

CHAPTER SIX

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE: ITS BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS -

A Response to Barr's View

In the preceding chapters we have established that Barr's preferred view of biblical inspiration reflects his presuppositions about the Bible, namely, its nature and authority. This view is closely linked to his emphasis on the Bible as a product of the community of faith. He asserts:

The striking thing about 2 Tim. 3:16 is not its declaration of scriptural inspiration but its unstressed and low-key application of it. It is not remarkable that it says nothing about inerrancy or historical accuracy, which were not an issue at the time or until many centuries later; but, more important, it says nothing about scripture being the foundation of the Christian faith, or the ultimate criterion of its genuineness, or the decisive factor above all others in the understanding of it. What it does say is that scripture is *useful, profitable*, for the needs of the pastoral ministry. The verse belongs to practical rather than to dogmatic theology.¹

Barr comments further:

¹ James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983, 20-21.

The Bible, then, is the product of tradition, editing, and revision on the part of the community. But this means that the argument traditionally considered to be ‘Catholic’, namely that the Bible derived from the church, is in many ways generally valid as against the position esteemed as ‘Protestant’, which was reluctant to see the Bible as deriving from the church and which therefore sought to give the scripture priority over the church in the order of revelation. The ‘Catholic’ argument has at least as much justification as the ‘Protestant’ one. This Protestant view was basically an anachronism: its account of scripture was predicated upon the completed Bible, and upon the distinction between scripture and tradition which was affected by the process of canonization; but it did not provide an account of scripture *as seen from within biblical times*, as seen from within the making of the Bible.²

Barr is even more precise in his explanations on the origin and nature of the Bible. He elucidates:

The Bible is in its origin a product of the believing community. Modern biblical study has made this much more plain to us than it could ever have been in the past. Traditional doctrines of scripture suggested to Christians over many centuries that the Bible was a message *from* God *to* the community. And of course we can still say this, but we can say it only more indirectly: in the sense, perhaps, that scripture grew out of the tradition of the believing community but, having so grown, became in its turn the Word of God to the community.³

Here, we see that according to Barr, the highest point of reference is the community of faith. This is the fundamental category shaping his thought. Consequently, the community is to determine the meaning of the

² Ibid., 28-29.

³ James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980, 113.

Bible. However, we must hasten to mention that Barr does attribute some kind of authority to the Bible, though he seems to deny that this authority is a resultant function of its inspiration.

The question of biblical authority and all the related observations, though a perennial issue, is still, in fact, the common stock of biblical and theological discussion in our present day. Hence, questions like ‘What in the Bible is God’s word and what is *only* man’s word? What is eternal, binding and valid, and what no longer concerns us, because it is bygone word of man? Where does the one begin and the other leave off? What must one believe, and what may one confidently give up as obsolete and archaic?’⁴ are still pertinent questions that require thoughtful answers. Professor Canaan Banana has also argued for a ‘new Bible,’ one that can be considered authoritative (not oppressive) by the Africans or other non-western peoples.⁵ Banana’s argument covers five major points, all related to the issue of biblical authority: (1) A need to liberate the Bible from culture-specific world views; (2) How the Bible has been and continues to be used as an oppressive instrument; (3) A short review of the origin and development of the Christian Bible; (4) What a de-mythologised, liberated Bible might mean for humanity today; and (5) Is Christ the product of the Bible or the Bible is the product of Christ?⁶ The central issue in Banana’s proposition is: Does the Christian church claim that its Bible, which

⁴ See Günther Bornkamm. *Early Christian Experience*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969, 3.

⁵ Isabel Mukonyora, James L. Cox, and Frans J. Verstraelen, ed. *“Re-Writing” the Bible: The Real Issues - Perspectives from within Biblical and Religious Studies in Zimbabwe*. Gweru: Mambo Press, 1993.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

originated in a particular time and context, possesses an exclusive and universally normative value for people living in quite different contexts and times with their own sacred traditions? This is an important and relevant question. Commenting on current issues with regard to biblical authority, Pinnock makes an important observation when he says, “The principal cause of modern theological sickness is a crisis of valid authority. . . . The central problem for theology is its own epistemological base.”⁷ Montgomery agrees with this analysis. He observes that “The doctrinal problem which, above all others, demands resolution in the modern church is that of the authority of Holy Scripture.”⁸ Barr also comments on the biblical authority issue:

In many traditions of Christianity the principle of the authority of scripture has been magnified as far as it can be done, but this runs into the ultimate difficulty that, when one enters into the Bible itself one finds that its own actual statements, taken as they stand, indicate a rather more relative and less absolute emphasis. The question then is, whether the phenomena of the biblical texts themselves are to be allowed to revise and remake our principles, or whether our principles are to be read into the biblical texts, even at the cost of obscuring their meaning.⁹

Thus we cannot overlook or react to those who make the Bible a mere datum of religious sociology, by attempting to deny that the Bible has a social milieu. We have to be willing and ready to discuss, evaluate, and analyse our theological presuppositions before we draw any logical

⁷ Clark Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1997, 10-11.

⁸ John Warwick Montgomery, ed. *God's Inerrant Word*. Minneapolis: Bethany, 1974, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

conclusions. Furthermore, we should not simply use our venerable theological traditions, be it evangelical or liberal, to shelter us from the radical truth of God's Word that may challenge our theological comfort zones in our day. In addition, as responsible students of God's Word, we cannot afford to deliberately twist or manipulate biblical evidence for personal gain, then that would be dishonest. However, we must hasten to mention at this juncture that the differences between the Euro-centric and Afro-centric approaches¹⁰ to doing theology become much more distinct and apparent when we evaluate theological presuppositions. Indeed, world-views influence our approach to interpreting God's Word. However, it is incumbent upon all of us to let the Scriptures set the agenda insofar as our interpretation of a given text is concerned.

We all have presuppositions. By presuppositions we mean the fundamental grid or framework through which people, theologians in this case, interpret or are engaged in biblical hermeneutics. Such an underlying grid is like an umpire or a referee at a hockey, basketball or soccer game. Sometimes referees may appear to be insignificant, and one may not even be aware of their presence during the course of the match. However, the fact of the matter is that it is the referee who monitors and influences, if not determines, the results of the soccer game. The referee calls the shots. Thus we see that down through the ages world-views serve not only as explanatory devices and guides to conduct, but also as

¹⁰ Barr does not employ the terms "Euro-centric" and "Afro-centric." However, he refers to different approaches to doing theology, namely, the *deductive* and the *inductive* [Ibid., 22]. Although speaking from a western or Euro-centric world-view, these two distinct approaches are tinted by one's presuppositions about the Bible. This fact will become more apparent as we proceed.

the foundation to re-enforce or alter the actions of those who embrace them.¹¹ Consequently, one thing is obvious though, it is imperative in western culture (Euro-centric world-view) to be critical, that is, to subject all our thinking, including biblical, to the criteria of either subjectivity or objectivity. The Afro-centric culture is also critical and perceptive, but is more open and willing to live with ambiguity. A belief system is not necessarily nullified by an inability to articulate some of its aspects. In Afro-centric theology, it is possible to strongly and comfortably believe in some aspect of God's revelation or the spiritual realm without pushing for well defined theological categories. In the western culture, crystallization of beliefs and theological positions is esteemed highly. The long and the short of this method, in our opinion, is that in the final analysis, the Gospel gets conformed to our ideology, rather than informing it authoritatively and correctively concerning God's overall purposes and design.

Some people object to any intrinsic authority of the Bible. There are several questions that need to be addressed as we consider this issue of biblical authority. Where and/or how did the Bible get its authority? Can we identify the Bible with God himself? Is authority a completely isolated and autonomous idea which can be attached to the Bible irrespective of the Bible's content? Is the authority of the Bible something intrinsic to the Bible itself? Where does the authority of the

¹¹ Thoughts from Dr. Tokunboh Adeyemo, (AEAM - Association of Evangelicals in Africa and Madagascar, General Secretary), "*Towards an Understanding of African World-View and Values - Inter-cultural Relationships.*" Unpublished speech prepared for AIC Orientation Weekend, October 2-4, 1982 at Brackenhurst Conference Centre.

