BRILL

ECCLESIOLOGY 13 (2017) 83-101

ECCLESIOLOGY

brill.com/ecso

Authority in the New Testament and the New Testament's Authority

Peter-Ben Smit
Utrecht University/Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam/University of Pretoria
p.b.a.smit@uu.nl

Abstract

In an essayistic manner, drawing on both exegetical and systematic theological insights, this paper explores the contours of the notion of authority in the New Testament, arguing that authority in the New Testament is primarily the performance of (liberating) authority by Christ, to which the New Testament witnesses. This witness is the New Testament's own source of authority, but only in as far as the communities reading the New Testament engage in a communal praxis that is in line with Jesus' own exercise of authority. The New Testament, it is argued, operates in a manner similar to that of a sacrament, while the diversity contained within its canon offers encouragement for an ongoing search for identity in Christ, rather than constituting a theological embarrassment.

Keywords

authority – hermeneutics – biblical interpretation – canonical texts – sacramentality

This paper was presented originally at the conference 'The Authority of the Churches in a Pluralist Europe: Anglican, Old Catholic, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed Perspectives', Exeter, 7–10 September 2015. This context is reflected in the structure and formulations of the paper. The author is grateful to the participants in this conference for their feedback, for the feedback received from the peer reviewers of *Ecclesiology*, and for the proofreading services performed by Mr William A. Hardin, Jr., Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC, USA.

 | DOI 10.1163/17455316-01301006

Introduction

"'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Mark 1:3, NRSV), with this Isaian imperative, questions of authority appear on the first page of the oldest Gospel in the New Testament and they will continue to do so until the last page of the canonical New Testament, in the parting words of John the Seer, who penned his Apocalypse, warning those who might want to tamper with his words and underlining the authority of his witness (see Rev. 22). At the same time, these are two somewhat different kinds of authority: in the Gospel narratives, authority is claimed for Jesus, as Paul will claim it for himself and the office that has been entrusted to him in his letters, while John the Seer claims authority for his witness to the revelation granted to him. In the same way, claims of authority have been attributed to the New Testament, the canonical text, as a whole, which also apply to the full corpus of canonical texts of Christianity, the two testament Bible. – Even though I will be speaking on the New Testament mainly, in what follows all I say is applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to the full body of the Christian Scriptures, including the Old Testament, as well; it is virtually impossible, if not nonsensical to want to speak of the authority of the New Testament on its own.

The authority of Scripture has been variously acknowledged in Anglican and Old Catholic traditions, often in formulations that were aimed at ecumenical rapprochement, for example by thesis 9 of the first Bonn Conference on Church Union (1874):

> The Holy Scriptures being recognized as the primary rule of Faith, we agree that the genuine tradition, i.e. the unbroken transmission—partly oral, partly in writing—of the doctrine delivered by Christ and the Apostles, is an authoritative source of teaching for all successive generations of Christians. This tradition is partly to be found in the consensus of the great ecclesiastical bodies standing in historical continuity with the primitive Church, partly to be gathered by scientific method from the written documents of all centuries.[1]

1 See Heinrich Reusch (ed.), *Bericht über die 1874 und 1875 zu Bonn gehaltenen Unions-Conferenzen* (reprint of the bipartite edition of 1874 and 1875; Bonn: Alt-Katholischer Bistumsverlag, 2002), pp. 33.50; here also the German version can be found. To wit and somewhat counter-intuitively, the authoritative version of the theses received by the conferences was in English (see Reusch, 'Vorwort' [without page numbers], in idem. (ed.), *Bericht*).

Or, in the Anglican tradition, in the 1886/1888 Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, which amounted to a partial restatement of Article 6 of Anglicanism's 39 Articles, which itself reads as follows:

> HOLY Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the holy Scripture we do understand those Canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.[2]

As self-explanatory, however, as such nineteenth century texts may put it, or as forcefully as a twenty-first century ecumenical text such as *The Church – Towards a Common Vision* may formulate it,[3] while noting the issue of the interrelationship between Scripture and Tradition, such authority has ceased to be self-evident, or, rather, maybe it is precisely ecumenical theologizing about the interrelationship between Scriptural text and reading community that brings to light the character of Scripture's authority as one that has been questioned time and again (cf. the concerns of the apologetics of the early Church fathers, the exegetical efforts of the Middle Ages, the scholarly scrutiny of Humanists and Reformers, the questions raised by Enlightenment critics, and the concerns of contemporary post-secular scholars); and, accordingly, one that is in need of reformulation for every age anew.[4] That such reformulations may be full of surprises can be documented abundantly, be it with reference to the rediscovery of the canon as a relevant literary and exegetical

2 See also the Chicago Quadrilateral (1886): 'As inherent parts of this sacred deposit, and therefore as essential to the restoration of unity among the divided branches of Christendom, we account the following, to wit: The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the revealed Word of God': e.g. in Peter-Ben Smit, *Tradition in Dialogue: The Concept of Tradition in International Anglican Bilateral Dialogues* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2012), p. 24.

3 Commission on Faith and Order (World Council of Churches), *The Church – Towards a Common Vision* (Geneva: WCC, 2012), par. 11: 'All Christians share the conviction that Scripture is normative, therefore the biblical witness provides an irreplaceable source for acquiring greater agreement about the Church.'

