
Introduction

Mapping Theologies of Scripture

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Most of us hear the word “scripture” without stumbling over it. Using it, we give the impression, even to ourselves . . . that we know what scripture is. On reflection, it turns out that it is hardly the case.

—Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture?*

What is scripture?¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith challenges us to pause and ponder this question. All religious traditions that ground themselves in texts must grapple with certain questions. In worship services and public and private readings, Christians often turn to scripture for guidance: to the stories of Abraham or Moses, to the Psalms, to the prophecies of Isaiah, to the life of Jesus, to the letters of Paul, to the vision of John. Therefore, Christians must confront their own set of questions. Indeed, to ask the question, what is scripture? is to become mired in a muddy pool of questions: What is the nature of scripture? Is it divine? Human? Both? Is scripture authoritative? If so, how and for whom? What is the scope of its authority? Is scripture inspired by God? What about scriptural interpretation—is that inspired? Does God illuminate humans to understand scripture? Is there an appropriate method of interpreting the words of scripture? Who can interpret scripture? What is its purpose? How *is* scripture used? How *ought* scripture to be used? How do scripture and tradition relate? Does scripture interpret tradition or does the tradition interpret scripture? Or both? What does it mean for a Christian to call the Bible “the Word of God”? And if Jesus is also

called the Word of God, how does Jesus as the Word of God relate to the Bible as the Word of God?

To ask these questions about scripture is to set forth on a dark and winding path—there seems no end to the list of questions over which we suddenly stumble. But we are not the first to ask these questions, nor the first to stumble over them; in fact, two thousand years of Christian tradition provide guideposts to mark our way and lampposts to illuminate our path. This book traces what the preeminent Christian theologians have said about scripture when they stumbled over these questions, and over each other. The goal of this volume is to map the terrain of the Christian tradition on scripture and let the contours speak for themselves. This is not a work of dogmatic or systematic theology that posits a specific doctrine of scripture that must be rigidly followed. Nor is this a work of religious history that records the transmission of Bible texts or the development of the canon; it does not enter into debates about how the Bible was formed, compiled, and preserved. Rather, this book investigates the history of Christian thought by looking at major figures in the tradition and describing their unique contributions to the lingering and overarching question, what is scripture?

We will use the phrase “theologies of scripture” to include the diverse discussions about the nature, authority, interpretation, and uses (liturgical, political, corporate, personal, etc.) of scripture, as well as the relationship between scripture and tradition. Theologians at different times have focused on different topics regarding scripture. While Origen’s treatment of scripture is distinct from both St. Augustine’s and St. Thomas Aquinas’s, all three dealt with similar issues common in the patristic and medieval eras—relating the plain or literal sense of the biblical text to figural, allegorical, or spiritual interpretations. Theologians of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation focused on the issue of authority and interpretation, as debates continued about which books should be considered scripture and who was the appropriate interpreter of them. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries theologians sought to determine how the Bible was still the Word of God in light of historical-critical methods that seemed to challenge its historicity and reliability.

The term “scripture” as used in this book designates a body of texts that are recognized as authoritative for Christian thinking—although the nature and extent of that authority is a matter of debate. Christians agree that the Bible bears witness to the drama of redemption in both the history of Israel and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Within

this basic agreement on the importance of scripture, however, various theologies of scripture have emerged. Our investigation will find that different theologies of scripture exist not because the Christian tradition is inherently contentious and cannot reach a consensus, but because each moment, era, and epoch raises different questions about the nature, authority, and interpretation of scripture, and about how scripture relates to tradition, reason, and experience.

While the focus of the following chapters is on theologies of scripture, it is important to note that each of the theologians examined deals with a common issue, namely, negotiating how the self-disclosure of God in Jesus relates to the scriptures as the Word of God. As you read these chapters, notice that each theologian discusses the relationship between “the Word” becoming human flesh (Incarnation) and “the Word” becoming human words.²

This book has four parts. Parts I, II, and III present the theologies of scripture in three different historical eras; Part IV deals with contextual theologies of scripture. Each of the first three parts begins with an introductory chapter that presents an overview of the theologies of scripture in that era. The goal of the overview chapters is to provide readers with a broader context for understanding the more specialized studies of individual theologians that follow, and also to identify the concerns that bind their work together.

