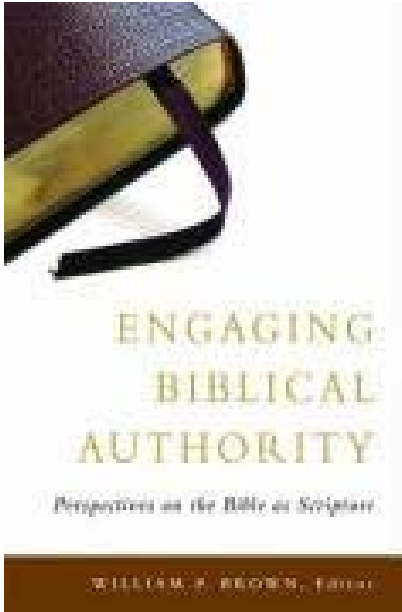


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**Brown, William P., ed.**

***Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture***

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007. Pp. xvi + 158.  
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Most people in the Western world no longer believe the Bible has the unique authority it was once widely believed to have held. Many of those who do are fundamentalists or evangelicals, and their approaches to scriptural authority (or at least the views others *believe* that they hold) are not often acceptable in mainline Protestant, Catholic, and even Jewish seminaries or schools of theology. William Brown, Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, has therefore assembled a team of sixteen writers, most all of whom teach or have taught at divinity schools training clergy for their various religious traditions and who therefore value the Bible highly and find it in some sense a unique authority, but who do not believe in its inerrancy. He has invited each contributor to pen a concise essay explaining his or her model of scriptural authority, how it plays out in his or her theological context, and how it applies to one or more sample texts by way of illustration.

The team of writers includes two Jews, three Catholics, and eleven Protestants. Ten are men; six are women. Three are African American; one is Asian American. Among the Protestant contributors are adherents to Lutheran, Presbyterian, Reformed, Disciples of Christ, Methodist, Episcopal, and African Methodist Episcopal traditions. Their essays are presented in the alphabetical order of their last names. The contributors are Marc Zvi

Brettler, Michael Joseph Brown, Katie G. Cannon, Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, Ellen F. Davis, Terence E. Fretheim, Robert W. Jenson, Luke Timothy Johnson, Serene Jones, Sarah Heaner Lancaster, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, Frank J. Matera, S. Dean McBride Jr., Peter Ochs, Allen Verhey, and Seung Ai Yang.

To give a one-to-two sentence summary of each essay would scarcely do justice to the rich autobiographical reflections, multifaceted models of scriptural authority, and interpretive illustrations each writer offers. To give much more would substantially exceed the bounds of a typical *RBL* review! At first I puzzled over why the chapters would not be grouped into several larger sections, perhaps gathering together the most like-minded essayists into more methodologically homogeneous segments. Then I began to think that at least I could perform that task in this review. But, although some differences do appear from one writer to the next, especially according to the religious tradition of each, and also according to gender and ethnicity, what struck me the most by the time I finished the book was how much the sixteen writers had in common.

In other words, quite a few themes recur repeatedly from numerous authors. The most prominent are these: the Bible contains many contradictions—with extrabiblical history, modern science, and especially from one biblical writer to another and one part of one book to another. Therefore traditional, conservative views of biblical authority cannot be accepted. In many instances, this means turning one's back on or significantly modifying the faith of one's own parents or family. But Scripture remains formative, powerful, uniquely influential to an extent no other books do. As this volume's writers struggle to articulate in what ways this is so, Karl Barth and classic neo-orthodoxy regularly appears: the Bible is not the Word of God directly but it witnesses to God's Word. Or through it we encounter God's personal, nonpropositional Word. In keeping with recent emphases on narrative theology, scriptural narratives have the uncanny ability to be lenses through which we better understand life and God's dealings with humanity and better interpret ourselves. Even where it presents myth in the guise of history, it helps us imagine alternative, better worlds that God may empower us to help create, much like a volume from the *Chronicles of Narnia* might do.