Bible reside? Responding to the question, ‘Has the Bible any Authority?’
Barr concludes:

Authority resides in the people of God, or perhaps more correctly in the central leadership of the people of God; but it also resides in the scripture which they formed and passed on to later generations as their own communication, as the voice which they wanted to be heard as their voice. The grounding of scripture is in the history of tradition within Israel and the earliest church.¹²

God has given us inquisitive minds, and it is alright to ask such hard questions. Moreover, the doctrine of inspiration, rightly understood, can provide us with some solutions to these issues. Furthermore, renowned Bible scholars like, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, and James Barr,¹³ - to mention but a few, have argued that the Bible is essentially a human product on which evangelical pietism has imposed an authority.

The purpose of this chapter is to respond to Barr’s view of biblical authority and to establish a view of biblical authority by evaluating what the Bible says about itself. In a word, in our attempt to establish the authority of Scripture, we have to consider its source or origin and the purpose for which Scripture was given. We have pointed out that we all have presuppositions whenever we encounter data, and in this case, biblical data. Our premise is that the Bible, in its final canonical form, is God’s Word to human beings, and it must be the Christian’s final authority in matters of doctrine and practice. In other words, we do accept

¹² Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, 64.

¹³ Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984, 139.

that the human perceptions, speculations, creativity, editing, *et cetera*, and all that contributed to and shaped the Bible in its definitive form, is according to God's direction. God, through his Holy Spirit, influenced, superintended, and guided the process (involving individuals and communities of faith) leading to the final text. Inspiration rests in the written authoritative text, not in the writers. It is this written normative text, the Holy Scripture, that is to be the judge.¹⁴ Thus we can assert that this "God-breathed out" book, the collection of books (the sixty-six books, recognized as the Protestant canon) are normative or authoritative for the Christian. Scripture, then, is to be perceived as the objective standard for measuring what we need to know concerning faith in God and how we ought to conduct ourselves as Christians, God's people. This premise is a point of departure from some nebulous or undefined view of the nature and authority of Holy Scripture, like the one advocated by Barr. Such a view of Scripture does not seem consistent with what Scripture tells us about itself. In a word, the view of Scripture Barr has embraced is eisegetically drawn. We do not apologize for spelling this out and taking such a stance. We do affirm the absolute importance of and commitment to an inspired written text, the Word of God, as the locus of God's special revelation to human beings. Does this special revelation, the Bible, itself, tell us its authority, its origin or why it was written? What is the foundation for biblical authority? In his

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion on the text-centred interpretive approach to Scripture, see Walter Vogels, *Interpreting Scripture in the Third Millennium: Author, Reader, Text*. Ottawa: Novalis, Saint Paul University, 1993. Professor Vogels argues that the best interpretation of Scripture is one that looks for the world within the text because the text is the final judge.

comment on the issue of whether the Bible is God's word or merely man's word, Bornkamm lays a crucial foundation for proceeding in tackling this question. He advises:

And yet I think that under the influence of this "either-or" question of God's word or man's word in the Bible we entangle ourselves in hopeless uncertainties from which we no longer are able to emerge. To solve and answer these questions one must bring along as it were an already finished dogmatics, i.e. a doctrine about what in the Bible is valid as God's word and must remain intact, and what we may confidently view as the mere outdated word of man from an antiquated era. However, by such a procedure we circumvent the best that contact with the Scripture yields to us: the hearing, amazement and discovery of that about which we knew nothing. In other words, we miss a real and living encounter with God in his word. For how is such an encounter with God's word still to occur if, either from a rigid, orthodox dogmatics or from what reason accepts as valid, we already know from the start what is God's word and what is merely man's? So we ought to learn a thoroughly different approach. First and foremost we ought to direct our thoughts to what the New Testament itself has to say to our question and how it answers it.¹⁵

Thus the Bible itself becomes an important source and foundation for responding to our questions.

The Source of Scripture

In keeping with the main thrust of this thesis, that is, endeavouring to establish theological conclusions derived from textual (exegetical) analysis, II Timothy 3:16-17 is, indeed, a key passage in understanding

¹⁵ Bornkamm, *Early Christian Experience*, 4.

the origin of the Scriptures:

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All Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the everyone who belong to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (*The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament*1990)

How does Barr understand II Timothy 3:16-17 in relation to the biblical authority question? He certainly agrees that here, in II Tim. 3:16-17, “we have an assertion of the biblical inspiration,”¹⁶ but not without a qualification. He summarizes his position quite clearly when he says:

The striking thing about 2 Tim. 3:16 is not its declaration of scriptural inspiration but its unstressed and low-key application of it. It is not remarkable that it says nothing about inerrancy or historical accuracy, which were not an issue at the time or until many centuries later; but, more important, it says nothing about scripture being the foundation of the Christian faith, or the ultimate criterion of its genuineness, or the decisive factor above all others in the understanding of it.¹⁷

He comments further on the meaning of II Tim. 3:16 in another one of his books:

The famous text in which inspiration is mentioned, II Tim. 3.16, is from a fairly marginal source, and it makes no connection whatever between inspiration and historical accuracy, it leaves it quite vague which books were the ‘scriptures’ under

¹⁶ Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 1983, 20.

¹⁷ Ibid.

discussion, and above all it is notable for its low-key treatment of the matter: though it says that all scripture is inspired, it does not for a moment suggest that this is the foundation of Christian doctrine or practice, all it says is that scripture, being inspired, is ‘profitable’ for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.¹⁸

According to Barr, “the Bible is fully authoritative, but it does not have authority to question the accepted doctrinal tradition. This is analogous to the late medieval position against which the Reformers protested.”¹⁹

Earlier in chapter 4, we observed that the adjective *ἐκθεωρητός*, a biblical hapax legomenon, literally means ‘breathed-out by God.’ Hence, this text openly declares to us the divine origin of the Scriptures. The fact is simply and plainly stated, while the process itself is not dealt with. Pinnock’s words are worth noting at this juncture when he says:

It is probably best to think of inspiration as a divine activity accompanying the preparation and production of the Scriptures. We are not privileged to observe how in hidden and mysterious ways the Spirit worked alongside the human agents in the creative literary work, but we can plainly see what was done.²⁰

Thus Packer is correct when he comments on the process of inspiration:

Inspiration did not necessarily involve an abnormal state of mind on the writer’s part, such as a trance, or vision, or hearing a voice. Nor did it involve the obliteration or overriding of his personality. Scripture indicates that God in His

¹⁸ Barr, *Scope and Authority of the Bible*, 63.

¹⁹ Barr, *Holy Scripture*, 30.

²⁰ Clark Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*. Cambridge: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984, 63.

providence was from the first preparing the human vehicles of inspiration for their predestined task, (cf. Je. i.5; Is. xlix. i, 5; Gal. i.15) and that He caused them in many cases, perhaps in most, to perform that task through the normal exercise of their abilities which He had given them. . . . Moreover, it appears that biblical books may have passed through several editions and recensions over the centuries before reaching their final form, as the book of Proverbs certainly did. (cf. Pr. x. i, xxiv. 23, xxv. 1.)²¹

Indeed, II Timothy 3:16-17 makes a profound statement about the origin of Scripture, that is, the whole of Scripture is "God-breathed," literally, "breathed-out by God." ²² In II Tim. 3:16 Paul declares that "All Scripture is inspired by God." In this designation, that is, "in calling Scripture 'inspired,' Paul gives it the highest claim to authority. It is specifically 'Scripture' that Paul points to as the locus of God's revelation."²³ Consequently, it is this divine origin of Scripture that ensures its usefulness (v.17). Thus we appeal to Scripture because we see and accept Scripture as ultimately God's Word, written not only for our information but also for our transformation. Erickson highlights the significance of the Scriptures according to II Tim. 3:16-17. He explains:

The impression here is that they are divinely produced, just as God breathed the breath of life into man (Gen 2:7). They therefore carry value for building up the believer into maturity, so that the man of God may be "complete, equipped for

²¹ Packer, James I. *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God - Some Evangelical Principles*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958, 78.

