

## **Scriptural Authority and Believing Criticism The Seriousness of the Evangelical Predicament**

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Academic study of literature that one considers sacred can be a tricky business. A believing student must continuously find ways to concurrently openly receive and “objectively” critique the literature in question. Many evangelical philosophers<sup>1</sup> who base their beliefs primarily on the Bible must simultaneously approach what they perceive as an authoritative Scripture with both faith and suspicion. For all the diversity that has begun to increasingly characterize evangelicalism, an amazingly resilient expression of faith at least amongst American evangelical Christians remains: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and therefore inerrant in the originals.”<sup>2</sup> A statement like this sociologically and theologically aims to communicate the import of a doctrine of Scripture that emphasizes its divine origin and subsequent authority. However, in spite (or perhaps because) of the vogue of acknowledging one’s historical moment and attendant, though often latent, presuppositions, it appears a virtual impossibility to be both an evangelical believer of this kind and a critical scholar at the same time—a sort of believing critic, if you will. The religious icon of the evangelical believing scholar has become a disingenuous cultural construction that ought to be replaced by a more realistic aspiration.

In what follows I write from experience of at least two problems that attend the integration of evangelical philosophical thought and evangelical biblical studies. The first is an observation that so many conservative Christian scholars wittingly or unwittingly allow one characteristic of Scripture (authority) to dominate their intellectual queries, not least those that investigate the phenomenon of Scripture itself. It seems that too often the parameters within which such scholarship is conducted can become predictably restrictive in order to preclude results that are incompatible with conservative Christian affirmations. Dispositions are noticeably defensive even in works where an insistence upon Scripture’s ultimate authority is never mentioned and remains unsaid.

To their credit, one conservative seminary in the U.S. that I attended attempted to methodologically compensate for these limitations by pre-supposing the inerrancy of Scripture; however, on account of newly expanded parameters—and this is the second problem—conclusions from critical scholars were regularly accepted that were, at least in my view, in considerable tension with the above affirmation. These biblical scholars, then, found themselves battling for their Bibles with their right hands while they accepted critical conclusions that undermined these very convictions with their left.

The results of critical scholarship have by no means affected only conservative Christian scholars in the States; they have forced believing scholars of every tradition (and not only within Christianity) to respond in their own ways.<sup>3</sup> This essay reconsiders the prospects of the enterprise of an evangelical (as defined above) believing criticism by collectively considering a handful of findings within biblical scholarship and highlighting a philosophical tension that irascibly hounds believing evangelical scholars of the said kind. Perhaps, this tension will prove a representative example of the lurking

incompatibilities that beset academic study within the context of conservative religious allegiance, especially with respect to religionists who believe in written, inerrant revelation.

## I

The above EPS affirmation claims that the Bible is the Word of God and inerrant *in the originals*, meaning, presumably, the autographs. The claim implies that even though a complicated prehistory and a convoluted subsequent history can be admitted for several (if not all) of the writings contained in Scripture, there can only be one particular phase, even if it is beyond historical recovery, during which God inspired the holy writings. Consequently, it was only during that phase that the divine authority was imbued. It is held that obviously subsequent handlings of the text cannot be considered authoritative in the same way that this elusive and vague autograph phase of production is. After all, there might be errors or corruptions in these. In the same way, there is no infallible, divine authority in any of the traditions that pre-exist the autograph, even if it turns out that that pre-existing material was in large measure (or even singly) responsible for the specific content of that autograph. That both pre- and post-histories of the Bible can shed much light on the Bible is freely admitted (though not by all), but these are never as authoritative as the autograph itself. The divine authority resides in the autograph plain and simple, end of story.

