

The Long and Winding Road: Reimagining Biblical Authority For the 21st Century

Michael Hardin
Director, Preaching Peace
June 2009

(Draft Copy: Not for Circulation)

“The best school for learning to doubt the existence of God as ruler of the world is church history, if it be granted that that is the history of religion, Christianity, which was established by God in the world and if it be assumed that God has guided its history. Obviously he has done nothing of the kind. To judge from it, Christianity seems as completely abandoned to the world as anything else which exists there.”¹

In his 1920 review of Franz Overbeck’s Christianity and Culture Karl Barth spoke of ‘unsettled questions for theology today.’ These unsettled questions remain with us almost a century later. Indeed, the unsettled nature of modern theology, its foundationlessness is being hailed in many quarters as a benefit. This lack of moorings is perceived as in itself a foundation. But is it not the case that modern Christian theology is being blown about by every wind of doctrine? Is it not the case that the relation between Scripture and Church has turned into an ideological struggle? Can it not be said that in many ecclesial traditions there is little or no biblical authority, that ‘everyone does [or interprets] as they saw fit?’ (Judges 21:25) Are we not floundering at sea, tossed about in the tempest of deconstruction, shattered on the waves of historicism, drowning in the abyss of theological methods that have little or no practical application to human life?

The issue of the authority of Scripture carries with it a number of concomitant questions. These include questions of inspiration, canonization and hermeneutics. In each of these cases the question becomes whose view of inspiration, whose canon, what hermeneutic method? Each of these disciplines contains ancillary sub-disciplines and each sub-discipline areas of specialization. To try and speak to the whole may seem to some a fruitless enterprise, indeed sheer folly, but if Christianity is to have any hope of being a light to the world, it cannot rest content with the current miasma of scriptural interpretation.

Our major concern with the doctrine of the authority of Scripture in our contemporary situation comes from those who affirm the inerrancy or infallibility of the biblical text by which they mean that Scripture contains either no error or false assertion of theological

¹ Franz Overbeck in Karl Barth Theology and Church (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 61.

significance.² The current model, arising from seventeenth century Protestant scholasticism has undergone some changes in its history, but in every case when the biblical record makes an assertion about God, this assertion is taken as a truism.³ Scripture as a whole and in its parts is then a witness to God. I refer to this as the flat view of Scripture. Further I contend that this way of securing biblical authority is not a doctrine of inspiration *per se*, but is in fact a veiled hermeneutic with dire consequences for Christian theology and ethics.

In this essay I propose a new model for affirming the authority of Scripture. I will demonstrate that the Scripture's authority derives from its own internal self-critique. Using insights from Rene Girard, Sandor Goodhart, Paul Ricoeur, John Howard Yoder, Jean-Luc Marion and James Alison, I argue that this self-critique is not haphazard but grounded in the biblical revelation of human violence and divine nonviolence. Violence in this essay is defined as *the problem of reciprocal vengeance*. I will then suggest that the anthropological interpretation of the biblical texts utilizing the mimetic theory offers categories by which we can understand this internal self-critique. These categories allow us to bypass many of the hermeneutical dilemmas such as supercessionism, anti-Semitism, triumphalism, etc., bequeathed to us from Marcion and Justin Martyr and to help to formulate a robust doctrine of the authority of Scripture within the Christian communion.

I. The Problematic of a Flat View of Scripture

In the doctrine of inspiration proposed by inerrantists, the Spirit is located in the text itself (based upon a questionable exegesis of II Tim. 3.16). When every word comes from God, when every word is 'in-spirited' then every word has the same full power of revelation as every other word. Words of violence and nonviolence, of wrath and mercy, of love and eternal rejection thus all have the same value as each other. This explains why modern Protestant Christian hermeneutics have always tended toward justification of violence. A recent survey highlights this tendency.

“The more often Americans go to church, the more likely they are to support the torture of suspected terrorists, according to a new survey. More than half of people who attend services at least once a week -- 54 percent -- said the use of torture against suspected terrorists is "often" or "sometimes" justified. Only 42 percent of people who "seldom or never" go to services agreed, according the analysis released Wednesday by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

² I use the terms inerrancy and infallibility interchangeably in this essay although I recognize that the former is but a more defined position of the latter. Either way, both models depend upon a correspondence theory of truth and neither allows an authentic plurivocality to language or text. It is the inerrantist position that is the theological foundation for the fundamentalist Christian Right in America whose politics have dominated our national agenda for well on thirty years. Whether or not this position has become politically decentered upon the election of Barack Obama to the U.S. Presidency remains to be seen.

³ Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) offer a detailed history of this doctrine, particularly focused on post-Reformation developments. Inerrantists claim to be able to trace their understanding back to the early church and thence to the New Testament, but only by using a tortured historiography.

White evangelical Protestants were the religious group most likely to say torture is often or sometimes justified -- more than six in 10 supported it. People unaffiliated with any religious organization were least likely to back it. Only four in 10 of them did.

The analysis is based on a Pew Research Center survey of 742 American adults conducted April 14-21. It did not include analysis of groups other than white evangelicals, white non-Hispanic Catholics, white mainline Protestants and the religiously unaffiliated, because the sample size was too small. The president of the National Association of Evangelicals, Leith Anderson, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The survey asked: "Do you think the use of torture against suspected terrorists in order to gain important information can often be justified, sometimes be justified, rarely be justified, or never be justified?"⁴

Further evidence of this way of using Scripture was revealed in May 2009 when the Defense Intelligence Estimates given by the Pentagon to President George Bush at the beginning of the Iraq war, made headlines around the world. They had as their cover pages photos of triumphalist American tanks at sunset or soldiers praying, complete with biblical texts emblazoned on the picture, texts usually from the Hebrew Bible. I contend that reading the Bible from a 'flat' view of revelation can only produce the kinds of logic that justifies violence, torture, war and suffering and that the dominance of this view of Scripture plays into the hands of those who are seeking to justify all manner of violence.

Many will undoubtedly find my critique of the position of inerrancy/infallibility to be passé; and they are correct. Nevertheless this is still a powerful and dominant religious conviction of many Christians in America. Wherever I travel I always encounter questions relating to this new paradigm of biblical authority; so while the academy may be light years ahead of the churches, it is necessary to lay out in as clear as possible a fashion the distinction between the old and new ways of conceiving biblical authority. It will just not do to criticize the Bible, as seems the habit of those who gleefully destroy the faith of naïve Bible believing Christians when they point out errors and contradictions. If we are to win over those for whom the Bible is a living word, we must offer an alternative way to conceive its authority.

Now reading the Bible as a flat revelation gives the impression that one is simply letting the text speak, letting God speak.⁵ It is to read honoring the text. This is similar to

⁴ CNN.com, April 30th, 2009. The article also points out "The religious group most likely to say torture is never justified was Protestant denominations -- such as Episcopalians, Lutherans and Presbyterians -- categorized as "mainline" Protestants, in contrast to evangelicals. Just over three in 10 of them said torture is never justified. A quarter of the religiously unaffiliated said the same, compared with two in 10 white non-Hispanic Catholics and one in eight evangelicals

⁵ Inerrancy is a slippery word. There are many ways to define it. For our purposes we will use the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. Cast in the style of a Reformation Confession, complete with affirmations and denials, this document has been the explanatory centerpiece for those in America who assert the inerrancy of Scripture. While inerrancy purports to be about the nature of the text, it is also about the way

certain rabbinic understandings of how Torah was read in the first century. One can find in certain schools of thought that Torah was ‘dictated’ by God.⁶ It is certainly the case that much Torah interpretation pays attention to every ‘jot and tittle.’

“Every detail of the text being held to contain revelation, meanings were deduced from the smallest peculiarities. In Gen. 2:7, the verb ‘create’ contains two yodhs where there should be only one; this was interpreted as pointing to the fact that man is composed of two elements, the earthly and the heavenly.

