

THREE MORE BOOKS ON THE BIBLE: A CRITICAL REVIEW*

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The last few years have witnessed the publication of several books on the Bible, most of which are in some measure innovative. In addition to the three I shall review in this essay, one cannot overlook Peter Jensen's *The Revelation of God*,¹ which makes the gospel central to his development of the theme of revelation; Timothy Ward's *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture*,² which relies rather heavily—a bit too heavily, in my view—on speech-act theory to address the accumulating problems that have arisen in recent decades over the notion of the sufficiency of Scripture; and Kevin Vanhoozer's, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*,³ which in some ways is as much a book about how to read the Bible—though, remarkably, without any need for a Scripture index—as it is a book about an innovative way to form a systematic theology. Reflecting on these three, which I am not going to discuss, makes me wonder if I should have doubled the length of this essay and titled it “Six More Books on the Bible” — but then I'd have to ask myself why I did not include several other recent contributions.⁴ So I have restricted myself to the following three, all of which are

*The “more” in the title refers to an essay I wrote with a similar title more than twenty years ago, viz., “Three Books on the Bible: A Critical Review,” *JETS* 26 (1983): 337-67.

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¹Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002.

²Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

³Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.

⁴To mention only a few: R. C. Sproul, *Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2005); Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004); I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); David S. Katz, *God's Last Words: Reading the English Bible from the Reformation to Fundamentalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Robert M. Fowler, Edith Blumhofer, and Fernando F. Segovia, ed., *New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millennium* (London: T & T Clark, 2004); David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Scott McKendrick and Orlaith O'Sullivan, eds., *The Bible as Book: The Transmission of the Greek Text* (London: The British Academy, 2003). Many more could be adduced, not to mention a far greater number of essays.

interesting, helpful, and problematic—all three in very different ways. In other words, there may be some gain within the compass of one essay in reflecting on three such different books, for the stance each adopts and the innovations each introduces shed light on the other two.

I. JOHN WEBSTER

A. Content

Webster's book, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*,⁵ is the most intellectually demanding of the three. Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Aberdeen and the editor of the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, Webster first presented the four chapters of this book as the *Scottish Journal of Theology* lectures in 2001. The first of the four chapters is the most innovative.

"Holy Scripture," Webster writes, "is a shorthand term for the nature and function of the biblical writings in a set of communicative acts which stretch from God's merciful self-manifestation to the obedient hearing of the community of faith" (p. 5). The definition is important to Webster, not least because it focuses on God himself. Even while his definition speaks of "texts in relation to revelation and reception" (p. 6), the most important thing is that

both the texts and the processes surrounding their reception are subservient to the self-presentation of the triune God, of which the text is a servant and by which readers are accosted, as by a word of supreme dignity, legitimacy and effectiveness. (p. 6)

Otherwise put:

Holy Scripture is dogmatically explicated in terms of its role in God's self-communication, that is, the acts of Father, Son and Spirit which establish and maintain that saving fellowship with humankind in which God makes himself known to us and by us. (p. 8)

Webster's first task in unpacking this definition is "to offer an overall sketch of the doctrine of Holy Scripture by examining three primary concepts: revelation, sanctification and inspiration" (p. 9).

1. Revelation

Webster asserts that for a long time the doctrine of revelation has been pummeled and distorted by attempts to formulate it in relation to "dominant modern intellectual and spiritual conventions" (p. 11) and not in relation to the self-disclosing Trinity. Scholars have

⁵Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

discussed “revelation” as a feature of a merely “theistic” metaphysical outlook, with scarcely any material reference to such aspects of Christian thought as Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, “and—embracing them all—the doctrine of the Trinity” (p. 12). Ironically, while the doctrine of revelation was thus being eviscerated, more and more demands were placed on it, “to a point where they became insupportable” (p. 12).

Perhaps the most significant symptom of this is the way in which Christian theological talk of revelation migrates to the beginning of the dogmatic corpus, and has to take on the job of furnishing the epistemological warrants for Christian claims. (p. 12)

What we do *not* need is a still “more effective defense of the viability of Christian talk about revelation before the tribunal of impartial reason” (p. 13). Rather, we must

call into question the idea that the doctrine of revelation is a tract of Christian teaching with quasi-independent status; this will in turn offer the possibility of an orderly exposition of revelation as a corollary of more primary Christian affirmations about the nature, purposes and saving presence of the triune God. (p. 13)

So Webster provides us with his definition:

Revelation is the self-presentation of the triune God, the free work of sovereign mercy in which God wills, establishes and perfects saving fellowship with himself in which humankind comes to know, love and fear him above all things. (p. 13; italics his)

Thus the *content* of revelation is “God’s own proper reality” (p. 14); the agent is God himself; and it follows that revelation “is identical with God’s triune being in its active self-presence” (p. 14)—which is precisely why “revelation is *mystery*, a making known of ‘the mystery of God’s will’ (Eph. 1.9)” (p. 15).

That is to say, revelation is the manifest presence of God which can only be had on its own terms, and which cannot be converted into something plain and available for classification. Revelation is God’s *presence*; but it is *God’s* presence. (p. 15)

Its purpose is *saving fellowship*, and thus its end “is not simply divine self-display, but the overcoming of human opposition, alienation and pride, and their replacement by knowledge, love and fear of God. In short: revelation is reconciliation” (pp. 15-16). Webster quotes Barth: “Reconciliation is not a truth which revelation makes known to us; reconciliation is the truth of God Himself who grants

Himself freely to us in His revelation" (p. 16).⁶ In other words, "revelation is itself the establishment of fellowship" (p. 16). For

knowledge of God in his revelation is no mere cognitive affair: it is to know *God* and therefore to love and fear the God who appoints us to fellowship with himself, and not merely to entertain God as a mental object, however exalted. (p. 16)

It follows that "the proper doctrinal location for talk of revelation is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, and, in particular, the outgoing, communicative mercy of the triune God in the economy of salvation" (pp. 16-17). In sum:

"Revelation" denotes the communicative, fellowship-establishing trajectory of the acts of God in the election, creation, providential ordering, reconciliation, judgement and glorification of God's creatures. (p. 17)

2. Sanctification

Webster understands that the application of this term to the doctrine of revelation is non-standard, but he argues that much can be said for it. Sanctification he understands to be "the act of God the Holy Spirit in hallowing creaturely processes, employing them in the service of the taking form of revelation within the history of the creation" (pp. 17-18). What Webster is attempting to address is a perennial and deepening problem in "modern intellectual culture" (p. 18), viz., "how we are to conceive the relation between the biblical texts as so-called 'natural' or 'historical' entities and theological claims about the self-manifesting activity of God" (p. 18). The more that "modern Western divinity" has stressed the "natural" and the "historical," the less space remains for a justifiable revelatory function "within the communicative divine economy" (pp. 18-19). Otherwise put, this is the challenge of "the dualistic framework of modern historical naturalism as applied to the study of the biblical texts" (p. 20), dominant from the time of Spinoza. It is no solution to follow those theologians who

leapt to the defense of Scripture by espousing a strident supernaturalism, defending the relation of the Bible to divine revelation by almost entirely removing it from the sphere of historical contingency, through the elaboration of an increasingly formalised and doctrinally isolated theory of inspiration. Rather than deploying theological resources to demonstrate how creaturely entities may be the servants of the divine self-presence, they sought to dissolve the problem by as good as eliminating one of its terms: the creatureliness of the text. (p. 20)

⁶Karl Barth, "Revelation," in his *God in Action* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), 17.

This is the problem that Webster seeks to address by his use of the term “sanctification.” The biblical texts, he asserts, are “creaturely realities” that have been “set apart by the triune God to serve his self-presence” (p. 21). Alternative expressions often deployed to describe the nature of Scripture (Webster discusses five of them) are less satisfactory. As developed in Protestant scholasticism, accommodation depends on too neat a distinction between the mode and the content of revelation. The analogy with the hypostatic union Webster finds deficient, because the Word made flesh and the scriptural word “are in no way equivalent realities” (p. 23):

The application of an analogy from the hypostatic union can scarcely avoid divinising the Bible by claiming some sort of ontological identity between the biblical texts and the self-communication of God. Over against this, it has to be asserted that no divine nature or properties are to be predicated of Scripture; its substance is that of a creaturely reality (even if it is a creaturely reality annexed to the self-presentation of God); and its relation to God is instrumental. In the case of the Bible, there can be no question of “a union of divine and human factors,” but only of “the mystery of the human words *as* God’s Word.”⁷

Less dangerous is the concept of prophetic and apostolic testimony, much loved by Barth. Yet this, too, requires careful handling, “because the notion of Scripture as human testimony to God’s revealing activity can suggest a somewhat accidental relation between the text and revelation” (p. 24). The fourth concept, “means of grace,” is not necessarily faulty, but much depends on the way “means” is understood: *any* theology of mediation (not only textual, but also sacramental, ministerial, or symbolic) is in at least some danger of eclipsing “the self-mediation of God in Christ and Spirit” (p. 25). A happier expression thinks of the “servant-form” of Scripture—an expression much loved by Berkouwer, but advanced by Herman Bavinck—which thinks of God’s active presence as Word in terms of “treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor 5:7).

But Webster prefers to speak of the biblical text as “sanctified.” As with human beings, so with texts: sanctification does not diminish creatureliness. “A sanctified text is creaturely, not divine” (p. 28). Because the text is creaturely, all the tools of its creatureliness are legitimate: grammar, source criticism, redaction criticism, and so forth. Yet creatureliness is not to be confused with naturalness. The text is sanctified, set apart by the triune God for his revelatory purposes. Initially, this might sound as if Webster sees a *chronological* development: the text first comes into being as the product of creaturely activity, and then God opts to set the text apart, to sanctify it. In reality, however, Webster avoids the trap:

⁷Page 23, citing G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 203.

Sanctification is not to be restricted to the text as finished product; it may legitimately be extended to the larger field of agents and actions of which the text is part. The Spirit's relation to the text broadens out into the Spirit's activity in the life of the people of God which forms the environment within which the text takes shape and serves the divine self-presence. Sanctification can thus properly be extended to the processes of the production of the text—not simply authorship . . . but also the complex histories of pre-literary and literary tradition, redaction and compilation. It will, likewise, be extended to the post-history of the text, most particularly to canonisation (understood as the church's Spirit-produced acknowledgement of the testimony of Scripture) and interpretation (understood as Spirit-illuminated repentant and faithful attention to the presence of God). (pp. 29-30)

3. *Inspiration*

Webster urges that there are three requirements if talk of inspiration is to be profitable. *First*, it "needs to be strictly subordinate to and dependent upon the broader concept of revelation" (p. 31); it must not become the hinge on which all else turns, for "inspiration is not foundational but derivative, a corollary of the self-presence of God which takes form through the providential ordering and sanctification of creaturely auxiliaries" (p. 32). Webster wants to avoid grounding Christian certainty on some notion or other of inspiration. Instead, he says, he wants to follow Calvin, who asserts that "since certainty of faith should be sought from none but God only, we conclude that true faith is founded only on the Scriptures which proceeded from him, since therein he has been pleased to teach not partially, but fully, whatever he would have us know, and knew to be useful" (p. 32).⁸ *Second*, the notion of inspiration must avoid both objectifying (i.e., the inspired *product* must not take precedence over the "revelatory, sanctifying and inspiring activities of the divine agent" [p. 33]) and spiritualizing of the divine activity (so that the center of gravity is pulled away from the text toward the persons associated with the text). And *third*, the notion of inspiration must be expounded "in clear connection to the end or purpose of Holy Scripture, which is service to God's self-manifestation" (p. 35).

This brings Webster to his "conceptual paraphrase" (p. 36) of 2 Pet 1:21. I mention only one of his four points: "the Spirit generates language" (p. 37). This, and not dictation, is what is properly meant by "verbal inspiration." "What is inspired is not simply the *matter* (*res*) of Scripture but its verbal *form* (*forma*)" (p. 38). Webster writes:

Inspiration is the specific textual application of the broader notion of sanctification as the hallowing of creaturely realities to serve

⁸Webster is citing *Articles Agreed Upon by the Faculty of Sacred Theology of Paris, with the Antidote*, in *Tracts and Treatises*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), 106.

revelation's taking form. Where sanctification indicates the dogmatic ontology of the text as the servant of the divine self-communicative presence, inspiration indicates the specific work of the Spirit of Christ with respect to the text. (pp. 30-31)

I cannot devote equivalent space to the detailed description of the remaining three chapters of Webster's book, but I may attempt very brief summaries.

In his second chapter, "Scripture, Church and Canon," Webster provides what is in fact an elegant defense of the classic Protestant view of the processes of canonization during the patristic period (though he doesn't call it that). He begins with a "dogmatic sketch" (p. 42) of the relations between Scripture and the church, describing the latter (i) as a "hearing church": "the definitive act of the church is faithful hearing of the gospel of salvation announced by the risen Christ in the Spirit's power through the service of Holy Scripture" (p. 44); (ii) as a "spiritually visible" church (p. 42):

The church's visibility, of which Holy Scripture is part, is spiritual visibility. . . . Positively, this means that the church has true form and visibility in so far as it receives the grace of God through the life-giving presence of Word and Spirit. Its visibility is therefore spiritual visibility. (pp. 47-48)

(iii) as an apostolic church: "The church's history, of which Holy Scripture is part, is apostolic history" (p. 50). By the latter, Webster means more than the affirmation that the gospel came to us through the first witnesses, the apostles, who therefore have a certain status—for this converts apostolicity "into a given form of social order" (p. 51). It is better to think of apostolicity as

a matter of *being accosted* by a mandate from outside. It is a Christological-pneumatological concept, and only by derivation is it ecclesiological. Apostolicity is the church's standing beneath the imperious directive: "Go." (p. 51)

With these matters understood, Webster insists that "the church is not competent to confer authority on Holy Scripture, any more than it is competent to be a speaking church before it is a hearing church, or competent to give itself the mandate to be apostolic" (p. 53). Of course, the authority of Scripture cannot be "abstracted from the life and acts of the church as the place where the saving presence of God is encountered" (p. 55).

To sum up: the authority of Scripture is the authority of the church's Lord and his gospel, and so cannot be made an immanent feature of ecclesial existence. Scripture's authority *within* the church is a function of Scripture's authority *over* the church. The church's acknowledgement of Scripture's authority is not an act of self-government, but an exposure to judgement, to a source not simply

of authorisation but also and supremely of interrogation (pp. 56-57).

So it is not surprising that Webster, while acknowledging the element of human decision in the process of canonization, follows Calvin approvingly: Scripture does not take its approbation from the church; rather, "this act of confession, the church's judgement with respect to the canon, is an act of submission before it is an act of authority" (p. 63). By it, "the church affirms that all truthful speech in the church can proceed only from the prior apostolic testimony" (p. 64).

Webster's third chapter, "Reading in the Economy of Grace," is a penetrating and sometimes moving contrast of two theologies of reading, or, more precisely, two anthropologies of reading. On the one side stands Schopenhauer, who embodies attitudes to reading that dominate today's culture; on the other side stand Calvin and Bonhoeffer, with quite different approaches to reading Scripture. Schopenhauer contrasts reading with "thinking for yourself": too much reading may so swamp the mind that the mind's originality is squashed. The *summum bonum*, then, remains the human mind, the mind's autonomy, its originality. By contrast, Calvin and Bonhoeffer insist that thought must be subordinate to the Word. For the Christian, reading Scripture "thus involves mortification of the free-range intellect which believes itself to be at liberty to devote itself to all manner of sources of fascination" (p. 90). Or again:

For Calvin, the counter to the vanity, instability and sheer artfulness of the impious self is "another and better help," namely "the light of his Word" by which God becomes "known unto salvation." God counters pride by self-revelation through Scripture. Scripture is on Calvin's account "a special gift, where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his most hallowed lips. Not only does he teach the elect to look upon a God, but also shows himself as the God upon whom they are to look." . . . This does *not* entail wholesale abandonment of any appropriation of the tools of historical inquiry, but raises a question about their usefulness by asking whether they can foster *childlike* reading of the text. (p. 77)⁹

Webster's final chapter, "Scripture, Theology and the Theological School," takes its departure from interaction with Ursinus (who drafted the Heidelberg Catechism). In prestigious theological schools today, universal reason reigns, and divides (not to say fragments) the subject matter into the well-known fourfold division: biblical, historical, systematic, and practical theology. By contrast, Ursinus saw catechism and systematic theology as helping tools to enable the Christian more productively to read the Scriptures and thereby encounter God. In other words, the reading

⁹The references in Calvin are to *Inst.* I.vi.1.

of Scripture is not the starting point for the creation of a reason-generated theological superstructure, but the end point, the *telos* of all the disciplines—the fruitful encounter with God in the Scriptures. Webster calls for major revision of the theological curriculum. “Christian theology is properly an undertaking of the speaking and hearing church of Jesus Christ” (p. 123), and therefore can claim only marginal connection with the atmosphere in the university. If that means theology is squeezed to the periphery of university life, so be it: “In contexts committed to the sufficiency of natural reason (or at least to the unavailability of anything other than natural reason), theology will have something of the scandalous about it” (p. 134). Webster wants the curriculum overhauled to reflect these sorts of concerns. Indeed, Calvin’s understanding of the role of theology becomes, for Webster, the high point of wisdom in this arena.

B. Critique

This book is one of the freshest things I have read on Scripture in some time. It must be evaluated, of course, on its own terms: it is a “dogmatic sketch,” and so makes no pretensions of being comprehensive; it is a “dogmatic sketch,” and therefore makes limited appeal to historical development, exegesis of Scripture itself, contemporary communication theory, and the like. But as a dogmatic sketch, even where it is articulating positions that are in fact traditional, Webster’s freshness of thought and probing intelligence make the book a delight to read. Better yet: Webster writes as a churchman who thinks and serves by self-consciously putting himself *under* the authority of the Word. On many fronts, the work is quietly edifying, which of course will damn it in some academic circles.

