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978-0-521-83118-5 - Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch

John Webster

Excerpt

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Introduction

What follows is a dogmatic sketch of a topic much neglected in contemporary theology, namely, the nature of Holy Scripture. It is only a sketch, not a treatise, and many issues which ought properly to be considered in a full account – the relation of Scripture and tradition, or of Scripture and preaching, for example – do not receive treatment. I am also conscious that I have little to say about topics which are very fully discussed in modern theology and hermeneutics. I offer no theory of ‘textuality’, and say almost nothing about such matters as the impact of deconstruction or of speech-act theory on thinking about the nature of Scripture, or the workings of interpretative communities. Whether these omissions are deficiencies I leave to the reader’s judgement. The subjects to which I have addressed myself are chosen because they appear to me to constitute the essential articles of an orderly dogmatic account of what Holy Scripture is.

But *is* there such a thing as Holy Scripture? Theorists in cultural and religious studies, and more than a handful of modern theologians, seek to persuade us that there is not: that the term ‘Holy Scripture’ is an extension of the term ‘scripture’, and refers not to properties which the biblical canon has by virtue of its relation to God’s communicative activity, but to the activities of human agents in constituting a cultural and religious world. Because what follows is an essay not in cultural or religious studies but in Christian dogmatics, it proposes that there is, indeed, such a thing as Holy Scripture, for the depiction of which we must deploy language of the triune God’s saving and revelatory action. This dogmatic depiction does not deny that Holy Scripture is also a field of cultural invention, since Holy

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Scripture (the human text which God sanctifies for the service of his communicative presence) is still ‘scripture’ (human writing generated and used by religious communities). But dogmatics does not allow the particular concept of ‘Holy Scripture’ to be folded into the more general category of ‘scripture’, preferring to maximise the differences between the two and thereby to resist the subordination of Holy Scripture to cultural poetics. The result is a dogmatic ontology of Holy Scripture: an account of what Holy Scripture *is* in the saving economy of God’s loving and regenerative self-communication.

Dogmatics lies at the periphery of modern Anglo-American Protestant divinity, and I am acutely aware both that what many of my contemporaries regard as self-evident I find to be puzzling or unpersuasive and that matters which I regard as self-evident make many of my contemporaries feel bewildered. I console myself with the fact that I can find good company in some of my forbears. In 1935, Günther Dehn, who two years previously had been ejected from his chair in Practical Theology in Halle, gave a rather startling set of Dale lectures in Oxford under the title *Man and Revelation*. His hearers were certainly startled: in his preface to the published version, Dehn remembers the gentle head-shaking of the audience,¹ and goes on to say:

I have endeavoured to deal with certain questions of Christian thought and life, not as a free scholar but as a theologian bound to the Church. This must seem strange to those who are told that theology is to be ranked among the branches of general knowledge, and that its problems can be treated in the same manner as those in other branches of spiritual knowledge, i.e. in accordance with the cultural consciousness of the age. The theologian most assuredly participates

¹ See G. Dehn, *Man and Revelation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), p. 8; in his foreword to the book, Nathaniel Micklem, then Principal of Mansfield College, under whose auspices the Dale lectures were offered, notes somewhat wryly that ‘I cannot anticipate that this book will win full acceptance from English-speaking Christians’ (p. 3).

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in the cultural consciousness of his time, but for his work this has none but formal significance. Theology is not promoted by culture but by the belief in God's revelation as an event beyond all human history, to which Scripture bears witness and which finds confirmation in the Confessions of our Church. Only a theology that clings inexorably to these most essential presuppositions can help build up a Church that really stands unshaken amidst all the attacks of the spirit of the age. And such a Church alone will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world; any other Church will perish along with the world.²

Rem acu tetigisti.

