

Unity and diversity in the canon Implications for the church

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The Bible itself is a lesson in unity and diversity that the church would do well to learn. It is a collection of many different kinds of documents written by many different persons over more than 1,000 years. It consists of legal material, love poetry, wisdom sayings, historical narrative, teachings, letters, prophecies, worship material, parodies, and many other types of material. Even works of the same genre betray remarkably different interests (compare Amos with Jonah or Zechariah).

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The recognition of diversity within the scriptures is not new. In 1864, German Protestant Johann Peter Lange included, in the introduction to his commentary on Genesis, sections entitled, “Import of the Unity of the Bible in Its Diversity” and “The Riches of the Scriptures in Their Endless Diversity.” Lange probably goes a bit too far when he says,

The records of Revelation, especially of the Old Testament Revelation, or the sacred writings, notwithstanding their endless diversity, as to authors, time, form, language, constitute one Holy Scripture perfectly consistent with itself, and perfectly distinct from all other writings; yet entering into such a relation and interchange with them as to manifest as perfect a unity of spirit as if they had been written by one pen, sprung from one fundamental thought, in one year, in a single moment.¹

Schooled in unity

The church has consistently emphasized the unity of scripture. Many of us grew up learning that the whole Bible says more or less

the same thing in different ways. Proverbs 26:5 says, “Answer fools according to their folly,” and the verse just before it says, “Do not answer fools according to their folly.” As a child I learned that this meant that one should answer *some* fools according to their folly, but not others.

Examples of diversity within the canon

There are so many examples of diversity in the Bible that only a couple of examples must suffice. Mark 1:9 says in a rather matter-of-fact way that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. Matthew 3:14 reports that when Jesus approached John for baptism, “John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” Why the difference? Some would say that Matthew is supplying additional information that Mark thought unnecessary to include. Others suggest that since John’s baptism was a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4), the fact that Jesus was baptized by John could have given the wrong impression that Jesus needed such repentance and forgiveness. In order to avoid giving that wrong impression, Matthew added or supplied the additional words. While it may well not have been *factually* or *historically* true that John articulated this objection, his words are nevertheless true at a deeper, more important level. (It appears that biblical writers did

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The Bible exhibits considerable diversity in its internal conversation about what qualifies a person as being acceptable to God. For instance, Deuteronomy 23 identifies some of the community boundaries for the Israelites. Barred from the “assembly of the LORD”

are those with missing or crushed genitalia (v. 1), those born of an illicit union (v. 2), Moabites and Ammonites (vv. 3–6), and Edomites (vv. 7–8). The second and third categories of people are barred from the assembly “even to the tenth generation” (vv. 2, 3), though Edomites of the third generation are allowed (v. 8). Such boundary setting seems prejudicial and offensive in our day.

When the book of Moses was read to the people in the post-exilic era, Deuteronomy 23:3–6 sparked the conscience of the

people with regard to the presence of foreigners in their midst—much of it due to intermarriage. Many of the Israelites responded to the reading of Deuteronomy by segregating along ethnic and national lines (Neh. 13:3). Nehemiah himself was incensed at how things had gotten out of hand through intermarriage. He went so far as to curse, beat, and pull out the hair of those Israelite men who had married foreign wives (Neh. 13:25).

Nehemiah's reading of Deuteronomy 23 was not the only one around. Some unknown Israelite challenged his reading by writing a beautiful love tale about how one particular foreign Moabite woman (Ruth) displayed the kind of covenant loyalty (*hesed* in Hebrew) to which Israelites aspired. Her covenant loyalty is clearly blessed by God in the text, resulting in a marriage with Boaz that conformed impeccably to the legal standards of the *go'el* (kinsman-redeemer). And just in case the reader missed the import of this story, the writer notes subtly at the end of the book that Ruth, this Moabite foreigner, was the great grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:17–21). If Deuteronomy 23 had been taken at face value, this would have disqualified from the LORD's assembly many of the kings of Judah!

The book of Ruth is not the only participant in this conversation with Deuteronomy. The third part of Isaiah (chapters 56–66) is usually considered to be postexilic, probably a little earlier than Ezra and Nehemiah. The author begins this part of Isaiah with what can only be a (re)reading of or response to Deuteronomy. He begins with his bottom line, the central message of Trito-Isaiah: "Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed" (Isa. 56:1). He then pronounces a blessing on those who keep the Sabbath and do what is right (v. 2). Following this, he responds to Deuteronomy 23: "Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, 'The LORD will surely separate me from his people' [compare Deut. 23:3–8]; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree'" [compare Deut. 23:1–2] (Isa. 56:3; compare also vv. 5–8). Here the author of Trito-Isaiah maintains that it is the *life of faithfulness* that counts with God, not how or in what circumstances one was born.