In the first overview chapter, “Patristic and Medieval Theologies of Scripture,” Lewis Ayres outlines key categories in the theologies of scripture of those eras and explains how patristic and medieval reading practices imply certain assumptions about the nature of scripture. In his overview chapter, “Theologies of Scripture in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation,” Michael S. Horton describes the role of scripture in the age of reform and introduces the often-misunderstood Protestant position on *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) as it relates to tradition. Finally, in “Theologies of Scripture in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” John R. Franke argues that theologians in the past two centuries provided a variety of theological conceptions of scripture that sought to affirm its unique and authoritative status while also taking into account the questions and challenges posed by the Enlightenment.

Each of the remaining chapters in the first three parts is devoted to an in-depth presentation of a particular theologian’s view and treatment of scripture, except for the chapter on scripture and theology in early mod-

ern Catholicism, which covers numerous theologians. The chapters do not attempt to defend the theologian they are describing. Rather, they investigate how each theologian developed ways of interpreting scripture in response to the demands of his time and place and his particular understanding of the Christian tradition.

Part I, on patristic and medieval theologies of scripture, covers Origen, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas. R. R. Reno brings Origen's spiritual interpretation of scripture into focus, offering a detailed analysis of a portion of Origen's exegesis and then examining Origen's teaching on scripture in Book IV of his treatise, *On First Principles*. According to Reno, Origen casts a fresh and interesting light on the role of the literal sense of scripture in the divine plan. Origen is an excellent point of departure for our study since he provides a clear example of the underlying practice of early Christian interpretation.

Pamela Bright argues that the axis of Augustine's doctrine of scripture is the Incarnate Word. To underline the originality of Augustine's theology of scripture, Bright follows the development of his thought patterns with particular attention to two of his works—*On Christian Doctrine* and *Confessions*. She shows how Augustine sets his theology of scripture within the broader spectrum of the theology of salvation.

Peter M. Candler, Jr., describes the context of the period between Augustine and Aquinas and some of the developments in Christian thought that had a formative influence on Aquinas's notion of scripture. Through his correlative accounts of the literal sense of scripture and of its relation to theology, Aquinas continually uses scripture to indicate the abundance of what we are allowed to believe.

Part II covers the Reformation theologians Martin Luther and John Calvin, as well as the competing views offered by key figures in early modern Catholicism. Mickey L. Mattox explains Luther's contention that the scriptures alone speak with certainty and bind the consciences of the faithful in obedience to the Word of God. For Luther, scripture was a source not only of theological truth, but also of practical wisdom for facing all the challenges of life. Mattox argues that the tension between Law and Gospel lies at the heart of Luther's theology of scripture.

Randall C. Zachman points out that Calvin was concerned not only with the authority of scripture, but also with the true interpretation of scripture and its proper use in the Church. Calvin devoted his life to restoring the teaching of scripture to the Church and to training future interpreters of scripture.

Donald S. Prudlo examines the complexity of the Catholic Counter-Reformation's relation to the scriptures. For Catholics, *sola scriptura* was a puzzling doctrine because the Church itself had gathered, tested, and confirmed the scriptural canon; therefore, the Bible had been compiled by its authority. Prudlo explains how the key theme for Catholic scriptural theology taken up at the Council of Trent was the relationship between scripture and tradition.

Part III, on theologies of scripture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, covers Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Hans Frei. Jeffrey Hensley contextualizes Schleiermacher within the Reformed tradition before turning to the dogmatic function, location, and meaning of scripture as a doctrine in Schleiermacher's book *Christian Faith*. Hensley argues that Schleiermacher's views have much to offer contemporary theologians who want to maintain an honest openness to the best of historical scholarship but still regard scripture as a normative, inspired, and sufficient witness to the Word of God in Jesus Christ.

Mary Kathleen Cunningham explains Barth's view of scripture as a witness to God's self-attestation in Jesus Christ. Barth points out that the Bible is God's Word to the extent that God causes it to be God's Word—that is, to the extent that God speaks through it. According to Barth, the Bible becomes God's Word not because of our initiative, but rather because of God's.

W. T. Dickens presents Balthasar's views on the necessity, unity, inspiration, and authority of scripture. He also describes how Balthasar conceived of the Bible as authoritative by virtue of its role in mediating God's presence to the faithful as they use it in their common, ecclesial life. However, Balthasar denied that tradition constituted a distinct source of revelation that the magisterium—the teaching office and authority of the Roman Catholic Church—has at its exclusive disposal.

Mike Higton describes Frei's call for a pre-critical way of reading scripture. In doing this, Frei was not rejecting the last two centuries of biblical criticism. Rather, he was arguing that the modern way of reading scripture has missed the point of identifying Jesus Christ as the heart of scripture. Higton explains key concepts that are central to Frei's view of scripture: narrative interpretation, figural reading, and the *sensus literalis*.

