

The Authority of Scripture

INT02



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The Authority of Scripture

INT02

Introductory Module Two Unit Five

**The Word of God: Implications of Divine
Revelation**

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DVD Presentations

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INT02 Unit Five Assignments

Read and understand all the Unit notes.

Think about and make rough notes for the assignment: **The concept of authority.**

Provide a couple of examples for the assignment: **Personal encounters.**

Think about six statements and indicate whether you agree with them for the assignment: **Perceptions of authority.**

Read a short passage and comment on its validity in the assignment: **Changing perspectives.**

Revisit the assignment: **The concept of authority.**

Write **a short essay** answering one of four given questions.

Fill in and sign **Self Assessment Form.**

INT02 Unit Five Instructions

Read this page first!

This is quite a straightforward Unit, though may require some thought to work through some concepts relating to the nature of authority. There are not too many Assignments, though the final one will take a little time.

Read the **Introduction** and complete **Unit Assignment 1** which requires no prior study and will take only ten minutes.

The section on **Contemporary Attitudes Towards Authority** assumes at least a basic understanding of the concepts of modernity and postmodernity, though nothing technical is required. **Unit Assignment 2** asks you to think about your personal encounters with these different mindsets.

In **The Recognition of Authority** we consider our encounter with authority and the way in which we perceive it in everyday life. These principles are then considered in relation to the Scriptures. There are three assignments in this section:

- **Unit Assignment 3** requires no previous special knowledge and is simply a 'thinking' exercise to help discern ways in which we might perceive authority.
- **Unit Assignment 4** requires you to read and comment on a passage with reference to your personal experience.
- **Unit Assignment 5** asks you to return to the first Unit Assignment and have a brief 'rethink.'

The final section of the Unit (and of the Module) is **The Role of Scripture as Authority**. The idea of the authority of narrative is considered, before looking at the authority found within other Biblical genre within the context of narrative. **Unit Assignment 6** requires you to write a short essay on one of a selection of four options.

A Final Check. Make sure you have done everything you have been asked to do and then prepare to submit your work and proceed.

Introduction

This final Unit aims to summarise what we have so far had to say regarding the *Authority of Scripture* before considering some contemporary attitudes towards the concept of authority, something of the nature of our recognition of authority and the role played by Scripture as having authority in all aspects of our lives.

Though this is an Introductory Module, it has covered areas which on some levels can be rather complex. The essential principles may well be fairly straightforward, but we have been introduced to a number of areas which may have previously been unexplored and we have raised a number of questions for which there may yet be no definitive answers. As we pursue a lifetime of Bible reading and contemplation, it is likely that many of these questions will find answers and others may no longer seem as important as they might appear now.

Above all, we must not ever lose sight of the One whose words these are and who seeks to draw us into ever closer harmony with him through their study and pursuit. At no point should we see God as having abandoned his work of communicating with his creation. God must be seen not only as Creator and Revealer of all truth, but also as its principal Communicator and Preserver. And as we move beyond the area of Scripture's authority to consider matters of interpretation in another Introductory Module, we might also come to see him as prime Illuminator, Elucidator, Expounder and Interpreter.

A brief recapitulation

Revelation

The first Unit examined the subject of Revelation. After considering a number of words and terms used to describe the process, we briefly considered the rationale for divine revelation and why it makes sense that the God of heaven and earth would communicate with those he had created in his image. We made a distinction between General, or Natural, Revelation and Special Revelation - the latter being the means by which God has revealed himself through Scripture.

'Inspiration'

The second unit addressed the means by which God's special revelation was received and recorded for future generations. We looked at the use of the term 'inspiration' before considering biblical claims to it and its recognition by other biblical writers. Something of what we might understand of the process was explored before we considered some contemporary attitudes towards the subject.

Canonisation

The third unit began to explore what is the rather complex area of canonicity and the discovery of which writings had been breathed out

by God and were therefore to be considered authoritative. The formation of both Old Testament and New Testament canons was examined with a view to understanding their development.

