
A Case for Biblical Authority

by John N. Oswalt

In an age crying out for authority, many are looking to the Bible. But what is the nature of the Bible's authority? From whence is it derived? How is it expressed? What are its implications? The thesis of this article is that any view of the Bible's authority vested in it by the community is inadequate in the face of the Biblical phenomena. The authority of Scripture is inherent in its nature as revelation. What such a view does and does not demand will be examined in closing.

For virtually its entire history, until the last 100 years, the Church has accepted the Bible's apparent claim that it is the written Word of God. It was, and is, the revelation of God. So said the Church. Therefore, the Bible was also assumed to be the final source on all matters of science, history, geography, etc.

The rise of literary and historical criticism in the last century raised questions about all that. So much that the whole idea of the Bible having its source in God was rejected by many thinkers and theologians. It was a record, now entirely rewritten, of a people's groping for God.

However, for many in both Europe and America who accepted the findings of literary and historical criticism, such a conclusion did not do justice to the singularity of the Bible. They were impressed by its unusual concepts of history, God, humanity, etc. The consensus arose that while the Bible was not itself revelation, it was a witness to revelation. It reported and recorded, interpreted and re-interpreted certain genuinely revelatory acts of God in history. Thus, the idea of revelation in history became an important theological construct, especially in this country during the 1950's.

However, the British scholar James Barr, among others, pointed out that this construct with its great emphasis upon the revelatory acts of God does not do justice to the majority of Scripture where God is quoted or at least said to be the source of the ideas.¹ One must hasten

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to add that Barr does not argue that God did speak, but only that any attempt to convey the Biblical idea of itself which does not take account of the idea of the speaking God is to that degree inadequate. To accept certain Biblical categories while rejecting others, he suggests, is to arrive at a position which is neither Biblical nor scientific.

Many other voices echoed Barr's and raised other questions as well. The result was a consensus that Biblical authority cannot be thought to reside in a "revelation in history" concept. But no general agreement has been reached as to where the authority does reside. The most which many can say is summed up in the position of Barr: *the Bible holds authority over the community of faith because the community has delegated it such authority.*² He refers to the Bible as the "Classical model of faith." The Jewish and Christian communities have designated certain experiences and statements as the best examples of what their faith is all about. Since their faith is our faith, we are not free to vary from this model as we will. True, it is not prescriptive, nor does it say all there is to say, but, as we step into the future, we must always evaluate ourselves by that model, lest unknowingly, we lose our identity.

Similarly, John Bright uses the analogy of the United States Constitution, a document which has authority over us because of its summarization of the ideas upon which our nation was founded and because we agree to abide by it.³ The Constitution defines what the United States is, not because of some inherent quality, but because of the facts of history. Nevertheless, while the 50 states could make a radical departure from the Constitution, in so doing they would become radically discontinuous with that entity which has been the United States of America.

The comments of both Bright and Barr are useful because they remind us that if the day should come when the Bible is not a key (if not *the* key) factor in the formation of the nature, doctrine and ministry of the Christian Church, on that day, whatever else it may be, it ceases to be the Christian Church.

Nevertheless, there are thoughtful people around the world who wonder if Bright and Barr and those like them are saying enough. Given the unique character and impact of the Bible across at least 3000 years, is it enough to say that the Bible has authority because the communities of faith have given it authority? Certainly the people of the United States have created their Constitution and made it what it is. Is the same true of the Bible? Is it the product of Israel and the Church? Or in some sense are *they* the products of the Bible and

that divine self-disclosure which it records? Obviously, it took a community of faith to interact with God and to record the ways in which He revealed Himself. But did not that revelation, now enclosed in Scripture, in some sense create that community and does it not do so still?

The issue comes down to this: does the Bible reveal the character and nature of a God seeking a community, or is it the record of a community seeking God? If it is the former, then it is revelatory and carries the very authority of the unchanging God for all people in all times. If it is the latter, then it is no more authoritative than any other body of religious literature. It is the province of religious historians and antiquarians, speaking only to those who already believe.