A dogmatic account of the nature of Holy Scripture can, of course, have only a modest role, ancillary to the primary theological task, which is exegesis. The clarifications which such an account can offer are not without their significance, articulating as they do the exegete's understanding of the location, character and ends of exegetical labour. In a theological culture in which exegetical self-understanding is often formed by other, less fruitful, influences, the development of a dogmatic account of Scripture may have a certain polemical timeliness. But what it may not do is replace or eclipse the work of exegesis.

An earlier version of the material was delivered at the University of Aberdeen in May 2001, as the *Scottish Journal of Theology* lectures. I am deeply grateful for the invitation to give the lectures, as well as to friends and colleagues in Aberdeen who took time to discuss their substance with me. And I am particularly indebted to Iain and Morag Torrance for their many kindnesses.

² Ibid., pp. 7f.

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1 | Revelation, Sanctification and Inspiration

Holy Scripture is not a single or simple entity. The term ‘Holy Scripture’ refers primarily to a set of texts, but importantly and secondarily to its divine origin and its use by the church. Thus the content of the term can only be thoroughly mapped by seeing this set of texts in connection with purposive divine action in its interaction with an assemblage of creaturely events, communities, agents, practices and attitudes. To talk of the biblical writings as Holy Scripture is ultimately to refer to more (but not to less!) than those writings *per se*. It is, on the one hand, to depict these texts in the light of their origin, function and end in divine self-communication, and, on the other hand, to make recommendations about the kinds of responses to these texts which are fitting in view of their origin, function and end. ‘Holy Scripture’ is a shorthand term for the nature and function of the biblical writings in a set of communicative acts which stretch from God’s merciful self-manifestation to the obedient hearing of the community of faith.

The sufficiency of Scripture, that is, is not quite the same as its ‘self-sufficiency’.¹ Yet whilst ‘Holy Scripture’ does refer to a composite

¹ The distinction between ‘sufficiency’ and ‘self-sufficiency’ is drawn firmly by T. Ward in *Word and Supplement. Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), who seeks to clarify ‘in theological and hermeneutical terms the senses in which “the sufficiency of Scripture” is necessarily a circumscribed concept’. Hence he criticises both the iconic theories of text in the ‘New Criticism’ and the highly formalist understanding of scripture in Hans Frei, which he terms ‘hyper-sufficiency’ (p. 150), and which confuses the objectivity of a text with its self-sufficiency (see p. 198). Ward’s counter-suggestion is to appeal to Derrida’s notion

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reality (texts in relation to revelation and reception), there is a definite order to its elements. Most of all, both the texts and the processes surrounding their reception are subservient to the self-presentation of the triune God, of which the text is a servant and by which readers are accosted, as by a word of supreme dignity, legitimacy and effectiveness. This order is critically important because, unless their strict subservience to communicative divine activity is stated with some firmness, both text and practices of reading and reception may break loose and become matters for independent or quasi-independent investigation and explanation. When that is allowed to take place, the result is a disorderly ontology of Holy Scripture.

One type of disorder – the isolation of the text both from its place in God’s revelatory activity and from its reception in the community of faith – has, as we shall see, long been a problem in Western divinity since the Reformation. A somewhat different kind of disorder results when the term ‘Holy Scripture’ is expounded in such a way that its primary (or sometimes exclusive) reference is to the uses of the biblical texts made by readers, and only secondarily (if at all) to the place of the texts in the economy of God’s communicative grace. By way of example: in *What is Scripture?* Wilfred Cantwell Smith presents a sustained argument that ‘Scriptures are not texts!’² – that the term

of textual ‘supplements’ and, most especially, to Wolterstorff’s deployment of speech-act theory, which ‘shows how authors, their texts and meanings, and readers, exist meaningfully only in that they are related to one another, without the otherness of any one element being subsumed into another’ (pp. 198f.). Ward’s ordering of the relation of divine action to the human activities of authorship and reading rightly prioritises the divine agent. Yet – almost inevitably in a work which invests a good deal in the conceptual resources afforded by a philosophical theory of communicative action – Ward’s deployment of dogmatic materials is decidedly modest. One may legitimately wonder whether speech-act theory can furnish all that is required for a ‘critical retrieval’ of the classical Protestant doctrine of Scripture, and whether much more extensive appeal to such concepts as revelation and inspiration (and so, therefore, to the doctrine of the Trinity) is required.