Can this understanding of authority be maintained, given what we know of the early production and use of Scripture?<sup>4</sup> Could it ever have been practically meaningful for any believer living at any time throughout history to affirm such a thing? The latter question may prove anachronistic, but it has become increasingly difficult to see how such an emphasis on autographs can be insisted upon without accepting a version of divine dictation (and the majority of conservative evangelicals do

not). Still, even if *that* is conceded, there is still the matter of reckoning with how the degree to which the interpretive traditions of a non-inspired, non-authoritative Second Temple Judaism, for example, permeate the New Testament writings does not speak against any theory of inspiration and authority that allows for a measure of divine “perfection” to affect the autographs only. I have not concerned myself with the question of the identity of an inspired text in light of subsequent textual transmission, preservation, translation and availability;<sup>5</sup> I am inquiring rather after the relative status of late Second Temple and early Christian traditions in light of how intrinsic these are to the Scriptures’ own identity. In fact, without their profound infusion of prevailing traditions, the New Testament writings lose a great deal of the coherence that they apparently evinced to their earliest readers. We can even go so far as to say that the New Testament that we read today is *not* the New Testament of the first Christians insofar as the New Testament that we handle has been of historical and cultural necessity stripped of its Second Temple context. The evangelical hermeneutical truism that stipulates a Bible without a context is no Bible at all has come to plague me to the effect that a Bible without an infallible context simply cannot be infallible.

“Aha!” A naysayer might interject, “You have simply confused ‘text’ and ‘interpretation’!” I, too, had hoped that in a naïve way I had made some such category mistake (and maybe I have), but let us take care in articulating the matter more clearly: Is it the mere words that make the page of a printed or copied Bible part of *the Bible*? After all, strings of words that appear on a sheet (in whatever language or translation) that happen to match those that are read (in whatever language or translation) in the opening chapters of Genesis, for example, do not in themselves constitute ‘the Fall,’ do they? If Genesis 3 were omitted, Christians would likely feel that their Bibles were not intact, but can the same be said if one took out ‘the Fall’? Obviously (is it?), the Fall is

a derived concept, a full-blown interpretation that goes above and beyond the strings of words that appear on a page. Still is it not curious that if a chapter heading that read ‘The Fall’ were removed and replaced with, say, ‘The Maturation’ or ‘The Prank’, many evangelicals would feel as if they were not reading the Bible at all?

It seems correct to say that the Bible is often thought of on at least two different levels: one where the actual text is in mind, the very words that comprise a verse ( $B_1$ ), and one where an interpretation is in mind, where the rubber actually hits the road and academic reflection begins ( $B_2$ ). This means that if I were to say, “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and therefore inerrant in the originals” (hereafter,  $*$ ) there would be a need to elaborate and indicate to which Bible I am referring, whether  $B_1$  or  $B_2$ . It appears to me that equivocation is inevitable whenever  $*$  is affirmed.

Logical instincts compel to avoid equivocation and one might do so by maintaining  $B_1$  throughout  $*$ : “Only the very words in this book, and all of these very words, are the Word of God written and therefore these very words are inerrant as they appeared in the originals.” Let us call this (or something like this)  $*_1$ . Here, I might understand that the very words in the elusive autographs were God’s very words and that God never slipped up in his spelling or had a prophet or apostle write the incorrect word. I could also be affirming that the grammar and syntax of every biblical clause was immaculate (how about punctuation?). However, no evangelical would make a big deal of this (unless he or she happened to be interested in claiming that God is a God who can guarantee proper spelling and grammar). Obviously, this is not the reason why so many evangelicals affirm  $*$ . Any attempt to get at that reason would call upon  $B_2$ .

“Interpretation of this book alone, and the interpretation of all its parts, is the Word

of God written and therefore inerrant in the originals” ( $*_2$ ). This seems more like (but is not quite exactly) what I would think that I were saying if I said  $*$ . However, notice how the phrase ‘interpretation of this book’ is now the stand-in for ‘Bible’ in the original  $*$ . In other words, I understand *both* something like  $B_1$  and something like  $B_2$  to be implied by the word ‘Bible’ in  $*$ . Without  $B_1$  I would not have  $B_2$ , but without  $B_2$  I have no use for  $B_1$ , especially with respect to authority (which is what the whole ‘written’ and ‘inerrant’ business is supposed to achieve). So I would be forced to equivocate when affirming  $*$  or, at the very least, *insist that both  $B_1$  and  $B_2$  are somehow implied, if not conflated, in the one word ‘Bible’*. Only usage and intention can determine which aspect is primarily in view in a given occurrence.