4 For a recent overview and discussion, see, e.g., Ulrich Luz, *Theologische Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2014). The need for and reception of new theologies of Scripture, such as Karl Barth's, are also a case in point; see for instance: Ulrich H.J. Körtner, *Theologie des Wortes Gottes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), pp. 32–35.

phenomenon,[5] or to the Scriptural inspiration of plenty of 'prefigurative' communities, religious or secular.[6] In what follows, I will sketch the contours of the phenomenon of 'authority' *in* the New Testament first and then move on to the question of the authority *of* the New Testament. The two are interrelated, to be sure, and the first largely determines the content of the second, even if the second has its own characteristics as well. Given the breadth of the topic and the limited space and time that are available, I will restrict myself to an essayistic outline, with limited references, rather than to a full treatment of the subject, which would go widely beyond the confines of this contribution. This also means that not all possibly relevant authors can be mentioned, let alone done full justice to.

Authority in the New Testament

The question of authority in the New Testament has formal and material aspects. The latter explicate what the former stand in the service of. Formally, all authority in the New Testament that is fully positively evaluated is from God and typically pertains to the characters that the narrative invites readers to identify with and/or the authors of the New Testament writings and their viewpoint. A key term associated with authority is ἐξουσία, as it is used in a text like Mark 1:22: ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων καὶ οὐχ ὡς οἱ γραμματεῖς; but other ways of claiming authority, such as in the Pauline letters, or indicating it, such as in the Gospel narratives, the story of Acts and the Revelation

5 See Peter-Ben Smit, *From Canonical Criticism to Ecumenical Exegesis? A Study in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Leiden: Brill: 2015).

6 Prefigurative communities and prefigurative politics engage in the (usually communal) performance of utopian societal ideals, in doing so, they 'prefigure' what they think society at large should be like. Examples range from the Jesus movement, by way of the late-Medieval Brethren of the Common Life, to twentieth-century communes with a socialist inspiration, the 'Occupy' movement, to contemporary neo-monastic communities. Also movements such as IS, however unpalatable they are, can be analysed from the perspective of prefigurative politics. See for a classic study (kind reference of Dr. Ernst van den Hemel, Utrecht University): Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (rev. ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). See further on prefigurative politics: Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzelini, *They can't represent us!: Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy* (London: Verso, 2014); Andrew Cornell, *Oppose and Propose: Lessons from Movement for a New Society* (Edinburgh: AK, 2013). See on anarchist politics and ecclesiology also: Theo Hobson, *Anarchy, Church and Utopia: Rowan Williams on Church* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2005).

of John exist as well. Such divine authority is mediated: be it to Jesus through the Spirit, e.g., in the narratives of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan; be it through Jesus to others, such as his disciples in the Gospel narratives; be it by the Spirit, associated with Jesus after Jesus' glorification, or by those endowed with the authority of God's Spirit that now also mediates Jesus and his authority, to others, such as in the pastorals. At least when following the flow of the various texts themselves, it is all about the one and same authority, which is variously mediated and constructed. True authority is therefore, always the authority of God, Christ, and the Spirit and those exercising authority need to perform and embody this life-giving authority, or they fall short of having any real authority at all. Paul's patterning of his own life after that of Christ in his letters is one significant indication of this, given that it serves to underpin this credibility and authority, when addressing his churches.[7] Besides that, this means all authority in the New Testament is, in one way or the other, derived from divine authority; furthermore, it also means that any opposition between charism and institution falls away, at least as a matter of principle.[8] It is also true, however, that those formally, even divinely, endowed with authority are held to exercise this authority in line with its source, otherwise it is, sooner or later, revealed to be less than authentic and, consequently, authoritative. This is a major theme in the prophetic tradition that continues in the New Testament in the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth.[9] This also means that authority and its exercise does always need to be received and validated;[10] therefore, authority and its exercise should always assume some kind of 'synodality', in the sense that a broader group of people needs to receive the exercise of authority, analogous to what takes place in formal episcopal-synodal structures.[11] But

7 See for a further substantiation of this the exegesis of Paul's letter to the Philippians, Peter-Ben Smit, *Paradigms of Being in Christ: Paul's Use of Exempla in Philippians*, Library of New Testament Studies (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013).

8 See also Peter-Ben Smit, 'A Note on Early Christian Associations and the Development of Offices in Early Christianity,' *Teologia* 56:3 (2013), pp. 48–65.

9 See: James A. Sanders, '"Nor do I …": A Canonical Reading of the Challenge to Jesus in John 8,' in: B.R. Gaventa and R.T. Fortna (eds), *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul and John in Honor of J. Louis Martyn* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), pp. 337–347.

10 See on this also the considerations of the Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue, *The Church of the Triune God* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2006), par. IX.12: 'Reception cannot be imposed by authority, since the authority of truth is recognised in and through communion.'

11 This understanding of synodality and its relation to the reception of authoritative acts and decisions derives from the ecclesiological preamble to the statute of the International Bishops' Conference of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht,

what the nature of this 'synodality' is, depends on the kind of authority that is exercised, that is to say whether it empowers or subjects people.