Further, liberation—spiritual, physical, material, and cultural—is central to the Bible's storyline and purpose. But not all of Scripture is equally liberating. In some parts of the Bible, good news (the gospel) is barely perceptible at all. Some parts actually appear to work (or actually do work) against human liberation in the modern world. Whether via a Catholic combination of Scripture and tradition or a Wesleyan quadrilateral of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience or simply the individual's and the faith community's joint common-sense understanding of the contemporary context, some texts of Scripture must be rejected, some must be marginalized, and others must be stressed. The fact that

Scripture itself canonizes this very diversity gives us permission to make these choices. Some of our writers are happy to call this a canon-within-the-canon and to stress that all interpreters create one anyway whether or not they are conscious of so doing or appropriate the label. The role of the contemporary Christian or Jewish community also looms large in most contributors' views as a check against idiosyncratic individual approaches to the text as well as against mindless preservation of outmoded tradition.

The historical-critical method is clearly valued by all of the essayists, but none dares stop after employing it without moving on to additional procedures. For some the additional, main step involves advocacy and praxis for liberation. For others it means dialogue with other religions and the appropriation of their insights deemed most valid. For still others, interpreters should allow the sacred text to help them cultivate such central scriptural virtues as humility, charity, and patience or to work for a world filled with more love, peace, and justice. For most, good methodology should distinguish between the small handful of timeless theological and ethical truths, such as those enshrined in the Decalogue or the major ecumenical creeds, but recognize how the vast majority of the Bible is so situation-specific that one mostly intuitively applications for today rather than being able to chart any reproducible hermeneutical method for uncovering them. (Fretheim's chapter is an important exception that *does* give a detailed methodology for this task.) Most all of this anthology's offerings agree that every text has many valid meanings and uses, but they also insist that one can exclude at least certain approaches as wrong-headed and adjudicate among more and less plausible interpretations. Most invoke a respected human authority or group of authorities within their given religious tradition—Rashi, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Vatican II—but then apply the principles of those founders or foundational documents in ways that go substantially beyond their authors' original uses.

Evangelical scholars reading Brown's collection of studies might well agree with thoroughgoing postmodernists that these writers, often by their own admission, are groping to describe what more often than not they do unreflectively, or at least without a very definable hermeneutic. The evangelical would then likely go on to point out that this creates an instability and subjectivity that a more classical historical-*grammatical* approach can in part help to avoid and that the so-called contradictions to which they point have potentially satisfactory resolutions that they have not discussed. The philosophical postmodernist would no doubt attribute this instability to the fact that the writers are trying to have their cake and eat it too—that is, to keep one foot firmly in the contemporary world, while still (inconsistently) believing in God and a skeletal metanarrative of his ways with humanity, thus thinking they have salvaged a way to justify retaining the Bible as a unique religious authority.

But whether Brown's writers are trying to straddle an ever-widening gap between historic Christianity and contemporary skepticism, which will ultimately prove unsuccessful, or whether they have found an ideal middle ground between anti-intellectual obscurantism and unimaginative atheism and/or pure relativism, this anthology certainly demonstrates the vibrancy of a committed, thoughtful middle ground in debates over Scripture and what kind of authority, if any, it might retain in our complex, pluralistic world. Centrism in this debate, at the moment at least, is alive and flourishing. The book is also an enjoyable read, laced as it is with the candid autobiographical reflections of its authors about their own spiritual and academic pilgrimages. These are women and men who take the Bible seriously, who reflect on it fully abreast of all the scholarly challenges to it, who still find it uniquely powerful in their lives in a variety of ways, who remain deeply devoted to God (and the Christian contributors to Jesus, too), and who commend their approaches to others even while insisting on a range of acceptable diversity of methods of interpretation and appropriation of the Bible. No other book on the current landscape attempts anything at all like this, so we are placed significantly in Brown's debt for assembling this collection of stimulating studies.