

Bible versus Theology: Is “Theological Interpretation” the Answer?

MARKUS BOCKMUEHL

University of Oxford

Oxford, England

THIS BRIEF study concerns a classic problem that continues to be one of the most vital and consequential theological questions for today. Can we say to what extent Scripture and Christian doctrine are or should be normatively related? Are they largely or entirely independent, is one dependent on the other, or is there some sort of interdependence?

After laying out the two main alternative views, we shall find that only the second offers fruitful scope for discussion. Even here, however, there are some impossible polarities, and in the quest for a mediating position I propose to examine a couple of widely noted recent proposals for “Theological Interpretation” as a springboard for some concluding observations of my own.

Scripture and Doctrine: Two Alternative Views

The first alternative argues there can be no meaningful relationship between biblical scholarship and Christian theology. This has long enjoyed the status of a default position: it has diverse, if not necessarily compatible, support among biblical scholars and dogmatic theologians alike.

- Mainstream *biblical scholars* still very widely take the view that all responsible study of the Bible is critical, and all critical study of the Bible is, at least to an important extent, historical. Proper historical study of the Bible, however, must be concerned first and last with genetic questions of the origin of texts, and not with the theological or devotional use to which they were later put. On this view, historical study must distinguish clearly between what things meant

and what they came to mean, let alone what they might mean today. Some would continue to construe biblical scholarship as “the task of removing from an original painting the work of later hands”—as one recently deceased Oxford don liked to put it, apparently without a hint of irony or self-doubt.¹ Such historical study, especially as aided by cultural anthropology, soon reveals that the biblical authors speak out of and into a world that is vastly different from our own, and which therefore can have little of relevance to say to our situation. The biblical authors are, as Bruce Malina influentially expresses this widely held view, “a group of foreigners somehow dropped in our midst.”² Most of all, however, historical study must on this reading refrain assiduously from questions of Christian doctrine or belief, which are the result of a long and complex process of much later ecclesiastical reception and imposition.³ We must subscribe to the axiomatic otherness and insurmountable cultural alienation of first-century authors from their twenty-first-century readers.

- *Systematic theologians* who hold this two-track view appear to be concerned with a different set of considerations. Theology from this angle may be regarded as above all philosophical—and *not* textual or historical. This is the flip side of Lessing’s concern that contingent historical facts cannot underwrite eternal truths. The Bible, by contrast, looks philosophically inarticulate and trapped in a cultural and historical particularism of often tedious banality. Aristotle, Plato, or for that matter medieval and modern philosophers yield far more of substance. Scripture also does not offer careful doctrinal articulations, but is a record of conflicting interpretations: here too the creeds and leading patristic thinkers are seen as far more rewarding in this respect. What is more, this view that the Bible has little of interest to contribute seems to systematicians perversely to find confirmation in the work of biblical scholarship itself, whose results typically reinforce the impression of

¹ Cited with apparent approval in his obituary in London’s *Daily Telegraph* (Anonymous 2009), which includes the equally quaint advice that J. C. Fenton’s 1963 Penguin paperback remains, half a century later, the best (non-specialist) introduction to Matthew.

² Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 24 (on which cf. more generally my remarks in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, no. 2002.04.19: ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2002/02-04-19.html).

³ It is worth noting en passant Robert Jenson’s insistence that this point, like the previous one, instantiates classic biblical scholarship’s fundamentally sectarian view of ecclesiology. See Robert Jenson, “The Religious Power of Scripture,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52 (1999): 89–105.

philosophical and theological triviality. And of course there is the more pragmatic professional reality for many theologians: given what the biblical colleague down the hall gets up to, one finds a certain happy economy in a clear division of labour, which allows one to concede without apparent detriment to one's own work that the Bible is indeed the literature of ancient Mediterranean tribes belonging to a culture wholly alien to ours. In other words, it is philosophically, morally, and theologically uninteresting for contemporary purposes—except perhaps in certain aesthetic or poetic ways that are readily accessible apart from the biblical critics' soul-crushing banal esotericism.

So much for the view that the Bible and doctrine, like history and revelation, can have no formal connection. It is an intellectually defensible and in its own way convenient and tidy division of labor.

The main alternative to this first option emerges among those who insist *au contraire* that there is, or at least there *ought* to be, some sort of relationship between Bible and Christian doctrine, however imbalanced that may turn out in practice. It is this more constructive argument on which we will concentrate for purposes of the present study. Most of those who support this view would self-identify as practicing believers (whatever their professional affiliation), although from time to time even a post-Christian or atheist writer may unexpectedly slip in a quasi-homiletical appeal to some perceived moral quality in the text.⁴

Potentially rather more interesting than semi- or post-confessional contributions are those from interfaith participants in discussion of the Christian Scripture. Jewish readers may, for example, insist on the religious force of Jesus' Jewishness, or Muslim ones press for clarification of some of the more casual expressions of Christian Trinitarian language. Both kinds of intervention, we must note, offer theologically engaged voices whom Christians ignore at their peril.

