Authority and Truth[†]

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Discussions of the authority of scripture are commonly intertwined with discussions of the truthfulness of scripture. Indeed, a casual survey of the literature on biblical authority might well convey the impression that questions about the nature and scope of biblical authority *just are* questions about the nature and scope of biblical truthfulness.[1] in fact, however, these issues are very different—as we can see quite easily by attention to the fact that questions about the nature and scope of parental authority (say) are very different from questions about the nature and scope of parental truthfulness. Taking a low view of a parent's truthfulness might imply taking a low view of her authority in some particular domain. But the precise connection between authority and truthfulness in this case is hardly immediately obvious. Saying anything helpful about the connection would require us to get clear on what exactly we mean by calling a parent authoritative (no doubt distinguishing, along the way, various different

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[1] To see just how the impression might be conveyed, see (for example) Achtemeier (1999:148 - 50), Moo (ed.) 1997, and Rogers and McKim 1979. Both the title of Moo's edited volume and the title of the book by Rogers and McKim convey the impression that each book is primarily about biblical *authority*; and yet the clear focus of each is, instead, the question of biblical truthfulness. In similar vein, Achtemeier moves very quickly within the space of two paragraphs from saying that "the Bible is authoritative…because it is true" to saying that "the divine authority of the Bible consists in propositional truth" (149).

ways in which a parent might be authoritative), what we mean by calling her truthful, and the like. So too, I think, with the relation between biblical authority and biblical truthfulness.

This essay is divided into three parts. In the first part, I try to get clear about what we might mean in calling a text authoritative. In the second part, I draw distinctions between different things that we might mean by saying that a text is truthful. My goal in both of these parts is to arrive at some general conclusions about *texts*, rather than specific conclusions about the Bible. Consequently, I try to refrain from making assumptions about (e.g.) biblical interpretation or about the truth of particular biblical texts. Indeed, for much of the discussion, the Bible is not even directly in view. In the third part I draw out some of the implications of the discussions in the first two parts for the question of how textual authority and textual truth are connected to one another. I also comment on the significance of these conclusions for discussions about the relation between biblical authority and biblical inerrancy.

Many people seem to think that if a text is authoritative, then what it says must be true. We shall see, however, that this is not quite correct. To say simply that a text is authoritative is, in fact, to say nothing at all definitive about whether it is, or even could be, just plain true. Nor does it guarantee freedom from falsehoods. There are, however, connections to be drawn between certain kinds of authority and *reliability*, or likelihood of being true. Many also seem to think that if a text is truly authoritative over a person, then she must regard it as *perfectly* reliable, or inerrant. (Thus, for example, one sometimes hears arguments to the effect that if one thinks that the Bible makes mistakes, then one thereby treats human sources of evidence—reason, sense perception, scientific investigation, testimony from others, etc.—as authoritative over the Bible rather than the other way around.) We shall see, however, that

there is no clear way to derive the claim that a text is perfectly reliable from the claim that it is authoritative over a person unless we also make substantive philosophical assumptions about the very nature of the text's author. What this means, then, is that a high view of biblical truthfulness—the view that Bible is perfectly reliable, or close to it—stands or falls not with the claim that the Bible is authoritative (which a text may or may not be, regardless of how truthful it is), but rather with philosophical-theological claims about the nature of God and the divine authorship of scripture.

I. Authority

Throughout this article, as I have indicated, I shall be concerned first and foremost with questions about the authority and truthfulness of *texts*. This, of course, raises the question of what counts as a text. Books, articles, contracts, and written signs are paradigm examples. But where do we draw our boundaries? Are films texts? Photographs? Symphonies? Paintings? Dance performances? Ordinary artifacts or natural objects that signify or can be taken to signify something to somebody? Though I can see the attraction of drawing the lines liberally enough to allow a very wide range of communicative acts and objects to merit the label 'text', for purposes here I shall simply follow Kevin Vanhoozer in defining a text as a 'communicative action fixed by writing' (1998: 229).[2]

We treat a wide variety of texts as authoritative, and we do so in different ways. In *Scrabble*®, the latest edition of the *Official Scrabble*® *Dictionary* is authoritative with respect to questions about which sequences of letters form admissible words and which do not. In a

[2] See also Vanhoozer 1998: 103 – 113 for a helpful survey of alternative characterizations.

physics class, the assigned text is generally authoritative with respect to questions about physics. Homer's *Iliad* is authoritative with respect to questions about certain matters of Greek mythology. An uncontested will is authoritative with respect to questions about how a person's assets are to be distributed after her death. The United States Constitution is authoritative with respect to questions about the permissibility of a wide variety of executive, legislative, and judicial acts, election practices, and the like. Reflection on examples like these helps to shed light on what it might mean to say that a text is authoritative.

Note first that it would make little sense to say (e.g.) that the *Iliad,* or Jack's last will and testament, or the *Scrabble*® *Dictionary* is authoritative, *simpliciter*. Each of these texts has a *domain* within which it is authoritative. One might think that to say that a text is authoritative *simpliciter,* where not even the claim's context specifies a domain, is just to say that the text is authoritative in every domain within which a text might possibly be authoritative. If so, however, then no text—and certainly not the Bible—is authoritative *simpliciter*. For Jack's last will and testament is (we may suppose) the *only* text that is authoritative in the domain of questions about how precisely Jack's possessions are to be distributed after his death, and that text is authoritative in virtually no other domain. In light of this, one initial conclusion we might draw is that no ascription of authority to a text is complete without the specification of the domain within which it has authority. We may also conclude that unqualified ascriptions of authority are charitably interpreted as saying something other than that the text has authority in every domain within which a text might have authority.

Note, second, that there are different kinds of authority. The authority of a physics book is primarily *theoretical*: it is "belief-guiding" rather than action-guiding. The *Official*

Scrabble® Dictionary and a last will and testament are partly belief-guiding, but primarily action-guiding, albeit in different ways. Thus, their authority is primarily *practical*. Homer's *Iliad* is theoretically authoritative for us about (among other things) the contours of Greek mythology and ancient legends about the Trojan war. For the ancient Greeks it was theoretically authoritative in a different way: it provided authoritative information about (at least) the personalities and dispositions of the beings who (so it was thought) inhabited Olympus. In other words, for *us* the text is an authoritative source of information about *mythology*; for them, it was (to some degree) an authoritative source of information about *the gods*. It was also practically authoritative, insofar as it helped to define Greek ideals about courage and other virtues, for example.[3] Saying that a text is authoritative, then, is twice incomplete: not only do we need to specify the domain within which the text is authoritative, but we need to specify the kind of authority that the text has.

In the previous paragraph I indicated that there is a distinction to be drawn between practical and theoretical authority. It will be helpful in what follows to understand that distinction a bit more fully. Roughly speaking, practical authorities provide *decisive reasons for action* in the domains over which they are authoritative (tennis matches, state law, morality, etc.); theoretical authorities provide *decisive reasons for belief* in the domains over which they are authoritative (chemistry, mathematics, etc.).[4] For our purposes, *an authority* is any source

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[3] Cf. MacIntyre 1998, esp. Chs. 1 – 2.