Now with respect to  $B_2$ , many conservative evangelicals are given to connecting interpretation in one way or another to some type of authorial intent. I will not make a particular issue out of that here. The books of the Bible did not just drop out of heaven, after all; they were composed, edited, etc. within various literary, cultural and historical matrices by living, breathing human beings who existed during distinct historical eras in determinate geographic locales (even if they cannot be determined). Perhaps, texts proper ( $B_1$ ) can arguably be identified and distinguished without reference to such contexts (though I doubt it), but the possibility of discourse ( $B_2$ ) is absolutely abandoned when contexts are thus disregarded (as if that could be done). By continuing to rely upon authorial intent, it seems to me that many conservative evangelicals are recognizing that  $B_2$  inherently implies a further delineation such as  $B_{2a}$  and  $B_{2b}$ , where  $B_{2a}$  is the author’s interpretation of what he has written and  $B_{2b}$  is a hearer/reader’s interpretation of what is written. The objective in much of conservative Christian hermeneutics is to have  $B_{2a}$  and  $B_{2b}$  coincide as closely as possible. That leaves us with  $*_3$ : “The authors’ own interpretations of their

writings (contained in this book alone as far as conservatives are concerned), and their interpretations in all their parts, are the Word of God written and therefore inerrant in the originals.” It is this and other similarly implicit claims that ultimately prove so problematic for the maintenance of a full-fledged evangelical believing criticism.

A truncated version of  $*_3$  (which I’ll call  $T*_3$ ) reads as follows: “The authors’ own interpretations of their writings (contained in the Bible alone as far as we are concerned)...is inerrant in the originals.” One problem that appears immediately is that what these authors (i.e., the biblical writers) so frequently do in their writings and the interpretations that they depend upon in their writings have proven unmanageable insofar as I have tried to find a way to integrate them into a statement like  $T*_3$ . The problem nags me on two fronts: There is an academic restraint that obtains from the use of the terms like ‘inerrant/infallible’ and a related critical selectivity, which results from the insistence upon a notion like ‘the original.’ Let me try to explain.

## II

The degree to which the  $B_2$ -dimension of the New Testament depends upon its literary, cultural and historical matrices should be considered inversely proportionate, in my opinion, to the degree to which conservative evangelicals and others can approach the Scriptures—particularly in its autograph phase—as an ultimate source of authority. Theoretically, I could imagine holding another opinion if it were the case that the New Testament depended solely upon what Christians traditionally call the Old Testament and that the New Testament was grounded in this Old Testament in such a way that it did not rely upon pre-existing extra-biblical interpretive traditions. Perhaps, then, some case could be made for an authoritatively inspired autograph.<sup>6</sup> But the reality of the

matter is quite the contrary. For the sake of space I will only briefly mention the conclusions of two studies by evangelical biblical scholars.

In a study of the book of James, Peter H. Davids observes that

the author of James needs the reader to supply the traditional embellishments of the biblical account to fully understand the passage...The freedom with which James combines the canonical with the extra-canonical means that he apparently had no firm boundary in his mind between the two...His apparent biblical references are not so entirely biblical at all.<sup>7</sup>

I find it impossible to believe (if Davids is right—I suppose an EPS-type evangelical could always contest this) that James had thought that only the autograph was vested with divine authority when he seems to have in a number of places (in order to make his points) mined traditional embellishments more than he did the  $B_{2a}$ ’s of the autographs that (should have?) comprised his authoritative Old Testament. In other words, in various sections of his letter, James (even if he did so theoretically) does not *practically* distinguish between a primary, authoritative autograph and a secondary interpretive tradition. On pains of oversimplification, for James there was not only a  $B_1$  and a  $B_{2a}$  (was there a  $B_{2a}$  at all?), but something more like a  $B_3$ , which I will categorize by example.

The mention of Job, for instance, in the epistle of James implies that the author was working with a  $B_3$ .  $B_3$  will be for us a renegade  $B_{2b}$  that was given such a life of its own by a religious community that it effectively eclipsed its  $B_{2a}$  source. It, in fact, becomes  $B_{2a}$  for all intents and purposes, giving rise to a case where extra-biblical tradition takes the place of the author’s own interpretation of the biblical material by way of embellishment, elaboration and/or

supplementation. One can find examples of this in the book of Jude, the Pauline corpus and other places.

