

Response to Joe Gordon

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A strength of Dr. Gordon's book, *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding*, is the frank acknowledgment of the contextual subjectivity of so much our language, and so it seems appropriate to first of all provide a context for my own subjective response. I am a New Testament scholar who focuses primarily on the gospels. I "cut my scholarly teeth," so to speak, in the realm of historical criticism: languages, and historical backgrounds, along with and source, form and redaction criticism. And as a gospel scholar, I also work in the realm of narrative ... and see our texts in their existing form telling a story that is perhaps greater than the parts, and more universal than the world in which they arose, both features of which I suspect Dr. Gordon would agree with.

I also teach on a regular basis the Theology of the New Testament at Emmanuel Christian Seminary, which is an attempt to understand the theological constants that course through the New Testament. Fundamental to my approach has been the explicit effort to let the New Testament show its own theology, and so I avoid "systematic" thought: in part because systematic theology seems to overlook the wonderful "messiness" and contradictions and diversity of the biblical texts; but in part also because I fear that "systems" are extraneous to the world of the text, and so represent an intrusion of a different order – an *eisegesis* so to speak. I admit, also, that I often found the engagement with Lonergan and de Lubac challenging and at times impenetrable. I give this subjective prolegomena to perhaps explain where I find deep resonance with Dr. Gordon's book, and yet at other times to disagree or be simply at a loss since our approaches and language seems to come from very different places.

In general, I understand this volume to be an attempt to understand how and why Christians should value our Bible as “divine scripture” – that is, as writing (*graphie*) that embodies and transmits knowledge and understanding of Godself. To many this would not be problematic, but it is to Dr. Gordon’s credit that he is quite willing to engage the various issues and questions that might make this issue problematic: the challenge that post-modernism has brought to the fore that all language is itself subjective and culturally bound, so that “pure objectivity” seems a distant idea; the long and varied transmission of the texts, with their many variations, both in miscellaneous textual variations and in major recensions (e.g. the MT and Septuagint); the issue of translations themselves and their variability. I particularly welcome the attention to scripture as scripture, rather than simply assuming it. In my New Testament Theology class we spend the a significant period of time exploring whether New Testament Theology as a discipline should limit itself to our current New Testament canon, or whether instead should be simply descriptive of the emerging Christian movement, with all of its various documents (any of which are not canonical). Understanding what scripture is, and what scripture does is an essential task, and this is central to Dr. Gordon’s task.

I am particularly appreciative of a number of approaches to reading and understanding Scripture that Dr. Gordon engages in chapter four, entitled *Location of Scripture II*. As he expands his discussion on the nature of language and the human thought process which uses and engages language in producing meaning, Dr. Gordon makes very important points about the cultural relativism of language itself. We learn language, and learn to reflect and make meaning, within the confines of our present culture – those things which we see, hear, which are reinforced by others around us. Thus language, and our ability to use language in

constructing meaning, is somewhat subjective to our cultural environment. Yet, and this is another strength of Dr. Gordon's essay, despite this cultural location, still the communicative function is still possible since the human mind does operate and use language in similar ways. That is to say, human beings engage in meaning-making in very similar ways across time and cultures. As a result, it is theoretically, and I think practically, possible to communicate across time and cultures, provided we acknowledge and deal appropriately with the cultural boundedness of texts.

In framing his discussion with such a broad theoretical view of human language, he asserts that our scriptures are, indeed, the products of human beings in culturally bound settings. At the same time, he notes that the church's understanding of history and scripture both acknowledge that God has become immanent in both of them: in history in specific actions, notably the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ; and in scriptures by means of "revelation," by which the texts contain testimony of God's very nature and activity.

The challenge, of course, is bridging the language and cultural gap. This is the task of hermeneutics, of which translation itself is a major initial component. The understanding that texts are culturally bound, yet universally useful means that the process of continual re-appropriation in each culture and language is essential. This likely was outside the realm of this volume; Dr. Gordon touches on this, but perhaps not fully engaging the challenge and value of those committed both to historical critical efforts to do exegesis – that is, to understand the original culture – and then to re-contextualize this in our modern contexts.

Secondly, and related to this, I very much appreciated his description of scripture not only as the result of historical human action, but that the transmission of these texts also has a history. Chapter 5, *Scripture in History I*, was a very solid review of many of the features of our biblical materials as they were formed, transmitted and combined to become our “bible. I particularly note his emphasis on a number of elements that are often lost in many conservative treatments of scripture: first, that any discussion of autographs is not helpful, given their unrecoverability; second, the oral nature of (at least NT) writings, which may well have influenced much of the variability of the text we have; third, the short but appropriate discussion on the nature of textual transmission and the reality of textual variance; fourth, the helpful discussion of the “realia” of scripture – notably the role of the codex and the *nomina sacra*, which testify to the growing scriptural consciousness very early on; and fifth, the awareness and engagement with the distinction between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint, and what that meant for the development of the New Testament’s use and understanding of the Old testament. Finally, I was glad for a discussion about the development of the canon of the NT, though I wanted and expected perhaps much more, and felt the issue of OT canon was somewhat deficient.