² W. Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (London: SCM, 1993), p. 223. By contrast, T. Ward is entirely correct to insist on the need for an ontology of

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‘Scripture’ is a way of talking about human practices vis-à-vis texts rather than about texts themselves:

There is no ontology of scripture. The concept has no metaphysical, nor logical, referent; there is nothing that scripture finally ‘is’ . . . [A]t issue is not the texts of scripture that are to be understood and about which a theory is to be sought, but the dynamic of human involvement with them . . . Scripture has been . . . a human activity: it has been also a human propensity, a potentiality. There is no ontology of scripture; just as, at a lower level, there is no ontology of art, nor of language, nor of other things that we human beings do, and are. Rather than existing independently of us, all these are subsections of the ontology of our being persons.³

A much more theologically complex examination of the issues is offered by Ingolf Dalferth, who explores a distinction between the singular term ‘Scripture’ (*Schrift*) and the plural term ‘scriptures’ or ‘writings’ (*Schriften*). Where the latter refers to the biblical writings *per se*, the former refers to these writings in their use by the faith community. ‘Scripture’ is thus ‘the use made of the scriptures of the Bible in . . . the event of the church’s proclamation’;⁴ hence ingredient within the concept of ‘Scripture’ is ‘the Christian *community* or church’ which uses the biblical writings as Scripture.⁵ Dalferth’s concern is, clearly, a legitimate Reformation point of conscience: the desire to avoid any account of the nature of Scripture *extra usum*, and to insist on determining the nature of Scripture *in usu et actione*. The

Scripture, and on the need to root the use of the text in the properties of the text: *Word and Supplement*, pp. 300–2.

³ Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture?* p. 237.

⁴ I. U. Dalferth, ‘Die Mitte ist außen. Anmerkungen zum Wirklichkeitsbezug evangelischer Schriftauslegung’, in C. Landmesser et al., eds., *Jesus Christus als die Mitte der Schrift. Studien zur Hermeneutik des Evangeliums* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), p. 183.

⁵ *Ibid.*; see also I. U. Dalferth, ‘Von der Vieldeutigkeit der Schrift und der Eindeutigkeit des Wortes Gottes’, in R. Ziegert, ed., *Die Zukunft des Schriftprinzips* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), p. 169.

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difficulty arises when use and action are identified too closely with ‘kerygmatic-doxological use’ of Scripture by the church.⁶ Dalferth certainly avoids Cantwell Smith’s collapse of the notion of Scripture into that of community usage by insisting on the coinherence of Scripture, church and faith with communicative divine presence; but his claim that, nevertheless, the term ‘Scripture’ identifies an aspect of Christian *Lebenspraxis* without empirical content⁷ points in a quite different direction, one in which the corporate subjectivity of the church looms very large.

What is required, and what this book tries to sketch, is a dogmatic account of the nature of Holy Scripture which neither restricts the scope of what the term indicates (texts in relation to God’s communication and its hearing) nor allows the element of creaturely reception to become inflated. The first three chapters undertake such an account by looking at the relation of Scripture to the divine acts of revelation, sanctification and inspiration, and then at the churchly and readerly acts of receiving the Word of God. Crucially, my suggestion is that the proper connections between the various elements (revelation, text, community, faithful reception) can only be retained by their careful dogmatic specification.

This first chapter begins the task of mapping Christian talk of the Bible as Holy Scripture in a dogmatic projection by arguing that an essential task of the term ‘Holy Scripture’ is to indicate the place occupied by the biblical texts in the revealing, sanctifying and inspiring acts of the triune God. Holy Scripture is dogmatically explicated in terms of its role in God’s self-communication, that is, the acts of Father, Son and Spirit which establish and maintain that saving fellowship with humankind in which God makes himself known to us and by us.⁸ The ‘sanctification’ of Scripture (its ‘holiness’) and its ‘inspiration’ (its proceeding from God) are aspects of the process

⁶ Dalferth, ‘Von der Vieldeutigkeit’, p. 163; cf. ‘Die Mitte ist außen’, p. 183.