²² Benjamin B. Warfield. *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948, 245.

²³ John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995, 42.

every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17).²⁴

Paul's mention of (D' NZ,²⁵Black, 1963, 202. "writing," in II Tim. 3:16 refers to the Old Testament which he has previously mentioned in verse 15, "and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ." However, (D' NZ cannot be limited to the OT only because all Holy Scriptures, including Christian writings, came to be given an equal authority.²⁶Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, 492. In the New Testament, the word (D' NZ (50x) is used only of holy Scripture,²⁷ God's authoritative revelation to mankind. This technical term was used as a designation of Holy Scripture. Thus, II Tim. 3:16 highlights the significant source or origin of this Holy Scripture, that is, God, (God-breathed out). Assuming Pauline authorship of II Timothy, some key points need to be noted here in recognition of the authority of the Scriptures. Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ. In the NT, the use of the word '*apostle*' carried the idea of being "sent on a definite mission, in which he acts with full authority on

²⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983, p. 202.

²⁵ J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*. London: Adam & Charles

²⁶ Colin Brown, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*.

²⁷ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957, 163. "Scripture" is exclusively used in the NT with a sacred meaning of Holy Scripture: (1) the individual Scripture passage and / or (2) Scripture as a whole; all the parts of Scripture.

behalf of the sender and is accountable to him."²⁸ Apostleship has elements of commission, that is, having authority of and responsibility of the sender. Paul, like all the other apostles of Jesus Christ, was primarily preoccupied with the notion of communicating clearly God's Word to people. We must admit that under God's influence and guidance, they succeeded in the execution of their task. In the NT we find that the opening verses of most books state the author's relationship to Jesus Christ. Thus we find phrases like, "... a prisoner of Christ Jesus," (Philemon 1), "... an apostle of Jesus Christ," (I Pet. 1:1), "... a servant of God," (Titus 1:1); *et cetera*. In the book of Acts, especially chapters 9 and 13, observe Paul's recognition of his apostolic work by the other apostles and teachers of the Gospel. Paul also recognized his apostleship (Acts 26:16 "I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you," Jesus Christ had said to him); I Cor. 2:13 "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words;" and in I Thess. 5:27 Paul also writes, "I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers." He recognized that what he taught was coming straight from the Lord Jesus Christ, I Thess. 2:13 "... the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe." (see also I Cor. 14:37). In addition, there is also the point made in II Pet. 3:15-16 that Paul's writings were considered to be Scripture even by a fellow apostle, Peter:

²⁸ Elwell. *Dictionary of Theology*, 71.

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their destruction.

Therefore, since II Timothy is a writing of Paul, and since he was an apostle (one given authority to teach and write on behalf of Christ), it has the direct authority of Christ. II Tim. 3:16-17 is declaring that Scripture, in its entirety (“*All Scripture*”), is God-breathed. In a word, God, in a very personal way controlled and guided the human authors of Scripture in such a way that they wrote exactly what God intended them to write. We also see in the Scriptures how the Holy Spirit was working in and through these human authors in such ways that their personalities, literary creativity, *et cetera*, were not suppressed or overtaken but rather became channels of this divine revelation. Perhaps, this explains, to some degree, the different genres contained in Scripture, allowing for such a diversity of personalities of biblical authors to sparkle throughout Scripture. God was (and is) revealing himself to people through each of these Bible authors and characters. Furthermore, we also find that there are some words and phrases unique only to some writers. Thus, our study of II Tim. 3:16-17 reveals that this text becomes an important passage as well as an authoritative source about the origin and resultant nature of Holy Scripture in its entirety. This seems to have been the view taken also by the early Church and key evangelical scholars. Commenting on the use of the phrase, ‘the Word of God,’ as it applied to the Bible, Packer

concludes:

The phrase declares the divine origin of that to which it applies: whatever is denominated 'the word of God' is thereby affirmed to be a divine utterance. It is for this reason that the phrase is applied to the Bible. The purpose of this usage is to make explicit the biblical conception of Scripture—which is that Scripture is the sum total of divine revelation recorded in a God-breathed written form, and that every scriptural statement is therefore to be received as a divine utterance.²⁹

Furthermore, texts like Romans 3:1-2, "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God," show that New Testament writers perceived the Scriptures as the Word of God, the written 'oracles of God,' (NIV). Silva makes a significant observation and contribution to this topic when he comments on theological importance of II Tim. 3:16 when saying, "As if to anticipate the modern objection to inscripturated revelation, Paul in II Timothy 3:16 explicitly identifies the *written* word (graph') with God's very breath (*theopneustos*, "God-breathed").³⁰ Hence we see that the emphasis on the written text, breathed-out by God, reveals God's desire and plan to ensure the permanence of his word among fallen human beings.

Therefore, a closer look at II Tim. 3:16-17 shows that two things are declared and affirmed in this passage: (1) Scripture's divine origins, that is, "**all Scripture is God-breathed out**" and (2) "**all Scripture is**

²⁹ Packer, "Fundamentalism," 85-86.

³⁰ Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990, 37.

useful" for godliness. Therefore, the Scriptures are always relevant and authoritative because they are in their entirety God's Word to mankind. One other crucial point to observe in II Tim. 3:16-17 is that the emphasis is on the *inspiration of Scripture not the writers*.

We can confidently conclude that II Tim. 3:16-17 "teaches that the entire Bible ((D" NZ) came from God in order to show us how to live."³¹

Another key passage that also highlights the divine origin of the Scriptures is II Peter 1:20-21:

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. [NIV]

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In this text, the apostle Peter is building on to his transfiguration experience (verses 16-18), highlighting the impact this event made upon him and the other apostles (James and John) who were present on that day. There is no doubt that Peter makes reference to this extra-ordinary experience in attempt to highlight at least three points: (1) to re-enforce his authority as an apostle, (2) to show the existing relationship between the Old Testament and the apostolic message (which was being twisted by false teachers), and (3) to point to the future coming of Jesus Christ,

³¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986, 69.

which the false teachers objected to. However, in verse 19, Peter has clearly moved from a personal eyewitness testimony to the Scriptures, the Old Testament in this case. See how he says, “6" ÂSP@u, < \$, \$" 4 J, D@< JÎ < BD@NOJ46Î < 8` (@<, ‘And we have the prophetic word made more sure, . . .’” This indicates a very crucial link between prophets of Old and the apostolic witness. The critical term here is \$, \$" 4 J, D@<,³² which means ‘reliable, dependable, certain.’ It becomes clear that Peter’s focus is on the reliability of the Holy Scriptures, the Old Testament. Peter seems to be saying, ‘If you do not believe me, turn to the Holy Scriptures.’ We find this approach to the Scriptures throughout the New Testament. One of the most powerful arguments for the truth of Christianity throughout the New Testament was the argument from prophecy. Speeches we find in Acts 2, Romans 15, I Peter 2, the whole book of Hebrews, and Revelation, place tremendous emphasis on what is written in the Scriptures. The biblical writers sought absolute assurance, just like their Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, for whom the phrase “it is written,” sufficed to clinch a theological argument.

In II Peter chapter 1 verse 20, Peter is basically continuing his previous point on the reliability of the Scriptures.³³ “Above all,” literally, “knowing this first,”³⁴ establishes a foundation for what is to follow. The interpretive or exegetical issue in this text (verse 20) lies in the meaning

³² Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979, 138.

³³ Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, 275.

