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Texts in Context

A Piece of Scripture on Part of the Bible: Listening to Romans 15:1–6

DAVID E. FREDRICKSON

This is an essay on the nature and authority of Scripture, a hot topic because of the unrealistic but broadly shared expectation that the Bible can settle, with certainty, contentious moral issues. Unfortunately, the fiery prose of those championing the Bible's moral clarity has not brought light. Why not? Our thinking about the Bible has been hampered by large, and largely unhelpful, abstractions about Scripture wheeled out by controversialists to gain the upper hand. Both conservatives and liberals are at fault. Here is an abstraction often employed by both sides in the fray: the Bible is the word of God and you should obey it. Abstractions like this obscure the fact that the Bible has numerous voices uttering competing and even conflicting words of God. Nor should we assume that obedience to God's word is what the Christian tradition at its best has meant by faith in God's word. How do you *obey* a promise? Can Christian faith be *commanded*?

The problem here is so tangled that even my attempt to define it turns for help to an abstraction, which the phrase "nature and authority" most certainly is. Resolute in its will to win out over human reason, "nature and authority" often assumes, like the abstraction mentioned above, that the sacred writings have one nature running through them. Furthermore, the phrase takes advantage of a com-

We think about the Bible best not in abstraction but by looking at particular texts. In Romans 15, Paul, too, looks at a text (Psalm 69) to think about the nature and authority of Scripture.

mon habit of thought in many Christians: the depressing idea that biblical authority implies our yielding in obedience to divine commands. So let me correct myself. This essay is not about the nature and authority of Scripture. Yet it will try to speak about the issues awkwardly and only partially indicated by “nature and authority.” It is difficult to say what these issues are at the outset, and I will no doubt slip back into the customary way of speaking. Perhaps, if we admit that there is a problem even in the way we frame our reflection on biblical interpretation, we may ward off abstraction. This much can be safely said: this is an essay on taking the Bible seriously due to our faith in Christ.

To avoid abstractions, let’s sneak up on just one piece of Scripture. Stealth imposes a discipline upon us, since it discourages us from talking too loudly in general statements such as “the Bible says.” Here is the procedure I propose. We will analyze just one piece of Scripture and listen for the way it summons divine authority from another part of the Bible. Rather than looking for a “nature” that pervades all of Scripture and funds the text’s authority to give us commands, I am proposing that we listen carefully to just one piece of the Bible as it uses another fragment of Scripture to make sense of faith in Christ. I suppose this method might be classified under “What Does the Bible Say about Itself?” This title, however, embodies the very generalizations that I am hoping to avoid. Too bad, for if the Bible can tell us how to interpret the Bible, then we can claim that *we* are not doing any interpreting. We are just saying what the text says. The plausible deniability of being an interpreter is the dream of all theologians who long to have their statements received with certainty. And who among us has not at one time or another had this desire?

ROMANS 15:1–6: THE HAPPY EXCHANGE

Not so innocently, then, I have selected Rom 15:1–6. I confess that I am guilty of “happy exchange-ism” in this choice. I am one of those Lutheran Christians who sees the world, God, my neighbor, the church, and the future through the following principle made famous by Martin Luther: Christ bears the world’s sin and death in his body as he simultaneously shares with the world his own innocence, righteousness, divinity, and even his inheritance of everything that is his Father’s.¹ To discover passages in the Bible that appear to promote this “happy exchange” is, for me, thrilling, because they are rarities of good news. Whenever and wherever I find them, these passages build up my hope that the union of God and the world in Christ’s flesh is and will be the truth about the world and the truth about God forever. Were it not for these passages, faith in Christ would be all the more difficult and the mystery of his God-bearing, world-loaded body would be too far above my

¹Luther makes this point often. See, for example, his *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 26 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1963) 284 (commenting on Gal 3:13): “By this fortunate exchange with us He took upon Himself our sinful person and granted us His innocent and victorious Person. Clothed and dressed in this, we are freed from the curse of the Law, because Christ Himself voluntarily became a curse for us.”

head. But, thank goodness, Rom 15:1–6 is full of the happy exchange. These verses think of Scripture as the creator of hope through the patience and the consolation that the news of God’s incarnation and the world’s *theosis* (divinization) in the one Jesus of Nazareth delivers. My approach to Rom 15:1–6, then, may be stealthy, but it is not innocent of “what I want the text to mean” sorts of convictions. To be aware of this predilection for the happy exchange may be the beginning of confessional hermeneutics, the church’s taking the Bible seriously, owing to its faith in Christ, apart from command and obedience. I hope it is not simply trading one abstraction for another.