This consideration leads to a further observation: authority is not only a property to be associated with leaders, even if it is a logical step to make. Saying that the effective exercise of leadership depends to a large extent on its reception by those who are being led also means that such a group or community has authority and that there is always a kind of 'synodality' in play, more or less formal and effective in nature, and that there is, accordingly an exchange going on between the leader and led – all this is no more than another way of stating what Paul says much more eloquently in texts such as 1 Cor. 12, utilizing the metaphor of the body, to argue that all members of the community have been endowed with χαρίσματα, including the gift of formal leadership (see v. 28). The head of the body just as its various members, in positions of leadership or not, have been given the Spirit and possess, therefore, various kinds of authority vis-à-vis each other and the challenge that Paul addresses is more concerned with the right ordering of it all than with arguing that some do and some do not have that from which true authority derives, such as the gift of the Spirit, or a divine commissioning.[12] If this may serve as a sketch of formal contours of authority in the New Testament writings (and other early Christian writings, to be sure), then an attempt can be made at outlining some of the material characteristics of such authority and its exercise, which will also flesh out the meaning of these formal characteristics somewhat.

The connection between formal and material aspects of authority in the New Testament has its source in the fact that all (legitimate) authority in the New Testament stems from the God of Israel. This fills the concept of authority with both form and content. The formal part has everything to do with authority

---

as it was published in: Urs von Arx and Maja Weyermann (eds), *Statut der Internationalen Altkatholischen Bischofskonferenz* (IBK)*: Offizielle Ausgabe in fünf Sprachen* (Bern: Stämpfli, 2001). It is consonant with an understanding of reception as put forward by the Anglican-Orthodox dialogue, e.g. in *The Church of the Triune God: The Cyprus Agreed Statement of the International Commission for Anglican–Orthodox Theological Dialogue* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2006).

12 It seems that on a very basic level, Paul assumes that all members of the body have received the Spirit, albeit in a variety of ways and resulting in a variety of 'charisms'. See for this, e.g., the interrelation between the notion of the body and the gift of the Spirit in 1 Cor. 12. It is in fact the gift of the Spirit that turns persons into members of the body; all of the members have been 'soaked' (verse 13) by one Spirit. The (unifying) gift of the Spirit to all for the benefit of all is the counterpoint to the diversity of the body that Paul also seeks to underline and value.

stemming from this and no other deity, which has all sorts of consequences; of course, its content has to do also with the character of this deity, which governs its exercise and effects. The contours of the latter become apparent in the various narrations of the work of Jesus and its continuation in that of Paul and the others exercising ministries of authority and oversight in the nascent Jewish sect that would evolve into present-day Christianity. In their most succinct form, these contours are those of a new creation,[13] which manifests itself in a community of (communities of) people which has a healing and life giving character, a renewed humanity *qua* people of God *qua* renewed and reconstituted Israel, in other words, prefiguring the consummation of a new creation, the eschatological hope of early and present-day Christianity. As such, just like other utopian communities, early Christian communities, established through the exercise of divine authority by Jesus and his representatives, indeed have a prefigurative character and engage in prefigurative politics of a particular kind.

In this connection, it may be helpful to point to a distinction between types of power and authority that Strecker has underlined in relation to the early Christian way of dealing with the crucifixion. He discerned on the one hand a type of authority that is based on the power to destruct and destroy (*Souveränitätsmacht*) and on the other a kind of authority that is based on the power to transform and make alive (*Biomacht*).[14] From this perspective, he argues that, in early Christian theology and praxis, the ritual appropriation of Jesus' death (e.g., in baptism and in the Eucharist) turned the crucifixion, the epitome of the power to kill and destroy, into an instrument of the power to transform and make alive.[15] Thus, God's (and Jesus') authority in the New Testament rests on the power to overcome the power of death by means of the power to give life. Such power is the characteristic of Jesus' authority and is what is experienced as a reality in early Christian communities. This reality is as spiritual as it is social: it is about restoring people to life; about, for example, the reintegration

13 I am indebted here to the work of my doctoral student Christian Hølmgaard, Copenhagen, who in his dissertation emphasizes the importance of this notion in the Gospel of Matthew.

14 Naturally, these two terms could be defined differently, but here Strecker's definitions are followed; his distinction serves a heuristic purpose.

15 Christian Strecker, 'Macht – Tod – Leben – Körper: Koordinaten einer Verortung der frühchristlichen Rituale Taufe und Abendmahl', in Gerd Theißen and Petra von Gemünden (eds), *Erkennen und Erleben* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagsbuchhaus, 2007), pp. 133–153; p. 152: 'mit der rituellen Aneignung des Kreuzestodes Jesu [wird] eine öffentliche Hinrichtung, das Schlüsselritual der antiken Souveränitätsmacht, letztlich in den Dienst des heilvollen Lebens gestellt.'

of a person into a community and thus the (re)creation of community, the defeat of all powers that deny life and life in communion with oneself, one's neighbor, and God in particular, in sum: about reconciliation. Other authorities do exist, but only this one is valid and, ultimately, truly authoritative. With this, some contours of authority in the New Testament have been outlined.

