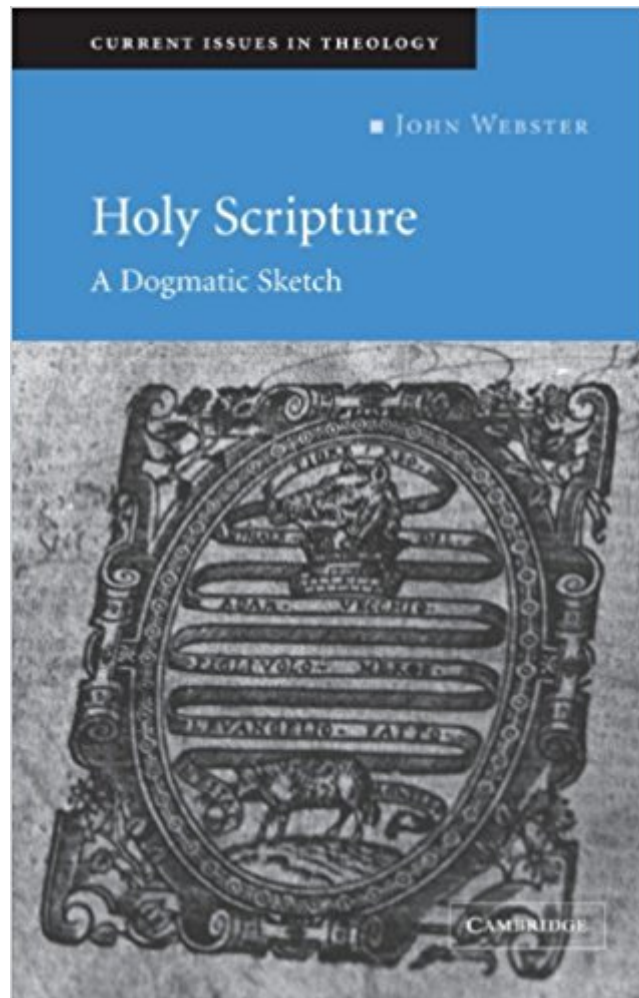




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# Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch (Current Issues In Theology)



## Synopsis

John Webster argues that, whereas any understanding of scripture must be subject to appropriate textual and historical interrogation, it is also necessary to acknowledge the special character of scriptural writing. His book strongly reaffirms that the triune God is at the core of a scripture-based Christianity. Written with intellectual enthusiasm by a theologian who understands the currents of modern secular thought, the volume develops a constructive position on biblical authority.

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## Customer Reviews

"[A] firecracker, primed to explode those pitiful suppositions about Scripture with which many biblical scholars and theologians 'from below' currently operate." C. Clifton Black, Princeton Theological Seminary, *Theology Today*...this is a thought-provoking book by a mature theologian with a coherent thesis to defend. It cannot be skimmed; it must be read slowly and pondered, and there is much to gain from it." D.A. Carson, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, *Trinity Journal*

May we speak, in the present age, of holy scripture? John Webster argues that while any understanding of scripture must subject it to proper textual and historical interrogation, it is also necessary to acknowledge the special character of scriptural writing. His book is a loud reaffirmation of the triune God at the heart of a scripture-based Christianity, but it is written with intellectual rigour by a theologian who understands the currents of modern secular thought and is able to work from

them towards a constructive position on biblical authority.

Well written and worth reading as a good conversation partner.

John Webster's work, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* is exactly what the title implies, it is a dogmatic account sketching out a doctrine of Holy Scripture. It is not meant to be a comprehensive account of Holy Scripture, thus it is just a sketch. Also it is a piece of dogmatic theology, thus it is a piece of theology which exists within the bounds of recognized church dogma. In the book he takes for granted the most essential pre-suppositions of Christianity and creates an account of scripture from there. What results is a brief, but dense, dogmatic ontology of scripture. It is an account of "what Holy Scripture is in the saving economy of God's loving and regenerative self-communication."<sup>[1]</sup> This book is divided into an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. Foundational to Webster's account is Chapter 1. The content of chapter one, specifically his definition of revelation, sets the trajectory for the rest of his work. One might even say that the rest of the book is an unfolding of Webster's definition of revelation. In the introduction Webster tells the reader what he intends to do in this dogmatic sketch. He tells the reader that he is trying to give an account of what Holy Scripture is. Not necessarily what Scripture does, or why it does the things it does, but what it is. Any talk about what scripture does in the life of the church, or in the life of unbelievers will flow out from what it is. For Webster these other issues are secondary. Webster begins with the question of whether there even is such a thing as Holy Scripture. He claims that the Christian dogmatic position says that yes there is, and whatever Holy Scripture is, it must be understood in the context of the triune God's saving action and the triune God's revelatory action. Although we do need to take into account that Holy Scripture is still a human text, we must first understand Holy Scripture in light of what it is in the context of God's loving and regenerative self-communication. Chapter 1 begins by attempting to clear up what people mean when they speak about "Holy Scripture." Naturally Holy Scripture can refer to a set of texts, but we must be careful not to treat it as simply another text which is religious in nature. Perhaps Holy Scripture can be considered in light of how the text is used by the church. However we must be careful about defining Holy Scripture solely in its relationship and reception by the community that uses that text. Although we may talk about Holy Scripture in these two ways Holy Scripture must be primarily understood in light of its "origin, function, and end in divine self-communication."<sup>[2]</sup> Understanding Holy Scripture in this way will lead us to see that Holy Scripture is shorthand for "the nature and function of the biblical writings in a set of communicative acts which stretch from God's merciful self-manifestation