Other writings

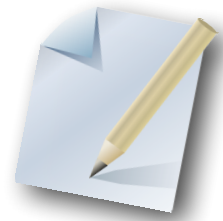
In the fourth unit we introduced a number of other books not generally recognised as being canonical and considered why they should not be included within the canon of Scripture. Particular attention was given to the Apocrypha, and consideration made of other writings which have found more recent popularity in some circles.

The matter now at hand

Bearing in mind all that has gone before, it is now time to consider what are some implications of divine revelation. If God has specifically revealed himself through his written word, and if that word which has been preserved is recognised as being from God, what are we to do with it? What difference should it make in our lives today? How are we to understand the authority of Scripture in the 21st century? In what way can it be said to be authoritative?

UNIT ASSIGNMENT 1 - THE CONCEPT OF AUTHORITY

Before proceeding further, jot down in a rough format the words and phrases that come to your mind when you hear the word 'Authority.' Spend no more than ten minutes doing this, but try to build up something of a picture of what you perceive when you read or hear the word. You might like to think of how the word fits into different categories of life and experience. You do not need to submit this Assignment, though feel free to do so if you choose.



Contemporary Attitudes Towards Authority

We introduced this Module with a brief note on what might be seen as a general reaction to the notion of “authority” within contemporary Western society. It is generally not a popular notion and the word is often associated with unfavourable ideas of authoritarianism or perhaps simply dismissed as being outdated and irrelevant in a world where appeals to ‘rights’ and the ideal of ‘freedom’ seem almost to reign supreme (if one is willing to overlook such an inconsistency).

In discussing the subject of Authority and Scripture in his *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, Richard Bauckham suggests:

We need to observe the effect of greater and greater secularisation, which means, initially, the increasing triumph of Enlightenment rationalism and, later, the partial transition from modernity to postmodern pluralism that is happening at present.¹

We do well to have something of an understanding of cultural shifts in the West that have affected the ways in which authority is generally viewed by contemporary society. And we need “an adequate understanding of authority ... that takes account of the way our contemporary culture has radically problematised the notion of authority.”² This will not only help our understanding of why others think the way they do and so inform our practice of more effectively communicating the concept of Biblical authority to an increasingly secular mindset, but it should also help us to better understand ways in which our own understanding of Biblical authority might have been tainted by the world around us.

A modern view of authority

Ever since the Enlightenment, that swept Europe from the 17th century and which extolled the virtue of reason above all others, the recognition of ‘traditional’ authority has taken a pounding. Indeed, any matter that could not be firmly established by rational argument based on empirical evidence was to be rejected in favour of only those matters that could be clearly discerned by any intelligent being. The authority of the ‘Church’ was dismissed, the authority of the Bible underwent unprecedented (and often unscrupulous) scrutiny and ultimately God himself was cast aside as being the invention of those who sought to dominate others in the name of religion.

In response, those of faith sought to defend the Scriptures and argue for the existence of God through yet further rational argument that though persuasive, did little to convince those whose minds were firmly set against all that lies beyond the scope of human reason -

¹ Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, 2002: 53

² Bauckham, 2002: 56

the existence of that which is essentially spiritual. In this context, the modern battles between 'popular science' and religion have been waged, most recently epitomised in the popular writings of Richard Dawkins and his ilk.

It is against this background that many still view God and the Bible. The modernist might ask: "Why would we want to live our lives and determine our decisions according to an authority that cannot be verified or discerned through purely rational means?" Though he might be willing to depend upon the authority of the scientist, or some other 'expert', he would do so only with the understanding that their authority or expertise could be checked and proven to be reliable by what he would consider rational processes.

Modernism's criticism of much that was paraded in the name of religion was well-deserved and needed to be made. The exercise of authority by the 'Church' was, at times, oppressive and could often rightly have been described as both unreasonable and authoritarian. But its rejection of God, and its consequent dismissal of the divine nature of Scripture was an unnecessary step too far. It was not rational reason alone that found no place for God and all that was spiritual – it was a preconceived belief that man was supreme and that nothing could stop what appeared to be his relentless progress towards Utopia.



ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

If you are less familiar with the background to this area, you might find it interesting to undertake some further research on the *Age of Enlightenment*, its influence on *Modern* thinking, and the development of *Postmodern* thought.