Nevertheless, some questions must be raised, and these are of various kinds. In some instances I am not quite sure what Webster means: I am simply inquiring. In other cases, I suspect the balance of things is not quite right—but I acknowledge that the disagreement may sometimes spring from Webster’s brevity. In still others, I am not sure Webster is right, which is of course a polite way of saying that I am pretty sure he is wrong, and I hope that by this sort of interaction we may sharpen each other’s thinking.

(1) It should be obvious that the terminology Webster uses in this dogmatic sketch of the doctrine of Holy Scripture is not the terminology found in Holy Scripture to describe itself. This is not necessarily a disastrous weakness, of course; indeed, it is commonplace in dogmatics. For instance, the *καταλάσσω* word-group in Paul, as is well known, invariably depicts human beings being reconciled to God, never God being reconciled to human beings, even though, conceptually speaking, there is space for the latter idea in the field of dogmatics, not least because that idea is found in Scripture, even though it is never connected with this

word-group. Again, only rarely in the field of systematic theology does “sanctification” mean what it means in the NT—though what is meant by the use of the term in systematics is common enough in the pages of the Greek Testament, but without using the term. The domain of dogmatic discussion is often quite different from the domain of exegetical discussion. This is a well-known phenomenon, of course, but it raises a deeper question: At what point do terms found in the Scriptures but which are deployed within the field of systematic theology in ways quite different from that found in the Scriptures generate unfortunate confusion, finally producing a dogmatic structure that is more than a little problematic? Several of the points raised below reflect this problem.

(2) The definition of Scripture that Webster provides, for all its strengths, is simultaneously too large and too restrictive. He writes (as we have seen), “‘Holy Scripture’ is a shorthand term for the nature and function of the biblical writings in a set of communicative acts which stretch from God’s merciful self-manifestation to the obedient hearing of the community of faith” (p. 5). The strength of the definition is in the resolve to connect Scripture to God himself; the notion of “Scripture” is incoherent if it is abstracted from God, who reveals himself by this means. But what is gained by saying that Holy Scripture is a shorthand “for the nature *and function* of the biblical text”? It is entirely proper to discuss the function of Scripture, of course; is it wise to make the function of Scripture part of the definition of what Scripture *is* as opposed to what it *does*? The next phrase is ambiguous: “in a set of communicative acts which stretch from God’s merciful self-manifestation to the obedient hearing of the community of faith.” Does this mean: (i) Scripture is the God-given means for linking the communicative acts of God to their reception by obedience in the community of faith? Or: (ii) As a category, “Holy Scripture” *includes* the entire sweep of movement from the communicative acts of God all the way to their reception by obedience in the community of faith? Judging by what he goes on to say, Webster has the latter in view—but both readings are problematic. If the former, then Scripture itself is not revelation, but constitutes part of the link from revelation to reception of revelation; if the latter, then what “Holy Scripture” includes is much *more* than what is meant by ἡ γραφή: it goes way beyond the *writing* to include the entire communicative act, from its giving to its reception. Not for a moment should we deny the importance of the *entire* sweep when it comes to discussion of the ways in which God graciously presences himself with his image-bearers, but that is not the same thing as saying that the word *Scripture* is *itself* the appropriate term to refer to this entire sweep. Such usage is too all-embracing; worse, the effect, ironically, is to reduce what *Scripture itself is*, what the written thing is. For whatever the written thing is, it remains that, *even if people ignore it, even if people turn blind eyes to it and fail to see it for what it is, and receive none of God’s self-presencing by this means.* By

opening the aperture to include the sweep of God's self-disclosure, Webster fails to acknowledge, as we shall see, what Scripture says about itself.

The same problem can be seen in Webster's treatment of revelation. Recall his definition:

Revelation is the self-presentation of the triune God, the free work of sovereign mercy in which God wills, establishes and perfects saving fellowship with himself in which humankind comes to know, love and fear him above all things. (p. 13; italics his)

Thus the *content* of revelation is "God's own proper reality" (p. 14); the agent is God himself; and it follows that revelation "is identical with God's triune being in its active self-presence" (p. 14). He stipulates further:

Revelation is purposive. Its end is not simply divine self-display, but the overcoming of human opposition, alienation and pride, and their replacement by knowledge, love and fear of God. In short: revelation is reconciliation. "This is what revelation means," writes Barth, "this is its content and dynamic: Reconciliation has been made and accomplished. Reconciliation is not a truth which revelation makes known to us; reconciliation is the truth of God Himself who grants Himself freely to us in His revelation."¹⁰ As the gracious presence of God, revelation is itself the establishment of fellowship. . . . God is present as Saviour, and so communicatively present. (pp. 15-16)

Once again, however, there is a hasty leap from the assertion that revelation is purposive (which of us would disagree?), and that its "end" is reconciliation, to the assertion that "revelation is reconciliation." We must applaud Webster's insistence that revelation not be cut off from God and from the larger sweep of God's purposes. Nevertheless, by *identifying* revelation with its purposes so closely, Webster is more Barthian than biblical: the Bible, as we shall see, is quite prepared to talk about the reality of God's revelation *even where no reconciliation takes place, even when God's revelation is spurned*. It is true to say that the conceptual range of revelation *includes* the personal, the reconciling, the communication of God himself; it is entirely reductionistic to say that all those ingredients must be present in *every* display of revelation. This analysis seems to have no purpose other than to deny that Scripture *is* revelation even when people do not receive it.

(3) Another way of getting at the same problem is by observing that Webster has an understanding of revelation and of Holy Scripture in his mind that he carefully and thoughtfully works out, but without testing it against the sheer phenomena of the documents that make up Scripture. At one level, this is related to what I said at

¹⁰Webster is citing Barth, "Revelation," 17.

the beginning of this critique: systematians often use categories that are somewhat removed from the categories of the Scriptures themselves. But if the synthetic categories are too far removed from what the Bible says—in this instance, what the biblical documents say about themselves—then sooner or later a question mark is raised over the validity of the synthesis.

To begin with what initially appears a small thing: Webster can comfortably speak of God's Word, but never of God's words. Yet the biblical writers can oscillate between the two without a trace of embarrassment (e.g., Exod 4:12; Num 22:38; Deut 18:18-20; Jer 14:14; 23:16-40; 29:31-32; Ezek 2:7; 13:1-19; *passim*). Sometimes the biblical writers refer to the words of YHWH which he spoke through his prophet (e.g., 1 Kgs 16:34; 2 Kgs 9:36; 24:2; 2 Chr 29:25; Ezra 9:10-11; Neh 9:30; Jer 37:2; Zech 7:7, 12; *passim*). Sometimes God's words are said to be written (e.g., Exod 24:4; 34:27; Josh 24:26). Even when God is not cast as immediately being the speaker (as in a "Thus says the Lord" utterance), later writers can say, "[T]he Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David" (Acts 1:16; see the diverse formulae in Hebrews, for instance) or the like.¹¹ Scripture itself can be personified (e.g., Scripture foresees, Gal 3:8), because it is a colorful way of saying that God foresees, as reported in Scripture.

This neglect of what Scripture says gets worse. As we have seen, Webster denies any appropriate analogical connection between the Word-made-flesh and the inscripturated Word. He writes:

But the Word made flesh and the scriptural word are in no way equivalent realities. Moreover, the application of an analogy from the hypostatic union can scarcely avoid divinising the Bible by claiming some sort of ontological identity between the biblical texts and the self-communication of God. Over against this, it has to be asserted that no divine nature or properties are to be predicated of Scripture; its substance is that of a creaturely reality (even if it is a creaturely reality annexed to the self-presentation of God) and its relation to God is instrumental. In the case of the Bible, there can be no question of "a union of divine and human factors," but only of "the mystery of the human words as God's Word." (p. 23)¹²

Here several things must be said. (i) Of course it is true that the Word-made-flesh and the scriptural Word are not "equivalent realities." No one says they are. The question, rather, is whether an appropriate *analogy* may be drawn between them. (ii) There is at

¹¹Although he attempts no sophisticated theological integration—after all, that was not his assignment—in his essay, Wayne Grudem's survey of the ways in which Scripture refers to itself ("Scriptures' Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture," in *Scripture and Truth* [ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983], 19-59, 359-68) should be required reading for those, like Webster, who do make the attempt.

¹²The words quoted by Webster are from G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 203.

least some biblical hint that an analogy might be appropriate, viz., the frequency with which “word” and “words” refer to Scripture, on the one hand, and the fact that “Word” can be applied to Christ, on the other—applied both directly (John 1:1, 14; Rev 19:13) and by implication (Heb 1:1-4). (iii) In passing, observe once again the unfortunate and unnecessary distinction—the biblically unsanctioned distinction—between “human words” and “God’s Word.” (iv) I am not sure what Webster means when he speaks of the danger of “divinising the Bible.” Perhaps he is thinking of well-meaning but not very well-informed believers who understand correctly that, however mediated, this book has been given by God, but who understand so little of the humanness of the Bible that they have no categories for the idiolects of the individual corpora, the complex array of literary genres and their diverse rhetorical appeals, and so forth. But this is not so much the “divinising” of the Bible as the dehumanizing of the Bible. As far as I can see, the greatest contemporary danger of divinizing the Bible does *not* lie with the fundamentalists who, however conservative their views, invariably understand that the Bible *is talking about something outside itself*, about God, Christ, people, the world, atonement, the gospel, and that it is this God of the gospel who saves us, not the Bible itself. In other words, they understand that the Bible is a graciously provided means to refer to extra-biblical reality, to God himself. In that sense, they do not so “divinise the Bible” that they are tempted to worship it. No, the greatest danger of bibliolatry today lies with some in the Yale school who are loath to say clearly that the Bible actually does refer to extra-biblical realities, or, if they concede it does, they give the impression that we cannot know them. They speak of the importance of reading the Bible, memorizing the Bible, firing our imaginations by much meditation on the Bible, but can scarcely bring themselves to say that what saves us is something extra-biblical: the gospel of God, which has both historical and super-historical content, both natural and supernatural content. Clearly, Webster is not addressing that problem, at least not here. So is the warning against “divinising the Bible” merely a rhetorical condemnation of those who buy into what is in fact the more traditional view of what Scripture actually is throughout the centuries of the church?¹³ (v) Above all, is it justified to assert that “no divine nature or properties are to be predicated of Scripture”? Here again, Webster has not listened carefully enough to what Scripture says of God’s word or of God’s words. *Like God himself*, God’s words and God’s word (the biblical writers can use both the singular and the plural) are frequently asserted to be faithful, true (Ps 118:160), righteous (Prov 8:8), pure or flawless (Ps 12:6; 118:40). Small wonder that the appropriate response to God’s word is

¹³For an excellent survey of the primary sources on this subject, see John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

humility, contrition, trembling (Isa 66:2)—exactly the appropriate response to God himself.

(4) The use of “sanctification” to try to describe the way in which God uses Scripture and manifests himself in Scripture, even while the Scriptures are the product of human, historical contingencies, certainly opens up some windows, and is worth pondering. The biblical texts, Webster writes, are “creaturely realities” that have been “set apart by the triune God to serve his self-presence” (p. 21). Yet the category of “sanctification,” applied to Scripture, has at least as many problems connected with it as the terms Webster wants to displace.

(a) Webster’s definition of sanctification could easily be contested: sanctification is “the act of God the Holy Spirit in hallowing creaturely processes, employing them in the service of the taking form of revelation within the history of the creation” (pp. 17-18). Remembering that in the original, “sanctification” and “hallowing” share the same lemma, the definition breaks one of the cardinal rules of all definitions: one cannot use the same or a cognate word to define what is being defined. But the problem with the definition runs deeper. Sanctification is “the act of God the Holy Spirit in hallowing *creaturely processes*”: when the shovel that removes the ash from the altar before the tabernacle is “sanctified” or “hallowed,” is it a process? Or is the word “process” used to call to mind the dominant use in Reformed dogmatics, to refer to ongoing patterns of *growth* or *improvement* in the people of God? Even here, however, one needs to be very careful, since exegesis has often shown that the “sanctification” vocabulary in Paul can refer, not to process, but to something positional, instantaneous—which is why many have dubbed such passages “positional sanctification” or “definitional sanctification.” Indeed, some argue that most “sanctification” passages in the NT rightly belong in that camp,¹⁴ while biblical texts that speak of the Christian’s growing conformity to Christ (e.g., Philippians 3) do not use the term “sanctification.” In other words, we often find sanctification without “sanctification,” i.e., we find the theme of sanctification (in the dogmatic sense) without the word being present. Even if we manage to negotiate around such details in Webster’s definition, what is meant by saying that God the Holy Spirit employs the said creaturely processes “in the service of the taking form of revelation within the history of the creation”? I suppose that in some very broad sense this could be said of the Spirit’s “employment” of the shovel that takes out the ash, and of the Christian who is set aside to do God’s will: both are used of the “taking form of revelation within the history of the creation.” Yet the extension of such usage to Scripture is not obvious. At least in the case of the analogy between Scripture and the hypostatic union, there is, as we have seen, some Scripture-given common

¹⁴See esp. David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (NSBT 4; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1995).

terminology. What precisely is the warrant for this extension of sanctification to Scripture? Merely the fact that it too belongs to "creaturely processes"? But so also does the thermonuclear burning of the sun and the stars, the writing of a pornographic book, a sunset, and the rape of Nanking.

(b) More precisely, the application of "sanctification" to cover the God-sanction of Scripture is extraordinarily ambiguous. One could take it positively and appreciatively, and find little fault with it; but one could use the term so loosely that almost anything could slip under it. The shovel that is "sanctified" and thus set apart for God's use is in itself amoral; the believers who are "sanctified" and thus set apart for God's use are not only moral beings, but still flawed, frequently rebellious, frankly guilty. So what kind of "thing" is Scripture, which is also said to be "sanctified" and thus set apart for God's use?

(c) Despite the powerful and sometimes moving passages Webster has written to foster childlike reading of the text and wholehearted submission to Scripture, passages by which we are challenged and for which we are grateful, the "sanctification" category does not lead him to address the hard questions. In fact, he rather ruthlessly avoids them. On the one hand, because the Scriptures are "creaturely realities," the full panoply of human literary and historical criticism is appropriate, he says: source criticism, redaction criticism, and so forth; yet on the other, the Bible is so "sanctified" by God that we are to submit before it, not stand in judgment over it, for it is nothing less than the self-disclosing self-presencing of God. But suppose the historical criticism leads many to the conclusion that what is actually said in the Bible is not true? For instance, many "minimalists," and even some mainstream OT critics, do not think a person by the name of Abraham really existed, and do not think that the giving of the law, depicted in Moses, has any reality in history. It is a late creation, about the sixth century B.C. (or, in the case of the minimalists, datable to the Persian period). But Paul's argument for the way promise and law fit together turns absolutely on their relative historical sequencing (Galatians 3); the argument for the supremacy of the Melchizedekian priesthood depends on Psalm 110 being written *after* the giving of the law-covenant that prescribes the Levitical priesthood (Hebrews 7). Elsewhere, the argument for the obsolescence, in principle, of the Mosaic covenant, once the new covenant has been announced, depends on which came first (Hebrews 8); the argument for the identity and stature of the one David refers to as "my Lord" depends on the truthfulness of the superscription of Psalm 110; and on and on. Does the "sanctification" of the biblical texts mean that they are telling the truth? If so, does that not impose at least some sort of curb on ostensibly "historical" reconstructions? Alternatively, if we are to submit to these texts even where they are not telling the truth about such fundamental matters, are we being encouraged to bow to what

is untrue, simply because the text is in some sense “sanctified”? This is not to deny the historical, literary, and idiolectical particularities of the biblical texts. Any robust doctrine of Scripture must account for these realities. But how would Webster address them? Quite frankly, he does not say, and his exposition of “sanctification” of Scripture gives no clue of the direction in which he would go. And that is the problem. These sorts of issues cannot be ducked. Moreover, they become even more acute when we recall that Webster applies the “sanctification” label to the entire process of the development of the text, not to mention also its reception among readers, for many historical and literary critics create processes of ostensible development that portray the components of texts to be saying the diametric opposite of what the final text says. What does the “sanctification” of these “processes” of text-development mean? Does it mean the same thing as the “sanctification” of the final product?

(5) Related to these problems are some of the antitheses that Webster creates. Here are a batch of them:

In an objectified account of revelation [which Webster rejects], the inspired *product* is given priority over the revelatory, sanctifying and inspiring activities of the divine agent. But properly understood, inspiration does not mean that the truth of the gospel which Scripture sets before us becomes something to hand, constantly available independent of the Word and work of God, an entity which *embodies* rather than *serves* the presence of God. Inspiration does not spell the end of the mystery of God; it is simply that act of the Spirit through which this set of texts proceeds from God to attest his ineffable presence. Inspiration is a mode of the Spirit’s freedom, not its inhibition by the letter. (p. 33)

Observe: (i) Webster sets the *product* over against the *activities of the divine agent*. Why the antithesis? Why not rather say that *because* of the activities of the divine agent, the product is what it is? (ii) This is all the more pertinent when θεόπνευστος, the Greek word closest to what we mean by “inspired,” is explicitly tied by the Pastoral Epistles to the *text* of Scripture, to the γραφή, not to the process (2 Tim 3:16)—a point exquisitely demonstrated by Warfield a century ago.¹⁵ (iii) Webster characterizes any inspired *product* as having a certain “independent” status, of being “constantly available independent of the Word and work of God.” But would it not be closer to what Scripture says of itself to say that Scripture must never be seen as anything other than the Word and work of God? How does an inspired product diminish such a view—unless, of course, one has rejected the way in which θεόπνευστος explicitly refers to γραφή, in favor of some other dogmatic structure? (iv) Similarly, Webster says that having an inspired *product* makes it “an entity

¹⁵B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 245-96.

which *embodies* rather than *serves* the presence of God." The antithesis is misleading, for it would be closer to the evidence to say that precisely because this inspired product *embodies* the presence of God, it also *serves* the presence of God. (v) Webster implies that the view he wishes to confute "spell[s] the end of the mystery of God." But why? There is plenty of mystery in how these biblical texts came into being, plenty of mystery remains in how the Spirit of God uses them to bring conviction of sin and to awaken faith, plenty of mystery in how God presences himself through them, plenty of mystery in what the Scriptures themselves tell us remains unknown (e.g., Deut 29:29; Rom 11:33-36).¹⁶ Just because God is so great and so hidden, that there are lots of things we do not know of him and therefore cannot say of him, does not mean that there are no true things that we can say of him – the more so if God himself insists he is the One who has disclosed them. And finally, (vi) Webster's final sentence, another antithesis, is baffling: "Inspiration is a mode of the Spirit's freedom, not its inhibition by the letter." Is not the Spirit free to say things in words, as the Scriptures themselves attest? In the light of what Webster himself later says about "verbal inspiration," why is an inspired *product* a sad instance of "inhibition by the letter"?