In the book of Jude, the author employs “midrash on midrash,”<sup>8</sup> quoting and alluding to extra-biblical material just as often as he does biblical material. Of course, in the case of Jude, Ellis (as do countless other conservative evangelical scholars) proffers a cautious caveat, insisting upon Jude’s (and by implication this is believed to hold for all NT writers) conscious distinction between canonical and non-canonical writings.<sup>9</sup> But if one is convinced, on the basis of Davids’ and others’ arguments, that Ellis’ caveat is not easily sustained, can he still affirm \*? In other words, how does \* fare when lore, tradition, custom and canon were practically (and sometimes theoretically) indistinguishable for some of the NT writers? There definitely seems a tension here wherein a believing scholar must decide, at least on some level, whom she will allow to have the final say, faith or criticism, Scripture or scholarship?

A most interesting example is the “movable well” tradition that Paul seems to have unconsciously accepted in 1 Cor 10:4.<sup>10</sup> If we grant that none of the writings that contain a variation of the movable well tradition were ever considered “canonical,” it is hard for me to doubt that the oral or written tradition itself was seen as sure (i.e., this is what “really” happened), authoritatively filling in perceived exegetical gaps of the OT.<sup>11</sup> Whether there was an oral or written exegetical tradition, as it were, to which it would have been perfectly legitimate for Paul to appeal, conservative evangelicals would not find a “movable well” tradition in any text that they (or any Christian as far as I know) would acknowledge as Scripture (and, therefore, authoritative). So instead of appealing to a B<sub>2</sub> to make his point, Paul, here and elsewhere, appeals to a B<sub>3</sub> as if it were a B<sub>2</sub>.

Of course, conservatives are free to disagree with the conclusions that are being

drawn with respect to James and Paul, but if a conservative believer were to accept them (as I have), would not his scholarship force him to disaffirm \*? Perhaps, he would consider following Richard Swinburne, who, in his book, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, proposes that modern readers of Scripture must weed out cultural presuppositions before deciding upon the truth or falsity of a statement compared therein.<sup>12</sup> Roughly, Swinburne suggests that readers must convert B<sub>3</sub>’s into B<sub>2</sub>’s when engaging Scripture academically. He writes,

In order to separate statement from presupposition, we must ask, whatever the speaker’s actual beliefs, what were the common beliefs of the culture which they could reasonably presuppose that the speaker shared with them; and whatever the actual purpose of his utterance, can any such presupposed beliefs be siphoned off, leaving what the culture would naturally suppose to be the main message intact? If they can, we must then judge the truth-value of the utterance by criteria to which the falsity of the presuppositions is irrelevant.<sup>13</sup>

Paul most certainly believed in “the well...that had provided Israel with water during the march through the desert.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, the whole culture understood something along the lines that God had provided Israel with a rock or a well (traditions differ) that followed them in their travels in order that they might have water for their journey. According to Swinburne, “the statement is whatever the speaker, by public criteria, is seeking to add to the existing beliefs of the hearers.”<sup>15</sup> Paul writes in 1 Cor 10:4 that the Israelites “were drinking from a spiritual rock that followed them; and that rock was Christ” (NASB). Irrespective of how one might understand Paul here,<sup>16</sup> what Paul is adding to pre-existing beliefs is, minimally, that “that rock was Christ.”