³⁴ Ibid.

of ἡ ἀποκάλυψις, ἡ ἀποκάλυψις (interpretation; explanation), a biblical hapax legomenon (as a noun). However, the most probable, sound interpretation of this crucial term should lead us to the conclusion that, “. . . no prophecy of Scripture is to be interpreted by an individual in an arbitrary way. This fits the problem of the false teachers’ distorting Paul’s writings and other Scriptures mentioned at 3:16, and the next verse (v.21) clarifies that the prophecy originated with the Holy Spirit.”³⁵

Hillyer’s commentary on the theological significance of II Peter 1:20-21 is worthy noting:

When Peter’s readers obey his behest and study the OT, they must keep clearly in mind as they do so that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. The words they read are not what a prophet has thought up for himself. True prophecy never came about as a result of some individual’s personal ideas: it never had its origin in the will of man. The impulse came from the Holy Spirit of God. When the OT prophets spoke, they were not passing on some understanding or view of their own. They were revealing a message from the Spirit: they spoke from God. It was for this reason that their words must be closely heeded.

It follows, therefore, that readers of the Scriptures must look to the same divine Spirit to inspire their understanding of the text (Ps. 119:18). It is the Spirit who must interpret and apply his own message in his own way.³⁶

Indeed, the human authors of Scripture had the Holy Spirit of God as their impulse for writing Scripture. Their messages revealed the very thought

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Norman Hillyer, *New International Biblical Commentary: 1 and 2 Peter, Jude*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992, 180.

or intent God wanted his people to hear, "they spoke from God." In other words, the human authors of Scripture did not convey their own understanding or view of what God wanted them to communicate through the written word.

II Peter 1:20-21 makes two important points: (1) The Holy Spirit guided the human writers along as they delivered God's truth; and (2) The Scriptures are not a result of human will. Commenting on II Pet. 1:20-21 Warfield says that this text, first, denies that Scripture owes its origin to human initiative. Second, this text asserts that Scripture's source lies in God.³⁷

Having considered what the Scriptures say about their own origin, it is important to note that the resultant nature of Scripture stems from the character of God.

As we have established from these explicit references to the origin of the Bible that God is the source of Scripture, it is appropriate that we consider briefly some of the permanent qualities of God. Most evangelical systematic theology texts discuss God's greatness, spirituality (Jn. 4:24), personality (Exod. 3:14), eternity (Acts 17:24-25), constancy (Ps. 102); God's goodness - moral purity (Is. 6:1-4), integrity (2 Tim. 2:13), love (I Jn. 4:8); God's immanence (Jer. 23:24), transcendence (Is. 55:8-9); the trinity of God (Gen. 1:1); and so on.³⁸ These characteristics of God affirm at least two truths about God: his incomprehensibility (Job

³⁷ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948, 136.

³⁸ For further explanation of these characteristics of God see Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 263-342.

11:7, Is. 40:18) and his knowability (Jn. 14:7, I Jn. 5:20).³⁹ Other Scripture passages such as I Sam. 15:29, Titus 1:2, Heb. 6:18, Jn. 17:17, 19, Num. 23:19, - to mention but a few, affirm that God cannot lie. Deceitfulness or lying is inconsistent with the very nature of God. Thus, whatever God says is always true and trustworthy. In a word, the veracity of God guarantees to us the truth of everything he discloses to us. Hence, the Word of God, the Bible, has both an inherent and bestowed authority because it is God's Word to mankind. The authority of the Bible is not imposed by its human authors or biblical scholars. The Bible is intrinsically authoritative because it is God's Word; it embodies God's truth to human beings. The Bible points beyond itself to God. It has conferred authority.

Therefore, the Bible should be viewed and accepted as our authority in matters of doctrine and conduct for it tells us about the Supreme God and what he requires of mankind. Carl Henry is correct when he concludes:

It is the Bible that is God's authoritative Word. Whoever would speak of God as authoritative over human life, yet clouds the authority of the Bible, in effect obscures an authoritative God. Critics who compromise the authority of Scripture almost invariably correlate the authority of God with speculative notions of God's Word and its implications for man's answerability to God and duty to his fellow-men. The church is not determinative of Scripture, but Scripture is authoritative over the church; whatever authority the church has, she has solely on the basis of the revelational prerogative of God.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 25.

⁴⁰ Carl F.H. Henry, "The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* ed., Frank E. Gaebelin, Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, 12.

Such an understanding of the Bible is witnessed and/or expressed by the Old Testament prophets, Jesus' understanding of the Scriptures, and the New Testament writers.

The Old Testament Prophet(s)

Vangemeren says of the *n-bî*, prophet:

The prophets opened windows to the grand plan of God by which the eye of hope may have a vision of what God has prepared for his people. The prophets spoke in time as they were human beings empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak God's word in space and time. . . . The Lord empowered the prophets by the Spirit to proclaim and write down the revelation he gave them as a witness for future generations.⁴¹

The Old Testament prophets knew that their authority lay beyond themselves, outside of themselves, that is, in God. Time and time again, these prophets employed phrases to enable their audiences to take note of their divine authority. Jeremiah is a good example here, (1:4) "The word of the LORD came to me saying," (1:7) "But the LORD said to me," (1:9) "Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, 'Now, I have put my words in your mouth,'" (1:11) "The word of the LORD came to me," (1:12) "The LORD said to me," (1:13) "The word of the LORD came to me again," (1:14) "The LORD said to me," (2:1) "The

⁴¹ Willem A. Vangemeren. *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*. Grand Rapids: Academy Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1990, 18-19.

word of the LORD came to me,” *et cetera*.

The main idea conveyed in the word *n~bî*, prophet, is “that of authorized spokesman.”⁴² There are three Pentateuchal loci for understanding *n~bî* (prophet): (a) Exodus 6:28-30 - where we read of Moses refusing to be God’s spokesman to the children of Israel, and then Aaron was to speak in Moses’ place to Pharaoh. Thus Aaron was the *n~bî*; (b) The second locus is in Numbers 12:1-15 - where Miriam and Aaron presumed to take the place of Moses as the mediator of God’s divine revelation to the Israelites. The LORD God himself intervened, came down in a pillar of cloud, and declared that Moses only was able to hold a direct communication with God. As for the other prophets, God would communicate with them via dreams and visions. In Jeremiah 23 we learn that a true *n~bî* was someone who spoke on God’s behalf only if the LORD God had given him/her a message to speak to people; and lastly (c) In Deuteronomy 18, before Moses died, God announced that the office of *n~bî* would continue. In the light of the false prophets in the land of Canaan, God wanted his messengers, the prophets, to speak and/or write with similar authority that Moses had exercised. Actually, God commanded the people to render the *n~bî* following Moses’ departure, the same obedience. According to Psalm 74:9, Matthew 12:38, and Acts 2:22, five certifying signs of a *n~bî* are indicated: (1) the *n~bî* must be Israelite; (2) speaks in Jehovah’s name; (3) supernatural knowledge of the near future was to be a sign of the authenticity of divine appointment; (4)

⁴² R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, ed. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980, 544.

the *n-bî* might perform some other miraculous sign; and (5) strict conformity to (absolute agreement with) the previously certified revelations of God by Moses and other future prophets (Deut. 13:1-18). This final requirement was so important that Deut. 13 is devoted to it.⁴³ These servants of God were aware that there is certainty in the Scriptures, God's revelation. F.F. Bruce makes an important note when he comments:

When we speak of 'the scriptures' we mean 'the sacred writings' as distinct from other writings: to us 'scripture' and 'writing' are separate words with distinct meanings. But in Hebrew and Greek one and the same word does duty for both 'writing' and 'scripture': in these languages 'the scriptures' are simply 'the writings'—that is to say, 'the writings' *par excellence*.⁴⁴

This is evidenced by their authoritative proclamation "Thus says the Lord," which could be understood as a reference to the authoritative Word of God as well as an appeal to inspiration, the origin of their proclamation⁴⁵. This phrase "Thus says the Lord" appears over and over again in prophetic literature to highlight the authority of the prophets' messages based on the source of their oracles, that is God. What God communicated was regarded as truth and therefore, authoritative. The

⁴³ Ibid., 544-545.

⁴⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988, 29.

⁴⁵ God's spokespersons, (the biblical prophets and biblical writers), appear to have spoken on God's behalf and uttered Scripture in a way tantamount to quoting God himself. Thus making their words authoritative because they knew that God was the source of their utterances and/or writings. For further explanation, see Brown, *Dictionary of NT Theology*, p. 400.