To be sure, this still leaves the vast majority of advocates for some sort of logical correlation of Scripture and doctrine speaking from a position within the Church. Robert Jenson rightly argues that in fact the Bible can be the Bible only in the Church's reading of it: outside that context, Scripture appears to bear little compelling interest, force, or consequence.⁵ It is a

⁴ Surprising quasi-pastoral, moralizing asides are offered e.g. in Bart Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵ Robert Jenson, "The Religious Power of Scripture," 89–105. For more on this, cf. idem, "Scripture's Authority in the Church," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. E. F. Davis and R. B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 28–37.

matter of historical record and inescapable historical significance that, if it were not for this liturgical, churchly *Sitz im Leben* in living communities of faith, *we would not have these documents before us at all*—except perhaps for a few scraps of papyrus from a dump somewhere in Egypt.

From a Christian vantage point the relationship between Bible and doctrine is therefore usually, and quite rightly, a matter of interdependence. In practice one finds a strong preponderance of positions that give priority to one or the other—an imbalance that may be defensible in that it is not easy to see what exactly it might mean to conceive of the relationship as “equal.”

Here we may articulate two deliberately caricatured theses that in my view can help to identify poles of opinion between which much of the discussion is situated:

1. **Doctrine trumps the Bible.** The idea that the senior partner in the relationship is theology takes two seemingly very different but epistemologically cognate forms.
 - a. **The Church preceded, wrote, and “owns” the Bible.** This position is often characteristic of a particular sort of conservative Orthodox and (especially pre-Vatican II) Roman Catholic theology. Some would add that the Church’s tradition is the voice of the Holy Spirit through which he leads us into all truth—including truth not revealed in the Bible. Although (or because) it still exerts a degree of “official” ecclesial influence, the thesis in this form has been less well represented in scholarly debate about “Scripture and theology.”
 - b. **The Church may indeed “own” the Bible but today no longer needs it for normative theology and ethics.** We receive new revelation through reason (science) and experience, and in the modern world the Bible can be only one facet of what makes for authoritative appropriation of Christian teaching and praxis. This secular, critical articulation of the thesis arguably remains the default position in leading university departments and in seminary faculties representing what survives of the formerly “mainline,” historic Protestant denominations. It shares important features with classic nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal (including “liberal catholic”) positions, offering a paradigm of ready engagement with the philosophical, scientific, and cultural challenges of the contemporary world. While my own loyalties admittedly lie elsewhere, I will suggest in a moment that this

broadly influential contemporary view could nevertheless usefully contribute to one of the twin foci of an ellipse around which the answer to our question might be sought and debated.⁶

2. **The Bible trumps doctrine.** The second thesis is in practice equally varied, but in its pure form is perhaps most characteristic of Protestant groups of either Pentecostal or pietistic inclination. In these circles the tradition of the established churches may be perceived as unnecessary, arcane, dead, humanly invented, authoritarian, etc.—in other words, as the imposition of alien constructs on a biblical text that speaks for itself.

The assumption here is often that the reader has direct individual access to the text and its meaning, unmediated by any rule of faith. That view can appear in pietistic or charismatic forms, but also in more Barthian ones. It is perhaps no accident that its basically anthropocentric hermeneutical reliance on the experientially (or sometimes exegetically) expert interpreter of the Bible shows key epistemological analogies with the supposedly more critical (scientifically or experientially expert) position just described in 1(b) above. In practice, even the *sola Scriptura* claim is typically buttressed by more articulate ideological frameworks, which may operate implicitly through the authority of particular groups or their leadership, or explicitly through confessional statements of faith or catechisms.⁷

The critical and theological weaknesses of this second thesis are all too apparent. And yet no serious analysis today can bypass the fact that

⁶ It is difficult to resist pondering certain links with a critique offered long ago by Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.8.1. He too engaged with a Christian group who believed that cultural progress since the New Testament era meant that we have left behind some of its primitive Jewish cultural presuppositions and now have a rather more advanced understanding of key moral and spiritual issues than the apostles did. We might call this the “as we now know” phenomenon. Irenaeus compared such culturally relativizing detachment of the Bible from the apostolic Rule of Faith to someone dismantling the beautiful mosaic of a king and re-assembling it in the form of a dog or fox. Without the key to the mosaic its meaning is lost. By no means all contemporary manifestations of the “theology trumps Bible” position are of this form; but the analogy seems salutary nonetheless, and worth pondering.

