to the critique of historical criticism offered by Legaspi and Berger, yet equally unhappy with approaches to faith that sidestep or ignore the results of historical-critical method, is the important book by Roy A. Harrisville, *Pandora’s Box Opened: An Examination and Defense of Historical-Critical Method and Its Master Practitioners.* In the extended metaphor Harrisville deploys, the period before Pandora’s box is opened was the period before the dawning of historical criticism, when scholars thought the Bible, because it is the Word of God, should be read in a unique way. As one reviewer puts it, “The relatively recent asking of historical-critical questions has engendered a host of answers pestilential in their effect on many people’s faith in the Bible as God’s Word, or even as containing or becoming the Word of God.” Harrisville candidly depicts the many questions that cannot now be put back into the box. Moreover, they shouldn’t be put back into the box. More worrisome to Harrisville, however, is the fact that these developments have raised vast armadas of additional questions — questions that touch on whether the notion of canon remains useful; on the ways the Old Testament is taken up by the New; on complex issues surrounding accommodation, naturalism, truth, and perspicuity; on the interplay between revelation and reason; on the role of the Spirit; on a complex array of hermeneutical issues, including allegory and typology; on interpretive grids that offer, say, Marxist readings of the gospel, postcolonial readings, and feminist readings; and much, much, more (this is a very partial list). The opening of Pandora’s box, in

other words, has led to vast methodological disarray. One sympathizes with the depth of Harrisville’s dismay. At the end of the day, although he acknowledges that the opening of Pandora’s box must largely be laid at the door of the rise of the historical-critical method, it is futile to try to reverse history. As his subtitle makes clear, Harrisville is launching a defense of historical-critical method over against the open-ended questions frequently raised by scholars primarily concerned with their own agendas; one must hope for help from the box itself, Harrisville insists, from the kind of relatively conservative historical-critical approach exemplified in Harrisville’s teacher, Otto Piper. He does not seriously consider the kind of historical probing that faithfully recognizes the historical particularity of biblical texts, while integrating confessional stances that recognize some of the entailments of treating the Bible as the Word of God. A glance at some of the chapter titles in this present work discloses how a number of issues that Harrisville raises are discussed in the following pages (though of course all of these pages were written before the publication of Harrisville’s work).

The thrust of Harrisville’s thesis is both admirably right and disturbingly weak. It is right in that Harrisville perceives that the biblical revelation is very frequently enmeshed in historical events, so that to ignore the historical narrative and the critical study of that narrative is to turn away from huge swaths of Scripture. This is a salutary reminder to pay attention to the text, to be suspicious of multiplying contemporary agendas, and to remember that God has disclosed himself in history — not least in the incarnation and in the resurrection events, which claim to take place in history. The Harrisville thesis is weak, however, in that the history that many liberal forms of historical criticism reconstruct is so destructive of what the historical narrative of Scripture actually says that the faith that Harrisville wants to encourage cannot have as its object what Scripture says. Scripture’s authority has been leached out. To put this another way, the faith that Harrisville (and Crump, too) enjoins is not grounded in Scripture and its authority but is held out as a desideratum despite the critical reconstructions of Scripture that have undermined its objects.

No less important for our purposes are the volumes and essays that espouse supernatural Christian religion, and that want Scripture itself to be authoritative in some sense, but that disavow traditional formulations of Scripture. They are of many kinds. Some of the writers of these books (though certainly not all) identify themselves with the evangelical heritage from which they spring, a heritage whose doctrine of Scripture, they aver, badly needs correcting. Some of these authors offer thoughtful proposals; others belong to the “angry young man” heritage (irrespective of the ages of these authors!).

A volume by Kenton L. Sparks, God’s Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship,24 and another by Peter E. Enns,

Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament,\(^{25}\) both slightly angry and slightly self-righteous, have been admirably discussed in many reviews and in a fine book edited by James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary, Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture.\(^{26}\) The volume by Sparks raises many questions about how to think of God as the author of Scripture and of Scripture’s human authors, but his discussion lacks the rigorous theological reflection displayed by Henri Blocher in his essay in this volume (about which more will be said below).\(^{27}\) The volume by Enns engages in prolonged parallels between the inspiration of Scripture and the incarnation of Christ, and these and related matters have been discussed at length.\(^{28}\) One of the things that characterize both of these books, and more recent ones that have flowed from the same authors, is that both Sparks and Enns seem to be more certain of what version of inspiration and authority they are against than of what version of inspiration and authority they are actually advocating. It is difficult to delineate in their writings a stable positive construction.

Rather sophisticated is the thesis of Craig D. Allert,\(^{29}\) who argues that for the early Christians “Scripture” was not coterminous with “canon” — that many more books were thought to be Scripture and “inspired” that were not listed as canonical. The notion of canon, Allert insists, was a late development. But Charles Hill, whom we shall mention later, convincingly demonstrates that canonical thought is very early. Yes, Allert is right to say that “inspiration” is occasionally used more loosely than it is by, say, the Reformers, and can refer to more books than the canonical ones. The sermons of Chrysostom, for instance, are said by some to be inspired. But the Fathers claim freedom from error only for the canonical books. In any case, what is meant by “canon” is something to which we shall return.

Although he does not disavow the importance of exegesis, Joel Green\(^{30}\) adopts a kind of reader-response hermeneutic. The “model reader” (shades of Umberto Eco) is one whose theological location lies within the church, the historic and global church. The community reads the Bible as God-revealing Scripture, and is thereby shaped by it. When one looks around at what the church,

27. “God and the Scripture Writers: The Question of Double Authorship” (ch. 17 in this collection).
30. Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).
however, whether local or global, is allegedly “finding” to be the central message of Scripture, one could easily conclude that there is little hope for renewal along such lines: the agendas of the churches soon domesticate hearing the Word of God.\textsuperscript{31} Meaning is being abstracted a little too far from the intentions of the authors (human and divine) as disclosed in the text.

Yet something must be put in place to enable us to reflect helpfully on the relationship between the believing interpreter and the believing community. For a start, one must recognize that there can be disadvantages as well as advantages to communal handling of Scripture. One thinks, for instance, of Jeremiah 8:8: “How can you say, ‘We are the wise, for we have the law of the Lord,’ when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely?” Moreover, those who champion communal interpretation do not obviously check out and submit to community thought in a way that others do not. Does, say, a Joel Green or a Stanley Grenz, who emphasize the importance of community in the interpretive process, actually reflect a community or submit his findings to a community in a way in which, say, Millard Erickson or I. Howard Marshall does not? Most theologians and biblical scholars recognize that all interpretation of Scripture is in some measure shaped by the interpreters, including the interpretive communities from which they spring. Nevertheless to suspend all the weight of meaning from this solitary insight would mean it is impossible for different individuals and communities to study common texts with a view, so far as it is possible, to come to a meeting of minds as to what those texts say.

Consider a telling example: When the Africa Bible Commentary was published a few years ago,\textsuperscript{32} its publishers and promoters kept insisting that at last we could hear the voices of Christians living in another continent reaching their own conclusions as to the meaning of Scripture, thus contributing to worldwide mutual Christian enrichment. In some measure, of course, this is wonderfully true. The Africa Bible Commentary devotes more attention than do Western one-volume Bible commentaries to exorcism, to questions surrounding ancestor worship, and to challenging the “health, wealth, and prosperity gospel.” But what is most striking about the volume is that 90 or 95 percent of its content could be read and understood by, and could have been written by, believing Christians in virtually any part of the world. That should not surprise us: after all, we do share the same Book. Before we become too enamored with a narrowly conceived reader-response hermeneutic, we must ask ourselves in what ways the Africa Bible Commentary is not innovative, and shouldn’t be. An essay by Richard Lints helps us with these questions.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} E.g., Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, and Jonathan A. Draper, eds., The Bible in the Public Square: Reading the Signs of the Times (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

\textsuperscript{32} Ed. Tokunboh Adeyomo (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

\textsuperscript{33} “To Whom Does the Text Belong? Communities of Interpretation and the Interpretation of Communities” (ch. 29 in this collection).
Harder to classify is one of the recent books by Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture.*\(^{34}\) The work has convinced some of us that Smith is a better sociologist than he is a theologian.\(^{35}\) But sometimes the person who is trying to modify a longstanding position on Scripture is not a sociologist but a mature theologian: we might mention A. T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Spiration of Scripture: Challenging Evangelical Perspectives.*\(^{36}\) In the central section of the book, McGowan wants to redefine and thus correct evangelical use of a number of words, including inspiration (he prefers spiration), illumination (he prefers recognition), perspicuity (he prefers comprehension), and inerrancy (he prefers a carefully qualified infallibility) — with more dangers afoot than he seems to realize. Doubtless the most informed and penetrating review is that of John Frame, available online.\(^{37}\)

Or consider the 2005 volume by N. T. Wright, *The Last Word.*\(^{38}\) The subtitle in the American edition is *Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture.* While he ably defends, say, the resurrection of Jesus, and treats the Jesus Seminar with the dismissal it deserves, Wright nevertheless argues that categories like “truth” which demand an antithetical response of either belief or unbelief, are rendered unimportant if we understand the context of Scripture. He cannot possibly be rejecting all antitheses, as he himself constructs an antithesis elsewhere (as we shall see). The context of Scripture, he avers, is the authority of God. He argues that “the phrase ‘authority of Scripture’ can make Christian sense only if it is shorthand for ‘the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* Scripture.’”\(^{39}\) Read very sympathetically, the assertion could almost be applauded. Nevertheless the word “somehow” niggles a little, and “through” is wonderfully ambiguous.\(^{40}\) How does God exercise his authority *through* the Bible? Wright answers that God’s authority is “his sover-
eign power accomplishing the renewal of all creation.” Scripture, then, is the narrative of that authority, of that power. And then Wright’s antithesis: Scripture is not to be interpreted as a “list of rules” or a “compendium of true doctrines,” even though rules and doctrines are found in it. Thus he has managed to relegate “rules” (law? ethics?) and doctrines to at best subsidiary importance — subsidiary, that is, to narrative. Inerrancy he has occasionally dismissed as an American aberration — a conclusion that can be sustained only by the most remarkable ignorance of the history of the doctrine. Instead of adding the importance of the Bible’s storyline to older emphases on law, truth, confessionalism, and the like, it trumps everything, and establishes an antithesis that leaves young pilgrims happy to avoid technical discussions of the nature of Scripture that have occupied the church for two millennia, and feeling quite superior as they do so.

And so we could continue describing this book or that. Yet it may be helpful to pause and offer a generalizing impression. It is fair to say that although there are many fine voices espousing a traditional view of Scripture (more on them in a moment), and although there are many competent scholars who ably defend a more skeptical tradition, one of the most striking tendencies is the rising number of students and scholars who seek to blur as many distinctions as possible. They publicly adhere to a high view of Scripture, but are entirely comfortable with multiple Isaiahs, a very late date for Deuteronomy, and the deuterocanonical status of the Pastoral. They may even begrudgingly adhere to that bugaboo “inerrancy” (especially if the institutions where they teach require it), while arguing that the label is late, unfortunate, unnecessary, and American. One thinks, for example, of several of the writers in the book edited by Christopher M. Hays and Christopher B. Ansberry, *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism*, who espouse a form of historical criticism that is happy to get rid of Adam and Eve and the fall, and very loose on whether the exodus took place, and comfortable with great swaths of pseudonymity and with Jesus making predictions that are erroneous. Not to buy into these conclusions means (we are told) that evangelicals are not using historical criticism honestly.

For some authors, the move away from the traditional understanding of the nature of Scripture is accompanied by, or even generated by, the move to postconservatism.

It is easy to sympathize with Greg Beale’s observations on *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism*.

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41. Frame, “N. T. Wright and the Authority of Scripture,” 29.
44. See Osvaldo Padilla, “Scripture and Authority in Postconservative Evangelical Theologians” (ch. 21 in this collection).
45. Wheaton: Crossway, 2008. See also J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett, eds., *Five Views*
Before leaving this opening survey, it would be a mistake to ignore some of the books and essays that have in recent years attempted to defend a traditional view of Scripture and its authority, sometimes in pretty traditional ways, sometimes by carefully reviewing what Christian thinkers have said in the past, and sometimes by careful interaction with the most recent discussions. More such works will be introduced in the pages that follow, but a smattering must be noticed here.

Some approaches are broadly traditional. One thinks of the book edited by Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder, *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture,* cast at a semi-popular level. Perhaps the volume that has the greatest potential for serving as the heir and successor to “Fundamentalism” and the Word of God, the influential paperback of J. I. Packer fifty years ago, is the compelling and readable little book by Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word.* Similarly cast at the popular level is Sinclair B. Ferguson, *From the Mouth of God: Trusting, Reading and Applying the Bible.*

Another group of books cuts fresher paths. Though they agree in their support of the trustworthiness of Scripture that dominates the church across the centuries, these books, in smaller or larger ways, go about their task with an enviable freshness of purpose or tone. In the realm of systematic theology, pride of place goes to John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God,* part of the series A Theology of Lordship. The essays edited by Paul Helm and Carl Trueman ask, among other things, what it means for God to be trustworthy, and then probe the ways in which the Bible fits into such categories. Many of the essays are characterized by fresh and rigorous thought. Rather unusually, the book provides two stimulating responses (by Colin Gunton and Francis Watson). Similarly, the book edited by David B. Garner provides only seven essays, but all of them address issues or writers that control much of the current discussion. Equally contemporary is the engaging book by Craig L. Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible? An Evangelical Engagement with Contemporary Questions.* Several chapters engage primarily with Bart Ehrman (on whom more, below). Blomberg’s notes are rich and invaluable (though it is more than a little frustrating to find them on *Biblical Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013) for a remarkable spread of opinions among those who would call themselves evangelicals.

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52. Garner, ed., *Did God Really Say?*
collected as endnotes in double columns). I have already briefly mentioned the lengthy volume edited by James Hoffmeier and Dennis Magary.\textsuperscript{54} The volume by John Douglas Morrison, \textit{Has God Said? Scripture, the Word of God, and the Crisis of Theological Authority},\textsuperscript{55} is both stimulating and sometimes frustrating: stimulating, because Morrison paints on a large canvas and interacts with substantial numbers of scholars, and frustrating for the same reason: Morrison’s own proposal, integrating as it does some of Einstein, some of Torrance, and some of Calvin, elicits praise for parts of the creative integration, and frank uncertainty over the credibility of some of the leaps. Shorter but more polished is the book by Timothy Ward.\textsuperscript{56} Reflecting on the frequency with which Scripture connects God and his words, Ward writes:

God has \textit{invested} himself in words, or we could say that God has so \textit{identified} himself with his words that whatever someone does to God’s words (whether it is to obey or disobey) they do directly to God himself. Obvious though this may seem, in the following pages we shall discover that its implications are enormous. When they are overlooked, it is always detrimental to our understanding of Scripture. To ask why or how this can be, that words and persons can be so intimately related, is to enter deep theological and philosophical waters. . . .\textsuperscript{57}

Another creative thinker is Vern S. Poythress, who has contributed two important books on this subject: \textit{Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible},\textsuperscript{58} and \textit{Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization}.\textsuperscript{59} Poythress invites us, courteously but firmly, to think theologically and worldviewishly, as well as historically, when we give ourselves to try to articulate the nature of Scripture. Two further volumes sustain this commitment to worldviewish thinking. Written from a confessional Lutheran perspective, one volume attempts to anchor the authority of Scripture in the transforming gospel of Christ.\textsuperscript{60} Another seeks to repristinate the influence of the six-volume work of Carl F. H. Henry.\textsuperscript{61} But perhaps the most stimulating and

\textsuperscript{54} Hoffmeier and Magary, eds., \textit{Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith?}
\textsuperscript{55} Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006.
\textsuperscript{56} Timothy Ward, \textit{Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God} (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).
\textsuperscript{57} Ward, \textit{Words of Life}, 27.
\textsuperscript{58} Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.
\textsuperscript{59} Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.
\textsuperscript{60} Peter H. Nafzger, \textit{"These Are Written": Toward a Cruciform Theology of Scripture} (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013).
\textsuperscript{61} Gregory Alan Thornbury, \textit{Recovering Classic Evangelicalism: Applying the Wisdom and Vision of Carl F. H. Henry} (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013) — referring, of course, to Henry’s \textit{God, ...}
creative of the recent books on Scripture is a volume by Andrew G. Shead, *A Mouth Full of Fire: The Word of God in the words of Jeremiah.* By a careful and cogent reading of one biblical book (a form of biblical theology), combined with a judicious use of speech-act theory, Shead contributes rigorous theological construction that is exegetically based in one biblical book. Perhaps this is the place to mention the more popular work of Tim Meadowcroft, *The Message of the Word of God.* Instead of working out the nature of Scripture in some sort of systematic fashion, Meadowcroft expounds twenty passages that unfold important things about the Word of God — e.g., the glory of God made known (Psalm 19), the Word made flesh (John 1:1-14), and so forth.

Several books focus on what former generations of thinkers have said about Scripture. This is important because, as the next section of this paper observes, various revisionist readings of the history of the doctrine of Scripture have sought to marginalize those with a high view of Scripture by insisting that their views are late and therefore erroneous. The massive volume edited by Peter A. Lillback and Richard B. Gaffin Jr., pulls together into one place the *Essential Writings on the Doctrine of Scripture from the Reformation to Today* (as the subtitle puts it). The volume includes essays and excerpts from Luther, Calvin, Monod, Owen, Turretin, Gaussen, Edwards, Spurgeon, Hengstenberg, Machen, and more — including some of the debates of the past half-century. Conceptually similar but much more modest is the book by Stephen J. Nichols and Eric T. Brandt. More historically focused yet is Gaffin’s exposition of the thought of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck.

Finally, a little hunting turns up many essays that are either wise and admirable summaries of important aspects of what the Bible is (e.g., Carl Trueman on “The Sufficiency of Scripture”67) or provocative pieces that stimulate fresh thought (e.g., Roland Deines, “Did Matthew Know He was Writing Scripture?”68).

We turn, then, from this survey of the diversity of recent books and essays on the Bible and its authority, and focus attention on a handful of storm centers.

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63. BST; Nottingham: Apollos; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 2011.
Historical Revisionism That Seeks to Become the New Orthodoxy

In the last half-century, many periods in the history of the church have been churned over afresh to demonstrate either that (a) historical criticism goes back a lot farther than many people think, or, more commonly, that (b) orthodoxy, and especially an orthodox view of Scripture, are rather late developments, so they can, and perhaps should, be held rather lightly. A fine example of the former view — that biblical criticism goes back a lot farther than many people think — is found in John Barton’s *The Nature of Biblical Criticism.* In his fifth chapter, Barton argues that biblical criticism finds its roots not in the Enlightenment, but earlier, in the Reformation, better in the Renaissance, and even in the ancient premodern world. In part, he is able to sustain his thesis by denying that the historical-critical method is central to biblical criticism, opting instead for semantics and textual understanding. Failing to recognize how central the notion of revelation was to the patristic fathers and the Reformers alike, Barton does not see that their embrace of the authority of Scripture was grounded in their perception of the truthfulness of that revelation. Sometimes Barton pitches his argument as an either/or: for example, *either* the Enlightenment *or* the Renaissance. But few of the thinkers of the Renaissance, indeed few in the early Enlightenment, and none of the Reformers, entertained the kind of skepticism needed for the rise of modern biblical criticism. Such criticism becomes strong as the Enlightenment progresses, along the way adopting Troeltschian assumptions.

But we shall leave Barton to one side, and focus on the much more prevalent result of contemporary research into the history of the church, viz., that orthodoxy, and especially an orthodox view of Scripture, is a rather late development, so it can, and perhaps should, be held rather loosely.

(1) At least four interlocking arguments, drawn from a revisionist history of the early church, are commonly advanced to undermine confidence in the Christian Scriptures.

(a) Bart Ehrman has been at the forefront of those who argue that during the first few centuries of the Christian era the orthodox themselves were primarily responsible for the corruption of their own Scriptures. The most telling response lies in the series of essays in the book edited by Daniel B.  

