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Peopled by the Book

ALLEN G. JORGENSON

Christians, along with other religious groups, are sometimes called “people of the book.” Despite its laudable intentions, this phrase sometimes fosters the tendency to set up readers of the book as masters of this object in their possession. I seek here to unsettle this prejudice with the suggestion that the Triune God uses the Christian Scriptures to master us by transforming us into the people of God. We are, in fact, peopled by the book. I will unpack this thesis in three steps: by exploring the notion of *authorship* of Scripture, by discussing the question of scriptural *authority*, and by exploring the notion of *authenticity* of Scripture. In conclusion, I will consider some consequences of this treatment of Scripture for contemporary readers.

AUTHORSHIP OF SCRIPTURE

From the outset, it should be noted that the words *author* and *authorship* have their origin in the Latin verb *augere*, which means “to grow or produce.” The verb is dynamic and suggests that these words and their cognates are founded on an event that cannot be conceptualized and so be ready at hand. Moderns have an insidious tendency to concretize what should be left fluid, and I propose that this tendency is immediately evident in the manner in which we construe the relationship between an author and her work. But to whom do we attribute the authorship of Scripture?

The theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries insisted that God

To say we are “peopled by the book” is to affirm that Holy Scripture is not some thing that we accept (or not), but that Scripture is the communal means by which we are spoken into being by the God of life.

was the author of Scripture.¹ There is something to be said for this approach. Certainly the fecundity of Holy Writ suggests a source of Scripture that is divine. Yet more must be said. A clear appreciation of God's affirmation of the sensual recognizes the contextual character of the authorship of Scripture. Luther, for instance, speaks of the text as the stall containing the infant Christ and so suggests the place of carpenters and farmers in the production of the frame and the straw that bear the Word of God.² God shines through the rough-and-ready instances of the contextuality of authorship. Holy Scripture is not itself divine, but it is holy because it is sanctified by God, or as John Webster suggests, it is annexed by God.³ Yet we need to ask what is annexed. The book is, of course, a book of books, a veritable library. The notion of the Bible as a library invites us to imagine a series of texts grouped around a common theme. But is it enough to construe the Bible as a series of *texts* alone? Or, more important, can this text, which is a library, be seen as something other than an object?

It is self-evident to many of us that what we produce in writing is of a kind different than ourselves. This is first evidenced in the enduring character of the text. While the author passes on, the text is passed on, and so we configure the text as *something*. The nature of this particular thing, admittedly, is dramatically different than other things, like, for instance, a rock. All the same, the reification of the text results in an estimation of its dispensability and, on occasions, a posture of indifference toward it. In fact, it is a mark of genius, in the minds of moderns, to be so distanced from the text that we see it as an object that we are able to master. The text is subject to our ability to look behind it and is open to analysis that can sometimes seem clinical in nature. Even in the case of Scripture, despite reverential protests to the contrary, mastery of the text demonstrates our tendency to objectify the text. Part of the condition for the possibility of this dilemma is the notion of a fractured relationship between the author and the text. We presume that the enduring character of the text marks it as an object—subject to the sort of analysis that would not be countenanced toward a subject per se. What needs to be reclaimed is the connection between the writer and the written, evident in an author's reaction to the reception of her text. The *genesis* of a text (complete with birth pangs) presumes that the author is, in some fashion, re-presented in the text, and clearly counters the postmodern assessment that the “absence of the author and the absence of the referent are not accidental but constitutive features of writing.”⁴ While

¹See Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd ed., trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (1875; repr. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961) 39–50, where God is described as the “author (*causa principalis*)” and the prophets and apostles as “only the instruments (*causa instrumentalis*)” of Scripture, citing post-Reformation theologians Chemnitz, Gerhard, Hollazius, Calovius, and Quenstedt as sources.

²Martin Luther, *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels* (1521), in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, 55 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 35:122 (hereafter, *LW*).

³John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 23.