[4] Here I follow Mark Murphy (2006: 413), who writes:

…if A is a genuine practical authority over B in some domain, then in that domain A's telling B to ϕ is a decisive reason for B to ϕ. … If A has theoretical authority over B in some domain, then A must be a speaker and B must be one who can believe things for reasons; and if A tells B that it is the case that p, then A's telling B that it is the case that p is a reason to B to believe that p, a reason that is decisive from B's point of view.

of information or directives. An authority might be a *communicator* (e.g., a speaker or institution); it might be *the product of a communicative act* (e.g., a text or a gesture); or it might even be something like a cognitive faculty (e.g., reason, or sensory experience).[5] A *decisive reason for action* is, among other things, a reason to ignore in one's deliberations alternative courses of action.[6] A *decisive reason for believing* a proposition is, among other things, a reason to disbelieve conflicting propositions and perhaps also a reason to discontinue further investigation into the matter. Note, too, that reasons here are justifiers, not (necessarily) motivators. Having decisive reason to tell the truth, for example, is different from being motivated to tell the truth.[7] Likewise, having decisive reason to believe that you are an inferior chess player is different from being motivated to believe this. (It might seem odd to speak of motivation and stubbornness with respect to belief-formation, but that is only because many of us think of belief-formation as an involuntary matter. I don't want to take a position on that issue here.)

This is, of course, not a full account of the distinction. It tells us only what is necessary for practical and theoretical authority, not what is sufficient. We learn, for example, that *in order* for A to have practical authority over B, then A's directives *must* supply B with decisive reasons for action. But we don't learn anything to the effect that *whenever* a certain range of

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Whereas Murphy focuses on the authority of *speakers*, however, we are also, and primarily, concerned with the authority of *texts*.

[5] I assume that it's not just metaphor to speak, for example, of 'the authority of reason'. I also assume that not just any object is a source of information or directives. Experience of a sofa, for example, is a source of information about the sofa; but (in the usual case) a sofa is not itself a source of information.

[6] Cf. Murphy 2006: 413. On this point, Murphy follows Raz (1979).

[7] Cf. Hampton 1998: 85 – 92.

conditions are satisfied, A has practical authority over B. This much is fine for our purposes, however. We have no need right now for a full analysis of either kind of authority.

Still, we do need to attend to at least one complication. The complication has to do with cases in which authority is *defeated*. For instance: Dad tells Bart to go mow the lawn. Unbeknownst to Dad, Mom has told Bart to clean his room. Both Mom and Dad are authorities for Bart, but, given that mowing and cleaning preclude one another, Bart does not have *decisive* reason to take either course of action. Claire is told by her doctor that a trans-oceanic flight is safe at this stage in her pregnancy; but she is told by another doctor that it is not. Assuming she has no reason to distrust either doctor, both may be theoretical authorities for her with respect to this issue. But she does not have decisive reason for believing that the trans-oceanic flight is safe.

The two examples just mentioned—cases in which we have conflicting authorities—show that it isn't strictly true to say without qualification that authorities provide decisive reasons for belief or action. Problems also arise in cases where there is no overt conflict among authorities. Consider again the case of Claire, and her question about the trans-oceanic flight. Although doctors generally function as authorities for us in matters of health, we know enough about the prevalence of disagreement among doctors to *continue investigation* when we receive answers from our doctors that, for one reason or another, we are tempted to doubt. Thus, if Claire were sufficiently worried about the safety of the flight, reassurance from her doctor might fail to settle the matter for her even in the absence of an explicitly conflicting report from another doctor. Even while granting that her doctor is an authority on this matter,

she might reasonably take herself to lack *decisive* reason for believing that it is safe to fly until she has consulted several doctors.

To handle these sorts of cases, we must add 'no defeater' conditions to our account of the necessary conditions on practical and theoretical authority. Authorities are suppliers of reasons (more on this below), and reasons have the power to confer justification on beliefs or actions. In epistemology, a reason for a belief is said to be *defeated* whenever its power to confer justification is neutralized by some other belief or experience. The neutralizing belief or experience is then called a *defeater* for the reason. The defeater might be a reason to believe contrary to the original belief (i.e., it might be a rebutting defeater). Or it might be a reason to think that one's original set of reasons does not really support the belief, or indicate that it is true (i.e., it might be an undercutting defeater).[8] Similar might be said in the case of reasons for action.

An example will help to illustrate the distinction between rebutting and undercutting defeaters. Suppose Betty believes on the basis of Barney's testimony that Barney is a brilliant neurosurgeon. If she later learns that Barney has a pathological habit of lying about his profession in order to attract women, she will have an undercutting defeater for her reason (Barney's testimony) for believing that he is a neurosurgeon. If, on the other hand, she learns that Barney flunked out of college, has never been to medical school, and spends every day of the week working at the local rock quarry, she will have a rebutting defeater—i.e., she will have reason to believe that Barney is *not* a brilliant neurosurgeon.

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[8] For more precise characterizations, see Bergmann 2006, Ch. 6, Plantinga 2000, Ch. 11, and Pollock & Cruz 1999: 195 – 197. Bergmann and Plantinga treat beliefs as the objects of defeat whereas Pollock & Cruz treat reasons as the objects of defeat. As Bergmann (2006: 159 – 60) explains, however, this is mostly just a terminological difference.

In the problem cases above, what we seem to encounter are situations wherein *authority* is defeated. Importantly, these are not cases in which an erstwhile authority has simply ceased to be one—as if, say, Claire's doctor was once an authority in the domain of medicine but has now entirely lost whatever authority she once had. Nor does it seem exactly right to say that the *reasons* supplied by the authority are defeated. The fact that Claire's doctor says that It is safe to take the flight is still a serious reason for thinking that it is safe to fly. (So it is not in that respect like the case of poseur-Barney's testimony.) It's just that the doctor's testimony no longer supplies *decisive* reason. In other words: *relative to the present context and the particular issue at hand* the doctor is no longer authoritative. Likewise in the other cases. Putting it just this way, however, suggests wrongly that authority might be an *entirely* situation-relative matter, and it still gives us no clear information about the circumstances under which authority is defeated. It will help, then, to seek a bit of further clarity.

In order to understand the phenomenon of authority-defeat and the circumstances under which it occurs, we need first to understand three other concepts: the concept of one reason being *prior* to another, the concept of someone or something being a *source* or *supplier* of reasons, and the concept of a source of reasons being *more authoritative than* another. I'll take these in order.[9]

Suppose Fred has a reason—self interested fear of consequences—to lie to his boss, and a different reason—the fact that lying is immoral—to tell the truth. Suppose further that he

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[9] I am particularly grateful to Matthew Lee for pressing objections that helped me to see that clarification of these three concepts was necessary in order to understand authority-defeat. I am also grateful to him for helping me to make some of the relevant clarifications.

has no other reasons relevant to the decision whether to lie. One of these reasons *has priority* over the other if, and only if, it is more (practically) rational to act on the basis of one rather than the other.[10] Likewise with reasons for belief: one has priority over another if, and only if, it is more (epistemically) rational to believe on the basis of one rather than on the basis of the other.[11]

A source or supplier of reasons is, intuitively, an individual or a cognitive faculty or a text or some other entity from which we are able to acquire cognitive input that functions for us as a reason for belief or action. But it is a rather tricky matter to identify once and for all the list of things from which we are able to acquire cognitive input on a topic. There is a perfectly good sense, for example, in which God is a source of input on any topic whatsoever. God knows everything, after all; and God can reveal to us anything that can be understood by our finite minds. But there is also a perfectly good sense in which God is not a source of cognitive input on most topics. For example, one can't simply consult God to find out how one's deceased relatives want their worldly possessions distributed. One can't expect God to adjudicate between theories in fundamental physics. Though God *has* that information, there is absolutely

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[10] You might be tempted to object that whether it is more rational to act on the basis of reason R1 rather than on the basis of reason R2 depends on the circumstances. But, as I see it, any circumstances that would be relevant to how one should act would simply be additional *reasons*. Suppose, for the sake of argument (and contrary to philosophers like Thomas Aquinas) that there is an exception to the moral prohibition on lying: it is always wrong (and therefore irrational) to lie, except when doing so will protect innocent life, in which case it might be more rational to lie than to tell the truth. If this is true, then whether it is more rational for Fred to lie or tell the truth to his boss depends on whether the consequences of telling the truth will include loss of innocent life. But this doesn't at all show that circumstances make a difference to the question whether it is more rational for Fred to act *on the basis of* the reason supplied by morality or the reason supplied by his self-interested fear. Suppose innocent life *will* be lost if Fred tells the truth. In that case (assuming, again, that it might be rational to lie in order to protect innocent life), it might be more rational for Fred to act *in accord with* the reason supplied by his self-interested fear; but there is still no reason to think that it is more rational for him to act *on the basis* of that fear.