To challenge the validity of any word of Scripture was blasphemy: ‘He who says the Torah is not from God, or even if he says, The whole Torah is from God with the exception of this verse or that verse which Moses spoke from his whole mouth – that soul shall be rooted up.’”⁷

The view that every word is inspired by God is both ancient and modern. The modern Protestant scholastic apologetic for inerrancy may be different from the ancient Jewish one, but in both cases what is being said is that God has chosen to speak through the medium of the written text. The very words themselves, indeed the very letters, constitute revelation. The substantive difference between this ancient Jewish understanding of inspiration and the contemporary Protestant scholastic one is that the rabbis accepted the fact that there were contradictions in Scripture whereas modern inerrantists cannot acknowledge such due to the Aristotelian logical syllogism “God does not lie or err, God wrote the Bible, therefore the Bible does not lie or err.”

The rabbis went to great pains to both acknowledge the internal contradictions of Torah and to formulate hermeneutical principles by which to interpret them. Jewish scholar Sid Z. Leiman observes that ‘the redactor(s) of Torah saw no problem in incorporating and canonizing a contradiction for all generations’ and that those responsible for the Jewish canon “were not troubled by apparent or real inconsistencies – at least with regard to according books biblical status.”⁸

that text is read, it is a hermeneutic. To stand outside the text, to critique the text is to render the text less than God’s Word, or to disrespect the text. See <http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html>. Norman Geisler, who wrote the commentary, says “The Denial (‘*WE DENY* the legitimacy of separating the authority of Christ from the authority of Scripture, or of opposing the one to the other.’) points out that one cannot reject the divine authority of Scripture without thereby impugning the authority of Christ, who attested Scripture’s divine authority. Thus it is wrong to claim one can accept the full authority of Christ without acknowledging the complete authority of Scripture.” This essay demonstrates that such a position is not only untenable; it also fails to discern the internal biblical critique.

⁶ An excellent survey is provided by Rimon Kasher “The Interpretation of Scripture in Rabbinic Literature” in *Mikra* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 547-594. See also Emil Schurer *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev ed. Vermes, Millar, Black (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 314-321.

⁷ James D. Smart op. cit., 178-179. The *baraita* is from the B.T. Sanhedrin 99a. Cf. also Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1 “These have no part in the world to come: he who says there is no resurrection from the dead and no Torah from heaven.”

⁸ “Inspiration and Canonicity: The Formation of the Biblical Canon” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition Vol 2*, ed. By E.P. Sanders with A.I. Baumgarten and Alan Mendelson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 60.

Christian New Testament scholar Nils Dahl observes that “the Bible is full of contradictions” and that “in view of the importance of the problem of contradictions in the Bible, one might expect that its history would already have been investigated. However there is little literature on this topic, although the question of contradictions in Scripture has been discussed almost as long as the canon existed.”⁹

Contrast these frank admissions with that of Evangelical inerrantist Roger Nicole who asserts that “some scholars of Scripture strongly emphasize that the phenomena of Scripture *do* lead us to posit errors of fact...undoubtedly, there are some cases in which the statements of Scripture might appear to fall in this category.” However Nicole avers, one must not be seduced into thinking that errors are to be found in the text and that “this temptation must be resisted, because the assumption that erroneous material was introduced into Holy Writ jeopardizes both the authority of the Bible as a norm and the divine authorship.”¹⁰

There arises for the inerrantist the problem of how to deal with these contradictions. John Murray contends that the scriptural interpreter must acknowledge apparent contradictions (which are not real, just unsolved) and that inerrancy does not demand resolution of all so-called contradictions. He then jumps to what is of significant consequence when he says,

“The Scripture does not adversely criticize itself. One part of Scripture does not expose another part as erroneous. It goes without saying that, if Scripture itself witnessed to the errancy and fallibility of another part, then such witness would be a finality, and belief in the inerrancy of Scripture would have to be abandoned. But it is a signal fact that one Scripture does not predicate error of another.”¹¹

It is precisely this view, that Scripture does not contain its own internal self-critique, that we are contesting. If in fact, Scripture can be shown to contain an internal critique, this has profound implications for how we use and interpret Scripture. We need not fear this self-criticism of the Bible, rather it may provide for us the very means we need to escape from the very kinds of interpretive strategies that we are warned against by both Torah and Jesus that justify marginalization, war and violence.

We must recognize that there is a long history to this debate. Indeed it is a long and winding road that leads to current views of biblical authority. This road has its offshoots and dead ends, but like all roads has a beginning point. Our beginning point is the difficult conversation between Christianity and Judaism in the second-fifth centuries and the role of the Jewish Scriptures within these communities of faith. Reassessing the antique relationship between Judaism and Christianity has gone a long way to assisting current Jewish-Christian dialogue.¹²

⁹ “Contradictions in Scripture” in Studies in Paul (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 159-160.

¹⁰ Inerrancy and Common Sense, ed., Roger. R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 89-90.

¹¹ “The Attestation of Scripture” in The Infallible Word (Philippsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980, 3rd ed.), 11

The second century arch-heretic Marcion was not the first figure to observe that there is a distinct difference between the Gospel of Jesus and the Jewish Scriptures, but the question he raised about the problem has haunted us ever since.¹³ Following Paul (or so he thought) Marcion completely separated the Gospel from its Jewish roots based upon his conviction that the God revealed in the Gospel could not be the same God revealed in the Jewish Scriptures. His hermeneutic program ends up excising any influence of the Jewish Scriptures upon his new canon, the Gospel of Luke and a selection of the Pauline corpus. To put it crassly, what does the gracious God of Jesus have to do with the violent God of the Older Testament?

I am in no way affirming Marcion's solution although I want to acknowledge that his question gets to the heart of the problem that has bedeviled Christianity ever since, namely the relationship of divinity to violence.¹⁴ Need I observe that Christian justification for violence has primarily taken its warrant from the Jewish Scriptures almost exclusively? The many religious wars fought in the name of Christianity were modeled on the holy wars of Israel. The use of torture, the building of death camps, the crusades against infidels have all found their justification in the theology of divine violence. It is not difficult to multiply these examples.

Raymund Schwager has pointed out that there are over a thousand references to divine violence in the Jewish Scriptures.¹⁵ The question is why are they there, how do they function? Are they to be taken as straightforward assertions about the divine character itself? Our contention is that they serve a purpose, but that that purpose is not theological but anthropological. What allows us to recognize this is the Christian assertion of the divine identity in the figure Jesus of Nazareth and his relation to the institutions of sacred violence in his time. Schwager, building on Rene Girard's mimetic theory, has opened up a new way for us to conceive the authority of Scripture.

Many and varied are the ways by which the early Christian Fathers try to bring the two Testaments into relation. For Justin Martyr, they stand in a relationship of promise and fulfillment, for Clement of Alexandria they are pedagogically related, for Irenaus and Cyprian they are related as differing historical dispensations. Augustine's theory goes under many names but is dualistically inspired by his neo-Platonic philosophical background: they can be related as letter-Spirit or even law-gospel, but his dictum that

¹² Hayim Goren Perelmuter, Siblings: Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity at Their Beginnings (New York: Paulist Press, 1989); Tikva Frymer-Kensky et. al., Christianity in Jewish Terms (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000); John Howard Yoder, The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Adam Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, The Ways That Never Parted (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Matt Jackson-McCabe ed., Jewish Christianity Reconsidered (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

¹³ On Marcion and his importance see R. Joseph Hoffmann, Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984) and the older but still valuable study by E.C. Blackman, Marcion and His Influence (London: SPCK, 1948).

¹⁴ Walter Wink, Cracking the Gnostic Code: The Powers in Gnosticism (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 29 says that "thinkers like Marcion had anticipated this development [viz., that God was indistinguishable from a world monarch] in their reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, and had tried to counter it by splitting God so as to hold up the shadow side of reality to awareness." Perhaps more to the point of this essay he observes "few Christians have risen to Marcion's challenge to critique the image of God thoroughly in the light of the cross."

¹⁵ Must There Be Scapegoats? (New York: Harper, 1987).