to the obedient hearing of the community of faith." [3] Since Holy Scripture is primarily the writings in a set of divine self-communication, but also a text which is meant to be received by a creaturely community, this means that a dogmatic account of Scripture must be about God's communication and about humanity's reception of the text. In this chapter Webster takes on the first part of this task, sketching out how Holy Scripture relates to God's revealing, sanctifying, and inspiring actions. It could be said that this chapter is the most important chapter in the book because it sets the foundation for the rest of the chapters. Webster begins by defining revelation as "the self-presentation of the triune God, the free work of sovereign mercy in which God wills, establishes, and perfects saving fellowship with himself in which humankind comes to know, love, and fear him above all things." [4] By defining revelation Webster points out that revelation is not merely cognitive. Revelation is the act of presenting a person for the sake of relationship. The triune God presents himself so that humans would enter a relationship with him that is marked by love, fear, and presence. In the end revelation reconciles humanity to God and brings humans into the light of the knowledge of God. Webster goes on to define sanctification as "the act of God the Holy Spirit in hallowing creaturely processes, employing them in the service of the taking form of revelation within the history of the creation." [5] Defining sanctification in this way allows Webster to bypass docetic and naturalistic tendencies that are often played out when discussing the nature of scripture. If we understand scripture as a sanctified text we are allowed to maintain the special nature of scripture and the creaturely processes involved in the writing of scripture. Finally Webster says that any definition of scripture must not primarily be about the text itself, nor how it functions in the community, but rather it must be about the divine action accounting for the formation of the text. This must include the fact that the generative impulse of the text lies in God's will and not the human will, that the action is carried out by the Holy Spirit, that the Holy spirit impels writing of words, not just subject matter. In chapter two Webster takes on the relationship between Scripture and the Church and Scripture and the canon. Webster works out how these relationships are to be understood in light of what has been said about revelation, sanctification, and inspiration. However, these relationships are primarily worked out in light of what has been said about revelation and God's saving work. Webster says that however we are to understand these relationships we must understand them keeping in mind that the church is hearing church, a spiritually visible church, and an apostolic church. First the church is a hearing church; it hears and receives God's revelation through the gospel. Secondly, the church is visible as the place where the gospel, the revelation of God, dwells. Finally, the church is apostolic in that it is sent by the mandate of the risen Christ, to proclaim the revelation of God. The church that is described by these three characteristics is the

church that the Spirit has enabled the recognition of, trust in, and glad obedience to the Holy Scriptures. Finally as we talk about the canonization of scripture, we must understand canonization as the act of the church accepting, submitting, and committing itself to the authority of these writings. In chapter three Webster shows the reader what it looks like to read the scriptures within "an economy of grace." Once again the definition of revelation helps us understand what he means. Remembering that revelation is the self-presentation of the triune God that perfects saving fellowship, we come to understand that as revelation, scripture is a part of God's saving work which leads to fellowship with God. Thus when a believer reads scripture she must read it in light of how God uses it to perfect fellowship with himself. This means that the reader must come to the scriptures with humility, willing to be confronted but also expecting to be given grace through God's presence. The fourth and final chapter takes up some of the material presented in chapter three and applies it to the field of theology. By examining Ursinus' "A Hortatory Oration to the Study of Divinity," Webster argues that theology must be done with humility, that it must lead to the edification of the church, and that it must keep Holy Scripture central. If the church and theological schools are to do theology properly, they must understand theology as an operation of reason in the economy of grace.[6] These four chapters constantly return to the fact that Holy Scripture is to be understood in light of its position in the economy of grace. The giving of scripture is an act of grace. The reading of scripture is an act of God's grace. The studying and teaching of scripture is an act of God's gracious purposes to bring us into perfect fellowship with himself.

