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Authority of the Bible

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The Ground of Freedom.

For Both Sanders and Brown¹, tradition is irreducibly pluralistic, equivocal and the work-in-progress of an ever-ongoing process of change. Both our authors analyze the concept of a canon in depth and work to understand the way canon and tradition stand in relationship with each other. Sanders works through the discipline of Canonical Criticism, a yet forming branch (in 1978 when the book was originally published) of Biblical Studies. Canonical Criticism sees itself as the discipline which can take the work done by the various other Biblical Studies disciplines and use them to re-present the Bible to worshipping communities as something relevant, viable and formative. By working to understand how the canon (not strictly limited to the Biblical material in Sanders' assessment, but this is where his focus is) was formed as it currently stands and what meaning it had for communities in their time, Sanders hopes to return the Bible to the chapel lectern, away from the study of the scholar.²

1. James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A guide to Canonical Criticism*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000).

Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction*, (New York, SUNY Press, 1994).

2. Sanders, 40.

Whereas the goal of the various critical disciplines has been to find the original meaning, the goal of Canonical Criticism is to identify why certain texts were chosen, considered authoritative, and ultimately why they continue to be read in this way. “Biblical Criticism has established itself and its legitimacy largely on its developing ability to explain Scripture. [. . .] This has meant the recovery of the original intent of the author or the understanding of the original audience.”³ Canonical Criticism, on the other hand, seeks to see the canon diachronically, at each stage along its line of evolution and transmission.

While Sanders’ work is in the realm of Biblical studies, Brown’s is philosophical. Brown takes Whitehead’s process metaphysics and aptly applies it to the transmission of tradition from one generation to the next.⁴ Tradition is the given reality of our communal past that we use to form our own self-identity. Tradition is neither absorbed without reflection nor a mere repetition of the past, “the relationship of the human subject and her or his given environment is, in either case, simply ‘causing’ [. . .] nor ‘being caused.’” Tradition and canon are the matter out of which social and self-identities are formed; societies identify themselves through their traditions and individuals identify themselves in relation to their societies by their adoption and rejection of various aspects of the larger tradition. Canon, in Brown’s analysis is the more stable content of a culture’s tradition. In the shaping of our canon, by shaping and reforming our traditions, we pass on to future generations the legacy of our struggle. Everything that has been done is a part of us. Everything we do will become a part of the future.

3. Sanders, 25.

4. Brown, *Boundaries*, 50.

For Brown, tradition and canon are neither intrinsically good or bad. Traditions can be used to legitimate existing power structures and to liberate the oppressed. Both are equally possible. To evaluate canon as entirely conservative and oppressive, as Foucault (via Derrida) did, is to neglect revolutionary and transformative content in canons. Yet, to focus too much on the liberating content in canons is to ignore how canons have been used to preserve and maintain illegitimate power structures.⁵ Sanders notes that in the bible, “for almost every assertion one can find its contra-positive.”⁶ The canon contains both priestly (conservative) and prophetic (liberating) voices and that the prophetic voices often used priestly materials in making their assertions.⁷ As Brown notes “The claim that canon is used to legitimate the prevailing social order is [. . .] true enough, so far as it goes, but it overlooks the fact that canon also can be, and often is, the tool for subverting regnant dominations.”⁸ To absolutize a canon as either entirely for or against any system is to miss the point of a canon. “The same Word that comforts the afflicted may also afflict the comfortable.”⁹

The drive to find one stable voice, a hermeneutic key, or normative perspective in the bible, is impossible. Looking for something like Marxsen’s Jesus Kerygma is a laudable goal in Historical Criticism, and may even fall in the arena of Canonical Criticism, but it cannot be seen as the once-and-for-all solution to ‘what the Bible means.’ “Elevating the earliest

5. Brown, *Boundaries*, 68.

6. Sanders, 46.

7. Sanders, 52-53.

8. Brown, *Boundaries*, 72.

9. Sanders, 53.

traditions to a normative position requires a justification that is not given.”¹⁰ Any attempt to reconcile all the different voices in the canon, to make them say the same thing, would be impossible. Even getting them to sing in harmony while remaining faithful to each voice’s unique message would be a difficult task, “A unitary, normative Bible does not exist, a normative perspective within the Bible cannot be established; it can only be asserted. [. . .] Opting for one construal allows the interpreter to dismiss data that are utterly crucial for another.”¹¹ Instead of trying to find a single key that makes all the voices speak in agreement, letting each voice speak for itself is the only viable option. But, along with the canonical voices themselves, we also have to listen to the voices that collected and maintained the material, those that lovingly preserved, organized, edited, commented on, and passed down what has become the canons

Canonical Criticism asks “why this?” as well as “what is this?” Given that each generation’s mark is left on the canon and traditions, the theological question of the role of the Holy Spirit in the formation and preservation (and ongoing development) of the canon is very important. Even if the canon is “closed” in that it admits no new writings or authors (wrongly construing canon as nothing other than scripture, neglecting liturgies, rituals, prayer books, jurisdictional decisions, etc.), the super-canon of interpretation and midrash continues through all generations. Even something that seems to reject the canon, such as some of the feminist voices, still must stand in relationship to what is being rejected. If the Holy Spirit is active in each generation (a claim I think few Christians would reject) then the priority of the

10. Delwin Brown, “Struggle till Daybreak: On the Nature of Authority in Theology,” *Journal of Religion*, 65 (1985), p 18.

