

by the voice of God? Put another way, if (too much) authority is bestowed upon the interpretive community, what happens to the authority of the Bible? These are serious issues that call for some attention from the Christian exegete who employs reader-response criticism, and we now turn our attention to a brief engagement with these issues.²²

THE BIBLE AND AUTHORITY IN READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

To speak of the authority of the Bible concomitantly plunges one into a conversation about the inspiration of the Bible. Traditionally, Christians have believed that the words of the Bible somehow possess “the breath of God.”²³ An account of the Bible’s authority presupposes some description, however tentative, of the Bible’s inspiration, that is, its connection to God.

My discussion of the Bible’s inspiration will have two foci. The first involves God’s relationship to the composition of the Bible broadly configured (i.e., how the Bible was written). The second involves the ways God’s presence is mediated through the Bible for contemporary communities of faith (i.e., what happens when the Bible is read). In the history of Christian practice and scholarship different groups have accentuated at least one of these foci. The reader-response approach I advocate is obviously more interested in the second element, namely, what happens when the Bible is read. Nonetheless, by reflecting on the role of inspiration in the composition of the Bible I will clarify what I think should (and perhaps often does) happen when contemporary communities read the Bible.

One must assume a crucial characteristic about the nature of God in order to speak intelligibly of God’s “involvement” in the writing of the Bible. This assumption, which is the bedrock of the Christian faith, is that God has revealed (and does reveal) aspects of God’s nature to humanity. In short, just as the discussion of authority presupposes a discussion of inspiration, so too a discussion of inspiration presupposes a discussion of divine revelation.²⁴

One formulation of the doctrine of revelation maintains that even though many elements of God’s nature are beyond the reach of human analysis and imagination, God, nevertheless, has graciously decided to reveal aspects of God’s nature to humanity. God is both subject (i.e., originator) and object (i.e., content) of the revelation. Yet, as Sandra Schneiders adroitly suggests, revelation is only effective if there is some-

one to receive it.²⁵ Schneiders observes, "To be accessible to us, to invite us into divine intimacy, God has to approach us . . . in and through perceptible reality."²⁶

Thus God's revelation is mediated through human experiences, and human participants in those experiences attempt to testify to the experiences through language. As humans record and interpret these experiences in language, the words themselves are not the divine reality but rather point to the divine reality. Words are records of the revelation. In this sense I affirm that the biblical texts left by the authors and their communities are inspired *in their composition*. Believing that they were participants of revelatory experiences with God, these people sought to testify about those experiences in spoken (and eventually written) language.

Obviously, in ancient Israel and the early Church there were countless persons and communities who claimed to have had experiences with God, which they wanted to express and chronicle. This process produced in Judaism and early Christianity a plethora of religious texts²⁷—texts that in one way or another claimed to be inspired by God. At this point one may begin to see the inherent difficulty of simply understanding inspiration as an experience with divine reality that prompts one to testify to that experience. Many persons in Jewish and Christian antiquity claimed to have had such experiences. Therefore unless one possessed a rubric to distinguish "legitimate" from "illegitimate" claims there would be no way to distinguish one text's claim of inspiration from another.

Religious, or more specifically theistic texts are produced when persons attempt to codify their experiences with God in language. This process of codification, however, does not in and of itself catapult these religious texts to the status of "Scripture." Scriptures are religious writings that a *community* deems to be reliable mediators of "an encounter with the transcendent."²⁸ In spite of the large number of religious texts that both ancient Israel and early Christianity composed, the history of canonization of both the Jewish and Christian Bibles²⁹ demonstrates that not all "religious writings" in these religious movements were elevated to the status of Scripture.

As Jewish and Christian communities read (or more probably heard)³⁰ certain texts, they became convinced that their interactions with these texts were profitable for forming and developing communities that bore the character of God. Those texts that were most useful for community formation and religious development were elevated to the status of

Scripture. As Israel and the early Church assembled texts that would guide their formations there was no “self-evident” criterion called “inspiration” by which some religious writings were accepted as authoritative and others rejected as non-authoritative. Rather, the designation “inspiration” was a byproduct of a religious text’s *usefulness* in a religious community.³¹ In light of this one can affirm that the community of faith preceded the Scriptures.