Law (*Torah*) contained the laws which the people of God were under obligation to obey. For example, Moses wrote “all the words of the LORD” in the “Book of the Covenant,” Exodus 21-23; 24:4-7. Samuel spoke words about the manner of the kingdom and “wrote them down on a scroll and deposited it before the LORD,” Samuel 10:25. Hence, these Sacred Writings “were received as abidingly valid ‘oracles of God,’ to be treasured, studied, believed and obeyed.”⁴⁶ Another important text is Hebrews 1:1-2 which “clearly declares that the entire OT is a deposit of written oracles of the *n^ebî’îm*. The word “prophets” is extremely important in this text, for, “In the LXX *n-^ebî’* is always translated *prophets*; (TDNT, VI, p. 812).⁴⁷ It was these prophets who spoke on behalf of God, that is, God made his declarations through his servants (see Num. 3:16, 51; Josh. 19:50; 22:9; II Sam. 22:31; Prov. 30:5; Isa. 5:24).

One other key observation to note here is that both the oral and written traditions of Scripture (sacred writings) were regarded as authoritative before the establishment of the canon. The narrative of Exodus 24:4-8 shows this:

Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said. He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the Lord has said: we will obey.”

⁴⁶ Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, 54.

⁴⁷ Harris, Archer, and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook*, Vol. 2, 545.

Initially, OT or classical prophecy was mainly orally expressed. The written prophetic literature forms came up later. However, the goal of this process was to establish an authoritative foundation, the Holy Scripture.

Here we agree with Childs' analysis:

In the transmission process, tradition, which once arose in a particular milieu and addressed various historical situations, was shaped in such a way as to serve as a normative expression of God's will to later generations of Israel who had not shared in those original historical events. In sum, prophetic oracles which were directed to one generation were fashioned into Sacred Scripture by a canonical process to be used by another generation.⁴⁸

Therefore, we can confidently conclude that the canonization of the Scriptures did not impose authority on the Bible. It seems the canonization process simply recognized what had already been accepted in practice as the authoritative Word of God. A second observation to note is that the appeal to the authority of Scripture by the prophets was never doubted or questioned. In fact, disobedience and law-breaking brought about judgment or disaster.⁴⁹ A third observation is that there seems to be no separation between what Scripture and God says. What God says, Scripture says, and vice versa. This is a crucial observation in that references to Holy Scripture by the community of faith often carried the notion that this was indeed God speaking. Again, we must hasten to

⁴⁸ Brevard S. Childs. "The Canonical Shape of the Prophetic Literature." Interpretation 32 (1978), 47.

⁴⁹ For some selected examples, see Leviticus 24; Deuteronomy 28; and II Kings 12:13.

mention that we must not personify the Word of God. The Word of God is basically God's revelation, and we should not equate it with God himself. We must realize that the Bible does not share in the same qualities that God possesses. As God's revelation, the Bible discloses God and his will to human beings. It is not a static or abstract concept, but rather living, dynamic, and spiritual. The fact that Scripture came from God, conferred this inherent authority. Furthermore, the statement 'the Bible is the Word of God' evokes the notion of authority.

Jesus' Understanding of the Scriptures (the Old Testament)

The word 'testament' means 'covenant,' pointing to the agreement made between human beings or between the Almighty God and human beings.⁵⁰ Wiersbe says, "As far as the Bible is concerned, the Old Testament is the record of the old covenant, the covenant God made with the Jews at Mt. Sinai; and the New Testament is the record of the new covenant that Christ made through His blood."⁵¹

What is the Old Testament? What does the phrase "Old Testament" mean? What is actually embedded in this phraseology? Sailhamer explains:

An important assumption lying at the heart of the use of the name *Old Testament* is the notion of a New Testament. To speak of an *Old Testament* is to confess the existence and legitimacy of the *New Testament*. Otherwise, what would be the sense of calling the

⁵⁰ Warren W. Wiersbe. *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament*. Colorado Springs: Victor Books/SP Publication, 1993, 11.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Testament *Old*? It is *Old* in relation to the New.⁵²

Sailhamer expounds on the significance of the Old Testament:

The Testament (Covenant) bears witness to the fact that among all the religions of the world, the Old Testament claims to witness to a unique relationship between God and man. To speak of an Old Testament theology is to mark it off from the theologies and the religious texts that abound in the setting of the ancient Near East.⁵³

This also suggests the protracted historical dealings in love, mercy and faithfulness of God who alone establishes the covenant. Commenting on the Old Testament theology as an attempt to understand divine revelation, Sailhamer offers this explanation:

Old Testament theology is concerned with that revelation of God's will in the OT. It expects to find in its study of the OT that which comes from God. To speak of the OT as revelation is not to speak in the past tense. If God has spoken in the text of Scripture, then there is no reason to limit that Word to the past. If he has spoken, it does not matter when he spoke. If God has spoken, his voice is still to be heard today. The OT, then, is the revelation of God's will; and a theology of the OT must seek to be a presentation, or statement, of God's will. In other words, the task of OT theology implied in the definition given above is a normative one. It has taken up the idea of revelation. It seeks to say, "Thus says the Lord."⁵⁴

It is with such an understanding that Kaiser, in his book, *Toward an Old*

⁵² John Sailhamer. *Introduction to Old Testament Theology - A Canonical Approach*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995, 22.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

Testament Theology, agrees that OT biblical theology “is the presumption that an inner unity which can bind the various OT themes, concepts, and books will be found.”⁵⁵

Consequently, Jesus Christ, as the ultimate fulfilment of God's revelation ("In the beginning God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe," Hebrew 1:1-2) endorsed authority of the Scriptures with great emphasis. He appealed to the authority of the Scriptures in his teaching, not to human authority. The following few examples indicate his understanding of and attitude to the Scriptures as recorded in the gospels: ". . . whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said to me, so I speak," (Jn. 7:16, 12:49ff); He declared to his hearers that their eternal destiny was subject to hearing and keeping his word (Mt. 7:24ff); He taught "as one having authority," (Mk. 1:22, Mt. 7:29); and "It is written (*It stands written*)," (Mt. 4:1-10); "You have heard;" "It has been said;" "I have not come to abolish the Law but to fulfil it," (Mt. 5:17-48). These passages give evidence to the absolute authority of the Scriptures, to which Jesus Christ directed his audience now and again. In fact, it is quite apparent in the Gospels that one word seems to encapsulate Jesus' teaching and preaching methodology, that is, authority. Matt. 7:28-29 shows that the crowds were amazed at

⁵⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Toward an Old Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978, 20. He sees a single plan or development running through the Bible. The OT concept of *promise, blessing, seed*, etc are identical to the NT *epangelia*. (Italics mine)

Jesus' teaching, "for he was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes." Jesus Christ, the ultimate fulfilment of God's revelation confirmed without reservation that the Scriptures are authoritative. Jesus treated all his arguments from Scripture (Jn. 10:35; Mk. 12:24 "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?").

Jesus Christ did not only endorse the authority of Scripture but he humbly submitted himself to the authority of Scripture. The account of Jesus' temptation recorded in Matt. 4:1-11 and Lk. 4:1-13, shows Jesus' commitment to obey what was written. It is crystal clear that his response to the tempter was based solely on the authority of Scripture, "It is written," literally, "It stands written." These words from the Scriptures are cited as words with eternal validity. Jesus "regarded the words of the text as an authoritative answer to the insinuations of the devil."⁵⁶ He also kept the Law, although his critics who did not understand that he had come to fulfil the Scriptures accused him of breaking the Law. Guthrie makes an important point when he comments:

On several occasions Jesus was engaged in controversy with the religious leaders, but in no instance does he detract from the authority of the OT. On the contrary, he criticized the Pharisees for leaving undone the weightier matters of the law (Mt. 23:23), although they were meticulous over the observance of its lesser demands.⁵⁷

In Matthew 15 we are exposed to Jesus' sharp attack against the Pharisees

⁵⁶ Donald Guthrie. *New Testament Theology*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1981, 958.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

and scribes who had made God's word powerless and had substituted their human tradition for it, "So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said, 'This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines,'" (vv6-9). Furthermore, although Jesus' whole life and ministry was an embodiment of freedom and transcendence of the Law, he also characterized submission to authority of the Scriptures. Packer rightly observes Jesus' life:

His whole ministry, as recorded in the Gospels, may justly be described as a prolonged and many-sided affirmation of the authority of the Old Testament. For He drew His conception of the Messianic office entirely from the strands of Old Testament prophecy concerning the One that should come--the Son of David who was the Son of God, the Son of man who should take the kingdom, the Servant who should preach mercy and suffer for the people's sins. He told the congregation at Nazareth that He was preaching in fulfilment of Scripture.⁵⁸

This explains the frequency of the statement ". . . the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled / . . . the Scriptures must be fulfilled," (Matt. 26:56, Mk. 14:49).

