

A Human Understanding of Divine Scripture

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A Review of Joseph K. Gordon, *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Bible*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019. Pp. ix + 424.

“A constitutive judgment” of this book is that “Christian Scripture is truthful, unified, and authoritative for Christian faith, thought, and praxis,” and this is a “non-negotiable within the horizon of the Christian faith” (263).

Where is this truth, unity, and authority located? It is found, as I understand Gordon, in the economic work of the Triune God. “The words of Christian Scripture,” Gordon writes, “truthfully and usefully mediate the reality, the *res* or *Sache*, of the recapitulation of all things in Christ” (268). That reality is the pattern of God’s activity through Christ in the Spirit for the sake of humanity. Thus, according to Gordon, “the fundamental purpose for which God gives humanity Christian Scripture is the transformation of the understanding and praxis of those who read, hear, and mediate [sic; meditate, JMH] upon it in accordance with God’s unified overarching redemptive purposes” (265), which is the recapitulation of all things.

The truth, unity, and authority of Christian Scripture, then, are not so much located in the words on the page as much as in the reality of the Triune God at work in human history to which Christian Scripture bears witness and by which the *res* is mediated. This, essentially, gives space for human error, diversity, and ambiguity within Christian Scripture while at the same time confessing its truthfulness, unity, and authority since the message is infallible and the economic work of the Trinity is real and actual.

My Summary for the sake of Engagement

The title, as one might expect, is significant. It tells the story of this book if we hear it as a compressed or telescoped theological claim.

To describe this text as “divine Scripture” is to make a theological claim. Gordon unpacks this claim as a threefold confession: scripture is (1) inspired, (2) the written word of God, and (3) useful for transformation and participation in the divine mission. At the same time, this confession entails a particular understanding of these claims, a human understanding. This is the goal of systematics, that is, to understand what it means to say these writings are divine and how this forms us. In other words, Gordon pursues a true judgement about the reality of Divine Scripture that has such explanatory power that we may not only understand the claim that Christians confess but also articulate the intelligible and objective relationships that reality sustains to other realities. This is the function of human understanding, which involves a particular way of thinking about the human being and the human realia of Scripture itself. Thus, in this sense it is a systematic judgment, as Lonergan envisions the project of systematic theology.

Part of the process of human understanding, and thus systematic judgments, is to explore what one means by “Divine Scripture” when one also acknowledges that the “Christian Bible” is a human book. “Divine Scripture” can be misleading if we mean that Scripture shares the ontological status of the divine. If not ontologically such, then what is it? The confession that Scripture is divine necessitates the pursuit of understanding (or faith seeking understanding), and that understanding is necessarily and inescapably human. What Gordon means, it seems to me, is that these writings, which the church has called and accepted as

Scripture and are in some unique sense divine, mediate an understanding of God's work and are instrumental in the performance of that divine work. In essence, Scripture is divine because it is the instrument by which God mediates the meaning of God's Triune work for humanity and by which God transforms the human person in light of the actual work of the Trinity.

In harmony with the "church fathers," Gordon suggests that "Scripture [is] a means of the divine teaching of the Triune God that facilitat[es] the deifying transformation of its readers and hearers" (250). *Theosis* is the goal of God's economic work.

Three Affirmations

I have several questions to raise about Gordon's project, but first I want to affirm three helpful dimensions of his work, which all subsequent reflections on the Christian Bible must take account.

First, chapter two, while largely descriptive, lays an important foundation for the whole book. Gordon addresses the question of what did the early church fathers do with Scripture, how did they read it, and through what lens did they read it? His answer is the Rule of Faith. This is an appropriate lens because the Rule of Faith—though fluid in its articulation—is assumed by, partially articulated in specific texts, and disclosed through the New Testament documents. The Rule of Faith, in this sense, is prior to the New Testament documents and, we might say, are the confession of faith that gave rise to the New Testament documents. The New Testament writers, despite their diversity, operate within the narrative world of this common confession. As Tertullian, Origen, and Irenaeus testify, to read Christian Scripture without the Rule of Faith or contrary to the Rule of Faith is to distort the meaning of the Biblical authors. In

essence, the Rule of Faith confesses the truthfulness and unity of the faith, and the New Testament documents narrate, elaborate, and extend the understanding of that faith.

Second, chapter five defends an illuminating thesis that the Bible is a human book, the product of human technology. The Bible is not a divine book in the sense that its *realia* are divine. It is the written word of God, but it is not the Word of God, who is divine. The Bible, in this sense, is not divine. When we confess that Scripture is divine, we do not mean that the book, its transmission, and its particularity possess a divine ontology. Rather, we mean that God works through this human book in cooperation with human beings rather than in competition with them. To affirm “Divine Scripture,” then, one must also acknowledge “the human subjective process involved in ongoing determination of Scripture” (171). This includes canonization, transmission, translation, reading, and hearing in contrast to a set of original documents autographed by the authors.