‘the new in the old is concealed, the old in the new is revealed’ has been the maxim that has determined western Christian understanding of the testamental relationship for sixteen hundred years.¹⁶

What all early Christian use of the Jewish Scriptures had to reckon with was the issue of revelation. The assertion of the apostolic church that God has revealed God’s self in the person Jesus of Nazareth meant that all Scriptural revelation had an orienting point, namely Christology. This could only result in having to reckon with the differences, and reconcile them, between God as revealed in the Jewish Scriptures and God revealed in Jesus. This would be the project of a Platonic, and later Aristotelian, inspired Christian worldview. Whether Gnostic, heterodox or orthodox, every Christian writer had to come to terms with the Jewish Scriptures.

These figures, heretic and orthodox, defined the problem of the relation of the gospel to the Jewish Scriptures in a Greek philosophical framework.¹⁷ But they also had assistance from a Jewish perspective for Philo of Alexandria had related the Jewish Scriptures to Greek philosophy in the previous century. The key issue in this discussion is the character of God. Concomitant to this is whether or not God is fully revealed in the person of Jesus as is asserted by the New Testament writers. It is the question of the divine identity and revelation of that identity that constitutes the true crux of the relation of the gospel to the Jewish Scriptures.

II. The Dual Trajectory of Scripture

The rise of the historical-critical method in the 17th century revolutionized biblical studies forcing students of Scripture to reckon with historical and cultural contexts and languages. While still fruitful, it has also led to extreme skepticism and some of its proponents, in dialogue with Protestant Orthodoxy have been led to propose that the human element in Scripture dominates over any capacity of Scripture to be revelatory. In certain respects, the historical-critical perspective is just as flat as the inerrantist.¹⁸ Both presuppose that Scripture is God-given; the inerrantist proceeds to find revelation in every text, the contradictions of Scripture justify the modern critical stance over against the Bible. For the inerrantist, the Bible is God’s Word, for the critic, the Bible is human religious language.

The rise of methodologies to transcend this abyss has dominated hermeneutics since the 1960’s. Literary, structural, post-structural and canonical criticisms as well as

¹⁶ G.W.H. Lampe and K.J. Woolcombe, Essays on Typology (Naperville: Allenson, 1957); James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, Early Biblical Interpretation (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); John Rogerson, Christopher Rowland and Barnabas Lindars, The Study and Use of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Manilo Simonetti, Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

¹⁷ The view that texts were inspired comes into Judaism from Hellenism in the centuries before Christ. Cf James D. Smart, The Interpretation of Scripture (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 181, who argues that Alexandrian Judaism appropriated this view at least two centuries before Christ and that it would eventually be taken up by the Palestinian rabbis.

¹⁸ I understand this to be the argument of Walter Wink The Bible in Human Transformation (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

deconstruction have all attempted to wrestle with the issues raised by historical-criticism. Theologies of the genitive (e.g., liberation theology, feminist theology etc.) have proliferated like rabbits as every group seeks to find its identity within the biblical framework. I suggest that the work of Rene Girard offers a way out of many of the impasses created by reading the Bible from either a conservative or liberal flat perspective.

Girard says that the Hebrew Scriptures began a hermeneutic enterprise that is only clearly brought to light in the gospel texts. This enterprise is the demystification of the mechanism from which religion and culture stem: the unanimous violence against the scapegoat.¹⁹ This unanimous victimage occurs when a mimetic crisis reaches feverish proportions and demands an outlet so that internal mimetic aggression will not lead to an all-encompassing destruction.

The demystification process, i.e., the process of exposing the true character of violence, begins by pointing out the origin of myth in the false attribution of guilt to the scapegoat. The failure to discern the mimetic process eventuates in the expulsion of the victim, as seen in non-biblical mythology. This expulsion or sacrifice in turn generates the rituals and prohibitions of both religion and culture while the justification for this generation is enshrined in its mythology.²⁰

The Judeo-Christian tradition exposes the victimage mechanism offering a distinctive treatment of myth.²¹ It is precisely the intervention of God in the 'founding murder' of Abel that differentiates the Jewish myth from other ancient myths. The innocent Abel may indeed be the ground of Cain's city, but it is a city doomed to disintegrate because it is grounded in a mechanism that will ultimately fail. This is clearly seen in the glorying of Lamech regarding the escalation of human violence and vengeance. (Gen. 4:23-24)

The earliest stories of the Jewish people are stories that share violence, death, and victimization of the poor, the needy and the outcast. They differ from mythology in that God does not take the side of the aggressor but the victim. This new viewpoint ties revelation to the victim. Whose perspective do we hear when we engage Scripture? The perspective of the persecutor and the perspective of the victim are intertwined throughout the Bible. In the light of the passion of Jesus, we can see the structural similarities between these two perspectives. Thus, unlike Marcion, we need not jettison the Hebrew Bible *in toto* for it is initiating a necessary step, albeit a penultimate step, in assisting us to discern revelation from religion. Girard suggests:

¹⁹ Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 155.

²⁰ Robert Hamerton-Kelly "An Introductory Essay" in Politics and Apocalypse (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007), 17, summarizes the generative power of victimage when he says that "ritual makes institutions, myth makes identity, and prohibition makes law."

²¹ Ibid. 144. Girard refuses to follow Marcion instead seeing the testamental unity as "real and substantial" in clearing the victim of guilt. Rene Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 123 and 129 where he says, "seeing as 'prophetic' the interrelation of all texts that denounce persecutory illusions is based on a profound intuition of the continuity between the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels."

“In the Hebrew Bible, there is clearly a dynamic that moves in the direction of the rehabilitation of the victims, but it is not a cut and dried thing. Rather it is a process under way, a text in travail; it is not a chronologically progressive process, but a struggle that advances and retreats. I see the Gospels as the climactic achievement of that trend, and therefore as the essential text in the cultural upheaval of the modern world.”²²

Charles Mabee concurs:

“The Hebrew Scriptures represent the first sustained dialectical engagement with the rise of the militaristic state in Western civilization. The operating principle of these writings is the achievement of Shalom. Authentic Shalom can only be achieved in a dialectical way, engaging both the ideal of "perfect Shalom" and the realities of political-military life as experienced in the larger historical world of ancient Near Eastern cultures from which these writings emerged under the influence of wisdom and spiritual writers. The many references to violence in the Hebrew Scriptures represent a nod toward the human realities of one pole of this engagement. Yet, these writings never lose their "idealistic" character at the same time. It is in the unraveling of these two dialectical poles that authentic biblical theology begins.”²³

To listen to the Bible from the perspective of the scapegoat is the internal biblical logic, the Bible's own internal hermeneutic. This perception of what Bonhoeffer would call 'the view from below' is the signal merit of the biblical text and is what grounds its authority. Girard concludes,

"The Judeo-Christian scriptures should be regarded as the first complete revelation of the structuring power of victimage in pagan religions, and the question of their anthropological value can and should be examined as a purely scientific question, in the light of whether or not myths become intelligible when interpreted as more or less distant traces of misunderstood episodes of victimage. I believe that they do.”²⁴

For Girard, the unity of the two Testaments stems not from a theological datum such as God or covenant, but from an anthropological datum, unanimous victimage. The propensity of humanity to turn to violence presents a theory of humanity. As Andrew McKenna wryly put it, "In the beginning was the weapon.”²⁵ Girard has been influenced in this regard by the anthropological thinking of Simone Weil. In a personal conversation Girard affirmatively quoted her saying that "in the gospel there is a theory of humanity.”²⁶ The Passion of Jesus is *the* key to interpreting the entirety of the biblical tradition inasmuch as “at the anthropological level, therefore, the Passion is typical rather than

²² In Robert Hamerton-Kelly ed., Violent Origins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 141.

²³ E-mail to author May 22, 2009

²⁴ Violent Origins, 117.

²⁵ Semeia, Vol. 33, 185. Girard is not contending for a historical reconstruction but a generative principle for reading texts and rituals. See Violent Origins, 91.