It appears Jesus Christ's understanding of biblical authority highlights at least two significant points. First, the Scriptures (the Old Testament) must be received as authoritative because they originate from God. What the Scriptures say, God says. We cannot accept one without the other. However, we must be careful here not to attempt to equate

⁵⁸ Packer, "*Fundamentalism*," 56-7.

Scripture with God. Second, Jesus' words or teaching was given in accordance with the previous revelation of God, that is, the Old Testament. Perhaps this explains why some biblical scholars today assert that we cannot understand the New Testament without the Old Testament, and vice versa. The Scriptures were written so that mankind (more specifically, the people of God) would learn them, understand them, believe them and live by them. Therefore, we can conclude that the Scriptures are our authority in matters of what to believe about God and how believers should conduct themselves as God's witnesses.

The New Testament Writers' Understanding of Scripture

To anyone who reads the New Testament, it does not take long to realize that, here, the Word of God, that is, what God has spoken to people directly and through the human authors has been meshed to establish an authoritative document. It becomes immediately clear to anyone who reads this document that the New Testament writers claimed God to be the source of their writing. In other words, there is no doubt that these writers knew fully well that they were communicating God's authoritative and reliable Word. This seems to have been their understanding of the Scriptures right from the outset. For example, the apostles preached the gospel of Jesus Christ based on the authority of the risen Christ according to the Scriptures (OT). Actually, the apostles argued from the Scriptures, citing, both directly and indirectly, words from Scripture as the words of God. These early followers of Jesus Christ battled against the corruption of God's revelation through human

ordinance and tradition, Colossians 2:8 “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.” However, in the final analysis the New Testament writers appealed to the authority of Holy Scripture. Three selected examples will suffice the point here:

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:
'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? (Acts 4:25)

The gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, . . . For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'
(Rom. 1:2, 9:17)

The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' (Gal. 3:8)

The New Testament is replete with citations and/or quotations from the Old Testament. Jesus followers recognized the abiding authority of the Scriptures in their proclamation of God's revelation. In fact, Scripture is treated as God-given law for the people to live by. It seems, submission to Scripture's teachings was regarded as authoritative. Actually, the Old Testament was the early church's text for it contained the acknowledged divine teachings. Edwin Blum explains:

To the apostles, the Old Testament Scripture was clearly their supreme authority! It is an absolute, not a relative, authority. They do not attempt to correct it, nor do they seek to put one Old Testament book or saying against another. They assume that the book speaks with a unified voice. They plainly recognize that the books were written by human authors, but even more explicitly they maintain the God speaks in through these writings (Acts 4:25; 28:25; Rom. 9:27, 29).⁵⁹

The apostle Paul is a key New Testament writer who also witnesses to the authority of the Scriptures. There are numerous indications of Paul's convictions in all his epistles. Paul communicated God's truth authoritatively. In Col. 4:16, he instructs the Church at Colossae to read his letter to the other churches, "And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea." Furthermore, he declares that the truth he communicated through his letters was to be obeyed, "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed," (II Thess. 3:14). The apostle Peter warns his readers against false teachers who misunderstand the Scriptures. He also regarded Paul's writings to be Scripture:

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. *His letters* contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they *do the other Scriptures*, to their own destruction. (II Pet. 3:15-16) [italics is mine]

⁵⁹ Edwin A. Blum, "The Apostles' view of Scripture" in *Inerrancy*, 41.

Here, Paul's writings are actually equated to Old Testament teachings or instructions as indicated by the underlined words. The warning to be on the look out for teachers who through their erroneous understanding of the Scriptures undermines the authority of Scripture applies also to us today.

Commitment to the authority of Scripture can never be emphasized enough in our day and age where God's truth is being regarded with the same relativism that permeates our society. It is expedient that the authority of the Scriptures be affirmed if God's absolute truth is to be proclaimed in all nations.

One of the most recent and promising developments for Protestant and biblically oriented theologies is the great work being done on narrative theology. For a long time, the world of biblical studies has been preoccupied with the *Sitz-Im-Leben*, with its focus on the 'form,' the formal structural components, that is, vocabulary, grammar, and idioms, and life situations.⁶⁰ Indeed, there has been a lot of research conducted on the notion of discovering the world which gave birth to the Bible, but neglecting the world within the text itself. As Vogels observes, the text-centred focus on the world within the text is really the key to proper hermeneutics:

A text is a world of its own. Some texts may even become independent of the prevailing historical, social, economic and political conditions. Their value and meaning transcend these changing factors and seem to have a kind of 'eternal'

⁶⁰ Hermann Gunkel was one of the first to propose that the prophetic forms be studied separately as literary phenomena in an essay "Nahum 1," *ZWA* 13 (1893): 223-44; idem, "The Prophets as Writers and Poets," in *Prophecy in Israel: Search for an Identity*, ed. David L. Petersen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 22-73.

value. The limited, restricted, finite world of the author is replaced by the unlimited, unrestricted, infinite world of the text. This certainly applies to the Bible, which is not limited to one culture.⁶¹

On the other hand, the narrative theology attempts to bring the reader to the *Sitz-Im-Text*, thus making the written text a reality in itself. The virtue of the *Sitz-Im-Text* approach to biblical theology is that it really sees that the Bible itself is a story, a kind of literature with a logic (actually even logics) of its own. Kaiser and Silva are right when they conclude, “That text, as it were, has a life of its own.”⁶² It is absolutely important for us to understand that the meaning and truth of God’s Word (the written text) is not in that it conforms to standards of rationality and intelligibility which are drawn from outside it, but that it invites us to be taken up into its patterns, expressions, and grasp of reality. We have to do the best we can to enter into the world of the text if we are to hear the voice of God as recorded in his revelation, the Holy Scripture. It is this text, the inspired text, that we believe has timeless truth. Anyone in a totally different culture and period in time can discover God’s eternal truth as he/she interacts with the Holy Scripture.

The next section attempts to make a palatable connection between the concept of the authority of Scripture and the Christian life. How does the authority of Scripture affect the life of a believer? Are there practical implications for this connection? Or, is there any connection at all

⁶¹ Vogels, *Scripture in the Third Millennium*, 77-78.

⁶² Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994, 238.

between the two concepts?

Some Implications of the Authority of Scripture Today

It is crucial that we begin from the biblical foundation we have established in this study. As we have seen, a proper understanding of the doctrine of biblical inspiration should lead us to a high view of Scripture. We have considered various Scripture passages and have discussed what seems to have been the view of Jesus Christ and the New Testament writers' understanding of the authority of Holy Scripture. Again, II Timothy 3:16-17 provides such a profound statement about the concept and significance of a high view of Holy Scripture:

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All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Brown's comment on the essence and applicability of II Timothy 3:16-17 is worth noting. He says, "Scripture teaches us the right path, - it rebukes us when we go off the right path, - it corrects us as to how to get back on the right path, and - it trains us to stay on the right path."⁶³ This agrees

⁶³ Professor Mike Brown, "Theology Readings on Scripture," Directed Study Course, Trinity Western Seminary, Langley, British Columbia, Spring 1995.

with what the psalmist expresses to the LORD God in Psalm 119:105-106, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I have sworn and I rise to it, to keep your righteous judgments,” (*The Interlinear Bible - Hebrew and English, Hendrickson, 1976*).