The Authority of the New Testament

The authority of the New Testament, i.e., the authority that has been attributed to it in the course of history through a complex interplay of texts' claims of authority for themselves in particular situations, the reception of this authority, and its extension to other situations through the reception of some of these texts as canonical, involves a number of aspects, three of which will be covered here. All three of these aspects relate to the core of all authority in and of the New Testament: the authoritative, liberating, even if sometimes contested, communication of the divine and its perspective on the reality. In other words: this is the authority of divine revelation, mediated through the Scriptures. The three topics that will be addressed briefly here are: (1) the authority of the New Testament in terms of its character as a witness; (2) the authority of the New Testament *qua* canonical texts; (3) the interrelationship between the authority of the New Testament and communal praxis.

Witness

Witness is the category often used to encapsulate the interrelationship between the texts of the New Testament (and Scripture at large) and the revelation that took (and takes?) place in God's history with God's people. In Old Catholic theology, for example Andreas Rinkel (1889–1979, Archbishop of Utrecht 1937–1970), who shaped this discourse in the mid-twentieth century, highlighted this notion,[16] which itself is present in a number of ways in Scripture as well; one could point to various instances in which the disciples and also Jesus Christ are referred to as witnesses, in the Gospels, just as much as in the Epistles and in

16 See: Peter-Ben Smit, 'An Old Catholic View of Scripture and Tradition: A Short Study of a Theological Organism', *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 97 (2007), pp. 106–123. Rinkel also used the Dutch 'oorkonde' ('charter'); see Andreas Rinkel, *Dogmatische Theologie* 1 (Amersfoort, 1956), p. 145.

the Book of Revelation.[17] For the authority of the New Testament, this means that it has authority as Scripture as long as it is interpreted in relation to what has authority in the Scriptural texts, namely the God of Israel, who creatively liberates people from all sorts of idols, entailing enslavement and estrangement from themselves, others, and God, and reconciles them into communion with Godself and each other, even to the extent of and (therefore) through the process of raising Jesus from the dead, initially gathering them in a community (of communities) that in its life prefigures the consummation of the reconciliation and redemption of the entirety of creation.[18] In this way, the authority of Scripture is analogous to persons bearing divine authority. As an authoritative written witness to divine revelation itself, Scripture has also become itself part of the historical process of revelation, given that it provides access to the contents of revelation through its witnessing to it. At the same time, the notion of 'witness' also prevents one from identifying revelation with Scripture, but, just as the church as a community refers to God who transcends the church, Scripture refers to God's revelation that transcends the witnesses to it. Similarly, just as the church embodies what it means to be the people of God, the Scriptures also embody and, when read 'correctly' also participate in performing what it means to be a true witness – form and content are, in this particular case, closely bound together. This form, to be sure, encapsulates more than just that of the individual writings, as has become increasingly significant in the study of religious Scriptures again: they are canonical texts and as such part of the cultural memory of a community.[19] For this reason, the New Testament (and further Scriptural) texts in terms of their character as canonical texts needs to be considered as well, given that it is in this form that they are authoritative.

17 See, e.g., the essays collected in William Horbury and Brian McNeil (eds), *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament: Studies presented to G.M. Styler by the Cambridge New Testament Seminar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

18 This has the corollary that interpretations that further life are 'authentic,' on which, see Peter-Ben Smit, 'The Meaning of "Life." An Essay in Ecumenical Hermeneutics', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 43 (2008), pp. 320–332.

19 The work of Jan and Aleida Assmann has contributed enormously to this development; see, e.g., Jan Assmann, *Fünf Stufen auf dem Wege zum Kanon: Tradition und Schriftkultur im frühen Judentum und seiner Umwelt* (Münster: LIT, 1999). Cultural memory is a topic of its own that cannot be pursued here at any length. For an outline in relation to the New Testament, see Sandra Hübenthal, *Das Markusevangelium als kollektives Gedächtnis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), pp. 77–155.

The Authority of Canonical Texts

While the process of canon formation, which, as becomes apparent from more recent research, is anything but extrinsic to the now scriptural texts,[20] a much debated question is still what is the significance of this is for scriptural interpretation and, as a matter of consequence, for its authority.[21] Two particular issues need to be highlighted: the canonical form of the New Testament and the diversity contained within it. Both of them have everything to do with the interrelationship between form and content, as the previous section stressed.

First, the canonical form and status of the New Testament and the Scriptures as a whole implies that they also function as canonical texts, part of the cultural memory of the Church, and therefore as texts with a particular authority in a community of interpretation; examples of how such authority could be described in confessional traditions and ecumenical documents were given in the introduction. As soon as a community of interpretation ascribes canonical authority to a body of texts, or accepts such authority, this means for the interpretation of these texts that their exegesis can never be considered as completed by an historical analysis of their original setting only – however mandatory, this would not be to interpret them as canonical texts at all, but, as far as the New Testament writings are concerned, as the disparate literary remains of an early Jewish Messiah-confessing sect in the margins of Mediterranean society. In fact, the existence of the New Testament as a canon demands that its contents be related to new communities of interpretation time and again. This leads to a somewhat paradoxical observation concerning the authority of the canonical Scriptures: they are only authoritative in ever new (and ever developing) interpretations.[22] Fixedness in terms of meaning is

20 See, e.g., the argument of Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); see also the work of James A. Sanders, e.g., *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text, Canon as Paradigm* (Philadephia: Fortress, 1987), especially 'Biblical Criticism and the Bible as Canon', 'Canonical Context and Canonical Criticism' and 'From Sacred Story to Sacred Text' (pp. 75–86, 153–174, 175–191), as well as Smit, *Criticism*. To be sure, also all the writings that have not been included in the current scriptural canon(s) of Christianity are part of this process, they only ended up in a different spot, even if some of them currently enjoy much esteem and authority precisely because they are *not* part of the canonical Scriptures; the Gospel of Thomas would be a case in point.