⁴Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 96.

this re-presentation of the author in the text can be affirmed for all texts, in the case of the Christian Scriptures there is also a profound theological foundation for such a connection. The liturgical praxis of Advent, grounded in the ancient church's expectation of the imminent return of Christ, provides a lens through which to view the relationship of the church to its Scripture.⁵

Word and sacrament comprise an event in which the divorce of the text and its author is annulled. As such, this event invites us to read all texts differently.

In comforting believers who mourned amiss in a state of despair, Paul reminded them that “since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died” (1 Thess 4:14). Paul intimates that while the dead in Christ await the resurrection of their bodies, they live in the heart of Christ Jesus from eternity. Paul’s text refers specifically to the advent of Christ at the end of time. But a sacramental theology of Advent recognizes that the final advent of our Christ and his present advent in word and sacrament are not unrelated. If the faithful confess that the saints in glory are “in Christ,” we also confess that they are present as we gather around word and sacrament. And so, in fact, the writer and the written cannot be so easily fractured by the metaphor of death. Death is subject to its inversion by the event of the resurrection, since Christ’s resurrection is the condition for the possibility of the repose of the faithful in him, and Christ’s presence in word and sacrament is the visitation among us of the church catholic. Word and sacrament comprise an event in which the divorce of the text and its author is annulled. As such, this event invites us to read all texts differently.

What I am proposing in denying the absence of the author in her text is simply this: how we treat a text and how we treat people are not unrelated. What this implies might not be quite so simple, but in some provisional fashion I think that it sketches out the necessity of adopting a particular posture in reading that is informed by the hermeneutics of Luther’s explanation of the Eighth Commandment.⁶ This does not gainsay the possibility of being critical of the text, but it radically revisits this criticism in terms of establishing a different context for criticism.

So, where does this lead us in terms of Holy Scripture? If we take my sugges-

⁵What follows sketches a case for a particular ethic of reading Scripture. In my estimation, this ethic is instructive for all reading, insofar as reading Scripture instructs us how to read. Further to this, see David S. Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) 126.

⁶See Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* (1529), in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 353: “You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor. What is this? Answer: We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”

tion regarding the connectivity between text and author seriously, to enter a library is, in a sense, to come upon a party of authors. Scripture, insofar as it is the primordial instance of a library, is a community. Karl Rahner was found of calling Scripture the objectification of the experience of the early church.⁷ While that definition has the benefit of linking Scripture to the original dynamism that resulted in its production, it is important to confess that this dynamism is not frozen in time. One can, with the appropriate proviso, confess Scripture as the visitation in the present of the church catholic, insofar as the dead in Christ live in the heart of Christ who is embodied in word and sacrament.

I am not aiming here at some paranormal description of such a visitation, but rather a christological affirmation of the logic of the embodiment of being human. If being human is being in *carnis* (in the flesh), then it goes without saying, or better, it demands saying, that we should be able to locate an event, if not a place, where the dead in Christ are. Pointing to heaven will not serve that purpose until we have come to see that heaven appears in that time and space carved by altar, font, and pulpit.⁸ Part of the proviso of confessing Scripture as the visitation of the church includes the recognition that we cannot reclaim the connection between text and author as a means to secure access to authorial intent. Indeed, the confession that personhood is proper to God and only analogously true of humans also characterizes the designation “author.”⁹ To be an author is to be in converse with those who speak through you as well as to you. The text instantiates the community that constructs the author.¹⁰ Behind Moses, Paul, and John stand a host of voices that amplify the communal character of Scripture. As we gather around holy words, we gather around and with the church catholic, which includes those ancient authors who have given something of themselves in Holy Scripture. For this reason, word and sacrament bespeak the same reality: the people of God gathered in and by God who authors our community.

SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY

It has been suggested that the watershed distinction between Roman Catholics and Protestants is that the latter derive the authority of Scripture from faith in

⁷Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 363.

