

EVANGELICAL RESSOURCEMENT
ANCIENT SOURCES FOR THE CHURCH'S FUTURE

A HIGH VIEW OF SCRIPTURE?

The Authority
of the Bible and the
Formation of the
New Testament
Canon

CRAIG D. ALLERT

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D. H. Williams, series editor

The *Evangelical Ressourcement* series is designed to address the ways in which Christians may draw upon the thought and life of the early church to respond to the challenges facing today's church.

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Formation of the New Testament Canon

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ABBREVIATIONS

- ANF* Ante-Nicene Fathers. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867–72. Reprinted Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950–51.
- KJV* King James Version = Authorized Version
- LCL* Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912– .
- LXX* Septuagint
- NASB* New American Standard Bible
- NIV* New International Version
- NPNF 1* Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church, Series 1. Edited by Philip Schaff. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983–87.
- NPNF 2* Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church, Series 2. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983–87.
- PG* Patrologia graeca [= Patrologiae cursus completus: Series graeca]. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–1886.
- NRSV* New Revised Standard Version

INTRODUCTION

REMEMBER A STUDENT'S complaint about the introduction of a book assigned for a class. The student expressed frustration that the author of the book spent so much time detailing what his book was *not* about that the student couldn't get a grasp of what the book actually *was* about. I tried to explain that the reason for this was perhaps that authors are painfully aware of other people's expectations of their work and of the things that they simply cannot cover, which leads to a bit of anxiety as it goes to press—in a way, authors are trying to protect themselves from what they see as unwarranted criticisms of their work. Although this did not alleviate the student's frustration, it did give him a sense of the issues and tensions faced by anyone who publishes a book.

With deference to that student, I am now faced with those same issues as I try to introduce the book you now have in your hands, and I realize that I must begin by indicating what this book is *not* about—a history of the formation of the New Testament canon.¹ This task has been accomplished in a number of excellent canon histories, the influence of which can be seen throughout the pages of this book.² This book is,

1. The term “canon” is here used to refer to a closed collection of texts to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken.

2. The best short introduction to the subject is H. Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). For a more detailed account, I would recommend the following: J. Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997); L. M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 2nd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995); L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002); B. M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

rather, about investigating the implications of the formation of the New Testament canon on evangelical doctrines of Scripture.

Most evangelicals, particularly at the popular level, have what I call a “dropped out of the sky” understanding of the Bible. What I mean by this is that since the Bible is the primary source for evangelical faith and life, it is taken for granted as being always there and handed on to us as such. We give little thought to the question of why we have this particular collection. How, when, and why did this collection come into being, and why was it raised above all other documents of the early church? How was the authority of this collection recognized and appropriated in the early church? Did it act as the church’s *sole* authority?

It is a significant lacuna that the understanding of the formation of the Bible is rarely broached by those who offer a “high view of Scripture.” A constant theme in what follows, therefore, is that a high view of Scripture should take account of the historical process that bequeathed to us the Bible, and that examination of this issue should actually precede an investigation into what the Bible says. Surely those who collected these documents into a canon had reasons for doing so; an investigation into the formation of the New Testament canon gives us a window into the church’s thinking in this respect.

Rarely, however, do evangelical doctrines of Scripture take these historical issues seriously, assuming that a high view of Scripture starts with the doctrine of inspiration.³ Consider, for example, one recent summary of the state of an evangelical doctrine of Scripture. Louis Hodges states, “The starting point for the evangelical view of Scripture is the doctrine of inspiration.”⁴ According to Hodges, one issue that arises in forming a doctrine of Scripture is the relationship between the divine and the human in the authorship of the Bible. He argues that the evangelical must affirm both. Hodges then claims that there are two methodologies one may adopt with regard to tensions between the dual authorship of Scripture, that is, between the divine and human elements in Scripture.

