Scriptural Reasoning as Communal Thinking

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Scriptural Reasoning (SR) mediates an encounter between individuals from the three Abrahamic religions and the scriptures of those traditions. By designating it Scriptural *Reasoning,* practitioners suggest that this encounter has a rational or cognitive component to it. Its rationality as a practice has a communal character, analogous to the corporate reasoning processes of the sciences, the academy, or the legal system. Each is more than the sum of its individual thinking parts. This essay is an attempt to develop a model of SR's communal rationality, exhibiting as it were the mechanics of an SR group mind. As a model, its status is that of a hypothesis which would have to be tested by sustained empirical inquiry into SR as a practice.

In the first part of this essay, I offer an account of SR as a particular kind of public space, one in which individual participants, embodying various wisdoms, are invited to justify assertions about a particular scriptural text. I draw on this account to examine several types of corporate argumentation exhibited in SR, focusing on the rationality of relativizing, modalizing, and qualifying religious claims. I then suggest that SR facilitates a type of wisdom discourse analogous to various forms of contemporary academic inquiry, situating the practice of SR within the wider rational labor of the academy.

Elements

SR creates what I shall refer to as a distinctive **public** space. By "public" I mean that it makes claims possible about objects that are available for the independent examination of any group member. In SR, it is mainly the texts and the individual participants (their bodies and utterances) that are public in this sense. Appeals to entities that are unavailable in the context of an SR session—such as personal experience, academic or traditional texts, or laboratory instruments—cannot be independently evaluated by other group members and so, with respect to an SR session, function as "non-public" (though not necessarily private). SR does not exclude non-public claims, but it permits them no independent authority. To be sure, non-public claims are often accepted by the group without controversy; but where some non-public claim proves controversial, the cardinal rule of SR is that such claims must be defended *as* readings of the text at hand, which means that they tend to be evaluated by group members with respect to what SR makes publicly available.

The publicly available objects in an SR session—texts and participants—are decontextualized linguistic objects. Texts are obviously linguistic, and SR participants present themselves to others primarily (not exclusively) through spoken language. Texts and individuals enter into SR by being separated from their usual contexts through a process of **decontextualization.**[1] Scriptural selections are small parts of larger contexts called "Tanakh,"

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[1] I owe this insight to Emily Filler.

"New Testament," and "Qur'an," while religious participants are generally parts of larger traditional and institutional contexts called "Judaism," "Christianity," and "Islam," which include commentaries and traditional practices. SR abstracts texts and their readers from each of these larger wholes.

Nevertheless, in SR, texts and participants are designated *as* parts of these wholes through **labeling**. Texts are explicitly labeled by chapter and verse, while individuals are usually (though less explicitly) identified as members of a particular tradition. Yet while these labels themselves are publicly available in SR, the wholes to which they refer are not. SR therefore brings participants into Schleiermacher's hermeneutical circle in a peculiar way: participants must interpret a small part with reference to a whole to which they lack access. Kant called this activity, so characteristic of SR, "reflection."[2]

The publicly available texts and participants are also recontextualized within the SR public space in a particular way: by being placed beside one another in physical proximity through **juxtaposition,** what linguist Roman Jakobson calls the relation of contiguity.[3] In spoken and written discourse in general, juxtaposition is one of the primary means by which linguistic entities are contextualized. The fact that letters are placed beside one another on a page, for example, instructs the reader to construe them as words and sentences. Yet juxtaposition does not necessarily signify any particular kind or degree of relation between juxtaposed objects—a page may contain simply a list of words rather than a unified text. Consequently, juxtaposition as such functions merely as a vague sign of the possibility of relation. In SR, juxtaposition thus tends to function as a provocation to consider possible relations between the texts and individuals present, without determining these relations in advance. Juxtaposition provokes participants to make hypotheses, or what Charles Peirce calls "abductions."

Agreement and Disagreement

These conditions make possible a form of corporate rationality proper to SR, one that, *qua* corporate, cannot be described merely as the aggregate of the thinking of individual participants. Instead, I suggest we think of SR as analogous to other kinds of social rational entities, such as a legal system or a political body. A trial, for example, is a social procedure for reasoning about the facts in a particular case. It is a form of social reasoning because the individual actors may be rationally pursuing ends very different than those towards which the procedure as a whole tends. Disputants might be seeking their own interests, the lawyers their own financial gain, the judge social respect, and so on. Nevertheless, through the procedural rules of the trial, the whole may become more than the sum of its parts.