Following the three historical sections, Part IV deals with contextual theologies of scripture. The four chapters in this section illuminate the fact that scriptures are not read in a vacuum but in specific contexts and for various purposes. Graham Ward's chapter, "Tradition and Traditions:

Scripture, Christian Praxes, and Politics,” presents a clear understanding of what tradition is and is not, as well as how tradition, traditions, and scripture relate. His chapter serves as an example of the contextualizing power of tradition and traditions.

In “Scripture, Feminism, and Sexuality,” Pamela D. H. Cochran outlines the differing feminist perspectives on scripture, the nature and extent of its authority, and how it ought to be interpreted. Cochran explains why various theologies of scripture enter into conflicts regarding feminism and sexuality.

Lewis V. Baldwin and Stephen W. Murphy’s chapter, “Scripture in the African-American Christian Tradition,” explores the “doubleness” of African-American Christianity—in response to the centuries of oppression faced by African Americans, this tradition looks to scripture for a dual hope of salvation in this world and in the next. Their chapter offers an example of how a tradition reads scripture and even comes to tell its own story, from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement and Black theology, using the language and symbols of the Bible.

In “Postmodern Scripture,” Gerard Loughlin explores what happens to such ideas as scriptural “inspiration” and “truth” in a postmodern context. While postmodernism insists on the textuality of the world, Loughlin suggests that it must also allow for what comes to us from beyond and between the texts we inhabit, as well as from within them. He argues that it is precisely because we are within textuality that we can see beyond it.

In mapping the theologies of scripture, this book serves as a guide to the variety of views about scripture found throughout the Christian tradition and can also assist us in developing theologies of scripture for our present and future contexts. In claiming to offer a map, it is important to note that making a map of the wilderness renders it no less wild.³ Also, reading a map is not the same as walking the wilds and stumbling a bit. Stumbling challenges our quest for steady forward progress, reminds us that we are contingent, and challenges our autonomy. One does not calculate a stumble; one stumbles unexpectedly—and it is only when we stumble, it seems, that we begin to ask questions. This is no less true of scripture and theology. In fact, one of the great things about scripture is that it is unpredictable, or rather, always surprising—this makes exegesis difficult, but also rich. Those who want to pave a smooth path through scripture—or fly over it, looking down from a safe remove—rather than risk stumbling, are missing the twists and turns and moments of being perplexed. Inter-

estingly, one can stumble over something or one can stumble onto something—stumbling can be at once an interruption in a planned course *and* a moment of discovery (such as happened to Paul on the road to Damascus). Stumbling raises a question, and a question is a revelation of a kind.

The great thinkers of the Christian theological tradition forwent their quest for security and embraced the questions, the stumbling, and thus they teach us. Sometimes fruitful theology and wisdom emerge when we reject the quest for absolute clarity and listen to the warning not to foreclose on meaning and truth too early for the sake of certainty.

Ultimately, this is not a book with one answer to the one question, What is scripture? Indeed, as demonstrated by the wide diversity of Christian theologies of scripture presented in this book—from Origen to Augustine, Luther to Christian feminists—there is no single Christian theology of scripture. Instead, this book offers many answers to many questions provided by many Christian theologians and traditions over the two-thousand-year history of the Christian faith. Only such an approach can do justice to the rocky terrain of scriptural interpretation and begin to draw a map of Christian theologies of scripture.

NOTES

1. Special thanks to Jason A. Danner and Stephen W. Murphy for their insightful comments and helpful suggestions on this chapter and on how to bring together the many themes of this volume.

2. The designation of Christianity as a “religion of the Book” is certainly congruent with the fact that Christians believe the Bible to be an indispensable, reliable, and authoritative means of knowing about Jesus and of interpreting God’s self-revelation in him. This should not guide us into thinking that Christianity is focused on the Bible, rather than the Incarnation, as the primary mode of revelation. From the Christian point of view, Jesus is the message—God participating in human life. Jesus is not just the main person in one of many events in the story of God’s people. For Christians, Jesus is the final revelation of the fact that God has a story, a drama of redemption. That is, in Jesus, humanity sees the God who has always been a part of the drama in the full light that reveals God’s role in it. According to the Christian tradition, Jesus is God’s ultimate word *about* human life and the Bible is God’s Word *about* God’s self-revelation *through* human life.

3. I am grateful to Jason A. Danner for the explanation regarding stumbling, scripture, and revelation that follows in the rest of the paragraph.