In this vein, it is interesting to note that Barr, in his recent book *The Bible in the Modern World*, only mentions the possibility of the Bible being revealed in passing, and then dismisses it.⁴ Yet when inveighing so eloquently against the adequacy of historical experience as constituting revelation, he argued that only some concept of revelation which accounted for the Biblical idea of the speaking God was acceptable. One has the unpleasant feeling that he attacked the idea of revelation through history, not to put a more adequate conception in its place, but because the whole concept of a revealing God, in word or event, is meaningless to him. Yet without that concept the Bible has only a very relative claim upon society today, a fact which becomes painfully clear as Barr tries to explain how the religious apprehensions of people 2000 to 3000 years ago has any relevance to persons in the second half of the twentieth century.

But on what basis might one argue for an inherent rather than a derived authority for Scripture? One reason is the not inconsiderable Church tradition of 1900 years. We ought not dismiss lightly the best thinking of scholars and divines of the past 19 centuries and more. Another is the Bible's incomparable ability to survive, and bury, the predictions of its imminent demise. Another is its capacity to rejuvenate broken and battered lives. Another is its ability to capture the essence of human life so well that across 4000 years we see ourselves in its characters. Beside it how strange and odd seem the finest examples of ancient literature: *the Enuma Elish*, *the Gilgamesh epic*, *the Tale of Aqht*, *Homer*, *the Anaëid*. We can say of each of them, "This is great literature." Yet, somehow, none of them lay hold of us as does the Bible.

Emile Cailliet, the French theologian, tells of his first encounter with the Bible when he was a young agnostic in his twenties. He had long

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looked for a book which would, in his words, “understand me,” but had never given the Bible serious consideration. One day, at a difficult point in his life, he came into the possession of a Bible, never having owned one before. He read it through the night, exclaiming again and again, “Here is the book which understands me.”⁵ That kind of authority was not delegated by the Church.

But perhaps one may argue that all of the above, and the latter especially, are very subjective. Is there no more objective evidence to believe that the Bible has authority over us because it has come from God? There is. John Bright is hinting at this point when he speaks of the Bible’s theology as being authoritative.⁶ However, I would go beyond that and argue that the world view of the Bible is so radically different from that of its neighbors that it could not have been discovered, only revealed. This is essentially the position of G. Ernest Wright as expounded in his *Old Testament Against Its Environment* 25 years ago.⁷ While there are many today who say that his position must now be modified,⁸ those modifications do nothing to the central cogency of his case.

It is probably correct that we know today, more than in 1950, that Israel was an integral part of Ancient Near Eastern culture, sharing many of the basic approaches, customs and outlooks. Yet this knowledge does not decrease our consciousness of the radical difference between the world view of Israel and her neighbors. Indeed it heightens that consciousness, for she held these positions from within the culture, not in isolation from it.

What are the features of this distinctive world view? They are as follows, and as difficult as it may seem, they are unique to the Old Testament, appearing elsewhere, if then, only in its daughters Judaism, Christianity and Islam. God is one, transcendent, uncreated, transsexual, personal. He cannot be represented by any visual form, especially a natural one. He cannot be manipulated magically, but longs to bless people who will respond to Him in personal faith, trust and obedience. He is utterly consistent and trustworthy. The system as created is good, but because of an ethical choice by man, is fallen. Man, male and female, is the highest and best of creation. The human problem is not security, but alienation. There is a distinction between humanity and nature which, like that between Creator and creation, may not be blurred. Existence is not cyclical, finding its meaning in the recurrent. Rather, it is linear, moving from promise to fulfillment, finding its meaning in the unique, non-recurrent events.

Individual differences are significant and worthy of record. The body is good. Ethical behavior is rooted in the consciousness of God's behavior toward oneself. Thus, love, honor, justice and faithfulness are not desiderata, they are obligations because they describe the character of God. One could go on, but these are enough to demonstrate that, although the Bible does partake of the culture of its day, it infuses that culture with a radically different world view.