(6) One sometimes wonders who Webster's theological sparring partners are. At the risk of speculation, I suggest they fall into two groups. On the one hand are pure rationalists, philosophical materialists, scholars who are trying to maintain an "objectivity" over against Scripture and who really have no place for God himself. Webster sometimes names them, and in any case handles them fairly and well. For convenience, we'll place them on Webster's left. On the other hand are those who seem to be on Webster's right. It is hard to know exactly who they are, because Webster never names them or interacts with them. Who are they? Maybe he thinks they are evangelicals, or conservative evangelicals, or some conservative evangelicals, but the positions Webster deplores do not fit them very well. He worries about those who abstract Scripture from God and from the gospel: well and good, and Peter Jensen shares his concern.¹⁷ He warns against the "strident supernaturalism" of those who leap to the Bible's defense by "almost removing it from the sphere of historical contingency" (p. 20), but few have thought more deeply about such matters, and avoided the dualism Webster deplores, than Warfield (even if Warfield's dogmatic conclusions about Scripture are different from Webster's). He wants to anchor the Scriptures in the self-disclosure of God, and he is right to do so –

¹⁶Incidentally, I cannot forbear to mention that Webster's proof-text for the "mystery" of God's revelation, viz., Eph 1:9 (p. 15), clearly misunderstands what *μυστήριον* means in the Pauline corpus. I am certainly not denying that there are massive emphases on the ineffability of God in Scripture, but only that this word, and this text, supports them.

¹⁷*The Revelation of God.*

but of course, in his own way, that is exactly what John Wenham was trying to do.¹⁸ He is highly suspicious of the category of accommodation, which he blames on the Protestant scholastics (p. 32): indeed, he has only negative things to say about “Reformed scholastics.” Interestingly enough, however, he has only positive things to say about Calvin (who is quoted more than anyone else in the book), even though there is a rising chorus of scholars who have argued that the ostensible distance between Calvin and the Reformed scholastics is not nearly as great as many like to think it is (Webster refers to none of that literature),¹⁹ and even though Calvin’s own treatment of accommodation is rich, nuanced, and not mentioned by Webster. He wants to see systematic theology as the handmaid of Scripture, that which helps us read Scripture better, the ultimate goal being encounter with God in the Scriptures, not the production of systematic theology—a point repeatedly made over the years by J. I. Packer. But because Webster does not mention any of these contemporary scholars by name, or refer even once to their writings, it is not entirely clear whom he has in mind when he levels his guns toward the right. But sometimes, I fear, he is shooting at a caricature.

(7) Would it be churlish of me to wonder why a scholar as helpfully committed to reforming theological education as he is, distancing it from the prevailing mindset of university faculties, isn’t teaching at a church-based theological college instead of in a university department?

In short: this is a thought-provoking book by a mature theologian with a coherent thesis to defend. It cannot be skimmed; it must be read slowly and pondered, and there is much to gain from it. Yet its distance from what the texts of Scripture actually say contributes to its serious flaws.

II. Peter Enns

A. Content

The subtitle of the book by Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*,²⁰ shows it to have a very different purpose from that of Webster’s volume. Enns, Associate Professor of OT at Westminster Theological Seminary, is not trying to make a positive statement about the nature of Scripture, except incidentally; rather, he is trying to refute what he judges to be

¹⁸*Christ and the Bible* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

¹⁹The most important contribution, not only because of its comprehensiveness but also because of its subtlety, is doubtless that of Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Orthodoxy: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca 1725. Vol. 1: Prolegomena to Theology; Vol. 2: Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology; Vol. 3: The Divine Essence and Attributes; Vol. 4: The Trinity of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

²⁰Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.

the failure of evangelicals to face up to real problems in the nature of the Bible that they tend to skirt. These he breaks down into three large categories. After an opening chapter, he devotes a long chapter to each of these problem areas, and then concludes with a final chapter that draws his discussion to a close and points the way forward. Each chapter except the last ends with a list of "Further Readings." The book provides an excellent glossary, making it accessible to almost any competent reader.

In his opening chapter, "Getting Our Bearings" (pp. 13-22), Enns tells us that his purpose

is to bring an evangelical doctrine of Scripture into conversation with the implications generated by some important themes in modern biblical scholarship—particularly Old Testament scholarship—over the past 150 years. (p. 13)

He is not suggesting that such a conversation has not taken place: it has, he admits, but "what is needed is not simply for evangelicals to work *in* these areas, but to engage the *doctrinal implications* that work in these areas raises" (p. 13). His primary envisaged readers are the "fair number of Christians who conclude that the contemporary state of biblical scholarship makes an evangelical faith unviable" (p. 13). Enns writes that evangelicals must maintain their conviction "that the Bible is ultimately from God and that it is God's gift to the church" (p. 14), but how "these fundamental instincts" are fleshed out is another matter. The kind of adjustment Enns thinks is necessary is akin to the kind of reinterpretation of the Bible that took place in the wake of Copernicus. In other words, "Reassessment of doctrine on the basis of external evidence . . . is nothing new" (p. 14). Enns is not proposing to solve "Bible difficulties" (his expression, p. 14). Rather, by focusing on "three problems raised by the modern study of the Old Testament," he hopes to suggest

ways in which our conversation can be shifted somewhat, so that what are often *perceived* as problems with the Old Testament are put into a different perspective. To put it another way, my aim is to allow the collective evidence to affect not just how we understand a biblical passage or story here and there within the parameters of earlier doctrinal formulations. Rather, I want to move beyond that by allowing the evidence to affect how we think about what Scripture as a whole *is*. (p. 15)

The three issues Enns proposes to take up in the following three chapters are, respectively, the OT's relation to other literature of the ancient world (i.e., the issue of the Bible's uniqueness); the theological diversity of the OT (the issue of the Bible's integrity); and the way in which the NT authors handle the OT (the issue of the Bible's interpretation).

Before embarking on this exercise, Enns devotes a few pages to suggesting that the "incarnational analogy" is a good way to address

the problem (pp. 17-21). Just as the ancient church had to come to grips with the heresy of docetism, so we must come to grips with “scriptural docetism” (p. 18): we must come to grips with “the human marks of the Bible” which are “*everywhere, thoroughly integrated* into the nature of Scripture itself” (p. 18, emphasis his). Thus the Bible is written in human languages, not some heavenly dialect. The OT is a world of temples, priests, sacrifices, and both Israel and the surrounding nations “had prophets that mediated the divine will to them” (p. 19). Both Israel and the surrounding nations were ruled by kings, and “Israel’s legal system has some striking similarities with those of surrounding nations” (p. 20).

In short, if we take Jesus’ humanness seriously, we ought to take the Bible’s “situatedness” equally seriously. To put the matter in two statements that Enns italicizes:

That the Bible, at every turn, shows how “connected” it is to its own world is a necessary consequence of God incarnating himself. . . . It is essential to the very nature of revelation that the Bible is not unique to its environment. The human dimension of Scripture is essential to its being Scripture. (p. 20)

In the second chapter (pp. 23-70)—the first of the three lengthy, substantive chapters—Enns begins by surveying the contents of ten ANE (=Ancient Near Eastern) texts. Any graduate from a decent seminary will have been exposed to the first batch of these, and probably read them in English translation.²¹ The Akkadian texts introduced us to *Enuma Elish*, the so-called “Babylonian Genesis,” with distinct parallels to the Genesis account of creation; and to *Atrahasis* and *Gilgamesh*, not to mention the still older Sumerian version. These two documents give us parallels to the flood accounts. Enns points out that the parallels are not the sort that demonstrate direct borrowing, but are adequate to demonstrate a connection of some kind, perhaps through some even older precursor. The *Nuzi* tablets (for which there is no standard English translation) preserve various legal, administrative, and economic texts that show remarkable parallels to the patriarchal period reported in the Bible. But if these depictions of life in ancient Mesopotamia are so close to the cultural practices of the Bible, “the reasonable question is raised of how *different* the Bible really is. If the Bible reflects these ancient customs and practices, in what sense can we speak of it as revelation?” (p. 31). Similarly, the *Code of Hammurabi* provides parallels to the Mosaic legislation; Hittite suzerainty treaties provide parallels to Deuteronomy. (Enns is careful to admit that some scholars do not think that the decalogue and Deuteronomy directly reflect the structure of Hittite suzerainty

²¹I first read them when I was a beginning seminary student in the 1960s, devouring them in an early edition of what we all called “Pritchard”: James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958).

treaties, though most accept some sort of connection.) The recently discovered Tel Dan inscription speaks of the house of David, and the consensus is that the Davidic dynasty is in view. The Siloam tunnel inscription is linked to the time of Hezekiah; the *Mesha* inscription to the time of Omri; and the book of Proverbs certainly reflects influence of Egyptian wisdom literature, in particular the *Instruction of Amenemope*.

So what is the problem? Enns specifies it with three questions:

1. Does the Bible, particularly Genesis, report historical fact, or is it just a bunch of stories culled from other ancient literature?
2. What does it mean for other cultures to have an influence on the Bible that we believe is revealed by God? Can we say that the Bible is unique or special? If the Bible is such a "culturally conditioned" product, what possible relevance can it have for us today?
3. Does this mean that the history of the church, which carried on for many centuries before this evidence came to light, was wrong in how it thought about its Bible? (pp. 38-39)

Enns develops his argument by placing the ten sources to which he has already referred into three groups, which, he says, reflect these three problems. First, *Enuma Elish*, *Atrahasis*, and *Gilgamesh*, all dealing with creation and the flood, raise the question, "Is Genesis myth or history?" (p. 39). After all, "how can we say logically that the biblical stories are true and the Akkadian stories are false when they both look so very much alike?" (p. 40). Enns argues that the way forward is to refuse to think of "myth" as a "made-up" story, but to define myth in "more generous" terms: myth is "*an ancient, premodern, prescientific way of addressing questions of ultimate origins and meaning in the form of stories: Who are we? Where do we come from?*" (p. 40; the italics are his). After all, the "scientific world in which we live and that we take so much for granted was inconceivable to the ancient Mesopotamians" (p. 40). But if the ANE stories are "myth," and the biblical parallels are similar, "does this indicate that myth is the proper category for understanding Genesis? Before the discovery of the Akkadian stories, one could quite safely steer clear of such a question, but that is no longer the case."

Second, Enns groups together the *Nuzi* documents, the *Code of Hammurabi*, the Hittite suzerainty treaties, and *Instruction of Amenemope*—all reflecting customs, laws, and proverbs. On any dating, the *Code of Hammurabi* predates Moses by several hundred years. Granted the parallels with the Bible, don't these facts make the Bible look a good deal less than unique? "In other words, the Bible seems to be relativized" (p. 43).

Third, Enns groups together the Tel Dan inscription, the Siloam tunnel inscription, and the *Mesha* inscription, all dealing with Israel and her kings. In some ways, these support the historicity of the monarch. The first two inscriptions attest the reigns of David and

Hezekiah respectively. But the *Mesha* inscription introduces a new problem. It is an account of King Mesha of Moab, and transparently it is a seriously biased, self-serving account. The conflict with King Omri of Israel is introduced, but in the *Mesha* inscription, Moab got out of that one because their god Chemosh came to the rescue. "In other words, the Mesha Inscription raises the following problem: do biblical authors have an ax to grind as well?" (p. 45).

In the past, Enns avers, as these documents became available, the sure ground of Scripture was eroded by liberals who argued that these historical contexts unavoidably relativize the Bible, which can no longer be taken as the unique Word of God. But evangelicals, implicitly assuming that

the Bible, being the Word of God, ought to be historically accurate in all its details (since God would not lie or make errors) and unique in its own setting (since God's word is revealed, which implies a specific type of uniqueness) (p. 47)

opted for selective engagement, and embraced evidence that seems to support the biblical text, while retreating from or criticizing "evidence that seems to undercut these assumptions" (p. 47). Worse, "the doctrinal implications of the Bible being so much a part of its ancient contexts are still not being addressed as much as they should" (p. 47).

So what is the way ahead? Before proceeding, Enns articulates two assumptions: (a) he rejects the notion "that a modern doctrine of Scripture can be articulated in blissful isolation from the evidence we have" (p. 48); and (b) all articulations of the nature of Scripture, including his own, are corrigible. He then circles around his three problem questions again, this time with his own proposals for the way ahead.

First, "Is Genesis myth or history?" (pp. 49-56). Enns rejects the disjunction, "myth" or "history." Israelite culture is a relative late comer on the ANE scene, so it seems unlikely that late Israelite texts preserve the earliest form of these accounts in Israel's much later texts. So when "God adopted Abraham as the forefather of a new people . . . he also adopted the mythic categories within which Abraham—and everyone else—thought" (p. 53). Of course, he did not leave these myths unchanged: "God transformed the ancient myths so that Israel's story would come to focus on its God, the real one" (p. 54). Still, Enns preserves a schematized drawing of this ostensible ANE universe, taken over from Alan P. Dickin, complete with the foundations of the earth, the pillars of the earth, the location of Sheol, the distinction between the upper waters and the lower waters, the actual floodgates of heaven, the roof of the sky, and the throne of God. It is almost inconceivable to think that God would have given his revelation to people of the time in the terms and categories that make sense to twenty-first century Westerners. Rather:

This is what it means for God to speak to a certain time and place—he enters *their* world. He speaks and acts in ways that make sense to *them*. This is surely what it means for God to reveal himself to people—he accommodates, condescends, meets them where they are. (p. 56)

Second, “Is revelation unique?” (pp. 56-59). With respect to the second group of texts, Enns argues that ancient Israelite laws and proverbs, Israel’s customs and ethical standards, “are not absolutely unique to Israel” (p. 56). In short, it is not the *content* of Israel’s laws and customs that is unique, but something else, exemplified, for instance, in the introduction to the Decalogue (Exodus 20): the “motivation and the historical conditions of Israel’s law code are very different from its neighbors [*sic*]” (p. 58).

Third, “Is good historiography objective or biased?” (pp. 59-66). Historiography, after all, is not a mere statement of facts, “but the *shaping* of these facts for a particular *purpose*. To put it another way, historiography is an attempt to relay to someone the *significance* of history” (p. 60). Moreover, there is plenty of evidence that this takes place in Scripture: one need only compare 1-2 Chronicles with Samuel-Kings to see that there is a somewhat different agenda, an independent point of view, even though roughly the same material is being covered. One could say much the same with respect to the Gospels.

Of course, the Bible is different. It is God’s word. But what is true of all historiography is also true of biblical historiography—it is not objective. In fact—and this is getting more to the heart of the matter—in the strict sense of the word, there really is no such thing as objective historiography. . . . What makes biblical historiography the word of God is not that it is somehow immune from such things. It is God’s word because it is—this is how God did it. To be able to *confess* that the Bible is God’s word is the gift of faith. To *understand* this confession is an ongoing process of greater clarification and insight, a process that will not end. (p. 66)

In the second substantive chapter, the third chapter of the book (pp. 71-112), Enns treats the theological diversity within the OT. He begins by summarizing three quite distinct approaches to reading the Scriptures. Jewish interpreters delight in the diversity, tensions, and ambiguities, which spur Jewish scholars on to more profound reflection. The effort is not so much to resolve tensions as to enter the conversation. By contrast, both liberal-critical scholars and evangelical scholars adopt quite a different assumption: “God’s word and diversity at the level of factual content and theological message are incompatible” (p. 73). The liberal-critical scholars make the assumption and conclude that this is not God’s word in any meaningful way; the evangelical scholars, with the same assumption, feel awkward in the face of the diversity and expend their energies explaining it away. Enns’s purpose in this chapter is

to outline some examples of diversity in the Old Testament in order to demonstrate that diversity is inherent to the Old Testament text and not imposed onto the Bible from outside attacks on its unity.... [I]t is an important part of Scripture's own dynamic. (p. 73)

I do not have space here to summarize all of the evidence that Enns adduces, but I will try to convey something of its sweep. He begins with the Wisdom literature, in particular Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job (pp. 74-82). Proverbs can tell us not to answer a fool according to his folly, and to answer a fool according to his folly (Prov 26:4-5); it can treat wealth as a blessing that secures them while the poor are left unprotected (Prov 10:15), but it can treat wealth as something unstable and thus a false security (18:11; cf. 11:28), while yet again treating wealth as a more or less neutral thing whose benefits depend on the quality of the person who possesses it (10:16).

