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The Authority of Scripture: A Biblical Theology

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Introduction

Since the time of the Renaissance, the authority of Scripture has been debated both outside and inside the Church.¹ Outside the Church, the argument usually consists of some form of protest to allowing an ancient literary work of one of the many world religions to decide what is right and wrong. This usually results in an attack of Biblical stories such as the Flood, or the talking snake in the Garden, to discredit said authority. To this the Church responds with appeals to eternal evidence such as the words of Jesus concerning the reality of the Flood or snake, to which the secular response is that this appeal is circular reasoning; thus, the frustrated Church gives up, commenting that only the spiritual can discern the spiritual things. As valid as this answer may be, it only complicates the fact that even within the Church there is much debate as to which portions, and to what extent Scripture has authority. Therefore, the problem takes this form, “What authority makes Scripture authoritative?” This proposes that the problem lies in the term authority, as it is commonly viewed as the right to give orders, set standards, or command obedience. Although this is true of Scripture, it is the authority, or power of creation and redemption, that gives Scripture the former; thus, the power of Scripture, is its authority. The following research was conducted to determine the connection between the spoken and the written word of God, as well as, the connection between the God-man authorship of the Bible and the God-man who creates and redeems. This article is not intended to end the debate of Scripture’s authority, but to offer an alternate point of departure, suggesting that from this point true authority may be established. Assuming the unifying theme of redemption, this study intends to build a biblical theology of authority founded in the progress and fulfillment of creative-redemptive history through Christ. This project will be limited to the development of

¹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity; The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, Vol. 1. (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 435.

creation and redemption as it is related both to the spoken and written Word of God. Beginning in Genesis, a case is built that the parallel in John chapter one demonstrates the connection between the spoken and physically manifested Word of God, Jesus Christ, through whom God now speaks to His people in the gospel. This gospel, which is the power of God, is the pinnacle of the biblical narrative; thus, concluding that the authority of the Word of God is its inherent power to create and redeem, which is the foundation upon which all other claims of authority must be built.

Scripture as the Word of God

Some may argue that there is a difference between the written and the spoken Word of God, which in turn exposes one problem when defining the authority of Scripture. Many, even those among Christendom, see the Bible as nothing more than an ancient literary work finished nearly two-thousand years ago, begging the question, what authority does this ancient work bear on modern life? Martin S. Jaffee states, “Ontologies of the written and spoken word are thus bound up with systems of power relationships,”² which indicates that the nature of the “Word,” its being, is the same whether spoken or written. Agreeing with the correspondence of the word of God regardless of form, Herman A. Preus comments, “The Word, whether written, spoken, or signed, is the same Word,” prefaced by, “...God speaks to us in three different ways. But it is the

² Martin S. Jaffee, "A Rabbinic Ontology of the Written and Spoken Word: On Discipleship, Transformative Knowledge, and the Living Texts of Oral Torah," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 3 (September 1997): 525-549. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed July 29, 2016), 529.

same Word that He speaks in all three.”³ Thus, for believers there need not be a distinction, which is useful to the debate and illustrated in the commonly quoted verses for biblical authority.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16 NIV). This is one of the most frequently cited verses justifying the authority of Scripture, and thus the focus is primarily shifted to the beginning or the ending of the verse. The debate among scholars is often occupied with the *πᾶσα* preceding Scripture, which depending on one’s handling of Greek grammar would render—every God-breathed Scripture is, or every Scripture is God-breathed.⁴ The resulting argument concerns itself with which Scripture is of the ‘God-breathed’ authority, and the Word of God is reduced to whatever critics decide is inspired. The latter end of the verse lists areas of authority, which are assumed under the notion that Scripture’s appeal to inspiration grants this authority.⁵ The point here is neither what portion of Scripture is inspired nor in what areas does this inspiration grant authority, but that Scripture is God-breathed. The word used by Paul, *θεόπνευστος*, is a compound word formed from *θεός* (God)⁶ and *πνέω* (I blow, breath),⁷ which, at the risk of sounding overly literal, is God-breathed. This illustrates, for current purposes, that Scripture, the

³ Herman A. Preus (Herman Amberg) "Written, Spoken, and Signed Word," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 26, no. 9 (September 1955): 641-656. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed July 29, 2016), 641.