In this chapter, we have established that Scripture is ‘God-breathed out.’ It is a divine revelation from God, not a human speculation about God. Scripture is, indeed, God's Word to human beings. Therefore, biblical authority becomes a crucial doctrine for us today because it is from the Bible that we derive all the theological truths that we need in order to lead lives that honour God in the world. We live in a society that is characterized by relativism. Truth has become a rather relative concept. Hence, we find that the concept of absolute truth is shunned, if not ridiculed. Truth has been individualized - *what is truth to you may not be truth for me!* Such an approach to life fails to acknowledge that human beings are sinful and that they have a propensity to rebel against God's standards for life (Rom. 3:23-24) *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."* Human beings need a higher criterion for measuring truth about what they need to know about God, the human condition, redemption, eschatology, *et cetera*, that is beyond themselves. The Bible is, then, that reliable standard of truth which God has given to human beings so that they can know how to relate to God and live according to his revelation. God's Word, the Bible, must be accepted as the final authority in matters of doctrine and conduct. In other words, in every culture in the world where people have accepted the gospel of

Jesus Christ as the Saviour (Christianity), Scripture should be the standard for measuring what they need to know and believe about God as well as how they ought to live.

The origin and nature of Scripture, that is, it came from God, requires that human beings ought to subject themselves to God's revelation (truth). Scripture has inherent authority because it is God-breathed out. In a word, a proper approach to the subject of biblical authority must begin with God himself since all truth has its beginning in him.

Therefore, since God is the supreme authority, he is his own authority. Thus, God's disclosure of himself becomes our authority if we are to know who he is and what he requires of us. In actual fact, God's revelation, the Bible, declares his authority to human beings, his creation.

Such a high view of Scripture has pragmatic implications for the theologian, the clergy, lay person, and the church at large. As an Afro-centric theologian, a Zimbabwean-Canadian, to be more specific, my examples in this section will reflect this cultural context. Christianity is growing rapidly in Zimbabwe.⁶⁴ However, although the church is growing rapidly in Zimbabwe, theologically, it is still very poor. Dialogue on the relationship between the Zimbabwean animistic cultural milieu and the Christian faith continues as the church attempts to relate to its local environment. In addition, ancestral worship, the concept of death and after-life, polygamy (especially among the older generation), reliance on

⁶⁴ Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993, 598. Current statistics show that Zimbabwe is 61.7% Christian while traditional religions are at 32%.

charms, superstition, witchcraft, - to mention but a few issues, are still affecting the life of the church significantly. It goes without saying that Christianity does not exist in a vacuum, but is always expressed culturally. Judith Bahemuka, in “The Hidden Christ in African Traditional Religion,” makes an important point when she discusses inculturation:

Christianity in Africa was brought to a people deeply rooted in their culture. They had their own understanding of God; they had their forms of worship, their rituals, symbols, cleansing and reconciliation ceremonies, and they had their own worldview. They perceived their situation vis-a-vis their environment in their own way. God, in His wisdom, revealed Himself to the African in his own situation. In other words, Christianity did not find a vacuum in Africa. It came to a rich culture, and this culture was to receive the Word of God, and either become richer because of the Gospel message or give way to the same.⁶⁵

For an example, when a black Zimbabwean turns to faith in Christ he/she becomes a black Zimbabwean Christian. God neither expects nor requires that this black Zimbabwean Christian must abandon his/her Zimbabwean culture and adopt another culture. We cannot agree more with an Afro-centric theologian, a Cameroonian to be specific, who observes that ‘the Churches of Africa suffer from genuine underdevelopment’ and are weighed down by the ‘cultural burden’ of western Christianity.⁶⁶ This is all part of current efforts and commitment to constructing an African

⁶⁵ In J.N.K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa, ed. *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*. Nairobi: Initiatives Publishers, 1989. 13-14.

⁶⁶ Jean-Marc Ela. *African Cry*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985, 107.

theology that is truly African yet still remaining true to the biblical text.⁶⁷ Thus the command of Jesus Christ, “Therefore, having gone, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all things whatsoever I commanded you,” (Matt. 28:19-20, *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament 1990*) must be taken seriously once a person turns to faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour. The discipleship process takes shape within one’s cultural context.

In brief, the believer’s understanding of Jesus Christ (Christianity) is always culturally expressed. One’s cultural world-view provides that theoretical framework for rationalizing events and life experiences.

Côté beautifully defines culture:

A complex whole (which includes the arts, the customs and habits of a people, their fundamental values, and functional myths) which gives a society or particular group its distinct identity and uniquely characteristic way of thinking, perceiving, behaving, judging, and valuing.⁶⁸

Culture, as that acquired knowledge which enables a people group to analyse and interpret data so that they can make meaning out of life experiences, is a very complex reality. When a person gets converted to Christianity, his/her cultural world-view influences how he/she will

⁶⁷ For a detailed discussion on the inseparable connection between the Christian faith and the African culture, see Dr. Tite Tienou’s book *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa: Theological Perspectives in Africa*. Nairobi: Africa Christian Press, 1990.

⁶⁸ Professor Richard Côté, Class Lecture “Faith, Religion & Culture,” Fall Semester 1996, Mission Studies - St. Paul University, Ottawa.

express or flesh out the Christian faith within his/her milieu. However, God in his grace, brings all ethnic groups to the realization of their unity in Christ as they deliberately seek to obey the Scriptures.

In the light of the significance of the authority of the Scriptures, the criterion for determining what we need to know about God and how we ought to conduct our lives as believers becomes God's Word. The Bible, as God's absolute and reliable standard for truth must have the prerogative to purge, to leaven, and to permeate my culture (as a Zimbabwean Christian). Anything that is inconsistent with godliness or biblical teaching must be discarded in honour of God's revelation. Besides, every culture, as a human contrivance, has both good and bad practices in it. There is no culture that has become totally Christian. Therefore, it is wrong to talk of a *Christian culture* or *Christian nation*. That is a misnomer. Actually, the truth of the matter is that Christianity is foreign to every culture because it originated with God who cannot be confined to cultural restrictions. Thus Christian believers in different cultures have to attempt to embrace and express the Christian faith from within their cultural standpoint.

True theology should always have a practical link with the day to day life of those who take God's Word seriously as Christians do their best to formulate a sound doctrine, obey the Scriptures, and live godly lives as Zimbabwean Christians. The authority of God's Word becomes our absolute and most reliable standard for measuring what to believe about God, how to relate to God, and how to behave the Christian faith. Failure to acknowledge and submit to biblical authority results in self

made speculations and standards which replace God's rightful position in human life. We would be left with relative truth where there would be no objective measurement for truth. All truth is relative to God, and this is in harmony with what the apostle Paul says, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ," II Cor. 10:5. Actually, Bible teachers would have no authority to teach or preach authoritatively if there is no acknowledgment of or submission to biblical authority. Jesus Christ said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me," (John 14:6). Thus the cultural understanding of divine redemption through ancestral worship and all that goes with it, would be an acceptable practice in the Zimbabwean church if there is no biblical criteria for measuring what God requires of us. Furthermore, according to Professor Canaan Banana, the whole notion of "rewriting the Bible" would also be an option because the Bible as we have it today would not be deemed relevant and authoritative. Adherence to biblical authority implies that God's Word must be studied diligently, applied, and obeyed faithfully. The Bible is God's Word. The Bible is always relevant, "*All Scripture is God-breathed . . . and is useful for . . .*" (II Tim. 3:16). The key point we are advocating here is that the Bible is culturally sensitive and that Christianity is culturally expressed. There are descriptive as well as prescriptive truths (teachings) in Scripture. Consequently, a good student of the Bible must faithfully study the biblical text (exegetically, not eisegetically) employing a proper hermeneutical approach that is true to the text before applying Scriptural

truth in a given cultural milieu.