The point to be stressed here is that *all* of these proverbs are wise. *All* are correct. The question is not *whether* they are correct, but *when*. It is, therefore, wrong to think of "the teaching of Proverbs on wealth" with the expectation that all its statements about wealth "say the same thing" or are compatible on the level of isolated concepts. The wisdom derived from Proverbs on the question of wealth differs depending on what proverb you read. To isolate any one proverb and claim universal validity is in fact a fundamental misreading of the trajectory of the book. (p. 76)

Ecclesiastes goes further, and displays two kinds of diversity: (a) diversity within the book itself, as Qoheleth adopts different stances amid the contradictions of life to try to make sense of existence; and (b) diversity between what this book says and what mainstream OT theology says—including the insistence that with much wisdom comes much sorrow (1:18), which is scarcely what Proverbs says (cf. Prov 4:7), or its approach to the afterlife (Eccl 2:18-21). As for Job, while much of the OT "presents the notion that deeds have consequences" (p. 80; cf. Deut 5:32-33; Prov 3:1-2), this is the stance of the three miserable comforters (Eliphaz, Job 5:17-18; Bildad, 8:20-22; Zophar, 11:13-15—all of whom are condemned) and even of Elihu (36:5-7). For Job is in the position of a man who is suffering even though he does not deserve it.

Enns turns next to diversity in Chronicles (pp. 82-85). He places Samuel and Kings within the sweep of the Deuteronomistic History, affirming that the purpose of these books, at least in part, is to explain the exile to an exilic audience: Why did we get into this mess? By contrast, the purpose of Chronicles is to address those who have returned to the land.

The burning question was not, "What did we do to get us kicked out of the land?" but, "Now that we are back, what do we do?"; or, perhaps a better way of putting it, "Who are we? Are we still God's people? How can we be sure he'll have us back?" (p. 84)

In consequence, the books of Chronicles greatly diminish the sins of David, emphasize the unity of God's people, strongly emphasize the temple and Solomon's role, and articulate a theology of "immediate retribution" (p. 84). "The basic point . . . is that there is considerable theological diversity between the two accounts of Israel's history" (p. 85).

As for diversity in law (pp. 85-97), Enns notes the differences between the two reports of the Decalogue (Exod 20:2-17 and Deut 5:6-21) and infers, "God seems to be perfectly willing to allow his law to be adjusted over time" (p. 87). Moreover, the Decalogue insists that God is a jealous God who punishes the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation (Exod 20:5-6/Deut 5:9-10), while Ezekiel 18 seems to restrict the punishment to the individual: "the soul who sins is the one who will die" (18:4; see esp. vv. 19-20). Enns goes on to detail differences he finds in laws regarding slaves, the Passover, and the contrast between the central importance of sacrifices in the Pentateuch and the casual relegation of sacrifice to at best secondary importance in some of the prophets (Hos 6:6 ["For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings"]; Amos 5:21-27; Mic 6:6-8; Isa 1:11-14; Jer 7:21-23). Of course, Enns is careful to recognize these assorted texts were never meant to be taken in isolation: "They were speaking to the mere institutionalizing of sacrifice, that is, sacrifice without heartfelt obedience in the remainder of one's life" (p. 94). But Enns insists his point stands firm anyway:

What is important for us to note, however, is that within the Old Testament itself there is a dynamic quality. Even something so fundamental to Israel's religious system as sacrifice is open to critical reflection. (p. 94)

This is exactly the same sort of flexibility Enns finds in Paul, when on the one hand the apostle insists that "circumcision is no longer binding for Gentiles to enter God's family" (p. 95; see Acts 15:1-35; Enns could have added Gal 2:1-4), but on the other hand happily circumcises Timothy (Acts 16:1-3). "Paul does what he does because the *situation* calls for it" (p. 95). Or again, the OT's stance toward Gentiles is highly diverse. For instance, on the one hand we are told that no Ammonite or Moabite may enter the Lord's assembly, down to the tenth generation (Deut 23:3); on the other hand, Ruth is a Moabitess whose first husband, Mahlon, is an Israelite from the tribe of Judah, and whose next husband, Boaz, joins with her to form the line that sires David and thus begins the David dynasty—all within four generations.

Even what the OT says about God is diverse (pp. 97-107). On the one hand, there are passages that stress God's superiority over other gods (e.g., Ps 86:8; 95:3; 135:5; 136:2). The Israelites are told to serve the Lord *alone* (e.g., Josh 24:2, 14-15). When the Decalogue is disclosed (Exodus 20), God does not reveal himself as the only God,

but as the God who brought the Israelites out of the land of slavery (Exod 20:2). But on the other hand, there are “high points” of insistent monotheism in which the gods of the surrounding nations are dismissed as nothings (e.g., Isa 44:6-20; 1 Kgs 18:16-46). Moreover, though the Bible can say some powerful things about God being the Creator of everything, who thus stands sovereignly over the whole, it often depicts God as someone *within* the story. God “changes his mind” (p. 103)—not only in the context of massive movements (e.g., Gen 6:5-8), but also in consequence of Moses interceding with him (Exodus 32-34). Enns insists he is not entering the “openness of God” debate; rather, he writes,

I feel bound to talk about God *in the way(s) the Bible does*, even if I am not comfortable with it. . . . God reveals himself *throughout* the Old Testament. There is no part that gets it “more right” than others. Rather, they get at different sides of God. Or, to use the well-worn analogy, the different descriptions of God in the Old Testament are like the different colors and textures that *together* combine to make a portrait. In keeping with the incarnational analogy, we can appreciate that the *entire* Bible, through and through, has that human dimension. So, for the Old Testament to speak of God as changing his mind means that this is *his* choice for how *he* wants us to know him. (p. 106)

Enns ends the chapter by asking what such diversity tells us about Scripture. He must again be quoted at length:

It seems to me that there is a significant strand of contemporary Christian thinking on the Old Testament that feels that these sorts of things just shouldn’t happen. And, if they do, they just *appear* to be a problem. You just need to read a bit more closely or do a little more research, and if you’re patient enough, you’ll get the right answer eventually. For others, however (including myself), such an approach comes close to intellectual dishonesty. To accept the diversity of the Old Testament is not to “cave in to liberalism,” nor is it to seek after novelty. It is rather, to read the Old Testament quite honestly and seriously. And if diversity is such a prevalent phenomenon in the Old Testament, it would seem to be important to do more than simply take note of diversity and file it away for future reference. We must ask *why* God would do it *this* way. Why does God’s word look the way it does? (p. 107)

What this diversity shows is that “there is no superficial unity” to the Bible (p. 108). The unity that exists is “not a superficial unity based on the surface content of the words of passages taken in isolation” (p. 110). It is something more subtle and simultaneously deeper:

It is a unity that should ultimately be sought in Christ himself, the living word. . . . It is . . . a broad and foundational theological commitment based on the analogy between Christ and Scripture....

Christ is supreme, and it is in him, the embodied word, that the written word ultimately finds its unity. Christ is the final destiny of Israel's story, and it is to him that the Bible as a whole bears witness. (p. 110)

That brings us to Enns's final substantive chapter, his fourth chapter (pp. 113-65). Here Enns surveys the way the OT is interpreted by and in the New. Beginning with the requisite example of a preacher who abuses an OT text—the choice is Gen 31:32, “On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled,” with the preacher explaining that Jesus rose on the “third day” and “fled” from the grave—Enns wants, rather, to affirm the basic instinct to respect the author's intention. Nevertheless, he asserts, the NT appeals to the OT, or makes use of it, in ways that are so strange that they make us uncomfortable. Enns rejects solutions (a) that try to show the NT authors really do respect the OT context; (b) that concede the NT author is not using the OT text “in a manner in which it was intended,” but which then argues the NT author is not really interpreting the OT text but merely *applying* it (p. 115); (c) that concedes the OT text is being stretched way beyond its context, but which then simply appeals to apostolic authority to cover the breach. Enns is happy to summarize his alternative:

1. The New Testament authors were not engaging the Old Testament in an effort to remain consistent with the original context and intention of the Old Testament author.

2. They were indeed commenting on what the text *meant*.

3. The hermeneutical attitude they embodied should be embraced and followed by the church today.

To put it succinctly, the New Testament authors were explaining what the Old Testament means *in light of Christ's coming*. (pp. 115-16)

And if we are to begin to understand apostolic hermeneutics, Enns says, the first thing to be done is to try to understand, “*as best we can, the interpretive world in which the New Testament was written*” (p. 116; italics his).

So that is what he turns to (pp. 116-32). He begins with innerbiblical interpretation—not simply the rewriting implicit in the work of the Chronicler, but how Daniel interprets Jeremiah's prophecy of the seventy years (Jer 25:11; 29:10; Dan 9:1-2, 21-22): because Gabriel provides him with “insight and understanding,” Daniel is able to interpret the seventy years as “seventy sevens” of years. “It is by heavenly illumination that Daniel comes to understand the fuller, deeper measure of Jeremiah's prophecy” (p. 118). This, Enns says, is akin to the way the resurrected Christ had to “open the minds” of his disciples to enable them to

“understand” the Scriptures written about him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44-48).

With this sort of “interpretation” in mind, Enns scans some of the literature of Second Temple Judaism. The *Wisdom of Solomon* not only retells some aspects or other of biblical stories, but adds interpretive traditions that had become commonplace in the understanding of those stories. Enns finds similar phenomena in the *Book of Biblical Antiquities*, certain rabbinic texts, Jubilees, some of Philo’s writings, and the Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan. The much-quoted *peshet* on Hab 1:5, 1QpHab, puts in an appearance so that a comparison can be drawn between the form of this *peshet* and the form of reference to Scripture in Luke 24. The point Enns is attempting to establish from all this is that the NT writers adopted similar interpretive *methods* and interpretive *traditions* as these writers (p. 128).

To clarify and justify this conclusion, Enns devotes the next section to NT interpretive methods (pp. 132-42) and the subsequent section to NT interpretive traditions (pp. 142-51). As for methods: Enns briefly analyzes a number of texts to demonstrate his point, including the use of Hos 11:1 in Matt 2:15, of Isa 49:8 in 2 Cor 6:2, of the use of Abraham’s “seed” in Gal 3:16, 29, of Isa 59:20 in Rom 11:26-27, and of Ps 95:9-10 in Heb 3:7-11. I will pick up on one or two or these below; for now it is enough to note that in each case Enns thinks that the NT writer, adopting Jewish hermeneutical methods, felt free to add words or change the referent or the like, in order to establish his point, even if that point was substantively different from the OT text itself. As for the willingness of NT writers to adopt the interpretive *traditions* of Second Temple Judaism, Enns adduces the mention of Jannes and Jambres in 2 Tim 3:8; the mention of Noah as “a preacher of righteousness” in 2 Pet 2:5; the dispute over Moses’ body picked up in Jude 9; the allusion to *1 Enoch* in Jude 14-15 (though Enns thinks of it as a citation); the reference to Moses’ Egyptian education (Act 7:21-22); the triple NT reference to the fact that the law was put into effect through angels (Acts 7:52-53; Gal 3:19; Heb 2:2-3); and the rather strange mention of what Enns calls “Paul’s movable well” (1 Cor 10:4). In each instance there are analogous passages in the literature of Second Temple Judaism, and on the face of it the NT writers seem to be picking up on these traditions without any discomfort, even though they are not clearly found, or not found at all, within the canonical OT text.

So what makes apostolic hermeneutics unique? Neither the methods nor the traditions adopted by the NT writers qualify as unique, Enns avers. The difference is this: the NT writers came to believe that Jesus is Lord; they knew that the historical death and resurrection of the Son of God had taken place, “and on the basis of that fact reread their Scripture in a fresh way” (p. 152). By our standards, the result is eisegesis; by their own, their reading of the OT is “*christotelic*” (p. 153)—i.e., “To read the Old Testament

'christotelically' is to read it *already knowing* that Christ is somehow the *end* to which the Old Testament story is heading" (p. 154). And we must read the OT the same way (pp. 156-60).

In his final brief chapter (pp. 167-73), Enns summarizes his argument and encourages his readers in humility, love, and patience. And he returns to his "incarnational paradigm":

To work within an incarnational paradigm means that our expectations of the Bible must be in conversation with the data, otherwise we run the very real risk of trying to understand the Bible in fundamental isolation from the cultures in which it was written—which is to say, we would be working with a very nonincarnate understanding of Scripture. Whatever words Christians employ to speak of the Bible (inerrant, infallible, authoritative, revelational, inspired), either today or in the past, must be seen as attempts to describe what can never be fully understood. (p. 168)

B. Critique

In some ways, this is the most traditional of the three volumes reviewed in this article. Appearances to the contrary, it advances no new theory or grand hypothesis. At least one of its aims is to enlighten the less informed constituents of evangelicalism, and Enns tackles this assignment with verve. As a result, the book is easy to read and assimilate. And of course, it must be evaluated against the standard of its own objectives.

(1) That introduces the first problem: Who are the intended readers? The answer to that question, in the case of this book, must be an integral part of the evaluation. Enns himself, it must be recalled, states that his envisaged readers are the "fair number of Christians who conclude that the contemporary state of biblical scholarship makes an evangelical faith unviable" (p. 13). In other words, granted the historical/literary/archaeological/historical difficulties cast up by "biblical scholarship," how can "evangelical faith" — presumably what evangelical faith says about the Bible — be viable? Taking this at face value, the difficulties should be the "given" in the minds of the envisaged readers, and the book would then either challenge some of those "difficulties" in order to maintain evangelicalism's stance on the Bible, or it would accommodate the difficulties and provide a more sophisticated understanding of "evangelical faith," or perhaps a revision of it. Yet in the three substantive chapters, most of the space is devoted instead to convincing the reader that the difficulties Enns isolates are real, and must be taken more seriously by evangelicals than is usually the case. In other words, despite his initial claim that he is writing the book to comfort the disturbed, as it were, the actual performance aims to disturb the comfortable. This makes the book rather difficult to evaluate. Moreover, Enns's ambitions are vaulting:

the evidence cast up by biblical scholarship, we are told, is of the sort that requires that an “adjustment” be made in how we think of Scripture, akin to the reinterpretation generated by the Copernican revolution (p. 13). Wow. So are we explaining how evangelical faith accommodates biblical scholarship, or are we asserting that a Copernican revolution must take place within evangelical faith so as to accommodate biblical scholarship?

Either way, a fair evaluation must probe the status of the problems that Enns adduces, the nature of the solution he advances, and the pastoral wisdom and effectiveness of the presentation.

(2) The controlling analogy that Enns advances is the incarnation: the title of the book is not accidental. In choosing the incarnation as the fundamental way to think about the nature of Scripture, Enns is adopting a path diametrically opposite to what Webster judges to be appropriate. We have already seen that there is at least a superficial parallel to be drawn between, on the one hand, confessing Jesus to be God and a human being, and, on the other, confessing that Scripture is both God’s word and human word—not least when the Scriptures themselves can speak of Jesus as the Word made flesh. Enns, of course, is not the first to draw attention to the parallels between Christ and Scripture. Yet this is the place where Enns’s discussion becomes disturbingly inadequate, not to say seriously slanted. Three things stand out.

First, Enns offers no discussion whatsoever of what the doctrine of the incarnation actually looks like. If the incarnation is to become the controlling model for our understanding of the nature of Scripture, then are we not owed some exposition, however brief, of what “incarnation” means to Enns? The word is thrown around in contemporary discussion with an enormous array of meanings; it is entirely unclear what Enns means. But let us suppose, for charity’s sake, that he stands roughly in line with Nicea and Chalcedon.

That brings up the *second* problem. The *only* thing that Enns draws from the doctrine of the incarnation is that Jesus is *truly* a human being; he does not merely *appear* to be a human being. In other words, for Enns an adequate affirmation of the incarnation entails the abolition of docetism, and the parallel with Scripture entails the abolition of a kind of scriptural docetism, in which Scripture only *appears* to be human, but is not *truly* human. So far so good. But the doctrine of the incarnation was used to fight off multiple errors, not just docetism. For instance, it equally fights off Arianism, in which Jesus is not *truly* God, but at most is an inferior god, or perhaps merely godlike. If incarnation is to serve as the controlling model for how Scripture is to be understood, why does not Enns use it to refute the voices that confess the Bible to be *only* a human document, or a collection of human documents? In what sense is the Bible *God’s* Word, or, as we have noted in biblical usage, a collection of *God’s words*? And how do the human and the divine dimensions of Scripture cohere? Is there some point where we

appeal to mystery, as we appeal to mystery when we are talking about the divine nature and the human nature cohering in the one person, Jesus the Messiah? Without ever discussing the nature of the incarnation, Enns is using the incarnation as a positive “buzz” word to fight off his opponents to the right, but he never develops the doctrine, or the argument, to warn against dangers at least as great on the left (if we may resort to that old left/right spectrum). Nor is it merely a question of balance which could be remedied by another book treating the other side. The doctrine of the incarnation is powerful and central to Christian confessionalism not only because it counters “left” and “right” alike, but because it carefully formulates what it *means* to confess Jesus as the God/man. If the incarnation were deployed *only* to fight off docetism, pretty soon we would have a thoroughly human Jesus, but nothing more; if it were deployed *only* to fight off Arianism, pretty soon we would have a thoroughly divine Jesus, but nothing more. The doctrine of the incarnation tries, with appropriate caution, hesitation, and adoration, to get it right. But the only way it functions in Enns’s analogical argument is to confirm that docetism is bad, and therefore a failure to confess the truly human nature of Scripture is bad. Enns adduces all the evidence he can for the Bible’s humanness, and reflects on it at length; he does not attempt to adduce all the evidence he can for the Bible’s rootedness in God himself, and reflect at length on that—not even the very sketchy bits of evidence I mentioned in discussing Webster’s book. It is not just that the view of Scripture that Enns paints is lopsided, but that the *heart* of the issue is side-stepped, i.e., how it must all cohere. Think “incarnation” in any historic, confessional sense of “incarnation,” and you are never far away from mystery (in the modern sense of that word); apply it as Enns has done to the nature of Scripture, and there is very little that is mysterious at all. Apply it to Jesus, and you think “God/man”; apply it to the Bible in the way that Enns does and you think “not docetic; thoroughly human.” True, Enns repeatedly concedes that the Bible is God’s Word, but because he does not tie that confession to incarnation, or warn against a kind of scriptural Arianism, or probe the difficulties inherent in Scripture’s dual nature, the result is remarkably distorted.