⁸Then we will be able to say with Luther, “I also have the Gospel, where I hear the voice of the church,” and not vice versa. Martin Luther, “Psalm 45” (1532), in *LW* 12:251.

⁹Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936) 138–139: “The doubtful thing is not whether God is person, but whether we are. Can we find among us even one man whom we can call this in the full and proper sense of the term? But God is real person, really free subject.”

¹⁰There is, then, something salutary about asserting that it is the text with which we have to do, provided that this assertion does not make of the text an object at my disposal. This latter represents the danger in distancing the author from her text, yet surely we want to be able to affirm that the author is more than the text, and the text is more than the author, in spite of my interest in reconnecting author and text. Above all, we want to affirm that we never encounter one without the other, and propose that the author first appears to us *as author* in the moment she steps beyond herself by way of the community that has constructed her and enables her arrival with the text. The author, then, is both transcendent and immanent to the text.

Christ directly, whereas the former point to the church as mediator.¹¹ Such a generalization may no longer be meaningful in communions in which biblical illiteracy is rampant. Still, the relationship between the authority of Scripture and church needs to be sorted out in some fashion. Perhaps, by proceeding from the confession of Scripture as a community, this relationship can be recast in a different light and the notion of scriptural authority can be seen as something other than a *problem*.

Moderns largely conceive authority in problematic terms. Authority is analogous to power in this fashion, and despite attempts to shelve authority, this cannot be done. Authority just is. Wherever humans exist in community, lines of power and authority necessarily emerge. Certain people have an ability to coerce, convince, or constrain others. With this, of course, a dynamic of resistance comes into play, and authority, in our experience, necessarily includes the phenomena of dissent. This is equally true in the community of the Bible. Texts stand in conflict with other texts. Some texts vie for more attention than others and so invite Christians to consider again the question of authority implicit in the act of reading the text.

Jesus does not just empower people, he empowers people by self-giving. True authority, christological authority, is kenotic in character.

A pattern for understanding the dynamic between text and reader might be sketched by distinguishing three appearances of authority in the act of reading a text. The first moment is one of divine authority, the second scriptural authority, and the third ecclesial authority. In order to clarify this, however, it is important to recast authority in a light other than permission granting. This is surely how we construe authority in our culture, but authority insofar as it is rooted in *augere* points to empowerment. Yet more can be said of authority in the reign of God. Jesus does not just empower people, he empowers people by self-giving. True authority, christological authority, is kenotic in character. What makes authority authentic is the manner of giving up and giving over power for the sake of growth and renovation. God in Christ is the primordial source of authority who authorized the community of the saints by kenotic self-giving. Christ poured himself into the disciples, the original recipients of this kenotic authority. These, in turn, passed and pass on this authority by pouring their very selves into the text that is Holy Scripture. This latter is poured into the church catholic. Those who receive kenotic authority in reading these same Scriptures do not use that authority to coerce or manipulate others. Authentic exercise of authority, rather, takes place when we make space for people to think and act with the gospel. Of course, “with the gospel”

¹¹See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989) 103, 591.

implies that authentic empowerment only occurs because the gospel conditions us to think, feel, and do in accord with the kenotic Christ. Love that comes unconditionally conditions us so that we embrace a gospel-centered authority that is a giving up and a giving over. Such a giving allows the possibility that a given reading of the text might very well be reimagined in a new context.

*the church that receives authority can only retain
authority by giving it away*

Sometimes the church has failed miserably in reading Scripture. Power is too often misused for the sake of a status quo that precludes freedom. In short, scriptural authority is not about finding in Scripture a set of rules and regulations so much as finding the freedom to love and serve. The church receives that freedom from the community called the Bible, and that community receives its freedom from the God of Jesus Christ who communicates freedom in love. Moreover, the church that receives authority can only retain authority by giving it away. Empowerment is at the heart of the redemption that is reading Scripture. But the question remains, what happens when Scripture tells me something I don't particularly like? Then what?

