Holy Scripture and the Quest for Authority at the End of the Middle Ages

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Holly Scripture was accepted as the principal foundation of authority in the late medieval church. Everyone—popes, theologians, and lawyers—was bound by the divine truth it conveyed. No teaching or practice could stand if it were proven to contradict Holy Scripture. But if the principal authority of scripture was itself universally accepted, the interpretation and subsequent application of its inspired meaning remained fiercely contested. All sides of the many debates that persisted throughout the Middle Ages were in search of an authoritative determination of the biblical text. This study focuses on the quest for such authority that occurred roughly between the years 1370 and 1430, from John Wyclif to Thomas Netter, thereby encompassing the struggle over Holy Scripture waged between Wycliffites and Hussites on the one side and their British and Continental opponents on the other. No matter the precise subject at issue—be it the sacraments or the papacy—the discussions were dominated by the same fundamental questions: By what means does one arrive at an authoritative reading of Holy Scripture that will decide the matter at hand; and who is in a position to determine whether that reading is correct and therefore authoritative? In short, if Holy Scripture is the principal criterion of doctrinal truth, then these questions pertain directly to the determination of orthodoxy and heresy in the late medieval church.

Without questioning the sincerity of such theologians as William Woodford, Thomas Netter, or Jean Gerson, the fact remains that they were intent on constructing a narrative in which their Wycliffite and Hussite opponents were dangerous heretics with scant regard for the inherent authority of
catholic tradition. Having severed themselves from the larger tradition, these “heretics” had broken loose from the accepted standards and channels of orthodoxy. More specifically—in light of the authoritative status of Holy Scripture—there was a concerted effort to de-legitimize Wycliffite and Hussite biblical exegesis, presenting it as specious and tendentious, beyond the bounds of the generally accepted norms sanctioned by the greater tradition. This may have been an effective polemical move, but it was in fact a massive distortion of their opponents’ exegetical principles and methodology. As one analyzes these debates it becomes clear that the effort to construct the prevailing narrative of Wycliffite and Hussite “heresy” was largely driven by the deep-seated realization that the Oxford and Prague dissenters were too firmly entrenched in the long-established tradition of medieval exegesis and academic debate to be decisively defeated. John Wyclif and Jan Hus adhered to, and argued on the basis of, the same sources of authority as their adversaries. Indeed, all sides of the debate shared the same fundamental catholic assumptions and aspirations.

One should never lose sight of the context in which these debates most often took place: these were sophisticated disputes conducted among university masters. Wyclif and Hus, along with their opponents, were all very much part of the establishment. Indeed, one could not be much more deeply embedded in the power structure of medieval society than to hold a magisterial position at Oxford or Prague. Again, one is struck by the tremendous amount of common ground that all sides shared. They all held recognized licenses of expertise, venerated the catholic tradition, esteemed the church fathers, and embraced Holy Scripture as the principal authority in Christendom. What is more, they all shared the same hermeneutical strategies with regard to authorial intention, the literal sense, and appeal to the fathers and holy doctors in order to open up the text. What separated Jan Hus from Jean Gerson—the man who went to the stake and the man who sent him there—was almost nothing in comparison to what these two had in common. And it is precisely this commonality that rendered the situation virtually intractable. Hence the effort to frame the whole narrative in such bold strokes so as to relegate the Oxford and Prague “Wycliffites” to the margins. Only when presented as extreme outriders could their positions be effectively proscribed. The lamentable irony is not that the Netter/Gerson narrative prevailed in its own day, however, but rather that it has since taken hold among many modern scholars, who readily accept the categories of orthodoxy and
heresy as defined by one set of fifteenth-century protagonists. Indeed, it is commonplace to assume that Netter and Gerson spoke for “the church,” whereas Wyclif and Hus were ultimately destructive forces who would tear down this institution. Yet the boundaries between heresy and orthodoxy were never so neatly drawn.

None of this is to say that Woodford, Netter, and Gerson did not generate serious arguments to counter their adept adversaries. But a close reading of those arguments exposes an underlying ambivalence in their own conceptualization of authority. They are not certain themselves where the most authoritative line of argument rests when attempting to establish the correct interpretation of scripture. No doubt they were placed in a difficult position by their opponents, but they had no fully coherent system of authority at their disposal that could meet the sophisticated parries of their reform-minded adversaries. Hence we often find the same writer torn between appeals to the authority of antiquity and that of the present hierarchy of the church. Even appeals to the universal and apostolic church are often vague upon reflection, especially given the fact that their opponents believe just as deeply in the very same church. The truth is that even as Holy Scripture was recognized by all sides as the principal authority in matters of doctrine, Catholicism in the early fifteenth century possessed no absolute means of determining the final authoritative meaning of the biblical text—hence the range of appeals to antiquity, to the papacy, and to councils, none of which were conclusive. In this pre-Tridentine era no one had yet determined the sort of absolutely fixed boundaries of authority that were adopted in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Thus even as Gerson (unlike Woodford and Netter) believed general councils to be infallible and ultimately superior to the pope, this was itself a contested principle of authority in its own time, which was formally condemned just a few decades later by papal decree. Hence despite what we might call a “rhetoric of finality,” which was displayed in an attempt to present these contentious matters as “settled” and thus no longer open for discussion, there was precious little foundation for such assertions.

None of the foregoing should be taken to imply that orthodoxy itself is a relative concept with no objective referent; or worse yet, that it is merely a “power construct” designed to achieve political ends. That is not the case: orthodoxy is objectively real, and it does matter. And orthodoxy certainly did matter to those involved in the late medieval debates that we will examine.
throughout this book. All the theologians involved sincerely believed that they could locate orthodox doctrine within Holy Scripture as it had been explicated over the centuries by the sacred tradition. Wyclif and Hus were deeply committed to Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church. It is precisely for that reason that they pressed for reform, indeed the very reform of the church in head and members that their opponents also sought. Even if one were to argue that Netter proposed a more reasonable path than Wyclif, that does not amount to proving the former orthodox and the latter heretical. Nor would that determination settle the larger issue as to who has the final authority to bring these debates to a close. Authority in the late medieval church was such a vexing matter precisely because it had not been fully resolved. We should resist, therefore, an anachronistic recasting of these events. The church at the turn of the fifteenth century was still marked by a good deal of flexibility, even fluidity, which could at once be exhilarating and exasperating. This church looked quite different, therefore, than it would some 150 years later in the aftermath of the Council of Trent. And it was even further from the church of Pius IX and the First Vatican Council. Whether one sees this as reason for regret or confidence is a separate matter. Yet from the perspective of a historical study—which this book is—such differences need to be borne in mind.