Third, whenever one makes an entire argument turn on analogy, it is imperative to explain in what ways the two poles of the analogy are alike and unlike. In Christology, for instance, we speak of two natures and one person; we cannot deploy exactly that terminology in talking about the Bible. When we speak of Jesus as truly human, as truly a man, we carefully insist that he is a *perfect* man, i.e., a man without sin, and that there is nothing intrinsic to humanness that requires that humans be sinners. In that sense, Jesus is thoroughly like us, human; he is also thoroughly unlike all of us, since he alone is sinlessly perfect. If the incarnation is to be our model for how we think of Scripture, or even of Scripture’s humanness, how do such

elementary distinctions as these play out? What might it mean to say that Scripture is composed of thoroughly human, but perfect, documents? Or does the analogy break down? If so, why and where? None of this is discussed. "Incarnation" is merely a rhetorically positive word to approve Enns's argument; it is not a word with real substance that can clarify or illuminate the nature of Scripture by really careful analogical argumentation. Thus, when Enns writes (his italics), "*It is essential to the very nature of revelation that the Bible is not unique to its environment. The human dimension of Scripture is essential to its being Scripture*" (p. 20), the statement is formally true and hopelessly muddled. Using the incarnational analogy, the "human dimension" of the God/man not only places him in the human environment, but leaves him unique in that environment since only he is without sin. And even more strikingly, of course, what makes Jesus most strikingly unique to the human environment is that, without gainsaying his thorough, perfect, humanness for an instant, he is also God, and thus the perfect revealer of God, such that what Jesus says and does, God says and does. But when Enns speaks of "the very nature of the revelation of the Bible" as "not unique in its environment," he looks *only* at its "human dimension" and integrates nothing of what else *must* be said if we are to understand what the Bible *is* in this "human environment." I hasten to add that I am as rigorously opposed to what he thinks of as a docetic understanding of Scripture as he. But I am no less suspicious of an Arian understanding of Scripture—or, if we may get away from the incarnational analogy, I am no less suspicious of assorted non-supernatural and domesticated understandings of the Bible, understandings of the Bible that are far removed from, say, that of the Lord Jesus. Methodologically, Enns gets himself into these problems because he has spelled out neither what he understands of the doctrine of the incarnation, nor how well analogical arguments work in this case, and what limitations might be applicable.

(3) The argument as to whether Genesis 1-11 is myth or history is freighted with generalizations and antitheses that leave the informed reader saying, "Yes, but . . ." Basing his argument on comparisons between the biblical accounts and other ANE accounts, Enns is surely right to ask hard questions, and he is commendably careful not to rush toward any theory of direct literary dependence. The same sorts of questions could be raised by asking what literary genre(s) these chapters belong to, for different literary genres have different ways of making their rhetorical effects, of talking about reality, and so forth. Enns is certainly right to insist that we should not expect Genesis to use the scientific terminology of twenty-first century science—for why not seventeenth-century science, or twenty-third century science (which option, of course, makes a small assumption!)? Nevertheless:

First, the "myth" category is not so much wrong as loaded. Enns's definition, we recall, is that myth is "*an ancient, premodern,*

prescientific way of addressing questions of ultimate origins and meaning in the form of stories: Who are we? Where do we come from?" (p. 40; the italics are his). By itself, of course, this definition is fairly innocuous, for it does not even glance at the question of how we should relate this "ancient, premodern, prescientific" way of thinking about origins with reality. Yet the history of the use of "myth" in the study of the Bible—not only with respect to origins, but also with respect to who Jesus is: one cannot easily forget the influence of David Friedrich Strauss—warns us that unless one asks a lot of pressing questions, "myth" becomes the proverbial nose of the camel in the tent.²² Are there not some slightly better ways of proceeding than a choice between "twenty-first century science" and "myth"?

Second, the choice between "history" and "myth" seems to control Enns's discussion for a while, and then he carefully debunks the choice (p. 49). The distinction

seems to be a modern invention. It presupposes—without stating explicitly—that what is historical, in a modern sense of the word, is more real, of more value, more like something God would do, than myth. So, the argument goes, if Genesis is myth, then it is not "of God." Conversely, if Genesis is history, only then is it something worthy of the name "Bible." (p. 49)

The argument rushes on, and it takes a moment before you realize you've just been had. Doubtless it is true that the *modern* definition of "myth" and the *modern* definition of history is a *modern* invention: that is mere truism. But in that case, why apply the *modern* sense of "myth" to this ancient literature? The fact remains that the ancient writers could distinguish between, say, what they understood to be actually taking place in the domain of human existence and a fable: observe how Judges 9 stands out from the surrounding chapters. The ancient literary categories do not overlap exactly with ours, of course, and that is why we must always take care when we talk about biblical genres (lament, poetry, oracle, letter, apocalyptic, and so forth). It is also why sometimes our label must be carefully distinguished from the use of the formally identical label in the text (e.g., the word παραβολή covers a far wider array of forms than what we mean by "parable" today, which is almost entirely restricted to narrative parables; what Paul means by "allegory" is not exactly what we usually mean by "allegory"—indeed, it is not even quite what Paul's contemporary Philo meant by "allegory," since the word then covered a broader semantic swath than we sometimes think). So whatever we decide is the most helpful and insightful genre-label for the opening chapters of the Bible, a fair bit of sophistication is

²²Cf. the wise words of Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Genesis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 61, who prefers something generic such as "theological history," and says, regarding other proposed genre labels such as "novella, legend, fable, etiology, and myth": "Such terms are clearly prejudicial to the historical intentionality of the book."

needed. And isn't it proper to ask (however difficult it may be to answer) what the ancients themselves thought was the connection between, on the one hand, their accounts of creation and the flood, and what actually happened? Isn't that a question we must ask of *Enuma Elish* every bit as much as we ask it of Genesis? And if they *did* think that their accounts really did describe things, more or less, as they occurred, what, precisely, are we to infer? If they did *not* think of their accounts as describing, more or less, what occurred, what *did* they think? Or do we know too little to say? I can imagine half a dozen ways of proceeding from here, some of which would be seen as widely acceptable to traditional understandings of the nature of Scripture, and some of which would not be. What I cannot imagine is a responsible handling of the nexus of Scripture, myth, and history, *without* addressing some of these questions.

Third, while Enns rightly asserts that there is no convincing evidence of direct borrowing between Genesis and the relevant ANE accounts of creation and flood, he does little to point out the differences. That the categories of thought are remarkably similar is obvious, and should cause no surprise among those who fully recognize how much the biblical revelation is grounded in history (more on that below); yet competent scholars have laid out the differences between Genesis and the other ANE accounts with penetrating attention both to detail and the big picture, and Enns does not interact with that literature.²³ Had he done so, perhaps his argument would have been a tad less tendentious.

Fourth, the much published line-drawing of Dickin, complete with foundations of the earth, pillars of the earth, sheol, lower and higher waters, and all the rest (p. 54), raises interesting questions about how the OT writers themselves understood these expressions. Did they think of literal pillars, as the drawing suggests? Perhaps so—but I wonder, and I have my doubts. Does the reference to “the circle of the earth” in Isa 40:22 mean that the writer thought of the world as a sphere? Or that at the very least he was aware of the curvature of the world? And in that case doesn't Dickin's rather flat surface beg a few questions? Or if the Isaiah reference should be understood in some sort of poetic/metaphorical sense, may “pillars of the earth” be understood similarly? When I was a boy of about nine or ten, my father called me over to listen to him reading an editorial or a letter to the editor (I cannot remember which) in *The Montreal Star*, one of the leading papers in eastern Canada at the time. The writer was inveighing against all those stupid Christians who believe the Bible is the Word of God, when it speaks so ignorantly of the sun “rising” in the east: any schoolboy knows that

²³One thinks, for instance, of the important book by David Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction: A Reappraisal of the Chaoskampf Theory in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005). If this edition of the book appeared too late for inclusion in Enns's volume, the earlier edition, under the title *Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Evaluation*, made the same points in 1989, with somewhat less detail.

the sun does not rise, but that the earth rotates on its axis. My father asked me what I thought of the argument. I looked at him rather nonplused. He grinned, and calmly turned to the front page of the paper, and drew my attention to the line, "Sunrise: 6:36 am."

Fifth, all this reflection is decidedly lacking in pastoral sensitivity. I do not mean to ask Enns to write an entirely different book. But when I compare this book with the one by Tremper Longman, to which I have already referred (*viz.*, *How to Read Genesis*), I know which one I would be happy to put into the hands of students. Longman covers much of the same turf, but his judgments are subtler, there is no hint of the "angry young man" syndrome, he maintains a serene evaluative stance that does not project itself into the position of correcting everybody, and he happily lays out the kinds of themes that the Genesis text is certainly establishing. On the latter point, he reminds me of the book by Francis Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time*, now more than three decades old.²⁴ Schaeffer raises some of the questions that are extremely difficult to resolve to everyone's satisfaction, and then asks the disarming question, in effect, "What is the least that Genesis 1-11 must be saying if we are to maintain that the Bible is true and hangs together?" Longman does not ask exactly the same question, but he happily reflects on the "theological teaching" of the book of Genesis.²⁵ Or again, the volume by Henri Blocher tackles many of the questions raised by Enns, but he integrates his discussion into a much more integrated framework that includes exegesis, science, ANE literature, historical and systematic theology, and more. Enns refers to neither work. Moreover, some of the best recent commentaries on Genesis, not least those written by evangelicals, display the same merits. This is not to say that every Christian reader will want to adopt all of the conclusions put forward by Blocher, or by Schaeffer and recent commentators, or, for that matter, by Enns. But with Blocher and Schaeffer, one does not feel "got at," and it is easy to admire both the largeness of their vision and their pastoral wisdom.

(4) Enns repeatedly asks his readers to reflect on the questions, If Genesis is so much like other ANE literature, how can we think that Genesis alone is revelation? More generally, if laws and "historical" records in the Bible are so much like parallel ANE sources, in what sense is the Bible unique? Or more pointedly yet, if the parallel "historical" sources are biased, shouldn't we admit that the biblical documents are no less biased? Isn't it best to admit that there is no such thing as objective historiography?

After a while, these questions begin to feel as if I am being squeezed into a Sophie's choice, into a "damned if you do and damned if you don't" pair of alternatives. If Bible readers think that what is found in the text of Scripture is rather different from what one finds in parallel ANE literature, obviously they are flirting with

²⁴London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972.

²⁵E.g., *How to Read Genesis*, 27-34.

a docetic (mis)understanding of Scripture. Alternatively, if they find the text of Scripture is rather similar to what one finds in parallel ANE literature, obviously Scripture is as biased and as guilty of subjective historiography as are those sources, threatening the very foundations of what we mean by revelation.

But why? Most of us glory in the fact that God has disclosed himself to us in space-time history, in real words, to real people, in real languages. This is one crucial component of the doctrine of accommodation. Almost half a millennium ago, Calvin treated that subject with more imagination and flourish, more rigor and comprehension, than the occasional reference to accommodation in this book, which makes it all the more irritating to be told that evangelicals have not thought much about these matters. Moreover, the notion of "objective historiography," which Enns dismisses so confidently, deserves more thoughtful treatment. If by "objective historiography" Enns is holding out for an ideal in which historical events are portrayed in absolute comprehensiveness and perfect proportion, then it is a mere truism that there is no such thing as "objective historiography": the bar has been raised so high that objective historiography is open only to Omniscience. Moreover, since God himself cannot dump his omniscient knowledge into the minds of finite beings, even the most staggeringly immediate notion of revelation could not alleviate the problem: human knowledge will always be partial, even in eternity, since omniscience is not a communicable attribute of God. That is one of the reasons why the notion of accommodation must be thought through. The problem is that to ordinary readers whom Enns wants to help, the disavowal of objective historiography will sound, rather, like the disavowal of historiography that tells the truth, which is quite a different thing. King Mesha provides a rather self-serving report: good observation. But one of the remarkable things about biblical treatment of biblical "heroes" is that they are portrayed warts and all: think of David, Abraham, Moses, Peter, Barnabas, and so forth. Where are Mesha's warts? Of course the biblical records regarding King Omri do not tell *everything* that Omniscience knows about him: in that sense, the selection itself guarantees that the report is "biased." But does the report that is transparently and inevitably "biased" in this sense nevertheless tell the truth about him? Yes, the biblical report of the new Persian policy that permits the Jewish exiles to return home focuses almost all attention on the Jews themselves, without discussing how the policy affected a lot of other national/tribal groups: in that sense, it is "biased." But does it tell the truth about what is actually reported? And if we are going to maintain the incarnation as a useful analogy for our understanding of Scripture, doesn't the "humanness" of Scripture's approach to reportage have to be tied, somehow, to the evidence that these words are also God's words, duly accommodated?

(5) Enns is right, of course, to point out that Scripture includes diverse theological emphases. And he is right to point out that Scripture is being domesticated if this diversity is flattened, whether by reading Mark and John as if they boasted identical emphases, or by reading 1 and 2 Chronicles as if their theological emphases cannot be properly differentiated from those of Samuel and Kings. But Enns expends too little energy in showing how these diverse voices sing in the same choir and harmonize rather well.

I cannot take the space to deal with every instance Enns adduces, but a few examples will demonstrate that the diversity is not quite as problematic as he wants us to think. Consider the two Proverbs, 26:4 and 26:5: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself"; "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes." The fact that these two lie side-by-side is strong evidence that the compiler did not think they are mutually irreconcilable. Indeed, the second part of each proverb hints at the different situations when one or the other might be most appropriate. I have often appealed to this pair of verses to demonstrate the way proverbs work: they are not universal case law. The formal divergence in this instance powerfully embraces more comprehensive reflection than either proverb alone could have done. Yes, Proverbs includes divergent emphases on wealth. But far from being irreconcilable, these diverging emphases—wealth as an evil, wealth as a blessing; poverty as an evil, poverty as a blessing—are utterly realistic, and together paint a more comprehensive picture than one emphasis alone could have done. Why should anyone find these divergent emphases in any sense problematic?²⁶ True, at a superficial level, passages such as Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21-27; Mic 6:6-8 and others might be taken to be in conflict with the insistence of the Mosaic code that the prescribed sacrifices be offered. But apart from the fact that, as a literary form, Hebrew prophets regularly use a "not this . . . but that" form to articulate strong preference or ultimate preference, these verses are also part of the fabric of OT theology that slightly relativizes the Sinai law, thereby preparing the way for that to which, canonically speaking, the law was pointing (as Hebrews 10, and many other passages, insist: more on this below). As for diverse emphases in Ecclesiastes, Enns criticizes those who see "Qoheleth as a fool himself, someone whose lack of faith will not allow him to see past the end of his nose. The end of the book does not cancel out the words of Qoheleth" (p. 79). But as one reviewer comments in this regard,

No, they don't cancel them out, but they situate them, especially when it is realized that Qoheleth is speaking from an "under the

²⁶Indeed, one of the strengths of the book by Craig L. Blomberg (*Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* [NSBT 7; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999]) on this subject is its wisdom in knitting the divergent biblical emphases together in faithful proportion and with prophetic application.

sun” perspective and that the second wise man who is quoting him to his son (12:8-14) is trying to lift his son to an above the sun perspective.²⁷

It is easy to adduce other examples of formal divergence where the disparate emphases must be given full voice, but where the unity is not only fairly transparent, but also more powerful precisely because it is layered and complex. For instance, Deuteronomy 6 commands the Israelites to take their oaths in YHWH’s name; the Sermon on the Mount reports Jesus saying that his followers are not to swear at all, but simply let their “Yes” be yes and their “No” no (Matt 5:33-37; cf. 23:16-22). But is this so very problematic? One swears by what one values most highly. When ancient Israel was constantly tempted by polytheism, taking solemn oaths in the name of their covenant Lord, YHWH, was one small sign of continuing faithfulness. But where swearing by something sacred could be construed as more or less binding depending on antecedent decisions about just how sacred the thing was, then swearing by something sacred became a complex justification for evasive lying: hence Matthew 5 and 23. Paul joins with others in refusing to allow Titus to be circumcised (Gal 2:1-3), yet circumcises Timothy (Acts 16:1-3) This polarity owes nothing to the fact that the latter incident is written up by Luke and not Paul. Rather, if anyone is suggesting that Gentiles *must* be circumcised if they are to accept the Jewish Messiah and belong to the messianic community, Paul will vehemently refuse, for such a stance jeopardizes the exclusive sufficiency of Jesus Christ. By contrast, where no one is making that assertion, and being circumcised removes barriers and opens the door to synagogues for the sake of evangelism, Paul is eager to comply – and this is entirely in line with Paul’s own flexibility when evangelism is at stake (1 Cor 9:19-23). Enns himself points out that the contrast between Deut 23:3, where Moabites are prohibited from entering the assembly of the Lord all the way down to the tenth generation, and the book of Ruth, which tells of a Moabitess only four generations removed from King David himself, is in fact of a piece with other OT polarities. In the book of Jonah, God promises the destruction of the Ninevites, yet forgives them when they repent. The Assyrians and the Egyptians are under God’s curse, yet the prophet anticipates the time when they will be part of the eschatological people of God (Isa 19:23-25). Note well that these polarities do not require different authors writing at different times: they can be tied up in one book (e.g., Jonah). Yes, Exodus 32-34 depicts God “changing his mind” in response to the prayer of Moses,²⁸ but Pierre Berthoud, in a paper not yet published, traces out

²⁷Tremper Longman III, review of Enns in *Modern Reformation* 14/6 (Nov/Dec 2005): 34.