11. Brown, “Struggle till Daybreak”, 18.

Jesus Kerygma or earliest teachings of the fathers seems to be misplaced.¹² The Kerygma and the fathers rightfully have a voice in the conversation, but they are by no means a trump card that once-and-for-all settles debate.

Given the multi-vocal nature of canons the specter of “the morass of relativism”¹³ looms large. Can a text be made to say anything the reader wants it to say? Brown insists that, even if the boundaries are fluid, they still exist, “though ragged and fractious, canon in each historical circumstance is a force that in varying degrees resists some interpretations and supports others, inhibits some ideals and promotes others, counts for some tendencies and opposes others.”¹⁴ The choice isn’t either one meaning or absolute relativism; ‘either it’s all true or none of it is’ is a spurious assertion. But, rather, there are boundaries to what it does say within a wide berth of valid and possible readings—informed by prior interpretations as well as our own contextual location. Consider an extreme example for a moment, the first commandment cannot possibly be construed as allowing other gods to be worshiped above God, but it may allow the acknowledgement of other gods (“You shall have no god before me”) even though the traditional interpretation has been decidedly monotheistic for millennia. The canon *resists* a polytheistic interpretation but it *forbids* the worship of a god above God.

Whence (the) authority of the canon? For Brown and Sanders, the authority comes from their success in addressing problems. “These multiple ideals, so presented, are thought to

12. The question of the legitimacy of ongoing canon development in other faiths is interesting—Islam and Judaism both have rich midrash traditions even though (especially for Islam) the scriptural canon is explicitly closed.

13. Brown, “Struggle till Daybreak,” 19.

14. Brown, *Boundaries*, 79.

have demonstrated their worth as an evolving community of guides, interlocutors, and adversaries.”¹⁵ Those voices that help are kept in and those that don’t offer anything are eventually discarded or forgotten. That is not to say that the current community agrees with every voice in the canon, but that they are seen as necessary conversation partners. Just as the canon contains a plurality of voices, so do the communities that stand in relation to the canons. Any adequate education requires dealing with voices which stand in sharp contrast to one’s own opinion; steel sharpens steel. Every Jeremiah needs Qoheleth; the duteronomistic principle of balanced reward or punishment for behavior in this lifetime needs Job. Working with a canon should be seen as playful engagement with the canonical material and our individual and corporate lives, “to take on the resources of a tradition is to play within and contribute to its perpetual doing and undoing—to receive and give, honor and challenge, accept and create, continue and change.”¹⁶

At some point, in some communities, certain texts take on a sense of being set apart and sacralized. This process more sharply defines the boundaries as to what is in the canon and dramatically complicates their removal. Sanders calls this a “special aura and sanctity.”¹⁷ But, it is always in community that decisions are made (*de facto* or *de jure*) as to what is canonical—what will be considered in the conversation. More often than not, the decision is *de facto* and one of silence rather than an explicit decision—we simply ignore the texts with which we don’t want to deal or which fail to say anything meaningful to us. Luther’s attempt

15. Brown, *Boundaries*, 79.

16. Brown, *Boundaries*, 88.

17. Sanders, 38.

to remove the Epistle of James from the *de jure* protestant canon may have been unsuccessful but in large measure he did succeed in removing it from the *de facto* canon in much of Protestantism's thought. The "special aura" of the Epistle of James was too strong for Luther to succeed in removing it from the *de jure* canon, but his criticism of it being an epistle of straw still looms whenever the text is considered in protestant circles.

The authority of the canon is the ability to author lives, to engage people in a transformative process through conversation with and about the stories, lives, situations and contexts of the canonical material. One cannot live in America without encountering the reality of scripture's ability to form, transform and deform society even if the "authoritativeness" of the Bible is rejected. The normative power extends beyond those who explicitly grant such authority to the Scriptures—but the converse is also true. Extra-scriptural canons, even secular ones, influence the lives of devout Christian believers. Try as we might, we cannot succeed to remake a culture in our image any more than a culture can fully make us into its image without our participation. We can move to remote Idaho, toss out our TV, home school our children and read only the books of the Bible and yet we will still, negatively, be formed by the culture against which we stand. By providing many of the symbols and content through which we discuss and describe the world, the Bible acts as an authoritative conversation partner (never absolute, but strongly present) calling us to carefully consider our place and path.