3. Notable exceptions are N. L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Introduction, Bible* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002); N. L. Geisler and W. E. Nix, *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1974); R. L. Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible: An Historical and Exegetical Study*, Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969). These are notable not only for the fact that they recognize the importance of canon formation in forming a doctrine of Scripture, but also for the fact that they fail to take the history of that formation seriously and are guided by a preconception about what inspiration must mean if the Bible is God’s Word; thus they too begin with inspiration and not canonicity.

4. L. I. Hodges, “New Dimensions in Scripture,” in *New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought: Essays in Honor of Millard J. Erickson*, ed. D. S. Dockery (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 213. All references and citations of the essay in this section are from pp. 213–15.

First, there is the inerrantist perspective, which works “deductively from the self-teaching of Scripture . . . as well as the attributes of its divine author, and interpret[s] the phenomena associated with human authorship in light of Scripture’s own claims. This method begins with certain theological assumptions and arranges the human phenomena within that grid.” The other perspectives are those of the noninerrantists, who begin “with their exegetical and historical understanding of the phenomena and work inductively toward a view of the nature of Scripture, even if it requires modifications of its self-teaching.” For Hodges, the choice one makes between these two mutually exclusive methodologies is of “momentous importance.” “Deductivists, who begin with the express claims of Scripture, inevitably end with a high view of its authority, and inductivists, who begin with the phenomena, conclude with a correspondingly lower view.”⁵

This is a fairly typical example of evangelical approaches to bibliography. In it a certain view of inspiration is argued as the “high view of Scripture” with the implication, often explicitly stated, that failure to hold this verbal plenary view of inspiration results in the propagation of a corresponding “low view of Scripture.” Essentially what has happened is that the definition of a high view of Scripture has simply become synonymous with the verbal plenary doctrine of Scripture. Its adherents see this as the only possible high view of Scripture. And since evangelicals traditionally hold a high view of Scripture, all evangelicals are virtually locked into this view for fear of espousing the dreaded low view of Scripture.

The problem here is not that evangelicals have a high view of Scripture but rather that a high view of Scripture has been usurped by verbal plenary theorists—the determination of what is high and what is low comes from them. The difference between a high and low view of Scripture has been reduced to the difference between what the Bible says or teaches (high view) and what the Bible is or its phenomena are (low view)—yet surely what the Bible *is* has much importance for what the Bible *says*, and a high view needs to take this into consideration. When it comes to understanding what the Bible *is*, evangelicals like Hodges (above) have usually asserted the divine authorship of Scripture while recognizing the human aspect. But when it comes to actually expressing what the Bible *is*, the divinity of Scripture has virtually eclipsed the humanity, and concerns about the process of canonicity are thus implicitly moot. We see this in Hodges’s claim that the deductivist works from the “attributes of its divine author” and hence interprets “in light of Scripture’s own claims.” The assumption at work here is that if the

5. Hodges, “New Dimensions in Scripture,” 215.

Bible is the very word of God to humanity, surely concern about what it says should overwhelm any concern about the process of how it came into the church's hands.

I am *not* here denying the inspiration of the Bible, but rather I am arguing that we evangelicals have come close to deifying this collection of texts with little to no understanding of how they came to be collected into the Bible. Even when evangelical treatments of Scripture cover the issue of canonicity, this near deification of the Bible sets the agenda. For example, in the only full-length evangelical treatment of New Testament canonicity and doctrine of Scripture to date, R. L. Harris argues that the recognition of a document's inspiration determined inclusion in the canon.⁶ The divinity of the text sets the agenda for his examination of canonicity, and the very real and important work and judgment of the early church is glossed over in favor of God virtually forcing these documents on the church so that even the process of canonization is deified. This, again, has the effect of making any further examination of the canon process unnecessary because such evangelicals claim that the church did not choose the documents to be included in the canon; rather, the documents forced themselves on the church by virtue of their divine inspiration. Thus, all the church did was recognize, not choose. Yet how this inspiration was recognized is given little explanation.

