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# Scripture: the Current Debate

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A review article of

**Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon**, editors **D A Carson** and **J D Woodbridge**

468 pp IVP £9.95 pbk

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This volume is a companion to **Scripture and Truth** published in 1983. Together they constitute an important contribution to the current debate about Scripture. They should, say the editors, be taken as a whole. This review will concentrate on the second volume.

The preface makes it plain that each of the contributors is writing within the evangelical tradition regarding the authority and infallibility of the Bible. However their concern is not simply to republish the familiar arguments but to defend, examine and rearticulate the evangelical doctrine of Scripture as new questions are raised. The treatment is selective, addressing the questions of the moment yet at the same time trying to work towards a responsible doctrine of Scripture. So for example if you read ch.4 on the problems of harmonisation and hope to find all your problems solved you will be disappointed. It is dealing with issues and with methods and must of necessity be selective.

There are nine different contributions of varying length and readability. Smooth reading is virtually impossible because of the different styles. However the book does not have to be read from cover to cover and can be used as a reference book. These volumes are not popular reading and are intended for leaders (if the IVP advertising blurb is to be followed). I do not wish to turn anyone away from reading them however because they deal with important and relevant issues which thoughtful Christians will have pondered, e.g. How do we know that the biblical canon is only 66 books? Why are there apparently contradictory statements in parallel biblical accounts? Does the Bible contain different kinds of truth? How do we come to believe that the Bible really is the word of God? These questions are not new of course but they have to be wrestled with by each generation of Christians. With this in mind we ought to be grateful that Messrs Carson, Woodbridge and others have blazed a trail for us to follow.

This review article will look at each of the nine contributions, pick out some of the main points and attempt to assess the importance and usefulness of each.

Chapter 1 is by D A Carson. It is entitled **Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture**. Here the reader will find a valuable birds-eye view of the ground.

This chapter should be read before you tackle any section in either volume because it contains the rationale for the whole undertaking. He points out that while evangelicalism is growing it is fragmented and the doctrine of Scripture

is one area where fragmentation is taking place. The crisis of authority in the Western world is correctly identified as an 'epistemological abyss'. He also draws attention to the changing mood within Catholicism as liberalism gains a larger foothold so that no-one is quite sure which parts of Scripture are actually God's truth.

He outlines eight recent developments:

1. Revisionist Historiography
2. Focus on the Phenomena of the Bible
3. Debates over Various Terms
4. Uncritical Attitudes toward Literary and Other Tools
5. Sensitivity to 'Propositions' and 'Literary Genre'
6. The New Hermeneutic and Epistemology
7. Discounting of the Concursive Theory
8. The Diminishing Authority of the Scriptures in the Churches

Most of these are taken up by the contributors to the two volumes. His assessment is in our opinion well-balanced. He is critical for example of those who suggest Hodge and Warfield 'invented' the modern view of inerrancy, of those who have a naive confidence in certain critical tools, of the new hermeneutic that confuses truth and meaning, of the new authoritarianism in charismatic circles and the ways in which the authority of Scripture is sometimes avoided even within professing evangelicalism. On the other hand he criticises evangelicals for knowing too little about the history of doctrine, for tending to use inerrancy to provide short cuts and avoid facing difficulties in interpreting Scripture, for being slow to use literary tools properly and to allow for literary genre in their handling of the Word of God.

The last section is the most important. He says, 'to our shame we have hungered to be masters of the Word much more than we have hungered to be mastered by it'.<sup>1</sup> His plea needs to be consistently heeded. It is a call for repentance and faith in learning and obeying God's Word. As Packer reminded us some years ago, 'It is not enough to fight and win the battle for biblical inerrancy if we are then going to lose the battle for understanding the Bible and so for living under its authority.'<sup>2</sup>