“Romans 15:1–6 is one of the few places in the Bible that contain an explicit theory of Scripture”

Romans 15:1–6 is also one of the few places in the Bible that contain an explicit theory of Scripture. What makes the things written aforesaid “Scripture” is that they are good for something. Their authority rests on their efficacy. Yet, it is not a vague usefulness. Scripture is good for creating hope. To grasp Paul’s practical approach to biblical interpretation, it is worth comparing it to the theory offered by one of his unknown successors, the author of the Pastoral Epistles. Both theorists stress the ability of Scripture to *do* something, but that is where the similarity ends. While in Paul’s case Scripture creates hope, in 2 Tim 3:16–17 Scripture disciplines bodies. Furthermore, while Rom 15:1–6 refuses to establish Scripture’s authority through an account of how the Bible came to be written, the author of 2 Timothy embraces that very move: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” All Scripture, we learn, is θεόπνευστος (God-inspired). The theory of inspiration in 2 Timothy bears an uncanny resemblance to the philosophic explanation of the divinely moved utterances of the Delphic oracle; God, as pervading spirit, replaces the human mind and controls the materials of communication. There is also in 2 Timothy an uncanny resemblance between the mode of production of the Bible and what it is good for, discipline. Just as the text comes into being through the mind’s control over materiality, so the Bible aids individuals to control their own bodies and eradicate passion.

Romans 15:1–6 illustrates a way of being serious about the Bible without turning the Bible into a playbook for the disciplined, virtuous life:

We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me. For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope. Now the God of patience and consolation grant you

to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind *and* one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.²

QUOTATION AS EXAMPLE

Notice that Paul bases his generalization about “whatever was written aforetime” (which to him, of course, was the Septuagint) on just ten words (eight in Greek): “The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me.” If you were to count up the many divine commands in the Old Testament (and the New Testament as well) you would be hard pressed to explain why these ten words, in the form of a very brief narrative, should be the inspiration for Paul’s generalization about the Bible. Given the statistics, you might reasonably think that imperative rather than narrative should define the nature of Scripture. Nevertheless, Paul goes with the story, however microscopic it might be by Proustian standards.

Perhaps he does so because as a public speaker he is in need of an example. As a preacher of Christ, he needs a body. Abstractions won’t do. For ancient audiences, an example had the power to move the emotions and reason to action in a way that precept and imperative simply could not. Embodiment of meaning was a given in Paul’s world. There was something about the visualization of a human body carrying the deepest meanings of life that was, well, inspiring.

Ancient philosophers knew the power of story-laden bodies. One of the spiritual exercises they gave to their students was to choose a good person from the past, visualize that person’s face, and then make a change for the better as a person might rearrange his or her hair in a mirror. Ancient rhetoricians also knew the persuasive power of bodies. Advocates in criminal cases were not above bringing a weeping wife and wailing children before the eyes of the jury. So philosophers and orators would have figured out pretty quickly why Paul turns to this brief scriptural narrative: “The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me.” They would say Paul is looking for amplification, which is the oratorical gift *exemplum* gives. He wants to make what he just said about Christ’s not pleasing himself bigger in the minds of his hearers—louder, more obviously true, praiseworthy, and worthy of emulation.

The pieces of a theory about Scripture are fitting into place. Paul needs a narrative to turn up the volume. He goes looking for one in his Bible. He finds it in Ps 69:9 (“the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me”). This movement from preacher’s need of amplification to fragment of Scripture is the beginning of a theory. It begins to look as if Scripture is a repository of examples of Christ’s action as narrated in Rom 15:3. And just to be clear: there is the strong suggestion in Rom 15:1–6 that whatever is not an example of Christ’s not pleasing himself, or whatever words refuse to be refashioned in this direction by a creative genius like Paul, is not Scripture for us.

²King James Version. I regret the sexist language, but the New Revised Standard Version misleads readers of English in this passage.

But why does Paul need a text outside of the text he himself is making? What advantage does it provide? Why isn't Christ's example enough? There could be two reasons for Paul's move outside of his own discourse. The first has to do with the double power of a quotation to confirm the claim at hand. Here is the basic claim: Christ did not please himself. That claim is probably powerful enough in itself to go without further example. Paul makes it in other places in his letters without quoting the Old Testament. But in the present case, it is not Paul alone who testifies to the event, and this is all the more persuasive. A voice from the past narrates the same story. We hear again that one bears the suffering of another.

“Might Scripture be a repository of examples that derive their authority from their agreement with Christ’s bearing of the reproaches that fall on others?”

My phrase “from the past” is not completely accurate. “As it is written” translates a perfect tense verb, and this means that past and present have a great deal in common. Specifically, they agree on the rightness of Christ's bearing the reproaches of others. The agreement between ancient voice and contemporary event is so complete that it appears as if Christ himself said the words “the reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me.” A theory of Scripture's authority is emerging from this phenomenon of one text witnessing to another. It is too early to say conclusively what the theory is, but it must have something to do with voices in agreement. Might Scripture be a repository of examples that derive their authority from their agreement with Christ's bearing of the reproaches that fall on others?