Legal and political institutions have formal procedures that designate what shall count as the results of their social reasoning processes: rendering a verdict, voting and signing a law, and

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[2] "If, however, only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found, then the power of judgment is merely reflecting" (*Critique of the Power of Judgment,* trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 67 = CJ 5.179). On reflection, see Randi Rashkover's essay in this issue of the *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning.*

[3] Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disorders," in *Language in Literature,* eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Ruda (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1987), 95-114.

so on. SR obviously has no such formal procedure. How then can we characterize the *corporate* rationality it exhibits, and how is this rationality related to those of the individual participants?

I propose to characterize SR conversations in terms of two basic states, agreement and disagreement. By **agreement** I mean a situation in which one participant affirms the truth of a sentence, and no other participant affirms the truth of a contradictory sentence. Thus, agreement includes both the express and tacit agreement of other participants. Agreement may also result from a conversation when someone is induced to abandon a view that she initially defended. An SR group is probably most likely to agree about something public, e.g., an empirical claim that can be confirmed by pointing to the text at hand. Frequently, however, the testimony of some participant to something non-public is sufficient to establish agreement. For example, in the model SR session in Higton and Muers' book *The Text in Play,* one non-Muslim participant asks about the meaning of the word "vain-doers" in Sura 40:78: "Are they…people consumed with vanity—all preening and posing?" A Muslim participant answers definitively, "They are those who deny God's revelation," the "disbelievers."[4] The Muslim participant's answer depends on his knowledge of the broader context, that is, on non-public information; nevertheless, as Higton's stage directions note, "murmurs of assent lapse into another brief silence."[5]

Agreement constitutes what we might call the emerging common sense of a group. In such cases, the group mind can safely be regarded as affirming the sentence agreed upon, in the sense that agreements may then serve as shared presuppositions for the continuing conversation (until such time as a participant calls it into question). This is the case even if the tacit assent of some individual member veils her own private dissent, for until she voices her dissent to the group, her private opinion does not influence the common sense of the group mind. Conversely, it seems likely that the process of discovering or reaching agreement tends to strengthen the certainty with which any particular individual affirms the agreed sentence, particularly for those to whom it was new or dubitable—e.g., those non-Muslims who came to accept that in the Qur'an, "vain-doers" refers to unbelievers. The fact that no one in a diverse group disagrees is a probable (not necessary) sign of the truth of what is agreed.

Higton observed that assent led to silence. This is characteristic of a more general tendency: agreement as such tends to bring a discussion to a halt. Nevertheless, by introducing new clarity to the discussion, agreement frequently sparks new insights which go beyond the agreed sentence without contradicting it. Thinking abhors a vacuum, we might say, but thrives on specificity.[6] Agreement about certain particulars is an essential feature of SR in its reflective or meditative mode.

I would like to focus, however, on **disagreement**, by which I mean a situation in which one participant affirms a sentence and at least one other affirms a contradictory sentence. (For simplicity's sake, I therefore abstract from a number of important variables: the intensity of disagreements, the number of those disagreeing, the content of the disagreement, etc.). I emphasize disagreement because reasoning is, in some sense, a normative exercise. If SR

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[4] Mike Higton and Rachel Muers, *The Text in Play* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012), 96.

[5] Ibid., 97.

[6] Compare Immanuel Kant's famous simile: *"*The light dove, in free flight cutting through the air the resistance of which it feels, could get the idea that it could do even better in airless space" (*Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 129 = CR A5/B9).

purports to be reasoning, one will have to account for what, if anything, it excludes, and it is in disagreement that the issue of what should be excluded emerges most clearly. I focus on **respectful** disagreement, by which I mean disagreement between individuals who regard their interlocutors as *prima facie* capable of persuasion if offered sufficient reasons.[7]

In cases of disagreement, the logical significance of a group mind whose individuals disagree with one another is more difficult to articulate. I would like to propose two logical effects of disagreement in SR. First, it tends to **relativize** assertions by showing that the truth-conditions of those claims are not present in the public context of the SR session. Relativization is a consequence of the epistemic limitations of decontextualization, which tend to suggest to the group that disagreement persists because of non-public information with respect to which disagreeing participants believe the text should be contextualized. Frequently, some participant will make this relativization explicit. She might say, for example, "That *may* be true, but it's not evident in the text before us," reframing disagreement about the public text as a disagreement about something non-public. Within the context of SR, one cannot fruitfully challenge such claims except insofar as they yield readings inadequate to the particular text at hand. A controversial statement may turn out to be true or false, but in that particular SR session, it is undecidable.