Kevin J Vanhoozer says, 'A thoroughgoing acknowledgement of Scripture's diverse forms better helps us to understand the humanity of Scripture, without surrendering the notion of divine authorship. God used linguistic and literary convention in order to communicate with human beings. The diverse literary forms, far from being a weakness of Scripture, ensure a rich communication and are actually one of Scripture's perfections.'<sup>3</sup> Ch 2 **The Semantics of Biblical Literature** forces us to look at the 'literary pluralism' in the Bible. Inspiration does not mean that there is a blandness about the literary forms and language of God's Word. Vanhoozer points out that 'propositional revelation' has tended to be seen only in intellectual terms failing to realise that God addresses the whole man and not just his mind. (We wonder if the charismatic movement is not, in part, a reaction to this tendency. Or again is this one of the reasons why Western Christianity appeals more to the educated person?) He proposes that we need to appreciate the power and purpose of the

Scripture's diverse language. He adopts a definition of 'propositional revelation' as matters that God has propounded for our consideration, not just assertions but also warnings, commandments, prayers, questions etc.

Though Vanhoozer is hard to read when dealing with Wittgenstein and company his contribution is an important one. It brings us to appreciate the rich variety of God's Word and to guard against an unhealthy intellectualism. Furthermore if we are to answer James Barr's criticism that evangelicals are so preoccupied with the truth that we do not allow Scripture to be what it is then this essay can help us. It will make us more aware of the multi-faceted authority of Scripture **and** the multi-faceted response it requires of us.

Chapters 3 and 4 by Moises Silva and Craig L Bomberg discuss the problems of historical reconstruction in NT criticism and the limits and legitimacy of harmonisation respectively. The material covered by them is very limited in scope but both of them are concerned with facing fearlessly **historical questions and harmonisation problems**. Silva points out that the Scriptures are not complete historical books. This does not mean that they are false however. E.g. the information in Acts 12 about Herod Agrippa is not sufficient for the modern historian but is adequate for the purposes of Acts. However I am not convinced about Silva's approach to the question of reconstructing first-century Pharisaism. It appears to me he may be allowing too much to extra-biblical sources for an accurate picture of Pharisaism thus unwittingly undermining the authority of Christ's assessment.

Blomberg argues that harmonisation is a legitimate exercise and proposes eight types of resolution to explain apparent discrepancies. He applies these to Scripture and to non-biblical material. He selects a number of problem passages. Many readers will be surprised to find that Mat 17:27 is not considered a miracle but overall he provides a necessary corrective to the tendency to make inerrancy a tool to produce contrived, artificial harmonisation. English readers will be interested to note his criticisms of J W Wenham's 'Easter Enigma'.<sup>4</sup> Blomberg is more ready to use some of the newer branches of Gospel study, source, form and redaction criticism to reconcile apparent contradictions. Much more work is needed before one can accurately assess the usefulness and significance of his approach.

Ch 5 is entitled perhaps a little misleadingly 'The Problem of Sensus Plenior' and is by Douglas Moo. It deals with the vexed question of the **NT use of the OT**. The question of 'Sensus Plenior' (a deeper meaning intended by God but not the human author) is considered in only 4 pages. In the earlier volume Silva deals with the textual questions arising from the NT use of the OT. Moo here deals with **the meaning** of the NT. Just why do NT writers either modify or appear to read into the text other meanings? He gives a brief historical review showing how the question is part of a bigger issue, namely the relationship between the two testaments. He rejects the allegorical approach as did Calvin and Luther and proposes a canonical approach. He adds however that there is no one formula which encompasses all uses. By a canonical approach he means that a biblical text can be interpreted in the light of the

whole, i.e. a redemptive historical framework. In this way we can see the validity of an added and deeper meaning as revelation unfolds. He is hesitant about adopting Raymond Brown's 'sensus plenior' approach. He also has some interesting comments about the meaning of fulfilment language, *pleroo* in particular.

John M Frame writes in ch 6 about **The Spirit and the Scriptures**. This is an important essay because it covers a neglected aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit. His concern is to examine and clarify the role of the Spirit in our coming to believe that the Scriptures are the authoritative Word of God. He points out that there is no 'uniform' text in the Bible but a richness, fullness and clarity that is the result of the Spirit's work in different human authors. He takes us back to Calvin and his contribution to the understanding of the internal testimony of the Spirit, though he is not uncritical of Calvin.