Where did these radical ideas come from? They were not borrowed. Other ancient cultures from around the world share with one another a basic set of concepts, a set very different from those just described. Why do all of them have those ideas in common? Because they all share the same perspective. They are all reaching out toward the divine in an attempt to discover the meaning of life, and they are all expressing the nature of the divine and of life in terms of the given — this natural system.

This approach issued in four problems. First, deity was conceived of as non-transcendent, multiple, arbitrary and fundamentally sexual. They were chiefly to be understood as personifications of nature. Second, the appropriate means of relating to the deity was through sympathetic magic. This magic is rooted in the conviction of non-transcendence. Since God is not distinct from this world, but rather, is continuous with it, He is best manipulated through the performance of certain imitative acts which of necessity will produce similar acts on the part of the appropriate deity. Thus, in the area of fertility, productivity and power, a human sexual rite can be made continuous with divine activity which is in turn continuous with certain responses in nature.

This issues in the third problem. Human historical experience is devalued. Since moral and ethical choices made by individuals do not affect the course of events, but only ritual acts which connect the moment with divine acts outside of time, those choices and the persons making them become insignificant and unworthy of study. This leads directly to the fourth problem: the utter relativization of ethics. Since there is no single creator who could say, "This is the way I made you," since divine behavior was fundamentally perverse and arbitrary, and since ethical behavior was unrelated to ritual power, the choice of right and wrong became largely a matter of personal or group choice.

In and through all of this world view the goal was the amassing of power for the sake of personal security. Whether that security was conceived of as the freedom from want, as in the Near East, or the freedom from desire, as in the Far East, the basic aim and approach was the

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same. One has only to study the sales records of Carlos Castaneda's books to discover that this conception of life is as attractive to twentieth century A.D. sophisticates as to thirtieth century B.C. sophisticates.⁹ And one has only to reflect for a few moments to see how all of these tenets arise naturally if this physical universe is our only basis for forming our understanding of life.

Yet the Old Testament explicitly denies every one of these points and all of their attendant ones. Why? But perhaps more to the point, how? Where did the Hebrews get these startling, revolutionary ideas? If all the rest of the world, speculating upon the Given, comes up with one world view and the Hebrews alone come up with another, does this not suggest a different source for the Hebrew world view?

This is especially so in the light of the Biblical claim for the source of their ideas. Far from depicting themselves as an unusually perceptive people who could take the same raw materials and methods as their more highly sophisticated and educated neighbors and effect a philosophical breakthrough, the Hebrews present themselves as being stubborn and thickheaded, slow to depart from the beliefs of their pagan neighbors and quick to return to them. In effect they say, "We were not religiously perceptive, but religiously blind. God handed Himself to us on a platter. We tried everything to keep Him out, to avoid the unwanted dignity of being individually confronted with the holy God, and so set free to make choices, responsible for them when made, unable to manipulate Him, but free to trust, stripped of the comfortable anonymity of being a tiny cog in a great machine, called to the painful loneliness of a life of personal integrity before God in history. But, blessed be His name, He has broken through our walls and shown us life."

So the Hebrews tell us they did not discover God, but He discovered them. Such a claim is logical. This is the only way in which the doctrine of transcendence can be explained; this is the only way in which the doctrine of God's unity can be explained, etc., etc. These ideas can only be explained if they have come to us from outside the given. And if they have, then the Bible speaks to us with an authority all its own. That is, the authority of the Author of life. This being so, it has authority over us whether we give it any or not.

But some would argue that one can only hold such a position by committing intellectual suicide. One must, they say, ignore all recent study. One must believe the Bible was dictated word for word by God, etc. This is not the case. It is possible to see the Bible as having its ul-

timate source in God without being an obscurantist.