⁷ ‘Die Mitte ist außen’, p. 185.

⁸ The rooting of the doctrine of Scripture in the doctrine of the triune God is consistently emphasised in A. Wenz, *Das Wort Gottes – Gericht und Rettung*.

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whereby God employs creaturely reality in his service, for the attestation of his saving self-revelation. Thus, what is said about the sanctification and inspiration of Scripture is an extension of what is said about revelation; but what is said about revelation is an extension of what is said about the triune God. What Scripture is as sanctified and inspired is a function of divine revelatory activity, and divine revelatory activity is God's triune being in its external orientation, its gracious and self-bestowing turn to the creation.

The first task, then, is to offer an overall sketch of the doctrine of Holy Scripture by examining three primary concepts: revelation, sanctification and inspiration. The first and third terms are familiar in theological discussion of the nature of Scripture, and, although I argue that some careful dogmatic specification of these terms is required if they are to be serviceable, appeal to them should hold no surprises. However, the second term, 'sanctification', may seem somewhat out of place, since its more usual application is in discussion of soteriology, specifically in giving a theological account of the 'application' of salvation, that is, the effectiveness of Christ in the lives of believers. But although the primary field in which the term is deployed remains that of the relation between divine and human persons, it may legitimately be extended to non-personal realities in so far as they are instruments of the personal relations between God and humankind. 'Sanctification' is not improperly used in this way in, for example, sacramental theology, to indicate the segregation of creaturely realities by virtue of their moulding and use by God to undertake specific tasks in the economy of salvation. In this sense, a 'sanctified' reality is most generally described as set apart by God as a means of divine self-communication. In the context of discussing the relation between divine self-revelation and the nature of Holy Scripture, sanctification functions as a middle term, indicating in a general way God's activity of appointing and ordering the creaturely realities

Untersuchungen zur Autorität der Heiligen Schrift in Bekenntnis und Lehre der Kirche
(Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996).

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of the biblical texts towards the end of the divine self-manifestation. The scope of its application is thus wider than the term ‘inspiration’, which is best restricted to discussion of the more specific question of the relation between divine self-communicative acts and Scripture as textual entity. It is certainly true that, with declining confidence in the viability of a dogmatic notion of verbal inspiration, the range of the term ‘inspiration’ has in some modern theology been considerably broadened, to become equivalent to, for example, a supposed intuitive awareness of the divine on the part of the biblical authors, or the illumination of the readers of the biblical text. A more orderly account of the matter will, however, restrict the application of the term to the specific set of divine acts in respect of the production of the biblical texts, and look for a term of wider reach to indicate the overall process of God’s ordering of creaturely realities as servants of his self-presentation. For this wider task, I suggest the adoption of the term ‘sanctification’.

As used here, it is closely related to two other tracts of theological doctrine, namely providence and the theology of mediation. ‘Providence’ speaks of the divine activities of ordering creaturely realities to their ends; ‘mediation’ speaks of the instrumentality of created realities in the divine working. Both terms are readily applicable in the context of discussing the nature of Scripture. God’s work of overseeing such processes as tradition-history, redaction, authorship and canonisation could well be described in terms of the divine providential acts of preserving, accompanying and ruling creaturely activities, annexing them to his self-revelation. And the function of these providentially ordered texts in the divine economy could be depicted as mediatorial. If the term ‘sanctification’ is still to be preferred, it is, as I hope to show, because it covers much of the same ground as both of these terms, whilst also addressing in a direct way the relation of divine activity to creaturely process, without sliding into dualism. But the terms are certainly porous, and in and of themselves they are of little consequence; all that matters is their fitness for the task of orderly explication of the matter itself.