Everything was good in ordering and receiving this book. I haven't read much of it yet, so I don't have much input yet.

Holy Scripture: to depict these texts in light of their divine self-communication (Webster 5). It is a "short-hand for the nature and function of these communicative acts. Scripture has its place as an act of the God who speaks to and sanctifies his people (8). Webster makes an unusual move: he speaks of the sanctification of Scripture. It is the holiness of Scripture which is an aspect of God's using creaturely reality to attest to his revelation (this is what we normally call the self-attestation of Scripture). The sanctification of Scripture always refers back to God's activity. Revelation Webster notes a problem when revelation is collapsed into prolegomenal foundations: it isolates revelation "from material dogmatic discussions" (12). Webster proposes an alternative, identifying revelation as "the self-disclosure of the Triune

God's self-revelation (13) in which God establishes mercy and fellowship with human beings. The content of revelation is God's own proper reality (14). It is divine self-presentation and not merely facts about God. But not only is God not merely the content of revelation, he is the subject. Further, revelation is not merely God's self-displaying, but it is the establishing of fellowship and overcoming human opposition. In fact, Webster concludes: "revelation is reconciliation" (17). I disagree, but more on that later. Sanctification Webster's emphasis on the sanctification aspects of Holy Scripture is much appreciated. Whatever else the Bible may mean in relation to political theology or historical criticism, if it is not first anchored in the sanctifying acts of God towards his people, then we have divorced Scripture from life.

### SCRIPTURE, CHURCH, AND CANON

The Church does not create Scripture, but is called into being by God the Word. If it is called into being, it stands in the relation of hearing. Webster notes, "The church's being is ectopic" (47); its place is in the being and creative act of God the Word. Invisibility of the Church: it is in-visible in that it is not identified/seen in the world's social institutions. Apostolicity and Tradition: tradition is just as much an act of hearing than a fresh act of speaking (49). Further, the church's acknowledgment of Scripture's authority is not so much an act of self-government, but an exposure to judgment (57). Canonisation The canon is an extension of Christ's communicative presence in his church (58). The Church's speech is generated and controlled by Christ's own self-utterance (60). We do not deny the canon is the church's act; we are simply clarifying what kind of act it is (62). It is an act of assent rather than self-derived judgment. It is an act of confession of that which precedes and imposes itself upon the church. It is an act of submission before it is an act of authority. The act of canonization has a backwards reference. The church and all of its acts are ostensive--pointing above and beyond itself.

### Reading in the Economy of Grace

"Grace establishes fellowship" (71). Reading erodes spontaneity and subjects the reader to different modes of learning. Bonhoeffer: we must be wary of positing an archimedean point of judgment outside of Scripture. We should inculcate a habit of "listening" that draws us into the story extra nos (83). self-interpreting: only so by virtue of its relation to God.

### Helpful Points

Webster avoids predicating divine attributes to Scripture; its relation to God is instrumental (23). This might appear a sop to liberalism, but a moment's reflection will prove its

obvious point: No one believes the pages of the bible as such are divine, for they wear away (which an attribute like eternity cannot). Therefore, the bible I have is a copy of something. A copy of what, precisely? This isn't Barthianism. It's common-sense. Let's go back to the Augustinian use of res/signs. What's so bad about looking at my individual copy of the Bible as a sign to God's res? I really don't see how one can avoid this conclusion. We don't have the autographa, but if we want to maintain a strong doctrine of inspiration (or better, ex-piration), then we have to use some form of Augustinian signs. Webster suggests we should prioritize the model of "Scripture as prophetic testimony." It fits in with speech-act concepts. It is "language that depicts a reality other than itself" (23). However, Webster suggest we best see Scripture as "a means of grace" (24). What do we mean by means? He warns us not to view "means" as something that makes the divine reality present where it wasn't present before, giving a quasi-divine and magical connotation to the "means." Disagreements Webster says revelation is reconciliation (16). Does he mean all acts of revelation are reconciliatory? Surely he can't mean that, because Paul says the "wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness of men" (Romans 1:18). This aspect of revelation is not saving. It is judgmental and even damning. Practical conclusions: We should insist on Scripture in usu et actione (7).

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