⁴ J. W. Roberts, "Every Scripture Inspired of God," *Restoration Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1961 1961): 33-37. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed July 29, 2016), 34-35.

⁵ Patrick Nullens, "Theologia Caritatis and the Moral Authority of Scripture: Approaching 2 Timothy 3:16-17 with a Hermeneutic of Love," *European Journal of Theology* 22, no. 1 (2013 2013): 38-49. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed July 29, 2016), 39.

⁶ G. Abbot-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1921), 205.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 369.

written Word, comes from the mouth of God; thus, whether audible or not, Scripture is the spoken Word of God—God’s communication. The apostle Peter further demonstrates this sentiment.

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20-21 NIV). The message that Peter proclaims here is probably the most clear biblical example of the written Word equated to the spoken Word. Commenting to this end, Paul E. Jacobs states, “They [Scriptures] are not man’s word of which he is lord and master and interpreter;” furthermore, “The prophetic Word is the Word of God in which God speaks and acts.”⁸ More importantly, Jacobs makes the connection between Scripture and acts of God indicating that these are not mere writings from a human pen, but words that carry the power of God. John Sherwood illuminates the power and agency of God behind the human author through the use of grammatical variants of φέρω (to bear) in describing the rushing of wind at Pentecost (Acts 2:2), or a ship being driven by the wind (Acts 27:15, 17);⁹ the same word that marks the carrying of the prophet. Moreover, Louw and Nida list this term as a marker of an experiencer of an overwhelming event.¹⁰ Having established God’s voice as the initiating and active source behind any expression thereof, including Scripture, and raising awareness of the power vested therein,

⁸ Paul E. Jacobs, "Exegetical-Devotional Study of 2 Peter 1:16-21," *Springfielder* 28, no. 2 (1964 1964): 18-30. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 30, 2016), 27.

⁹ John Sherwood, "The Only Sure Word," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 7, no. 1 (1996 1996): 53-74. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 30, 2016), 73.

¹⁰ Johannes Louw and Eugene A Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd, Vol. I Introduction and Domains. II vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 1002.

the argument may now turn to the biblical theme of Creation as displaying the power of God's Word.

The Word of God in Creation

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...And God said... (Gen. 1:1a, 2a NIV), and everything that now exists sprang into existence through the creative power of His Word. The Creation narrative vividly demonstrates the power of God's Word, and although points of this narrative are largely debated, the fact that the Word of God was the instrument of creation is rarely the topic of that debate. For Paul, the Word of God was the power that "calls into being things that were not (Rom. 4:17b NIV)," and the early church fathers, such as Augustine, greatly admired this powerful agent.¹¹ Augustine artistically commenting and questioning the nature, form, and expression of this divine force finally declares, "It is the eternal word of God that in the beginning and...in eternity, utters the words 'Let there be light'... the eternal agency through which creation is spoken."¹²

The concept of the *ex nihilo* Creation is so intrinsically and metaphysically exhaustive that its philosophic limits exceed the bounds of mere physical creation to that of spirit, soul, time and space. The Word of God not only spoke visible creation into existence but the laws of physics that maintain the order therein. Explaining the doctrine of Continuous Creation, Felicity S. Edwards states,

Theologically, continuous creation follows from the understanding that in the beginning God created everything *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. What God did in the beginning he, being God, continues to do. Three points are relevant. (1) He created in and through his Word, his *Logos* (= the classical doctrine of *creatio per*

¹¹ David Chidester, "The Symbolism of Learning in St Augustine," *Harvard Theological Review* 76, no. 1 (January 1983): 73-90. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 16, 2016), 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, 82.