The myth of Darwinian evolution was built upon this myth of progress which was something of a mainstay of the Enlightenment movement. It was an essential part of the progressive story which began in disorder and confusion and which was leading to a grand new order of universal reason, backed by the autonomous intelligence of mankind. But it always lacked a credible 'beginning'. Of course, without God, there can be no beginning. But without God there can be no adequate basis for authority.

A postmodern view of authority

Where, for the sake of autonomy, modernism rejected all authority that could not be rationally deduced from empirical evidence, postmodernism essentially rejects all authority apart from the individual. If the gods of modernism were *science* and *reason*, those of the postmodern world are the *individual* and his or her *rights* or

freedoms. The postmodern mind sees the modernist agenda itself as being oppressive and considers it to be little more than an attempt to dominate the world through its own tradition of autonomous reason, with the 'expert scientist' put forward as a figure of authority.

In part there is good reason for it to be seen like this. Modernism has offered what is understood by many in the West to be a universal ideal, in which Western science and technology, education and morality are seen as being equally valid within any society, often overriding and replacing indigenous cultural traditions which are seen as being inferior. This universality is seen by the postmodernist as an exercise of power – as an attempt to dominate the world through the imposition of one people's 'truth' over another. This domination was seen clearly through the West's colonial expansion across the globe and its continued dominance through consumerist imperialism.³

But postmodernism rejects universalism in favour of individualism. Essentially it recognises no universal truths, seeing any attempt to propose truth to be accepted by all as an attempt to dominate others. Rather than accept even general truth which had once been established through autonomous reason, it allows the individual to determine for him/herself what is truth – and what is true for one, need not necessarily be true for another. The postmodernist might ask: "Why should any one view of 'truth' be correct and all others wrong?" So truth becomes little more than simply "whatever works for me!"

Where the modernist mindset cannot accept the possibility of truth beyond that which is immediately observable and testable, that of the postmodernist cannot accept the possibility of any absolute truth beyond that which he or she is willing to accept at any particular moment – and at that it is true only for the individual concerned. Modernism rejects authority unless its credentials are demonstrated by reason – postmodernism rejects any authority it chooses to reject, regardless of any reason, and essentially accepts only the authority of self.

This may not be the place to further this discussion, but there are important missional aspects which do need to be properly considered at some point.

UNIT ASSIGNMENT 2 - PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS

Before moving on, give an example of a personal encounter with Modernism and another with Postmodernism in which you have seen the authority of God undermined. You might want to think specifically of conversations you have had where others have opposed your beliefs from different mindsets. Or you might think of changes you have seen in society reflecting these differing perspectives. You should write **no more than 300 words**.



³ See Bauckham, 2002: 61-64

The Recognition of Authority

The way in which we view the origin of Scripture will affect the way in which we recognise its authority. That is not to say that the two matters are identical, but that one is very much dependent upon the other. Understanding the divine origin of the Scriptures, that they are breathed out from the mouth of God, we see them as being essentially authoritative.⁴ But what exactly does that mean? How do they exercise that authority and in what way do we recognise it?

We have already said that authority does not need to be authoritarian in nature, and in regards to the Scriptures we would probably do well to dismiss any notion of enforcement of authority altogether. Of course, God is sovereign over all, but for his authority to be both effective and beneficial to mankind it must first be recognised and accepted - rather than simply demonstrated and enforced. At times God may enforce his authority, but that does not really happen in Scripture.

Encountering authority

There is something rather ubiquitous about authority and we encounter it on a daily basis. Sometimes it might be obvious, perhaps in the form of a government official or police constable, but we run across it in all kinds of settings, often without realising that that is what we are seeing or without recognising it as authority. We might be watching a documentary on television and listening to a scientist who is introduced as being an 'expert' in some particular field. At college we might attend a lecture being presented by someone acclaimed to be an authority in an area of the arts. We might be willing to listen to and maybe learn from people like this, understanding that their knowledge and experience far exceeds our own.