If we were to follow Swinburne, the fact that Paul, along with his hearers/readers, assumed the movable well tradition is entirely irrelevant to the “something new” that Paul is asserting. In conservative terms, the *authoritative* Word of God resides primarily in Paul’s teaching that “that rock was Christ” and not in the presuppositions behind the assertion. Some would go on to argue that since the presuppositions are not themselves iterated in Scripture, they cannot be construed as the Word of God. It seems to be the case, though, that, without the pre-existing beliefs, Paul’s identification of the rock with Christ is meaningless. What rock is Paul talking about? The rock that *moved*, the one that *followed* them. *That* rock was Christ. It does not seem to me that a reader can simply disregard the cultural presuppositions in this case. I know of no conservative evangelical who believes that there was a rock (or a well—the tradition developed over time) that followed the Israelites around for forty years in order to give them water (how many are even aware of the tradition?). Quite the contrary, many biblical scholars (not only conservative) have argued singly against the possibility that Paul could have so naively accepted the popular tradition at face value. Such a thought is somewhat of an embarrassment to a believing conservative evangelical scholar, but if she resists the instinctual search for alternative explanations or is convinced that they are unsatisfactory, what she seems to have is a situation where she, as a conservative scholar, can admit that she has succeeded in roughly approximating a B<sub>2a</sub> but has found that it is intrinsically linked to a B<sub>3</sub> in such a way that it is not possible to extricate the one from the other or the other from the one in a meaningful way. The B<sub>2a</sub> wholly depends upon a B<sub>3</sub>.

### III

What does all this mean for a “believing scholarship” for EPS-type evangelicals? My conclusion is that on account of the practices of some of the NT writers, \* must be considerably revised to

something analogous to T\*<sub>4</sub>: “The prevalent interpretation of the author’s interpretation of their own writings is inerrant in the originals.” And with this, any hope of meaningfully affirming something in line with the original aims of \* comes crashing down. There arise at least three problems that we can adumbrate:

- (1) The idea that the Bible alone is the Word of God is confused on account of the fact that the canon itself does not seem to understand itself this way: How can a B<sub>2a</sub> alone be the Word of God when it so intimately depends on a B<sub>3</sub> for its intelligibility? How can a non-Word of God become the Word of God only as it is appropriated in the Bible? Isn’t there a bit of fudging going on here on the part of conservative evangelical scholars (quite a bit of B<sub>2b</sub>-ing and B<sub>3</sub>-ing under the guise of B<sub>2a</sub>)?<sup>17</sup>
- (2) It follows, then, that the emphasis on “written” needs to be rethought on account of the distinctions that must be made between B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2a</sub>, B<sub>2b</sub> and B<sub>3</sub>:
  - (a) Though different versions of B<sub>1</sub>’s are extant, B<sub>2b</sub>’s and B<sub>3</sub>’s often circulate orally and are those that become authoritative;
  - (b) (Related to (1)) The “written” Word of God must now include at least *some* non-canonical materials;
- (3) In the end, the insistence upon “originals” is unwanted: the historical development of B<sub>2b</sub>’s and B<sub>3</sub>’s necessitates that there be an allowance for the divine inspiration of successive revisions, interpretations and uses of Scripture.

### IV

EPS-type philosophers and theologians should, in light of these and other considerations, at least begin to acknowledge (or at the very least be made more aware) that it may be the case that with nothing but considerable difficulty can an EPS-type “believing criticism” continue to

claim anything like “the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and therefore inerrant in the originals.” The existence of a discrete autograph seems impertinent, and it seems the case that conservative evangelicals have well-intentionally, yet stubbornly, committed themselves to a pious chimera. Scripture always exists as an “interpreted Bible” if not a “rewritten Bible”: the Christian Bible repeatedly usurps, builds upon and even coincides with varying streams of tradition, lore, and cultural stock.<sup>18</sup> Given the B<sub>3</sub>-ness of the unrecoverable autograph phase of production, evangelical scholars of the EPS-type should buffer their claims about the authority of their Scriptures, at least as they are contemporarily articulated in philosophical societies, such as the EPS.

We could go on and suggest that, by extension, non-conservative (or even non-Christian, by analogy) claims of authority might also be in need of similar attenuation. Religion’s indelible dependence upon and explicit inclusion of contemporary culture, tradition and interpretation should preclude religious scholars from confessing statements comparable to \* as they conduct their scholarship. Otherwise, there is a great danger that either historic distinctions between canonical and non-canonical will become arbitrary, or scholars will turn blind eyes toward what might be called “tradition history.” Either way, one will almost always have to give way; be it religion or academic integrity, belief or criticism.