21 For this and what follows, see Peter-Ben Smit, *De canon – een oude katholieke kerkstructuur?* (Utrecht: Utrecht University Press, 2011) and idem, *Criticism*.

22 See Lawrence H. Schiffman, 'The Reception of the Bible in Ancient Judaism' (paper presented at the EABS/SBL International Meeting, Vienna, 7 July 2014). This could also be taken to mean that a canon is always self-deconstructing with regard to its own stability.

not an inherent characteristic of canonical texts – not even in a fundamentalist interpretation. This has all sorts of consequences for the interrelationship of Scripture and tradition,[23] amongst others, it means that Scripture always pertains to a reading community with its traditions and conventions of interpretation (such as the early Church's 'rule of faith').[24] But, given the focus of this paper on the question of authority, it is more important to stress that the authority of the canonical Scriptures of Christianity needs to become apparent, or even 'performed', through ever new interpretations, which also uproot existing reading conventions, albeit slowly, relating the texts to ever new communities of interpretation. This also means that the authority of canonical texts is bound to a process of reception, which implies a kind of synodality, in the sense that the texts can only be authoritative in a community of interpretation that indeed interprets them as such in a way that is meaningful to them. This is a risky procedure to be sure, for as liberating and reconciling the witness of Scripture purports to be, just as strong are the idols of every age in which Scripture is interpreted leading to the danger of turning Scripture into a ventriloquist's puppet for one's own desires. Nonetheless, and somewhat paradoxically, such contextual, meaningful, and risky acts of interpretation are essential for the process of reception of Scripture as an authoritative text. Even if one can speak, and rightly so, of the infinite translatability of Christianity (and, with that, of Scripture), one assumes that there is something to be translated even if it may only become apparent (again) in the process of translation.[25]

In this vein, one could begin to think of a 'kenotic' authority of Scripture, in which the Scriptures and their received interpretation always stand at the service of new translations of the text, both literally and figuratively, and need to empty themselves in order to fulfill this function.

23 On which the insights of the Orthodox-Old Catholic dialogue are quite apt; see Urs von Arx (ed.), *Koinonia auf altkirchlicher Basis: Deutsche Gesamtausgabe der gemeinsamen Texte des orthodox-altkatholischen Dialogs 1975–1987 mit französischer und englischer Übersetzung* (Bern: Stämpfli, 1989), pp. 174–175 and 194–195.

24 See on this, e.g., Peter-Ben Smit, 'Wegweiser zu einer kontextuellen Exegese? Eine Miszelle zu einem Nebeneffekt der kanonischen Hermeneutik von Brevard S. Childs', *Theologische Zeitschrift* 62 (2006), pp. 17–24, as well as idem, *Criticism*.

25 On the infinite translatability of the Christian faith, c.q. Scripture, see Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (rev. ed., Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009). See also: John Rogerson, 'Can a Translation of the Bible be Authoritative?' in: Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem van Henten (eds), *Bible Translation on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Authority, Reception, Culture and Religion* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 17–30.

At the same time, there is more to the reception of Scripture than just interpretation through the agency of a reading community. This has everything to do with the fact that Scripture, as a canonical text, is part of a tradition and is, by definition, offered, given to the reading community as well (tradition – *tradere*). As in the case of each and every gift this transaction includes an element of otherness: Scripture comes from a chronological (and cultural) beyond (all the previous contexts of Scripture) and needs to be encountered and appropriated in a new and different setting, a process that is, in fact, very formative in nature (as the encounter with the other always is) and potentially a catalyst for communion and reconciliation across cultures and contexts,[26] while it also refers to the transcendent beyond, God. The canonical authority of Scripture is, therefore, also bound up with at least two kinds of otherness that can never be fully subdued by the agency of the reading community.

(1) The physical difference between the Scriptural text, especially when presented in a lavishly decorated edition, venerated in the liturgy, providing the text for the public reading of the Scriptures, and physically handed down from one generation to the other, and the community that reads it, despite all intertextual exchange that takes place, the community that reads itself into Scripture and Scriptural narrative that is understood through the narrative of the community, serves as an indication of this otherness as well.
(2) Precisely the fact that the Scriptures are canonical and therefore part of tradition endow it with a surplus of otherness that cannot be negated. This otherness is of importance to safeguard to role of Scripture as a witness to the great Other seeking communion with creation and humankind, an enterprise that is predicated on otherness as well. Otherness enables reconciliation, identity does not. (Reading Scripture as Scripture means also embracing otherness; the canonical texts are the reading community´s familiar `other´, who remains a stranger, but one to which one also belongs.)