Dr. Gordon’s book provoked a number of questions and reactions however, which I turn to now. In chapter six, *Scripture in History II*, he concludes the chapter with a bold statement: “The unity, authority, and truthfulness of Christian Scripture can only be “found” or discovered in a nuanced understanding of its production, reference, and purpose within the unified work of the Triune God in history.” (p. 260) [and I raise questions about the totalizing reference “can only”]. This refers, I think, to his foregoing discussion of the role of the scripture as “inspired” --

as testifying to the work of Jesus as Christ, and as pertaining to the usefulness of scripture in pedagogy. As Dr. Gordon notes, the issue of “inspiration” is challenging. I was particularly pleased that he challenged the notion of “verbal plenary” inspiration (though I don’t think he refers to this term) with his comment on p. 217 that the history of scripture rules out any direct dictation, etc., and further on p. 221 that inspiration of scripture cannot be located exclusively in the processes of the Holy Spirit moving only in the original authors. This discussion about the nature and location of inspiration, then naturally leads to questions about the role of the community of faith in the inspiration of scripture. So I raise two specific questions here that might lead to more: (1) in the discussion of the Holy Spirit, and a useful acknowledgment of the continued work of the Spirit in reading and engaging the Holy Spirit, I sense a very “individualist” perspective in the work of the Spirit. For instance, he cites the presence of the Spirit inhabiting “temples” of the divine – without seeming to have an awareness of the communal focus of Paul’s writings. In the continued role of the Holy Spirit, the effort of Christian communities in the ongoing task of understanding and engaging scriptures seems to be an important, perhaps even primary, locus of the Spirit’s activity. (2) And this relates to a similar understatement on the communal nature of the church in forming the canon. I wonder if we might explore how Dr. Gordon sees the role of the Holy Spirit in the “church,” both in the formation of scripture in its initial “inspiration” and canonization, and its continued role in recognition and appropriation of scripture?

In the same chapter, (chapter six), there is a helpful discussion that scripture’s primary role is to testify to Jesus; that is, it is the word about the Word. This distinction between scripture as the “word of God” that testifies to “the Living Word” is an important one. But it

does raise questions, some of which Dr. Gordon does engage, for instance his engagement with John Goldingay – specifically how we should understand the books of the Old Testament as scripture. While certainly Christians will have a uniquely Christo-centric perspective and will read the Old Testament with an eye to the New Testament, I sensed lack of appreciation for the Old Testament on its own terms, not simply as texts pointing to Jesus. Current efforts to make sense of how New Testament authors engaged the Old Testament, as with Richard Hays’ work in both Paul and the Gospels and also the extensive literature of intertextuality, suggest that while the New Testament does use the Old Testament in new and novel ways, it also does not diminish the original context of the OT as the story of God’s interaction with Israel. It is certainly true that the awareness of the “newness” of the Jesus event preceded the writings of the New Testament, as especially the work of Larry Hurtado has pointed out – that almost immediately in the period after Jesus’ resurrection the church began to understand the Jewish emphasis on monotheism in distinctly binitarian terms. And yet the church in its understanding of Scripture also emphasized the need to keep that Old Testament as part of its scripture, suggesting that an awareness of its independent nature was also an important part of “biblical” understanding (and scripture formation?).

Further on his discussion of the *Scripture in History II*, I was pleased that Dr. Gordon acknowledged that a key role of scripture is its “usefulness” in the pedagogy of Christian lives. This reflects, I might add, one of the key “criteria” by which New Testament books were acknowledged as “scripture” in the formative period of the canon – that is their catholicity of use (and usefulness). In this discussion, Dr. Gordon suggests that “the language of Scripture does mediate historical and doctrinal truths. The reality to which Scripture refers, though, is not a

set of discrete, logically or conceptually related propositions of doctrine.” [emphasis mine]. And yet interwoven in this “yes and no” of doctrine is another discussion that argues that a primary role of scripture is to create an alternate *narrative world* that outlines how we might live “in Christ.” This seems less to do with abstract doctrines (contra de Lubac’s suggestion that such abstractions are necessary), but with a way of living. Isn’t scriptures role in giving us a way to be part of God’s story, to live “in Christ” sufficient? What “necessary” role are secondary doctrines in the usefulness of Scripture?

And this leads me to my biggest objection to the book, the role that Dr. Gordon gives to the rule of faith and the creeds (offered as fully formed rules of faith) in knowing and appropriating Scripture. In his second chapter, *Historical Precedents*, suggests that the rule of faith testified to, and even served as the guiding principle around which the canon of scripture was recognized and formed. I am not convinced this is true. He further points to the Nicene creed as the fuller manifestation of the rule of faith (thus explaining in part his regular use of the term “Triune God”). As such, he suggests this creed/rule should serve as a vital instrument by which to understand and interpret scripture. Yet he also acknowledges that the rule of faith was not a fixed unit of text, but rather it varied between Irenaeus and Origen and Augustine. Moreover, Dr. Gordon admits that the scripture – at least the gospels and parts of Paul -- rather organically became accepted as scripture, and both became universally used and considered authoritative, before Irenaeus. In other words, while the canon was not fully formed, certain books were recognized as Scripture almost spontaneously. Why, then, is the rule of faith necessary? It would seem to me that the rule of faith was simply a short-hand summary of some key features being found in scripture. Should a short-hand summary become the norm

for the more complete exposition? Creeds and “rules of faith” are, it seems to me, doctrinal distillation of scripture, and as such would seem to be secondary to them. Or, to be perhaps more accurate, they are part of the church’s ongoing discussion about recognition of the reality of the Christ event, and thus should rather be seen as a reflection of the larger project of church’s activity in recognizing and forming the canon of scripture. Yet would not Scripture itself represent the full object of that searching activity, and thus stand alone as the final and complete product? I hope that a fuller discussion about the need and role of a rule of faith, and especially a creed, given the Stone-Campbell claim to have “no creed but Christ.”