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Wallace. 71 Most recently, after assuming that the New Testament books commonly thought to be deuterocanonical are in fact pseudonymous, Ehrman strenuously argues that this was a self-conscious deceit and thus a moral failure. 72 Ehrman labels about half the canonical New Testament books “counterfeit” (viz. Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, the Pastorals, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, Jude, 1 John, Acts, and Hebrews). The latter two, Acts and Hebrews, he calls “non-pseudepigraphic forgeries” because Acts, though anonymous, incorporates “we” sections in the book to establish verisimilitude designed, falsely, to validate the authority of the record, while Hebrews, also anonymous, deploys a closing paragraph that was taken to imply, quite wrongly, Pauline authorship. At no point in this 628-page book does Ehrman engage critics who deny that these books are forgeries; indeed, one supportive reviewer, J. K. Elliott, says that Ehrman “rightly refuses to engage with such ostriches.” 73 Ehrman’s sole concern is to insist that pseudepigraphy was meant to deceive, and therefore could not be innocuous and benign. For myself, I should say that I agree with that conclusion, but disagree that pseudonymity is found in the NT. 74

(b) A vociferous handful of scholars insists that originally Christianity was diverse and tolerant, and that other “scriptures,” other gospels and “acts” and apocalypses, were once considered no less authoritative than the books that make up our New Testament. It was the narrow intolerance and bigotry of the “orthodox” who, as they grew stronger, shut down this delightful diversity. 75 It is well worth reading the robust response of Craig Evans 76 and the carefully understated volume by C. E. Hill. 77 Transparently this reconstruction of a very broad or open early Christianity is tied to the old thesis of Walter Bauer, 78 a thesis that has been hit on the head repeatedly, like the beast that receives a “fatal wound” in Revela-

78. Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971 [German orig. 1934]).
tion 13 and nevertheless keeps coming back, resurfacing again and again.\textsuperscript{79} The essay by Simon Gathercole in this collection is extraordinarily helpful.\textsuperscript{80}

(c) Many have argued that the early fathers were sloppy with their texts and sloppier with their exegesis, demonstrating complete freedom from any notion that might be dubbed “inerrancy.” The riposte of James Kugel, recently retired from Harvard, is much more in line with reality. He demonstrates that all ancient readers of Scripture operated with four assumptions. The fourth is that the Bible is a divinely given book in which God speaks directly through its pages. Hence (third assumption) the Bible has no mistakes or contradictions, so that when apparent difficulties are uncovered, they must be explained away by clever exegesis; and, indeed, the Bible’s meanings must be dug out by various interpretive strategies (second assumption).\textsuperscript{81} This is not to say that the church fathers got everything right; it is to say that they operated with a very high view of Scripture, with what would today be called an inerrantist view of Scripture.\textsuperscript{82}

(d) More broadly, an array of writers has argued that patristic and gnostic disputes over interpretation, and the lack of systematic reflection on the doctrine of Scripture, not to mention the delay in defining the New Testament canon, demonstrate that a high view of Scripture is a late Protestant preoccupation. Here the essay by C. E. Hill brings needed clarity. By carefully working through the patristic period he demonstrates “the foundational role which Scripture played in Christian intellectual and spiritual life, even from the earliest times and even in the midst of conflict.”\textsuperscript{83} The Fathers thought of Scripture “as divine, as God’s self-attesting word, and as consistent, harmonious, or inerrant.”\textsuperscript{84} Along the way he explores the rise of the New Testament canon, and the relations between Scripture and the \emph{analogia fidei}. In the words of Augustine, “Let us treat scripture like scripture: like God speaking.”\textsuperscript{85}

(2) One of the most confusing areas of historical debate concerns the doctrine of accommodation. The language of accommodation is used in every extended period of the church’s life. This can scarcely be surprising, for every generation must wrestle with what it means to confess that the God who inhabits eternity

\textsuperscript{80} “\textit{E pluribus unum?} Apostolic Unity and Early Christian Literature.”
\textsuperscript{81} James L. Kugel, \emph{How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now} (New York: Free Press, 2007).
\textsuperscript{82} See Michael Graves, \emph{The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture: What the Early Church Can Teach Us} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).
\textsuperscript{83} “‘The Truth above All Demonstration’: Scripture in the Patristic Period to Augustine” (ch. 2 in this collection).
\textsuperscript{84} “‘The Truth above All Demonstration’, 44, below.
\textsuperscript{85} Sermon 162C.15.
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and who has no vocal cords speaks through the words of human beings who inhabit time, speak in various languages, and communicate with sounds and letters. The strength of Glenn S. Sunshine’s essay is that it carefully analyzes the shape of accommodation in the patristic period, the medieval scholastic period, the Reformation, and the later rationalist period, and shows that only in the latter period did accommodation extend to the notion of God accommodating himself to allow errors, theological mistakes, and the like. To read this second and radically different understanding of accommodation back into the understanding of accommodation before the rationalist period is to perpetuate a major historical blunder. It is to claim that the contemporary notion of accommodation, one that anachronistically insists that errors and moral failures are a necessary component of Scripture owing to the necessity of divine accommodation to human limitations and failures, has always been the church’s position, when transparently earlier understanding of accommodation allowed no such lapses. Moreover, the modern view of accommodation presupposes that error is essential to being human. It is difficult to adopt that assumption when one contemplates the incarnation.

(3) The need to understand a little better the relation between natural philosophy (what we would today call “science”) and Scripture in the seventeenth century becomes obvious when we recall how often the church is set up as ignorant, authoritarian, and anti-science. Historians of science are aware that the situation was a little more complicated than the popular press makes it out to be. By working through the contributions of Kepler, Copernicus, and Galileo, and especially the responses to them by many informed Christians, including John Ray of Trinity College, Cambridge, Rodney Stiling demonstrates how seriously Christians at the time wrestled with the phenomenological language used in Scripture.

(4) Several other periods of church history attract the attention of those who are convinced that a truly high view of Scripture is a very late development. Perhaps the Reformers limited the authority of Scripture to matters of “faith and practice,” excluding other matters; perhaps Jakob Spener and the German Pietists had nothing vested in an infallible Scripture; perhaps Wesley’s quadrilateral demonstrates that for Wesleyans Scripture does not have quite the same claim to truth that it enjoys among the followers of Calvin. In each case, excellent studies have worked through the primary material to recognize how tendentious such arguments are.

(5) Bebbington argues that British evangelicals held uninformed views on bib-

86. “Accommodation Historically Considered” (ch. 8 in this collection).
88. “Natural Philosophy and Biblical Authority in the Seventeenth Century” (ch. 4 in this collection).
89. See chs. 3, 5, and 6 of this collection: respectively, Robert Kolb, “The Bible in the Reformation and Protestant Orthodoxy”; John D. Woodbridge, “German Pietism and Scriptural...
But we have already glimpsed how inerrancy has been a primary belief of Christians since the early church. It was not constructed a mere 250 years ago. More pointedly, in his hugely influential work on Scripture (1841), Gaussen himself leans on French authorities to defend his views on biblical infallibility. Gaussen insists that the biblical books “contain no errors; all their writings are inspired of God,” the Spirit himself guiding the human writers “even in the employment of the words they were to use, and to preserve them from all error, as well as from every omission.” Kenneth J. Stewart’s published dissertation on the Swiss Réveil draws similar conclusions about Gaussen. A check on the men who delivered the prestigious Bampton Lectures at the University of Oxford during this period shows them to be staunch inerrantists. More telling yet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, intending to dismantle what he perceived to be the dominant views on the doctrine of Scripture in his day, wrote a revealing book with the title *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, published posthumously in 1841. Setting forth the need for his work, Coleridge asserts that he has listened to clergy from every denomination, Calvinist and Arminian, Quaker and Methodist and Established Church, and everywhere “their principal arguments were grounded on the position, that the Bible throughout was dictated by Omniscience, and therefore in all its parts infallibly true and obligatory, and that the men, whose names are prefixed to the several books or chapters, were in fact but as different pens in the hand of one and the same Writer, and the words the words of God himself.” And so, Coleridge concludes, “What could I say to this? — I could neither deny the fact, nor evade the conclusion, — namely, that such is at present the popular belief.” Small wonder, then, this book by Coleridge stirred up a hornet’s nest of

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controversy on both sides of the Atlantic. What is certainly clear is that Bebbington is wrong to say that British views on Scripture were inchoate until the rise of the influence of Haldane and Gaussen. It is past time that scholars stopped trying to knock out the word “inerrancy” on the ground that it is a late addition to the discussion. Doubtless it would be unprofitable to speculate why this “narrative” is constantly shored up when the hard evidence is so consistently against it.

(6) A number of scholars have tried to position Charles Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield of Old Princeton as the innovators in the field — innovators so much influenced by Thomas Reid and Scottish Common Sense Realism that they introduced notions like inerrancy that had not been part of the church’s heritage before their time. Doubtless the most influential book defending that thesis was written by Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim.98 They relied overly much on the work of Ernest Sandeen, who argued for a trajectory toward greater confidence in inerrancy, passing from Archibald Alexander through Charles Hodge to Benjamin Warfield.99 It appears that the formidable historian George Marsden supports the view that Hodge and Warfield were so influenced by Thomas Reid and his Scottish Common Sense Realism that their high view of Scripture became paradigm-dependent on Common Sense — such that not only were they innovating, but now that Common Sense commands little respect among those concerned with epistemology, the Old Princeton stance on Scripture is similarly weakened.100 Today, however, most recognize that the thesis of Sandeen has been dismantled.101 Woodbridge has demonstrated that Common Sense influenced Warfield’s opponents as much as Warfield; that although both Hodge and Warfield leaned on Common Sense, neither was uncritical of the movement and carefully distanced themselves from it, not least when discussing the nature of Scripture; that many writers in the nineteenth century other than Hodge and Warfield shared their view; and that in any case their high view of Scripture is remarkably paradigm-independent across the history of the church, not unlike some other major doctrines (e.g., the deity of Christ, and Jesus’ resurrection from the dead).102 Now the careful essay by Bradley N. Seeman, who has worked through the Princeton archives, brings additional clarity.103

102. Woodbridge, Biblical Authority.
103. “The ‘Old Princetonians’ on Biblical Authority” (ch. 7 in this collection).
(7) To bring history a little closer to our own time, scholars continue to work through the implications of Vatican II for Roman Catholic understanding of Scripture. Three decades after Vatican II, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* asserts, in line with pre–Vatican II stances, that the biblical documents teach truth for salvation “firmly, faithfully, and without error.”104 This *Catechism* is in fact citing Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum* 11, which more fully reads: “...we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures” (italics added).105 The italicized words have generated a certain amount of discussion among Catholic authorities. The inerrantists focus on the words “firmly, faithfully, and without error”; the non-inerrantists focus on “for the sake of our salvation,” and insist *Dei Verbum* allows for errors of history and perhaps other domains, but affirms inerrancy solely in matters pertaining to salvation. The most recent treatment of Scripture by the Pontifical Biblical Commission106 though it is in many respects a remarkably conservative document, apparently betrays this ongoing intramural debate (though it does not deploy terms like inerrancy and non-inerrancy) when it approaches what presents itself as history in the Old Testament and decides it is not: e.g., “we must understand the entire event of the conquest as a sort of symbol, analogous to what we read in certain gospel parables of judgment.”107 This is a kind of Sachkritik: we find it difficult to make sense of the ostensible history, so declare it to be a different genre and thereby domesticate it. It is difficult to imagine pre–Vatican II documents making the same move.108 Anthony N. S. Lane argues convincingly that Vatican II moved the Roman Catholic Church from a largely formal acknowledgment of the human authorship of Scripture to a stance that makes human authorship more significant. That shift has brought Catholic scholars increasingly into line with mainline Protestant liberal scholarship. Such a shift would surely have doctrinal implications for Protestants, but apparently has fewer for Catholicism, since for Catholics the ultimate teaching authority is not Scripture but the teaching of the church.109

On the Protestant side, there has been a renewed interest in the view of Scripture found in the voluminous writings of Karl Barth. Probably no one has been so ardent and so articulate a defender of Barth’s view of Scripture as John

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108. E.g., the Council of Trent, Leo XIII’s encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, and Pius XII’s encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritus*.
109. Anthony N. S. Lane, “Roman Catholic Views of Biblical Authority from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present” (ch. 10 in this collection).
Webster, who in turn has influenced many of his own students in a similar direction. One can easily detect the diversity of reactions to Barth by reading the book edited by George Hunsinger, *Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture*. In his assessment of Barth, David Gibson holds that Barth’s impassioned invitation to read and reread the Bible, precisely in his work as a dogmatician, is sometimes undermined by his exegetical handling of text — not least those texts that formulate his understanding of the nature of Scripture.

The “Inerrancy” Dragon

In discussions about the nature of Holy Scripture, no word evokes such strong responses as the word “inerrancy,” among both inerrancy-affirmers and inerrancy-deniers. On the one hand, it is the shibboleth that, provided you affirm it, provides you with the keys to the (evangelical) kingdom. On the other hand, authors like Peter Enns repeatedly blog about people they know who were brought up with inerrancy but who have now “moved on,” still smarting under various “burns.” J. R. Daniel Kirk seems to think that an inerrantist must hold to a young earth, such that if you tell a high schooler “inerrancy or bust” this is an invitation to bust. Citing Lesslie Newbigin, Enns says that inerrancy is sub-Christian, and is more Muslim in its theology than Christian.

Clearly the important question is the meaning of the word “inerrancy.” If it is associated with certain interpretive schemes that critics dislike, then the critics may disavow the word because they dislike the interpretive schemes. One ought to begin, then, with a more sophisticated definition of “inerrancy.” To claim that the Bible is inerrant is to focus on the Bible’s truthfulness wherever it is making a truth claim. The word is not to be confused with degrees of precision or with hermeneutical stipulation; it happily acknowledges that there are complex issues of literary genre with which to wrestle, and that not every sentence is a falsifiable proposition. This and much more have been treated in an essay by Paul Feinberg that deserves reprinting and wide circulation. A more recent

essay by Paul Helm extends the discussion to think through how inerrancy is tied to indexicality, assertion, speech-act theory, and kinds of error.116 Another essay by Peter J. Williams homes in on the nuanced and exegetically grounded arguments for inerrancy that are regularly misinterpreted because some of the key terms have come to mean different things in different camps, causing remarkable confusion.117

If someone were to ask what is the use of a word that requires so much careful definition and discussion, we might respond by asking what significant word in the theological arena is not subject to careful definition and discussion. Justification? God? Truth?

The Authority of Jesus, the Biblical Writings, and the Canon

The issues, like certain kinds of demons, are legion. Not a few are admirably discussed in books already mentioned.118 Here we restrict ourselves to a handful of issues.

(1) Transparently there is a voluminous literature on the historical Jesus. Little of that literature is written with questions about the nature of Scripture in mind. It would take a book merely to usefully categorize that discussion over the last thirty years and more. Nevertheless it is worth reflecting on one of the constantly slippery elements in contemporary discussion, viz. what is meant by “historicity” or “historical event.” Many a New Testament scholar, including some who designate themselves evangelical, hold that an event is “historical” only if it meets the criteria of the historians’ guild for historical events — and such criteria are invariably universal and naturalistic. Under such a definition, the transfiguration of Jesus, say, or his resurrection, is not “historical,” but it may still be a “real” event, one that is accessible only to faith. Yet this is an intellectualist’s playground. Try preaching that the resurrection of Jesus is not historical yet nonetheless real. The overwhelming majority of our hearers will either misunderstand what is being said, or confess they do not understand the claim. If, by contrast, we allow an event to be called “historical” if it takes place in space-time history, even if it does not fall within the limitations of philosophical naturalism and appeals to

Zondervan, 1979), 367-404. It is not unfair to observe that critics such as Peter Enns and Carlos Bovell tend to be much more precise on what they do not like about traditional formulations of the doctrine of Scripture, than exactly what they would put in its place. In addition to the literature already cited, see Bovell, Rehabilitating Inerrancy in a Culture of Fear (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

117. Peter J. Williams, “Ehrman’s Equivocation and the Inerrancy of the Original Text” (ch. 13 in this collection).
118. E.g., Hoffmeier and Magary, eds., Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith?
universal criteria, then clearly the New Testament writers are convinced that both the transfiguration and the resurrection are indeed “historical” events.

(2) Not only are there wildly different scholarly assessments of the historical value of the Old Testament documents — all the way from “minimalist” schools to highly maximalist readings of almost all genres — but where different documents cover the same period (e.g., 1 and 2 Chronicles over against Samuel and Kings) some posit not complementary or progressive understandings but mutually contradictory communities. V. Philips Long has devoted a lengthy essay to bringing clarity to the issues.\textsuperscript{119}

Some authors have attempted to address the way the Bible speaks the truth by thinking about what might be called the “genre” of the Bible writ large. In a stimulating essay Luke Timothy Johnson asserts that his premise is that, “like the character in the song who is ‘looking for love in all the wrong places,’ readers of the Bible . . . have been looking for truth in all the wrong places.”\textsuperscript{120} In particular, the American culture wars have insisted that the truth of the Bible lies in the past, in what the Bible says to have taken place in history, or in its future, as various Christian groups read the future off the face of Revelation. Unfortunately for both claims, Johnson asserts, historical criticism has destroyed confidence in the Bible’s ostensible “history,” and a learned grasp of apocalyptic literature makes future-casting from the Book of Revelation a dubious exercise. Johnson proposes that the truth of the Bible “works in and through literary imagination.”\textsuperscript{121} He asks, “How, then, is the Bible true? I believe that this question grows richer and more pertinent to our lives when we begin to imagine the world Scripture itself imagines, through its literary art; when we ask what is the shape of that world and its rules and how we might embody it. . . .”\textsuperscript{122}

But one must ask some questions. (a) Assuming it has been given by God, does the Bible intend primarily to incite the human imagination? Even at the human level, avoiding appealing to God as the Bible’s ultimate author: Do the human biblical writers primarily intend to spark human beings to exercise their imaginations? Or would it be more accurate to say that they have a variety of goals, including provoking imagination, but also providing moral exhortation, disclosing the nature of God, making historical claims, and much more? What precisely sanctions such a high valuation of imagination set over against other ways of conveying truth? Certainly one might argue that heavily symbol-laden literature, such as apocalyptic, is more vested in sparking the imagination than,
say, genealogical lists. But even apocalyptic demonstrably has other intentions built into the genre. In other words, Johnson is short-circuiting serious discussion of the complex functions of diverse literary genres. Granted that, say, the book of Proverbs is not primarily interested in making historical claims, what forms of Scripture are interested in making historical claims? How does one decide? Johnson’s essay begins to appear like a whimsical piece of reductionism. (b) More importantly, the Bible occasionally underscores the importance of what has taken place in history, observed by attested witnesses. Doubtless the prime example is the resurrection of Jesus. The apostle insists that if one avers it has happened (sc. in history), when in fact it has not happened (sc. in history), then we remain in our sins, the apostles are liars, our faith is futile, and we are of all people most to be pitied. In other words, there are crucial contexts when one of the factors that validates faith is the truthfulness of faith’s object, viz. the claim regarding what has happened in history. Must we not similarly say something similar about the historical nature of the incarnation? Moreover, there are several theologically rich, imagination-empowering arguments in the Bible that depend absolutely on the validity of a certain historical sequence (e.g., Galatians 3; Heb. 4:1-13 [if the Pentateuch is not telling the truth about entering into the “rest” of the promised land after the failure in the time of Moses but before the writing of Psalm 95, then the argument in Hebrews 4 makes no sense]; 7:1-25). (c) The treatment of “truth” in Johnson’s essay is thoroughly unclear. What is the relationship between truthful text and authoritative text? Both “authority” and “truth” call forth countless books and essays. By focusing on their relationship, we narrow the topic down to a focus on realism and anti-realism, and on the ease with which difficult matters of consistency and coherence (not necessarily the same thing) are readily sacrificed in the service of an unprincipled infatuation with eclecticism. The essay by Michael Rea in this collection clarifies many of the issues. (d) Johnson’s argument is profoundly intellectualist; try preaching it in the real world. More importantly, we are not saved by imagination-stirring ideas about the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God, but by the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God. What saves us is not a set of ideas that fire the imagination, and call us to share a similarly imagined world, but the extra-textual realities to which the text points. The Bible casts up many ideas, of course, but not because ideas themselves reconcile us to God, but because the ideas are about Jesus Christ, and he reconciles us to God. Once we get such matters clear in our minds, then of course we can say all sorts of useful things about the power of the imagination, the use of words and images to stir and shape us, and so forth: that is, in part, what good preaching does. But if one says such things at the expense of the extra-textual referentiality, it’s a bit like building a skyscraper after destroying the foundation. Only intellectuals can accommodate such nonsense. If you are a Buddhist, of course, and someone

123. “Authority and Truth” (ch. 27 in this collection).
“proves” that Gautama the Buddha never lived, it would not devastate your Buddhism: Buddhism depends for its believability very little on historical claims. But that cannot be said of Christianity. Prove that Jesus never lived, never died, and never rose from the dead, or declare that historical details are unimportant provided our imaginations are fired up, and you have utterly destroyed Christianity.