Verbum). And the Word of God, it must be remembered is not merely some sort of cosmic intermediary but God himself. (2) He created everything — all things visible and invisible, as Col. 1:17 and the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed put it. There is nothing that he is not constantly bringing into being. (All this is John 1:1-3) (3) Biblically, creation is a present event, for God, being creator and not creature, creates time as well as space; or rather, space-time and all other dimensions of existence, come forth from their origin in him, while remaining held together in his all-creative Word. He is "before all things and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17 N.B. present tense)...¹³

While the purpose here is not to advocate for any one doctrine, Continuous Creation illustrates the multifaceted function of God's Word in Creation. He not only spoke Creation into existence "in the beginning," but also remains active in Creation through His word in the present, which is elementally held together by the power of this same word. Moreover, God's word creates more than the physical, but also the time and space in which the physical exists; thereby making this magnificent word the origin, substance, and perpetuation of all things.¹⁴ As God is triune, the subject of Creation cannot be broached without the mention of the Word incarnate, and His role in Creation, which extends to His creative work in Redemption.¹⁵

The Word of God in Redemption

In the beginning was the Word...the Word was with God...was God...Through him all things were made...In him was life...The Word became flesh...whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 1:1, 3a, 4a, 14a; 3:16b NIV). John's prologue wonderfully unites the Word of God, λόγος, the Creator of all things, with its incarnate form, Jesus Christ the man, who

¹³ Felicity Souter Edwards, "Now: A Theological Proposal," *Journal Of Theology For Southern Africa* 41, (December 1982): 45-49. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 16, 2016), 46.

¹⁴ Mark Allen McIntosh, "The Maker's Meaning: Divine Ideas and Salvation," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 3 (July 2012): 365-384. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 16, 2016), 367.

¹⁵ Maximos Metr Aghiorghoussis, "The Word of God in Orthodox Christianity," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 31, no. 1-2 (1986 1986): 79-103. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 16, 2016), 80.

brings salvation to the world. Using *λόγος*, John communicates, as did the translators of the Septuagint, that the “Word” spoken by God created the heavens (Ps. 33:6);¹⁶ this word communicating the power of God in Creation, now communicates the power of God in Redemption. That is the Creator, through the medium of creation, bringing salvation to His creation through the Word communicating God in the person of Christ.¹⁷ Moreover, the progression of John’s Gospel displays the power of the incarnate Word through his book of signs (1:19-12:50), and concludes with his purpose statement, “that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (20:31b NIV).” Thus, for John, the introduction of the Word of God was for the express purpose of Redemption.¹⁸ Commenting on Augustine’s interpretation, Maico Michielin asserts, “The historical particularity of the Incarnation is intrinsically connected to the eternal Word who reveals himself as the Father in the Son by the power of the Spirit.”¹⁹ In revealing Himself, “salvation amounts to the ultimate clarification of the Logos’ foundational message, manifesting its implications for the life of the world;”²⁰ thus, the clear message of the Word of God is restored Creation through Redemption, with that message being the gospel.

¹⁶ Sir Lancelot Charles Lee Brenton, *The Septuagint version of the Old Testament and Apocrypha: with an English translation and with various readings and critical notes* (London: Samuel Bagster, 1900), 716.

¹⁷ David J. MacLeod, "The Creation of the Universe by the Word: John 1:3-5," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160, no. 638 (April 2003): 187-201. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 22, 2016), 189.

¹⁸ Kelli S. O'Brien, "Written that You May Believe: John 20 and Narrative Rhetoric," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (April 2005): 284-302. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 20, 2016), 290-91.

¹⁹ Maico Michielin, "Augustine's Interpretation of John's Prologue: A Theology of God's Word." *Theology Today* 67, no. 3 (October 2010): 299-307. *ATLASerials, Religion Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 23, 2016), 303.