QUOTATION AS SAMPLE

I said that any quotation has double power. We have just seen that one power resides in the exact words of the quotation confirming the rightness of the writer's basic claim. Less directly, however, the quotation suggests to the reader that the whole work from which it comes agrees with its judgment. This is the second power of a quotation. How does it work? A quotation takes advantage of the readers' predisposition towards trust. They trust the author not to misrepresent the work by slyly quoting a quirky or aberrant passage. Readers tend to assume that a quotation is representative of the document from which it is taken, especially when they do not have access to the larger work, lack the ability to read it, or are daunted by its size. In this way the quotation as example becomes quotation as sample. It is much like the quality control of commercial food products. An examiner tests small batches and assumes that any part represents the whole. We trust this process every day of our lives. Our consternation when it goes haywire is evidence of our reliance on it. Returning to the world of literature, we might say that even a small quotation casts a long shadow or that the whole is convinced of what the part proclaims.

For Paul's first audience, then, the jump from "the reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me" to "whatsoever things were written aforetime" would have seemed natural. Our contemporary ways of reading the Bible, however, make this jump more difficult. Although we understand and employ sampling in many reading situations in secular literature, we depart from this practice with the New Testament when it cites the Old Testament. The most studious among us often read Paul with an open Old Testament in hand, looking up his quotations in order to generate meaning in his letters. This method assumes that Paul's meaning is identical to the interaction between the quotation and its own immediate literary context. To take an example outside of the Pauline corpus, it is sometimes claimed that Jesus didn't *really* feel forsaken in the cry from the cross in Mark 15:34 because his words are a quotation from Ps 22. The psalmist admittedly begins in the pits but turns finally to trust in God at the end of the psalm. This sort of biblical fussiness believes that Old Testament sentences sweep the meanings of their immediate context into the New Testament, their home away from home. Listening for echoes of Scripture is a peculiar interpretative protocol generated in part by teachers of Scripture (like me) insisting that students interpret a text within its context. Having had this idea drummed into their heads, students find it difficult to imagine that Paul snatched pieces of Scripture with no regard for the contribution their immediate context made to their original meaning. But he did. Just look carefully at his reassignment of referents to the pronouns in the phrase "...reproached thee fell on me." In the context of the psalm "thee" refers to God and "me" refers to the psalmist. In Paul's creative recontextualization, "thee" is humanity and "me" is Christ.

I have wandered. Here is where we had been going. Guided by the literary phenomenon of quotation, we were headed in the direction of a theory about the nature and authority of Scripture. We were pursuing the idea that Scripture is a repository of examples of Christ's not pleasing himself. We noted a quotation's double power of agreement with the basic claim made by the exact words cited and by the implied approval of the whole work. Paul looks to Scripture for an example and the reader gets that and a sample of the whole Bible to boot.

BEARING OUR SHAME

Now, in order to put a body back into our own reasoning about Romans (I fear I have been too abstract), let's go back to the question about Paul's reasons for going outside of his own discourse. In addition to confirmation of the rightness, praiseworthiness, even divinity of Christ's action, the quotation also clarifies its meaning. This is particularly helpful for those who read the text in English. Quite honestly, I don't think that "Christ did not please himself" imparts a great deal of christological information, unless one succumbs to the temptation to fill in the gaps with stories of a supposedly self-effacing Jesus from the Synoptic Gospels or from John. The quotation of Ps 69:9 rescues English readers from their quest for the humble Jesus of history and allows them to see that "not pleasing oneself"

means “counting the reproaches that fall on another as one’s own.” Paul isn’t talking about humility.

Modern readers of the Greek text have an advantage here, although it is not enough to free them of the need for the quotation. They might know that the word “to please” (ἀρέσκειν) carries connotations of slavery. Ancient Greek readers would have known in addition that slaves were expected to please their masters, and the more reflective among them understood (though this knowledge rarely led to liberating action) that for the slave to please the master he or she must carry the toil, evils, and even the death of the master in their own bodies. A slave was a body-bearing body.

The psalmist’s words (after Paul reassigns the pronouns) say the same thing about Christ’s body, yet with the poignancy only a story can convey. What is it that Christ allows to fall on him? The Greek term that stands behind “reproaches” is ὀνειδισμός. This term had a specialized meaning by the time Paul’s readers encountered it in his letter to them. Ancient moral philosophers carefully distinguished levels of severity in moral exhortation. They knew that theirs was an honor/shame culture. They knew as well that too harsh a reprimand could induce shame, even suicide. Reproach (ὀνειδισμός) is the technical term for the severest criticism reserved for the most hardened sinner. Its aim was to change behavior by instilling shame. Now we know even more what the text means when it says Christ did not please himself. We learn that he bore in his own bodily experience the shame of us all.

And this is why if we did not have Scripture, we would have to invent it. We are needy. Not needy in the introspective, pious sense of feeling our dependence on God, but needy in the sense of wanting to believe that Christ did not please himself, that the reproaches falling on us fall also on him, and that his future is ours as ours has been his. We need the power of examples testifying, “Yes, Christ did not please himself.” We need samples of the Holy Spirit’s work of making it possible for one human body to bear another’s death. Unless we come to the Bible with this need, or if we come expecting clarification in moral matters, the Scripture will speak right past us. ⊕

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