Gordon helpfully walks us through the humanity of the text in several ways. To choose one, I found the section on book technology insightful. The information about the development of codex technology and its application to understanding the *realia* of the Bible was illuminating, and I was particularly struck by the function of codex technology. As appropriated by Christians, the codex functioned as *testimonia* under a single cover and thus served a pedagogical purpose. Moreover, codex technology—later enhanced by printing technology—enabled the isolation of the text from other sources of authority within the Christian community. It could then stand alone, become individualized, and even idolized as the authority. In this way, the codex, and later printed Bibles, tended to disconnect Christian

readers from Christian community as individual interpreters rather than assuming communal participation in the economic work of the Trinity that Scripture facilitates.

Third, the primary function of Scripture is pedagogical, that is, whatever our judgments about inspiration or the nature of Scripture, it is useful. Chapters three and six located the main thing—the reality—in the economic work of the Trinity. Gordon employs a form of theological interpretation that uses the economic work of the Trinity as the primary lens for reading Scripture within the context of its human *realia*. I think this is a strength of Gordon’s work, and it coheres with my own book *Searching for the Pattern* which is a lay-level, nonacademic read. He locates Scripture within the economic work of the Trinity, that is, Scripture is the product of that economic work through the instrumentality of human beings who write to confess, teach, and practice that work in their own lives and in their communities of faith. It is here that Gordon discovers the “authoritative rule of human life.” It is not Scripture itself, though Scripture functions instrumentally as such. Rather, “the mind of Christ is the meaning of Christ whose form is manifest in his incarnation, teaching, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. It is our transformation into this form, this self-sacrificing love that reconciles person to person, community to community, and all humanity to the Triune God” (266). *Searching for the Pattern* offers you a hearty amen to that claim.

Questions

I now turn to five questions or concerns.

First, is the theological reading of Scripture privileged? It seems, but I may be wrong, that though the theological reading of Scripture is not the sole method of reading Scripture, it is the primary way of reading it. Though historical and contextual methods are complementary, the

primary lens is theological, that is, the starting point is the economic work of God in and through the human situation. A historical reading accounts for the *realia* of the text, but left to itself it can only produce interesting historical probabilities or worse leave us with relative uncertainty through a variety of proposed reconstructed historical situations. A contextual reading is dependent upon the theological reading or else it would not be liberating in the first place.

Second, what is the function of *sola Scriptura* in Gordon's systematic theology? The absence of contributions from the Protestant tradition or key Reformers is striking for one whose faith heritage is the Restoration Movement. As I understand Gordon, perhaps his position is more like *prima Scriptura* rather than any association with *sola Scriptura*. For example, he writes: "Christian Scripture is the primary linguistic instrument that the Triune God has given to the world through which God continues to facilitate such transformation in communities of interpreters" (266). My question, then, is: in what sense, if any, do you affirm any sort of *sola* regarding Scripture? Is Scripture the *only* inspired text, for example?

Third, Gordon affirms the authority of Scripture. As I understand him, this authority is located in the meaning-making of God's economic work. This Scripture as an authoritative text tells the truth about that economic work (a pedagogical function), facilitates the transformation of believers, and invites us to participate in the ongoing mission of God for the recapitulation of all things. The authority is not so much in the text as it is in the message or the divine work itself; the authority lies in the *realia* of God's work rather than in the words on the page. Is this a fair characterization? Is the authority of Scripture its textual inscription or in its witness? Or both?

Fourth, what, precisely, is the judgment about inspiration? Scripture is equipped for its function “because its particular words eminently mediate the meaning of that work and because the Holy Spirit continues to transform the readers and hearers of Scripture who return to the written word of God again and again” (266). What does it mean to say Scripture is inspired? The focus of the book is more about Scripture’s pedagogical function and usefulness. But what is the theological claim about the particularity of its language that Scripture is inspired? If we confess that this is the written word of God and it is inspired by the Spirit, what does this mean exactly? How does this relate to the *realia* of Scripture? How are the documents of the New Testament different from the witness of Ignatius? Is one inspired and the other is not? What is the work of the Spirit through these texts that is not true of Ignatius’s work or my own work? The church has marked it as different, but what is the judgment of the church—the judgment of this systematic theology—of what is different in terms of the nature or ontology of the text?

Fifth, what are the implications Gordon’s understanding of Divine Scripture for the restoration plea of the Stone-Campbell Movement? Gordon writes: “God has given us Scripture as it is the purpose that we should do specific things” (266). Is this a kind of patternism? I surmise, like myself, that Gordon finds the pattern of restoration in the economic work of the Trinity. We look to the work of God and the patterns of God’s own action as the pattern of imitation, conformation, and participation. Yet, how might this apply, for example, to the organization of the community of faith; is there a pattern? Is there a pattern for baptism? How does the economic work of the Trinity become a helpful pattern for life within the community of faith?

Despite these questions, which only intend to extend or clarify Gordon's work, I appreciate his work. It is a substantive volume that contributes significantly to the ongoing work of understanding what we mean when we confess "Divine Scripture."