[11] The distinction between practical and epistemic rationality may be understood as the distinction between what it is rational to *do* given the goal of furthering one's overall best interests and what it is rational to *believe* given the goal of believing in accord with the truth. (Cf. Rea 2001: 139 – 44.)

no reason to think that God is willing to distribute it on demand (or even in response to a lot of effort). It is this sense of being a source of reasons—the sense in which God is *not* a source of reasons in every domain—that I have in mind when I talk about sources of reasons in what follows. Roughly (and I don't think we can do much better than 'roughly') a source of reasons is an entity from which it is *physically* possible without miracles or special divine intervention to acquire reasons for belief or action.[12]

We can now say what it is for a source of reasons to be *more authoritative than* another. Authorities are dispute-settlers. They are, in other words, sources of reasons that have priority over reasons that we get from non-authoritative sources. But, of course, the reasons that come from one authority might well trump the reasons that come from another. Schoolteachers have authority over children: they supply reasons for the children to act that trump a lot of other reasons they might have for acting (reasons like *the desire to throw chalk*, *the belief that it would be amusing to make Billy cry*, etc.). But, dysfunctional cases aside, parents are more authoritative than schoolteachers: the reasons for action supplied by a parent have priority over reasons for action supplied by schoolteachers. For example, other things being equal, the fact that a fifth grader's school teacher has assigned watching *The Matrix* as homework is reason for the fifth grader to watch that movie. But that reason will be

[12] Note, too, that being a source or supplier of reasons is—for purposes here—not the same as being a source or supplier of *information about* reasons that one has, as it were, from other sources. A parent might inform her child that it is wrong to lie; but in so doing she is not, in the sense I have in mind, becoming the source or supplier of a reason to tell the truth. When a parent tells her child that it is wrong to lie, she is simply informing the child of the existence of a reason that is available and supplied, as it were, from another source. The reasons of which parents are sources are reasons that we might express with phrases like *because mom told me not to lie* (a reason for telling the truth) or *because mom told me that it is wrong to lie* (a reason for *believing* that it is wrong to lie, and so a reason for *believing* that one has, from another source, a reason to tell the truth).

trumped by a parent's general prohibition on watching movies with an 'R' rating. Likewise, *Scientific American* provides, in the domain covered by the natural sciences, reasons for belief that trump a lot of other reasons we might have for belief in that domain (reasons coming from untutored empirical intuition, for example, or testimony by non-experts). But the word of a Nobel prize winning physicist speaking in earnest in her area of expertise trumps whatever conflicting reasons we might get from *Scientific American*. Thus, a bit more formally:

> THE 'MORE AUTHORITATIVE THAN' RELATION
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> A is *more authoritative than* B (for a person C, in a domain D) if, and only if, A and B are both sources of reasons for belief or action for C in D, and the reasons supplied by A have priority for C in D over the reasons supplied by B.

We may now return to the notion of authority-defeat. Note first that this whole messy issue arose because we found cases wherein (i) we still want to say that someone—Claire's doctor, for example—is an authority in a domain, but (ii) the authority in question has supplied reasons for belief or action that are not decisive in that domain. What ought to be clear by now is that these are cases where, for one reason or another, there are conflicting reasons supplied by other sources that are on a par with or have priority over the reasons supplied by the authoritative individual. But how can this occur, if an authority is, by definition, a supplier of *decisive* reasons?

The most natural response, I think, is to say (as indicated above) that *being an authority* is not an absolute matter: whether something counts as an authority depends a lot on context. This much is easily verified. For example, around my dinner table, I can say truthfully to one of

my daughters that my thirteen year old son is an authority on how to play the French horn. I can say this truthfully in that context because he is, for us around the family table, *more authoritative* in that domain than any other source to which we have access. But, of course, if I were to go to the members of the music department at Notre Dame and announce that they should take heed, for my son Aaron is an authority on how to play the French horn, I would be saying something false. But in saying that *being an authority* is not an absolute matter, we are in no way committed to the view that all of the facts about authority are situation relative. We can (and should) say that the absolute facts about authority are facts expressed by claims of the form 'X is *more authoritative than* Y (for individual S in domain D)'. To be *an authority* in some domain, then, is just to be, in that domain, a source of reasons that is (objectively, absolutely) *more authoritative* for some contextually salient group of people than other contextually salient sources of reasons. In the case of Claire's doctor, we can still truthfully say that she is an authority in the domain of medicine because, in context, that boils down to something like the claim that Claire's doctor is more authoritative for non-doctors than sources of evidence that are neither doctors nor medical texts written by doctors, etc. But in the particular context of our example, the authority of Claire's doctor is defeated by the fact that she is *not* more authoritative in the domain of medicine than the other doctors who are giving conflicting opinions.

In light of all of this, we can now identify the following conditions under which authority-defeat occurs:

AUTHORITY-DEFEAT

A's authority (for a person B, in a domain D) is defeated at a time if, and only if (i) there are contexts relative to which it would be true to say that A is an authority for B in D, but (ii) at the time of defeat it is not rational for B to treat some statement or directive from A in D as decisive reason for belief or action.

Condition (ii) is satisfied in cases like our earlier examples involving conflicting directives from parents and conflicting information from medical authorities. It is also satisfied in cases where B acquires evidence independent of conflicts with other authorities for thinking that that an erstwhile authority is no longer authoritative. Thus, for example, if B learns that A is morally corrupt in relevant ways, at least some of A's commands will no longer be decisive reasons for action; if B learns that A lacks expertise that B once thought she had, then there will be at least some contexts in which A's say-so is no longer decisive reason for belief; and so on.

Recall that we introduced the concept of authority-defeat because we needed it in order to flesh out our accounts of theoretical and practical authority. Now, we have already said that *being an authority* (and so, likewise, *having authority*) in a domain D is a context relative matter: it is a matter of being, for some salient group of people, more authoritative than other salient sources. Employing this insight, as well as our understanding of authority-defeat, we can now say more clearly what it is for someone or something to have theoretical or practical authority over an individual in a domain:

HAVING THEORETICAL / PRACTICAL AUTHORITY

> Where A is a source of reasons and B is someone who can believe or act on the basis of reasons, A has theoretical authority over B in D only if A's affirming something in D is, *in the absence of authority-defeaters,* decisive reason for B to believe what A affirms.
>
> Likewise, A has practical authority over B in D only if A's telling B to do something that falls within D is, *in the absence of authority-defeaters*, decisive reason for B to do that thing.

We have now taken note of two features of authority: first, that it is domain-relative; second, that it comes (broadly speaking) in at least two varieties. Thus, in order to be clear about what we mean in calling a text authoritative, we must both specify a domain and specify the type of authority we have in mind. Before closing, there are two further bits of terminology that I'd like to introduce. First, we should note the distinction between *de facto* and *de jure* authority. Second, it will be helpful to have in what follows a concept of *foundational* authority.