Against this background, it makes sense to consider the role of the canonical Scriptures as making this Other visible to those engaging the Scriptures and to consider its canonical authority to stand in the service of precisely that epiphanic process, not unlike the authority of those leading the church, standing in

26 On the formative and transformative nature of encountering Scripture and the other see, e.g., the essays collected in Hans de Wit and Janet Dyk (eds), *Bible and Transformation: The Promise of Intercultural Bible Reading* (Atlanta: SBL, 2015).

the service of precisely such an epiphany of God to the church.[27] This then, points to an understanding of the functioning of the canonical and therefore both familiar and strange texts along the lines of a sacramental theology or the theology of the icon, albeit that it concerns not a sacrament made of matter or an icon made of egg pigments and wood, but rather one that is made of human language. In other words, it might make sense to conceptualize the authority of Scripture, when functioning truly as Scripture, i.e., as the canonical witness to God as an icon that makes God visible in the mode of material, in this case: linguistic mediation.[28] The authority of Scripture is in this case clearly its authority as a witness that enables access to the one it bears witness to. Ideally, this is the God of Israel. As in all encounter, this encounter also implies transformation, which could be called conversion.

The diversity of the scriptural canon also has a role to play when it comes to matters of interpretation and authority. That the canonical writings are diverse needs not to be argued here, but what this diversity might mean for the process of interpretation and the authority of Scripture does. While there is a venerable tradition of thought that associates the diversity and difference in the New Testament with the unreliability of its witness and hence seeks to harmonize the various narratives implied by it (e.g., the history of Jesus and of

27 See also Rowan Williams, 'Authority and the Bishop in the Church', in Mark Santer (ed.), *Their Lord and Ours: Approaches to Authority, Community, and the Unity of the Church* (London: SPCK, 1982), pp. 90–112.

28 See on this, e.g. Simon Crisp, 'Icon of the Ineffable? An Orthodox View of Language and its Implications for Bible Translation', in Brenner and Van Henten (eds), *Translation*, pp. 36–47; p. 42: 'In Orthodox understanding the text of Scripture functions in a way more analogous to an icon, namely as a window onto another world, rather than as a source of propositionally expressed information …Orthodox tradition views language as an intrinsically inadequate tool for comprehending the holy, and therefore as performing verbally a symbolic role analogous to that enacted visually by icons. Just as the icon makes no claim to be a photographic – or even essentially pictorial – depiction of the scene or event it represents, but rather a window onto the timeless reality to which it testifies and a mysterious means of mediating that reality to the worshipper, so the language of Scripture cannot be a series of logical propositions with a single intended meaning; instead, "it is intentionally polyvalent, having several intended meanings, because what is being communicated is generally too complex to be communicated in clear and simple statements. It is not that kind of language."' (Mary Sanford, 'An Orthodox View of Biblical Criticism', *Sourozh* 26 (1986), pp. 25–32, 31; see further also idem, 'Scholarly Methods of New Testament Interpretation and their Reception by Orthodox Scholarship', in James D.G. Dunn Hans Klein, Ulrich Luz and Vasile Mihoc (eds), *Auslegung der Bibel in orthodoxer und westlicher Perspektive* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), pp. 123–141.

Paul) and to systematize its thought world,[29] it is also possible to consider the diverse canon of the New Testament as an indication of a particular concept of both unity and of authority. The unity and diversity in the scriptural canon can, in this way, serve as an inspiration for thinking about a communion of churches with the same characteristics (rather than as a legitimization of confessional diversity and lack of communion, as Ernst Käsemann seems to have argued;[30] he, however, as a typical representative of his generation of exegetes, did not consider the feature of the canon to be of any importance at all).[31] Here, however, not the matter of unity, but rather that of authority is of interest. This, again, has to do with the kind of witness that the New Testament provides and the kind of interaction with which it invites a community of interpretation to. In particular Michael Wolter has argued in this respect that the New Testament's diversity is not so much a problem, but rather a resource, when taken on its own terms, rather than on the terms of a preconceived notion of what an authoritative text should look like (e.g., singular, consistent, containing one story and point of view). This leads him to argue that the diversity found in the canon of the New Testament and in early Christianity at large is not to be seen as the lamentable loss of an original and pristine unity, but much rather as the way in which the Christian witness and confession functioned from its onset: as a witness that needed to be reformulated in highly contextual processes of sense making, necessary for the reception of the message of salvation. The meaning of the Christ event is, therefore, never fixed, but rediscovered and redescribed time and again.[32]

29 On which, see, e.g., Watson, *Gospel*.

30 As Ernst Käsemann (1906–1998) was, both in his day and afterwards, one of the most influential New Testament scholars of the twentieth century, his arguments carried considerable weight and many have sought to respond to his challenge. See, e.g., J.D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

31 Rowan Williams, 'The Unity of the Church and the Unity of the Bible: An Analogy', *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 91 (2001), pp. 5–21. See also the argument in Smit, *Criticism*.