Another example of diversity in the Bible comes in the conversations about how one can and should understand who God is. At

the heart of the biblical tradition is the revelation to Moses on Mt. Sinai, when the Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed,

*The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children's children,
to the third and the fourth generation. (Exod. 34:6–7)*

But what, exactly, does “slow to anger” mean? Nahum emphasizes that even though the LORD is “slow to anger,” God “will by no means clear the guilty” (Nah. 1:3b; compare Exod. 34:7). Why? Because God is “jealous and avenging . . . ; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies. The LORD is slow to anger but great in power” (Nah. 1:2–3a). In particular, this means that Ninevites should not expect God to go easy on them.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian kingdom. Assyria was a powerful and hated nation. The Assyrians had conquered the northern ten tribes of Israel in 722 BCE and forcibly resettled many of its leading citizens in different parts of the Assyrian Empire, never to return. Their army was notorious for its ferocious violence and cruelty to the citizens of other lands. So it is no surprise that the prophet Nahum burned with rage against Nineveh and imagined God burning with rage right along with him:

*Who can stand before his indignation?
Who can endure the heat of his anger?
His wrath is poured out like fire,
and by him the rocks are broken in pieces. (Nah. 1:6)*
*There is no assuaging your hurt,
your wound is mortal.
All who hear the news about you
clap their hands over you.*

*For who has ever escaped
your endless cruelty? (Nah. 3:19)*

The prophet Jonah shared Nahum's attitude. That is why, when God called Jonah to prophesy to Nineveh, he ran the other way (Jon. 1:2–3; 4:2). But the *author* of Jonah gently prods the *character* of Jonah to rethink his attitude:

And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" [Jon. 4:4]. . . . God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" [Jon. 4:9]. Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" [Jon. 4:10–11].

Here we see God and the *author* of Jonah gently—and a little humorously—urging Jonah the prophet to rethink his attitudes

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and maybe to take on himself something of the character of God, who, *unlike Jonah the character*, is "gracious . . . and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jon. 4:2).

Canonical unity

The categories of unity and diversity are limited in their capacity to describe the biblical witness. They certainly do not represent the only way to conceptualize the breadth and character of the biblical witness—and perhaps not even the best way.

Unity and diversity are not only binary options, as if one could ask whether the Bible exhibits unity or diversity on a given topic. One can as well talk about the unity *within* the diversity, or the diversity within the unity. Unity and diversity can be considered as two points along a continuum, both of which may appear between the extremes of unanimity and

chaos. But even the concept of a continuum here may be too simplistic, since unity and diversity can be thought of as overlapping planes.

In the field of Old Testament theology, questions about the unity of Old Testament theology predominated in the late twentieth century. Walter Eichrodt claimed that covenant defines the center that unifies the Old Testament amid all its diversity, even though the wisdom literature never fit the category well and therefore had to be marginalized theologically in order to make the category work. Others claimed that salvation history—the ever-changing story of God’s saving acts in history—provides the glue that unifies the Old Testament. However, increasing recognition of the diversity of the theologies within the Old Testament has increasingly led interpreters of the Hebrew Bible to appreciate the significant diversity within the Old Testament.

Is postmodernism and the diversity it celebrates something we should embrace and celebrate, or are they cause for concern? Yes: both. Diversity is beautiful only if some unifying factor provides a sense of order in all the chaos.

Theological implications of unity and diversity

The theological implications of unity and diversity within the canon have not been obvious. The quotation by Johann Peter Lange at the beginning of this article reflects the impulse of many Protestants: Whatever the realities and expressions of diversity that

we see within scripture, it is important to recognize and demonstrate the unity that exists within the canon, in order to defend its authority. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* illustrates this concern: “The focus of skepticism in relation to Scripture as a unified divine revelation has been on what it views as irreconcilable diversity within the phenomena of the biblical text.”² The dictionary exposes its defensive posture with regard to diversity in the following comment: “If Scripture is viewed for what it claims to be, reasonable explanations for diversity can usually be provided.”³ In other words, diversity is a problem for which Christians must account.

A remarkably different take on diversity is expressed in so-called cultural interpretation of the Bible. Eurocentric interpretation

of the Bible has been heavily influenced by the Enlightenment and its emphasis on rationalism. The Enlightenment and the modernism that derived from it taught us that one can and should rise above one's own social and cultural location in biblical interpretation.⁴ In modernist perspective, social location can only

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be a negative influence in the study and interpretation of scripture. The task of the biblical interpreter is to rise above culture in order to neutralize it and eliminate it as an influence in interpretation. The assumption here is that interpretation is a “controlled” enterprise—more science than art—and that there is only one correct interpretation of a passage. Of course, one needs to be skilled in the sciences of (Western!) scholarship in order to hope to interpret anything correctly. In (postmodern) retrospect, this belief system

looks amazingly arrogant and epistemologically optimistic. Ada María Isasi-Díaz says it well: “Most of the time what is considered objectivity is the subjectivity of dominant groups who can impose their understandings on others.”⁵

As Chris Wright puts it, “Postmodernity celebrates diversity of culture, whereas modernity pushes for uniformity and homogenization of human life into secular, scientific, and materialistic categories.”⁶ So, is postmodernism and the diversity it celebrates something we should embrace and celebrate, or are they cause for concern?