This neglect of the canon process has left evangelicals with an inadequate understanding of the very Bible we view and appropriate as authoritative. For the most part, evangelicals seem unconcerned with how we actually got our Bible, and when we do show interest, we rarely relate the implications of this concern to how this might affect a doctrine of Scripture. This is ironic since evangelicals have been quite loud in proclaiming the ultimate authority of the Bible; surely that proclamation should be informed about how the Bible came to be.

This book is about how a historical understanding of the formation of the New Testament canon should inform an evangelical doctrine of Scripture. Briefly stated, this is because the content of the biblical canon, as we know it today, was not a particularly early feature of ancient Christianity: the Bible was not always "there" in early Christianity. Yet, the church still continued to function in its absence. This fact warrants an examination of how this was so.

The historical issues covered in the book are not new; they have been examined and debated for many years, with significant shifts throughout. The relationship of these historical issues to a doctrine of Scripture is not even necessarily new; scholars have examined and debated them for some years. Yet this ongoing discussion has failed to reach many evan-

6. Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity*.

gelicals, especially at the popular level. It is my wish that this book be a small step toward remedying that failure and introduce these important issues to an evangelical audience that has not considered them.

There are essentially three mentalities with which one may approach the issue of canon that subsequently have tremendous implications for conclusions reached.⁷ First is the approach of the *religious historian*, who looks at the contexts of antiquity as neutrally as possible and then describes them as accurately as possible. In describing these contexts, the religious historian also uses terminology appropriate for the period being described. A second, contrasting, mentality is that of the *pastoral apologist*, which starts from the modern perspective and imposes it upon, or at least sees it in, the evidence of antiquity. “The stronger this mentality, the more one is tempted to find today’s beliefs implanted as far back as possible in yesterday’s evidence.”⁸ The third mentality is that of the *neophyte* or *generalist*, who comes to the topic with little to no disciplined theological or historical training with which to tackle the topic and is thus required to lean on the expertise of others.

Throughout this book I will delineate the danger in the second mentality. But here I will say that in my research of evangelical treatments of New Testament canonicity, this second mentality is dominant. Further, since most evangelicals with the *neophyte* mentality need assistance to deal with the issues, the *pastoral apologist* mentality is perpetuated because these are the sources consulted to obtain the high view of Scripture that evangelicals are supposed to espouse. The approach I have undertaken here is that of the sympathetic *religious historian*. This mentality does not claim absolute objectivity or “more assured results,” but it does call one to guard against forcing and reading modern presumptions and presuppositions into the ancient evidence—something that evangelicals are apt to do, as I argue in this book.

The title of this book, *A High View of Scripture?* is somewhat of a wordplay. Essentially I am asking whether the most common evangelical view of Scripture is actually a “high” view, or at least “high” enough.⁹ My position is that a high view of Scripture demands an understanding and integration of the Bible’s very formation. The Bible’s living authority in the life of believers is implicated in this formation because the Bible was formed and grew within the community of faith. This means that

7. E. Ulrich, “The Notion and Definition of Canon,” in McDonald and Sanders, *The Canon Debate*, 23–24.

8. *Ibid.*

9. N. T. Wright argues that most evangelical approaches to biblical authority are actually low because the Bible is not taken on its own merit. That is, the Bible is made into something that it is not. See N. T. Wright, “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?” *Vox evangelica* 21 (1991): 7–32, esp. 11–14.

the Bible did not drop from heaven but was the result of historical and theological development.

In the chapters that follow, I will build an argument for an alternative to Hodges's two mutually exclusive perspectives, which seeks to draw on the formation of the New Testament canon. The sections on the history of canon formation are selective rather than exhaustive, and in them I seek to raise some important incongruities between how our New Testament grew and became established as canon on the one hand, and our contemporary evangelical view of it on the other hand. Because I am examining historical theology, some may accuse me of naturalism—of denying the supernatural significance and origin of the Bible. At the outset of this book, let me state that I make no such denials. I affirm the authority of the Bible as God's revelation to humanity, and as such I affirm that it is the final source for the believers' faith and life. Nothing I write in this book should be read as a denial of this.