Frame looks at three areas where orthodoxy is called into question — the sovereignty of the Spirit's witness, the objects of the witness and the rationality of the witness. In the first he shows the uniqueness of the Spirit's testimony, for, he claims, no experience offers a more profound closeness with God. (Surely an area worthy of further reflection in the light of contrary claims.) He is critical of modern theology, especially Barth who merges inspiration and internal testimony. The idea that the Spirit can use an erroneous text is not foreign to Barth but it is foreign to God who binds himself to us in his truthfulness. In considering the second area Frame finds Berkouwer an unreliable guide in his book 'Holy Scripture' because he drives a wedge between the authority and the message of the Bible. Regarding the third area, the rationality of the witness, he discusses the role of rational arguments and the work of the Spirit. This is of course important in apologetics. Frame shows that it is not a case of either/or, but rather the Spirit changes our sinful hearts so that we come to acknowledge what is rationally warranted by the Scriptures.

John D Woodbridge's essay is the **one historical essay** in the volume. Ch 7 is called 'Some Misconceptions of the Impact of the "Enlightenment" on the Doctrine of Scripture'. He carefully examines the revisionist position propounded by Rogers, McKim, Vawter, Marsden and Ramm that the inerrancy doctrine is comparatively new and is the result of Protestant scholastics like Turretin. Some of these writers say that the Westminster Confession does not teach or imply inerrancy. Woodbridge seeks to show that the central tradition of the church has always been inspiration and inerrancy. His essay is helpful because it shows their case is far from proven. His point is important for our churches who are easily brow-beaten because of ignorance of the real facts. The innovators are the moderns who concede too much to higher criticism and misread history.

The essay in ch 8 **The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth** by Geoffrey Bromiley I found to be the most disappointing contribution. Presumably it was included because of Barth's influence in 20th century theology. From that point of view it does provide a useful summary containing over one hundred quotations from Barth. Bromiley does assess the strengths and weaknesses of

Barth but one is left with the impression that it is all rather academic. However we must surely remember that though Barth wanted to uphold the Bible's authority he was not known for his evangelicalism.

The final essay is the one which seeks to be the most comprehensive. It is the longest and contains the most footnotes (398 in all!). David G Dunbar writes on **The Biblical Canon**. He points out that it is 30 years since an evangelical produced a comprehensive treatment of the historical and theological issues involved. (In that connection I find it a little strange that there is no reference to M G Kline's 'Covenant and Canon'.) Basically Dunbar suggests that the idea of canon arises now that the process of revelation is complete or at least in abeyance for the present.<sup>5</sup> He examines the process by which both the OT and NT were recognised and rejects the notion that it was a church decision (the historical critical approach). Rather Scripture is self-authenticating and thus its authority does not depend on whether it is recognised by God's people or not. The value of the book is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of 80 pages of notes and indices — persons and subjects as well as biblical references.

I have not set out in this review to interact with all that has been said. Rather I have aimed to point out what I consider to be the most significant contributions. We need someone to give us a lead who is not afraid to ask tough questions and give us some answers even if we disagree. Some doubtless will be suspicious — the openness to various forms of biblical criticism may cause some to wonder if this is representative of evangelicalism. Still others may be suspicious because the contributors come from the other side of the pond! At least the first volume contains two English contributions!

Yet we cannot simply reassert the old paths. The contributors are not seeking to be innovators moving away from the central teachings of evangelicalism. Rightly they are critical of exponents of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy but also of evangelicalism where it has been slow to respond or responded inadequately. Better understanding is not gained by turning out old clichés. We would all like to sit back comfortably and not have to grapple with these issues. What is at stake is our integrity as evangelical Christians. We shall be sharpened by debate and interaction realising that our understanding of the truth is not final or complete. This series of essays should help us to see the issues and sharpen our thinking. Above all we want to be able to listen to the living and abiding Word of God, to be better interpreters of it and better Christians as a result.

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## References

1. p.47
2. p.36, J I Packer, UNDER GOD'S WORD, Lakeland
3. p.79
4. p.394, footnote 124
5. p.301