²⁸Though many have pointed out that “change one’s mind” is not the most obvious rendering of the Hebrew.

what he calls the “extreme tension” *within* these chapters in the depiction of God himself: for instance, he is not only the God who responds to Moses’ prayer, but also the God who insists that his mercy and compassion are his to dispense (33:19).²⁹ Why, then, should these polarities be viewed as “problems” at all? Why not simply rejoice in the just severity and joyous mercy of God? The disparate emphases regarding the nature of God leave us with a God who is utterly sovereign and transcendent (i.e., “above” space and time), yet who interacts with us as persons in “our” space and time.

Sometimes I think Enns sees this clearly, for several times he wisely avoids the obvious traps characterized by reductionism (e.g., he disavows the theology of the “openness of God” movement). He thus aligns with many generations of commentators and theologians who have wrestled with these things before him. And then suddenly he insists that we must not say that these polarities merely *appear* to be a problem: what people fail to see is that these divergences tell us something about Scripture that everyone seems to be missing (e.g., pp. 107-11). But what? Of course, there have always been Christian preachers and teachers who have veered toward reductionism, and they need to be challenged—but by the same token there have always been preachers and teachers who, precisely because they listen well to Scripture, reflect Scripture’s richness and diversity, within a holistic faithfulness, remarkably well. Will Enns join them and speak of the unity of the Bible? Well, yes and no: he asserts that we can speak of “a unity to the Bible . . . but it is not a superficial unity based on the surface content of the words of passages taken in isolation” (p. 110). Well and good: so far, I do not know any serious Christian thinker who would disagree. But then this:

The unity of the Bible is more subtle but at the same time deeper. It is a unity that should ultimately be sought in Christ himself, the living word. This itself is not a superficial unity, as if we can “find Jesus” in every passage of the Old Testament (a point we will address from a different angle in the next chapter). It is, rather, a broad and foundational commitment based on the analogy between Christ and Scripture. (p. 110)

Yet this is just one more reductionism, gently masked by sloganeering. What Christian wants to deny that in some sense the Bible finds its unity in Christ? Indeed, in recent decades quite a number of Christian thinkers have traced out inner-canonical themes to show how the Bible hangs together and comes to a genuine focus in him. And some of the polarities Enns adduces find some sort of further resolution in Jesus: e.g., texts that relativize the place of the sacrificial system, while people are still under the law-covenant that demands that certain sacrifices be offered. But appeal to Christ does

²⁹See also Michael Widmer, *Moses, God and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

not explain how the divergent emphases on wealth in the Wisdom literature belong together. There is a deep unity to the OT picture of God, which is then deepened further in the depictions of Christ—or, better, further exemplified in him—but Christ does not somehow resolve the polarities of transcendence/sovereignty on the one hand, and personal interaction with finite creatures on the other. And what Enns means by the last sentence of the block quote—the unity he stipulates is “a broad and foundational theological commitment based on the analogy between Christ and Scripture”—I have no idea. I’m not even sure what Enns means when he says that this unity is a commitment, “a broad and foundational theological commitment,” let alone that this commitment is “based on the analogy between Christ and Scripture.” With the best will in the world, I cannot see how this is anything more than an attempt to keep alive the title of his book. It does not unpack how Christ unifies the assorted polarities and divergences that Enns has set out.

(6) The extended chapter on the use of the OT in the New addresses one of the areas of biblical hermeneutics that has occupied my attention for several decades, so the temptation to write an entire book by way of interaction is pathetically strong. So I shall strive the more valiantly for brevity.

First, the thrust of the approach Enns adopts is that the hermeneutics deployed by the NT writers is indifferntiable from the hermeneutics of other first-century Jewish writers. However alien such interpretive principles may be to those of us weaned on grammatical-historical exegesis, those are the realities, and we need to come to terms with them. With much of this I am in happy concurrence. Indeed, this argument has been made by many people in recent decades, not a few of them evangelicals.³⁰ Enns’s treatment is a popularizing of much of that work: e.g., he does not set out for us the *middoth* (more or less “rules of interpretation,” usually numbering between seven and thirteen, depending on the ancient Jewish authority) and demonstrate the extent to which they are duplicated in the NT.

Yet the more one insists on the commonality of Jewish and Christian hermeneutics in the first century, the more urgently one faces two crucial needs. (i) One should try to identify *differences* as well as similarities in their respective hermeneutical approaches. For instance, many have pointed out ways in which NT *peshet* interpretation is rather *unlike* *peshet* found in 1QpHab.³¹ But we’ll let that pass. (ii) It becomes important to raise a question of warrant. If Paul’s way of reading the Hebrew Bible, the OT, is methodologically indifferntiable from the way of reading deployed by his unconverted Jewish colleagues, how are they managing to come to such different conclusions while reading the same texts? We’ll see in

³⁰E.g., one thinks of the many publications of E. Earle Ellis.

³¹E.g., see the discussion in Timothy H. Lim, *Pesharim* (Companion to the Qumran Scrolls 3; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

a moment that it is inadequate simply to say, "Well, Paul now believes Jesus has risen from the grave, and is the long-promised Messiah." That is true, but, as we shall see, not sufficient to address the question. To put it differently, how does Paul think his own reading of the OT has changed from three months before his Damascus Road experience to three months after? Is there *any* change in his hermeneutics? Or is it only that his *answers* are now different, so that he manipulates the hermeneutical axioms in rather creative ways? What hermeneutical change in his thinking *warrants* the Christological readings of the OT he adopts?

That is an important question. It is possible to identify several *hermeneutical* differences. I can take the space to mention only one, and it needs much more development than I will give it here. First-century Palestinian Jews who were asked the question, "How does a person please God?" were likely to answer, "By obeying the law." This answer they could apply not only to figures such as Hezekiah and David and Moses, all of whom are found *this* side of Sinai, but even to figures such as Abraham and Enoch, who are found on the *other* side of Sinai. After all, Genesis tells us that Abraham kept all God's statutes, and we know what they must have been; Enoch walked with God, and we know full well what is required for that to take place. One must infer that they received private revelations of the law. What this does, hermeneutically speaking, is elevate the law to the level of hermeneutical hegemony: it is the grid that controls how you read the OT. It is, in substantial measure, an a-historical reading. But when Paul as a Christian and an apostle reads the same texts, he insists on preserving the significance of the *historical* sequence. Thus in Galatians 3, Abraham was justified by faith *before* the giving of the law, and the promise to him and to his seed similarly came *before* the giving of the law. That means that the law given by Moses has been relativized; one must now think afresh exactly why it was given, "added" to the promise. Again, in Romans 4 Paul analyzes the relation between faith and circumcision *on the basis of which came first*: it is the historical sequence that is determinative for his argument. Nor is this approach exclusively Pauline. In Hebrews, for instance, the validity of *Auctor's* argument in ch. 7 turns on historical sequence. If Psalm 110, written *after* the establishment of the Levitical priesthood at Sinai, promises a priesthood that is *not* tied to the tribe of Levi but to the tribe of Judah, and is thus bringing together royal and priestly prerogatives in one person, then the Levitical priesthood has been declared obsolete in principle. Moreover, if this new king-priest is modeled on ancient Melchizedek, himself a priest-king, there is also an anticipation of this arrangement as far back as Genesis 14. In other words, where one pays attention to links that depend on historical sequencing, one has laid the groundwork for careful typology. The argument in Heb 3:7-4:13 similarly depends on reading the OT texts in their historical sequence: the fact that Psalm 95, written *after* the

people have entered the Promised Land, is still calling the covenant people to enter into God's rest, demonstrates that entry into the land was not *itself* a final delivery of the promise to give them rest. Moreover, the reference to "God's rest" triggers reflection on how God rested as far back as Genesis 1-2—and thus another typological line is set up, filled in with a variety of pieces along the *historical* trajectory.

Ultimately, this insistence on reading the OT historically can be traced back to Jesus himself. But the only point I am making here is that this is one of the *hermeneutical* differences between the apostolic interpreters of Scripture and their unconverted Jewish counterparts. But none of this is unpacked by Enns, even though such considerations must play a considerable role in any evaluation of how the NT writers are reading Scripture.

Second, as a result of these points being ignored, in quite a number of Enns's discussions I wish the presentation went in slightly different directions. I will not here treat the use of Hos 11:1 in Matthew 2, as I have discussed that quotation at rather too much length in my commentary on Matthew in the EBC series. But consider how Ps 95:7-11 is used in Hebrews 3 and 4. Enns makes much of the shift in the position of $\delta\iota\acute{o}$: he thinks that this means that, whereas in Psalm 95 God is angry with his people *for* the forty years of the wilderness wanderings, in Hebrews 3-4 God's anger comes *only at the end of the forty years* of wilderness wandering (pp. 140-42). But this is seriously overstated. Even in the account in Hebrews, it is clear that during the forty years the people are hardening their hearts, rebelling, and testing the Lord and trying him. That is why ($\delta\iota\acute{o}$) God was angry with that generation—i.e., because of this rebellious behavior *during* the forty years. The assumption, surely, is that God's response has been wrath as long as there has been rebellion. The text does not say that God was *not* wrathful during the forty years, but suddenly became wrathful at the end of forty years: the latter way of taking the text demands an antithesis that is simply not there. Instead, what one finds is a small difference in emphasis. One can even venture a guess as to why this small difference in emphasis has taken place: in Hebrews, *Auctor* wants to show his readers how God's wrath finally issued in his refusal to let his covenant people enter the Promised Land. The readers are thereby warned that they, too, might not enter into the ultimate rest, if, like the generation of the exodus, they begin well, but do not persevere to the end. Of course, that lesson was already there in the words of Psalm 95; all that *Auctor* has done is strengthen that point. And meanwhile, what Enns has overlooked in *Auctor's* brilliant exposition of Psalm 95 is (as we have seen) the way he situates the Psalm within the trajectories of redemptive history to show that even the OT writers did not think that entrance into Canaan constituted the ultimate rest. Collectively they generated a typological trajectory that *necessarily* outstrips the rest of Canaan.

It would be tedious to go through all of Enns's examples, but I cannot forbear to mention that readers would do well to compare Enns's treatment of "Paul's movable well" with that of, say, Thiselton.³²

(7) Enns draws attention to Luke 24:45: the resurrected Jesus "opened the minds" of the two Emmaus Road disciples "so that they could understand the Scriptures." Enns takes this to be the kind of claimed revelation the Teacher of Righteousness enjoyed at Qumran, reorienting the reader to a new understanding of Scripture along lines that are not transparently there on the surface of the OT text. But the context shows another dimension to this exchange between Jesus and the two Emmaus believers that must not be overlooked: toward the beginning of the conversation, Jesus tells them,

"How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (24:25-26)

Toward the end, Jesus adds, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (24:44).

This is quite striking. On the one hand, even the apostles and other disciples did not understand, before the cross and resurrection, that the Messiah would be crucified and would rise the third day, even though Jesus had told them. They simply did not have the categories to absorb such information. Transparently, when they had become convinced of his resurrection, they had to undergo a transformation of their understanding of the Scriptures. In other words, in the psychological development of their understanding, the resurrection of Christ comes before their Christianized understanding of the OT text. That is the point Enns is making. But on the other hand, *even before his resurrection*, Jesus himself holds his followers responsible for understanding the OT text in a Christianized way, and labels them foolish when they fail in this regard. He himself, and all the major NT writers, speak of the events of his life as *fulfilling* what the OT says, not as adding brand new meaning to what the OT says. (This, as we shall see, is one of the dominating themes in Wright's book.) Enns never explores what this side of things might mean.

Sometimes the two points come together in dramatic ways. For instance, in Rom 16:25-27, Paul's gospel is in line with "the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past"; but it is also "now revealed and made known *through the prophetic writings*." On the one hand, the gospel has been long hidden; but when it is

³²Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 737-40.

revealed and made known, this revelation takes place *through the prophetic writings*. Quite a number of the “mystery” passages of the NT turn on unpacking some things that are *genuinely there in the biblical texts*, but which have been “hidden” in the past until the great revelatory event of Jesus Messiah has taken place. Because they truly are there in the text, readers can be berated for not having seen them—i.e., the assumption is that if it were not for their moral turpitude and their ignorance of God, they would have seen how the texts are put together, would have grasped more clearly what this God is truly like, and would have understood their Bibles properly. That is also why the NT writers do not restrict their apologetic to the stance: If only you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah and that he rose from the dead, then you will be transformed and come to read the Bible the way we do. Rather, they urge upon their Jewish counterparts the *right* way to read the Bible. Their apologetic often consists of showing *from the Scriptures* that Jesus Messiah *had* to die and rise again. Their hermeneutic in such exposition, though it overlaps with that of the Jews, is distinguishable from it, and at certain points is much more in line with the actual shape of Scripture: it rests on the unpacking of the Bible’s storyline.³³

(8) The failure to get this tension right—by “right,” I mean in line with what Scripture actually says of itself—is what makes Enns sound disturbingly like my *Doktorvater* on one point. Barnabas Lindars’s first book was *New Testament Apologetic*.³⁴ The thesis was very simple, the writing elegant: the NT writers came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and that he had been crucified and raised from the dead. They then ransacked their Bible, what we call the OT, to find proof texts to justify their new-found theology, and ended up yanking things out of context, distorting the original context, and so forth. Enns is more respectful, but it is difficult to see how his position differs substantively from that of Lindars, except that he wants to validate these various approaches to the OT partly on the ground that the hermeneutics involved were already in use (we might call this the “Hey, everybody’s doing it” defense), and partly on the ground that he himself accepts, as a “gift of faith,” that Jesus really is the Messiah. This really will not do. The NT writers, for all that they understand that acceptance of who Jesus is comes as a gift of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:14), never stint at giving *reasons* for the hope that lies within them, *including reasons for reading the Bible as they do*. The “fulfillment” terminology they deploy is too rich and varied to allow us to imagine that they are merely reading in what is in fact not there. They would be the first to admit that *in their own*

³³I have dealt with this in some detail in “Mystery and Fulfillment: Toward a More Comprehensive Paradigm of Paul’s Understanding of the Old and the New,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, Vol. 2: *The Paradoxes of Paul* (ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid; WUNT 181; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 393-436.

³⁴*New Testament Apologetic: The Doctrinal Significance of the Old Testament Quotations* (London: SCM, 1961).

psychological history the recognition of Jesus came before their understanding of the OT; but they would see this as evidence of moral blindness. As a result, they would be the first to insist, with their transformed hermeneutic (not least the reading of the sacred texts in salvation-historical sequence), that *the Scriptures themselves can be shown to anticipate a suffering Servant-King, a Priest-King, a new High Priest, and so forth*. In other words, Enns develops the first point but disavows the second. The result is that he fails to see how Christian belief is *genuinely* warranted by Scripture. No amount of appeal to the analogy of the incarnation will make up the loss.

III. N. T. WRIGHT

A. Content

Tom Wright, one of the most influential and prolific NT scholars of our day, is currently Bishop of Durham. In comparison with some of his own weighty tomes, his little book on Scripture is slight. On the other hand, it is easily the best written of the three books under review here: Wright finds it difficult to draft a boring sentence. In some ways it is a simple book, pitched at the common reader; it does not require detailed technical interaction. Yet because it develops an independent proposal regarding how we are to think about Scripture, it demands evaluation that is prepared to think “outside the box.” I should say right away that the American title is different from the British original, so we had better get that squared away: the original is *Scripture and the Authority of God*, which admirably summarizes the book;³⁵ the American title, I’m afraid, has opted for a full dose of pompous nonsense, attributable, I hope, to the publisher: *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*.³⁶ The pagination of the two is different; references below are to the British edition.

Title aside, the book is made up of ten short chapters and a concluding Appendix (briefly mentioned below). As for the other end of this volume—well, anyone who opens his Preface with the sentence, “Writing a book about the Bible is like building a sandcastle in front of the Matterhorn” (p. xiii) has my interest already. The first chapter (pp. 1-3) gives a potted survey of the role of Scripture within the church from the first century until the present. This is cast as a sermonette to encourage us to keep reading.

In ch. 2, Wright sets the stage for his discussion by talking about “Scripture within Contemporary Culture,” along five axes. The first is Scripture’s relation to culture. The interplay between modernity and postmodernity has “created a mood of uncertainty within Western society at least” (p. 4). Modernity challenged “the overarching story of the church” (p. 4); postmodernity deconstructs

³⁵London: SPCK, 2005.