But perhaps one ought to ask first whether it is obscurantist to hold to a dictation theory of inspiration, or at least to some theory which would maximize Divine involvement while minimizing human involvement. It certainly seems so. There are a number of facts which argue against the Bible's having been "dropped on" an isolated group of people. A few of these are: much of the customary law of the Old Testament has nearly exact counterparts in older Near Eastern law codes; the design and embellishment of Solomon's Temple seems to have been Phoenician (Canaanite) in inspiration; sacrificial practices (although not rationales), were quite similar among the Hebrews and their neighbors; literary styles of Hebrew poetry are very similar to Canaanite styles;¹⁰ author's styles and emphases change from book to book. All of these and more argue that revelation involved a great deal more human-Divine interchange than some of the older theories cared to permit.

However, these discoveries cannot invalidate the evidence of the distinctive world view of the Bible. They only serve to show that no simplistic view of the Bible's origins is possible. At the heart of any concept of Biblical revelation, however, must rest the claim that God is to be known through Israel's history. What is proposed here is that God did indeed speak to certain persons, preparing them for His activity in certain historic events and interpreting those events in advance (cf. Gen. 15:13-16; Ex. 14:15-18; Deut. 28:58-68; etc.). As a result, knowing that God was to be seen in their history, the Hebrew people recorded it with an accuracy and objectivity unheard of at that time and not overly common in our own. Continuing reflection upon the meaning of that history was prompted and guided by God. The accurate nature of the recording and the inspired nature of the reflection means that the Hebrew experience is as revelatory and as confrontive today as it was originally.

It is at this latter point that Barr tellingly criticizes Wright. Although Wright argues convincingly for revelation through history, he is somewhat skeptical concerning the Bible's accuracy concerning the details of the events. *That* something happened is sure. *What* happened is considerably less sure. Barr correctly concludes that these nebulous events with their profound, but human, commentary hardly provide a satisfactory basis for ascertaining the source of the Biblical theology.¹¹

The writer would argue that Wright had the correct emphasis, but did not go far enough. The extreme skepticism of the last 100 years

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concerning Biblical history writing and its accuracy is unwarranted.¹² Again and again in recent years the reliability of the Biblical witness to historic events has been attested. To be sure, the kind of exactitude which characterizes modern Western outlooks is often missing, but this is not a part of the interest in that place and time and its lack in no way affects the essential reliability of the witness.

But all that has been said thus far could be fitted into a sort of pseudo-dictation theory. How is one to explain those commonalities previously mentioned? And if one insists on linking revelation with history, what is the place of the poets, or even of the prophets, where historical event is either lacking or very far in the background?

Although these appear to be very separate questions, the same point addresses both concerns. Thus, they will be treated together. God never spoke in abstractions. Rather, He spoke in and through the history and thought forms of the day in so far as possible. If you will, He incarnated Himself in these. Writers inspired by Him interacted with those events and ideas and expressed the result in terms of their own perceptions and limitations. To be sure, those perceptions and limitations were in thrall to that vision of the all-consuming One which unifies Scripture, but just as Jesus' humanity was a crucial part of His being as living Word, so each writer's background and character is a crucial part of the written Word.

This is no less so of the poets and prophets than it is of the historians. All of their reflections, however dark or ecstatic; all their pronouncements, whether terrible or hopeful, are made in the light of a conception of God they cannot escape. And that conception of God is rooted in Israel's overall historical experience. Not in some isolated event, but in the totality. Why are Israel's psalms so similar to Ugarit's in form but so different in theology? To the extent that they share a common historical context they are the same. And to the extent that the Psalms reflect that overwhelming conception of God borne out of her special historical context they are different.

This conception of revelation which sees God becoming incarnate in specific history and ideas means several things. First of all, it is inappropriate to make the Bible the last word on matters relating to the physical sciences. Its purpose is not to express abstract scientific fact. Its purpose is to confront men and women in their own lives with the reality of a God who cannot be manipulated and yet can be trusted. In other words, its purpose is to convey spiritual truth in concrete relationally-oriented terms. Since matters pertaining to the physical

sciences are more or less peripheral to the Bible's major purpose, we ought not to take it as a textbook in those areas. At the same time, let it be said that when the Bible does mention these areas, its level of accuracy has been much higher than anything we could expect from other ancient literature. But wherein the conceptions of the day were not patently false to that world view implicit in the nature of God, they were allowed to stand (e.g., the "windows of heaven" in Gen. 7:11).