The difference between *de facto* and *de jure* authorities corresponds roughly to the distinction between what we happen to *treat* as sources of decisive reasons and what are *in fact* sources of decisive reasons.[13] (Note that treating something as a source of decisive reasons doesn't necessarily involve *believing* it to be a source of such reasons. Parents are generally treated by small children as sources of decisive reasons even though small children

[13] To a certain extent, the distinction in view here could also be captured by the terms 'subjective' and 'objective' (replacing '*de facto*' and '*de jure*' respectively). But there are problems with these terms as well. For example, it seems rather odd to say that a text might be subjectively, but not objectively, authoritative for a nation, or for all of humanity at a time, whereas it sounds less odd to say that the same text is *de facto* authoritative but not *de jure* authoritative for a nation, or for all of humanity at a time.

typically lack the belief—by virtue of lacking the relevant concepts—that their parents are sources of such reasons.) Even atheists will agree that, for example, Biblical assertions and injunctions are *de facto* authoritative for many people. It is undeniable that many people *treat* the Bible's say-so as decisive reason for belief or action. But there will be real controversy over the question whether Biblical assertions and injunctions are *de jure* authoritative. For there is real controversy over the question whether the Bible's say-so provides anyone with *genuinely* decisive reasons for belief or action. Thus far, I have been treating an attribution of 'genuine authority' as equivalent to an attribution of de jure authority, and I will continue to do so in what follows. Thus, A's taking a text as authoritative—its being a de facto authority for A—isn't, in my terminology, sufficient for its being genuinely authoritative over A. Accordingly, unless otherwise noted, in the remainder of this essay all talk of authority should be construed as talk of de jure authority.

The notion of *foundational authority* may be characterized as follows:

FOUNDATIONAL AUTHORITY

A is foundationally (theoretically/practically) authoritative over B in D if, and only if, A has (theoretical/practical) authority over B in D and there is no source of (epistemic/practical) reasons for B in D that is more authoritative than A.

Given this definition, it should be easy to see that there can be more than one foundational authority for a given person in a given domain. The reason is simply that more than one source can be such that there is no source *more* authoritative than it. Given the characterizations of authority-defeaters above, it should also be clear that foundational authorities can defeat one another. Foundational authorities can also suffer authority-defeat if

other evidence comes to light—perhaps even from less authoritative sources—that they are no longer to be treated as suppliers of decisive reasons for belief or action.[14]

So, it would seem that a very rough and ready answer to the question "What does it mean to call a text authoritative?" is something like this: To call a text (genuinely, *de jure*) authoritative is to say that, within some domain and for some individual or individuals, the text supplies reasons for belief or action (or both) that are, absent defeaters, decisive. Again, it doesn't follow from this that the supplied reasons *motivate* the relevant beliefs or actions. Nor does it even follow that the individual or group in question will recognize them as decisive. (*De jure* authorities might fail to be *de facto* authorities—as often happens, we might think, when people casually and habitually act contrary to state laws or common moral intuitions.) But they will, nonetheless, decisively justify the relevant beliefs or actions.

This characterization of *textual* authority comports well with a variety of formal, informal, and partial characterizations of *biblical* authority that one finds in the literature. Thus, for example, in discussing Jesus' view of the authority of the Old Testament, Edward J. Young writes:

> [Jesus] believed that both as a unit and in its several parts [the Old Testament] was finally and absolutely authoritative. To it appeal might be made as to the

[14] In the domain of theoretical authority, what I have elsewhere called basic sources of evidence will be in some ways akin to foundational authorities. (Cf. Rea 2002: 2) To treat something as a basic source of evidence is to trust it as reliable even in the absence of evidence for its reliability. Our basic sources of evidence are de facto authorities for us and, in the typical case, they are treated as foundational (in the sense just described) as well. Of course, since we can treat hopelessly unreliable sources as basic, something's being a basic source of evidence for us doesn't guarantee that it is a genuine authority, much less a foundational authority. Still, treating something as a basic source of evidence will typically (though not necessarily) go hand in hand with believing it to be a foundational authority in some relatively wide domain.

> ultimate authority. Its voice was final. When the Scriptures spoke, man must obey. (1967: 59)

Here the idea seems to be that scripture is a de jure foundational supplier of decisive reasons for action. Robert Gnuse (1985) takes a similar view, quoting with approval Robert Bryant (1968: 156)

> The basic definition of authority is to speak of that "which is acknowledged as rightly and worthily commanding loyalty and obedience." (2)

Young, Bryant, and Gnuse are clearly (in these passages, anyway) focused on the practical authority of scripture. But the literature is also replete with characterizations of scripture as having what we are here calling theoretical authority. Thus, for example, Clark Pinnock assimilates the notion of scriptural authority to the notion of "primary evidence". (2006: 95) Similarly, John Woodbridge, in his own contribution to this volume, notes that one meaning for the Latin word *auctoritas* (from which our term 'authority' is derived) is "the things which serve for the verification or establishing of a fact." ($$: 18) The clear suggestion in the text following this remark is that this meaning is part of what we invoke when we call scripture authoritative.

On the other hand, there are other characterizations of biblical authority with which my own is inconsistent—such as, for example, characterizations according to which authority is equivalent to canonicity. (See, e.g., Stonehouse 1967: 92 – 3.) Being canonical, after all, has much less to do with being a de jure supplier of decisive reasons for belief and action and a lot more to do with being *regarded* by the Church as being divinely inspired or as containing a record of divine revelation.

It should also now be clear that the bare claim that the Bible is authoritative does not tell us very much. We can also see that many of the questions about Biblical authority that have vexed theologians over the centuries (but perhaps especially in the past two centuries) are more perspicuously characterized as, or at least dependent on, questions about the *domain* over which the Bible exercises authority (history? science? just "faith and practice"? or what?) and about the *type* of authority (*de jure*, *de facto*, foundational, non-foundational, theoretical, practical, etc.) that the Bible exercises. Does one challenge Biblical authority if one thinks that one can use reason or science to discover factual errors in the Biblical text? Does one challenge Biblical authority if one tries to demythologize the Bible? Does one challenge Biblical authority if one thinks that the Bible reflects an outmoded system of moral values that aren't binding on enlightened contemporary thinkers? In each case, the answer depends on what one takes the domain of Biblical authority to be, and on whether one thinks that the Bible has practical authority, theoretical authority, or both.

We turn now to a discussion of what it means to say that a text is truthful, after which we draw some conclusions about the relations between authority and truth.

II. Truth

Philosophers have worried quite a bit over the question of what it means to say that a sentence, or a belief, or a proposition is true. Our question here is orders of magnitude more complicated: we are asking what it means to say that a *text* is true—any text, including texts that go on for hundreds of pages, texts that consist of nothing more than pictures, texts that include literary tropes like metaphor and hyperbole, and so on. We cannot hope to do this

question (or even the simpler first one) real justice here. But we can, I think, hope to say enough about truth to draw some interesting conclusions about the relationship between authority and truth.

Let me begin by saying a few words about the nature of truth. In the philosophical literature, the major theories about the nature of truth are primarily theories about what it is for a sentence, belief, or proposition to be true. They are not theories about truth in pictures, truth in metaphor, truth in literature, or anything of the sort. For this reason, an extended foray into the overgrown jungle of theories about truth is unlikely to be productive for present purposes. Those theories are simply too narrow; they will not help us (much) with questions about what it means to say that a metaphor, or a parable, or a psalm, or an epistle is true. Still, it will be helpful to be aware of two of the main divisions within that literature.