SCRIPTURE AND AUTHENTICITY

We need to return again to the notion of the Scripture as community. It is the community that is founded by the author and perfecter of faith. It is the community that we encounter in celebrating word and sacrament; and, by the grace of our baptism, it is the community of our belonging (a theme I will take up in the conclusion). But all communities exist by way of conflict, which is a theological point of departure.

All of us are predisposed to prefer to relate with those who think like we do. We desire the company of the like-minded, and, in a sense, that prejudice has fueled the scandal that is the proliferation of denominations in Christianity. Every day, in North America, new denominations are being born over conflicts that range from issues of sexuality to the taxonomy of the *eschaton* (end times), to the contested merit of various forms of music used to praise God. Schism has become a sacrament in North America, because alterity (radical difference) is seen as demonic. In my estimation, the gospel suggests the need for a radical reversal of this way of seeing things.

Without going into the exegesis that such a tack demands, I want to suggest that a red thread that winds its way through all of Scripture is the need to attend to the alien. Scripture honors the outsider by narrating the gospel way of patiently waiting upon the temporal well-being of the other while witnessing to the hope that is within us—all the while entrusting their eternal well-being into the hands of God. This is evident in Levitical codes around treatment of foreigners in ancient

Israel. It is clearly seen in narratives such as Ruth, which makes a hero of a Moabite, or in Jonah, which turns anti-Ninevite sensibilities on their heads. It is also seen in Jesus' willingness to entertain the needs of the Gentiles, whom it was to be the task of the disciples to bless, and it is even seen in Paul's agonizing suffering in light of the Jewish rejection of Christ as Messiah.

In short, the foreigner, the alien, the other is a grace and gift to us precisely in their difference. This does not gainsay Christian interest in conversion. But our patience upon the Spirit means that it is God, rather than we, who effects conversion, our own included. In the meantime, we are given the gift of experiencing the other as a gift precisely in their difference. The other, we need to admit, is often seen as a problem to be solved rather than a gift to be embraced. "The urge to merge" is a phrase pointing to the problematic tendency some experience in interpersonal relations to reject the distance that makes relationships healthy. Sometimes we have that same tendency in our approach towards Holy Scripture. Some want to merge with Scripture by turning Scripture into a list of rules and regulations we unfailingly keep. Some want to merge with Scripture by turning Scripture into a series of platitudes that correlate with our liberal sensibilities.¹² In both cases, the distance between Scripture and us, and the creative tension that that distance allows, has been destroyed.

Scripture is sometimes most helpful for us because it assaults our sensibilities. It forces us to see things from a different perspective. In a sense, reading Scripture authentically is like inhabiting a foreign land, in which we are given new eyes to see. Yet we simultaneously dwell in this vale of tears—but now with new eyes and a fresh approach for old problems. This is not to say that we woodenly apply scriptural solutions to modern problems, but rather that Scripture so shapes us that we have a posture appropriate to the trajectory of its narrative. When we authentically engage Scripture, we experience a transformation by virtue of its alien and unusual character, not its simplistic familiarity. It unsettles us and engages us so that we might be blessed by wrestling with it. Scripture finally becomes familiar by becoming foreign. But that is not the end of the story.

AUTHORSHIP OF SCRIPTURE REVISITED

I conclude by returning to the theme of the authorship of Scripture; in doing so, I want to consider the possibility of understanding that phrase as a subjective genitive. I earlier pondered Scripture as that which is authored, but in conclusion, I want to reclaim a notion of Scripture as that which authors. Not only is this a book that we read, but it is a book that writes us into the book of life by including us in its very plot. Scripture *scripts* us.