³⁶San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005 (the paperback appeared in 2006).

it. Truth is often now reduced to power-claims or the perspective of a particular community, with no obvious connection to “what happened,” to “reality.” In all this, personal identity has become squishy and uncertain. The second axis is Scripture’s relation to politics: “The map of what we might call political morality has shrunk” (p. 7): this Wright attributes to the Enlightenment. The third surveys the relation between Scripture and philosophy: the substantial removal of God from the arena of philosophical discussion was supposed to eliminate the internecine wars generated by religious conflict, but in fact gave us Hitler and Stalin. Scarcely less sad, as Scripture has interacted with theology, theology has become disconnected from Scripture. Even the books that talk about Scripture devote very little space to wrestling with what Scripture actually says: here Wright mentions Webster’s *Holy Scripture*, reviewed above, and the “radical orthodoxy” movement, which says a great deal about tradition but rather little about the Bible. And in the domain of ethics, the dominant categories of discussion bounce topics like homosexuality and gender ethics around culture, politics, philosophy, and theology with all too little wrestling with the text of Scripture. Proof-texting is not the way ahead. What we must face, Wright says, are three questions, which the rest of his book addresses:

1. In what sense is the Bible authoritative in the first place?
2. How can the Bible be appropriately understood and interpreted?
3. How can its authority, assuming such appropriate interpretation, be brought to bear on the church itself, let alone on the world? (p. 13)

The rest of the chapter basically argues that the present debate cannot be cast in the categories of earlier centuries, and that much of it is shallow. The problems of shallowness, Wright says,

occur when people push the Bible to one side because it appears to be telling them something they do not wish to hear. This happens secretly in the case of the so-called “conservative,” who may well choose to ignore the ecclesial, ecumenical, sacramental and ecological dimensions of Paul’s soteriology, in order to highlight and privilege a doctrine of justification or “personal salvation” which owes its real shape to a blend of Reformation, enlightenment, romantic and existentialist influences. It may well happen in a bold, in-your-face manner in the case of the so-called “radical,” who will often take pleasure in saying things like, “Paul says this, and we now know he’s wrong,” playing to a gallery stacked with iconoclasts. All this has to be named, shamed and got rid of if we are to seek and find fresh wisdom. (p. 15)

Nevertheless, Wright concedes that some “thorough, indeed magisterial” (p. 15) work has been done, and that is why he provides the Appendix, “Recent Resources on Scripture,” as he will not be interacting with such materials in this short book.³⁷

The third chapter sets out one major plank in Wright’s argument: “‘Authority of Scripture’ as Part of a Larger Whole” (pp. 17-25). “We now arrive at the central claim of this book: that the phrase ‘authority of scripture’ can only make Christian sense if it is a shorthand for ‘the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* scripture’” (p. 17). But since whatever else the Bible is, it is a massive story, this raises the question of what it means to speak of the authority of a story, or of how God’s authority is exercised *through* this story. We should be nervous of preachers like Martin Luther and Charles Spurgeon who kept quoting the Bible as a protest against other positions: people appeal to “the authority of the Bible” when they want to stop other people from acting in some way of which they disapprove. Of course, Wright says, “there is a positive use [of the phrase ‘the authority of Scripture’] as well, exemplified in the teaching and preaching of scripture” (p. 20), but he judges it important to reiterate the warning. As for *God’s* authority, it is best thought of in the context of God’s kingdom—and that draws us toward the running tension between God’s constant sovereign rule over everything, and the way his sovereignty breaks into this world of corruption and decay: Yahweh will be king over all the world (Zech 14:9). As God’s authority is worked out in this advancing kingdom, the right question to ask is this: “[W]hat *role* does Scripture play *within* God’s accomplishment of this goal?” (p. 22).

“The authority of scripture” is thus a sub-branch of several other theological topics: the mission of the church, the work of the Spirit, the ultimate future hope and the way it is anticipated in the present, and of course the nature of the church. Failure to pay attention to all of these in discussing how scripture functions is part of the problem, as we can see when people, hearing the word “scripture,” instantly think of a rule-book—and then, according to taste, either assume that all the rules are to be followed without question or assume that they can all now be broken. (p. 22)

All of this means that Scripture transcends revelation, in the sense of conveying information; it is more than a devotional manual, not least when the Bible is used for personal guidance. What we *should* remember is that the role of the Bible within the Christian church indicates three things of central importance; first, God is a speaking God; second, the Bible is “central to early Christian instruction so

³⁷The Appendix is pitched at an entirely different level than the book itself: one would need to be a serious student, and sometimes a rather advanced student, to understand some of the books Wright lists. The selection is seriously slanted on some of the subjects covered, but doubtless that is a picky criticism.

that we can be transformed by the renewal of our minds" (p. 25); and third, it reminds us that "the God we worship is the God of world-conquering power, seen in action in the resurrection of Jesus" (p. 25).

The fourth chapter invites us to look at "Scripture Within the Kingdom-People, BC" (pp. 26-30). Here Wright makes three points. First, in the OT, the purpose of God's kingdom is to rescue his people and to complete creation, and the Scriptures, Israel's sacred writings, even allowing for all their diversity of literary genres, "were the place where, and the means by which, Israel discovered again and again who the true God was, and how his kingdom-purposes were being taken forward" (p. 27). Second, basing himself on Ps 33:6, Jer 23:29; Isa 40:8; 55:10-11; and Deut 30:14, Wright likens "the word of the Lord" to

an enormous reservoir, full of creative divine wisdom and power, into which the prophets and other writers tap by God's call and grace, so that the word may flow through them to do God's work of flooding or irrigating his people. (p. 28)

And third, this Scripture "was never simply about the imparting of information, reminding people of previous religious experience" (p. 29), but actually constituted Israel as the Scripture-hearing people. Moreover, within Second Temple Judaism, these Scriptures "formed the controlling *story* in which Israel struggled to find its identity and destiny as the covenant people," and "formed the call to a present *obedience* . . . through which Israel could respond appropriately to God's call" (p. 30).

As for the relationship between Scripture and Jesus (ch. 5, pp. 31-34), two things must be said. First, Jesus understands that the (OT) Scriptures point to him; he accomplishes and fulfills "an entire world of hints and shadows now coming to plain statement and full light" (p. 32)—which is the way Wright understands Matt 5:17-18.³⁸ Second, Jesus insists on Scripture's authority. But even this authority must be understood within the story-line in which Jesus fulfills Scripture, for otherwise it would not make sense to find Jesus declaring foods to be clean, formally modifying the law on oaths, and so forth.

The sixth chapter is devoted to "'Word of God' and Scripture in the Apostolic Church" (pp. 35-44). The earliest apostolic preaching did not announce a brand new religion, but told "the story of Jesus *understood as* the fulfillment of the OT covenant narrative" (p. 35). This preached "word" was the gospel itself, and it not only conveyed information—Jesus' story as the fulfillment of the old covenant narrative—but was itself charged with power to transform lives (e.g., Rom 1:16).

³⁸This chapter is, of course, in some ways the briefest possible digest of Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

Here we have the roots of a fully Christian theology of scriptural authority: planted firmly in the soil of the missionary community, confronting the powers of the world with the news of the kingdom of God, refreshed and invigorated by the Spirit, growing particularly through the preaching and teaching of the apostles, and bearing fruit in the transformation of human lives as the start of God's project to put the whole cosmos to rights. (p. 37)

In that way, the writers of the NT intended to "energize, shape, and direct the church," and thus their writings "were intended to be vehicles of the Spirit's authority" (p. 37), and that is in fact how they were viewed. The modern penchant for detecting mutually contradictory communities behind the various NT corpora is indefensible; in fact, the early Christians worked out a remarkably "multi-layered reading of the OT: not arbitrarily, but reflecting their understanding of the church as God's new covenant people and their place in the ongoing story" (p. 39).³⁹ These documents work out thoughtful continuity and discontinuity with the OT Scriptures, and stand as well "in dialogical relation with all human culture" (p. 43). Some things in the culture were approved, but often Christians found themselves in sharp opposition to the prevailing evils of the day, and pronounced against them by calling believers to "a costly and contested redemption" (p. 44). In short, the NT writings "guided the early Church in discerning the relationship between cultural context and the path of new, renewed humanity" (p. 44). But Wright again insists:

Yet this has nothing to do with the declaration of an arbitrary or "controlling" ethic, a standard imposed from without by constricting or bullying authority in the early church. It has everything to do with understanding human renewal as the beginning, the pointer towards, and even the means of, God's eventual eradication of evil from the world and the bringing to birth of the new creation itself. . . . We can summarize it like this: the New Testament understands itself as the new covenant charter, the book that forms the basis for the new telling of the story through which Christians are formed, reformed and transformed so as to be God's people for God's world. That is the challenge the early Christians bequeath to us as we reconsider what "the authority of scripture" might mean in practice today. (p. 44)

In ch. 7, Wright surveys "Scripture from the Second to the Seventeenth Century" (pp. 45-60). In the patristic period, he covers early challenges (Marcion, the Gnostics, and so forth), and the response of the church by appealing to early tradition and "good exegesis" (p. 45). For Wright, the most important thing is that the scriptural narrative ("creation spoiled and restored, covenant broken

³⁹Here and elsewhere, I have sometimes drawn on the exact words Wright uses in one of his lengthy subtitles, where he has in fact preserved capital letters. I have taken the liberty of removing the caps for the sake of the flow of my summary.

and renewed," p. 46) was reaffirmed over against approaches that were non-Jewish, atemporal ("de-storied"), and anti-creation. Sadly, however, this emphasis was gradually lost as Scripture became mere "court of appeal" or the focus of *lectio divina*. In time, the drift toward allegorical exegesis, which on the one hand testifies to the willingness of Christians to stick with Scripture even when they themselves were finding it problematic, brought more problems. The oft-discussed "four senses" of the medieval church became "a way of trying to get at the rich contours of Scripture without grasping the early Christians' own theological method" (p. 51). "As even apologists for the medieval period will admit, once allegory had taken over almost anything could be 'proved' from scripture, resulting in fantastic and highly speculative theories" (p. 52). Wright asserts that the popularity of the "four senses" went hand in hand with the development of "tradition" as a parallel authority to Scripture. That brings us to the Reformation. The Reformers' *sola Scriptura* slogan "was part of its protest against perceived medieval corruptions" (p. 53).

The Reformers thus set scripture over against the traditions of the church; the recovery of the literal sense over against the lush growth of the three other senses; and the right of ordinary Christians to read scripture for themselves over against the protection of the sacred text by the Latin-reading elite. They did so in order to insist that the church had got off the right track and that the living God was using scripture itself to get it back on the right one. (p. 54)

Of course, "literal sense" in this context means the first of the four medieval senses, not exactly what we mean by "literal" today. But where the Reformers fell short, Wright insists, is in their failure to deal adequately with "the great *narrative* of God, Israel, Jesus and the world, coming forwards into our own day and looking ahead to the eventual renewal of all things" (p. 56). Their readings of the gospels, for instance,

show little awareness of them as anything other than repositories of dominical teaching, concluding with the saving events of Good Friday and Easter but without integrating those events into the kingdom-proclamation that preceded them. (p. 57)

As for the English Reformation, Wright is eager to point out that Hooker's insistence on "reason" must not be seen in the light of later Enlightenment debates. "Reason" was not a way of undervaluing Scripture, but a way of thinking in the light of Scripture "and in harmony with the natural law which stemmed from the creator God in the first place" (p. 59). "The thought of 'reason' as an entirely separate source of information, which could then be *played off against* scripture and/or tradition, flies in the face of [Hooker's] whole way of thinking" (p. 60).

That brings us to "The Challenge of the Enlightenment," ch. 8 (pp. 61-77). Wright again paints with a broad brush. The Enlightenment was helpful to the church in that it insisted on *historical* readings of texts. Unfortunately, it soon offered its own rival eschatology, born along by "rationalism," which understood "reason" as a faculty utterly independent of Scripture. God and religion became private matters; evil was primarily a matter of ignorance, to be met with education and good government policies. In the light of these developments, modern biblical scholarship made some advances, but generated "muddled debates" and precipitated "complex interplay with cultural movements" (p. 66). Wright dumps fundamentalism and liberalism into the same pot: both are the products, he avers, of Enlightenment thought that screen out huge swaths of what the Bible actually says. More recently, postmodernism's challenge to modernism is appropriate, a necessary corrective, yet it veers constantly toward "nihilistic deconstruction" (p. 71). One of the signs of postmodernism's impotence, Wright asserts, is this: "It can protest against empire, but cannot bring Scripture's power to bear against it" (p. 73).

In ch. 9, Wright offers us two lists of misreadings of Scripture (pp. 78-83). Misreadings of the "right" include dispensational understandings of the "rapture," the prosperity gospel, support for slavery, endemic racialism of much Western culture, undifferentiated readings of the Old and New Testaments, assorted "new Israel" ideas applied to various Enlightenment projects, support for the death penalty, and overlooking political meanings in the text. Misreadings on the "left" include claims to objectivity, claims that modern science has disproved the Bible, various caricatures of biblical teaching, the "cultural relativity" argument, discovery of "political" meanings to the exclusion of religious meanings, the claim that the NT writers did not think they were writing "Scripture," and more of the same. (Neither list is as full as Wright's lists.) "The polarization of debates, especially in North America, leaves us in urgent need of fresh, kingdom-oriented, historically rooted exegesis" (p. 81).

The last chapter tells us "How to Get Back on Track" (pp. 84-104). Wright offers a paragraph that tells where the rest of the chapter is going:

We urgently need an *integrated* view of the dense and complex phrase "the authority of scripture." Such an integrated view needs to highlight the role of the Spirit as the powerful, transformative agent. It needs to keep as its central focus the goal of God's kingdom, inaugurated by Jesus on earth as in heaven and one day to be completed under that same rubric. It must envisage the church as characterized, at the very heart of its life, by prayerful listening to, strenuous wrestling with, humble obedience before, and powerful proclamation of scripture, particularly in the ministries of its authorized leaders. (p. 84)

Among the points that are then unpacked in the following pages are these: The authority of Scripture

is most truly put into operation as the church goes to work in the world on behalf of the gospel, the good news that in Jesus Christ the living God has defeated the powers of evil and begun the work of new creation. (p. 85)

The proper way to think of Scripture's relation to tradition is in terms of dialog with previous readings (p. 86). To appeal to "reason" "will mean giving up merely arbitrary or whimsical readings of texts, and paying attention to lexical, contextual, and historical considerations" (p. 88). It will mean giving attention to, and celebrating, the many massive discoveries in biology, archaeology, physics, astronomy, and so on, which shed great light on God's world and the human condition. This does not, of course, mean giving in to the pressure which comes from atheistic or rationalistic science" (p. 88). A truly multi-layered view of Scripture recognizes the "vital and theologically coherent differences between OT and NT" (p. 89)—and this means adopting Wright's five-act model.⁴⁰ When we read Genesis 1-2, we read it as "the first act of a play of which we are the fifth" (p. 91); Genesis 3-11 is the second act of the play of which we are the fifth; the entire history of Israel from Abraham to the Messiah is the third act; the story of Jesus is "the decisive and climactic fourth act" (p. 91) of this play of which we are the fifth. "To live in the fifth act is thus to presuppose all of the above, and to be conscious of living as the people through whom the narrative in question is now moving towards its final destination" (p. 91). And so our relation to the NT is not the same as our relation to the Old. We must also be committed to "a totally contextual reading of Scripture" (p. 93); "a liturgically grounded reading of Scripture" (p. 95); "a privately studied reading of Scripture" (p. 98); a reading of Scripture "refreshed by appropriate scholarship" (p. 98) and "taught by the church's accredited leaders" (p. 100).

In other words, if we are to be true, at the deepest level, to what scriptural authority really means, we must understand it like this. God is at work, through Scripture (in other words, through the Spirit who is at work as people read, study, teach and preach scripture) to energize, enable and direct the outgoing mission of the church, genuinely anticipating thereby the time when all things will be made new in Christ. At the same time, God is at work by the same means to order the life of the church, and of individual Christians, to model and embody his project of new creation in their unity and holiness. (p. 101)

⁴⁰This he develops at length in *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), ch. 5.

B. Critique

Despite its brevity, this little book leaves us with plenty to appreciate. Not least is Wright's running concern to trace the authority of Scripture back to the authority of God himself. The long-standing habit of beginning works of systematic theology with bibliology instead of with theology proper may not set up Scripture as an independent authority (as Wright avers), since even in such treatments of bibliology theologians typically talk about how God himself has (or has not) given Scripture, inspired Scripture, and the like; but the habit nevertheless focuses on human epistemology – i.e., how we know God – before focusing on God himself, and that is a very post-Enlightenment thing to do. Equally praiseworthy is Wright's attempt to tie the notion of the authority of Scripture to the Bible's story line, even if I'll pick away at parts of his proposal. In some ways, this is in line with the retrieval of biblical theology that has been going on for some time (though Wright does not cast his work in such categories). Again, Wright's underscoring of Jesus, in the NT's presentation of him, as the *fulfillment* of the OT narrative about Israel, is essentially right. Moreover, in remarkably brief compass, Wright has both appreciated postmodernism and skewered it. This little book is worth reading for that section alone.

In his Preface, Wright disarmingly warns his readers,

The present book makes no pretence at completeness, in terms either of the topics covered or the debate with other writers that might be expected. It is more a tract for the times. I trust that those who have grumbled at the length of some of my other books will not now grumble at all the things I have left unsaid. (p. xiv)

Quite – with one exception: Where Wright lays out what he thinks Scripture is saying in some area, and in effect claims that his summary is at the heart of things and is an accurate reflection of Scripture (however much it is a mere snapshot), we may legitimately raise questions if we judge that by omission of complementary themes the center has been lost or moved. Some of the following evaluative comments take that line.

(1) Wright's use of the conservative/liberal or fundamentalist/liberal polarity is a bit grating at times.⁴¹ Everyone understands how such polarities work, of course: there are twits to my left, and twits to my right, and I am situated in the sensible middle. That is a standard ploy in all discussion, especially polemical discussion, so I am not objecting to it. But since the way the polarity is deployed in this book sometimes distorts the subject of the book, i.e., the

⁴¹As an aside: Wright often treats "fundamentalist" and "conservative" as synonyms, which works well in much British academic polemics, but is linguistically four decades out of date in America.

authority of Scripture, it must be probed a little. I give three examples.

First, recall how Wright condemns the “shallowness” of both the “conservative” and the “radical”: the former

may well choose to ignore the ecclesial, ecumenical, sacramental and ecological dimensions of Paul’s soteriology, in order to highlight and privilege a doctrine of justification or “personal salvation” which owes its real shape to a blend of Reformation, enlightenment, romantic and existentialist influences;

but shallowness may well

happen in a bold, in-your-face manner in the case of the so-called “radical,” who will often take pleasure in saying things like, “Paul says this, and we now know he’s wrong,” playing to a gallery stacked with iconoclasts. All this has to be named, shamed and got rid of if we are to seek and find fresh wisdom. (p. 15)

But there is a *qualitative* difference between the two. The “radical” is *dismissing* what Paul says, i.e., he is denying its authority. The “conservative” may well misinterpret the text, but is, within his or her own lights, bowing to it. Wright may be convinced that there is little difference between the two, since both end up missing a substantial part of what the text says. By this, of course, he means something like “what the text says *as I interpret it*” — and I shall show in a moment that, according to *my* lights, Wright himself is missing and downplaying some major themes in the text. But that does not warrant an accusation that Wright is thereby self-consciously shunting aside the authority of Scripture, in the way that the “radical” is. Wright perpetually charges those who disagree with his *interpretations* with disowning Scripture’s *authority*: this is a major category mistake, for it will apply to Wright as much as to anyone else. Even if he were to insist that the result is the same—*viz.*, the disavowal of certain content that Wright himself finds in the Bible—the way of getting there is not the same, and the solution to the problem is not the same. The one disavowal stems from the fact that the “conservative” simply does not think those themes are there; the other disavowal stems from the fact that, whether the “radical” thinks they are there or not, he thinks they are ridiculous, or unimportant, or against his own atheism, or whatever, and thus not *authoritative* for him. Similarly, the solution to the conservative’s shortcoming is cogent exegesis and biblical theology, because in principle he or she already submits to Scripture’s authority. Of course, the conservative may or may not be convinced by the exegesis, on various grounds; but that is still a long leap away from the stance of the radical who must abandon his or her atheism or liberalism or whatever, even to be open to such correction from Scripture.