The first is that between *realist* and *anti-realist* conceptions of truth. To understand this division, and its import, we must first say what we mean by 'realism'. Realism has been characterized in many different ways. For purposes here, I'll adopt the following characterizations:[15]

[15] This formulation differs from the one I offered in Rea 2007 (p. 324) by replacing some of the talk about *dependence* with talk about *partial constitution*. I take the present formulation to be a precisification of the earlier one, not a substantial alteration of it. Being an F is *partly constituted* by facts F1 – Fn if, and only if, part of what it is to be F is for F1 – Fn to obtain. So, for example, *x*'s being Fred's favorite food is at least partly constituted by facts about Fred's attitudes toward different foods, including *x*: i.e., at least part of *what it is for something to be Fred's favorite food* is for Fred to have a certain pro-attitude toward that thing and to have no equally strong pro-attitude toward any other food.

REALISM

- Where 'x' is a singular term, *realism about x* is the view that some particular thing is identical to *x*.
- Where 'F' is the name of a kind (e.g., 'unicorn'), property (e.g., 'moral wrongness'), or relation (e.g., 'causation'), *realism about F* (or about Fs) is the view that the following conditions hold: (i) Something is (an) F or stands in the F-relation to something else. (ii) If some particular thing is an F or stands in the F-relation to some other things, that fact does not depend upon the experiences that other creatures might have of those things, nor does it depend upon what other creatures think about them or about the conditions under which being an F or standing in the F-relation is exemplified.

Given these characterizations, one way to be an anti-realist about God (say) is to affirm that there is no such being as God; but another way is to say, for example, that 'God exists' expresses a truth but that the truth it expresses *isn't* that there is something identical to God, but rather (say) the claim or "conviction that free and loving persons-in-community have a substantial metaphysical foundation, that there are cosmic forces working toward this sort of humanization." (Kaufmann 1981:49, quoted in Plantinga 2000: 41.) Likewise, one way to be an anti-realist about statues is to say that there are none; but another way is to say that nothing counts as a statue unless it is believed to be one by creaturely observers. One way to be an anti-realist about beliefs, or about minds, is to believe that whether a person has a belief or a mind depends in some way upon how individuals other than that person think about or experience her. And so on.

Accordingly, anti-realism about *truth* will be the thesis that (i) nothing is true or (ii) something's being true depends in some way upon people's beliefs about the conditions under

which something is true, or (iii) something's being true is at least partly constituted by facts about actual or hypothetical creaturely mental states.[16] For example, the view that *p* is true if, and only if, *p* is uncontroversial would count as a particularly radical version of anti-realism about truth. So too would the view that *p* is true if, and only if, *p would be* uncontroversial in a community of ideal rational agents.

It is sometimes thought that anti-realism about truth goes hand-in-hand with some sort of metaphysical anti-realism. But this is not correct. Metaphysical anti-realism is likewise characterized in many different ways. Sometimes it is treated as a view about the aims of metaphysics (roughly: metaphysical theories aren't aimed at truth). Sometimes it is treated as a view about commonsense and scientific kinds (roughly: anti-realism about all or most commonsense and scientific kinds is true). Sometimes it is treated as equivalent to the thesis that metaphysical theories aren't *objectively* true. And so on. We can capture the most important kinds of metaphysical anti-realism, I think, by saying that metaphysical anti-realism is the thesis that theories in metaphysics are not to be "interpreted realistically", where interpreting a theory realistically is to be understood as follows:

[16] We might note that beliefs count as true and they *are* mental states, but it doesn't follow that their being true *depends* on mental states in the relevant sense. To say that the truth of my belief that p is 'mind dependent' in the relevant sense is to say either that its being true depends on what other people think about the conditions under which a belief is true, or that the fact that my belief is true is partly constituted by facts about other people's mental states.

INTERPRETING A THEORY REALISTICALLY

> To interpret a theory realistically is (a) to take it as having an objective truth-value (i.e., to take it as something other than a mere evocative metaphor or expression of tastes, attitudes, or values), and (b) to interpret it as being true only if realism about the objects and properties (supposedly) referred to in the theory is true. (cf. Rea 2007: 324)

To be sure, some ways of being an anti-realist about truth will imply metaphysical anti-realism. For example, the view that nothing is true (because, e.g., the whole concept of truth is defective) counts as a version of anti-realism about truth, and it straightforwardly implies that no theory in metaphysics or any other discipline is to be interpreted realistically. But anti-realism about truth is also separable from metaphysical anti-realism. Suppose, for example, you think that p is true if and only if p is what would be believed by rational inquirers at the end of an ideal process of inquiry. This view implies anti-realism about truth. But one can hold this view while at the same time holding (for example) that God is the only rational inquirer capable of engaging in an ideal process of inquiry, that God believes that there are objective truths in metaphysics, and that God is also a realist about various commonsense and scientific kinds (e.g., the kinds 'person' and 'human being'). Thus, even though the view in question implies anti-realism about truth, it does *not* imply that truth in metaphysics is always subjective, or that no theory in metaphysics is to be interpreted realistically, or that anti-realism about commonsense and scientific kinds is true.[17] So it doesn't imply metaphysical anti-realism.

[17] On this, cf. Alston 1996 and Devitt 1991.

What goes for the relation between realism about truth and metaphysical realism goes also for the relation between realism about truth and theological realism. Theological realism is, in effect, a species of metaphysical realism: it is the thesis that theories in theology (or in some particular domain of theology—e.g. Christian theology, or distinctively Presbyterian theology) are to be realistically interpreted (in the sense described above). And just as one might endorse anti-realism about truth without endorsing metaphysical anti-realism, so too one might endorse anti-realism about truth without endorsing theological anti-realism.

As noted above, the division between realism and anti-realism about truth is just the first of the divisions to which we must attend. The second is that between epistemic and non-epistemic conceptions of truth. Epistemic conceptions of truth maintain that there is a necessary connection between what is true and what would be believed under certain specified conditions by a certain kind of rational agent or agents. Epistemic conceptions of truth abound in the literature. To take just a few examples: C. S. Peirce says that "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth…" (1878: 139); William James claims that "[t]rue ideas are those that we can validate, corroborate, and verify" (1907: 142); and Brand Blanshard holds that "truth *consists* in coherence [of our ideas]" (1940: 269). Non-epistemic conceptions of truth, on the other hand, maintain that there is no necessary connection between truth and what would be believed by rational creatures.

The main import of this second division within the literature on truth for our purposes is just this: Whatever other links there are between authority and truth, epistemic conceptions of truth introduce additional and very direct connections. For example, undefeated theoretical authorities validate, corroborate and verify our ideas, and, by definition, their assertions cohere

with the assertions of all authorities to which they are not prior. Thus, it looks as if on the theories offered by James and Blanshard, undefeated authoritative assertions are automatically true.

Be that as it may, I propose to set aside consideration of epistemic accounts of truth in what follows. This is not because they are unworthy of attention, but rather because I have elsewhere already given them the attention that I think they deserve. In Rea 2000, I have argued—developing a line of reasoning found in Plantinga 1982—that epistemic accounts of truth imply something very much like theism. Naturally, I am a fan of the implied consequence; but it is hard to take seriously a theory of *truth* that is so heavy-laden with ontological commitments. Better, I think, to look elsewhere for a theory of truth. Once we do so, however, we find that differences among theories of truth do not make for substantive differences in what we say about the relationship between authority and truth. And so we save ourselves the trouble of proceeding piecemeal, asking with respect to each theory of truth what the relationship between authority and truth is *if that theory is true*.