²⁶ March 1988. See also “Simone Weil vue par Rene Girard” in Cahiers Tome 9, No 3, 201-213.

unique; it illustrates the major events of Gospel anthropology, namely, the victimary mechanism that appeases human communities and reestablishes, at least provisionally, their tranquility.”²⁷

This anthropology is the framework within which revelation takes place. Revelation is then not to be conceived as a transcendent communication, a divine telegram but as a clear exposure of what we humans do when we sacrifice others and sacralize our victims. As a people, the Israelites were called out of paganism with its orientation to human sacrifice. Their texts reflect both their bondage to the mythic structuring of their religion as well as the work of God in delivering them from the bondage of reciprocal vengeance. This theme of mimetic violence “is found only partially in the Old Testament accounts. The mimetic crisis and collective violence are there, but the third phase of the mimetic cycle is absent: the sacred revelation, the resurrection of the victim.”²⁸

The resurrection is thus the keystone for both biblical revelation and biblical hermeneutics. Because this is so, the relationship between the Gospels and the Jewish Scriptures becomes clear in that both have the same project, “the reduction of all human religion and culture to its generative mechanism.”²⁹ The biblical texts are the “first in human history to allow those who would simply become silent victims in the world of myth to voice their complaint as hysterical crowds besiege them.”³⁰ It is this voice, the rehabilitation of victims that leads Girard to articulate a principle of major importance when discussing revelation: “The reversal of the relation of innocence and guilt between victims and executioners is the keystone of biblical inspiration” and “the refusal to deify victims is inseparable from another aspect of the biblical revelation, the most important of all: the deity is no longer victimized. For the first time in human history the divine and collective violence are separated from one another.”³¹

The key insight to be derived from this for our argument is that revelation is no longer to be perceived with the categories of western philosophical transcendence. It is rather, to be located precisely within the sphere of human religion, mythmaking and projection. How then is this different from the anthropological centeredness of much of Western Christendom? The anthropological center of the Christian tradition is largely due to the influence of Augustine. The neo-Platonist Augustine, deeply influenced by Plotinus, could not accommodate a world without a primordial act of divine violence or expulsion.³² Violence and the sacred had become merged in Augustine. Augustine's anthropology was refigured again at the time of the Reformation yet neither Calvin nor Luther was entirely able to break free from the dualistic presuppositions of their heritage.³³ The Reformers in turn read Paul through this Augustinian lens and the

²⁷ Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 28

²⁸ Ibid, 106.

²⁹ Rene Girard, “The Evangelical Subversion of Myth” in *Politics and Apocalypse*, op. cit., 36.

³⁰ Ibid, 116.

³¹ Ibid. 118, 119.

³² A Hilary Armstrong, *St. Augustine and Christian Platonism* (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1967); R.J. O’Connell, “The Platonian Fall of the Soul in St Augustine” *Traditio* Vol 19 (1963), 1-35.

³³ Both Calvin and Luther quote Augustine more than any other church figure. This is because Augustine was the authoritative figure behind Roman Catholicism. Neither Luther nor Calvin wanted their work to appear as anything other than a re-formation of the true church. For both Luther and Calvin, going back to

consequences of this anthropological reading have been seen globally ever since.³⁴ This anthropology has projected onto divinity that which the Biblical tradition separates and is thus a false rendering of revelation which can only be perceived as taking place outside the human sphere rather than understanding revelation as occurring within the matrix of the problem of reciprocal vengeance. The alternative, according to Girard is to recognize that,

“The Gospel revelation is the definitive formulation of a truth already partially disclosed in the Old Testament. But in order to come to completion, it requires the good news that God himself accepts the role of the victim of the crowd so that he can save us all. This God who becomes a victim is not another mythic god but the one God, infinitely good, of the Old Testament.”³⁵

To break free from the Platonic influence in biblical interpretation it is necessary to reexamine the matrix within which Christian theology developed, and as we are suggesting, by particularly examining the underlying presuppositions concerning the relationship of the Testaments.³⁶ A more holistic and consistent approach is needed in our investigations if we are to find the distinctive element of the anthropology, and the theology, of the Bible.³⁷ Summarizing Girard, the Bible is in the process of showing that violence is a human characteristic not a divine one. In the words of the second century Epistle to Diognetus, "violence is not an attribute of God."³⁸ And this is really the same problem that faced Marcion, what do the violent texts about God in the Jewish Bible and the gracious God of Jesus have in common? And so we have come full circle back where we started. A strategy is thus unveiled that allows us to recognize that the Scriptures, as collections of sacred literature in synagogue and church, are in the process of disentangling God's revelation from human projections.

III. Texts in Travail

What form does this strategy take? Jewish scholar Sandor Goodhart postulates that this hermeneutic of the victim can be placed under the rubric of anti-idolatry. Using the lens of Girard's interpretive strategy, Goodhart argues that anti-idolatry and the prophetic readings of Torah are two sides of a coin. He defines the prophetic as “the recognition of the dramas in which human beings are engaged and the naming in advance of the end of those dramas.”³⁹ If we have had trouble acknowledging the prophetic it is “because we have lived within the confines of a Platonic essentialism that has barred that knowledge

the early church meant going as far as Augustine, but really, no further.

³⁴ Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

³⁵ Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 130.

³⁶ Thomas Torrance has called for just such an approach in *Theological Science* (London: Oxford, 1969); *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); see also Dietrich Ritschl *The Logic of Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

³⁷ *Things Hidden*, 358, 443.

³⁸ Kirsopp Lake, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 365.

³⁹ *Sacrificing Commentary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996), 102.

from us.”⁴⁰ Proposing that our indebtedness to this Platonism has rendered inaccessible the prophetic, Goodhart turns to the appearance of this hermeneutic in both Greek tragedy and the Jewish Scriptures. The question is thus raised by both these traditions “how can I live in a world in which there are no longer any gods of the sacrificial kind?”⁴¹ Judaism’s answer is that

“at the heart of Judaism is Torah, the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, the Law. And all remaining books of biblical Scripture, the compilations of midrashic, Talmudic, and later rabbinic commentaries, as well as the more mystical and esoteric traditions of Kabbala and later Hasidic texts, are centered upon Torah and extend its reach. At the heart of the Law is the Decalogue, the *aseret hadibrot*, the Ten Commandments or Ten Words. And at the heart of the Decalogue, the Law of the Law, as it were, is the first commandment, the commandment for which all other commandments are themselves extensions, the law against substituting any other God for God, for the prophetic God, for the God of anti-idolatry.”⁴²

What characterizes this God? “The anti-idolatrous God is the God of repentance or *teshuvah*, the God of turning back, the God who commands you to recognize the path you have been following in order that you may give it up.” “To live anti-idolatrously is to live from the point of view of God, from the perspective of the Creator, from the Creative source of the universe.” This perspective has a specific angle related to the question above about the end of our human dramas. “There is no doubt that Judaism is the religion of the sufferers. There is no doubt that Judaism’s Law is the law of anti-idolatry.” Idolatry is further described as the identification of God with violence. The problem of idolatry is that “all social structures, all sacrificial structures, will become identical with violence.”⁴³

What does it mean then to acknowledge that there is within the Jewish canon an anti-idolatrous hermeneutic? It means that “to read the Bible critically, to read the Bible in the spirit of the Bible’s own inner reading or commentary, is thus to read neither esoterically nor exoterically but rather anti-idolatrously, prophetically, to read in advance what will turn out to have been contained within all along.”⁴⁴ More so, “to read anti-idolatrously would be to read any text as if it were always already a ‘part 1’ of a ‘part 2’ yet to be disclosed.”⁴⁵ Such a reading is opposed to a ‘pagan’ reading of the text that will be defined as reading the text from the perspective of transcendental violence and indeed “the first commandment is only monotheistic if and only if we already understand that monotheism as anti-paganism, which is to say, as the law of anti-idolatry.”⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Ibid. 102.

⁴¹ Ibid. 104.

⁴² Ibid. 104.