The same sort of miss-step appears in the literature in several different guises. For example, in a very recent book Peter Enns offers a slightly different antithesis to the one adopted by Luke Timothy Johnson. Enns insists that the Bible is not a cookbook but an ancient spiritual journey, full of mystery. Andrew Wilson has done an admirable job indicating where Enns makes some useful points, and where his analysis is hopelessly lacking. One of the most plastic of words regularly deployed in discussion of biblical (especially Old Testament) texts is “myth.” Bruce K. Waltke has brought some order to the discussion.

(3) For many years John Wenham’s little book *Christ and the Bible* has been a staple for young (and some not so young) Christians, who need to learn what Jesus thought of antecedent Scripture. Wenham made a strong and effective case for Jesus being convinced that what we call the Old Testament is in truth the Word of God, authoritative, and without error. An essay by Craig L. Blomberg updates Wenham’s thought by wrestling with the ways in which Jesus, while upholding the God-givenness of the Old Testament, maintains his own authority to interpret it, frequently deploying a typological reading of it that we must understand and learn if we are to read Old Testament texts in line with him.

(4) Despite the plethora of books and essays advocating or presupposing an extraordinarily skeptical approach to the canonical Gospels, several scholars stand out for the work they have done on the historical credibility of the Gospels. This does not mean they necessarily align with traditional understandings of the nature of Scripture, but their work is extraordinarily helpful for many readers. One thinks, for instance, of many of the historical essays authored by Roland Deines, the volume on eyewitnesses by Richard Bauckham, and some of...

128. “Reflections on Jesus’ View of the Old Testament” (ch. 22 in this collection).
129. See, for example, his *Acts of God in History: Studies Towards Recovering a Theological Historiography*, WUNT 317, ed. Christoph Ochs and Peter Watts (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).
the voluminous writings of N. T. Wright, one or two of them simultaneously percipient and wonderfully funny.\footnote{In particular, see his “Taking the Text with Her Pleasure: A Post-Post-Modernist Response to J. Dominic Crossan, The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant (T. & T. Clark, HarperSanFrancisco 1991) (With apologies to A. A. Milne, St Paul and James Joyce),” \textit{Theol} 96 (1993): 303-10.}


The strongest form of that sort of argument is of course utterly incompatible with any notion of a high view of Scripture. A less violent but slightly mystical version might say that God himself intended multiple meanings in those Old Testament texts that the human authors did not see or intend. More conservative scholars will try, in one fashion or another, to show that the New Testament use of the Old Testament rests on a handful of hermeneutical axioms and carefully formed typologies that most early Christians shared. Some have argued, for instance, that Paul’s mode of citation probably depends on his complex educational background, both Jewish and Greco-Roman.\footnote{E.g., Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, “Paul’s Bible, His Education and His Access to the Scriptures of Israel,” \textit{JGRChJ} 5 (2008): 9-41.} In any case, the last three decades have witnessed an amazing jump in the number and quality of studies on the New Testament use of the Old Testament. Though few intend to address directly the question of the nature of Scripture, such topics sometimes stand behind the work: see, for example, the large volume that Greg Beale and I edited.\footnote{\textit{Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).} But it is an essay by Doug Moo and Andy Naselli that thoughtfully explores these issues within the context of our understanding of what Scripture is.\footnote{“The Problem of the New Testament’s Use of the Old Testament” (ch. 23 in this collection).}

(6) Recent decades have spawned a complicated literature regarding the very notion of canon.\footnote{See especially Eve-Marie Becker and Stefan Scholz, eds., \textit{Kanon in Konstruktion und Dekonstruktion: Kanonisierungsprozesse religiöser Texte von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart: Ein Handbuch} (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012) — though the coverage is pretty much restricted to German literature.} This literature touches both Testaments. So far as the Old Testament is concerned, it pertains to different Hebrew text types, their relation to the so-called LXX, the very meaning of “Hebrew canon,” and, even when the meaning is agreed, the date by which “canonical” notions come into play. At issue, too, are disputed passages in the literature of Second Temple Juda-
ism with regard to the twenty-two-book canon. In the past, many of us have consulted Roger Beckwith.\textsuperscript{137} The detailed work of Chapman, influenced not least by Brevard Childs, focuses on the formation of the Old Testament canon: we must read the inspired documents not only as “Scripture” but as books that preserve and generate the interpretive framework that shapes further texts. “In other words, because the goal of the canonical process was to transmit a framework for interpretation (or ‘grammar’) along with the sacred writings themselves the received form of the text contains literary features which act as hermeneutical guides for present-day readers.”\textsuperscript{138} The work of Seitz is not entirely dissimilar, though the focus of his attention lies rather heavily on the way this canonical process must not be short-changed by allowing Paul, say, or some other New Testament figure to constrain the exegesis of the Old Testament texts.\textsuperscript{139} Now we have a splendid essay by Stephen G. Dempster giving these questions some fresh thought.\textsuperscript{140}

Much discussion regarding the New Testament canon has revolved around the question as to when books so came together in the mind of believers that they constituted a widely recognized canon. In other words, the focus has commonly been on the historical evidence, primarily from the patristic period. What has been lacking is a theology of the canon. This lacuna has now been nicely filled by two books written by Michael Kruger\textsuperscript{141} and a long essay by Graham A. Cole.\textsuperscript{142} Both Kruger and Cole argue persuasively that there are compelling intrinsic reasons why, owing to the communicative act of the God who speaks, the notion of canon was early and formative. Kruger outlines and responds to the five planks commonly advanced in support of the very common opposite view, viz., that the New Testament notion of canon arose haphazardly and late.\textsuperscript{143} Michael Thate


\textsuperscript{140}. “The Old Testament Canon, Josephus, and Cognitive Environment” (ch. 11 in this collection).


\textsuperscript{142}. “Why a Book? Why This Book? Why the Particular Order within This Book? Some Theological Reflections on the Canon” (ch. 15 in this collection).

\textsuperscript{143}. Certainly Kruger has been strenuously challenged (see especially John C. Poirier, “An Ontological Definition of ‘Canon’?” BBR 24 [2014]: 457-66), but one suspects that the different approaches are at least partly generated by fundamentally different readings of the fathers.
sent me the lovely quote from Tom Shippey: “[M]yths are still in fashion, and canons are not.”

**Some Epistemological, Philosophical, and Theological Issues**

Under this heading I include several topics on which there has arisen extensive literature.

(1) One of the striking lessons to learn from the fact that a high view of the authority of Scripture — indeed, a view that embraces inerrancy — has prevailed in the Christian church across the centuries, is that this view of Scripture, like many central Christian doctrines, keeps showing up in many lands, in many cultures, in many epistemological structures, even in many theological systems. If it could be shown that, say, inerrancy is utterly dependent on one particular epistemological structure — say, Cartesian foundationalism — then with the abandonment of that epistemological structure, inerrancy would necessarily fall. Indeed, this is the argument of Carlos Bovell, who for his approach to Scripture prefers a Husserlian emphasis on origins. But apart from incidental weaknesses to his argument (e.g., he provides very little evidence that the Westminster divines were in any way influenced by Descartes), the widespread acceptance of the doctrine across the centuries and across diverse structures of thought argues against monocausational analyses. In other words (as we saw earlier with respect to Scottish Common Sense Realism), high views of Scripture are surprisingly paradigm-independent — or, better put, they have a habit of surfacing in many philosophical and theological contexts.

That is why, among those who defend a traditional view of Scripture, substantial differences in their respective understandings of epistemology remain — just as there are, of course, substantial differences in epistemology among those who critique those with a high view of Scripture. In an essay in this collection, James Beilby surveys some of the epistemological issues irrefragably bound up with discussion of such issues as inspiration, revelation, and epistemology. He himself strongly commends a relational-dynamic view of inspiration, but he would be among the first to recognize that other models exist. While Bovell, just discussed, condemns inerrancy for its (ostensible) dependence on Cartesian foundationalism, R. Scott Smith, in this collection, is suspicious of non-foundational episte-


147. “Contemporary Religious Epistemology: Some Key Aspects” (ch. 25 in this collection).
mologies, 148 while Randall Hauser, writing from a non-inerrancy perspective, attacks attempts to defend inerrancy from any non-foundationalist perspective. 149 An increasingly widespread perception is that a modest, chastened foundationalism and a modest, chastened realism are not far from reaching out and touching similarly chastened non-foundational epistemologies. Cultural-linguistic models of doing theology, along with cognitive-propositionalist models and experiential-expressivist models, are all in danger, if any one of them is given unfettered sway, of subordinating and domesticating Scripture. Tied to these issues is the way in which one goes about constructing theology and making sense of doctrinal development. All sides of orthodox Christianity will acknowledge that in some ways the Trinitarian formulations of the third and fourth centuries go “beyond what is written,” 150 yet articulate the nature of God in responsible and faithful ways that are, if not mandated by Scripture, made virtually necessary by Scripture. Kevin J. Vanhoozer helps us think through what bearing such discussions have on the nature of biblical authority. 151

(2) What is the relationship between God and his Word — between the authority of God and the authority of his Word? This topic has many facets. For some authors, the issue revolves around the question of whether, in one's systematic theology, one should begin with epistemology and the nature of Scripture, or with God himself. Because the Word comes to us in our historical location, complex issues are immediately raised regarding the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity. Moreover, if there is one God, one divine Mind, behind the whole of Scripture, one must ask how that one Mind establishes the unity of all of Scripture, even while we take pains to observe the many diversities of form, language, style, vocabulary, author, purpose, genre, and length. Peter Jensen works out many of these intricacies by tying the diverse words that constitute Scripture into the one divine storyline, making the connection between the authority of God and the authority of Scripture irrefragably tight. 152

(3) The issues surrounding the double authorship of Scripture continue to command wide discussion. Transparently, if all the emphasis is placed on God while the human authors are little more than organic recording devices, the differences in Scripture from book to book are impossible to understand, and the

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148. “Non-Foundational Epistemologies and the Truth of Scripture” (ch. 26).
150. In the original context, of course, the exhortation “Do not go beyond what is written” (1 Cor 4:6) is not intended to undermine the legitimacy of teasing out necessary inferences from the Scriptural texts, but to rebuke the Corinthian factionalists who were going “beyond what is written” by identifying themselves in arrogant fashion with Peter, Paul, Apollos, or even (in some partisan fashion) with Christ (cf. 1:11-13; 3:4-15).
151. “May We Go Beyond What Is Written After All? The Pattern of Theological Authority and the Problem of Doctrinal Development” (ch. 24 in this collection).
152. Peter F. Jensen, “God and the Bible” (ch. 16 in this collection).
Bible becomes akin to the Qur’an or the Book of Mormon. Alternatively, if all the emphasis is placed on the human authors and God is no more than a ghostly cipher lurking some distance away, or if he could get up and take himself to another universe while leaving behind no sense of loss in our understanding of what Scripture is, then there are few if any constraints against purely naturalistic interpretations of the Bible, and the Bible’s own self-understanding (if I may strain language a bit) collapses.

Some scholars address the issues by exploring what double agency might mean in a particular cultural context — the context of Paul, for instance. Some in the charismatic tradition fragment the discussion, especially in the context of the Book of Acts, and pit Scripture over against acts of God and the authoritative voices of individuals who interpret those acts without appealing to Scripture. The most sophisticated treatment of the subject I have read for years is the lengthy essay by Henri Blocher.

(4) An age that is uncomfortable with definite and clear meanings of texts, preferring polyvalence and ambiguity, will be uncomfortable with any insistence on the perspicuity of Scripture. Put another way, any defense of the perspicuity of Scripture is going to have to be informed and sophisticated — and this we have in an essay by Mark D. Thompson.

(5) The popular writings of Richard Dawkins and others among the new atheists have strengthened the widespread perception that the Bible is not reliable, not truthful, especially when it bears, even tangentially, on scientific matters. Here it is imperative to wrestle with such thinkers as a theist like John Polkinghorne and a panentheist like Arthur Peacocke — not because they espouse a well-articulated view of Scripture, but because they are scientists who reject the philosophical naturalism of the new atheists, and find ways to think about the integration of scientific learning and fundamental Christian claims, including supernatural claims.

154. For example, some of the chapters in the recent book edited by Christopher M. Hays and Christopher B. Ansberry, Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism (London: SPCK, 2013), briefly discussed above, seem to flirt with this side of the pendulum.
158. “The Generous Gift of a Gracious Father: Towards a Theological Account of the Clarity of Scripture” (ch. 20 in this collection).
160. See, for example, Arthur Peacocke, Paths from Science towards God: The End of All
We need to adopt a certain cautious skepticism along two fronts. First, we ought to be skeptical regarding some of the claims of science, even when those claims command almost universal approbation. Not that many decades ago, phrenology and eugenics were both almost universally espoused and commonly practiced. They were, after all, “scientific.” Today they are equally universally dismissed. Of course it is difficult to know exactly what scientific claims are least well supported and most deserving of skepticism. A careful reading of Scientific Mythologies is a good place to begin.161 Scientists and non-scientists alike need to proceed cautiously — but it is important to recognize how even some commonly supported and widely attested theories may someday come crashing down. For example, although one hesitates to mention it, theoretical physicists have begun to raise new scientific doubts about the big bang theory (not the TV program of the same name!). It is too early to guess what other theoretical physicists and cosmologists will make of them.162 But what is clear is twofold: specifically, that serious and competent physicists may call in question something as widely assumed as the big bang, once again reminding us that many of the “facts” of science are provisional until a better theory comes along; and more generally, that scientists and non-scientists alike should be prepared to maintain a cautious skepticism over some scientific claims. This stance does not sanction arrogant dismissal; it mandates respect, careful listening, evaluation, and sometimes patient uncertainty, as we refuse to be intimidated by the overconfident claims of some scientists or by the popularity of some nearly universally adopted theories. Second, Christians should also maintain a certain cautious skepticism with respect to the hermeneutical reductionism advocated by some Christian thinkers. Some scholars appear to be utterly certain about how to read every line


of Genesis 1–11. The recent book by Walton and Sandy is aimed at destroying traditional certainties; unfortunately, the authors are equally certain about their alternative hermeneutical constructions. Frankly, in the light of the complexity of the hermeneutical issues raised by these opening chapters of Scripture, the question posed by Francis A. Schaeffer forty years ago is still the most pertinent one: What is the least that Genesis 1–11 must be saying in order for the book of Genesis, and the rest of the Bible, to be coherent and true? In any case, Kirsten Birkett wisely helps Christians think through some of the slippery issues surrounding “Science and Scripture.”

**Comparative Religious Topics**

The globalization of the world has its corollary in the globalization of Christianity. In missions, for example, it is no longer “from the West to the rest,” but from everywhere to everywhere. As the sheer numbers of believers in the Majority World continue to climb, many have observed that these believers largely accept the authority of the Bible, holding to a theology that, by Western standards, is orthodox, conservative, even traditionalist. By the same token, more and more Christians are compelled to think through how what we mean by Scripture and the authority of Scripture stands in relation to the scriptures of other world religions and their respective claims to authority. This cannot possibly be a neutral discussion. For example, Christians evaluate such matters out of the framework of utter confidence that Christ has taken away their sins, that God has revealed Christ in them and to them and promised them resurrection existence in the new heaven and the new earth. All that they know of the triune God and his providential purposes in the world and the church has been mediated to them by the Bible, so inevitably they think of the Bible within that confessional stance. At the same time, when Christians speak of the self-attestation of Scripture, they are referring neither to a fideistic leap of faith, nor to a mystical inner voice, but to the Bible’s own testimony to itself.


165. Ch. 30 in this collection.

166. See, for example, Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).


One of the striking contrasts between the way Christians view the Bible and the way Muslims view the Qur’an is that, although both religions are in certain respects “missionary” religions, the ways they propagate their respective holy books are quite different. For Muslims, the only way to read the Qur’an is in Arabic, the language in which Muhammad wrote it. Correspondingly, translations of the Qur’an are therefore not the Word of God, but interpretation of it, or commentary upon it. By contrast, Christians have since earliest times busied themselves with producing versions of their sacred Scriptures. Inevitably, this generates a great deal of discussion about how to translate the Word of God, how to communicate it not only in another language but in another culture — discussion that varies between the wise and the unwise, between the probing and the compromised. More fundamentally, it generates discussion about what it means to locate divine inspiration (and, consequentially, divine authority) in autographs written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, while preaching and teaching our English versions of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God. Much has been written on this subject, of course, but the best recent contribution is an essay by Karen Jobes.

Although there are books and essays that compare and contrast the Bible and, say, the Qur’an — whether written from the Muslim perspective or from the Christian — most of these are very general introductions. Missionaries, cultural anthropologists, historians, and other scholars sometimes compare and contrast roughly common themes in the Bible and the Qur’an — the people of God and the ummah, for instance, or disparate notions of the kingdom of God, or the nature of forgiveness. But relatively little has been written by biblical scholars on specific textual parallels, doubtless because the world of the Qur’an is largely closed to most readers of the Bible. In any case, the essay by Ida Glaser in this collection is designed to help Bible readers understand how Muslims think of the Qur’an.

At least Christianity and Islam are both monotheistic religions. It is at least feasible to compare the Bible and the Qur’an. It is far more challenging to com-

174. “Qur’anic Challenges for the Bible Reader” (ch. 32).
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pare the Bible with the sacred writings of a theoretically non-theistic religion like Buddhism, or of a polytheistic religion like Hinduism. In the one case, what is required is a fundamental explanation of Buddhism itself; in the other, while an explanation of the extraordinary diversity and complexity of Hinduism’s sacred texts is helpful, Timothy C. Tennent goes further, drawing us into careful evaluation by asking whether there is any sense, from a Christian perspective, that Hinduism’s sacred writings, or at least some of them, might serve as a kind of Hindu Old Testament.

Conclusion: Thinking Holistically

Although the topics undertaken by the essays in this volume are important and deserve serious treatment, nevertheless there is a sense in which the exercise is in at least some danger of serving as a distraction. As soon as I had written that sentence, I immediately said to myself, “No, that’s not fair. The topics addressed are hugely important; ‘distraction’ is not the right word.” Yet all of the focus of the essays in this volume is on the nature of the Bible, the authority of the Bible, the way the Bible has been viewed in various parts of the history of the church, the nature of inspiration and of truth, epistemology, the comparison of the Christian Scriptures with the sacred texts of other traditions, and much more — and nothing about how the Bible shapes us, what value lies in bowing to its authority, and how to read it. One does not want to give the impression that faithfulness to the Bible is primarily about defending the Bible. One remembers the quip universally attributed to C. H. Spurgeon: “Defend the Bible? I would as soon defend a lion. Unchain it and it will defend itself.” Moreover, if inerrancy or any other high view of Scripture drives us to think the Bible is all about the provision of mere information, we have swallowed a massive reductionism.