From the outset, some potential misunderstandings need to be set aside. First, we are not saved by a reading of Scripture that is an *opus operatum* (a work

¹²George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 15–19.

efficacious in itself). That would make us the agents of our salvation by the act of reading. Neither does Scripture save us by communicating propositional truths, nor modes of feeling to which we either assent intellectually or with which we engage sympathetically in order to confirm a well-ordered pious disposition. Rather, Scripture functions kerygmatically under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit, the power of proclamation.¹³ Those who read Scripture faithfully—that is, expectantly—encounter their inclusion into the trajectory of the story by virtue of the Holy Spirit. It is rather as if the notion of the inspiration of Scripture in its writing ought to be paired with an image of expiration in its reading. Scripture is, in this construal, rather like a lung, which experiences the *exitus* and *reditus* (exit and return) of the Spirit, whose kenotic giving via Holy Writ empowers its readers by incorporating them into the body of Christ. But how does this happen?

Above, I described Scripture as a “visitation” of the early church. The notion that Scripture is a community invites us to consider the possibility that reading a communal book is a communal act. This runs counter to commonsensical notions of reading. Reading, above all other things, is construed in our culture as an individual activity. But this really cannot be held consistently, insofar as authentic reading occurs by the grace of language. There is, of course, a reading that can remain narcissistic and that is only overcome by a return to the communal character of reading. In that moment, the texts wrestle with our propensity to be self-absorbed. For that reason, reading, as much as any other human activity, assaults the common conception that our experience as individuals holds a certain trump in finding meaning. Reading advances by way of our inclusion in the experiences of others, whether in the mode of assent or dissent. Meaning is given in the ebb and flow of our encounter with the other that the text instantiates. Reading, in this sense, carries us outside of ourselves, and, as such, reading provides the transport of self-transcendence. But self-transcendence is not yet an encounter with the Transcendent. How, then, does our experience of reading Scripture differ from other reading experiences?

Again, clarification occurs by a return to the character of the community we encounter in our engagement of Scripture. In reading Scripture, we encounter the dead in Christ, who live by the grace of God’s remembrance. The community of our inclusion by way of reading is that of the community of the cross, which is catholic in character. This inclusive community is christological rather than ideological in character. The story we read transports us out of ourselves, rather like all reading does, but the whither of the destination is determinative. Scripture locates us in Christ, where we discover that our lives are hidden (Col 3:3). Scripture provides us with a new point of reference outside of ourselves. In a fashion, we begin to live “ecstatically,” and so our life occurs in the communal life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who make space for us to live in the divine life.¹⁴ Those who read

¹³See Martin Luther, “John 16” (1538), in *LW* 24:362.

¹⁴Robert Jensen, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 226.

Scripture encounter a strange world that sometimes counters their experience. Scripture thereby has the effect of qualifying our appeal to experience. My experience is no longer determinative of my construal of reality, although it is not thereby insignificant. There is a dialectical character to the relationship between experience and Scripture. My experience begins to be understood as a means by which my reading of Scripture is enlightened, and Scripture illumines my experience. Scrip-

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ture serves as source for my life, and experience serves as resource in my spiritual life by helping me to see in Scripture what might have otherwise remained latent. Scripture first “annexes” experience and thereby transforms it into a beacon that illumines the sometimes hidden crevices within Scripture itself. Those having suffered loss read the psalms in a new way, and those who have read the psalms experience loss in a new way. The dialectical character of the relationship between language and experience applies to our reading of Scripture, yet Scripture is primordial insofar as we only speak after we have first been spoken to. Scripture embodies God’s initial address and thereby establishes the dialogue that is the give and take of worship. Worship is the communal act whereby we hear God’s address to us in sacrament, in Holy Scripture, and in our kerygmatic engagement of these, to which we respond in prayer, praise, and grateful reception, all shaped by Scripture.

In conclusion, Scripture is a linguistic font from which we learn to speak Christianly. Experience is made possible by language, and our engagement of Scripture, the primordial instance of Christian discourse, enables us to experience that grace of God that sustains us throughout life. Scripture, in short, cannot be construed as a bill of goods that we accept—or not—rather, it is the communal means by which we are spoken into being by the God of life. ⊕

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