Second, SR tends to **modalize** claims. Individual reasoners tend to operate within a non-modal logic, in which the only primary issue when considering competing claims is the question of their truth or falsity. By "modalizing" claims, I mean that SR incorporates contradictory claims into a broader moral logic in which they may be qualified by modal operators as necessary or, more typically in SR, *possible*. An SR group modalizes contradictory claims by putting them into play at the same time in a rational dialogue. By arguing about them, the group as a whole *performs* the fact that multiple readings are possible. Individuals frequently makes this explicit in the context of an SR session: someone might cap a disagreement by saying, "I think we would all agree that, given what we have here, each of these readings is possible." The fact that a group of reasonable people disagrees about a reading typically warrants the inference that each is possible (albeit more or less plausible or probable), within the epistemic limitations of the public space created by SR.

However, an individual committed to the absolute truth of her claims does not necessarily need to abandon those claims or their logic to participate in an SR session whose *corporate* thinking is relativized or modalized. The fact that the truth of a claim is relative to some context is consistent with believing that that very context should be normative and that one's construal of that context is true. Similarly, the possible truth of many propositions is consistent with the actual truth of one of them. The logical work of the group mind is greater (or at least different) than the sum of its parts.

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[7] Although I can't defend it here, I would argue that SR creates the conditions for individuals to display their rationality, and hence for disagreement that is respectful in this sense. Perhaps this is an implication of the fact that SR "makes deep reasonings public," as David Ford says (*Christian Wisdom* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 281).

Types of Argumentation

In light of this framework, let us now consider some of the types of corporate reasoning that take place under these conditions. Following David Ford, I model SR as an exercise in seeking and relating religious wisdoms.[8] For my purposes, wisdom refers to habits of reasoning formed by expertise and experience. Though wisdom is obviously profoundly social, it enters into SR only as embodied in an individual human being. SR puts into play **decontextualized wisdom,** those *aspects* of traditional or academic social reasoning processes that are available to embodied individuals within the context of SR under the conditions of decontextualization. A text scholar brings a great deal of knowledge and expertise about a text tradition to the table, but in the context of SR, she cannot for example search the sources for some reference or submit a claim to be peer-reviewed. (We say that she relies on her 'internal library.') Similarly, a laboratory scientist, in the context of SR, cannot perform an experiment under laboratory conditions. Instead, traditional or scientific learning is mediated through the embodied habits of particular individuals. As a result, it enters into SR as integrated with other kinds of non-specialized wisdom drawn from life experience, common sense, or whatever.

SR does not simply juxtapose claims; it also juxtaposes the wisdoms with respect to which those claims are made.[9] Moreover, SR sets various wisdoms into relation in a particular way: by setting them to work offering reasons for claims about the decontextualized objects publicly available in an SR session. SR fosters empirical attention to these particulars, putting them under the microscope, as it were. This, in turn, gives rise to two different kinds of thinking, distinguished by whether or not evidence is publicly available to decide a particular question. Where participants make claims that can be empirically verified or falsified by appeal to publicly available information, their arguments are primarily **inductive.** Sometimes induction occurs nearly automatically, e.g., when someone observes uncontroversially that a word is repeated several times in a passage. Frequently, however, one participant utters something that she regards as obvious but which other readers find dubious. Under these circumstances, her claim is modalized so that it comes to function as a **hypothesis** to be tested against the decontextualized particulars at hand.

The more a claim's content is narrowly restricted to the text at hand, the easier it is to verify. By contrast, very broad hypotheses are not much confirmed by a single positive instance. On the other hand, broad hypotheses can be easily falsified by a single case. For example, one member's assertion that "the Old Testament God is a God of judgment" is likely to be regarded as empirically inadequate by other group members if the text at hand speaks of "the Lord, abounding in mercy." If the group reaches agreement that her initial claim is untenable, she who upheld the falsified hypothesis must modify it to fit the case at hand—minimally, by **qualifying** her general claim into a narrower claim such as, "the OT God is *often* a God of judgment." One of the functions of SR is to effect this qualification of general claims and to cultivate more generally a wisdom that eschews overly general claims.

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[8] Ford, *Christian Wisdom,* ch. 8.

[9] Frequently, of course, the wisdoms of SR participants will conflict with one another, both in form and in content, and in such cases, they too are subject to modalization and relativization.