In a sense, we allow such people to have authority over us in those particular areas. Their authority is not authoritarian, but is rather seen as enlightening - maybe even liberating. We might allow them to help set the bounds or limitations of a certain discipline, defining its parameters and allowing us to more freely explore its possibilities, confident that their authority is well-founded and well-informed. We wouldn't necessarily allow them to have authority over other aspects of our life, but in those areas we consider them to be something of the 'final word', at least as far as our experience is concerned, we are happy to submit and let them take the lead.

Not only need authority not be authoritarian, it might even lead primarily by example without ever having to issue anything sounding like a word of command. By its life of virtue and integrity, it might inspire countless observers to follow in its steps. The kind of life we might recognise as simply being so much better than our own might

⁴ We could say "*intrinsically* authoritative" but we will be using that term later in a particular context in understanding our perception of authority.

almost compel us to take our own lives more seriously and live life more productively.

The authority of truth

We regard as authoritative that which is true - or at least, that which we believe to be true - and we allow our collection of truths to form a trustworthy or reliable paradigm by which we live our lives. For example, the way we see God and the way in which we understand the universe around us will determine what to us is true and will become the legitimised authority that will govern our words and deeds - even when we might not actually be able to describe the nature of that authority.

We might consider the life of Jesus and see it as one full of virtue and integrity. There is an absolute truth about him such that he virtually demands us to follow him before one single word of command is spoken. His life and simple, though profound, teaching inspires us to live out our lives beyond the ordinary. We see his authority in all that he does and says. He is absolute truth in every sense, and the ultimate Word of authority by which we have chosen to live our lives.

Extrinsic and intrinsic authority

A distinction might be made between authority that is extrinsic and that which is intrinsic - as far as our perception of it is concerned. Bauckham has a useful section on this in his chapter on 'Authority and Scripture'.⁵ Essentially, that which is extrinsic relies upon an external source that has to be trusted or taken at face value, whereas that which is intrinsic is essentially self-evident - one just knows that it is true and reliable in light of one's experience.

In the course of his practice, a doctor may diagnose a condition of which a patient has absolutely no prior knowledge. The doctor is relying on his years of training and experience, but the patient has absolutely no idea and must simply accept him at his word, understanding that he is something of an 'authority' in the field of medicine. The patient accepts his word as true on the basis of his *extrinsic* authority.

But if the doctor was to carefully explain all that was going on within the patient's body and describe in detail the nature and progression of the condition, a process that might take a considerable length of time not generally suited to a ten minute consultation, the patient might begin to understand more fully the field of medicine and come to accept the diagnosis in a more self-evident fashion. The patient might come to know for himself that what the doctor says is true and

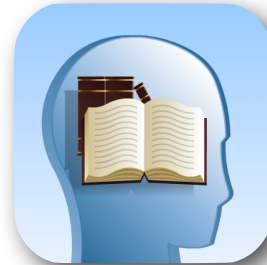
⁵ See Bauckham, 2002: 56-58. For a more accessible version of this section, see Bauckham, Richard, *Scripture and Authority Today*, 1999: 3-4 available from Grove Books, Cambridge.

authoritative, and there would be a shift from a recognition of predominately *extrinsic* authority towards that which was more *intrinsic*.

Think of the college lecturer, renowned in her field, speaking perhaps of the life of some great musician whose music she had studied and performed all her life. We might listen rapturously, applauding her knowledge of the subject, and consider her words full of truth and authority. This authority would be *extrinsic* by nature, wholly dependent upon a source external to us. But if we were to gain a personal knowledge of this music, and perhaps even of the composer himself, we would come to rely less upon an external source and more upon our own knowledge and experience. There would then again be a shift from an *extrinsic* to an *intrinsic* nature to this authority. We would know then that what was being lectured was indeed true - to us it would have become self-evident.

UNIT ASSIGNMENT 3 - PERCEPTIONS OF AUTHORITY

This is really just a thinking assignment, so there is no need to submit anything other than your personal observations should you so wish - but you do not have to submit anything if you so chose.



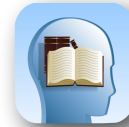
Below are a series of six statements. For each one, read and decide whether you consider it to be authoritative. For example, if you agree with the first statement and think that it is authoritative - that is that it 'rings true' with you - then tick the box alongside. If not, then leave it blank. Do this for the remainder of the statements, **without turning the page until you have finished.**

As they stand, unless you know of their sources, whatever authority they may or may not have is essentially of an *intrinsic* nature.