Second Timothy 3:16, a touchstone passage in the debates about the Bible’s inspiration, clearly indicates that certain early Christians considered inspiration to be a function of a religious text’s communal value. The Greek of 2 Tim 3:16 can be rendered in one of two ways: “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness,” or “Every scripture³² inspired by God is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.”

Regardless of how one renders this verse, the key indicator of inspiration is usefulness in the community (i.e., the texts that are Scripture are “profitable³³ for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.”). The assertion that a religious writing is useful is itself an interpretive claim or an estimation brought to bear by the community that is hearing or reading the text. James Barr writes: “Why is it important, according to 2 Timothy, that scripture is inspired? Because of its *practical effects*, in teaching and training.”³⁴ There is a Christian Bible because our foreparents in the faith interpreted certain religious texts as more useful in religious formation than other texts.

Let us summarize our observations thus far. I contend that the Bible is inspired in the sense that it contains testimonies of people’s encounters with transcendent reality. Divine revelation led to the composition of texts. Subsequently the communities who read, heard, and interpreted these religious texts deemed them to be useful in religious formation, and they elevated these religious texts to the authoritative status of “Scripture.” This important historical process explains how the texts of the Bible may have been inspired for ancient Israel and the early Church, but it does not adequately explain why these texts are still considered to be “inspired” for contemporary communities of faith. For an adequate response to this issue, other factors must enter the discussion.

When contemporary communities of faith assert that the Bible is inspired they are making a historical and theological claim that is rooted in faith. First let us consider the *historical* nature of this faith claim.

Contemporary communities who appeal to Scripture are affirming their faith in the essential correctness of our religious forebears' decisions concerning which texts most helpfully articulate the contours of the Christian faith.³⁵ Without necessarily passing judgment on the relevance of the specific contents of the Bible for current practice, contemporary Christian communities believe that the writers of Scripture were giving testimony to the revelation of God and God's Messiah that was useful for the community, even if those testimonies possessed the foibles of human production. Out of respect for the historical proximity of these useful testimonies to the foundational events that they recount, we believe that these texts have provided a basic framework for Christian existence.³⁶

Robin Scroggs offers us the valuable concept of biblical texts as "foundational documents." Scroggs writes: "By foundational documents I mean that they [the biblical texts] are those documents that have elicited, set the basic agenda for, and defined what Christianity means as a *historical* reality. A Christian may disagree with what he or she reads in the texts; a Christian cannot refuse serious dialogue with the texts without calling into question the rights of using the term 'Christian' as a self-designation."³⁷ Thus when contemporary Christian communities read the Bible they acknowledge a robust respect for and even faith in the historical experiences of our religious forebears as they struggled to give witness to divine revelation.

When contemporary Christian communities read the Bible they also make a faith claim that is more explicitly *theological*. These communities believe that as they read the Scriptures bequeathed to them by Christian history God *may* speak fresh words of revelation. The Scriptures are not the word of God *per se*, but the Scriptures possess the potential to become the word of God as they are read faithfully and creatively under the auspices of the Holy Spirit³⁸ and in light of the community's ongoing experiences. Thus we read the Scriptures and invite the Holy Spirit in our midst to help us discern what in the text is supposed to speak to us and how it is supposed to speak.