On the other hand, participants may make claims that cannot be fully evaluated without reference to non-public information. Frequently, what happens in such a case is that members of the group explore multiple possible contextualizations of a given passage, many of which often yield plausible readings of the text. For example, a Muslim reader might refer a biblical story about Moses to her expectations for the prophet formed by the Qur'anic narratives, while Jews and Christians might do the same for the biblical narrative, and these alternative possible contexts might produce different possible readings of the same text. (Again, frequently some individual simply *assumes* one contextualization, which is only modalized when challenged by another participant).

I find it useful to compare the corporate product of such activity to a **lexicon**, which maps a space of possible meanings of a word with reference to a series of vaguely determined possible contexts. In a similar fashion, an exploration of several possible readings of a scriptural text in an SR session can be seen as mapping a space of possible interpretations in possible scriptural, traditional, or social contexts. Unlike a historical lexicon, however, which records uses of a word in known *actual* contexts, the juxtaposition of different individuals and traditions encourages the consideration of a much wider range of contexts, many of which are novel or purely hypothetical. For example, a Christian text may be read as though it were part of the Qur'an, or a text may be read in light of some fanciful proposal. To explore such a reading is not, perhaps, to know what the text 'means' in any ordinary sense, but rather to experiment with what the text *would* mean *supposing* such and such were the case. I call this activity the production of a **hypothetical lexicon.**[10]

So far I have spoken as if SR consisted primarily in offering readings of texts. But texts may refer beyond themselves to the real world, so that to understand that text is inseparable from understanding the subject matter about which it speaks—God and prophets, yes, but also fire and swords, the poor and the rich, and so on. This discourse too can be inductive, insofar as the 'real world' includes the public texts, people, and environment of an SR session. It may also deal with merely possible states of affairs, leading to production of a hypothetical lexicon. But it may also go beyond both by fostering a kind of philosophical reflection about the world that proceeds by putting into relation the wisdom and common sense of the various participants. I imagine, perhaps fancifully, that this kind of reflection is not unlike that undertaken by ancient sages when they would discuss and argue with those from other traditions and cultures.

It is easiest to display this kind of thinking through examples. Let me offer two. First, I was part of a group at an SR training session at UVA several years ago discussing Exodus 20:18: "All the people saw…the sound of the trumpet." Our group soon began discussing a problem with a long history within traditional Jewish and Christian interpretation: why does it say they "saw" the sound*,* rather than that they "heard" it*?* This led our group to consider the differences in the perception of sight and sound. One member (whose religious tradition I no longer recall) volunteered the following observation. We are able to hear sound-waves that are half or double the frequency of other waves, which our ear registers as octaves. But the whole range of the visible light spectrum is less than an octave. To imagine *seeing* sound, then, we would have to

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[10] This activity is not unlike that underlying the production of classical rabbinic midrash. See Danial Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990)*,* 22-38, esp. 28-30.

imagine seeing something like color octaves. (Try to imagine a color that is somehow blue, but on the other side of red, as it were.)

In this case, the problematic text provoked one participant to introduce an empirical claim. We did not ourselves perform experiments on electromagnetic waves; rather, the received results of such experiments were mediated to the group by the wisdom of one individual and became part of our shared common sense when confirmed or at least affirmed by others. (The religious traditions of the participants were irrelevant to this part of the conversation, as far as I can tell.) This knowledge then provided the material for a kind of experiment upon intuition, whose parameters were determined by the wording of the text. I find it difficult to characterize what more I now 'know' about sight and sound after that SR session: it is not only a fact about the relevant wavelengths of two parts of the electromagnetic spectrum, but also a kind of phenomenological insight into the difference between light and sound. Certainly the members of the group learned *something*.

My second example comes from an interfaith peace project at Drew University. My SR group, which included a number of Islamic jurists from Oman, was studying Leviticus 19:15: "You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor." A number of Jewish and Christian interpreters found the text's apparent indifference to the poor rather difficult; perhaps the liberationist slogan about "God's preferential option for the poor" was echoing in others' heads as it was in mine. But one of the Omani jurists, noting that Islamic law has similar strictures, told a story about a case that had actually come before him, in which a poor man was seeking favorable treatment of some kind from the court. As the case proceeded, it became clear that this man was actually a rich man *pretending* to be poor to manipulate the court's sympathies. His story led our group to reach a consensus about the following claim: a law that specifies conditions under which even a vulnerable person may receive favorable treatment may simply provide another means for the powerful to manipulate the law.