1. "Mystery creates wonder and wonder is the basis of man's desire to understand."
2. "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."
3. "Guns will make us powerful; butter will only make us fat."
4. "And certainly we should take care not to make the intellect our god; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality."
5. "It's better to take hold of a mad dog by the ears than to take part in someone else's argument."
6. "One forgives to the degree that one loves."

Once you have made your judgement, look below to see the sources of each statement. Now ask yourself whether knowing the source makes any difference to your perception as to whether you consider the statements to be authoritative. If you became more persuaded of the authority of what was being said on the basis of knowing who had said it, then there would have been something of a shift from an *intrinsic* to an *extrinsic* nature to their authority.

Here are the sources of the statements on the previous page. Note that in some cases the statement might be a variation of something previously stated by someone else.



1. Neil Armstrong, from James R. Hansen's biography of Armstrong, *First Man*, 2006
2. Albert Einstein, though possibly a later paraphrase of a statement made in *New York Times*, 1946
3. Hermann Göring, in summer of 1936
4. Albert Einstein, *The Goal of Human Existence*, 1943
5. King Solomon of Israel, *Proverbs*, early 1st millennium B.C.
6. Francois de La Rochefoucauld, France, 17th century.

The authority of Scripture - intrinsic or extrinsic?

We should be careful not to make too clear a distinction between these types of authority as in most areas of life they very often co-exist to varying degrees. The same is likely true when it comes to the authority of the Scriptures. Certainly, at times, they demand obedience simply on the basis that: "It's what God says ...," but very often there is an appeal or persuasion for obedience at a different level and their authority is more intrinsic.⁶

The 'ten commandments' might be seen as an example of Scripture bearing a more extrinsic authority, in which commands are given which were to be obeyed simply because God said so and regardless of whether they made any sense. The whole sense of fear enveloping the mountain at Sinai might add to this perception. Only it is really not as simple as that.

Though extrinsic authority is often seen as being oppressive or burdensome, that of God is never intended to be like that. These and many other commands are given in the context of a covenant in which God enters into a relationship with Israel, whom he loves. He assures them on numerous occasions that he was giving them

⁶ There is, of course, a sense in which we might say that the Scriptures are intrinsically authoritative - that is, that their essential nature is authoritative. Though this is essentially true, it must be understood that their authority relies upon an external source, and we are here considering our perception of authority.

commands for them to obey in order “that you may live” or “that it may go well with you ...” (see Deuteronomy 4:1, 40; 5:16, 33; 6:3, 18; 8:1; 11:8-9; 12:25, 28; 16:20; etc.). Clearly, God is not acting in an authoritarian fashion, but rather only for the benefit of his people.

Even the surrounding nations, when they heard the statutes and rules that God had given to his people, would recognise the blessings of having such wisdom and understanding and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” And Moses continued, “For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?” (Deuteronomy 4:7-8). Far from being oppressive, the commands and statutes bearing the authority of God were seen as a blessing - even a delight (see Psalm 1:2; 112:1; 119:35, 47, 92).

This expression of delight in the law of God suggests something of a shift from a recognition of authority that is essentially *extrinsic*, to that which is *intrinsic*. Consider the following:

*The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules of the Lord are true,
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb. (Psalm 19:7-10)*

*Therefore I love your commandments
above gold, above fine gold.
Therefore I consider all your precepts to be right;
I hate every false way. (Psalm 119:127-128)*

As we grow in our relationship with God, we come to learn that all he has asked of us actually makes sense. As we walk with him, we come to understand that his word is indeed right - its ‘rightness’ has become quite self-evident to us. What we might first have simply taken on trust, has gained a degree of intrinsic authority. There is, as Bauckham suggests, “a kind of hermeneutical circle of authority and experience”⁷ that can only come through living by the Spirit of God.