Therefore, the principle of biblical authority has far-reaching pragmatic implications on the life of the believer today. It certainly calls Christians to submit themselves to God's divine revelation, the Bible. Such a high view of the Scriptures has practical implications on how we ought to approach, study and employ God's Word in our personal lives as well as in the Church life (*Christ's Church for that matter, Matt. 16:18 - Jesus said, ". . . I will build my church,"*). It is appropriate to conclude:

Jesus read "all the Scriptures" of the OT as a prophetic outline of what he came to accomplish; and he took its very language to be the natural, and at the same time the supernatural, expression of his Father's will. By his attitude to and use of OT Christ truly validated its divinity. With the same conviction of its divine authority the NT writers accepted it and quoted it; and in its light they themselves, as divinely authoritative.⁶⁹

Consequently, we see that the Bible's authority is really founded upon its own internal claims. It surely "stands written" as the Word of the living God, "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul and spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart," Hebrews 4:12. Here are a few selected texts from the Bible which highlight the authority or the uniqueness of God and his Word:

"He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on

⁶⁹ Elwell, *Dictionary of Theology*, 140.

bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord,”
(*Deuteronomy 8:3*).

“As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless,” (*II Sam.22:31*)
cf. *Psalm 30:5*.

“Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in
Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God,” (*II Cor. 2:17*)
cf. *II Cor. 4:2*.

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says,”
(*James 1:22*).

“Is not my word like fire,” declares the LORD, “and like a
hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” (*Jeremiah 23:29*).

Psalm 119, the longest psalm in the Psalter, is another beautifully crafted
key portion of Scripture on the significance of the Word of God to the
believer. With its twenty-two stanzas of eight verses each,⁷⁰ the alphabetic
acrostic manner (in the Hebrew text) displays the theme of the law of
God. The author employs eight different words for God’s word: (1) *tôr-h*,
occurs twenty-five times; (2) *d-b-r*, appears twenty-four times; (3)
mišp-šm, occurs twenty-three times; (4) *‘ dš*, occurs twenty-three times;
(5) *mišw-h*, occurs twenty-two times; (6) *juqqîm* occurs twenty-one
times; (7) *piqqûdîm*, occurs twenty-one times; and (8) *.mr-h*, occurs

⁷⁰ Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 5*. Grand
Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991, 737.

nineteen times.⁷¹ Hence, Matthew Henry beautifully summarizes the content of Psalm 119 as follows:

(1) God’s law, because they are enacted by him as our Sovereign. (2) His way, because they are the rule both of his providence and of our obedience. (3) His testimonies, because they are solemnly declared to the world. (4) His commandments, because given with authority, and lodged with us as a trust. (5) His precepts, because prescribed to us. (6) His word, or saying, because it is the declaration of his mind, and Christ, the essential eternal Word, is all in all in it. (7) His judgments, because by them we must both judge and be judged. (8) His righteousness, because it is all holy, just, and good, and the rule and standard of righteousness. (9) His statutes, because they are fixed, and of perpetual obligation. (10) His truth, or faithfulness, because the principles on which the divine law is built are eternal truths.⁷²

Indeed, biblical authority has a significant role in the community of faith (the church) and in the life of the individual believer. Church doctrines, formulated from within Holy Scripture, should form the foundation for what the Christians believe as well as be the measurement for how Christians ought to conduct their lives as God’s ambassadors, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, . . . (II Cor. 5:20).

Conclusion

In this chapter we have established the importance of biblical

⁷¹ Ibid., 737-738.

⁷² Matthew Henry, *The NIV Matthew Henry Commentary, In One Volume*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992, 734.

authority by observing the origin of Scripture (the Bible), the Old Testament prophets' understanding of the Scriptures, Jesus' understanding of the Scriptures, and the New Testament writers' view of the Scriptures. We have also observed a selected number of biblical passages that support biblical authority. The resultant nature of the Scriptures, that they are God-breathed, and that they have always been received authoritatively by Old Testament prophets, Jesus Christ, the apostles, the New Testament writers, and the New Testament (early) Church, places them as God's revelation to human beings, wholly reliable, and trustworthy regarding its facts. Thus, the Bible is our divine authority in all things pertaining to what to believe about God, how to approach God (or how to be reconciled to God) and how Christians should conduct their lives within a given culture.

God's Word (the Bible) must be our absolute standard for measuring what we must believe about God, how to approach God, and how we ought to live (behave) as God's people. Biblical authority has practical implications for us as Christians. Psalm 119:105, referring to the Scriptures says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." Those who have embraced God's authoritative truth have an awesome responsibility to dedicate their lives to assimilating this truth. Waliggo expresses similar concerns when he writes on Christianity and inculturation in the African context:

The permanence of Christianity will stand or fall on the question whether it has become truly African: Whether Africans have made Christian ideas part of their own thinking, whether Africans feel that the Christian vision of life fulfills their

own needs, whether the Christian worldview has become part of truly African aspirations.⁷³

Biko shares the same sentiments when he says, “Where people are subjected to a religion that is far removed from their cultural make up, then elements of disgruntlement begin to be noted and sometimes open defiance is soon displayed.”⁷⁴ Such an approach and sensitivity to one’s cultural milieu in contemporary theology calls for a higher view of Scripture as God’s authoritative word. ‘*Jesus in African Christianity*’⁷⁵ is, in my view, one of the best attempts to explore various aspects of contemporary theological issues pertinent to the African context. These African scholars advocate that theology is not Christian at all when it does not offer Jesus Christ of Nazareth as the answer to the human quest within a cultural environment, and as the answer to people who ask the reason for the hope that all Christians hold through faith. We must add that this faith is intelligent faith, that is, it is informed by God’s Word, the Bible. Although these reflections are culturally based, the foundation is God’s authoritative word, the Bible. Actually, this is the preoccupation of inculturation.⁷⁶ In this approach to theology, there is a deliberate effort to

⁷³ M. John Waliggo, ed. *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency*. Nairobi: St. Paul Publications, 1986, 12.

⁷⁴ Stephen Mpilo Biko, *I Write What I Like*. San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1986, 55.

⁷⁵ Mugambi and Magesa, ed. *African Christianity*, 1989.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 15. There are two approaches to inculturation. First, the attempt to construct a relevant theology by starting from the Scriptures. In other words, what the Bible teaches influences the entire process as well as the end result. Second, the approach that starts from the cultural context and strives to find relevant themes in the Bible.

incarnate the Christian message in a given culture by employing perspectives of that cultural worldview. Here, we are advocating that this process be established upon a solid foundation, that is, the Scriptures. The final aim is to have a theology that is biblical and offers Jesus Christ as that cornerstone, the Saviour.

God speaks to all people in their different cultural environments through His Word. He does not say one thing to one cultural or ethnic group and turns around to say quite a different thing to the other. If ever there is one additional principle to learn about God, it is his consistency.

The content of God's Word is like food—all peoples of the earth are to eat the same food (one menu for all) but it is prepared differently in all the different cultures. That is, the application of God's Word takes various forms among various people groups (ethnic groups), but all of them are to measure their beliefs and practices according to the Bible. Thus the Bible becomes both a measurement and a cleansing agent by virtue of its divine origin. Here, we are again re-iterating the significance of the text in its definitive form, to be the final judge. Nevertheless, we are aware that every reading, including every reading of the Word of God, always has a subjective element in it. However, in arguing for the text we are admitting that the reader gives meaning to the text, but also that the text itself, the biblical text, is the final authority of whether to embrace or reject certain interpretations and applications of the Bible.

We can comfortably place the Bible in such a position because "Scripture is the sum total of divine revelation recorded in a God-breathed written form, and that every scriptural statement is therefore to be

received as a divine utterance.”⁷⁷ Again, it seems scripturally logical to conclude that a proper understanding of biblical inspiration leads to a high view of the authority of the Bible, including its practical implications.

The next chapter answers the question, ‘How then should we think of biblical inspiration’ in the light of recent exegetical and theological developments? What can we learn from Professor Barr’s view of biblical inspiration?

⁷⁷ Packer, “*Fundamentalism*,” 85-86.