²⁰ Doru Costache, "Meaningful Cosmos: Logos and Nature in Clement the Alexandrian's Exhortation to the Gentiles," *Phronema* 28, no. 2 (2013 2013): 107-130. *ATLASerials, Religion Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 21, 2016), 122.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile (Rom. 1:16 NIV). For the New Testament authors, and in this case Paul, the gospel, is the Word of God telling the good news of Redemption through the person and work of Christ. Many hold that the gospel is the central theme of the book of Romans;²¹ however, this gospel is not merely a telling of the life and work of Christ, it is the power of God to reconcile lost Creation through the righteousness of God received by faith. In other words, the communication of Redemption, and the imparting of life, comes through the sole medium of the gospel (Rom. 10:9-15) which is evidenced in Cornelius' conversion (Acts 10). The gospel communicates the Word of God. In Hebrew, “[דְבָרִי] dābār, God's word is the virtual concrete expression of his personality,” a term rightly replaced by λόγος in the Septuagint,²² supporting the expression of God in the person of Christ, and the power of God in the expression of His gospel, which is a major aspect of the biblical narrative.

The Unique Message of the Bible

*Biblical theology has the task of expounding the theology found in the Bible in its own historical setting, and its own terms, categories, and thought forms. It is the obvious intent of the Bible to tell a story about God and his acts in history for humanity's salvation.*²³

George E. Ladd

The Bible has a unique message; as Ladd explains, it tells a story about God and biblical theology attempts to unite the multiplicity of authors through sixty-six books written over the

²¹ D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 254.

²² H.D. McDonald, "Word, Word of God, Word of the Lord," In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 1292.

²³ George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, revised ed. (Eerdmans, 1993), 20.

course of two millennia into a cohesive thematic narrative. As the Old Testament opens, all things were created for, and leading up to, the pinnacle of Creation, humankind (Gen. 1-2); however, that Creation and its relationship with the Creator are immediately lost (Gen. 3), and the remainder of the Old Testament is spent redeveloping a relationship between Creator and creation.²⁴ The New Testament opens, in the four Gospels, with the Creator taking on the form of His creature for the purpose of redeeming that which was lost, and ultimately, restoring the created order.²⁵ Therefore, one may assume that the storyline of the Bible is redemptive history expressed thematically in Creation and Redemption. Some may argue that this theology is too simplistic to explain the expressed theological ideas of each work contained within the canon, especially in the more thematically diverse canon of the Old Testament.²⁶ However, the purpose here is not to formulate a conclusive biblical theology, but to establish that the narrative of the Bible is the story of God's relationship with His Creation and that this story is communicated through the Word of God. That same Word is the agent of Creation and Redemption expressed therein. Moreover, the unity in purpose and power of this Word, reduces the latter theme to the former as the New Testament describes Redemption as rebirth (John 3:3), regeneration (Tit. 3:5) and a new creation (2Cor. 5:17).

Redemption was never an *ad hoc* rescue attempt, and is arguably the direction of creation that emerges in the protoevangelium of Genesis 3. The completely providential history of God

²⁴ Bernard Och, "Creation and Redemption: Towards a Theology of Creation," *Judaism* 44, no. 2 (1995): 226-243. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 27, 2016), 227-29.

²⁵ Clarence Tucker Craig, "A Biblical Theology for Our Day II How Does Jesus Save?," *The Journal Of Religious Thought* 5, no. 1 (1948 1948): 69-78. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 27, 2016), 71.

²⁶ Ben C. Ollenburger, "Discoursing Old Testament Theology," *Biblical Interpretation* 11, no. 3-4 (2003): 617-628. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 23, 2016), 627.

encompasses Creation and its restoration as one directed goal; thus, Bernard Och insists that Redemption is merely the “implementation of creation” whereby God “neutralizes and overcomes the antireational forces which threaten life and creation.”²⁷ Strengthening Och’s claim, Joseph Blenkinsopp states, “What might be called the classical interpretation of development in the Old Testament speaks of a continuous providential history which reached its goal in Christ and the Christian church.”²⁸ This can be traced through the pre-ordained genealogies, which lead to Christ, and through the covenants that find their realization in Christ.²⁹ The unique story of the Bible moves from Creation to Creation restored, through Christ, the Word of God in power and this power is the foundation of Scriptural authority.