My affirmation that the Scriptures are not inherently the word of God may seem shocking to some, and downright blasphemous to others. Yet I would remind readers that there is a long and respected tradition in Judaism and Christianity of understanding the word of God as a reality that is larger than the biblical text itself. For example, in rabbinic Judaism the commandments of God were not and are not identified simply with

the written words of the Torah. The commandments of God also include the oral Torah, or the ongoing interpretations of the written text in light of new circumstances.³⁹ Barry Holtz writes: "On Mount Sinai God gave not only the Written Torah that we know, but the Oral Torah, the interpretations of the Jews down through time."⁴⁰

Furthermore, the apostle Paul, reflecting his Jewish heritage, suggests in Rom 10:17 that the word of God is not the text *per se*, but the interpretation of the Christ event. For Paul the interpretation of the Christ event surely would have involved reflection on the texts of the Jewish Bible, but the Christ event and any interpretations of it expanded far beyond the simple words on the page of the text. Paul writes: "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ." One way of understanding the import of Rom 10:17 is not to start with the beginning of the verse and read forward, but rather to start with the end of the verse and read backward.

The word of Christ in this verse is probably Paul's way of referring to preaching, and preaching for Paul would have involved the oral interpretation of the texts of Judaism read through the lens of Jesus Christ.⁴¹ Thus Paul believed that when the texts of Judaism were read and proclaimed in the light of the death, resurrection, and imminent return of Jesus Christ they created a situation of address, or what Paul labels in Rom 10:17 as "hearing."

The living voice of God that addresses persons is not simply the words of the biblical text, but the words of the text as they are interpreted for the needs and concerns of the *present* community. When one responds to the address of God with openness and acceptance, this creates faith, or perhaps is a description of faith. Faith, in other words, is not intellectual assent to a "laundry list" of dogmas, but an active process of disciplined listening for and to the living voice of God's Spirit that occurs in the process of interpretation. Thus Paul teaches us that the word of God is not a static quality latent in the words on the page, but a dynamic process, even event that occurs when communities read the text through the lens of Christ and in the light of current needs.

With a kind of faithful openness both to the text and, more importantly, to the Holy Spirit, a community should read the Scriptures. A community's interpretations may confirm its assumptions and presuppositions about God, about the community itself, and about the world. On the other hand, its interpretations may overturn those assumptions and presuppositions, replacing them with new ones. To use Thomas Long's words, the Scriptures are the "meeting ground,"⁴² a reliable place

where the contemporary community gathers, hopeful for and, in fact, expectant of a word from God. Thus the contemporary reading community finally considers the Scriptures inspired not because they chronicle the revelatory experiences of our forebears in the faith, but because these texts, when engaged by the community under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, may emit God's revealing voice for us *in the here and the now*.

Contrary to the protestations of certain critics, reader-response approaches do not simply guarantee that the community will reconfirm its own assumptions.⁴³ It is not the text that makes claims upon the community. Rather, the Holy Spirit speaks to, through, and sometimes contrary to the experiences of the community as the community reads the text.⁴⁴ It is this sometimes messy and always mysterious interaction among the Holy Spirit, the community's experiences, and the Scriptures that creates or mediates the word of God.

Yet we must honestly admit that some Christian communities are notorious for ignoring or trying to suppress the word of God. Notable examples would include certain Christian communities' long-time support of chattel slavery, silence and inactivity during the Holocaust, and even the ongoing oppression of women by certain segments of the Christian church. Yet in every age, and in every community, the Spirit is not left without a witness, and the Spirit will send or raise up prophets in communities.⁴⁵ These prophets will see different things in the world and in the Scriptures, and their testimony (hopefully and eventually) will convict and convince communities to see things—in the world, in the biblical text, and in themselves—differently.⁴⁶

In light of this description of a communal engagement with the biblical text, I believe that authority is not so much a property of the biblical text as it is a way of talking about various communal processes with the text. The community believes that the biblical text is an indispensable ingredient in the process of shaping and reshaping the Christian community. Yet the community does not fall prostrate before the text, becoming completely subservient to its claims.

Rather, with an unflinching commitment to dialogue with the biblical text the community goes to the text in study, worship, preaching, and theological scholarship. Sometimes the community will read with the text, and at other times the community will read against the text. Regardless of the manifold ways that the community may engage the text, the community believes that if it talks with the text long enough, the Holy Spirit may speak.