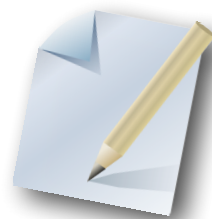
⁷ Bauckham, 2002: 58

Read the following passage and then comment as indicated:

I suppose that, for people growing up in a Christian context, it has often been the case that they start by regarding the Bible as an extrinsic authority, because everyone they learn from does. Then there comes a point when it begins to penetrate their experience ... and the Bible, they might say, comes alive for them, speaks to them; they feel for the first time that they know what it is really about. That is recognition of intrinsic authority or convincingness. Maybe now for many people things happen the other way around. In a secular culture they are not inclined to treat the Bible as authoritative at all, and it is only when its message in some form (not of course necessarily as the text of the Bible itself) strikes home for them that it first gains any authority for them at all. They start with the existential convincingness of the gospel message, but they also then need to acquire a trust in the word of this God they have begun to know. There has to come for all of us a taking, on authority, of what we cannot exhaustively verify. For the new convert an important dimension of that is becoming part of the Christian community for whom as a whole the Bible has authority.⁸

UNIT ASSIGNMENT 4 - CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

After reading the passage above, in **no more than 500 words** comment on whether you think it is a valid analysis, and then try to identify your own personal experience with regards to recognition of the authority of Scripture.



UNIT ASSIGNMENT 5 - THE CONCEPT OF AUTHORITY REVISITED

Looking back to the first assignment for this Unit, you jotted down a number of words and phrases that came to your mind when you heard the word 'Authority.' Having considered the concept a little more fully, please now go back to that list and in just a few minutes see whether there are words you might now add, or some you might even take away. Again, you do not need to submit this Assignment, though feel free to do so if you choose. The idea is simply to see whether your concept of 'Authority' might have changed.



⁸ Bauckham, 2002: 58

The Role of Scripture as Authority

In light of what we have said about contemporary attitudes towards authority and our recognition of it, it is time to turn our attention to the role that Scripture plays as the authority by which we are to live our lives. In many ways we are beginning to encroach upon the field of hermeneutics – the subject of Biblical interpretation – so we will be rather brief and trust that you will have opportunity to explore this area more fully at a later date.

The narrative of Scripture

The idea that the Bible somehow expresses its authority in a series of arbitrary *dos* and *don'ts* or as a handbook of essential doctrines is, to any who have read the book, quite simply absurd. There are *dos* and there are *don'ts*, and there are doctrines too, all of which are found within particular contexts but the majority of the Scriptures are written as narrative. From the first sentence to the last, in whichever way you choose to order the books, the Bible is the story of God and his dealings with his creation.

This is not to say that it is all written in 'story form,' as one continuous narrative, but all other genres such as prophecy, poetry, wisdom literature, epistles, etc. fit into the story in their appropriate places. They enhance it and bring it vitality and authenticity, whilst at the same time revealing more of God and his purpose to us. The overriding story also provides the overall context which, as we will see more fully when considering the subject of Biblical interpretation, is absolutely vital to our understanding of all that is written.

The authority of narrative

To understand the authority of the Scriptures, we must understand the authority of the Biblical story. It may seem a little strange to think of a story as having authority, but if we think in terms of the story as providing us with an understanding of the whole world and of our own place within it – as a worldview or a metanarrative – then it might make more sense.⁹ The Bible can then be understood as being the one, true story of everything - the truly authoritative way of viewing or interpreting all of reality. It becomes the interpretive framework through which we might make sense of all the data of life and the world.¹⁰ Bauckham offers this:

To accept the authority of this story is to enter it and to inhabit it. It is to live in the world as the world is portrayed in this story. It is to let this story define our identity and our relationship to God and to others. It is to read the narratives of our own lives and of the societies in which we

⁹ See Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 2004: 3

¹⁰ See Geisler and Watkins, *Worlds Apart*, 1989: 11

live as narratives that take their meaning from this metanarrative that overarches them all. To accept this metanarrative as the one within which we live is to see the world differently and to live within it differently from the way we would if we inhabited another metanarrative or framework of universal meaning.¹¹

In this sense the Scriptures are not just the authoritative explanation of everything, they are also the authority by which we live our lives in harmony with the whole purpose of God, becoming a part of that same true story in which Jesus, Moses, Abraham, et al. played their parts. Lives that are transformed begin with minds that are renewed (*cf.* Romans 12:2), with minds that have first learned to see and understand everything according to the story of God in Scripture. This is why some people just don't understand why those who believe in Jesus do the things they do, and live the sort of lives they live - they are simply living in a world that looks completely different.