32 Michael Wolter, 'Die Vielfalt der Schrift und die Einheit des Kanons', in John Barton and Michael Wolter (eds), *Die Einheit der Schrift und die Vielfalt des Kanons* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), pp. 45–68; p. 55: 'Die Ausdifferenzierung des einen Bekenntnisses in unterschiedliche und miteinander konkurrierende Heilskonzepte einschließlich ihrer lebensweltlichen Implikationen [darf] nicht als Verlust einer ursprünglichen Einheit verstanden werden, sondern [ist] ein integraler Bestandteil der Plausibilität des Bekenntnisses selbst gewesen, ohne die die Rezeption der christlichen Heilsbotschaft nicht möglich gewesen wäre. Was das Zeugnis vom Christusereignis konkret bedeutet (d.h. mit welchen Zeichen diesem Zeugnis welche Bedeutung zugeschrieben wird) steht nicht von vornherein fest, sondern wird in kontextabhängigen Bedeutungsprozessen ausverhandelt; das wird im

All of this is reflected in the earliest Christian witnesses. The canonized Scriptures, including the four gospels, therefore, do not reflect and pass on one stable Christian identity; rather, they bear witness to the (conflictuous) search for it, as evidenced by the disagreements between the various texts,[33] all of which seek to 'seduce' the reader by their varied use of captivating narrative, forceful argument, and enticing poetry – there certainly is literary power and authority in the texts themselves too!

While this certainly may sound relativistic *vis-à-vis* views of early Christianity as possessing a stable identity, it is anything but that, given that this view of canonical diversity does, in fact, not so much relativize as change the notion of the identity of early Christianity and its unity; unity and identity become more fluid, more processes than fixed forms.[34] Unity is more like a musical composition (intended for the praise of God), with a diversity of voices and even including dissonants, than like something else. For the canonized New Testament, this means that not so much a hopelessly diverse collection of texts has been assembled, nor that their messages really can or even should be harmonized in the end, but rather that (canonical and hence normative!) room for the negotiation of identity appears.[35] The kind of identity that is presented as normative by the canon of the New Testament, notably by the conflicting claims and witnesses of the four gospels, is therefore, an identity that in itself contains dialogue, struggle and even conflict with regard to this very identity and, in fact, establishes itself precisely in this manner.[36] When maintaining a dialogue with Wolter's considerations here, this also leads to a further consequence for the canonicity of texts: when a text is considered canonical, this does not only mean that it is normative, but also that a text does not stand on its own anymore, but is canonical only as part of an ensemble of texts and, therefore, in dialogue with other texts. The individual text is not canonical, but the dialogue (or conflict) between them is canonical – and

Kanon dokumentiert.' Compare also Childs' emphasis on the fourfold witness of the four canonical gospels in Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 262. In a lecture delivered on 4 September 2015 at VU University Amsterdam, Prof. John Behr seemed to argue something analogous, when he proposed to move from the notion of a (neo-patristic) synthesis to a notion of 'harmony' or 'symphony', which, although also pointing to a unity, leaves more room for diversity.

33 See Judith Gruber, *Theologie nach dem Cultural Turn: Interkulturalität als theologische Ressource* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2013).

34 Wolter, 'Vielfalt', p. 55.

35 See: Gruber, *Theologie*, p. 19.

36 See Gruber, *Theologie*, p. 20.

therefore also productive.[37] All of this, it seems, can be brought into dialogue again rather productively with insights gained from the study of the canon as a literary phenomenon, i.e. as a collection of texts that productively interact with one another in a double new context: that of the canon as a body of texts and that of a (new) interpretative community,[38] which in interaction with one another, guided by certain interpretative rules, which are themselves also open to negotiation, seek to reformulate and reconstitute the identity of this group.

Reflection on the question of the authority of New Testament texts *qua* canonical texts thus leads to both a further understanding of what it means for the authority of New Testament texts to be read as canonical texts, i.e., to be as authoritative only in ever new interpretations, through an ongoing process of reception by communities of interpretation, and to an interpretation of the authority of the New Testament *qua* diverse corpus of texts in terms of an invitation to join in the dialogical (and potentially conflictual) search for identity in Christ. This search is formulated ever anew in dialogue, and hence continuity, with earlier stages of this process in different times and places—thus also forming and shaping the present readers though the encounter with the (historically and/or culturally distant) other.[39] At this juncture, it is useful to consider a final aspect of the authority of the New Testament (and of Scriptural texts at large): their authority as it is communicated through the performance

37 See Wolter, 'Vielfalt', p. 65, Gruber, *Theologie*, pp. 20, 25–26; see further also Judith M. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), pp. 2–3: 'Texts do not simply reflect a "history" going on independently of them, they are themselves part of the process by which … Christianity came into being. For it was through literature that … a self-understanding was shaped and articulated, and then mediated to and appropriated by others, and through literature that people and ideas were included or excluded. What the texts were doing is sometimes as, if not more, important than what they were saying.'

38 See, e.g., Egbert Ballhorn, 'Das historische und das kanonische Paradigma in der Exegese. Ein Essay', in Georg Steins and Egbert Ballhorn (eds), *Der Bibelkanon in der Bibelauslegung: Beispielexegesen und Methoden-reflexion* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), pp. 9–30, at p. 13, even if one must be critical of the sharp distinction he makes between the 'unhistorical' scholarship of the early church that relied more on the rule of faith and modern day historical scholarship that does not do so. Rather, both kinds of exegesis included elements of both historical information (and curiosity) and, *nolens volens*, elements of a 'rule of faith'. See on the latter also Tobias Nicklas, 'Leitfragen leserorientierter Exegese: Methodische Gedanken zu einer "biblischen Auslegung"', in Ballhorn and Steins (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 45–61, at p. 48. The definition of 'canon' offered by Gerd Theißen, *Die Religion der ersten Christen: Eine Theorie des Urchristentums* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, ^{3}2003), pp. 341–2, suits this well.