⁴³ Ibid. 198-199.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 137.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 131

⁴⁶ Ibid. 130.

Goodhart's observations supply a necessary corrective to a flat view of Scripture by keeping alive for us the ever-present Word within the words, which always takes the shape of the perspective of the sufferer, of the victim. It is this trajectory that identifies with the persecuted which is anti-idolatrous. The obverse is also true; any interpretation of Torah that maintains the need for transcendental violence is idolatry.

Let me offer an example. Jeremiah 7:21-23 is translated in the New International Version:

'This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! ²² *For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices,* ²³ but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people.'

According to this translation, God gave many commands following the Exodus from Egypt; among them were commands about the sacrificial system. Now contrast the NIV translation of 7.22 with the translation of the Revised Standard Version⁴⁷:

"For in the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices."

There is in the NIV the addition of the little word '*just*.' The addition of this word indicates that among all the commandments given on Sinai were those of the sacrificial system, something that is certainly the case in Torah. Yet the RSV and almost all other translations do not have this addition. Jeremiah is saying that the sacrificial system was not part of the original Torah. The NIV translators (primarily conservative Evangelicals) could not handle the possibility that Jeremiah could be in contradiction to Torah and so brought his speech in line with what was in Torah. Yet, it is clear from the context that Jeremiah is a trenchant critic of the sacrificial system and the Temple. It was Jeremiah 7 that Jesus quoted when he shut down the Temple, equating sacrificial practice with that of zealous nationalism.

Many are the examples of this anti-sacrificial motif in many of the prophets and the Psalter, e.g., Ps 40.6, 50.8-15, 51.16f, 69.30, Isa 1.11, Jer. 6.20, Hos. 6.6, Amos 5.21, Mic. 6.6. This trajectory is carried forward in anti-Temple critiques throughout the centuries following and can easily be seen in the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. The anti-idolatrous reading is the anti-sacrificial reading and vice-versa.⁴⁸ The NIV

⁴⁷ A brief list of other major translations of Jeremiah 7:22: NASB "For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices"; KJV "For I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices"; ASV "For I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt-offerings or sacrifices"; Douay-Rheims "For I spoke not to your fathers, and I commanded them not, in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning the matter of burnt offerings and sacrifices."

⁴⁸ Philippe Sollers also notes "the Bible spends its time announcing that we must give up sacrifice. It is the prophetic dimension, the prophets urging the community to station itself no longer in the administration of divine violence." See his essay "Is God Dead?" in To Honor Rene Girard (Saratoga: ANMA Libri, 1986),

translation of Jeremiah 7.22 is an example of a passage that is originally anti-sacrificial (refusing to participate in sacred violence) being translated as sacrificial. The translation mutes the anti-idolatrous character of the prophet's speech and in fact, transmutes it into speech that justifies the violence of the sacrificial logic, thus rendering it idolatrous.

The inerrantist might object to this by asserting that if the Bible contains within itself tendencies toward idolatry (error), then it cannot be trusted. This would only be the case if it did not also contain a trajectory towards anti-idolatry, toward revelation. Our contention is that Scripture not only contains both tendencies but that both are necessary if we are to see how we may, in the light of the Spirit of God, interpret it.

This trajectory of the anti-sacrificial (Girard) or the anti-idolatrous (Goodhart) can be expressed from yet another angle. The poetics of violence, sacrifice and idolatry are all of one piece. As expressions of ritual violence, these poetics are persecutory, substitutionary, victimizing and satanic.⁴⁹ Prior to the identification of the satanic with the phenomena of violence by Girard, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur had already traversed a similar path observing the mythical character of accusation and punishment.⁵⁰

Myths are expanded symbols cast in narrative form that describe the originary situation of the human. Most of us are familiar with the use of the term myth as it comes to us from Rudolf Bultmann and his project of demythologizing. Here, the problematic of myth is its worldview, its cosmology. Biblical myth speaks of the sun standing still, a whale swallowing a prophet, a flat earth with heaven above and hell below. Bultmann argued that this cosmology is to be demythologized and translated into terms that 'speak' to moderns.⁵¹

For Girard and Ricoeur, myth points not just to our existential reality but also points back to our original 'moment' (in the structural not historical sense) of hominization. That is, there is a connection between what is occurring in these myths and who we are today, they have something significant to tell us about ourselves. To simply 'strip' the supernatural elements out of them, as Bultmann does, ignores the function of transcendence one finds in them. For Girard, myths are originary stories that cover up the scapegoating mechanism and justify the community's belief that the right thing was done in victimizing and that divinity had approved of this macabre act by showering benefits upon the persecuting community. The sacralization of the victim (sacred violence) includes the transcendental as the horizon of the benefit of violence. So for Girard and Ricoeur myths do not need to be demythologized but demystified (or demythed).

192.

⁴⁹ The satan is the accuser of the brethren and is thus the persecutory principle.

⁵⁰ "The Demythization of Accusation" and " Interpretation of the Myth of Punishment" in The Conflict of Interpretations (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974). Ricoeur has acknowledged his debt to Girard in "Religion and Symbolic Violence" Contagion, Vol. 6, Spring 1999, 1-11.

⁵¹ "New Testament and Mythology" in Kerygma and Myth, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 1-44.

Ricoeur refers to the process of demythization as “the question of the accusatory agency [which] helps bring out the double function of demythization.”⁵² The negative side of this demythification is to renounce myth; the positive side is to free myth from its symbolic basis. This deconstruction “is not so much myth as the secondary rationalization that holds it captive, the pseudo-logos of myth. The result...is the gaining of the revealing power that myth conceals under the mask of objectification.”⁵³

In Girardian terms one might say that this ‘secondary rationalization’ is the moment that occurs in the sacralization of the victim, when the victim becomes the first instinctual symbol, when transcendence arises. This rationalization is the origin of the angry God who must be propitiated that the community might survive. The immanent victim thus is given a transcendent “surplus of meaning” (Ricoeur).

The critique of accusation, of the judging and judged consciousness, opens up the horizon of both sin and guilt that Ricoeur had previously explored in The Symbolism of Evil.⁵⁴ In a critique of Freud, who placed sexual desire at the center of real guilt, and contrasting the Platonic notion of *adikia* (injustice) with the justice of the Hebrews prophets, Ricoeur observes that the fear of being unjust moves from taboo fear, fear of violating specific commandments to “the breaking of the interpersonal bond, the wrong done to the person of the other.” It is this breakdown of interpersonal relations that is also at the heart of Girard’s model of violent scapegoating and the desire for the survival of the community that will produce the myth that all against one is morally right and beneficial.

Ricoeur will next turn to the origin of the god who must be appeased having argued that “the...condition for a kerygmatic reinterpretation of evil is that symbolic figure of God should only preserve from the theology of anger only what can be assumed into the theology of love.” The fact remains that anger is real in a theology of love, but it is not penal, rather is now becomes “the sadness of love” or love grieving.⁵⁵

After a lengthy discussion with Hegel on the relation of crime and punishment, Ricoeur takes up the problems associated with this connection and sees that there are several lacunae, one of which is that in the religious sphere “the aporia of punishment becomes particularly insupportable.” And for us, here is the crux of the matter, for Christian theology has retained together what has been disconnected in the Cross of Christ, namely the relation between the juridical and the sacred.⁵⁶ Ricoeur will contend, “one can neither moralize nor divinize punishment.”⁵⁷

⁵² Ibid. 335.

⁵³ Ibid. 336.

⁵⁴ (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

⁵⁵ Ibid. 351. D.E.H. Whiteley, The Theology of St. Paul (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 61ff, speaking of Paul’s use of *orgh*, notes that while the wrath of God in the LXX is both *affectus* and *effectus*, in Paul it is only *effectus*.

⁵⁶ “What is at stake is no longer the sacralization of the right but the juridicization of the sacred”, Ibid. 358. Ricoeur goes on to observe that our ability to speak of the ‘myth of punishment’ is due to the fact penal theology has died in Christianity. Would that this were the case.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 363.