The importance of recognising the 'big picture' of metanarrative will be considered much more fully in the introductory module: *Understanding the Bible* (INT03). Here we have been concerned with the authority of that big picture – the authority of the worldview that both precedes and succeeds all other worldviews. Its authority is an authority of grace in which God is seen as always and only acting in the best interests of his creation.

Beyond the narrative

We have already transgressed onto the turf of hermeneutics, and we will do so a little more before we conclude our studies here and introduce our final assignment. Having briefly considered the authority of the Biblical narrative, as being that in which we reside and by which we come to understand the true nature of everything, we now turn our attention to just a few of those other types of literature to which the narrative gives its context.

Laws and commands

It is quite clear that there are times when Scripture contains direct commands. Whether these are recorded as being spoken directly by God or through an intermediary is perhaps of little consequence at this point. Our concern here is with the nature of their authority and of their implication for us today.

An authority of grace

Perhaps the first thing to bear in mind is that as all Biblical laws and commands are found within the context of the Biblical narrative, they are found within a narrative which is essentially one of grace. The authority of this narrative is not one of coercion or repression, but

¹¹ Bauckham, 2002: 64-65

rather is itself an authority of grace. Whatever God has ever required of us, his laws and his commands have always been preceded by his grace towards us. They have always been given within the context of covenantal relationship into which God has graciously invited us.

Consider the following couple of excerpts from Deuteronomy in which Israel are commanded to conduct themselves graciously towards others, because God has been gracious towards them:

If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today. (Deuteronomy 15:12-15)

You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge, but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. (Deuteronomy 24:17-18)

In both cases God's redemptive act in bringing Israel out of Egypt serves as a model for them to follow in the land to which he has brought them. Without the context of the narrative, some commands might seem unreasonable or even oppressive, but within the context of the whole Biblical narrative they can be seen as yet even further evidence of God's grace. There is a particularly significant passage in Deuteronomy in the context of the giving of the law in which the same is said of all his laws and commands:

When your son asks you in time to come, "What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?" then you shall say to your son, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us." (Deuteronomy 6:20-25)

A very New Testament principle

When God calls his people into covenantal relationship, he does so by grace, and in doing so he makes known the obligations of that gracious relationship. These obligations in no way negate God's grace but are simply the means by which the relationship works. As God blesses his people, according to the understanding of his covenant, so his people respond in loving trust. The same principle is found throughout the Scriptures, as we would expect, and no less within those of the New Testament.

In writing to the Ephesians, for example, Paul uses the first half of the letter to speak of God's goodness towards his people in Christ. He recounts numerous blessings that have been freely given to those in Christ, explained their new-found status and the privileges of being in covenantal relationship with him, and then he urges them "therefore ... to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Ephesians 4:1). The principle is simple: because of all that God has done for you by grace in bringing you into a restored relationship with him – **this** is how you should live your lives.¹²

Perhaps the most significant passage in the New Testament Scriptures that illustrates the gracious nature of the authority of God's commands is found in the teaching of Jesus shortly before his arrest:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another. (John 15:12-17)

This is not the place to discuss which of the plethora of laws and commands found in Scripture we are to consider as being applicable to us today, that is really a matter for hermeneutics, though we do recognise that not all are addressed to our contemporary context. We understand that we are not told to build a huge creation-saving, global flood-surviving, self-sustaining wooden box (or ark), nor are we asked to construct an elaborate, portable worship structure capable of being carted around the wilderness for years on end. But what about rules concerning eating meat which has been offered to idols, commands relating to head covering, or instructions regarding the treatment of slaves - are these applicable to us today?

¹² See also Romans 12:1; Colossians 3:13.

Though such matters belong to the arena of hermeneutics where we can wrestle with principles of understanding the Scriptures, it might be useful to remind ourselves that all of God's laws and commands are found within the authoritative narrative of Scripture and so must always be understood as authoritative within this context. When we understand a command to be applicable to us, we recognise it as bearing the authority of God but must remember that that authority is an authority of grace that is only ever interested in our well-being.