39 See De Wit and Dyk (eds), *Bible.*

of identity in and witness to Christ (in analogy to the witness of Scripture) in communities of interpretation, that is to say: churches.

Authority and Praxis

A very brief summary of this aspect of the authority of the New Testament would be that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The pudding at stake is the authority of the New Testament (and the rest of Scripture) as it is apparent from the performance of the witness that these Scriptures seek to communicate by communities of interpretation. That is to say: the embodiment of the witness of the Scriptures by churches in and through their lives as communities of reconciliation is the factual shape of the churches' interpretation of the Scriptures and that what is or is not regarded as authoritative. Put briefly: authority depends on praxis; what claims authority is in the end a praxis, the life of a community interpreting Scripture through its life. What the Scriptures mean in actual practice can be observed in the life of a community of faith (with its dimensions of service, witness, and worship) and as a community of reconciliation.[40] What church is and means is, to a substantial extent, communicated by actual churches, even if the churches' being does not depend on such performances of identity in Christ (similar to the traditional catholic view that the validity of sacraments does not depend on the worthiness of the celebrant, they are valid *ex opere operato* not *ex opera operantis*). In analogy to this, it can be said that what Scriptures are, is largely communicated along these lines, with all sorts of consequences for the kind of authority that they have, both in fact and in terms of content, even if the Scriptures always contain a surplus of meaning and are, as material objects, not fully dependent on their communities of interpretation. Ideally speaking, communities of interpretation continue, in and through their lives, both the life of the earliest communities in Christ, embodying and prefiguring creation's reconciliation with God in Christ. They do this inspired by the Scriptures, which they receive as authoritative canonical Scriptures, identifying with the ongoing search for what it means to live in Christ that is enshrined in them. Thus they are interpreting the Scriptures through their lives of witness, worship, and service and in relation to their own place, time, culture, and its particular forms of

40 This was, for instance, emphasized by the Swiss Old Catholic theologian Kurt Stalder, on whose ideas, see, e.g., Mattijs Ploeger, *Celebrating Church: Ecumenical Contributions to a Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Groningen/Tilburg: Instituut voor Liturgie-weten-schap/ Liturgisch Instituut, 2006), pp. 201–2.

idolatry, enslavement, and its particular need for liberation and reconciliation. Scriptural interpretation is, therefore, in its fullest form, communal performance in the Spirit and part of a community's following of Christ – as it is all implied by the liturgical reading of the Scriptures. What authority such Scripture has, is therefore also communicated through this performance (in which professional theologians and exegetes play an important role, but to which 'ordinary' readers of Scripture contribute just as much). In order to work out what this means, the dialogue with the secular, post-secular, but certainly also post-Christendom world in which we live, can be beneficial, given that it holds churches accountable and,[41] in doing so, offers the opportunity to once again perform the Scriptures in such a way that they may indeed be forceful witness to God's revelation and, by virtue of this revelation's appeal and quality, authoritative. In this way, the church becomes, through performing the witness of Scripture, a symbol (a sacrament) of Christ,[42] and in the process Scripture becomes truly authoritative again, given that it too offers a vision of God now, also in the mode of an icon or symbol.[43]

Conclusions

With this, I have offered some contours of what the notion of authority in the New Testament, as an aspect of the authority of the Church and of God's revelation as mediated in and through Jesus Christ, amounts to and what the authority of the New Testament might mean. Common to both is that it is in the end all about the authority of God's reconciling and life-giving revelation and its mediation in line with its content, which is none other than that of divine compassion. Authority *in* the New Testament is the authority of God in Christ,

41 See, e.g., Rowan Williams, 'The Judgement of the World', in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999), pp. 29–43.

42 See also: Rowan Williams, 'The Church as Sacrament,' *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 10 (2010), pp. 6–12.

43 As an aside, reference can be made here to the view of John Milbank that the 'copies' or later performances of the Christ narrative are no less real than the 'original' or the earlier performances. They are just as real and the creativity necessary to arrive at them is inherent to the process by virtue of which the church remains the church – or rather, becomes the church – time and again. For this insight, I am indebted to the presentation of Sjoerd Mulder, MA, in the PhD Seminar in Systematic Theology and Ethics of the Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER) on 12 January 2016 (Utrecht); see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (London: Routledge, ²2006), pp. 295–317.

mediated by the Spirit, which makes the authoritative force of life that is stronger than death present and enables a life in communion that is in accordance with that. The exercise of such authority by its bearers in the community always depends on the community's reception; an interplay between authority and its reception is essential. The authority *of* the New Testament consists of its role as a witness to this authority, which it becomes when it is authentically used, in line with its contents in terms of witnessing to the God of life. The diversity that can be found in the New Testament canon constitutes a resource, rather than a hindrance in this respect, given that it encourages a communal process of discernment, rather than the acceptance of a monolithic, clear cut picture of identity in Christ.