The third and final division to which I want to attend lies within the realist camp: the division between correspondence theories of truth and all the rest. The main thing that I want to note about this division is simply that it *exists*: i.e., some realist theories are correspondence theories, but not all of them are. It is sometimes thought that realism about truth goes hand-in-hand with a correspondence theory of truth. But this is a mistake. The confusion is especially important in the present context because it seems to be one to which Christian theologians, and especially evangelicals, are particularly prone. One often finds theologians taking a stand for the correspondence theory of truth, apparently in part because of the misguided belief that

one *must* do so in order to preserve the (absolute) truth of core doctrines of the Christian faith. The basic idea seems to be that giving up the correspondence theory means giving up realism about truth which, in turn, means giving up realism in theology. We have already seen that the second link in this chain of reasoning is weak; but it is important to see that the first is as well.

The correspondence theory of truth comes in different varieties, all of which maintain that being true consists in the obtaining of a relation—the correspondence relation, whatever exactly that is—between truth-bearers (propositions, beliefs, or sentences usually) and something in the world (states of affairs, or facts, for example). But one need not believe in the existence of any sort of correspondence relation, nor need one even believe that truth has a substantive, analyzable nature, in order to be a realist about truth. A coherence theory of truth, for example, maintains (roughly) that being true is a matter of cohering with certain other beliefs or propositions. But it does not follow from this doctrine that being true is "mind dependent" in the sense specified by condition (ii) of the schematic characterization of 'realism about F'.[18] Similarly, William Alston (1996) has defended at length the thesis that realism about truth is consistent with minimalism about truth—the thesis, roughly, that there is nothing more to be said about the nature of truth beyond the so-called T-schema ('X is true if, and only if, *p*', where particular instances are obtained by replacing '*p*' with a declarative sentence and 'X' with an expression referring to that sentence).[19] So, again, realism about truth does not require the correspondence theory.

[18] Though, of course, there are anti-realist ways of developing the coherence theory.
[19] For discussion of the T-schema and its relation to Tarski's 'Form T', see Alston 1996: 30ff.

So much for remarks about the nature of truth. I now turn to a more direct consideration of the main question of this section—the question of what it means to attribute truth (or falsity, for that matter) to a *text*. First some easy cases. If the text in question expresses a single (perhaps conjunctive) proposition, then the text is true if and only if the proposition it expresses is true. If, on the other hand, the text is a sentence like "Stop!" or "Enter at your own risk," then attributing truth to the text is just a category error. But, of course, we are not here interested in the easy cases. What interests us here ultimately is the Bible—a text composed of smaller book-length works of various genres, which includes within it sentences of various grammatical types, as well as various literary tropes like metaphor, allegory, hyperbole, and the like. What could it mean to say that a text like *that* is true?

Suppose someone were to tell you that Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is true—not that there are hobbits and elves and a place called Mordor, of course, but that, despite the nonexistence of these sorts of things and despite the fact that the events narrated therein never took place, the text is nonetheless *true*. Or suppose someone were to hand you a book of sonnets and poetic lamentations, and suppose they were to tell you that the poems were true. Could anyone make sense of these claims?

What I want to suggest is that we can make sense of claims like this in much the same way in which we make sense of similar claims about interesting metaphors. The philosophical literature on metaphor is vast and complicated, but we don't need a full-blown theory of metaphor in order to appreciate roughly what it might mean to call a metaphor "true". Attention to two main points of agreement in the literature ought to suffice for present purposes.

Note first that there is a distinction to be drawn between the *semantic content* of a text and what the *speaker or author* means by the text (or, in other words, what the text 'pragmatically conveys'). I don't have a theory about the relationship between semantics, pragmatics, and "what is said" by a text,[20] but we don't need any such theory in order to appreciate the basic point that what authors of metaphors typically mean by their words is something other than the bare semantic content of the metaphor. There is controversy in the literature over whether live metaphors typically (or ever) mean anything *determinate*. That is, there is controversy over whether what is conveyed by a metaphor is a definite proposition, or whether metaphors merely invite or stimulate certain kinds of reflection.[21] But there is general agreement that *if* metaphors convey anything determinate, what they convey goes beyond their semantic content.[22]

Accordingly (and this is our second point), so-called "metaphorical truth", whatever it is, will attach to what is intentionally conveyed rather than to the semantic content. This, of course, is why metaphors that are semantically false—e.g., 'Juliet is the sun'—can nevertheless be assessed as true. If the author of a metaphor intentionally conveys propositional content by way of the metaphor, then the metaphor (as such) will be true if and only if the relevant proposition is true. On the other hand, if the author of the metaphor fails to convey propositional content (perhaps because metaphors as such generally lack such content), then either the author fails to convey any "metaphorical truth" or the metaphor's "truth" consists in

[20] For a start into this literature, with particular attention to metaphor, see Camp 2006a.
[21] Compare, for example, Davidson 1979 and Cooper 1986 on the one hand with Black 1954/1955 and 1977, Soskice 1985, and, more recently, Stern 2000 and 2006 and Camp 2005, 2006a, and 2006b.
[22] See, e.g., Camp 2006a and 2006b, and Stern 2000.

its being insightful or revealing or otherwise interestingly illuminating by virtue of the sorts of reflections it stimulates.[23]

Return, now, to the cases we began with—cases wherein someone tells you, for example, that *The Lord of the Rings* is true, or that a book of poetry is true. It seems that we can understand these sorts of truth claims in roughly the way just described. Either we attribute to the speaker—the one who is telling us that the text is true—the view that the text intentionally *conveys a message* that is somehow different from the semantic content of the text, and that the message in question is genuinely true; or we attribute to the speaker the view that the metaphor intentionally invites lines of reflection that naturally lead to genuine insights, fruitful lines of research, and so on. If we buy into the view that the text conveys a true message, we employ our skills at literary analysis to try to extract the message and then to assess it as true or false. If we think that the text merely invites lines of reflection that lead to genuine insights, then we pursue the relevant lines of reflection.

This, then, is one way in which attributions of truth to a text require clarification. For all but the most simple texts, however, there is a further way in which such attributions must be clarified. Consider, for starters, Benjamin Franklin's poem, "Death is a Fisherman":

Death is a fisherman, the world we see
His fish-pond is, and we the fishes be;
His net some general sickness; howe'er he
Is not so kind as other fishers be;
For if they take one of the smaller fry,

[23] On this, see Cooper 1986, Ch. 4.

They throw him in again, he shall not die:

But death is sure to kill all he can get,

And all is fish with him that comes to net.

Someone might well attribute truth to this poem; and, indeed, one might well suppose that the poem conveys propositional truth (as opposed to *merely* stimulating interesting lines of reflection). But note that one can do so while disagreeing with central features of the allegory. So, for example, it seems that the following speech represents one perfectly sensible, though hardly inevitable, response to the poem:

> The poem is quite true—Death is merciless and takes all who fall into his net; and Death seems like a fisherman in other respects as well (Death is predatory and so on). But it just doesn't seem right to say that 'some general sickness' is his net. Death catches us in many ways.