The challenge is all the more acute now that we live in A Secular Age. This does not mean that our age demands the abandonment of religion, but the squeezing of religion to the periphery, to the private. It means we live in a time when it is no longer almost unthinkable to be an atheist, as was once the case;

The Many Facets of the Current Discussion

indeed, in many sectors of Western culture, a practical atheism is the default position. It means we live in a time of “expressive individualism,” in the “age of authenticity” (both are recurring phrases in Taylor) — a time when all authority is viewed with suspicion, when “authentic” living demands the sidelining of authority. We no longer think in terms of what everything means, in which we must find the order that is already built into the universe; rather, the “buffered self” must bring order and meaning to the universe. In the face of such assumptions, only the closest and most faithful reading of Scripture will have the temerity to construct an alternative world, a Christian world, that is deeply grounded in, and permeated by, Holy Scripture.

One of the things that is required is what Yarbrough calls “cognitive reverence,” which is more important, and more demanding, than merely insisting on propositional truth. It is what makes it possible for inerrancy to become “a place to live,” not just a position to hold. And it authorizes the preacher.

Today there are growing calls to reform life, culture, and theology by the Word of God. Some appeals for the greater integration of biblical studies and the life and conduct of the church seem to be driven by political and social agendas, or by rather too much respect for the “orthodoxies” of classic liberalism. Nevertheless the appeals themselves are reminders that debates about the authority of the Bible cannot substitute for unfeigned submission to the authority of the Bible. A friend sent me a quote from Martin Sheen, the actor who played the President in the television serial The West Wing. Commenting on Aaron Sorkin as a writer and the tendency of the actors to improvise, Sheen writes:

In the beginning, I have to say frankly, my discipline was not in line with the program. I was a bit too cavalier, and I was not always attentive to the very letter of the word. But gradually I came to realize that I was in the wrong. And when I surrendered to the word and was ruled specifically by the text, I learned a wonderful freedom. Aaron Sorkin is a masterful composer. You can do your

182. E.g., Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, and Jonathan A. Draper, eds., The Bible in the Public Square: Reading the Signs of the Times (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008); George G. Nicol, “Biblical Studies — Between Academy and Church,” ExpT 125 (2013): 105-16.
183. Melvin Tinker.
own riff and you can improvise — but it’s not the same composition. And the end result is different. I think all the cast came to that realization at different stages in the production. And now we’re all in sync.  

So now Daniel Doriani, who gave us what is the best book on faithful application in biblical preaching, provides us with a stimulating closing essay on what it means to read the Bible faithfully. After all, we serve the God who says, “These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit and who tremble at my word” (Isa. 66:2).

186. “Take, Read” (ch. 35 in this collection).
Historical Topics
Two

“The Truth Above All Demonstration”: Scripture in the Patristic Period to Augustine

Charles E. Hill

Nearly two millennia after their latest constituent member saw the light of day, the books that make up the Christian Bible continue to play an indispensable role in the spiritual lives of churches and individual believers. Yet today, many who wish to honor Scripture as the word of God can scarcely do so unaware that nearly every aspect of the study and use of their prized volume is under dispute. Whether the topic be the origins of Scripture’s individual books, the early scribal transmission of those books, their eventual collection into an exclusive “canon,” their interpretation, their reliability or truthfulness, or the role they play in the church’s attempt to define itself (and others), the reader of Scripture faces no lack of critical scrutiny. It is not surprising, then, that many should think of looking to the “pre-critical” past and should hark back specifically to the early centuries of the Christian era, when the foundations for scriptural exegesis in the Christian tradition were being laid and when Scripture was finding its place in the worshiping life of the church.

Such a pursuit is surely healthy and, in my view, much to be encouraged. Two preliminary considerations, however, may be mentioned. First, even in the patristic period one may look in vain for an idyllic past when scriptural exegesis flourished entirely unencumbered by criticism. From the very beginning there was strife with fellow Jews over the rightful interpretation of Scripture; gnostic, Marcionite, and Valentinian exegesis of the church’s books quickly added an array of serious challenges for Christian expositors. And if these somewhat “intramural” problems were not enough, just about as soon as Christians could lift their heads and venture into the public arena, their sacred writings were hit with the literary-cultural criticism of Greco-Roman intellectuals such as Celsus, Galen, Lucian, and, most devastatingly, Porphyry of Tyre. Second, the general dearth of lengthy systematic reflection on the doctrine of Scripture in this period, and the historical delay and disorder in achieving a consensus on the canon, have convinced some that a high respect for Scripture and a conviction of its central importance for the life of the church is a Protestant thing, or more narrowly,
a product of Protestant evangelicalism and therefore very much a historically circumscribed phenomenon. In the patristic period, it is thought, there was no canon of Scripture to appeal to, only a canon or rule of faith. And while the Scriptures, particularly the Jewish Scriptures, were regarded as authoritative, they were not consulted as much as were the various creedal summaries and an authoritative church hierarchy. The growing influence of specifically Christian writings (later called the New Testament) is often depicted as gradual, as is the slow dawn of the idea that there ought to be a limit to the number of books to which authoritative appeal in the church should be made.

What I hope to show in this brief foray into the patristic period is, first of all, something of the foundational role that Scripture played in Christian intellectual and spiritual life, even from the earliest times and even in the midst of conflict. This chapter will first seek to summarize how Christians conceived of Scripture as divine, as God’s self-attesting word, and as consistent, harmonious, or inerrant. The second part will consider the rise of the New Testament canon, engaging some of the current controversy about this subject. Then follow an examination of the relationship between Scripture and tradition (including the rule of faith) in one important writer, Irenaeus of Lyons; an exploration of Scripture’s inspiration in relation to certain “inspired” alternatives; and, finally, a glimpse at the path by which Scripture came to be part of the day-to-day spiritual lives of Christian clergy and even of laypeople.

Conception (Doctrine) of Scripture

Divinity

The Christian church did not so much construct a doctrine of Scripture as inherit one. It succeeded to its conception of the divinity and authority of Holy Scripture, one might say, as bequeathed to it from the broad Jewish heritage in general. As the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo said, “all men are eager to preserve their own customs and laws, and the Jewish nation above all others; for looking upon their laws as oracles (logia) directly given to them by God himself, and having been instructed in this doctrine from early youth, they bear in their souls the images of the commandments contained in these laws as sacred” (On the Embassy to Gaius, 210).1 Yet it would also be correct to say that the church received its conception of Scripture from Scripture itself, and from Jesus and his apostles in what soon became a new body of Scripture. “Until heaven and

earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished”; “Scripture cannot be broken”; “Thy word is truth”; “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable”; “no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Such conceptions were taught and received by the first Christians. Throughout subsequent Christian history the divinity of Scripture, that is, its ultimate divine authorship, sanctity, and authority, is the common assumption of the faith. Two examples from the third century will give a taste of the doctrine that undergirded Christian thought.

Origen:

The sacred books (tas hieras biblous) are not the compositions of men, but . . . composed by inspiration of the Holy Spirit (ex epipnoias tou hagiou pneumatos . . . anagegraphthai), agreeably to the will of the Father of all things through Jesus Christ, and they have come down to us. (De Principiis 4.1.9)

Hippolytus:

There is, brethren, one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures (tôn hagión graphôn), and from no other source. For just as a man, if he wishes to be skilled in the wisdom of this world, will find himself unable to get at it in any other way than by mastering the dogmas of philosophers, so all of us who wish to practise piety will be unable to learn its practice from any other quarter than the oracles (tôn logiôn) of God. Whatever things, then, the divine Scriptures (hai theiai graphai) declare, at these let us look; and whatsoever things they teach, these let us learn; and as the Father wills our belief to be, let us believe; and as He wills the Son to be glorified, let us glorify Him; and as He wills the Holy Spirit to be bestowed, let us receive Him. Not according to our own will, nor according to our own mind, nor yet as using violently those things which are given by God, but even as He has chosen to teach them by the Holy Scriptures, so let us discern them. (Contra Noetum 9)

Even schismatics and heretics used, and had to use, the Holy Scriptures, for all knew the final court of appeal among the churches was the voice of God speaking in the Scriptures. The arguments were not about whether to use Scripture, or (with notable exceptions) about which Scriptures to use, but about the in-
interpretation of the Scriptures given by God. Novatian, widely criticized for his schism in Rome in the third century, appeals to “the heavenly Scripture,” “the divine Scripture” (De Trinitate 6), as did every other church leader. In the fourth century, before controversy broke out over his theological statements, Arius had become famous for his commentaries on Scripture. All the great doctrinal debates were at their cores debates about the meaning of Scripture. Eusebius gives an interesting report to his somewhat skeptical home church in Caesarea after his participation in the Council at Nicea:

I had no criticism of the anathemas which were put after the creed. It forbade the use of un-Scriptural terms, which has been the cause of nearly all the confusion and anarchy in the Church. Because sacred Scripture makes no use of the term “out of nothing” or of “there was once a time when He was not” or of like words, it did not seem right to say these things or to teach them.

The Criterion of Truth: Scripture as Indemonstrable First Principle

The high confidence Christians placed in the divine writings was not at that time, as it is still not today, well understood or appreciated by outsiders. While Christians responded to numerous attacks on Scripture by defending it against charges of falsehood of various kinds, the divine origin and authority of their Scriptures was not, generally speaking, something they could or needed to “prove,” but was that by which they proved all things.

It is true that Christian writers throughout the period frequently turned to the “proof from prophecy.” The fulfillment of the prophets’ words was very often pointed to as showing that their written words truly were inspired by God’s Spirit (e.g., Origen, Princ. 4.1.6; Eusebius, Proof of the Gospel 1.1). But even this is best seen as an appeal to the way Scripture manifested its own divinity and not as a humanly constructed argument for its divinity “from the ground up,” so to speak. Though often lost sight of today, the self-authenticating quality of Scripture was perhaps surprisingly well recognized, especially among some early Greek writers.

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5. See, e.g., Charles Kannengiesser, “The Bible in the Arian Crisis,” in The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity, ed. and trans. Paul M. Blowers (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 217-28; “[T]he oldest chroniclers of Christianity felt confident to declare that Arius had become famous in his lifetime for commentaries on Scripture he delivered in preaching to the Alexandrian parish for which he had become responsible under Bishop Alexander. His congregation was astounded by the originality of his interpretations” (218).
**“The Truth Above All Demonstration”**

*Justin, Ps. Justin, and an Old Man*

The conversion of the philosopher Justin to Christianity, probably sometime before about 130 C.E., occurred after his encounter with an older man whose name Justin never reveals. In the course of their conversation, as Justin relates it, the old man introduced Justin to the Hebrew prophets, who in their writings spoke, he asserted, by the divine and Holy Spirit. One derives more help on philosophical matters, he said to the young philosopher, from the prophets than from the philosophers themselves. For these prophets “did not use demonstration (apodeixēs) in their treatises, seeing that they were witnesses to the truth above all demonstration (anōterō pasēs apodeixēs), and worthy of belief (axiopistoi)” ([Dial. 7.2](#)).

It is important to observe that, though the old man spoke specifically of the Hebrew prophets, this same quality of self-authentication apparently applied to “the words of the Saviour,” which, Justin later came to see, also “possess a terrible power in themselves, and are sufficient to inspire those who turn aside from the path of rectitude with awe; while the sweetest rest is afforded those who make a diligent practice of them” ([Dial. 8.2](#)). These words, “filled with the Spirit of God, and big with power, and flourishing with grace” ([Dial. 9.1](#)), are words Justin knew from the memoirs of Jesus’ apostles, books otherwise known as Gospels ([cf. Dial. 10.2](#)).

After exhorting Justin to believe the prophets’ testimony about the Creator and “his Son, the Christ,” the old man counseled him also to pray for light, “for these things cannot be perceived or understood by all, but only by the man to whom God and His Christ have imparted wisdom” ([Dial. 7.3](#)), cf. Matt. 11:25-27]. Thereafter a love for the prophets and for the “friends of Christ” (no doubt his apostles) was indeed kindled in Justin’s soul.

These two principles, that Scripture is divine and therefore not in need of philosophical defense or demonstration, and that it could only be truly and fully apprehended through divine aid, would often recur together.

A treatise *On the Resurrection*, once attributed to Justin but probably deriv-
ing from another second- or early-third-century writer, shares the old man’s idea that the truth, because it is from God, is self-attesting and beyond demonstration. This author opens his work in this way:

The word of truth is free, and carries its own authority (autexousios),11 disdaining to fall under any skilful argument, or to endure the logical scrutiny (di’ apodeixeös exetasin hypomenein) of its hearers. But it would be believed for its own nobility, and for the confidence due to him who sends it. Now the word of truth is sent from God; wherefore the freedom claimed by the truth is not arrogant. For being sent with authority, it were not fit that it should be required to produce proof of what is said; since neither is there any proof beyond itself, which is God. For every proof (apodeixis) is more powerful and trustworthy than that which it proves. . . . But nothing is either more powerful or more trustworthy than the truth. (Res. 1.1-6)

Clement of Alexandria

Such ideas may have been quite common among Christians, for they (or caricatures of them) are noted, though not appreciated, even by outsiders. Writing in about 180, the physician Galen complained about Jews and Christians not using demonstration in their treatises but relying on faith instead.12 Galen had evidently read Moses, whose method, he judges, was “to write without offering proofs, saying ‘God commanded, God spake.’” The schools of Moses and Christ speak of “undemonstrated laws” and order their followers “to accept everything on faith.”13 He clearly did not much admire the Christians’ intellectual achievements, as he knew them: “Most people are unable to follow any demonstrative argument consecutively; hence they need parables, and benefit from them . . . just as now we see the people called Christians drawing their faith from parables and miracles and yet sometimes acting in the same way [as those who philosophize].”14


13. The citations, in order, are from On His Own Books 1; On the Differences of Pulses 2.4: On the Prime Unmoved Mover (Arabic). All of these, and the next, have been taken from Robert M. Grant, Second-Century Christianity: A Collection of Fragments, 2nd edition (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 11-12, which see for more quotations.


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In the next decade, Clement of Alexandria would write very much aware of this kind of disdain. Clement’s understanding of Greek philosophy, and in particular its discussions of logic (including epistemology) is quite impressive and he does not shy away from the issue of demonstration. His response to charges such as those leveled by Galen is not to deny them by asserting that Christians do indeed demonstrate everything before believing. Rather, he defends the priority of faith by pointing out that some things (both ideas and material objects) do not stand in need of demonstration. In several places in the *Stromateis* Clement discusses what Aristotle had called “first principles” (*archai*), things that are true and primary, and “convincing on the strength not of anything else but of themselves.”

Clement found this concept conducive to explaining the role of Christian faith to critics like Galen: “Should one say that knowledge is founded on demonstration by a process of reasoning, let him hear that first principles are incapable of demonstration” (*ei de tis legoi tēn epistēmēn apodeiktikēn einai meta logou, akousatō hoti kai hai archai anapodeiktai*) (*Stromateis* 2.4.13.4). What is paramount here is to recognize that for Clement, whatever God says in Scripture has, perforce, the character of an indemonstrable first principle. Not only is this first principle indemonstrable by human reasoning, it is at the same time irrefutably demonstrated by God himself: “If a person has faith in the divine Scriptures and a firm judgment, then he receives as an irrefutable demonstration (*apodeixin anantirrhēton*) the voice of the God who has granted him those Scriptures. The faith no longer requires the confirmation of a demonstration (*di’ apodeixīōn oxyrōmenē*). ‘Blessed are those who without seeing have believed’ (John 20:29)” (*Strom.* 2.2.9.6).

While his most comprehensive work on logic and demonstration

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15. Faith here is a “preconception by the will, an act of consenting to religion” (*Stromateis* 2.2.8.4).


17. Here he may be invoking against Christianity’s critics the authority of Aristotle himself, who, in a discussion of philosophy, said that first principles were indemonstrable (*hai d’ archai anapodeiktai*), *Magna Moralia* 1197a 23-29.

tion (*apodeixis*) comes in the enigmatic book 8, the discussion most relevant to Scripture specifically comes in book 7.

For in the Lord we have the first principle (*tēn archên*) of instruction, guiding us to knowledge from first to last “in divers ways and divers portions” (Heb. 1:1) through the prophets and the gospel and the blessed apostles. And, if any one were to suppose that the first principle stood in need of something else, it could no longer be really maintained as a first principle. He then who of himself believes the Lord’s Scripture and his actual voice (*tē kyriakē graphē te kai phōnē*) is worthy of belief. . . . Certainly we use it [Scripture] as a criterion (*kriteriō*) for the discovery of the real facts. But whatever comes into judgment is not to be believed before it is judged, so that what is in need of judgment cannot be a first principle. With good reason therefore having apprehended our first principle by faith without proof (*anapodeikton*), we get our proofs (*apodeixeis*) about the first principle *ex abundanti* from the principle itself, and are thus trained by the voice of the Lord for the knowledge of the truth. For we pay no attention to the mere assertions of men, which may be met by equally valid assertions on the other side. If, however, it is not enough just simply to state one’s opinion, but we are bound to prove (*pistōsasthai*) what is said, then we do not wait for the witness of men, but we prove the point (*pistoumetha*) in question by the voice of the Lord, which is more to be relied on than any demonstration or rather which is the only real demonstration (*apodeixis*). (Stromateis 7.16.95)

So too we, obtaining from the Scriptures themselves a perfect demonstration concerning the Scriptures, derive from faith a conviction which has the force of demonstration (*apodeiktikōs*). (Stromateis 7.16.96)

God himself, of course, is the ultimate first principle, and Scripture, God’s voice, therefore gives us sure knowledge that proves other things but is not itself subject to proof. As Eric Osborn observes, this “foundationalism” is certainly not “naïve.”

For Clement, the Bible was “divine oracle and . . . true philosophy,

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which always included argument.”21 Argument, however, is secondary, for investigating, understanding, and explicating what is received through an act of faith. Clement the teacher was all about investigation. But he held that investigation to be best which “accompanies faith and which builds the magnificent knowledge of the truth on the base represented by faith” (Strom. 5.1.5.2).

We note that Clement’s description of Scripture, God’s voice, as a first principle that does not submit to human demonstration applies not only to the words of prophets, but to “the gospel and the blessed apostles.”

Origen

Origen continues the theme and derives support for it from the apostle Paul. Near the beginning of his great work against Celsus, written ca. 246, he wrote,

We have to say, moreover, that the Gospel has a demonstration (apodeixis) of its own (oikeia), more divine (theiotera) than any established by Grecian dialectics. And this diviner method is called by the apostle the “manifestation (or demonstration, apodeixin) of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor. 2:4): of “the Spirit,” on account of the prophecies, which are sufficient to produce faith in any one who reads them, especially in those things that relate to Christ; and of “power,” because of the signs and wonders that we must believe to have been performed, both on many other grounds, and on this, that traces of them are still preserved among those that regulate their lives by the precepts of the Gospel. (CCels. 1.2)

Almost twenty years earlier, Origen had begun his treatise On First Principles with a statement of his Christian epistemology. All who are assured that grace and truth came in Jesus Christ “derive the knowledge which incites men to a good and happy life from no other source than from the very words and teaching of Christ.” This does not mean merely those words Jesus uttered while on earth. For Christ, the Word of God, spoke in Moses and the prophets (citing Heb. 11:24-26). Jesus spoke also in his apostles, as “is shown by Paul in these words: ‘Or do you seek a proof (dokimēn) of Christ, who speaketh in me?’” (2 Cor. 13:3). Thus, that knowledge which leads to a good and happy life comes from Christ alone, through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Of the several teachings that Origen regards as first principles, derived from apostolic preaching, is that the Scriptures come from God,22 and that there is a spiritual meaning to Scripture that often lies hidden behind the material (Princ. praef. 8).

22. Moreschini and Norelli, Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature, vol. 1, From Paul to

Carson, ed., The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures, third corrections December 17, 2015 9:49 AM
Origen does not ignore the subjective effects that Justin and his teacher had spoken of, which Reformation theologians would call the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit: “And he who reads the words of the prophets with care and attention, feeling by the very perusal the traces of the divinity (ichnos enthousiasmou)23 that is in them, will be led by his own emotions to believe that those words which have been deemed to be the words of God are not the compositions of men (ouk anthropon)” (Princ. 4.1.6).