The myth of punishment or the mythology of the retributive deity must be completely rethought, “only a new logic can overcome an outmoded logic.”⁵⁸ It “is necessary to dejuridicize punishment as much as it is necessary to desacralize the sacred.”⁵⁹

In order to show that the myth of punishment has been radically deconstructed and reinterpreted Ricoeur turns to the logic of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. At issue is the role of the Law and its effects, viz., increase of sin, punishment and death. “For Paul it is necessary to go to the *extreme* of condemnation in order to go to the *extreme* of mercy: ‘For the wages of sin is death; the present gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 3:23).’”

“This absurd logic, as Kierkegaard calls it, makes the logic of law shatter upon an internal contradiction; the law pretends to give life but only gives death. An absurd logic, which produces only its contrary. What would appear to us as a logic of identity – ‘the wages of sin is death’ – becomes the lived contradiction which makes the economy of the law break apart. By this absurd logic, the concept of law destroys itself and, with the concept of law, the whole cycle of notions which are governed by it: judgment, condemnation, punishment. This economy is now placed *en bloc* under the sign of death.”⁶⁰

Does this mean then that we can dispense with the myth of punishment of the law? No. It still has a place in our preaching but now appears under a new guise.

“But what is it to be finished with the myth of punishment? Is it to relegate it to the bin of lost illusions?... The logic of punishment would appear to me to subsist in the manner of a shattered myth, a ruin, at the heart of this new logic, that is at the same time foolishness, the folly of the Cross. The status of myth is then that of the *memorial*. By ‘memorial’ I understand this paradoxical status of an economy which can be preached only as a ruined epoch. For Paul, punishment forms part of an entire economy which he calls *nomos*, law, and which has its own internal logic; law leads to covetousness, which evokes transgression, which entails condemnation and death.”

“Punishment is more an idol to break and less than a law to idolize. It is an economy which ‘marks’ an epoch and which preaching retains in its memory of the Gospel. If the wrath of God no longer had any meaning for me, I would no longer understand what pardon and grace signify; but if the logic of punishment had its own meaning, if it were sufficient unto itself, it would be forever invincible as a law of being; the atonement of Christ would have to be inscribed within this logic, and this would be the greatest victory, because it occurs in the

⁵⁸ Ibid. 368.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 371.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 373. If I read Robert Hamerton-Kelly correctly, he is interpreting Paul in the same vein in his book *Sacred Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). Neither Ricoeur nor Hamerton-Kelly suggest that it is Torah in and of itself that is bad; charges of anti-Semitism do not apply here. What they (and Paul) are saying is that Torah, interpreted as *nomos*, through a zealous hermeneutic, is the problem.

theologies of ‘vicarious satisfaction,’ which remain theologies of punishment and not of gift and grace.”⁶¹

The unrelenting logic of Ricoeur’s analysis allows us to suggest that the myth of punishment, the possibility that law can be used for death dealing and justification of violence, is the same thing as the idolatry that the prophets and Torah speak against. The internal self-critique of Scripture proposed earlier, noted as anti-sacrificial ‘contradictions’, now takes on significant hermeneutical consequence. It would appear that we must speak of two distinct trajectories in Scripture. If myth is one of them, Gospel is the other.

We do not therefore need to bow before the Ba’al of inerrancy in order to affirm biblical authority, for inerrantists flatten out the revelation given of God’s self in Jesus, making every biblical text of equal value with his person, work and teaching. This view remains in the prison cell of essentialism, reifying, by divinizing, the biblical text. This is why it cannot ever find a satisfactory solution to the problem of texts that speak of a violent God. The inerrantist will never be able to achieve the goal of ‘hearing the voice of Christ’ for Christ is identical with the text. As Marion puts it, “the theologian must go beyond the text to the Word, interpreting it from the point of view of the Word.”⁶²

What does this mean for us today? What we need is a doctrine of the authority of Scripture that does not elevate the texts beyond that which they were intended, nor jettisons them in the name of scientific reason. We need a model of the authority of Scripture that both recognizes that God speaks to us through the text and that is not bound to the Platonism of western Christian theology. Karl Barth had previously proposed such a model and the beginnings of this, in an American context, have been worked out by his pupil John Howard Yoder.⁶³

Yoder was a Mennonite theologian, although most of the work he did is to be contexted in the broader ecumenical conversations of the 1960’s-1980’s. One of the major burdens of his oeuvre was to show that the nonviolent ethic of Jesus was not ancillary to the gospel message but central to its ethics. He wrote several articles on the authority of Scripture and the biblical canon that in significant ways concur with what we have been saying in this essay and provide further grist both for our critique of inerrancy and for seeing that Scripture contains a double trajectory.⁶⁴

Yoder very clearly stands against a flat view of Scripture. Neither does he accept any definition of Scripture that arises out of Protestant Scholasticism.⁶⁵ For Yoder, there is a canon within the biblical canon and that is the person of Jesus.

⁶¹ Ibid. 376.

⁶² Ibid. 149.

⁶³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 457-742.

⁶⁴ Strikingly, in the two *Festschriften* written for Yoder, neither has an essay on his historical review of the authority of Scripture or his contention for the third way of ‘biblical realism.’ Stanley Hauerwas, et.al, ed., *The Wisdom of the Cross* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1999); Ben C. Ollenburger and Gayle Gerber Koontz eds, *A Mind Patient and Untamed* (Telford: Cascadia Publishing, 2004).

⁶⁵ He describes this view in “The Authority of the Canon” in *To Hear the Word* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 61, 68, hereafter *Authority*.

“There is nothing arbitrary or pietistic in saying that the story of Jesus is the canon within the Christian canon. An inner canon can be arbitrary, as in Luther’s ‘*was Christum treibet*’ or with the Pietist’s experience of Christ. But it can also be a formally responsible statement.”⁶⁶

“The ultimate canon within the canon must in the end, however, be the person of Jesus and, in a broader sense, the narration of the saving acts of God.”

The real foundation, both formally and materially, for Christian witness is the historic objectivity of Jesus and the community he creates.”⁶⁷

Yoder argues that the modern debate between Protestant Scholasticism/Inerrancy, contemporary critical analysis of the Bible (the historical-critical method) and the role of the Bible in Roman Catholic theology demands a canon within the canon. This comports with our argument that there is in Scripture both the standard and norm (what can be called revelation) and texts that although claiming to speak about God, must be measured by that norm. Yoder’s language for this is “traditioning.”

There is a right traditioning and a wrong traditioning; both claim the source of the tradition to be biblical or apostolic but whereas one has held to the norming influence of the gospel story of Jesus, the other has drifted due to the influence of Hellenism upon biblical thought which Yoder traces to the second century apologists.⁶⁸ The real ‘fall’ of the church did not occur in the fourth century with the advent of Constantine, it had its roots already back in Justin Martyr, Athenogoras, Melito of Sardis and others. The importation of Hellenistic categories into the narrative framework of the Bible, e.g., the Greek *logos*, has had profound implications for Christian theology.⁶⁹

Unlike the inerrantist who simply reads off the page God’s word, and who assumes that the interpretive frame is a ‘given’ taken from Scripture, Yoder counters that there is no reading of Scripture without an interpretive frame.⁷⁰ There is no such thing as exegesis without presuppositions. What Yoder challenges is the belief that inerrantists assume, viz, that the dogmatic system of “high Protestant Scholasticism” *is* what the Bible says.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Ibid. 102.

⁶⁷ “The Use of the Bible in Theology” in *To Hear the Word*, op.cit. 77, 80, hereafter *Use*.

⁶⁸ Independent of Yoder, I have been making this case since 1990, see my “Biblical Testaments as a Marriage of Convenience” at www.preachingpeace.org. Certain Mennonite scholars have an allergy to this kind of thinking but in my estimation Yoder is correct.

⁶⁹ Rene Girard observes this in *Things Hidden*, op cit., 263ff, where the violent *logos* of pre-Socratic philosophy is assimilated to the nonviolent *logos* of the Fourth Gospel.

