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# Inspiration and Authority: Nature and Function of Christian Scripture

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I heartily recommend *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*. It will prove an indispensable source for those needing an introduction and orientation to unfamiliar names and movements that they encounter in footnotes in other texts. For the ambitious reader, here is a spade for deeper digging.

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### **Inspiration and Authority: Nature and Function of Christian Scripture**

Paul J. Achtemeier  
Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999  
166 pages, \$16.50 Softcover

For Christians who are grappling with the “nature and function” of the Bible in the modern world, particularly with a way to think about how Scripture relates to God’s activity in believers’ lives, Achtemeier provides a solid, accessible starting point for consideration. Unconvinced by the doctrine of “factual inerrancy,” but from an admittedly conservative point of view, Achtemeier evaluates both the “liberal” focus on the human origins of Scripture and the “conservative” insistence on God’s role. He questions the assumptions driving each view. In a thoughtful, intelligible and pragmatic manner, he demonstrates how the benefits of critical scholarship can contribute positively to a contemporary Christian understanding of the inspiration of Scripture. Yet, he confirms that Scripture always points beyond itself to the reality of the living God.

Achtemeier develops a model in which the locus of inspiration, rather than being in several inspired individuals or in the words themselves, is in a dynamic, long-term, Spirit-led *process*. In the ancient world, the process involved God’s interaction with the community of faith, which led to the development of Scriptural texts and the formation of the canon. The process of inspiration continues into the present because the content of the Bible offers a transformative experience to

believers in Christian community today. As Achtemeier articulates, “as new situations develop, old traditions are used in new and different ways” (p.69).

Many of the original insights of Achtemeier’s first edition of this book (published under a slightly different title in 1980) are still relevant today. However, in his new chapter on Scriptural authority, Achtemeier fails to engage some important ideas that can affect how we understand the function of Scripture. Achtemeier proposes that the authority of Scripture derives from the fact that Scripture points beyond itself to God. Since God’s actions and will are consistent with Scripture, no experience outside of the content of Scripture can be affirmed as being from God. Perhaps, the implications of this thesis are more complex than Achtemeier has been willing to admit. First, believers in different historical and cultural settings will bring different experiences to their readings of the content of Scripture, and their readings may differ (and have differed). Achtemeier notes that the claim to hear God’s voice must always be subordinate to the biblical witness or else it becomes subjective. However, he does not acknowledge that hermeneutics are always involved in interpreting the biblical witness, and thus involves some element of subjectivity, especially when parts of Scripture can be interpreted in different ways. Certainly there are better and worse interpretations of texts, and God is active in the process, but the human element can create many complexities. In addition, because “authority” necessarily occurs in a community context, one may ask: who is “allowed” (given authority) to interpret the Scriptures within the community?

Overall, Achtemeier presents a thoughtful reflection on how Christians can retain the importance of the inspiration of Scripture without adhering to a dogmatic statement of inerrancy. Though some consideration of power issues in human community and the tension between Scriptural and cultural norms would have made his discussion on authority more realistic and up-to-date, this book provides a solid, comprehensible starting place for considering the “nature and function of Christian Scripture” today.

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