Again, the logical character of this insight is rather complex. On the one hand, it is a general and empirical maxim about a way people tend to behave, and one that, once stated, proved intelligible and plausible to the wise common sense of those from all three traditions. At the same time, the Jews and Christians did not in fact reach this insight until it was offered by an actual practicing jurist in a political context governed by religious law, analogous to the context presupposed by the Leviticus text. In this case, then, Christian and Jewish members of the group gained an insight into their text through an empirical observation about the world, and one which a Muslim jurist was particularly equipped to make.

I see at least two lessons here. First, one of the remarkable facts about SR is that it fosters a situation in which someone from one tradition may be dependent on someone from another tradition for insight into one's own text. This is surely part of SR's peace-building function, but it has a logical correlate realized by the SR group mind: that the soundness of one wisdom does not, in itself, entail the unsoundness of other wisdoms. Second, this possibility is not unrelated to SR's empirical orientation—in this case, not only to the text but to what is generally and for the most part true of the world. An implication is that inter-religious dialogue can be more fruitful where it is oriented towards and accountable to empirical particulars.

SR and the Academy

In light of my analyses above, I would like to end by offering a few suggestions about how SR is or might be related to academic inquiry.

First and most concretely, SR yields insights about the interpretation of texts that can help repair certain reductive and ideological tendencies of much academic work in the humanities. I have suggested, on the one hand, that taking time to study under the decontextualized conditions of SR makes possible inductive verification and falsification of certain claims. The practice of SR is a reminder of how important close reading is as a practice in the humanities, and a model for how to lead even ideological readers into such a practice.

At the same time, I have characterized SR as an experimental activity that produces a hypothetical lexicon of meanings in possible contexts. To treat a linguistic entity as something that might be experimented upon is to treat it as possessing a semantic potential that is still unfolding in history, yet that it is really knowable through its effects, as displayed to the wisdom of individual interpreters. (It is also to bring the reading of texts closer, methodologically speaking, to the laboratory sciences.) This entails that the diversity of interpreters are integral to the knowledge of texts, not only because meaning effects are displayed to human beings, but especially because different individuals embody different possible contextualizations. Indeed, the whole history of a text's interpretation and all contemporary attempts to read it can be interpreted as experiments that are part of knowing that text in its full potential. One possible example of this might be Margaret Mitchell's work on 1 Corinthians, who draws on the history of its interpretation not so much to determine its 'original meaning' as to map a range of perennial interpretive problems posed by Paul's text, even for his original readers.[11]

Second, I have suggested that in SR, a group embodying different wisdoms is put to work on a fairly narrow task: interpreting a particular text selection. I have also emphasized that SR decontextualizes individuals from the social institutions of the sciences (laboratories, libraries, etc.), mediating the *results* of these sciences through individual wisdoms. This suggests that SR is analogous to the interdisciplinarity practiced in the so-called applied sciences. Scriptural Reasoning is not unlike the reasoning of an engineering team solving a problem with fairly well-defined empirical parameters. Building, say, a self-driving car requires the expertise and creativity of multiple individuals in mechanical engineering, computer science, and product design, which are integrated with respect to an empirically measurable goal, such as producing a marketable car that can operate on ordinary roads. The Scripture, Interpretation, and Practice program at the University of Virginia sometimes exhibits a similar spirit: e.g., a Muslim philosopher, a Christian historian, and a Jewish ethicist might examine a particular *midrash* together, asking, "How did this text generate these readings?" In each case, a communal mind that focuses diverse wisdoms around a narrow task can both provoke creative proposals and wisely discipline them.[12]

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[11] Margaret Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians, and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[12] Compare the notion of "serious play" as an interpretive strategy in Higton and Muers, *The Text in Play*.

Third, SR raises questions about the role and formation of wisdom in the academy.[13] I have argued that in SR, a group mind emerges that is greater than the sum of its parts, one that tends to qualify, modalize, and relativize claims. This mind can function even if individual participants do not recognize or intend it to, but it nevertheless (or indeed, precisely because of this) has the capacity to form individuals according to its corporate logic. SR offers hints about how particular religious texts and wisdoms can engage in shared, fruitful inquiry in a carefully delineated public space. Discussions of method in the academy, especially in the humanities, ought likewise to ask about the *logical* function of the culture and politics of academic institutions, for these institutions produce particular relations between individual minds and form those individual minds accordingly. However, here especially I feel quite unequipped to pose these questions well, let alone to answer them.

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[13] On this, see again David Ford, *Christian Wisdom.*