Does the remark that 'it doesn't seem right to say that "some general sickness" is his net' negate the remark at the beginning of the speech—namely, that the poem is 'quite true'? No. For, clearly enough, an attribution of truth to a text *need not mean that every single message conveyed by the text or by some part of the text is true.*

In fact, I suspect that it is relatively rare for attributions of truth to a complex text to mean anything more than that the central, or most important message conveyed by the text is true. (Obviously for a long or complex text, the central or most important message may be a longish conjunction of smaller messages.[24]) Suppose you read an intellectual biography of

[24] In some cases it will be a bit of a stretch to speak of 'the central message', even if we insist that we are thinking of it as a long conjunction of smaller such messages. You might, for example, say of a newspaper that it tells the

Sartre that devotes hundreds of pages to a description of his upbringing, early intellectual development, and philosophical career but, as regards his romantic life, offers only one sentence: "Sartre enjoyed a life-long romance with Simone de Beauvoir, to whom he was ever faithful." Given that Sartre was notorious for his many mistresses, we would be reluctant to say of a biography like this that it is true, even if it were absolutely inerrant with respect to all of the other details of Sartre's life. The reason is that it gets wrong a fact that many of us will regard as pretty important. On the other hand, we probably would assess it as true if it were accurate on this and other salient details but included mistakes on such matters as the number of students attending some famous lecture of Sartre's, the precise date on which Sartre first met Camus, or the number of pages in the first edition of *Being and Nothingness* (so long as it was not mistaken by much). If asked how we could possibly say that *the text as a whole* is true when it contains manifest falsehoods, our reply would likely just be that the falsehoods simply aren't central—i.e., they are not part of 'the most important message' of the text. Moreover, it seems clear that *which* details count as part of the central message of a text (and so which details the text must get right in order to count as true) may shift from context to context. A time traveler who took Newton's *Principia* back to Egypt of 3,000 B.C. would not be lying if she said that everything in the *Principia* is true. But she would be lying (or confused) if she brought the text into a 21st Century graduate level physics course and announced that everything in the text is true. The reason is that the ways in which the *Principia* goes wrong are not salient in a

truth. But it sounds odd to say that the paper has a central message—even one that is just the conjunction of the central messages of all of the stories. Point taken (and I thank Paul Draper for raising the point); but, despite the oddity, I am inclined to think that if one were to assert of a newspaper that it is true, or tells the truth, what one would probably mean is just that the 'central message' (in the 'longish conjunction' sense of the term) is true.

context where Newton's work is being introduced to Egyptians of the fourth millennium B.C., but they are highly salient in a 21st Century graduate level physics course.

We may now formulate a recipe for assessing attributions of truth to Biblical texts or to the Bible as a whole. For any such attribution, we must determine whether the claim is (i) that the (central, or most important) semantic content of the text is true, (ii) that the text intentionally conveys a genuinely true message that is both the central or most important message conveyed by the text and also somehow differs from or goes beyond its semantic content, (iii) that the text invites reflection that will naturally lead to genuine insight, or (iv) some combination of these three. We must then employ our skills at literary analysis to uncover the central or most important message (which, again, will likely be a conjunction of smaller central and important messages), pursue the relevant lines of reflection, and so on. This means, of course, that there is real complexity involved in evaluating attributions of truth to texts—so much so that it is not clear that one says anything deeply informative when one says of a long and complicated text simply that it is true. Before we can even begin to evaluate such a claim, we need a lot more information—information about what is central to the text, about the proper interpretation of the literary tropes within the text, information about genre and much more. But I think that, rather than be troubled by such a conclusion, we ought to welcome and embrace it. No one is helped in their understanding or assessment of the Bible to be told, without further clarification, that the Bible, as a whole, is true. The really crucial questions, it seems, are questions about the parts.

3. Authority and Truth

We are now in a position to draw some conclusions about the relationship between attributions of authority and attributions of truth. First, it should be clear from the foregoing that to say without qualification that a text is authoritative is to say nothing definitive about whether it is true. The reason is that the text might be merely practically authoritative, and a merely practically authoritative text need not semantically express or pragmatically convey any propositional message. It need not even stimulate insightful lines of reflection. It might merely issue directives. (The Ten Commandments, for example, cannot sensibly be said to be true in any sense that we are interested in here.)

This is not to say, however, that truth is entirely irrelevant to practical authority. For example, it would be hard to take seriously a text's claim even to practical authority in the domain of morality if the text in question were filled with supposedly factual assertions to the effect that members of a particular race or gender are morally worthless, or if it went on for pages extolling the health benefits of cannibalism, or if it contained enough other misguided assertions as to lead one seriously to doubt the wisdom or sanity of its author. On the other hand, a text might have a great deal of merely practical authority and still be mistaken about a wide variety of facts, so long as its being so mistaken is consistent with the view that its author possesses sufficient wisdom and knowledge within the relevant domain to merit obedience. The point, then, is just that practical authority on its own is no guarantee of general truthfulness, both because it's possible that a merely practical authority make no factual assertions, but also because it's possible that the factual assertions such an authority does make are entirely irrelevant to its status as a practical authority.

Second, it should also be clear that if a text has *theoretical authority* over an individual in some domain, then the text's assertions within that domain must be *reliable enough* to warrant belief in the absence of defeaters. (For purposes here, 'what the text says' is just the conjunction of whatever it semantically asserts with whatever its author intentionally conveys;[25] and 'reliability' is to be understood in terms of likelihood of truth.[26]) How reliable is 'reliable enough'? That is hard to say; but we seem to understand the concept well enough to employ it in everyday judgments. Tabloids are not reliable enough within the domain of "world news" to warrant belief. If you believe that Elvis Presley is still alive because you read in *The National Enquirer* that he was recently seen at a mall in Kentucky, your belief is not warranted. *The Wall Street Journal*, on the other hand is reliable enough to warrant belief in this domain—and this despite the fact that it is hardly *perfectly* reliable. Note, in this connection, that it would be wholly implausible to say, in general, that if a text has theoretical authority over

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[25] Note too that what a text semantically *asserts* is not necessarily the same as what it semantically *expresses*. The proposition that Juliet is the sun, for example, is identical to the proposition that Juliet is the gaseous object around which Earth, Mars, Venus, and various other planets are in orbit. Romeo's metaphorical remark that Juliet is the sun semantically expresses this proposition—i.e., the proposition is its semantic content. But, obviously, his remark does not *assert* that proposition; it asserts a different proposition which is pragmatically conveyed by the words, in context, 'Juliet is the sun'.

[26] At the conference connected with this volume, it was pointed out that some have argued that 'the biblical concept of truth' is very close to the concept of reliability. Supposedly, then, according to 'the biblical concept', saying that something is true is roughly equivalent to saying that it is trustworthy, able to be relied upon, etc. If this view about truth is correct, then here we have a very close connection indeed between a kind of authority and truth *simpliciter*; and if it is indeed *the biblical concept*, then this might mean that Christians have good reason to endorse it. However, I am not persuaded by the arguments that purport to establish that this is *the* biblical concept. One problem is that those who give such arguments are always careful to distinguish epistemic from non-epistemic conceptions of truth. So, for example, Roger Nicole (1983) sometimes characterizes 'the biblical concept of truth' in a way that makes it sound like an epistemic conception, and sometimes characterizes it in a way that makes it sound more like a correspondence theoretic concept. Moreover, Thiselton (1978/2006) explicitly claims that multiple conceptions may be found in scripture. These two facts cast some doubt, I think, on the idea that there is one single 'biblical concept of truth'. Indeed, one might reasonably be skeptical that the Bible offers a robust enough set of linguistic data to determine any such thing as *the* biblical concept of truth.

Even if it is true that 'the biblical concept of truth' is connected with reliability in the way described above, however, it must further be noted that this is a different notion of reliability from the one I am invoking here—which is, again, a notion that is partly *definable* in terms of truth).

someone within some domain, then whatever it says to that person within the domain must be perfectly reliable. Theoretical authority implies reliability; it does not imply infallibility.