## V

I will conclude now with some reflections upon the prospect of an evangelical believing criticism of the EPS-type, based upon my observations from within conservative Christianity. Clearly, I am not the only student of Scripture and philosophy who has wrestled with this existentially painful dilemma. Other evangelical scholars (and others from other traditions) have also written candidly of an enduring tension that

has attended their work as scholars and believers. For example, Dennis E. Johnson writes,

This distinction between God’s Word and my understanding of God’s Word is hardest to recognize in ourselves, and it is perhaps the riskiest distinction to admit out loud. Simply acknowledging that there may be a difference between what Scripture says so plainly to my group and what Scripture itself actually says raises suspicions that the clarity, if not the authority, of Scripture is about to be compromised.<sup>19</sup>

Johnson proposes, for his part, that conservatives can cope more effectively with what he sees as the modern-postmodern dilemma by trying to learn from both. His strategy is one where conservatives should give the Bible “primacy” while giving general revelation (i.e., among other things, philosophy, scholarship in general) “priority.” His is an “all truth is God’s truth” approach that acknowledges that all truth is from God and is revealed through his Son, but that human understanding is finite and always only partial. One can discern in Johnson’s strategy a tactic of deferment: Things may not be meshing now, but they will on the last day.<sup>20</sup>

Readers would not be wrong—at least I would not think them wrong—if they interpreted Johnson as implicitly appealing to mystery. The majority of believing scholars (of any tradition) would surely agree that there must always be a place for such an appeal when dealing with things religious; however, various members of different communities will appeal to mystery in different ways. I, for my part, was driven to the uncomfortable, but relatively firm, conclusion that faith of the EPS-type and critical scholarship are mutually inimical for the study of religious literature because, among other things, I thought it inappropriate to invoke an appeal

to mystery at this particular juncture of my own research.<sup>21</sup> As I continue to reflect upon personal experiences and hear or read about reflections that have been penned by others, I suggest that a question that Christian philosophers of all stripes should entertain more fervently is: When is it acceptable for a believing member of a scholarly community to legitimately appeal to mystery?<sup>22</sup> The willingness of a scholar to appeal to mystery may determine *for him* a personal capacity for a believing criticism. However, believing academic communities will likely not be able to settle upon parameters for appeals to mystery, and, if this turns out to be the case, the burden will fall upon individual believing scholars to create their own niches within which they might conduct legitimate critical scholarship.<sup>23</sup> This is a heavy burden indeed.

## VI

In the absence of consensus parameters for the invocation of mystery, let us consider a working paradigm that might assist believing academics of every stripe in their respective academic studies in the short- to mid-run. I speak as a wavering evangelical, but others should be able to translate my proposal into their own philosophic and scholastic predicaments. The proposal is as follows: The feature of a religious enterprise that should most concern believing scholars as they involve themselves in their research and spiritual lives is its practicality. We will continue with the example of the conservative study of Scripture; it remains for others to analogize accordingly.

In our exposition of what is meant by “practicality,” I cautiously and critically commend Helmut Koestler’s description of the formation of the Christian canon as a methodological paradigm: “Whatever attested the events of salvation and told the shared story and whatever proved useful for the building of communities was acceptable.”<sup>24</sup> Koestler maintains that in the early church, writings themselves never

constituted the gospel; rather, the gospel consisted of “the saving message that created and sustained Christian faith.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, whatever proved practical, serviceable, and suitable for the faith and life of the early church was seized upon by the church for the perpetuation of believing communities and the establishment of new ones. Lee M. McDonald observes similarly with regard to Pseudepigrapha, “If a particular writing fit theologically with that which was acceptable to a particular Christian community, then it was acceptable even though it may have been written by someone other than the author listed.”<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps, the oft-quoted 2 Tim 3:15-17 lends support to such a pragmatic view. According to Brian S. Rosner, “Christians, Paul says, are to do two things with Scripture: believe it, for it testifies to the gospel, and obey it, for it instructs them concerning proper conduct.”<sup>27</sup> In 2 Tim 3:15-17, Rosner sees that Paul is claiming that the Scriptures point to the gospel and are useful for ethical instruction.<sup>28</sup> The fact that Scripture is “God-breathed” perhaps should not be plumbed for its implications of ultimate authority as so many often do, but rather for its implications regarding God’s ongoing love for his people, especially in light of the gospel, such that the Scriptures will ever be *useful* for the edification of the church and the furthering of the kingdom.<sup>29</sup>