Evangelicals have consistently and rightly affirmed the foundational position of the Bible in the community of faith. But we have also affirmed the fact that God has chosen to work through and with human beings in revealing himself. This places the evangelical in a tension between affirming, as Hodges points out above, both the divinity and the humanity of the Bible. The relationship between the human and the divine in the Bible has been explained in various ways, but at least in theory has never been denied by evangelicals. The tension between the human and the divine also exists in the canonical process. Although we may not be able to explain it adequately, we affirm God's providential leading through what appears, at times, to be very much a human process.

I am very aware of the fact that entering into a presentation and discussion of this sort can be a risky venture. This is so not only because of the divergent views prevalent within the topic, but also because of the dedication and dogma with which certain views are held. The comment of one well-known New Testament scholar comes to mind as I embark on this endeavor. I. H. Marshall believes that anyone daring enough to express his views on the nature of the Bible has a particularly difficult path to tread.¹⁰ His path does not merely run along the edge of a cliff, with the sea below on one side; he is traversing an edge with the possibility of going astray both to the right and to the left. If one deviates to the left and suggests that not all of what Scripture says is true in the strictest sense of the term, that individual will come under severe criticism from the right, not simply for saying so, but also for saying so as a confessed evangelical. If one unreservedly throws in one's lot with the

10. I. H. Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*, Biblical and Theological Classics Library (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1995), 7.

right, severe criticisms would center on that individual concerning the claim of biblical scholarship.

The former possibility is illustrated by two separate reviews of a book published in the 1990s.¹¹ One reviewer has described John Goldingay's work on the nature of Scripture as written from the standpoint of "an evangelicalism which believes that it has nothing to fear and much to gain from critical scholarship, and which has little sympathy with the view that an inspired Scripture must necessarily be inerrant."¹² Francis Watson's review is characterized by measured criticisms of the content of Goldingay's book. This certainly is what a review should concern itself with. Goldingay is affirmed as an evangelical concerned with understanding Scripture because of the authority it holds in the life of the believer.

In direct contrast is a review of the same book by E. R. Clendenen.¹³ Clendenen recognizes Goldingay as a "well-known evangelical Old Testament scholar," and precisely for this reason he severely criticizes Goldingay for attempting to think about Scripture in the way he does in his book. Like many evangelicals, Clendenen believes that inerrancy is the logical consequence of inspiration; he therefore proceeds to criticize Goldingay for not locating inspiration in the text alone and for believing that Scripture is not necessarily scientifically or historically inerrant. The review is not a reasoned examination of the issues presented by Goldingay but is, rather, a platform for a defense of the verbal plenary theory of inspiration and its logical conclusion of inerrancy. When all is said and done, Goldingay is criticized for going outside Clendenen's "evangelical" understanding of bibliology.

It is my hope that criticisms of the content of what is offered in this book will deal with the issues raised rather than merely affirming a traditionalistic bibliology, as described in chapter 1. I realize that some of the criticisms offered in these pages may give the appearance that I see little good in evangelicalism. In actuality, however, I offer the criticisms and choose to remain within my evangelical framework because I believe it has gotten many things quite right. I identify closely with evangelicalism precisely because its adherents hold the Bible as the ultimate authority for faith and life.

I would like to mention several people who have helped make this book a reality. First and foremost I would like to acknowledge my wife, Corinne, for her love and patience during this whole process, particularly as the book neared completion and more of my time was spent

11. J. Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

12. F. Watson, "Reviews," *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 3 (1995): 30.

13. E. R. Clendenen, review of *Models for Scripture*, by J. Goldingay, *Faith and Mission* 13 (1995): 132–34.

on it than with our family. Our sons, Ty and Zach, also deserve a big thank-you for their patience with a dad who was often too dazed and tired to wrestle.

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