Eusebius

Of course, not all readers of Scripture were so led. Christianity’s intellectual opponents were evidently not placated by the appeal to Scripture’s self-authenticating divinity — though it is certainly questionable how seriously this appeal was ever engaged by those opponents. The written refutations by people like Hierocles, a Roman official who helped instigate the great persecution, and especially of Porphyry,24 who struck hard at Scripture, had gone deep, but their essential criticism of Christian thought apparently had not moved much beyond Galen’s.

As we have such a mob of slanderers flooding us with the accusation that we are unable logically to present a clear demonstration of the truth we hold, and think it enough to retain those who come to us by faith alone, and as they say that we only teach our followers like irrational animals to shut their eyes and staunchly obey what we say without examining it at all, and call them therefore “the faithful” because of their faith as distinct from reason. (Proof 1.1.10)25

With these criticisms in mind, Eusebius wrote his great two-volume defense, Preparation for the Gospel and Demonstration of the Gospel, to show that “our

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23. This word often carries the connotation of ecstatic frenzy, but here “divinity” is a better translation, as will become clear in the section on “Inspiration and Frenzy,” 81-83 below.

24. See Lactantius, On the Death of the Persecutors 16.4; The Divine Institutes 5.2; Macarius, Apocriticus.

25. Robert M. Berchman, Porphyry against the Christians, Ancient Mediterranean and Medieval Texts and Contexts, Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition 1 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 137 n. 16, notes that this was “an authentic critique likely raised by Porphyry.”
devotion to the oracles of the Hebrews thus had the support of judgment and sound reason” (*Proof* 1.1.10). Scripture certainly functioned for Eusebius as supreme authority, as God’s own voice, though it does not appear that Eusebius stated so clearly as some of his predecessors did the principle of Scripture as the indemonstrable first principle of knowledge, due perhaps to the pressure he felt to answer the specific charges of Porphyry. But the principle is indeed alive and seems to cast a shadow over his entire work. At one point Eusebius observes that Plato himself said “we must in obedience to the law believe, even though . . . without certain or probable proofs (*apodeixeion*)” (*Timaeus* 40ε; *Preparation* 2.7.76b).

Eusebius does refer to some predecessors, who gave “demonstrations without number” in written defenses, and refers to commentaries on “the sacred and inspired Scriptures (*hieras kai enthous graphas*), showing by mathematical demonstrations (*apodeixeis*) the unerring (*adiaptoton*) truthfulness of those who from the beginning preached to us the word of godliness” 26 (*Preparation* 1.3.7c). Like Origen, Eusebius appealed to the man he says was the first Christian to deprecate “deceitful and sophistical plausibilities, and to use proofs (*apodeixesin*) free from ambiguity . . . the holy Apostle Paul, who says in one place, ‘And our speech and our preaching was not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power’” (1 Cor. 2:4, *Preparation* 1.3.7b, citing then 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:5). Eusebius’s substantial apologetic work is his attempt to keep Peter’s exhortation “to be ready to give an answer to every man that asketh a reason concerning the hope that is in us” (1 Pet. 3:15), and to show that Christians have not devoted themselves to an “unreasoning faith, but to wise and profitable doctrines which contain the way of true religion” (*Preparation* 1.5.14b). But in line with Christians before him, Eusebius places no ultimate confidence in the force of logical demonstrations but depends on “the help which comes down from the God of the universe” supplying “to the teaching and name of our Saviour its irresistible and invincible force, and its victorious power against its enemies” (*Preparation* 1.4.9d-10a).

Even when not stated in terms of an “indemonstrable first principle,” Scripture’s divine and foundational authority appears to be the common assumption and the common confession of the church. Gregory of Nyssa, more than perhaps any other fourth-century Christian author, absorbed Greek philosophy. He has been accused of merely applying Christian names to Plato’s doctrines and calling it Christian theology. 27 Nonetheless, Gregory affirmed “We are not able to affirm what we please. We make Holy Scripture the rule and the measure of every tenet. We approve of that alone which may be made to harmonize with the intention

26. I take it he means the apostles.

of those writings” (*De anima et resurr.*, MG 46, 49B). Scripture is “the guide of reason” (*Contra Eunom.*, I, 114, 126), “the criterion of truth” (107).²⁸

Two things perhaps need emphasizing here. On the one hand, the assertion that Scripture’s truth and divinity are beyond human demonstration, despite the carping of critics, cannot not be regarded as anti-intellectual. The charges leveled by Galen in the second century have echoed through the centuries right up to the present, but they ring no less hollow. Quite obviously, none of the Christian writers treated above found that faith in the teachings of Scripture impeded the robust and exacting employment of logic, historical study, philosophy, or any other tool of human erudition. For them, this view of Scripture provided the only sure foundation for intellectual endeavors of any kind. From Justin and his unnamed Christian teacher, to Clement, Origen, Gregory, and Augustine in our period, through the intellectual achievements of the Middle Ages, right up to Reformed Epistemology in the present, a Scripture-based Christianity has not avoided the encounter with non-Christian philosophies nor has it shirked a responsibility to “lead every thought captive to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5) and to do the positive labor of ordering human thought in accordance with Scripture. The words of Scripture, the voice of God, have been the criterion of truth that has legitimized human intellectual activity. Ultimately, Galen’s disparagement has proved to be reactionary and misinformed.

On the other hand, the adoption of terminology and ideas from the Greek philosophical tradition could be viewed as a sign of the church’s abandonment of Hebrew thought and its rapid capitulation to Hellenistic thought. While in some areas of Christian theology this charge might be made more or less compellingly, I would argue that in what we have seen regarding the doctrine of Scripture, the adoption of terms was essentially defensive and reciprocal. Adopting the philosophical term “first principle” for the privileging of Scripture was a way of “plundering the Egyptians,” or, of hoisting the critic with his own petard. The entire fabric of the effort from the Christian side was designed to assert the priority of divine revelation, and faith in that revelation, to syllogistic human reasoning exemplified in the demand for external “demonstration.” These early authors saw their approach as a working-out of what was implicit in scriptural passages such as John 20:29 and 1 Corinthians 2:4.

### Scripture’s Internal Harmony, Consistency, and Inerrancy

Because Scripture was divine and sacred, it was also received as internally consistent, harmonious, and a faultless expression of the divine will. We saw

above Eusebius’s allusion to the apostles’ unerring truthfulness (to apseudēs kai adiaptōton), which could plausibly be seen as one testimony to a belief in scriptural inerrancy. Most of the explicit expressions along these lines, though, have to do with Scripture’s consistency or harmony.

Following directly the claims made by NT authors themselves, the first non-canonical writers maintain Scripture’s truthfulness and harmony. Before referring a string of scriptural passages Clement of Rome reminds his readers, “You have searched the holy scriptures (tas hieras graphas), which are true, which were given by the Holy Spirit; you know that nothing unrighteous (adikon) or counterfeit (parapepoiemenon) is written in them” (1 Clem. 45.2-3). Justin at one point scolds his opponent:

If you spoke these words, Trypho, in order that I might say the Scriptures contradicted each other (enantias . . . allēlais), you have erred. But I shall not venture to suppose or to say such a thing; and if a Scripture which appears to be of such a kind be brought forward, and if there be a pretext [for saying] that it is contrary [to some other] (hōs enantia ousa), since I am entirely convinced that no Scripture contradicts another (hoti oudemia graphē tē hetera enantia estin), I shall admit rather that I do not understand what is recorded, and shall strive to persuade those who imagine that the Scriptures are contradictory, to be rather of the same opinion as myself. (Dial. 65)

Irenaeus too was confident that “the entire Scriptures, the prophets, and the Gospels, can be clearly, unambiguously, and harmoniously understood by all, although all do not believe them” (AH 2.27.2), that “the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit” (2.28.2). Such confidence in Scripture’s divinity, harmony, and perfection promoted a hermeneutic by which the ambiguous passages could be interpreted by reference to the clear: “all Scripture, which has been given to us by God, shall be found by us perfectly consistent; and the parables shall harmonize with those passages which are perfectly plain; and those statements the meaning of which is clear, shall serve to explain the parables; and through the many diversified utterances [of Scripture] there shall be heard one harmonious melody in us, praising in hymns that God who created all things” (2.28.4).

While it may be true that not all the difficulties unearthed by critics since the Enlightenment were known to or acknowledged by the ancients, I dare to say that a great many of them were. The ancients were not ignorant of “the phenomena” of Scripture. Because of their relatively greater accessibility and their centrality to the evangelistic and apologetic task, the four Gospels became a very public forum for attack, defense, and discussion of the harmony of Christian Scripture. From at least the time of Papias’s elder, probably ca. 100, discrepancies between the narratives of the Gospels were known and treated by Christians. The elder
defended Mark’s “order” (taxis), or lack thereof, on the basis of his intention to record simply but faithfully what he had heard from Peter (Eusebius, HE 3.39.15-16). The author of the Muratorian Fragment, too, acknowledged differences, but credited the Gospels with a Spirit-authored unity.

And so, though various elements [or beginnings] may be taught in the individual books of the Gospels, nevertheless this makes no difference to the faith of believers, since by the one sovereign Spirit all things have been declared in all [the Gospels]: concerning the nativity, concerning the passion, concerning the resurrection, concerning life with his disciples, and concerning his twofold coming; the first in lowliness when he was despised, which has taken place, the second glorious in royal power, which is still in the future.

Confidence in this harmony between the Gospels had already resulted in a new literary form, the Diatessaron, which attempted to combine all four Gospel accounts into a single harmonized narrative. We know of at least two before Irenaeus, one by Theophilus of Antioch and the more famous one by Tatian the Syrian. The name given to these productions, diatessaron, itself was a musical term for the interval we call “a fourth” and may well have been chosen because of a conception of harmony that was quite in keeping with that which Irenaeus would soon articulate concerning the four Gospels (AH 3.11.8) and Scripture in general. This conviction of an underlying harmony between the evangelists is no doubt also responsible for a significant number of “harmonizations” introduced by “well-meaning” scribes into the textual tradition of the Gospels, and of the NT generally.

The analogy with musical harmony is seen in Origen as well. Those who claim to find disharmony in Scripture, he says, are like those who do not recognize harmony in music. The blessed peacemaker (Matt. 5:9) “knows that all the Scripture


is the one perfect and harmonized [or fitted] instrument of God, which from different sounds gives forth one saving voice to those willing to learn, which stops and restrains every working of an evil spirit, just as the music of David laid to rest the evil spirit in Saul, which also was choking him (1 Sam. 16:14)” (Comm. Matt. 2). In Origen, however, we encounter a more complex musicology; Scripture’s perfect harmony did not mean that it contained no “errors,” on the material (as opposed to spiritual) level. “The chief concern of the evangelists,” he wrote, “was related to the mysteries; they did not so much care to report the accurate history of the events as to set forth the mystery of those things that derive from the historical facts. . . . The evangelists sometimes changed historical circumstances to the benefit of the spiritual purpose, so that they reported that something happened in a determined place and time, although in fact it happened in another place and time” (Comm. John 10.5.19). Michael Holmes summarizes Origen’s statements: “in order to accomplish its primary goal the Word utilized whenever possible actual historical events. But when these were not suitable, the Word worked fictional elements into the narrative in order to get the desired message across.” This applied to both the OT and the NT.

Holmes observes that Origen might be called an inerrantist with respect to the spiritual meaning of Scripture, but certainly not with respect to its literal meaning, at least not as inerrancy is usually understood. One might also observe that these things in Scripture that in Origen’s view “are not true according to the bodily sense” (Princ. 4.2.9) may be historically inaccurate or factually false, but are not exactly mistakes or “errors,” for they are deliberately placed there by the Spirit, intended not to deceive but to lead into deeper spiritual truth. It is only the sensual man who is led astray by focusing on the mere letter (Hom. Gen. 10.5).

Origen’s openness to recognizing historical untruths “according to the letter” cannot be separated from his particular hermeneutical approach and his enthusiasm to get to the “spiritual realities” of which the bodily realities are fig-

31. ANF 10, 413.
33. Origen sometimes drew distinctions between those parts of Scripture that had the quality of direct revelation, and those that came from the mind of the writer. Though all the Scriptures current in the church “are believed to be divine” (Comm. John 1.14), Origen also sometimes speaks as though there is a hierarchy among them: “we must say that the apostolic writings are wise and trustworthy and most beneficial; they are not, to be sure, on a par with “Thus says the Lord almighty” ” (Comm. John 1.15). Because of his many assertions of the divinity, sanctity, and authority of all the Scriptures, one imagines that the distinctions he has in mind here are much like genre distinctions.

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ures. Historical irregularities merely alert the reader that there is a deeper spiritual meaning to be found. Thus, one can understand how the hunt to discover spiritual treasures for the church might not only dampen interest in resolving an apparent discrepancy, but perhaps even magnify the discrepancy. This appears, for example, in his exposition of Genesis 24:16, where Origen explains, “history is not being narrated, but mysteries are interwoven” (Hom. Gen. 10.4). Precisely this tendency has been observed in Origen’s predecessor and “mentor” in allegorical method, Philo of Alexandria. Maren Niehoff writes that Philo “stresses problems in the literal text in order to make room for allegory. . . . The literal dimension of Scripture is thus not altogether dismissed, but shown to be problematic to a degree that renders the allegorical meaning plausible.” A desire to showcase the benefits of spiritual exegesis can open one’s eyes to literal contradictions where others may not see them.

In Origen’s Christian context, when it came to admitting factual or historical untruths in Scripture, it may be that he was not “an isolated example.” Yet it is not easy to find even among his many admirers any who were as quick to concede the presence of “inerrant errors” in Scripture as he was, or as willing to abandon the attempt to reconcile Scripture with reason or history or itself (even Origen, of course, did this at times). Recall the comment of Eusebius, one of Origen’s most enthusiastic supporters, about the apostles’ unerring truthfulness. We know that Origen was opposed even in his lifetime by Christians who believed he had exceeded the bounds of responsible exegesis. But another reason for the general failure of other Christian writers to match Origen’s boldness in this regard had to be the publication of a work called Against the Christians by a neo-Platonist critic who claimed that, as a young man, he had known the great Christian teacher. Porphyry of Tyre, says Kofsky, “sharply criticized the ten-

34. By his allegorical treatment of Genesis 24:15-16, he aims to “edify the Church of God” and to challenge “very sluggish and inactive hearers with the examples of the saints and mystical explanations” (Hom. Gen. 10.5).


37. For an example of one of his critics (Epiphanius), see Hill, Johannine Corpus, 186-90.


39. See Eusebius, HE 6.19.3-8. It has of course been questioned whether Porphyry was referring to Origen the Christian or another man by that name. But Porphyry’s description, given by Eusebius (HE 6.19.3-8), makes it hard to think it was not the famous biblical scholar we know. See also R. M. Berchman, “In the Shadow of Origen: Porphyry and the Patristic Origins of New Testament Criticism,” in G. Dorival and A. Le Boulluec, Origentiana Sexta: Origène et la Bible/
dency to allegorical interpretation popular among Christians. He was well aware that this exegetical approach offered a solution to difficulties presented by the Scriptures. . . . By ruling out allegorical interpretation one exposed the difficulties presented by the text.” 40 Porphyry specifically named Origen as the one who took from the Greeks the absurdity (atopia) which is the allegorical method (ton metalēptikon tropon) and introduced it to the Christians (Fr. 39). 41

Despite the best efforts of Diodorus of Tarsus and other teachers of the Antiochene school, Christians of course never completely discarded the allegorical method. Yet its vulnerability to abuse, particularly when used as a facile way to avoid exegetical difficulties, came to be widely recognized. Particularly after the withering critique of Porphyry, Christian scholars in general would not be so blithe as Origen sometimes seemed to be about the historical, factual, or internal consistency problems in Scripture. Apologetic responses to informed attacks on Scripture required greater sophistication and facility with the tools employed by the critics. According to Berchman, Porphyry’s critique “led Christians to a defense of scripture on historical and literary grounds. They became higher critics of scripture themselves.” 42 The use of literary and historical methods by Christian writers perennially raises questions among Christian communities about compromise and corruption from without. But it would be wrong to surmise that even the appropriation of the methods of ancient higher criticism by Christian scholars meant or must mean a weakening of faith in the transcendent power and veracity of Scripture.

“If we are perplexed by an apparent contradiction in Scripture,” wrote Augustine in his response to Faustus (397-400), “it is not allowable to say, The author of this book is mistaken; but either the manuscript is faulty, 43 or the translation is wrong, or you have not understood” (C Faust. 11.5). Faustus had rejected the Gospel testimonies because of the different genealogies of Jesus given in Matthew and Luke (a problem also observed by Porphyry). Augustine points out that many able and learned men had seen the obvious inconsistency and had found that “there is more in it than appears at first sight” (11.2). “But with a due regard to the high authority of Scripture, they believed that there was something here which would be given to those that ask, and denied to those that snarl; would be found by those that seek, and taken away from those that criticise; would be open

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40. Aryeh Kofsky, Eusebius of Caesarea Against Paganism (Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2002), 29. See also Berchman, Porphyry, 58: “What angered Porphyry was the way in which Christians used allegory to explain away, as he saw it, the difficulties in the Jewish Bible.”

41. Kofsky, Eusebius, 58.

42. Berchman, Porphyry, 60.

43. Berchman is mistaken when claiming (Porphyry, 69) that Augustine never appealed to copyist error in resolving difficulties. E.g., On the Harmony of the Evangelists 3.7.29.
to those that knock, and shut against those that contradict. They asked, sought, and knocked; they received, found, and entered in” (CFaust. 3.2). As he would say elsewhere, “It is a wonderful and beneficial thing that the Holy Spirit organized the holy scripture so as to satisfy hunger by means of its plainer passages and remove boredom by means of its obscurer ones” (OCD 2.15, Green’s translation).

What Augustine found when he sought concerning this difficulty was not a spiritual lesson derived by allegory, but simply that one evangelist’s account gave Joseph’s biological father, the other his adoptive father. Augustine then summarizes his dealings with the variations between the evangelists: “if one says one thing, and another another, or one in one way and another in another, still they all speak truth, and in no way contradict one another; only let the reader be reverent and humble, not in an heretical spirit seeking occasion for strife, but with a believing heart desiring edification” (CFaust. 3.5).44

Well aware of the critical attacks of Porphyry and others, Augustine could assert that the evangelists “in no way contradict one another.” In about the year 400 Augustine wrote a laborious treatise On the Harmony of the Evangelists. While his solutions may not always completely satisfy, he remained faithful to his conviction of Scripture’s truthfulness, harmony, and consistency. We even have in his letter to Jerome (Ep. 82.1.3) dated to 404/405 (PL 33) at least one statement of inerrancy proper.46

I have learned to yield this respect and honour only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error (ut nullum eorum auctorem scribendo aliquid errasse firmissime credam).47 And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the Ms. (codicem) is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what

44. Faustus, like many who would follow, showed a tendency to declare inauthentic those portions of the New Testament that did not support his doctrines. This ploy, in Augustine’s view, “is the last gasp of a heretic in the clutches of truth; or rather it is the breath of corruption itself” (CFaustum 10.3).

45. Berchman, Porphyry, 224-25, “By employing the very critical approaches Porphyry used to ridicule the truth claims of the Bible, Augustine turned Porphyry on his head. He defended the truth claims of scripture by demonstrating them efficacious — in reference to correspondence theories of truth.” Berchman speaks of Augustine’s approach as necessitating an abandonment of “Origen’s coherence interpretation of the Bible, which was based on allegorical and symbolic interpretations of scripture” (225 n. 8).

46. It is evident that Augustine is thinking not merely of intentional deception when he says he believes that Scripture’s authors are completely free from error. On the assertions of Rogers and McKim to the contrary, see John Woodbridge, Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/Mckim Proposal (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 44-46.

47. I have taken the Latin text of Augustine’s writings from the S. Aurelii Augustini Opera Omnia — edition latina at http://www.augustinus.it/index2.htm.