Third, we may conclude that if a text has *foundational theoretical authority* over S in D, then it must be at least as reliable as any other authority for S in D. For suppose this were not the case. Suppose, for example, you have two books (T1 and T2) about some historical event, one of which (T1) has foundational theoretical authority in that domain and the other of which (T2) doesn't. (Perhaps the first book contains the only surviving eyewitness account of the event, and there is no forensic evidence available about the event apart from the testimony of that source.) It follows from our earlier characterization of foundational authority that if T1 and T2 were to conflict in their assertions about the event, it would be more rational to believe in accord with T1 than with T2. But it is hard to see how this could be the case if T1 were *less reliable* than T2 in D. Thus, at a minimum, T1 must be at least as reliable in D as T2. Thus, if one understands attributions of authority to the Bible to be attributions of *foundational* practical authority or foundational theoretical authority in some domain, it follows that the Bible must be at least truthful enough to be *as reliable as* any other authority in that domain.

Thus far, our conclusions about the general connections between authority and truth—and so our conclusions about the connection between biblical authority and biblical truthfulness—have been rather milquetoast. In short: Attributions of authority, depending on what exactly they amount to, might require a reasonably high degree of reliability in some interesting domain, but (so far) nothing like reliability across the board, and nothing even close to inerrancy. But religious believers are often inclined to make assumptions about God and

God's relation to the biblical text that, given what else we have said here, would justify stronger conclusions. Importantly, however, many of these assumptions are negotiable.

Consider, for example, the following schema:

(α) G is the author of T, and, necessarily, for any text τ authored by G and for any individual S other than G, τ has foundational authority over S in D.

Many Christians are willing to assume that α is true in the case where 'G' is replaced with 'God', 'T' is replaced with 'the Bible', and 'D' is replaced with the name of some fairly large domain like 'the domain of truths about God, morality, the human condition, and salvation' or, much more generally, 'the domain defined by the text itself'—i.e., the domain which is just the conjunction of every proposition that is semantically asserted or intentionally conveyed by the text. And if some instance of α is true, it follows that whatever T says within D is true and whatever directives T issues within D constitute (for everyone) decisive reasons for action. In other words, T is perfectly reliable. Here is the proof: Consider a possible world W1 in which G produces a text T1 that is authoritative over some individual S ($\neq$ G) but less than perfectly reliable in D. Then there is a possible world W2 which differs from W1 in no relevant respect apart from these facts: (a) W2 contains, in addition to T1, a text T2 that is both authoritative over S and perfectly reliable in D; and (b) S knows that T2 is more reliable than T1.[27] In W2, then, T2 is clearly more authoritative than T1: reasons supplied by T2 have priority over reasons supplied by T1. But if that is so, then it is possible that there be someone (other than G) over which T1 does not have foundational authority, contrary to α.

[27] I assume that texts must be of finite length. Thus, there will be no text whose content is an infinitely long conjunctions that express in full detail the entire truth about a possible world.

Now let us consider the assumption, β, generated from α by substituting 'God' for 'G', 'the Bible' for 'T', and 'the domain defined by the text itself' for 'D':

(β) G is the author of the Bible, and, necessarily, for any text τ authored by God and for any individual S other than God, τ has foundational authority over S in the domain defined by the text itself.

Our fourth—and certainly more substantive—conclusion, then, is that β implies that the Bible is perfectly reliable within the domain defined by the text itself. Thus, if β is true, then every proposition that the Bible semantically asserts or intentionally conveys must be true, and all of its directives constitute decisive reason for action. Of course, β is not an implication of the bare claim that the Bible is authoritative, nor is it an implication of the bare claim that the Bible is true, nor is it even clearly implied by any passage in scripture. It is, it would seem, just a philosophical-theological doctrine. It is an interesting question whether its second conjunct in particular could be shown to follow from any of the central tenets of classical theism, or of some plausible alternative version of theism such as open theism or process theism. But this is a question that will not be taken up here.

The fourth conclusion is naturally construed as drawing a connection between a certain view about the nature of the authority of scripture—the view captured by β--and the *inerrancy* of scripture. For a lot of evangelicals, the go-to document for an 'official' statement of the doctrine of inerrancy is the *Chicago Statement on Inerrancy*. That document does a lot more than merely define the doctrine; but according to the portion of the document that looks most like a definition, "Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary

origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives." (Geisler 1980: 494) This is pretty close to the claim that the Bible is perfectly reliable in whatever it semantically asserts or intentionally conveys, and also perfectly reliable in whatever directives it issues. If there is a difference it all, it will lie in the difference between the sum total of 'what the Bible teaches' on the one hand and, on the other hand, the sum total of whatever the Bible says to us, along with whatever directives it issues. The Bible *teaches*, for example, that Jesus told his apostles to go unto all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I am not so sure, however, that it *teaches* that we are to do the same. If anything, by including the teaching that Jesus said this, the divine author of the Bible *intentionally conveys to believers the directive that they are to do the same*. But that is no more one of the Bible's teachings than a command to 'Stop!' is one of a policeman's teachings. Still, since I am inclined to think that believers in inerrancy would not want to exempt intentionally conveyed directives from the scope of what they take to be 'without fault' in scripture, I am inclined to think that this fourth conclusion here does indeed draw a connection between a certain view of biblical authority and the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.

Fifth, it is not clear that any (non-question-begging) assumption weaker than β will forge the same link between authority and inerrancy. We have already seen that a text can be foundationally authoritative for an individual in a domain without being perfectly reliable in that domain. β manages to connect authority with perfect reliability because it implies that there is an author who is such that any text of which s/he is the author would have to be *at least as reliable* in some domain as a text that is *perfectly reliable* in that domain. But that implication holds only when the author is necessarily such as to be the author *only* of texts that

have foundational authority of some kind. So it seems that those interested in maintaining a connection between scriptural authority and scriptural inerrancy will be best served by devoting their philosophical-theological energies to a defense of β.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the inerrancy doctrine itself has relatively few implications about what we actually ought to believe in light of scripture. It is, after all, compatible with widely varying views about what (if any) propositional messages are asserted or conveyed by biblical texts. Suppose that what the biblical text says is just what the divine author of the text semantically asserts or intentionally conveys through the text. Then what the biblical text says depends heavily upon what God aims to do with it. If we think that God intends to teach us the sober historical facts about the genesis of life on Earth, the origins of Israel, and the conquest of Canaan, then we will have reason to take most of the declarative sentences in the Old Testament as genuinely asserting their semantic contents. If, on the other hand, we think that God's authorship of the Old Testament amounts primarily to his having appropriated a variety of myths and hyperbolic tales to make rather general points about divine sovereignty, divine faithfulness, and the like, then we will have little reason at all to think that the same Old Testament texts say much of anything at all about the origins of life or of Israel, or about the conquest of Canaan. The claim that the Bible is perfectly reliable in whatever it says will imply that whatever it says is true; but it implies nothing at all about what the Bible actually says.

As I see it, then—and this is the sixth and final conclusion—our views about the nature and scope of biblical authority shed, all by themselves, relatively little light on the most interesting questions about the truthfulness of problematic passages in scripture.

Consequently, it is a mistake to treat the topic of biblical authority as somehow lying at the heart of debates about the reliability and inerrancy of scripture. Far more pertinent to these latter debates are questions about the nature of God and divine authorship: In what sense is God an (or the) author of scripture? What are God's aims in scripture? What might be God's aims in this or that part of scripture? Is God the sort of author about whom β is true? These are the questions that promise to shed the most light on the topics that really worry us. Of course, some of them—especially the last one—will involve us in questions about authority; but none of them are fundamentally about the nature of authority, and all of them seem to be questions different from those that have occupied so much of the literature.

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