A *second* example cements the problem. The brief linking of Martin Luther and Charles Spurgeon as two men who illustrate how the appeal to “the authority of Scripture” can merely be the language of protest, sometimes resulting in the protestor starting a new denomination or movement (p. 20), is singularly inapt. Of course it’s possible to claim Scripture’s authority in order to enhance one’s own, but I have not found that fault to be worse among those who protest current developments than among those who endorse them. Wright repeatedly emphasizes the special responsibility of those who are “authorized teachers” or “accredited teachers” of the church: I had not noticed him using that expression until he himself was elevated to the see of Durham. But I’ll let that pass, and notice how often those who occupy the role of “authorized teacher” in his own denomination have been happy to disown the bodily resurrection of Jesus, deny the incarnation (except in the most metaphorical sense), to go no further, without any serious repercussions whatsoever, except for a little charming notoriety. Thank God for those, then, like Luther and Spurgeon, who, in the name of what Scripture says, were willing to sacrifice their reputations⁴² to call people to the truth of the Bible *precisely because they submit to the authority of Scripture*. Shall we condemn Athanasius for standing alone? Shall we condemn Paul for confronting Peter? Once again, then, Wright is sometimes not really wrestling with the questions surrounding the authority of Scripture, but is scoring points on somewhat adjacent subjects related to his own theological agendas.

A *third* example:

The protest of that kind of fundamentalism [i.e. the kind that jumps from “Christ” to the divinity of Jesus without stopping along the way to think through first-century understandings of “Messiah”] against the “liberalism” of so-called modernist biblical scholarship (which often held the form of religion but denied its power) is simply a battle between one kind of Enlightenment vision and another. (p. 68)

This is an adaptation of the argument of Hans Frei, discussed above in my discussion of Webster. I am far from convinced that this is quite fair, though it is a mere truism in many contemporary academic circles. There is something to it, of course, for the influence of the Enlightenment has (as we have seen) shaped the way several generations of systematicians advanced bibliology to the first place of consideration, displacing God himself. Yet the charge that fundamentalism is merely another form of modernism, and thus one

⁴²Luther, of course, risked his life; in the middle of the “Downgrade” controversy, Spurgeon said he was willing to be eaten by dogs for the next fifty years, but he was sure that the later history would exonerate him—so certain was he that he was bowing to the truth of Scripture, and that the truth itself would prevail.

with liberalism, is surely not quite fair. In the words of one of Wright's reviewers:

Now I confess that it is one of history's high ironies that the vast majority of those in the 20th century who believed the words of the Apostles' Creed in the same way they were believed from the 2nd to the 19th century were also the kind of people who believed that Hal Lindsey knew what he was talking about. Okay, so God has a sense of humor. But I think it more accurate to describe all this as a rude and unlettered reaction to modernity than an expression of it.⁴³

Clearly, one of the reasons *why* these "conservatives" or "fundamentalists" tried to withstand the unbelief of late modernism was precisely *because* they wanted to remain under the authority of Scripture, as they understood it.

(2) Here and there, Wright's argument is tendentious in other ways. Consider two examples. At times, Wright seems to confuse function and essence, i.e., he talks about the right outworking of the authority of Scripture as if it were the theology of the authority of Scripture. Recall his comments on the preached word in Acts, and on Rom 1:16:

Here we have the roots of a fully Christian theology of scriptural authority: planted firmly in the soil of the missionary community, confronting the powers of the world with the news of the kingdom of God, refreshed and invigorated by the Spirit, growing particularly through the preaching and teaching of the apostles, and bearing fruit in the transformation of human lives as the start of God's project to put the whole cosmos to rights. (p. 37)

But these are *not* the "roots of a fully Christian theology of scriptural authority." Rather, they are the powerful outworking of that authority in the lives of the early Christians. This is a repeated confusion of category in Wright's book. The problem is crystallized by asking a few questions. Suppose missionaries lived and preached Scripture in some cultural setting or other where there was little or no "bearing fruit in the transformation of human lives as the start of God's project to put the whole cosmos right," where "confronting the powers of the world" resulted in martyrdom after martyrdom but no transformation. Would the authority of Scripture be in any way diminished, simply because no one but the missionaries themselves were responding positively to it?

For a second example, recall Wright's description of the "word of the Lord" in the OT as a "reservoir" into which the prophets and others can "tap" — basing himself on Ps 33:6; Jer 23:29; Isa 40:8; 55:10-11; and Deut 30:14 (p. 28). Well, at the risk of being picky, I confess

⁴³Douglas Wilson, on his "Blog and Mablog," posted 14 Jan 2006: <http://dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=Anchor&CategoryID=1&Bl>.

I'm not sure the prophets can simply tap into this reservoir: they typically seem, rather, to have had to wait until God gave them something: note the repeated expression, "The word of the Lord came to the prophet So-and-So." More importantly, why not survey the large and diverse ways the Bible speaks of itself, that Jesus speaks of biblical texts, and so forth? I briefly mentioned some of the evidence when I noted how little attention to it Webster had paid. Wright's course is rather different: he pays a lot of attention to a handful of biblical expressions, and entirely ignores others, thus giving the impression that he has summarized biblical teaching on how the Bible or "the word of the Lord" or related expressions are to be viewed, when in reality the evidence is so selective that it is mildly distorting.

(3) One of Wright's great strengths, viz., the careful way he ties his thesis to the Bible's "story," opens the door to one of his great weaknesses. The Bible's "story" for him is central to his understanding of Scripture: whatever else the Bible is, it is story. Israel's "story" is "fulfilled" in "Jesus' story." Yet the exclusiveness of this category to explain how the Bible hangs together rings gentle warning bells. I am sure this is a better category than law (as in the theonomy movement). Yet others trace out the relationships among the covenants, worry away at promise and fulfillment, or use "salvation history" as the controlling vector. Of course, any one of these can "control" the others. But would it not be a richer analysis to show how these and other trajectories intertwine?

The extent to which "story" controls Wright's thought is clearly seen when he discusses Second Temple Judaism: the Scriptures, he said, "formed the controlling *story* in which Israel struggled to find its identity and destiny as the covenant people," and "formed the call to a present *obedience* . . . through which Israel could respond appropriately to God's call" (p. 30). Well, yes, I suppose one could say that. But equally, large swaths of Judaism devoted enormous energy to thinking through how *law* should be worked out in their day, generating new *halakah*. Again, we are told that modernity challenged "the overarching story of the church" (p. 4). Why word it like this? Why not say that modernity challenged the truth claims of Scripture, and sought to undermine its *authority*? For transparently, one of the things that goes into making a document *authoritative* is its reliability, its "truthfulness" in that sense, when it speaks on whatever topic is the focus of its attention. But Wright ignores that facet of authority, so as to focus on the inbreaking kingdom and the Bible's story. I'm far from saying that all of his emphases are mistaken; but they soon appear distorted and troubling because they are so narrow, so reductionistic.

Moreover, the actual story Wright finds in the Bible is again so narrowly construed as to miss or reduce matters of central importance. We have repeatedly seen how the "story" of God's advancing kingdom is cast in terms of rescuing human beings and

completing creation, or perhaps in terms of defeating the powers of darkness. Not for a moment do I want to reduce or minimize those themes. Yet *from what* are human beings to be rescued? Their sin, yes; the powers of darkness; yes. But what is striking is the utter absence of any mention of the wrath of God. This is not a minor omission. Section after section of *the Bible's story* turns on the fact that God's image-bearers attract God's righteous wrath. The entire created order is under God's curse because of human sin. Sin is not first and foremost horizontal, social (though of course it is all of that): it is vertical, the defiance of Almighty God. The sin which most consistently is said to bring down God's wrath on the heads of his people or on entire nations is idolatry—the de-godding of God. And it is the overcoming of this most fundamental sin that the cross and resurrection of Jesus achieve. The most urgent need of human beings is to be reconciled to God. That is not to deny that such reconciliation entails reconciliation with other human beings, and transformed living in God's fallen creation, in anticipation of the final transformation at the time of the consummation of all things. But to speak constantly of the advance of the kingdom without tying kingdom themes to the passion narrative, the way the canonical Gospels do, is a terrible reductionism.⁴⁴ To speak a couple of times of the cross in terms of the *Christus Victor* theme, as Wright does (though without using that expression), is unexceptional; to do so without burning with Paul's "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2), and to show how this is tied in Paul's thought to the setting aside of God's wrath, and to the reconciliation of alienated rebels to *their Maker*, is irresponsible. I know that Tom Wright affirms substitutionary atonement: I have heard him defend it, for instance, from Rom 8:3-4. Yet the massive story of Israel is replete with sacrificial references—e.g., to Passover, to the slaughter of bull and goat on *yom kippurim*—which are then *explicitly* said to be fulfilled by Jesus in the NT. Yet not a word on this from Wright. While he berates Luther and the other Reformers for what they do not see, not to mention Spurgeon and assorted brands of "conservatives" and "fundamentalists," I confess I am more than a little worried by what Wright himself does not see—or, if he does see it, what he barely alludes to. We all have our blind spots, and most of the time I'm glad to be helped to see what Wright sees. But it is highly troubling that what Wright himself does not see lies at least as close to the heart of the gospel, in Paul's view, as what Wright does see. I would not want to take the step that Wright himself takes at this juncture, when he charges his opponents with stepping away from the authority of Scripture. All I would say is that we not only need to come under the authority of Scripture, and above all of the God whose authority

⁴⁴See, for instance, Peter G. Bolt, *The Cross From a Distance: Atonement in Mark's Gospel* (NSBT 18; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).

establishes the authority of Scripture, but we must strive with all our might not to do so in such a selective way.

(4) Wright repeatedly warns us against a “rule-book” approach to the Bible. If all he means by this is that the Bible cannot be *reduced* to a “rule-book,” that the “rules” of, say, the Sinai covenant must be read along the axis of the Bible’s story to try to discern in what way they find their “fulfillment” in the next “act,” then of course this is right. In itself, this is not an issue of scriptural authority; rather, it is a matter of interpretation by recognizing the different genres of Scripture, and above all the story—the metanarrative—that holds it all together. Yet Wright seems to go farther than this. For instance, recall that he says that what he is proposing

has nothing to do with the declaration of an arbitrary or “controlling” ethic, a standard imposed from without by constricting or bullying authority in the early church. It has everything to do with understanding human renewal as the beginning, the pointer towards, and even the means of, God’s eventual eradication of evil from the world and the bringing to birth of the new creation itself. . . . We can summarize it like this: the New Testament understands itself as the new covenant charter, the book that forms the basis for the new telling of the story through which Christians are formed, reformed and transformed so as to be God’s people for God’s world. That is the challenge the early Christians bequeath to us as we reconsider what “the authority of scripture” might mean in practice today. (p. 44)

One gets the impression that this is largely right in what is being affirmed, but dangerously wrong in what is being denied by appeal to pejorative language (e.g., “bullying authority”). Precisely because of the way that the NT writers establish the links between the covenants along the axis of redemptive history, very strong “rules” (for want of a better word) are enforced. The man sleeping with his step-mother is to be excommunicated (1 Corinthians 5); those who are preaching “another Jesus” are to be turfed out of the Corinthian church before Paul gets there, or he will impose discipline himself (2 Corinthians 11-13). Passage after passage is replete with moral exhortation, commands, threat of sanctions, promise of strength to enable believers to live out the right conduct, and so forth. These are things that *Scripture* mandates, things that we cannot ignore without disowning the authority of Scripture. Perhaps Wright has a place for all of this, but if so, I wish he would make it clear. Perhaps his presentation is so antithetical—that is part of Wright’s pedagogical style—that if he arrived in the same room as a few interlocutors who challenged him, he would work a little harder at the integration he nominally espouses. Perhaps it would help if he gave us a batch of ethical examples where the NT writers *do* speak. But his own role in *The Windsor Report*, which is a remarkably woolly piece on one of the most pressing and divisive issues of our day, is not reassuring. As they stand, the antitheses he generates in defense of his “story”

sound perilously close to skirting such “rules” as *are* found in the NT texts. What does that do for becoming obedient to the Scriptures—a stance that Wright himself forcefully advocates?

(5) Finally, Wright’s important insistence that the authority of Scripture is nothing other than the authority of God exercised *through* the Scripture, as important as that is (and of course many others have said the same thing), rapidly becomes skewed by Wright’s next moves. Wright does not leap to a meditation on, say, Psalm 119, with all the things said there about God’s word, God’s statutes, God’s words, etc.—a lot of them in remarkably atemporal categories. Instead, he stipulates that God’s authority must be thought of in terms of his *kingdom*, whether the eternal sovereignty God always manifests, or kingdom understood as the inbreaking of his transforming power to rescue human beings and to bring the creation to its completion. The former notion of kingdom Wright does not take up in connection with Scripture; everything depends on the latter notion of kingdom. As a result, the authority of Scripture becomes one vehicle (perhaps the most important one) of the authority of God as he displays his transforming kingly rule in rescuing people and transforming the world. The result of this is that the authority of Scripture becomes, as we have seen, “a sub-branch of several other theological topics: the mission of the church, the work of the Spirit, the ultimate future hope and the way it is anticipated in the present, and of course the nature of the church.” In one sense, this is the same mistake that Webster makes: Webster, it will be recalled, attempts to tie “Scripture” to the entire communicative act, and loses clarity on what *Scripture itself* is. Wright doesn’t do that, exactly; instead, he links the authority of Scripture to God’s authority (a good move), reduces God’s authority to his redemptive-kingdom display of authority (a bad move), associates the purpose of Scripture with this notion of kingdom (a reductionistic move)—and loses clarity as to what *Scripture itself* is, as to what *the authority of Scripture itself* is as God displays his authority *through Scripture itself*. We ask again, Does not Scripture’s authority stand, even if the church is failing in its mission, and people do not believe this word?

Failure to pay attention to all of these [themes] in discussing how scripture functions [note again: we have leapt from Scripture *is* to how it *functions*] is part of the problem, as we can see when people, hearing the word “scripture,” instantly think of a rule-book—and then, according to taste, either assume that all the rules are to be followed without question or assume that they can all now be broken. (p. 22)

But the problem that Wright has himself introduced is so to tie God’s authority to the inbreaking kingdom that the authority of Scripture becomes a “sub-branch” of such topics as mission, transformation, ultimate hope, and so forth. How does this follow? Where is the

notion, expressed in both Testaments, that God's word is forever settled in heaven, that the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of the Lord endures forever? Is God's authority diminished when mission is not accomplished? Is this not rather an instance of God's authority being undiminished, but liable to be manifest now in judgment? Why then should Scripture's authority be diminished, demoted to a "sub-branch" of mission? True, God's authority is *displayed* in his kingly advance to reconcile rebels to himself and bring in the new heaven and the new earth, but it is not to be *identified* with this king dominion. God's authority is also displayed in the courts of heaven; it is displayed in his sweeping, universal, sovereignty (which Wright, as I've said, does not develop in connection with Scripture). In both Testaments, the authority of Scripture is sometimes tied to God's reliability in both word and deed—and when in word, to God's reliability in speech, and thus to his truthfulness, whether he is believed or not. God's authority is chimerical and deceptive if he himself is not reliable: the point is developed at length by the Prophets and by some of the Psalmists. By the same token, insofar as God's authority is displayed in Scripture, the authority of Scripture is chimerical and deceptive if it is not reliable. It is certainly true that God's word is often described in performative categories, to use a term much loved by speech-act theorists: God's word *accomplishes* things, and these things are regularly bound up with God's redemptive purposes, and thus with the kingdom. But God's word is also often described in truth categories (which of course are also allowed by speech-act theorists), which inform, instruct, reform, teach, and so forth, and this word is true and reliable (as God himself is, for God discloses himself by this means) whether people accept it or not.

Sadly, this more comprehensive way of looking at things, clear from the very surface of Scripture, is lost when God's authority is tied exclusively to the notion of kingdom, understood to be advancing through the four acts of Scripture, and still advancing today in the fifth act. We have already seen how the actors in the fourth act, Jesus and the apostolic church, habitually speak of antecedent Scripture in more comprehensive terms than Wright deploys, including terms of truth, God speaking, the fact that Scripture cannot be broken, and the like—the kind of ways that Jesus himself spoke of Scripture.⁴⁵ Shouldn't those who live in the fifth act adopt the same stance toward Scripture as that held by Jesus himself, the star of the fourth act?

Wright's moves have made the authority of Scripture a "sub-branch" of mission and related themes. I'm afraid that this is of a piece with other moves he has made. At the risk of using theological labels as mere slogans, we might put it this way: As his understanding of justification, developed elsewhere, has in effect

⁴⁵The classic on this point remains John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

elevated ecclesiology over soteriology, so his linking of God's authority with the kingdom of rescue and transformation has in effect elevated ecclesiology over bibliology. It is better to recognize that God does not speak of his word and its authority as a sub-branch of mission or of anything else. Instead, he declares, "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (Isa 66:2).