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was said, or I myself have failed to understand it. As to all other writings, in reading them, however great the superiority of the authors to myself in sanctity and learning, I do not accept their teaching as true on the mere ground of the opinion being held by them; but only because they have succeeded in convincing my judgment of its truth either by means of these canonical writings themselves, or by arguments addressed to my reason.

Identity (Canon) of Scripture

Self-Authenticateing and Self-Delimiting?

One advantage of considering the kinds of materials we have reviewed in the first section of this essay is that it helps us to comprehend how differently the ancients viewed the Scriptures from the way moderns do.48 It is widely taught today that the Scripture “selection process” began in the second century,49 arising out of the churches’ felt needs for a new set of authoritative Scriptures,50 and was pursued through criteria developed by the church over time. Any conviction that there were or ought to be boundaries for this new set of Scriptures, we are often told, came fairly late: “In the early church there appears to be no interest in fixed collections of scriptures much before the fourth century.”51

But the confession of early church leaders presents a problem for this ap-
proach. Clement’s statement, quoted above, rings in the ear: “whatever comes into judgment is not to be believed before it is judged, so that what is in need of judgment cannot be a first principle.” How could a church which confessed that Scripture is the self-authenticating voice of God presume to determine if it needed a new set (or even the old set) of Scriptures? How could it presume to select what books it thought it needed as Scripture? How could it presume to select what books it thought it needed as Scripture?

I would argue that there is no reason to think that it did either of these things. If Scripture is its own interpreter, should it not also be its own delimiter? There are of course no canonical lists contained in Scripture itself (though Jesus in Luke 24 gives the three categories of the OT writings). But Scripture did provide the principle for a canon of new Scripture, and this seems to have been recognized by second-century writers.

For Justin, the same prophetic Scriptures that proclaimed beforehand the identity of the Christ, his deeds, his sufferings, his resurrection, and the founding of his church, also predicted an authoritative new word to be delivered to all nations. The mighty scepter of Psalm 110:2, by which the Lord would rule in the midst of his foes, is, according to Justin, the word of Jesus’ apostles, which went forth from Zion and is preached everywhere (1 Apol. 45.5). Perhaps the single most influential passage in this regard came from the prophet Isaiah, echoed by Micah, “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Isa. 2:3; cf. Mic. 4:2). This prophecy, Justin affirms, predicted the apostolic preaching: “For from Jerusalem there went out into the world men, twelve in number, and these illiterate, of no ability in speaking: but by the power of God they proclaimed to every race of men that they were sent by Christ to teach to all the word of God” (1 Apol. 39.3; cf. Dial. 24.1, 3). Irenaeus too interprets this law which goes forth from Zion in Isaiah’s prophecy as “the word of God, preached by the apostles, who went forth from Jerusalem.” But the appeal to Isaiah 2:3 (Mic. 4:2) did not originate in the second century. Jesus in Luke and

52. Or, as McDonald prefers to say, as a resource “for Christian identity and guidance” (McDonald, Biblical Canon, 422).

53. See C. E. Hill, “Justin and the New Testament Writings,” in Studia Patristica 30, ed. E. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 42-48, at 46. Justin also sees the preaching ministry of the apostles predicted in Ps. 110:2 (1 Apol. 45.5); Exod. 28:33 (Dial. 42.1); and Ps. 19:2 (Dial. 64.8).


55. AH 4.34.4; see also Proof of Apostolic Preaching 86; Melito of Sardis, Peri Pascha 7.
Acts alludes to this passage in the founding of the apostles’ mission to be his witnesses in all the world, “beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8).56 These and other prophetic texts constituted, for Jesus and the apostles and for early church writers, the scriptural authorization for the apostolic preaching, a new law and word of the Lord; in effect, these texts also limited that new law and word of the Lord to what the apostles and their assistants would produce in the original apostolic mission.57 The upshot of this is that the constant appeal in the church to the apostles and their authority was not the result of any church’s decision to adopt “apostolicity” as one of its “criteria” for selecting its books of sacred Scripture. Apostolicity was the authorizing and delimiting principle given by Scripture itself. The teaching authority conferred by Jesus on his apostles permeates the apostolic ministry as it is related in Acts and the New Testament epistles. Though the practice of public reading of Scripture in the synagogues was taken over in Christian meetings for worship, a new source arose immediately to take its place alongside the Hebrew Scriptures. On the day of Pentecost, after Peter had finished preaching, which preaching included exposition of Joel and the Psalms, we read, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The oral teaching of Jesus’ apostles continued to center, no doubt, on the words and deeds of Jesus to which they were commissioned witnesses. In the next decades written “Gospels” containing their remembered accounts would appear, and the apostle Paul would instruct that letters containing his teaching be read out to the congregations (Col. 4:16; cf. 2 Cor. 10:10; Eph. 3:4; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:14). This of itself need not indicate a scriptural status for Paul’s letters. But the authority with which he wrote as an apostle and the obedience he expected to his written word (1 Cor. 14:37-38; 2 Thess. 3:14) tell in favor of such a recognition from the first. In any case, 1 Peter seems to use phrases and concepts from some of Paul’s letters, and 2 Peter 3:15-16 refers to a known collection of Paul’s letters as Scripture. A collection was made either by Paul himself or, at any rate, not long after his death.58

56. For more on this, see Hill, “God’s Speech.”
57. This conception of apostolicity was not, of course, so restricted as to apply only to what an apostle personally spoke or penned. The reference here to “assistants” is intentional and reflects the universal recognition of the legitimate apostolicity of writers like Mark and Luke, the author of Hebrews (if he was not Paul), and even the Lord’s brothers (Gal. 1:18; Jude 1) James and Jude, the former of whom, at least, is known to have been visited by the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:7) and is explicitly aligned with the apostles in apostolic ministry in New Testament writings (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:18; Gal. 1:19, etc.).
There is a remarkably clean continuity between the NT writings and the early non-canonical writings on the understanding of the apostles as the authoritative custodians and publishers of the gospel of Jesus. Still in the first century, Clement of Rome writes, “The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ” (1 Clem. 42.1-2). The same understanding is present in the thought of Ignatius (Magn. 6.1; 7.1; Smyrn. 8.1), Polycarp (Phil. 6.3), Ps. Barnabas (5.9; 8.3) and is generally assumed among non-orthodox writers as well. From here it becomes virtually the universal Christian tradition (until modern times).

The Second Century

In the last half of the second century, church leaders in such disparate parts of the empire as Lyons, Antioch, and Alexandria would speak of the Gospels and other literature as what had been handed down to them (Irenaeus; Serapion; Clement). This denotes the very tangible aspect of the reception of the scriptural writings as a process that took place in real life: church leaders knew the collections that they had inherited from their predecessors, collections they perceived as going back to the apostles. The collections in these churches must indeed have developed from the actual artifacts of the original apostolic mission, particularly in the churches founded during that mission, judging from the early date by which we find some of these records in use. Echoes of Jesus’ teaching, sometimes actual quotations from the written Gospels, reverberate throughout the works of the Apostolic Fathers. And just as quickly, the letters of Paul are explicitly referenced (2 Peter; 1 Clem.; Ignatius; Polycarp), and letters of Peter, John, and “To the Hebrews” are used in the composition of early inter-ecclesial correspondence (1 Clem.; Polycarp).

There is a recognizable continuity between the apostolic sources used in Antioch (Ignatius), Asia Minor (Polycarp), Rome (Clement), and elsewhere (Ps. Barnabas — Alexandria?) at the beginning of the second century. It was surely


60. Irenaeus, AH 3.1.1, etc.; Clement, Strom. 3.13.93; Serapion in Eusebius, HE 6.12.3-6.

61. Tertullian (Praescr. 36) refers to the apostolic churches, “in which the very thrones of the apostles are still pre-eminent in their places, in which their own authentic writings are read (authenticate litterae eorum recitantur).” These churches, he claims, held “as a sacred deposit (sacrosanctum)” the apostolic letters (adv. Marc. 4.5).


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inevitable, however, there should also be variation and imperfection in the process of preserving, collecting, and handing down what Jesus’ apostles and their companions left behind. Confusion would arise as well from the appearance of other books that had no direct or indirect historical connection with apostles, but which in form or in content (some also in title) resembled those that had.

While by the end of the second century discrepancies in the collections of certain churches were coming to light, it is at least the case that, as far as we can tell, they all had collections. As we begin to hear that some doubted the Pauline authorship of Hebrews, or did not want The Shepherd read in church, etc., we hear of no church that regarded no Christian writings as Scripture or as authoritative. There are no reports of anybody protesting, “the orally-transmitted-words-of-Jesus, and the orally-transmitted-words-of-Jesus alone! If they were good enough for Peter and Paul . . .” Nor do the collections appear to be greatly at variance, as one might expect they would be, if indeed the diversity among the churches and the blurriness of lines of demarcation were as great as many current scholars allege.

As early as Ignatius, writing probably in about 107/108,63 we have a Christian using the categories of “gospel” and “apostles.” When it is seen that he uses these categories of religious authority alongside the canonical categories for the OT Scriptures, “the prophecies . . . the law of Moses,” etc. (Smyrn. 5.1; cf. Phld. 5.1-2; 8.2; 9.1-2; Smyrn. 7.2), it appears as if Ignatius may be thinking of the written collection in the church at Antioch.64 As early as Papias’s elder (c. 100), we have reference to the titles of at least two of the Gospels, Matthew and Mark (Eusebius, HE 3.39.15-16), and very possibly to all four (HE 3.24.5-17).65 The brief excerpt from Papias’s work preserved by Eusebius in HE 3.39.15-16 shows us that churches in Asia Minor already at the dawn of the second century were interested to have information about their written apostolic sources for the words and acts of Jesus.

In Justin we see that it is not only the words of Jesus, contained in the “Memoirs of the Apostles,” which are recognized as being “big with power.” The words of his apostles too were recognized as the words of God (Dial. 119.6). Though Justin does not mention apostolic epistles, the effects of Paul’s letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, and possibly others, in his writings are well known to scholars.66 He also considers the Apocalypse of John to be the work of the

63. Some date Ignatius’s writings two or more decades later.
66. See Oskar Skarsaune, “Justin and His Bible,” in Justin Martyr and His Worlds, ed. Sara
apostle (Dial. 81.4). Skarsaune is right that in Justin’s writings, all of which were addressed to outsiders, “there is not yet any clear delimitation of exactly which documents should be considered authoritative above others, once we are outside the category of Memoirs or Gospels.”67 Skarsaune is also right when he continues, “On the other hand, Justin has an incipient canon in the way he refers to the Gospels, exactly as Memoirs, and he has a kind of implicit canon in the decisive role he accords to the apostles.”68

Two opposing tendencies seem to be visible in the second century. There was an ideal of unity throughout the universal church. Contrary to what some have said, this was not an ideal that originated only with Eusebius or with Constantine in the fourth century. The term “catholic,” in use since at least Ignatius, depicts the ideal, and a self-conception. But at the same time there was also a respect paid to individual churches and their traditions, particularly if those traditions were held to go back to the apostles. We see this in one of the most divisive debates of the second century, the quartodeciman controversy. Victor of Rome, apparently motivated by a desire for uniformity, went to the extreme of cutting off fellowship with the churches of Asia Minor who had a distinctive Easter practice (Eusebius, HE 5.24.9). Irenaeus’s cool-headed approach would eventually prevail. He respected the antiquity of both practices, and the claim that each side made that it had received these practices from the times of the apostles. Irenaeus’s judgment was that, in this case, diversity must be allowed: “the disagreement in the fast confirms our agreement in the faith” (HE 5.24.13). It would be wrong to conclude, based on this diversity of practice, that at the time of the controversy there was no Easter observance at all in Christianity, or no concern about it, only that there was no universally established Easter practice. It is similar, I would suggest, to conceptions of a NT canon.

By the end of the second century, judging from the writings of Justin, Melito, the Muratorian Fragment, Theophilus, Irenaeus, Serapion, Clement, Tertullian, and Hippolytus in particular, a four-Gospel canon, Acts, a corpus of thirteen or fourteen of Paul’s letters (with or without Hebrews), the Revelation of John and at least 1 Peter and 1 John and probably Jude must have been in collections of new covenant Scripture throughout the empire. It is hard to discern the status of the other Catholic Epistles at this time, as their attestation is infrequent. It may be that it was the Syrian church which was the main holdout against other members of this corpus. Even in the late fourth century and afterwards the churches in that region omitted the Catholic Epistles from their canon. There are in addition

Parvis and Paul Foster (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 53-76, 179-87, at 74, and his list of studies establishing this in n. 91. He notes the possible, though debatable, traces of James, 1 Peter, and 1 John.

67. Skarsaune, “Justin and His Bible,” 76.
68. Skarsaune, “Justin and His Bible,” 76.
a few other popular books that could boast some support early on, chiefly the *Apocalypse of Peter* and *The Shepherd*, and to a lesser extent Ps. Barnabas, and the *Didache* (all cited favorably or as Scripture by Clement of Alexandria). There is no support among the writers listed above for the *Gospel of Thomas* or any of the so-called gnostic Gospels.

The third century would see at least the following three developments. First, we hear less and less of the *Apocalypse of Peter, The Shepherd* (after the *MF* and Tertullian in particular), Ps. Barnabas, and the *Didache*. Second, the book of Revelation took a hit. After widespread use as Scripture for a century in both east and west, it came under suspicion due to the way it was being interpreted. The criticism evidently began in Rome, in relation especially to the Montanist controversy, but also to chiliasm. The issue seems to have been quickly resolved there, however. Doubt took root in the east, after Dionysius of Alexandria rejected on critical grounds the book’s apostolic authorship (though not its revelatory status, Eusebius *HE* 7.25.7). It was probably Eusebius’s equivocation about the book in his widely read *Ecclesiastical History* (3.25.1-7) however, which was most responsible for several eastern sources in the fourth and fifth centuries not including Revelation in their canonical lists. Third, by at least sometime in the late third century the collection of seven catholic letters existed as a corpus (Eusebius, *HE* 2.23-24-25).

That there was variation, beyond the “core” books, and at least no successful, far-reaching attempt to impose any strict limitation, accompanied by the promulgation of authoritative lists, has been widely interpreted to mean that there was no conception at all of Scripture as a definite or closed set of books. The evidence shows, however, not the absence of a notion of delimitation but rather a level of disagreement or simply uncertainty about what belonged in that delimited body of writings. First of all, it does not seem to be the case that no attempts were made to achieve agreement, even by the beginning of the third century. Tertullian mentions church councils that had deliberated on canon issues at least

69. It is possible that the attack of Gaïus, which alleged that Revelation had been authored by the heretic Cerinthus, also pertained to the Gospel of John. But the evidence for this is quite debatable. For more see Hill, *Johannine Corpus*, 172-204.


71. Cf. Sundberg, “Revised History”; Hahneman, *Muratorian Fragment*; McDonald, *Biblical Canon*; Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible*; Allert, *High View*, 144-45, states, “No matter how one looks at the history, it is difficult to maintain that the church had a closed New Testament canon for the first four hundred years of its existence. This means that an appeal to the ‘Bible’ as the early church’s sole rule for faith and life is anachronistic.” One will find an ancient writer, Hippolytus, caught in a display of “anachronism” in his *Contra Noetum* 9, when he says, “There is, brethren, one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source.” See the entire quote on p. 45 above.
far enough to reject *The Shepherd (De Pudicitia 10).* 72 Despite the lack of treatment it has received, this reference will not disappear simply through neglect, or by a flippant attribution to Tertullian’s “rhetoric.” 73 In my opinion, the *Muratorian Fragment* shows signs of being related to one of these councils; it speaks more prescriptively for the church, as a council would, than does Origen or Eusebius. 74

Elsewhere I have shown several other indications that churches and individuals well before the fourth century did assume that even the NT Scriptures were a closed body of writings. 75 Another such indication is contained in the records of the quartodeciman controversy just mentioned (probably in the early 190s). Eusebius preserves portions of a letter written by Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, who at one point protested, “I have studied all holy Scripture (*pasan hagian graphēn dielekēythōs*), I am not afraid of threats.” If, as Dungan says, “scripture is a boundless living mass of heterogenous sacred texts,” 76 how did Polycrates know when to stop studying?

More evidence that Christians had a notion of a limited collection of authoritative, new covenant books by the end of the second century has come to light recently. 77 At some point in the early history of Christian scribal culture, some Christian scribes began to place a *siglum* in the left-hand margins of books they were copying to mark quotations from Scripture. This *siglum*, an arrow or wedge-shaped sign known as a *dipē* (pl. *diplain*), had been adapted from Greek scholarship where it had served for some time as a multipurpose marginal marking to indicate some textual or paratextual feature. The sign is used (though not consistently) in the great fourth- and fifth-century uncial manuscripts of the Bible, א, א, ב, ג and ד, to mark where NT writers quote the OT. But our earliest evidence so far for this practice occurs in Christian, non-Biblical manuscripts where an author quotes Scripture (I have not yet found the marking used by Christian scribes for any citations not presumed to be scriptural). 78 Clearly, the scribes who used this *siglum* (and not all did) had to know in advance which quotations to mark and which ones not to mark; that is, they must have had some notion of a limi-
“The Truth Above All Demonstration”

The Truth Above All Demonstration

It is clear that the scribe of Codex Alexandrinus (5th c.) does not use diplai for Paul’s citations of two pagan authors at Acts 17:28, nor for the citation of Enoch in Jude 14–15, nor for the citation of Epimenides in Titus 1:12. When did Christian scribes begin using this sign to mark scriptural quotations? We do not know, but we have two instances that may date from the end of the second century or the early third century. One is a fragment of Irenaeus’s Against Heresies (P.Oxy. 3.405, from book 3), which papyrologist Colin Roberts confidently dated to the end of the second century.79 In the fragment Irenaeus quotes Matthew 3:16. The other early example is a fragment from an unidentified Christian theological work, P.Mich. xviii.764, dated by its editor to the second or third century.80 The left margin of the right-hand column of the fragment contains diplai marking citations of Jeremiah 18:3-6 and 1 Corinthians 3:13.

What is most significant for our purposes is that each of these early examples uses the diplai to mark quotations not simply from an OT book but from a NT book (Matthew and 1 Corinthians). The occurrence of this scribal convention as early as the late second or early third century is one more indication that Christians had a conception of Scripture as a distinct set of sacred texts, so much so that they could mark them out visually in their writings.

The Twenty-Seven-Book Canon

In his On Christian Doctrine 2.8.13 Augustine gave a list of the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. The OT books are the traditional Protestant Canon plus six others: Tobias, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, and Ecclesiasticus (this corresponds to the contents of Codex Sinaiticus).81 The NT books are exactly the twenty-seven books that make up the NT now accepted by the three major branches of Christianity. Before naming the books, Augustine notes that the skillful interpreter of the sacred writings will know all of these books and in regard to the canonical Scriptures will follow the judgment of the majority of churches, and those in particular that had apostolic foundations.

Accordingly, among the canonical Scriptures he will judge according to the following standard: to prefer those that are received by all the catholic churches to those which some do not receive. Among those, again, which are not received

81. See Stephen Dempster’s chapter in this volume.
by all, he will prefer such as have the sanction of the greater number and those of greater authority, to such as are held by the smaller number and those of less authority. If, however, he shall find that some books are held by the greater number of churches, and others by the churches of greater authority (though this is not a very likely thing to happen), I think that in such a case the authority on the two sides is to be looked upon as equal. (On Christian Doctrine 2.8.12) 

By those books “not received by all,” he may have had in mind the OT books outside the list acknowledged by the Jews. It at least seems that virtually all the canon lists from the fourth and fifth centuries agree on that smaller canon, beyond which there is variation in the lists. When Augustine says to prefer the books received by all, he might mean that the extra six might not be used with the same level of authority as the rest in the construction of Christian doctrine, and this would form an analogy with the way these (and other) books are termed “deuterocanonical” even by contemporary Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

It is possible that Augustine might also have had some NT books in mind as “not received by all.” We know that at this time there were churches which did not receive one or more of the books 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, James, Hebrews, Revelation. Yet in the decade of the 390s these same twenty-seven books would be acknowledged by Augustine (here) and by a council in Hippo, by a synod in Carthage, by Rufinus in Rome, by Jerome in Bethlehem (Ep. 53.9; 394), and by Amphilochius of Iconium in Asia Minor (Iambi ad Seleucum). These are the books Jerome translated for his new Latin edition, and this would have a decisive effect on Western Christianity. As is well known, this same list had been claimed by Athanasius thirty years earlier in Alexandria in his Easter letter of 367 (the same list minus Revelation had been promulgated by the Council of Laodicea in 363). It is often stated that Athanasius’s letter in 367 signifies the first time a definite NT canon with exactly these twenty-seven books appears. But on the contrary, it seems that by the time Athanasius identified it, this twenty-seven-book New Testament had already had a long history of acceptance in the church.