⁷⁰ “The Authority of Tradition” in *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 66, hereafter *Tradition*.

⁷¹ *Use*, 81, “Rational scholastic orthodoxy errs in filtering the given [biblical] texts through the grid of its independent ordering operation.” This grid is the post-Reformation accommodation to Aristotelian logical method filtered through Scottish common sense philosophy, cf Rogers and McKim, op. cit. According to Yoder *Authority*, 86, the so-called “high” view of inspiration “abandoned the variety, the liveliness, and the sense of flux which had been characteristic of the middle third of the sixteenth century.” Yoder deals with these issues at greater length in his *Preface to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 335ff.

The circularity of the inerrant position regarding Scripture (as can be seen in the quote by John Murray above) is circular on two accounts, “it did not explain the criteria of canonization, and the basis for the claim to inspired authority was said to lay within the texts themselves.”⁷² As this is the dominant view in the American churches,⁷³ it is necessary to speak to it. The inerrancy position asserts that all truth and only truth is to be found in Scripture. Contrary to this, “The point is not that all truth is in Jesus or in the Bible. It is that the truth which is in Jesus is the truth which matters the most, which must therefore regulate our reception and recognition of other kinds and levels of truth rather than being set in parallel or subordinated thereto.”⁷⁴ Right traditioning is to then allow our theology to be corrected by Jesus: “In the specific Christian case, that ultimate court of appeal in the corrective use of theology is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ... But apart from revelation in Christ we would not know which God or what kind, God to whom we are appealing.”⁷⁵

Yoder’s arguments against the Protestant scholastic view of Scripture (and also, it must be noted, its detractors), his contention that there is a canon within the canon, and his urging a process of right traditioning are of the same logic we have been applying in using Girard, Goodhart and Ricoeur. What we have in Scripture is to use “Barthian” terms, both religion (the perspective of the violator/persecutor) and revelation (the perspective of the victim). We can recognize this only because of the ministry of Jesus, and more specifically, because of his Passion. Jesus is never victor over others during his life, he is servant and as such, is God enfleshed, revealing the very identity of God.

IV. The Bible as Idol or Icon

It is no small matter, therefore, when we seek to find an alternative view of the authority of Scripture other than that which tends to make Scripture an idol. Our human tendency toward idolatry, to fashion gods in our own image, even and especially the Creator of all life knows no bounds.

Jean-Luc Marion helps us to understand the difference between idols and icons. Marion’s God Without Being is a monumental deconstruction of the essentialist philosophical framework that undergirds western Christian theology, including that of those who affirm a flat view of Scripture. The radical loss of ‘being’ in western philosophy has yet to filter down into the trenches where ‘Bible Believing Christians’ conduct their straw-man wars.

⁷² *Authority*, 93. An aspect of the “high” view of Scripture is that the canonization process was revelatory, *Authority*, 88. This is a highly questionable thesis. Craig D. Allert has recently assessed problems regarding canonization and inspiration in A High View of Scripture?: The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007). Allert, 175, in Yoderesque fashion concludes by saying “Appeal to the Bible as authority is essential, but not without a similar appeal to a proper lens of interpretation.” For Allert this lens is “ecclesial canons”, whereas for Yoder the singular canon is the person of Jesus. A more critical historical appraisal of the problems associated with the canonization of the New Testament is David Dungan, Constantine’s Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007)

⁷³ “The Utility of Being Misunderstood” in To Hear the Word, op.cit., 68.

⁷⁴ *Use*, 81.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 74. Or in other words “the authority of Scripture does not stand alone,” *Utility*, 62.

An idol is a vessel for human projection. “The idol presents itself to man’s gaze in order that representation, and hence knowledge, can seize hold of it.” “The idol fascinates and captivates the gaze precisely because everything in it must expose itself to the gaze, attract, fill, and hold it. The idol depends upon the gaze that it satisfies, since if the gaze did not desire to satisfy itself in the idol, the idol would have no dignity for it.”⁷⁶

In these few remarks, Marion describes the inerrantists’ relation to Scripture. If, in the previous quote from Marion, one but substitutes the word “Bible” for “idol”, one will find the standard view promoted by inerrantists about the Bible’s dignity, worth and value. Contrary to the facts, the inerrantist can say,

“for our Lord, the Scripture, just because it was Scripture, just because it fell within the denotation of the formula, ‘it is written,’ was a finality. His attitude is one of meticulous acceptance and reverence. The only explanation of such an attitude is that what Scripture said, God said, that the Scripture was God’s Word, and that is was God’s Word because it was Scripture and that it was or became Scripture because it was God’s Word.”⁷⁷

The Preface to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (CSBI) begins,

“The authority of Scripture is a key issue for the Christian Church in this and every age. Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are called to show the reality of their discipleship by humbly and faithfully obeying God’s written Word. To stray from Scripture in faith or conduct is disloyalty to our Master. Recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority.”⁷⁸

Both of these statements bring the believer into a relationship with Scripture that is reserved for God alone. The use of the word “total” in the CSBI should already send red flags of idolatry up before our eyes for it is written “Thou shall have no other Gods before me.” Yet, following the convoluted logic of the previous statement by John Murray it is easy to see how Scripture can become identical to God, how Jesus the Living Word can become identical with Scripture the written word.

On the other hand, the icon “does not result from a vision but provokes one.”⁷⁹ This reverses the normal epistemological stance where the query of the inquirer already determines the answer. “The icon summons the gaze to surpass itself by never freezing on a visible, since the visible only presents itself here in view of the visible.”⁸⁰ Scripture as icon then is not simply a textbook of logical propositions that can be deduced if given an adequate logical base, this is to gaze upon Scripture as though one already had the answers to hand. Scripture as icon is to allow the gaze itself (one’s reading of the text) to

⁷⁶ God Without Being (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 10.

⁷⁷ John Murray in The Infallible Word, op. cit. 28.

⁷⁸ Op. Cit.

⁷⁹ God Without Being, 17

⁸⁰ Ibid. 18.

be radically transformed in the process of reading, in short, by coming to the text with a complete openness to change.

The relation of the *Logos* (Jesus) to the *logoi* of the text can never be one of simple analogy (they are both human and divine, they are both called God's Word, etc). Why is this so? Because "we cannot lead the biblical text back as far as it aims, precisely because no hermeneutic could ever bring to light anything other than a meaning, whereas we desire the referent [Jesus] in its very advent."⁸¹ Marion then proceeds to exegete Luke 24, the story of the disciple's journey to Emmaus confronting the Risen Christ, as warrant for his assertions. Marion observes that while unknown to the disciples, Jesus turns to the Jewish Scriptures to draw a relation between what the text says and "what has happened among us." As soon as they recognize Him, he disappears.

This motif of unrecognizability is the theme of many of the resurrection appearances (cf. John 20). It is this exegetical methodology of the Risen Jesus that provokes such, for when he is recognized (graspable), he becomes unrecognizable (he disappears).

"He [Jesus] can aim at the referent since he assures it; he whom no text can speak, because he remains outside the text, the referent (unspeakable Word), transgresses the text to interpret it to us, as an interpreter authorized by his full authority; less explaining the text than explaining himself with it, explaining himself through it, sometimes locutor, sometimes referent, saying and said; in short, strictly, he is told in it."⁸²

James Alison who proceeds to develop this encounter as the matrix for biblical hermeneutics affirms Marion's assertion that it is only an encounter with the Living Christ that can authorize Scripture (that is, render it authoritative). This step is essential for the Bible must be interpreted, the question is: who authorizes the interpretation if not the author? And if we claim to know this author as the Risen Lord, it means our interpretation(s) of the Scripture must comport with the revelation that has been given in his life, death, resurrection and ascension.