Other types of literature

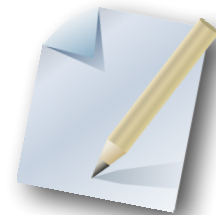
Having already seen something of the authoritative nature of Scripture apart from its laws and commands, in the form of narrative, it should not be too difficult to discover something of the authority of other types of Biblical literature such as wisdom or poetry. But yet again we encroach into the arena of hermeneutics.

Remembering that all genres of Scripture fit into the context of the Biblical narrative as a whole – a narrative that we have seen to be authoritative itself – we understand something of their authority as they find their place within that context. More specifically however, we might understand that each genre of Biblical literature possesses authority in its own special way.

The wise sayings of Proverbs are just that - they contain the authority of wisdom lived out within a Biblical worldview. The Psalms are not to be understood as containing laws or doctrines, but as Israel's hymnbook they authoritatively show us how we should pray to and praise God. At times they offer a sort of permissive authority, giving us confidence in our approach to God, authorising us to freely express ourselves before him. But we will leave these things for another time.

UNIT ASSIGNMENT 6 - A SHORT ESSAY

You now have an opportunity to write a short essay of around 1,500 words. Choose one of the four questions below. You should choose your own appropriate title for your essay.



1. In what way might the Christian community's experience of the intrinsic authoritativeness of Scripture surpass that of, and be beneficial to, the individual believer?
2. In a world that seems to resist extrinsic authority, in what ways might we explain that Scripture is to be the authority by which our lives are to be lived?
3. How might we effectively persuade an unbeliever of the intrinsic nature of the authority of Scripture?
4. How would you explain the concept of: 'authoritative without being authoritarian'?

Summary of Unit Five

In this unit we have:

- Summed up Units 1 to 4 of the Module
- Considered some contemporary attitudes towards authority
- Explored the process of encountering authority and considered a distinction between that which is extrinsic and that which is intrinsic.
- Begun to look at the role of Scripture as authority in our lives, both within and beyond the narrative.

In conclusion

We have covered a lot of material in this Module and some of it has likely been quite challenging. As an Introductory Module we have covered ground on which you will continue to build in further studies. You may well find it beneficial to revisit this Module at some time to help reinforce some of the concepts with which it deals.

INT02 Unit Five Checklist

Please ensure that you have done all of the following:

- Read and understood the Unit notes. If unsure about anything, do please consult your Module tutor.
- Undertaken the assignment, **The concept of authority**, and formed a picture of your initial perception of 'authority.'
- Thought about modern and postmodern concepts of authority, and completed the **Personal encounters** assignment.
- Thought about six statements and indicate whether you agree with them for the assignment, **Perceptions of authority**.
- Read a short passage and commented on its validity in the **Changing perspectives** assignment.
- Revisited the **The concept of authority** assignment.
- Written a short essay of around 1,500 words answering one of four given questions for the **Short essay** assignment.
- Completed the **Self assessment form** and returned for marking.

Please return the following for marking from Unit Five:

- Examples of personal encounters with Modernism and with Postmodernism in which you have seen the authority of God undermined, for the **Personal encounters** assignment.
- Your comments on the passage by Bauckham for the **Changing perceptions** assignment.
- A short essay for the **Short essay** assignment.
- Completed **Self Assessment Form**.

Self Assessment Form - INT02 Unit Five

Please complete separate form as supplied and retain this copy for your records

I promise that the answers I give below are true and accurate:

Signed: Date:

Please circle your answer:

1. Have you read and understood the notes for INT02, Unit Five?

YES / NO

2. Have you read all the Bible passages included within the notes for this Unit?

YES / NO

3. Have you completed all assignments for this Unit, including those for which no submission is required?

YES / NO

4. On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 = poor and 5 = excellent) please rate the usefulness of the following assignments by ticking one box in each row:

	1	2	3	4	5
1. The concept of authority					
2. Personal encounters					
3. Perceptions of authority					

5. What have you found most useful about this Unit?

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