These same twenty-seven books are the ones which Eusebius, fifty or more years earlier, noted were either “recognized” (homologoumenoi) by all or “dis-

83. I take it he does not mean “preferring” them in the sense of including them in the canon, as he indicates that they are canonical, but preferring them in the sense of building Christian doctrine from them.
84. At least by the time of Jerome, Jude was questioned because of its citation of 1 Enoch: “Jude the brother of James, left a short epistle which is reckoned among the seven catholic epistles, and because in it he quotes from the apocryphal book of Enoch it is rejected by many. Nevertheless by age and use it has gained authority and is reckoned among the Holy Scriptures.” See Jerome, De Viris Illustribus 4. Cf. Eusebius, HE 2.23.25.
puted (antilegoumenoi)” but known to most (HE 3.25). It is true that Eusebius only regards the books in the first category as “covenanted,” which appears to be his terminology for “in the New Testament” or what we might call “canonical.” In the second category are the five books, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2-3 John. It is the “disputed” label that has drawn most of the critical attention, while not so much attention has been paid to the rest of Eusebius’s description: “disputed but nevertheless known to most.” In another passage he says these books are “disputed yet nevertheless used publicly by many in most churches” (HE 3.31.6). And when he elsewhere mentions James and Jude as belonging to the group of “the so-called Catholic Epistles,” he notes, “we know that these have been read publicly along with the remaining epistles in most churches” (2.23.24-25). Besides these five, he places no other books in the same category. Consequently, no matter where we judge Eusebius’s own preferences to lie in the matter of these five, according to his researches it would appear that all twenty-seven books (with the possible exception of Revelation) were the New Testament Scriptures for most of the churches when he wrote, early in the fourth century.

Just how long this might have been the case is impossible to tell. The same twenty-seven books, however, do appear in an even earlier but usually neglected list given by Origen in about 240 in his Homilies on Joshua 7.1.

But when our Lord Jesus Christ comes, whose arrival that prior son of Nun designated, he sends priests, his apostles, bearing “trumpets hammered thin,” the magnificent and heavenly instruction of proclamation. Matthew first sounded the priestly trumpet in his Gospel; Mark also; Luke and John each played their own priestly trumpets. Even Peter cries out with trumpets in two of his epistles; also James and Jude. In addition, John also sounds the trumpet through his epistles [and Apocalypse], and Luke, as he describes the Acts of the Apostles. And now that last one comes, the one who said, “I think God displays us just how long this might have been the case is impossible to tell. The same twenty-seven books, however, do appear in an even earlier but usually neglected list given by Origen in about 240 in his Homilies on Joshua 7.1.

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Charles E. Hill

apostles last,” and in fourteen of his epistles, thundering with trumpets, he casts down the walls of Jericho and all the devices of idolatry and dogmas of philosophers, all the way to the foundations.

Unfortunately, suspicion exists here because, first, we do not have these homilies in Greek but only in the Latin translation of Rufinus, who has been known to “correct” Origen at some points, and second, Origen elsewhere notes that some of these books were disputed.90 It is hardly likely, however, that Rufinus fabricated the entire analogy between the trumpets and the NT books. And even if we should allow for the most generous emendation, Origen’s original list could not have been much different. What is most significant, in the light of current attempts to maintain that the church had no conception of a limited canon until well into the fourth century, is that Origen would give a list of the NT “trumpets” at all. And despite his reporting elsewhere that the authenticity of 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John was doubted (Comm. John), and that the Pauline authorship of Hebrews was disputed (Eus. HE 6.25.3-14), Origen himself appears to have accepted and used all these books. He routinely used Hebrews as Paul’s,91 and where he acknowledges that “God only knows” who wrote it, he says it is “not inferior” to Paul. In his Homilies on Leviticus 4.4.2 he used 2 Peter and attributed it without qualification to the apostle. He used James and Jude in his Commentary on Matthew. As Metzger has observed, it is entirely credible that Origen would give his own view (probably too the view of his church in Caesarea) in a sermon in an unqualified way while qualifying a report in his more scholarly writings.92

Scripture, Tradition, and Authority

In a recent book, Craig Allert writes at length on the relationship of tradition and Scripture.93 There are a few points that surface in his interpretation of the


92. So Metzger, Canon, 140.

93. Allert, High View.
important witness of Irenaeus in particular which, because they resemble the views of other scholars as well, might be profitably considered here.

Irenaeus's advocacy of a four-Gospel canon is well known, but Allert seeks to show that Irenaeus's support for these Gospels as Scripture is not as absolute as one might think. Allert points, first, to the fact that Irenaeus does not always cite these Gospels accurately, and second, to Irenaeus's advocacy also of the rule of truth or rule of faith, a somewhat flexible creed-like summary of Christian doctrine (AH 1.10.1; 1.221. 5,20.1).94 The first objection, however, rests on a mistaken assumption about citations in antiquity. Full or consistent accuracy in citation is simply not a reliable measure of the respect a writer has for a text, and cannot provide a refutation of a writer’s explicit statements about that text.95 Allert’s second reason calls for more attention.

He cites a passage from the third book of Against Heresies in which Irenaeus says that if the apostles had not left us writings, we would have to have recourse to the churches they founded in order to ascertain the truth. Irenaeus even asserts that there are illiterate Christians who are saved (without Scripture) through their knowledge of the truth as symbolized in the church’s rule of faith. Allert deduces from this that “[t]he true doctrine of the church has been faithfully passed on and is sufficient to lead people to salvation. Irenaeus confirms that the church of the second century really had no need of a written canon because it already had a canon of truth. It was this Rule of Faith against which everything was measured in the second century — even the writings of the developing New Testament.”96 He says we cannot push this so far as to say that “Christian writings were relatively unimportant in the early church.” But he cites with approval two other scholars who seem nearly to push this far: Hans von Campenhausen, who writes that Scripture “never suppresses or replaces the living, public proclamation of the church, which holds the original ‘canon of truth’”,97 and Annette Yoshiko Reed, who says that for Irenaeus the canon functions as an “extra-textual criterion for

96. Allert, High View, 125.
distinguishing true doctrine from heretical speculations, authentic texts from spurious compositions, and proper Scriptural interpretation from ‘evil exegesis.’” 98 Allert’s conclusion, which he believes is consonant with that of other scholars, is that the rule of faith “tempers the exclusivity of the four Gospels as canon in Irenaeus.” 99 On this basis he writes at an earlier point in the book that “even the Christian writings eventually included in the New Testament canon were subjected to this Rule of Faith.” 100

The rule of faith was a summary of apostolic teaching based on the Trinitarian baptismal statement enjoined by Jesus (Matt. 28:19), with elaborations under “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” The baptismal injunction (given in Scripture) was a natural framework on which to base catechetical teaching and to formulate creedal statements. As elaborated in the church, informed by the rest of the New Testament revelation, it also became a hermeneutic for the proper interpretation of Scripture.

Reading the entire context of the opening chapters of Book 3, however, shows that Irenaeus’s first appeal is not to “tradition” or the rule of faith but in fact to Scripture. It is only the heretics who posit a hierarchy that subordinates Scripture to their tradition. At the beginning of 3.1.1, Irenaeus writes, “We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.” The apostles, invested with the Holy Spirit and with perfect knowledge, proclaimed, and then they published. Their writings declare the truth about God the Creator and Christ his Son. Irenaeus is here constructing an apologetic for the authority of the apostles and their writings, against the heretics. The apostles represent Jesus: “For the Lord of all gave to His apostles the power of the Gospel, through whom also we have known the truth, that is, the doctrine of the Son of God; to whom also did the Lord declare: ‘He that heareth you, heareth Me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me, and Him that sent Me’” (AH 3.praef.). Thus if any gnostic, Marcionite, or Valentinian does not agree to the truths taught by the apostles he despises the companions of the Lord; nay more, he despises Christ Himself the Lord; yea, he despises the Father also, and stands self-condemned” (3.1.2).

100. Allert, *High View*, 55. It is true of course that certain writings were judged not to be Scripture because they were deemed heretical. But this does not mean that those that were recognized had endured an ecclesiastical screening process before being used. When questions arose about books already in use, as with Hebrews or Revelation, judgments were made about their orthodoxy. But for these two books the deliberation took place after they had been received and used in church settings.
Irenaeus continues, “When, however, they are confuted from the Scriptures, they turn round and accuse these same Scriptures as not being correct, nor of authority, and that they are ambiguous, and that the truth cannot be derived from them by those who are ignorant of tradition” (AH 3.2.1). It is only at this point, after the heretics have made their escape from Scripture, after they have invoked their own secret and unwritten tradition, that the appeal to true, apostolic tradition preserved in the churches is made. For Irenaeus, the true tradition of faith exists plentifully, having been preserved in the churches which the apostles themselves founded. It had been faithfully passed down from presbyters like Clement in Rome and Polycarp in Smyrna, and those in Ephesus who knew the apostle John. It is this tradition, summarized in Irenaeus’s rule of truth, which confirms the right interpretation of Scripture and the faith that Irenaeus is trying to give.

According to Irenaeus (and Allert agrees with this), there can be no dichotomy between Scripture and tradition, for both derive from the same source: the apostles of Jesus. Not only Scripture but “the faith” itself had been handed down from the apostles. Scripture in this sense is tradition, for Scripture is handed down. Yet this does not make “tradition” the more ultimate category. Tradition is authoritative not because it is tradition, but because it, like Scripture, is apostolic. As Tertullian would later say, “In the Lord’s apostles we possess our authority; for even they did not of themselves choose to introduce anything, but faithfully delivered to the nations (of mankind) the doctrine which they had received from Christ” (Praescr. 6). And what is apostolic is authoritative because it derives from Jesus, and Jesus was sent from God (i Clem. 42.1-2). John Behr provides a fitting summary:

So, for Irenaeus, both the true apostolic tradition maintained by the churches, and the apostolic writings themselves, derive from the same apostles, and have one and the same content, the Gospel, which is itself . . . “according to the Scriptures.” “Tradition” for the early Church is, as Florovsky put it, “Scripture rightly understood.” Irenaeus’s appeal to tradition is thus fundamentally different to that of his opponents. While they appealed to tradition precisely for that which was not in Scripture, Irenaeus, in his appeal to tradition, was not appealing to anything else that was not also in Scripture. Thus Irenaeus can appeal to tradition, to establish his case, and at the same time maintain that Scripture cannot be understood except on the basis of Scripture itself, using its own hypothesis and canon.

When Irenaeus says that we would have to revert to the apostles’ successors if the apostles had not left us writings, he is making a point from a contrary-to-fact hypothetical. The example Irenaeus cites to prove his point is the existence of those who are “barbarians” in speech, who have not read Scripture but who believe the truth that had been preached to them. They either cannot read or do not have Scriptures in their language (or both). One imagines that Irenaeus may have had certain believers in his own communities in Gaul in mind (cf. AH 1.praef.3). In which case, those who preach to these people still have the Scriptures to guide their preaching. Irenaeus of course knew that one could be saved by hearing and learning the saving message without having Scripture. But this does not mean Irenaeus would agree with the statement that “the church of the second century really had no need of a written canon because it already had a canon of truth.” After showing that the church did possess the true tradition from the apostles, he continues, “let us revert to the Scriptural proof furnished by those apostles who did also write the Gospel, in which they recorded the doctrine regarding God, pointing out that our Lord Jesus Christ is the truth, and that no lie is in Him” (3.5.1). Thus we come full circle, back to the Scriptures, and Irenaeus goes on to fulfill the purpose of his third book, as he says in its preface, “In this, the third book, I shall adduce proofs from the Scriptures.”

The appeal to tradition and the rule of faith in Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, and others occurs largely in the context of the clash with heretical alternatives. This aspect of the use of tradition is thus essentially hermeneutical: Where does one go to find the correct interpretation of Scripture when Scripture is interpreted in a false but “plausible” manner, or when Scripture’s testimony is rejected in preference to sectarian tradition? One goes to the churches where the living faith, handed down from the same apostles who gave us the Scriptures, still flourished.

The “Inspiration” of Scripture and Non-Scripture: Of Preachers, Prophets, Pseudepigraphers, and Sibyls

No one would contest that early Christianity received the books of Scripture as “inspired.” 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20-21 are among the loci classici which even in early times both reflected and guided Christian thought about the divine

103. Tertullian in his Prescription uses but also modifies Irenaeus’s argument. To tell who had the right interpretation all one had to do was to ascertain where the true Christian faith resided, and this search must lead to the churches founded by the apostles (Praescr. 19). One did not and should not use Scripture in debate with heretics, for the heretics had no legitimate right to it. This was rhetorically brilliant, but in the end it could have the effect of inserting something in front of Scripture as representative of the divine will.
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origins of Scripture. It is often observed these days, however, that the early Christians had a broader view of inspired speech and writing than that which would develop later in the history of the church. It at least cannot be said that the ancients believed that Scripture and only Scripture was, in any sense, truly “inspired.” The author of 1 Clement may have believed that he penned his letter for the Roman church to the Corinthian church “through the Spirit” (1 Clem. 63.2). Ignatius of Antioch claims to have cried out “with God’s own voice,” at an emotional meeting in Philadelphia (Phil. 7.1-2). The work of the Septuagint translators was inspired, according to Irenaeus (AH 3.21.2). According to Clement of Alexandria, even Plato and other philosophers, when they confessed that there was only one true God, did so “through his inspiration (kat’ epipnoian autou)” (Protr. 6.71.1).

Since inspiration of some kind seems to pertain to a great deal more oral and written materials than are scriptural, many contemporary writers have pointed out that inspiration was not a “criterion” but a “corollary” of canonicity. This may be true, as far as it goes. It is probably going too far, though, to claim, as Lee McDonald does, that “The Christian community believed that God continued to inspire individuals in their proclamation, just as God inspired the writers of the New Testament literature. They believed the Spirit was the gift of God to the whole church, not just its writers of sacred literature.” That the Spirit was the gift to the whole church was indeed the church’s confession. But if the Spirit’s


105. This may well be the correct translation. If so, perhaps Clement was mindful of 1 Cor. 12:8 and regarded his letter as a word of wisdom or word of knowledge. Lindemann thinks this “does not mean that the text claims to be ‘inspired’; however, it may well mean that the expressions here are not simply of personal convictions” (Andreas Lindemann, “The First Epistle of Clement,” in The Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction, ed. Wilhelm Pratscher [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010], 47-69 at 63). It is possible, however, that the sentence should be translated with “through the Holy Spirit” referring not to Clement’s writing but to the means by which the Corinthians are expected to root out their jealousy, as in ANF 10 translation: “Joy and gladness will ye afford us, if ye become obedient to the words written by us and through the Holy Spirit root out the lawless wrath of your jealousy.” It may then be related to verses like Rom. 8:13, “but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Given Clement’s words in 8.1; 22.1 (where the phrase dia [tou] pneumatou hagiou, as in 63.2, also precedes the verb it modifies) and 45.2 in particular, I am inclined to the latter alternative.

106. epipnoia, a word not used in the NT or the LXX, means a breathing out, or inspiration.

107. See, e.g., the collection of witnesses in Allert, High View, 177-88.

work was, and was understood to be, “just the same” in all Christians alike, it
would be incomprehensible why nearly all of the pseudepigrapha needed to claim
authorship by one or another of the apostles.

Was there anything that distinguished Scripture from other speech and lit-
erature said to be inspired? This is a subject much too large for full treatment
here, but it might be profitable nevertheless to ask how Christian writers spoke
about Scripture in ways that set it apart from other forms of “inspired” speech
or writing. A few preliminary points: first, this is not a subject on which there
was a common, agreed-upon, technical vocabulary among Christians in the early
centuries. The vocabulary of inspiration, deriving partly from the sacred writings
themselves, partly from the larger Greco-Roman culture,109 encompassed a num-
ber of different words, each with a history and with its own set of associations.
Second, many of the examples cited by Allert in particular of the attribution of
inspiration or scriptural status to works that are not in Scripture concern books
of the so-called OT Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical writings. There are well-
known debates from the early centuries about these books and their place among
or alongside the sacred Scriptures. We cannot enter into these here (though see
“Identity [Canon] of Scripture” above), only to observe that this is a special cat-
egory, due to the fluctuating judgments about them in the early church. Third, I
strongly suspect that in some cases inspiration words are used in laudatory and
hyperbolic ways (as when one of the Cappadocians praises another as “God-
breathed” (theopneustos) or as “a second Moses” or the like.110 I do not think such
statements were meant or were taken as straightforward, prosaic speech. Finally,
some of the distinctions I will broach below occur together in various places, so
segregating them is for convenience.

Inspiration and the Holy Spirit

A number of references to inspiration in people or non-scriptural writings argu-
ably involve an inspiration of a different order. Whereas the inspiration of Scrip-
ture is consistently attributed to the Holy Spirit, to God, or to Christ (sometimes
as Logos or Wisdom), this is not always true of other “inspired” literature. It
was, of course, culturally speaking, much more natural for people in antiquity to
acknowledge the occurrence of inspired speech. Most of Greco-Roman society

109. Robert J. Hauck, The More Divine Proof: Prophecy and Inspiration in Celsus and Origen,
AAR Academy Series 69 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 138: “Pagan understandings of prophecy,
inspiration and revelation provided the theory and language for the discussion of the experience
of prophecy, visions, dreams, and the knowledge of God.”
110. See Basil, On the Spirit 74; Gregory of Nazianzus, Orations 21.33; Gregory of Nyssa,
Apologia in Hexaemeron (PG 44, 61-62). This might apply to certain other instances as well.
in general regarded reality as punctuated through and through with elements of the supernatural. The second-century anti-Christian critic Celsus despairs of recounting “all the oracular responses, which have been delivered with a divine voice by priests and priestesses, as well as by others . . . who were under a divine influence (entheō phōné)”; indeed “the world is full of such instances” (CCels. 8.45). Of course, Christians often regarded such things as the effects of evil demons. But even New Testament writers speak not strictly of the work of the Holy Spirit but presume the involvement of plural “spirits” in forms of non-scriptural, divine-human interaction (1 Cor. 12:10; 14:22; 1 John 4:2; Rev. 22:6).

An instructive test case is the Sibyl. The collection of Sibylline oracles that has survived from antiquity is a fictitious and apologetically motivated Jewish production, which has been further interpolated and supplemented by one or more Christian hands. This seems plain to modern students, but was not so plain to all early Christian writers. Nor, for that matter, was it clear to many Christians living much later, such as Michelangelo, who depicted the four main Sibyls on the Sistine Chapel ceiling along with the Hebrew prophets. Clearly, some Christian writers did not know quite what to do with the Sibyl. For who could, or would want to, deny that she spoke beforehand of the coming of Christ, much like the Hebrew prophets? As perplexing as her “inspiration” might be to us, we note that she did present early Christians an undeniable apologetic opportunity.