Again, for the inerrantist, error in Scripture would mean that Scripture couldn't be trusted. James Alison asserts, on the contrary that,

"It is one of the advantages of the anthropology that I have been trying to set out that, by insisting on human alterity rather than some supposed imbued transcendental relation to God as constitutive of what it means to be human, it permits us to consider divine revelation as a process of human discovery. That is to say, it is not frightened of the utterly contingent, human, historical process by which cultures arose and declined, events occurred, peoples were formed, previous events were reinterpreted, the texts themselves edited and reedited. It is not as though divine revelation needs somehow to be protected from all such happenings, in order really to be divine revelation."⁸³

⁸¹ Ibid. 147.

⁸² Ibid. 148.

⁸³ The Joy of Being Wrong (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 67.

Rather than perceiving revelation as a divine communication or telegram, we ought to be able to recognize that revelation occurs constantly in the anthropological process of discovery. Alison asserts that “this means that the slow development of the understanding of who human beings are and the slow development of the understanding of who God is are a simultaneous process, and impossible the one without the other.”⁸⁴ Is this substantially different from John Calvin’s opening assertion at the beginning of his influential Institutes that, “Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.”⁸⁵

Thus the interpretation of Scripture is constantly reframing not only how we see ourselves but also how we perceive God. But this new viewpoint would not be possible apart from the resurrection of Jesus from the dead for it is in the resurrection that we are given the perspective of “the intelligence of the victim”, that other-worldly logic given to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Because we have “a foundational scene of origin in reverse, in which the victim is uncovered and given back in order to permit a new sort of foundation that does not depend on a cover up”, then “the resurrection is the possibility of a completely new and previously unimaginable human story, a rereading of all human stories from a radical perspective that had previously been hidden.”⁸⁶

Alison is asserting what has been a commonplace in Anabaptist hermeneutics since the sixteenth century, viz., “no one may truly know Christ, except he follow him in life.”⁸⁷ It is the revelation of the resurrected victim that creates the possibility, hitherto an impossibility, for reading texts outside the box of our anthropological mythmaking and justification of reciprocal vengeance. Christopher Marshall also points to this way of understanding our changed relationship to God:

“God’s perceived involvement in the infliction of violence is over. God no longer fights fire with fire. God has changed – or, perhaps more accurately, the human experience of God’s association with violence has changed. God no longer permits his identity to be defined by violence; God actively repudiates the violent behavior which has hitherto clouded his character so that the duplicity of violence itself may be exposed and defeated.”⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Ibid, 68.

⁸⁵ John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 35.

⁸⁶ The Joy of Being Wrong, 77.

⁸⁷ Hans Denck, cited by C.J. Dyck in “Hermeneutics and Discipleship”, in Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives, ed. Willard Swartley (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 30. See also Stuart Murray, Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2000), 186-205, who points out the crucial second half of Denck’s statement “and no one can follow him unless he first knows him.” I think that this is also true of Kierkegaard’s and Bonhoeffer’s definition of discipleship.

⁸⁸ “The Violence of God and the Hermeneutics of Paul” in The Work of Jesus Christ in an Anabaptist Perspective (Telford: Cascadia Publishing, 2008), 89.

Alison's observations about the intelligence of the victim have profound implications for interpreting Scripture. I will list the five essential aspects of the hermeneutics of this reading of Scripture as a result of an encounter with the Risen Jesus:

- 1) "The Risen Lord permitted a completely new rereading not only of his own life and death, but of the way that life and death reinterpreted the Scriptures."⁸⁹
- 2) "The difficulty of Jesus' teaching had something to do not in the first place with its own content, but with the constitution of the consciousness of those he was teaching. It was as if they had a veil over their eyes until after the Resurrection."⁹⁰
- 3) "After the resurrection, then, Jesus moral teaching and his teaching concerning discipleship were able to be understood not as extra features of his life, unrelated to his passion, but structured by exactly the same intelligence of the victim that led to his passion."⁹¹
- 4) "The first of the two key shifts permitted by the intelligence of the victim was a new perception on humans as formed in violence, and with victimization as the constitutional base of human awareness" and
- 5) "The second is the shift in perception that this affords with relation to who God is...so it becomes possible to understand God as entirely without violence."⁹²

Alison's correlation of hermeneutics with the resurrection and discipleship are the three legs of the stool of a new paradigm of biblical authority. This anthropological reading of the text, informed by the research of Rene Girard and explored in other ways by Sandor Goodhart, Paul Ricoeur, John Howard Yoder, Jean-Luc Marion and James Alison, is a formative new paradigm for framing the specifics of how the Bible is to be read, understood and lived within the Christian communion. It is a liberating paradigm for it moves beyond the contentious debates regarding the relation of truth to language and brings to the fore the key problem that has bogged down the church since Marcion on the relation of violence to divinity, and through the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus allows us to see our total sin and God's total grace. It is a paradigm that calls for more than just intellectual assent, indeed it requires the risk of obedience to Jesus so that, just as he is the Light of the World, so we too, in listening to him and following him, may be light to our world.

V. Summary

The authority of Scripture cannot adequately be deduced from the textual 'propositions' of II Tim. 3:16, II Peter 1.21 and John 10:34-35 (the most commonly cited texts for a "high" view of Scripture).⁹³ My point is that in affirming biblical authority we do not

⁸⁹ The Joy of Being Wrong, 79

⁹⁰ Ibid, 80.

⁹¹ Ibid, 81.

⁹² Ibid, 83.

⁹³ See Murray in The Infallible Word, op. cit. and critiques of this type of exegesis in Allert op. cit, 148ff, and Paul Achtemeier The Inspiration of Scripture (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 106ff.

need a doctrine of inspiration. Biblical authority can only come from the Author, the *Logos*, the Risen Lord, and this authority is not a top down authority, a tyranny (to accepted in ‘totality’) but is rather outside the bounds of our language and hermeneutic ability as it is grounded in reciprocal violence. The *Logos* who comes to us in the *logoi* of the biblical text transgresses the text, as Marion noted. As the *Victim par excellence*, as the revealer of violence as a purely human phenomenon, as the Crucified and Risen One, Jesus deconstructs for us not only our selves but also our texts, which are products of our selves as mimetically violent communities. Without a dual trajectory we would be unable to distinguish revelation from religion and the nonviolent God revealed in Jesus from the violent gods of our human mythmaking.

It is no shame to recognize this dual trajectory within the Bible, in fact the only way the light of divine nonviolence can be seen as revelation is if it is juxtaposed with texts of darkness, texts which are nothing more than human projection and mythic theologizing, texts that assert that God is violent. The sixteenth century Anabaptists began to move in this direction, and actually made the leap in their ethics, in their rejection of the sword. Now it is our turn to complete their project and develop a theology that is congruent with our ethics: to turn to the nonviolent God revealed as Jesus Christ.⁹⁴

In summary, I have argued that a flat view of Scripture is not a defensible position because it is neither biblical nor Christian but essentially ‘pagan’ in its orientation in that it equates the human projection of the god of myth with the revelatory compassionate Creator. I have sought to demonstrate that the Bible contains two trajectories or perspectives that must be read in light of each other (hence both belong to the biblical story of the people of God); that this way of understanding the authority of Scripture reckons with scientific anthropology as much as it does theology; and that significant rationale for this view from various disciplines can be brought to bear as witnesses. My hope is that Scripture will once again become a living text among our communities of faith, bearing witness to the Word of God, Jesus Christ and the good news of the nonviolent God He proclaimed.⁹⁵

A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

New Paradigm

Old Paradigm

⁹⁴ This is the burden of my colleague Jonathan Sauder in his tandem essay at this conference.

⁹⁵ Thanks to Scott Holland, Sharon Baker, Keith Putt, John Kleist and Tony Bartlett for their critical comments on a first draft of this essay.

Bible as Icon

Anti-idolatrous

Anti-Sacrificial

Love, Grace, Compassion

Perspective Of Victim

Gospel

Right Traditioning

Revelation

Bible as Idol

Idolatrous

Sacrificial

Fear, Guilt, Punishment

Perspective of Persecutor

Myth

Wrong Traditioning

Religion