The answer is probably yes: both. There is a difference between diversity and irreconcilable difference.⁷ Diversity is beautiful only if some unifying factor provides a sense of order in all the chaos. As R. S. Sugirtharajah has noted, much changed between the publication of the first (1991) and third (2006) editions of his book *Voices from the Margins*. Although the first edition celebrated the liberation of voices from the margins, recent years have seen “the atomization of the discipline and the fragmentation of audiences and readership.”⁸ Furthermore, the empowerment of voices from the margins has made it possible for “extreme fundamentalists” to “project a God who unleashes retaliation,” a mean-spirited God who acts on behalf of the powerful.⁹

So, what—if anything—unifies the Bible in all its wonderful diversity? Many have been the attempts to answer this question. From a human perspective, I am not sure that anything adequately qualifies. But from a divine perspective, it seems to me that *God* is what unifies scripture, especially its witness to Jesus.¹⁰ As James Dunn has noted, such a unifying center may seem to some to be too little. However, in the end “the unifying element of Jesus himself is not finally reducible to some precise formula.”¹¹

God created the universe in order to enjoy its beauty in all its marvelous diversity. The book of Revelation says as much when it repeatedly emphasizes the diversity of God’s creation united in praise.

God must be God. “To think that we somehow can finally pin down or determine the unity and therefore strictly control or legislate the diversity is the modern sin against the Holy Spirit.”¹²

God’s celebration of diversity

When God created the universe, God created it with a remarkable diversity. We are only beginning to catch a glimpse of that diversity as we continue to learn about new species in our environment, an environment that in all its beauty, breadth, and diversity inspires awe and praise to the Creator. Similarly, images of galaxies billions of light years away taken by the Hubble telescope inspire awe and wonder in the light of God’s majesty.

Augustine is sometimes credited with inspiring the thought behind the expression that became famous in the Westminster Confession: humanity’s chief purpose is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. God created the universe in order to enjoy its beauty in all its marvelous diversity.

The book of Revelation says as much when it repeatedly emphasizes the diversity of God’s creation united in praise of the one seated on the throne and of the Lamb. At the very moment that the Lamb is revealed as the key to humanity’s redemption in the dramatic scene in Revelation 5, we read,

*“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed
for God
saints from every tribe and language and people
and nation;*

*you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving
our God,
and they will reign on earth.” [Rev 5:9b–10; my emphasis]*

This litany of diversity—“every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”—is repeated in 7:9; 11:9; 13:7; and 14:6 (and with slight variations in 10:11; 15:4; 17:15). The diverse fruits from the tree of life are unified in their purpose: to bring healing to the nations (22:2).

In the days before the end of apartheid in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu said,

I will always have a lump in my throat when I think of the children at St. Mary’s [Cathedral in Johannesburg], pointers to what can be if our society would become sane and normal. Here were children of all races playing, praying, learning and even fighting together, almost uniquely in South Africa. And as I have knelt in the Dean’s stall at the superb 9:30 High Mass, with incense, bells and everything, watching a multi-racial crowd file up to the altar rails to be communicated, the one bread and the one cup given by a mixed team of clergy and lay ministers, with a multi-racial choir, servers and sidesmen—all this in apartheid-mad South Africa—then tears sometimes streamed down my cheeks, tears of joy that it could be that indeed Jesus Christ had broken down the wall of partition and here were the first fruits of the eschatological community right in front of my eyes, enacting the message in several languages on the noticeboard outside that this is a house of prayer for peoples of all races who are welcome at all times.

St. Mary’s has made me believe the vision of St. John the Divine: “After this I looked and saw a vast throng, which no one could count, from every nation, of all tribes, peoples, and languages, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were robed in white and had palms in their hands, and they shouted together: ‘Victory to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Revelation 7:9).¹³

Notes

¹Johann Peter Lange, *Genesis, Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* (1864; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1950), 3–4.

²Gary T. Meadors, “Scripture, Unity and Diversity of,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 717.

³*Ibid.*

⁴I am using *social location* and *cultural location* synonymously to refer to the ways we are all subconsciously determined to some degree by the social environment and cultures in which we grew up and in which we live. This “determination” is most dangerous when it is either unacknowledged or denied.

⁵Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “By the Rivers of Babylon’: Exile as a Way of Life,” in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 151.

⁶Chris Wright, “Christ and the Mosaic of Pluralisms: Challenges to Evangelical Missiology in the 21st Century,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 24, no. 3 (July 2000): 211.

⁷See James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 3rd ed. (1977; repr. London: SCM Press, 2006), xxvi.

⁸R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 4.

⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, esp. pp. 403–8.

¹¹*Ibid.*, xxx.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *Hope and Suffering: Sermons and Speeches*, ed. John Webster, comp. Mthobi Mutloatse (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 134–36.

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