Usefulness is a property that depends on the user just as much as it depends on what is being used. The critical conclusions presented above, for example, might be taken as evidence that much of Scripture’s “authority” actually lies in its practicality. In other words, the early church’s various hermeneutical approaches were so integral to the ancient understanding of Scripture that biblical writers could write “midrash on midrash” in order to further the gospel. This may be one reason why Christians have historically opted for a “Christocentric” hermeneutic where they try to relate every part of the Bible to Jesus Christ (notably,

otherwise irrelevant portions of the Christian Old Testament), realizing that the authority of Scripture somehow involves itself in the hermeneutical approaches to Scripture—the uses to which it could be put. I am persuaded, nevertheless, that conservative faith commitments too easily tend toward a tendentious one-sidedness in understandings of the Christian religion generally and the Christian Bible specifically, especially in American conservative academic settings.<sup>30</sup>

By setting Scripture's usefulness (perhaps somewhat artificially) over against its authority, attention can be drawn to other facets of Scripture and especially *interpretive traditions* that tend to be obscured when authority to “the Bible” is given disproportionate and equivocal consideration. Perhaps, in this way Christian philosophers can join in and ponder a new way toward the establishment and practice (of at least one kind) of a non-defensive, unequivocal believing-criticism for these and other evangelicals.

## Notes

1. “Evangelical” here refers to those Christian philosophers (and other academics) of whatever denomination (or non-denomination) who would align themselves according to their views of Scripture and canon with the Evangelical Theological Society, the Evangelical Philosophical Society and other like-mind affiliations. The view of Scripture in mind is stated below. The belief in inerrancy is still ubiquitous and its equivalent is taken for granted in many other religions where sacred texts play an important role.

2. These words articulate the defining affirmation of the Evangelical Philosophical Society (EPS), an organization that publishes a journal that, according to the editor, “has the highest circulation of any philosophy of religion journal on the planet” [Craig J. Hazen, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Philosophia Christi* 4 (2002): 299]. A second and last sentence reads, “God is a Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory”.

3. From a Jewish perspective, David Weiss Halivni, *Revelation Restored: Divine Writ and*

*Critical Responses* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997) and, even more candidly, *The Book and the Sword* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996). From a Muslim perspective, Shabbir Akhtar, “Critical Qu’anic Scholarship and Theological Puzzles” in *Holy Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, eds. H. M. Vroom and J. D. Gort (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997), 122-127.

4. See, for example, for historical concerns: Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock; repr. Fortress, 1985); Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, Rev. and Enl. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995); and for literary concerns: James E. Brenneman, *Canons in Conflict: Negotiating Texts in True and False Prophecy* (New York: Oxford, 1997).

5. A still-burgeoning field of study, see Eugene Ulrich, “The Bible in the Making: The Scriptures Found at Qumran” in *The Bible at Qumran: Text, Shape and Interpretation*, ed. P. W. Flint (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 51-66.

6. I think that only pushes the problem back to the Old Testament; however, nearly every recent conservative defense of Scripture has somehow based itself upon Jesus Christ. In other words, beginning with the OT has not been seen as a live option.

7. Peter H. Davids, “Tradition and Citation in the Epistle of James” in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation: Essays Presented to Everett F. Harrison by His Students and Colleagues in Honor of His Seventy-fifth Birthday*, eds. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford Lasor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 113-126. He covers a number of passages, including James’ references to Job and Elijah. Davids went on to incorporate these and other findings (his dissertation, too, was on the book of James) in his contribution to the NIGTC.

8. E. Earle Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 156 n.

9. On the failure of canonical/extracanonial dichotomies, cf. John Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Texts: The Canon in Early Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox), 1997.