In his Protreptikos, Clement calls the Sibyl a prophetess (prophetēs). This already reminds us that for early Christians, not every “true” prophet or prophetess gave revelations that were scriptural, and this may provide some insight into, among other texts, Jude 14, where the author regards Enoch as a prophet. The Sibyl, Clement says, speaks “very much in an inspired way” (entheōn sphodra), using a word (entheōs, full of God, inspired, or possessed) not used in the LXX or the NT but used, as we saw above, by Celsus for pagan oracles of various kinds. He then begins quoting from the prophets of Scripture, whose words he attributes in a conspicuous way to the Holy Spirit, “Now Jeremiah, the all-wise prophet, or rather the Holy Spirit in Jeremiah, shows what God is.” “Once again, the same Spirit says through Isaiah. . . . What says the Holy Spirit to them through Hosea?” (Protr. 8). Clement never ascribes the Sibyl’s words to the Holy Spirit, nor, I believe, do any Christian writers do so.

The treatise Cohortatio ad Graecos, at one time attributed to Justin but now ascribed to a third-century writer, acknowledges that the Sibyl spoke “by some

111. Here it is the one Spirit who gives the gift of distinguishing spirits.
112. 2 Peter 1:20, on the other hand, speaks of “prophecy of Scripture.”
113. Such as Ps-Barn. 11.10 and 12.1, which attribute to a “prophet” words from 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra respectively.
115. Moreschini and Norelli, Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature, 1:202-3. The translation used is from ANF 1; the Greek text is from Miroslav Marcovich, ed., Pseudo-Justinus
kind of potent inspiration (ek tinos dynatês epipnoias) ... truths which seem to be much akin to the teaching of the prophets” (37.1; 38.2). She even predicted “in a clear and patent manner, the advent of our Saviour Jesus Christ” (38.1). Yet the author never attributes her inspiration to the Holy Spirit or equates her writings with Scripture. Instead, he tells his pagan readers that her prophecies “will constitute your necessary preparatory training (progymnasma) for the study of the prophecies of the sacred writers (tês tôn hierônandrônprophêtêrias)” (Cohort. 38.2; so also Clement, Protr. 8.1). This author concludes, “From every point of view, therefore, it must be seen that in no other way than only from the prophets who teach us by divine inspiration (dia tês theias epipnoiai), is it at all possible to learn anything concerning God and the true religion” (Cohort. 38.2). Whatever was the source of the Sibyl’s “potent inspiration,” it was not divine in the sense that the scriptural prophets’ inspiration was.

In sum, many early Christians held notions of inspiration that accommodated the interaction of a variety of supernatural or otherworldly influences on a human subject, for ends that might be good or evil or mixed (see below). For these phenomena they made use of a “religious” vocabulary that was shared with the larger culture. But when it comes to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, we are met with an unparalleled clarity and consistency in the Christian confession of these books as “inspired” or “ breathed out” by God, or specifically by the Holy Spirit (De Principiis 4.1.9).

Full or Partial Inspiration

The attribution of Scripture to the Holy Spirit entailed something else that apparently separated Scripture from other forms of inspired speech, and that was its plenary nature. “All Scripture,” wrote Paul, “is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). Clement of Rome told the Corinthians, “You have studied the Holy Scriptures which are true, and given by the Holy Spirit (dia tou pneumatostou hagiou). You know that nothing unjust or counterfeit (oudenadikonoudenparapei̇menon) is written in them” (45.2-3). Irenaeus is assured that “the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit” (AH 2.28.2). But other speakers or writings could apparently be unevenly inspired. Justin could say that the Logos spoke through Socrates when he exposed the daemons (1 Apol. 5) and Clement of Alexandria could say that Plato and other philosophers spoke through God’s inspiration (kat’ epipnoian autou) when they confessed that there was only one true God (Protr. 6.71.1). But clearly, little if anything else these Greeks said or wrote could be so described.


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Augustine in the *City of God* also evinces a similar understanding of certain apocryphal Jewish writings:

There is indeed some truth to be found in these Apocrypha; but they have no canonical authority (*nulla est canonica auctoritas*) on account of the many falsehoods they contain. Certainly, we cannot deny that Enoch (the seventh in descent from Adam) wrote a number of things by divine inspiration,\textsuperscript{116} since the apostle Jude says as much in a canonical epistle. But there was good reason for the exclusion of these writings from the canon of the Scriptures. (*CivDei 15.23.4*)

He goes on to observe that, unlike the scriptural books, Enoch and other writings were not preserved by the priests in the temple, and then cites Enoch’s story of angels mating with women as indicative of its falsehoods.

### Inspiration and Frenzy

One important way in which the Sibyl’s inspiration distinguished itself from that of the scriptural prophets had to do with her psychological state. The very first literary reference to the Sibyl has her prophesying “with raging mouth” (Heraclitus, fr. 75),\textsuperscript{117} and depictions of her speaking in mantic frenzy are common, in non-Christian and Christian sources. The Sibyl, says the author of the *Cohortatio*, “was filled indeed with prophecy at the time of the inspiration (*epipnoias*), but as soon as the inspiration ceased, there ceased also the remembrance of all she had said” (37.2).\textsuperscript{118}

Though one might find an occasional representation of the OT prophets in similar terms, the state of mental ecstasy was generally not understood to be the genuine mode of true prophecy by church writers.\textsuperscript{119} The common view of mantic speech is seen in an offhand remark by Justin, *Dial. 9.1*, who chides Trypho for speaking nonsense when he condemned Christians, “For you know not what you say . . . and you speak, like a diviner (*apomanteuomenos*) whatever comes into your mind.” Irenaeus describes the process by which Marcus the Valentinian deluded his disciples/victims:

\textsuperscript{116} There is no separate word for “inspiration” here, simply *divine*, “divinely.”


\textsuperscript{118} See also Origen, *CCels. 7.3*.

\textsuperscript{119} It is sometimes held that Justin is an exception, for he speaks in *Dial. 115* of Zechariah prophesying “in a trance.” I am not convinced that this is an exception, for Justin’s point here is simply that Zechariah was not describing what he was seeing with his eyes but was reporting what he saw in a vision. The key seems to be that he was in possession of his senses as he wrote or dictated.
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He says to her, “Open thy mouth, speak whatsoever occurs to thee, and thou shalt prophesy.” She then, vainly puffed up and elated by these words, and greatly excited in soul by the expectation that it is herself who is to prophesy, her heart beating violently [from emotion], reaches the requisite pitch of audacity, and idly as well as impudently utters some nonsense as it happens to occur to her, such as might be expected from one heated by an empty spirit. . . . Henceforth she reckons herself a prophetess.

The general recognition that the true prophet spoke while in control of his/her own senses, would become important in the evaluations of Montanist prophecy.\(^{120}\)

The New Prophets were disqualified in the eyes of many not only because some of their prophecies proved false, but also because they came through mantic or ecstatic speech (the Anonymous, Eusebius, *HE* 5.17.1-4; Epiphanius, *Panar.* 48). Origen was one who offered several reflections on the “mechanics” of true, prophetic inspiration. Distancing himself from the views of Philo\(^{121}\) and of the Montanists, including Tertullian,\(^{122}\) Origen took up and explicitly refuted the opinion that the Hebrew prophets spoke in ecstasy.

For it is not the case, as some people surmise, that the prophets were out of their minds and spoke by the Spirit’s compulsion. The Apostle says: “If a revelation is made to another who is sitting there, let the first one be silent” (*1 Cor* 14:30). That shows that the one who speaks has control over when he wants to speak and when he wants to be silent. Also, to Balaam it is said: “But there is a word that I am sending into your mouth, take care to speak this” (Num 23:5, 16).\(^{123}\) This implies that he has the power, once he has received the word of God, to speak or to be silent. (*Hom. Ezek.* 6.1.1)

He then cites Jonah as an example of a prophet who was told what to say by God and did not want to say it (*Hom. Ezek.* 6.1.2). Origen saw the Holy Spirit’s work as effecting a clarity of mind, rather than ecstasy (*CCels.* 7.4) and that this constituted a “new way which had nothing in common with the divination inspired by daemons” (*CCels.* 7.7). The inspired prophet Moses, in fact, wrote his five books “like a distinguished orator who pays attention to outward form” (*CCels.* 1.18). As

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122. Tertullian defends ecstasy or rapture (amentia) of the New Prophecy in *Adv. Marc.* 4.22 (cf. the ecstasy of dreams in *De Anima* 45 and note that he wrote a now lost work *On Ecstasy*).

“The Truth Above All Demonstration”

to the Sibyl, the ambiguity as to the source of her inspiration in earlier Christian writers is removed by Origen: it is “of the race of daemons” (\textit{CCels.} 7.4).\textsuperscript{124}

\textbf{Authority and Apostolicity}

Ignatius believed that he spoke an exhortation at Philadelphia in an oracular way, with the voice of God. But when he wrote his letters, he recognized a categorical difference between his words and those of an apostle: “I do not order you like Peter and Paul. They were apostles: I am a convict” (Rom. 4:3; cf. \textit{Trall.} 3.3). An extemporaneous burst of what he deemed divine insight might produce an utterance fit for the moment. But as we have seen, it was apostolicity that was the defining human characteristic of the new Scriptures to be passed down in the church. For apostolicity denoted, indeed, an investment by the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49; John 20:21-22; Acts 1:8, etc.), but also an authority bestowed by Christ and predicted in the prophets, an authority to pass down authoritative teaching that is permanently relevant for the church (Irenaeus, \textit{AH} 3.1.1).

It is no surprise, then, that another reason for the church’s rejection of Montanist claims to inspiration by the promised Paraclete was that their prophecies were portrayed as something equal to, or greater than, the apostolic revelation. Whereas one may find early Christian writers who countenanced the possibility of the episodic appearance of the prophetic charism, the New Prophets crossed a line and so brought forth further reflections on the limits of legitimate prophecy. A Montanist named Themiso, we are told, impudently “composed a general epistle in imitation of the apostle” (Eusebius, \textit{HE} 5.18.5); Eusebius reports that the Roman controversialist Gaius, in his \textit{Dialogue with Proclus}, curbed the recklessness and audacity of his Montanist opponents who composed new “Scriptures” (\textit{HE} 6.20). The comment of an anonymous anti-Montanist critic has the same import. With a touch of sarcasm, he says that he had refrained from writing a response earlier “from fear and concern lest in any way I appear to some to add a new writing or add to the word of the new covenant of the gospel to which one who has chosen to live according to the gospel itself can neither add nor subtract” (Eusebius, \textit{HE} 5.16.3).\textsuperscript{125} Clearly it was perceived that some were presuming to add something. I have a hard time reading these statements in any other way than as indicating that these church leaders at the end of the second century held that the new covenant was represented by a known body of writings that could not be added to or subtracted from.

Even the rightful use of the prophetic gift was determined, by some at least,

\textsuperscript{124} See Hauck, \textit{More Divine Proof}, 121.
\textsuperscript{125} Translation from Heine, ed., \textit{The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia} (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989).
to have ceased with apostolic times, for true prophecy is only that which was approved by apostles. This forms a kind of parallel to what Josephus and the rabbis considered to be a “prophetic epoch” that had ended with Haggai, Zephaniah, and Malachi in the time of Artaxerxes. “From Artaxerxes up to our own time every event has been recorded but this is not judged worthy of the same trust, since the exact line of succession of the prophets did not continue” (CApion 1.8.41). Even an occasional prophetic utterance could be acknowledged, but whatever it produced was not considered to be on the same level as Scripture, because the succession of the prophets had come to an end. For Christians it was the time of the apostles which was the epoch of “canonical” revelation. This is seen also in the Muratorian Fragment when it prohibits The Shepherd from being read in church, not because it was not “inspired” but because it was after the apostles’ time (lines 79–80).

Augustine in Contra Faustum 11.5 (usually dated between 397 and 400) offers some reflection on the divide that separates scriptural and non-scriptural books:

[T]here is a distinct boundary line separating all productions subsequent to apostolic times from the authoritative canonical books of the Old and New Testaments (libris . . . canonicae auctoritatis Veteris et Novi Testamenti). The authority of these books has come down to us from the apostles through the successions of bishops and the extension of the Church, and, from a position of lofty supremacy, claims the submission of every faithful and pious mind.

Even if innumerable books should be written containing the same truths as Scripture, “there is not the same authority (auctoritas),” says Augustine, for “Scripture has a sacredness peculiar to itself” (CFaustum 11.5). We are free to agree or disagree with portions of any other book, depending on whether that portion can be clearly demonstrated, or shown to agree with a canonical book. But because of “the distinctive peculiarity of the sacred writings (in illa vero canonica eminentia sacrarum Litterarum), we are bound to receive as true whatever the canon shows to have been said by even one prophet, or apostle, or evangelist. Otherwise, not a single page will be left for the guidance of human fallibility” (CFaustum 11.5).

In these reflections we see multiple ways in which Scripture distinguishes itself from all other books. Its properties of sacredness and authority are internal properties by which Scripture manifests itself to be what it is: the word of God. Originating with prophet, apostle, or evangelist, the writings of Scripture have come down from the apostles as from a fountainhead, flowing through the hands of successive generations of church leaders. All these things form a distinct boundary line for Augustine.

Inspiration, Inscripturation, and Copying

The Sibyl’s words were often thought to have been inspired by some sort of spiritual power. But the taking down of her words was another matter. Their written form sometimes lacks proper meter, says the author of the Cohortatio, because those who took them down were illiterate (an interesting use of the word “illiterate”) and often went astray. The Sibyl could not later correct the meter for she could not remember what she had spoken in ecstasy (37.3). By contrast, Origen speaks of the scriptural prophets’ inspiration as pertaining not only to their experience and to their speech, but also to the writing process. “It was by a more divine spirit not only that they (the prophetic visions) were seen by the prophet, but also that they were described verbally and in writing” (CCels. 1.43).128 Thus even the writing down of Scripture is due to the divine Spirit.

This understanding of the inscripturation process, as also attributable to the working of the Holy Spirit, was probably assumed by Christians in general. The same did not extend, of course, to the discrete copying process by scribes after the original, for Irenaeus, Origen, Jerome, and others complain from time to time about the faults of scribes.129 For ancient readers, the need to inspect and correct handwritten manuscripts was a fact of life. Well aware of the imperfections inherent in the process of transcription, early Christian users of these manuscripts did not despair of their access to the word of God (unlike some modern counterparts). They seemed to have confidence that in doubtful cases the original text was there to be found, if sought for.

In conclusion, it is certainly the case that “inspiration” had a broader meaning and a somewhat expanded vocabulary in the patristic period than would later be the case in Christian theology. Yet there were several ways in which the inspiration of the sacred texts by the Holy Spirit was perceived to be distinctive, such that the Spirit’s activity in producing Scripture was not “just the same” in the speech and writing of individual believers.

The Private Use of Scripture

In Deuteronomy 17:18-19 the future king, assumed to have the ability to read, is instructed to “write for himself in a book a copy of this law, from that which is in charge of the Levitical priests; and it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all

129. E.g., Irenaeus, AH 5.30.1; Origen, In Matth. 15.14.
the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them." We live like kings today, with the ability to read daily from even several translations of the Bible, in copies we did not have to write out for ourselves. In antiquity, however, both books and people who could read them were much less readily available. Yet Christians were very much given to the reading and the study of their books, more so, it seems to me, than they are sometimes given credit for, and it apparently did not take long for the demand for Christian books to grow.

Throughout the period under review, the codex form is developing, enabling the binding together of (progressively larger) groups of scriptural books. One effect of the transition from the roll to the codex was the relatively greater affordability and portability of scriptural texts, thus making private possession and use of them an increasing possibility. Irenaeus must have thought there were many who could heed his advice when he advocated “daily study” (diuturno studio) of the things God has revealed in the sacred Scriptures (AH 2.27.1). Only a little later Clement of Alexandria could assume that many Christians not only could read but also had their own copies of at least some of the Scriptures. He wrote of the true, “gnostic” Christian, “His sacrifices are prayers, and praises, and readings in the Scriptures before meals, and psalms and hymns during meals and before bed, and prayers also again during night” (Strom. 7.7.49). For others, the churches often provided daily public reading and exposition of the Scriptures. The practice of daily Bible reading, whether public or private, is mentioned in Apostolic Tradition 36 (traditionally assigned to Hippolytus) in the early third century: “And if there is a day on which there is no instruction let each one at home take a holy book and read in it sufficiently what seems profitable.”

For three years in the 240s, Origen preached almost every day in Caesarea. In some of the homilies that survive (mostly in Latin translation), we find Origen exhorting catechumens to devote themselves to daily hearing of the Law read publicly (Hom. Josh. 4.1). While preaching on Genesis 24:15-16, he urges his hearers, “come daily to the wells,” that is, to the wells of Scripture (Hom. Gen 10.3). Origen reproaches those who come to church and hear Scripture read but do

130. Pace Roger Bagnall, Early Christian Books in Egypt (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 21: “[W]e have little evidence for the private lay ownership of biblical texts at any early date, and even later, ownership of Christian books by individuals may not have been extensive,” and 23, “There is no reason to suppose that Christians were disproportionately more likely than other people to own books.”

131. Gamble rightly cautions that “it can hardly be supposed that every Christian had personal copies of scripture” (Books and Readers, 232; see also Alistair Stewart-Sykes, Hippolytus: On the Apostolic Tradition [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001], 166). Yet he concedes that this reflects an ideal, and the injunction means that at least some people had their own copies and could read. The words of Clement and Origen (see below) may indicate that personal ownership of at least some Scriptural texts by laypeople was becoming more common.
not pay close attention, complaining, “There is no mutual investigation of these words which have been read, no comparison” (Hom. Exod. 12.2). He exhorts the faithful to “read the text again and inquire into it” and mentions those who are “neither occupied at home in the word of God nor frequently enter the church to hear the word” (Hom. Gen. 11.3). These last excerpts assume that many laypeople had their own copies of scriptural books and could read them at home and bring them to church. The growing availability of scriptural texts for a burgeoning reading laity is corroborated by the discovery of several early NT and OT papyri, including miniature codices and opisthographs, which show signs of having been copied for private, not public, use.\footnote{For instance, P$_{45}$ and P$_{72}$, the latter being in fact a miscellany that included 1 and 2 Peter and Jude mixed in with sundry non-biblical books. This drive for accessibility of the Scriptures is one significant reason for the entry of many errors into the manuscript tradition as copies were often made outside the direct auspices of church scriptoria.}

The line between the recognition of Scripture’s spiritual power, and a superstitious regard for it, may, however, have been too fine for many lay believers. As a sacred object, Scripture was sometimes treated as possessing magical powers, as manifested in the amulets\footnote{Many Psalm texts have been found in amulets used apparently for magical purposes. The incipits, or first words, of the Gospels were also popular. The practice was prohibited in canon 36 of the Council of Laodicea of 360.} incantations, examples of bibliomancy, and hermeneia, which have survived from antiquity.\footnote{Gamble, Books and Readers, 237.} Gamble cites Augustine’s words about one magical practice: “Regarding those who draw lots from the pages of the Gospel, although it could be wished that they would do this rather than run about consulting demons, I do not like this custom of wishing to turn the divine oracles to worldly business and the vanity of this life, when their object is another life” (Ep. 55.37).\footnote{Gamble, Books and Readers, 240.} Gamble concludes his treatment of this subject by saying, “But behind the sundry magical uses of these books lies the regular solemn reading and hearing of scripture in Christian worship, in which the power of scripture was experienced and emphasized as the source of divine revelation — a power that belonged to words, but no less to the books in which they stood.”\footnote{Gamble, Books and Readers, 241.}

**Conclusion**

Churches and individual Christians today who seek to give rightful place to Scripture as God’s word face multiple challenges, many of which have real precedents in the ancient world. It is not too much to hope that we may still learn from the constructive ways in which our forebears responded to the challenges they faced,
and that, like many of them, we too might persevere and contribute constructively to the ongoing ministry of the word of God in the world. In that spirit, it is fitting to conclude with the advice of Theonas of Alexandria writing to a younger colleague about the year 300:

Let no day pass by without reading some portion of the Sacred Scriptures, at such convenient hour as offers, and giving some space to meditation. And never cast off the habit of reading in the Holy Scriptures; for nothing feeds the soul and enriches the mind so well as those sacred studies do. (Letter to Lucianus 9; ANF 6, 160-61)