The Power of the Word as Authority

The power exerted by the Word of God, accomplishing both Creation and Redemption, substantiate the authority of Scripture. H.D. McDonald, quoting the *American Heritage Dictionary* states, “Authority is the right and power to command, enforce laws, exact obedience, determine or judge,” and commenting on the Greek word, *exousia*—translated as right, power, and authority, he adds, “In some contexts the emphasis falls on the authority the possession of power rightfully gives,” which is the contention here.³⁰ While orthodoxy accepts that the Bible is the Word of God by its own admission and finds contentment in the support of Jesus on troubling passages, those that hold this standard are not the ones in need of provision; thus, an

²⁷ Och, “Creation and Redemption,” 29.

²⁸ Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Old Testament Theology and the Jewish-Christian Connection,” *Journal For The Study Of The Old Testament* 28, (February 1984): 3-15. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed July 26, 2016), 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ H. D. McDonald, “Bible, Authority of,” In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 153.

appeal to such reasoning is pointless. However, the evidential power of the Word of God imparting life and new Creation where there was once death and decay is a marginally undeniable proof of scriptural authority. McDonald explains, “An approach to the subject of biblical authority must begin with God himself. For in him all authority is finally located,”³¹ and therein lies the problem. Having no authority higher than God, the argument becomes circular. Conversely, by appealing to the evidential change produced by the word of God, one is no longer arguing in circles, but attesting to the means by the ends.

The Power of Scripture is something visible, not merely an argument with persuasive words, but is tangible, physical and real. Robert D. Preus declares, “Just as our chief executive's word carries with it all the power and authority of our nation, so God's Word possesses all of His might and power.”³² Exploring this, one will find that anything scripture proclaims about God must be true in reality, and therefore, must be measurable in some fashion. When God said, “let there be light (Gen. 1:3 NIV),” it appeared, and it can be seen and measured. When the message of Christ is preached, lives are changed, and this change is not merely inward but outwardly visible.³³ Speaking on the Christian preconception of the Word of God and its power, Henry M. Morris demands, “it is not often realized how intimately associated is the concept of the power of God, not only in the spiritual sense but even in the physical realm, with the Word of God.”³⁴ After which Morris explores the physical laws of matter determining that it is the power of the

³¹ McDonald, “Bible, Authority of,” 154.

³² Robert D. Preus, “Power of God's Word,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 34, no. 8 (August 1963): 453-465. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed July 23, 2016), 457.

³³ *Ibid.*, 460.

³⁴ Henry M. Morris, “The Power of the Word,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 116, no. 461 (January 1959): 51-66. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed August 8, 2016), 51.

Word of God that holds all things together.³⁵ The power of God's Word is physically tangible, and substantiates Scripture's claim to authority.

Conclusion

The authority of Scripture has been debated among those from within and without the Church since the time of the Renaissance movement when science began to take center stage, and it will remain a debated topic for a time to come. While a perceived circular reason plagues the Churches appeal to scriptural authority and varying views within affect the Churches own conclusion on this authority, an appeal to the power of the Word may circumvent some of these contentious difficulties. Because the written word of God is synonymous with any other form, there is a unified dynamic between the effectual power of the word spoken in creation, the incarnate word of God in redemption, and the preached word of God as medium of that redemption. Biblically, God's word is the power enacting creation and redemption, and these two themes communicate its unique message. Thus, demonstrating the actual, physically tangible, evidences of this power provides a foundation for the authority of Scripture that is neither circular nor refutable—within reason. This proposal will by no means settle the debate of this topic; however, by starting from a non-assumed and relatively measurable position, an agreement may be more easily reached.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 53-55.

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