10. Though Ellis (*Prophecy*, 209-212) proposes (following Driver) that “the adoption of such a puerile fable would be ‘totally out of harmony’ with the character of Paul’s mind” and (against Driver) that “Paul and the Targum [of Onkelos] are related more directly to a particular interpretation of the passages of the prophets [Ps 77:20; 104:41; Is 48:21, etc.] than to each other,”

Enns surmises that “Paul’s matter-of-fact reference to ‘the rock that followed them’ seems dependent on a tradition of a “moveable well” (*Bib. Ant.* 10:7; 11:15; 20:8; *t. Sukk.* 3.11; *Tg. Onq.* to Num 21:16-20)” [Peter Enns, “Biblical Interpretation, Jewish” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, eds. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 159-165, 164.]. If these two biblical scholars appear at first glance to be saying the same thing, it should be noted how Ellis is trying to trace Paul’s interpretation in I Cor 10:4 more directly to the Old Testament whereas Enns surmises that Paul’s reference to a popular interpretive tradition was an unconscious supplanting of the biblical story with Second Temple lore. See also his “The Moveable Well in 1 Corinthians 10:4: An Extrabiblical Tradition in an Apostolic Text,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6 (1996): 23-38.

11. See Enns, “Movable Well.”

12. *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (New York: Oxford, 1992), 28-38.

13. Swinburne, *Revelation*, 31.

14. *The Legends of the Jews: Moses in the Wilderness*, ed. Louis Ginzberg (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1939), 308. Of course, nothing can be said regarding any association of the well with Miriam as recorded here. For more on the well traditions with respect to Paul, see the aforementioned works by Enns and Ellis along with the works cited therein.

15. Swinburne, *Revelation*, 32.

16. For a survey of various proposals, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 719-730.

17. Note here the relative paucity of conservative attention given to the problem of the NT’s heavy reliance upon Greek versions of the OT, for example (Moises Silva being a notable exception).

18. For example, Craig A. Evans writes, “In a sense, exegesis precedes Scripture, for the latter is largely the product of the former” [“Luke and the Rewritten Bible: Aspects of Lukan Hagiography” in *The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation*, JSPSup14, eds. J. H. Charlesworth and C. A. Evans (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1993), 170-201, 170]. It was from his essay that I first learned of the phrase “rewritten Bible” and the like.

19. Dennis E. Johnson, “Between Two Wor(l)ds: Worldview And Observation In The Use Of General Revelation To Interpret Scripture, And Vice Versa,” *JETS* 41 (March 1998): 82.

20. For a different take, see James K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).

21. Some may at this point (if they have not already) inveigh the charge of unnecessarily capitulating to methodological naturalism. I, for my part, have no qualms with Michael J. Murray’s “Natural Providence (Or Design Trouble),” *Faith and Philosophy* (July 2003): 307-327.

22. The most candid discussion that I have found is Davis Young’s *The Biblical Flood: A Case Study of the Church’s Response to Extrabiblical Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

23. Halivni’s reflections of comparable matters have led him to contrast “traditional” study with “critical” study of Scripture. For his part, he has noticed that he was typically drawn to traditional study of Scripture whenever he sought to recapture his childhood “assurance of security.” He claims that he has since been able to fully embrace his own critical approach to Scripture while maintaining a vigorous devotion to Torah. It is interesting to note that he laments the fact that, as happened to Mendolsohn, his students have proven unable to follow in his footsteps in this regard (*The Book and the Sword*, 123-126, 149-151.)

24. “Writings and the Spirit: Authority and Politics in Ancient Christianity,” *HTR* 84:4 (1991): 353-372, 370.

25. “Writings,” 366.

26. *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, Rev. Ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 289.

27. “Written for Us’: Paul’s View of Scripture” in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 81-106, 100. Rosner’s stress on the divine origin of Scripture is not disputed here. The realization that our understanding and appropriation of Scripture’s authority operate within a substantially different social, cultural, and hermeneutical context has prompted the present author to endeavor to gain a more helpful perspective on the nature of Scripture.

28. “Written,” 104; cf. William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

29. A notable scholar who has taken a similar course in thought is James A. Sanders. Among his many works, see his seminal article, “Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of

Canon” in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God*, eds. F. M. Cross, W. E. Lemke, and P. D. Miller, Jr. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), 531-560.  
30. See Anthony C. Thiselton, “Hermeneutics: Some Proposals for a More Creative Agenda” in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, eds. Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 107-142.