Furthermore, such an understanding of the process of revelation points up the lack of wisdom in defending the Bible's authority from the viewpoint of errors or lack of errors. The argument for authority must rest upon the overall nature and impact of the Bible rather than upon the exactitude of this number or the precision of that date, especially when this exactitude or precision is posited to exist in a hypothetical autograph, but does not exist in present documents. This is not to say that the reliability of the Scripture is of no concern. It is of great concern. But that reliability must be seen in terms of the standards of that day, against the background of the literature of that day and in the light of the Bible's overall purpose, not in terms of a syllogistic scheme of perfection.

Finally, such an understanding highlights the importance of interpretation. Four outcomes of paganism were cited above. They were: (1) deity was conceived of as continuous with nature; (2) deity can be manipulated through imitative magic; (3) human historical experience is devalued, and (4) ethics become completely relativized. Given this situation, God could not simply drop a systematic theology book upon the world. He had to prove that He was transcendent, that He could not be manipulated, that human freedom and responsibility are real, and that there are consistent ethical standards for all of creation. This proof could only be given in the crucible of specific human experience. But this means that the time-bound and the timeless are caught up together in the Scriptures. Thus, the task of interpreting the contemporary significance of what was said 2000 years ago will always be with us. However, let it be said, that significance can be discerned with less difficulty than some would have us believe.

In summary, we have argued that the Bible's distinctive world view supports its claim to have its ultimate origin in God, so that it is revelatory both as to its beginnings and as to its impact today. This distinctive world view is the result of certain specific events in history as well as the general historical experience of the Hebrew people. God was

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distinctively active in both elements and inspired certain individuals to give authoritative interpretation to those elements, both before and after the fact. This is the Biblical claim and is the only adequate explanation of the phenomena.

To take such a position is not to ignore recent discoveries about the relation of Israel to her neighbors and their culture. If these findings increase the complexity of the process of revelation and inspiration, they do not render it an impossibility. He who translated Himself into a specific human form and culture, fraught with weaknesses and limitations, bound by the forms of the day, yet able to unveil the fullness of Himself to all persons in all times is able to speak and indeed has.

NOTES

¹James Barr, "Revelation Through History in the Old Testament and in Modern Theology," *Interpretation* XVII (1963), pp. 193-205.

²James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*, Harper and Row Publishers, New York: 1973, p. 118.

³John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament*, Abingdon Press, Nashville: 1967, p. 29.

⁴Barr, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁵Emile Cailliet, *Journey Into Light*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids: 1968, pp. 15-18.

⁶John Bright, *op. cit.*, p. 148f.

⁷G. E. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*, SCM Press Ltd., London: 1950, p. 28f. Cf. also *The God Who Acts*, SCM Press Ltd., London: 1952.

⁸David Noel Freedman, "In Memoriam G. E. Wright," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 220 (Dec. 1975), p. 3.

Cf. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia; 1970, p. 76.

⁹Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, University of California Press, Los Angeles: 1968. This book had gone through 20 printings by March, 1974. It details how a UCLA anthropology student became an apprentice of an Indian sorcerer and gained magical powers. Four subsequent books continuing the chronicle of Castaneda's apprenticeship have sold nearly as well.

¹⁰Psalm 29 is said to be indistinguishable from certain Canaanite hymns. Cf. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 1-50*, Anchor Bible, Vol. 16, Doubleday and Co., Inc., Garden City, New York: 1966, pp. 174-180.

¹¹James Barr, "Revelation . . .," *op. cit.*, p. 198f.

¹²Cf. Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, The Tyndale Press, London: 1966.