⁷ It is often Christian groups with the fiercest anti-traditional rhetoric who appear most imprisoned in the steely grip of what looks uncannily like authoritarian tradition in all but name. It seems almost a rule of thumb that individuals and societies are most prone to that which they are most determined to repress. A cognate twenty-first-century example in secular Europe is the insinuating force of quasi-religious fundamentalisms that go unchallenged precisely where the church’s voice is most insistently stifled in the public square. It is not hard to think of North American analogies.

this view of the Bible's superiority over creedal theology represents a far greater proportion of world Christianity, perhaps easily by a factor of 10 to 1 or more, than the "liberal" form of the first one (1b), which to many Western scholars may still seem intellectually more familiar and perhaps politically and socially more comfortable. The kingdom of God is not of course a democracy; nevertheless, I wonder if the intellectual condescension or even derision in which many academic circles hold supposedly "biblicist" views is in fact deeply out of step with the twenty-first century's global Christian reality. What St. Paul calls "rightly judging the Body" (1 Cor 11:29) would seem to require an urgent re-appraisal and appropriation of a spirit of humility from educated Western brokers of church and academy. Although they still disproportionately control the key institutional, professional, and publishing organs, academics from the formerly mainline denominations urgently need to recognize that in practical terms their theological constituencies have largely disappeared and been replaced by others, who are both more vital and more numerous.

3. **New directions?** In the midst of these stark alternatives, then, I suggest we may most effectively safeguard the possibility of intellectually and ecclesially serious debate about the Bible and theology by seeking fresh parameters of discussion. Drawing on the tension between our two theses above, these parameters may usefully be understood as an ellipse defined between two foci, neither of which will by itself suffice to grant access to the truth. In its pure or undiluted form, neither of the two foci will command consent or prove compatible with the other; indeed they may be thought mutually exclusive like opposing electrical poles. Between them, however, is defined an electrical field in which serious interchange and engagement may well prove fruitful.
 - a. The first of these two foci comprises variations of what one might broadly call the "liberal" position. Here the Bible may be read liturgically, but its interpretation is subject to notions of critical or historical reason, personal or cultural experience, perhaps together with an account, sometimes more and sometimes less defensible, of "tradition."
 - b. The other focus of the ellipse is constituted by various forms of creedal realism or positivism. On this side of the ellipse prevails a relatively sanguine understanding of divine revelation and Scripture's role in it. Here, critical questions of context and criticism may matter too. But the Bible, properly exegeted in relation to the

Rule of Faith, speaks clearly and directly on matters of importance; and what it is heard to say to the Church remains Word of God in Christ for today. This discourse is assumed to operate in either an unmediated or a very straightforwardly mediated form.

Is “Theological Interpretation” the Answer?

These, roughly speaking, seem to be among the key points of reference in the current debate about the Bible’s role in theology. I would like in the remainder of this study to relate this discussion to its instantiation in the recently popular phenomenon known as “Theological Interpretation,” which some have seen as providing an important new *modus vivendi* for the relationship between biblical studies and Christian theology. It is not necessarily the only or even the most promising discussion in this area, but I believe it does helpfully focus for us some of the crucial issues for debate: if it is granted that any theologically serious context will require some constructive account of the encounter between dogmatics and critical reason, between revelation and history, then what should theological interpretation look like?

Recent years have seen in parts of biblical scholarship an encouraging trend toward renewed openness to certain lost dimensions of interpretation. There are signs of a rediscovery of the sorts of self-involving connections between the biblical texts and their theological object that were once common currency throughout the world of Christian (or for that matter Jewish) biblical study, but which during the period of modernist biblical criticism were frowned upon and virtually wiped out from serious scholarly discourse.

Excursus: Benjamin Jowett and the Background of Anti-theological Criticism

Since first-hand experience of that period is not today universally shared by those whose formation has been in more overtly confessional contexts, it may be helpful briefly to illustrate this point by rehearsing an influential (but dated, and therefore hopefully uncontroversial!) example from the history of my own institution. A good reminder of the obstacles still facing this discussion is the case of Benjamin Jowett (1817–1893), one of Oxford’s leading and enthusiastic early adopters of the new German higher criticism. Raised in an evangelical family, he articulated views about the Christian heritage of biblical interpretation that have remained widespread among university-based interpreters to this very day:

The Early Fathers, the Roman Catholic mystical writers, the Swiss and German Reformers, the Nonconformist divines, have qualities for which we look in vain among ourselves; they throw an intensity of light upon the page of Scripture which we nowhere find in modern commentaries. But it is not the light of interpretation. They have a faith which seems indeed to have grown dim nowadays, but that faith is not drawn from the study of Scripture; it is the element in which their own mind moves which overflows on the meaning of the text. The words of Scripture suggest to them their own thoughts or feelings.

Jowett by contrast commended instead the notorious critical principle to “Interpret the Scripture like any other book,” which was widely drummed into students until not so long ago: it was still unselfconsciously affirmed when I began my doctoral studies, and perhaps in some places it may still be believed.⁸ Related to this principle was Jowett’s insistence that Scripture has only “one meaning—the meaning which it had in the mind of the Prophet or Evangelist who first uttered or wrote, to the hearers or readers who first received it.”⁹ For this reason “the true use of interpretation is to get rid of interpretation”: even the commentators, properly understood, add nothing of consequence to what we can discover from the Greek text—at best they offer “either conjecture, or very slight topographical or chronological illustration.”¹⁰

A man unwaveringly sustained by the courage of his own convictions, Jowett was said once to have quipped, “Even the youngest among us is not infallible.” Even this insight, however, failed to cast doubt on his own sense that there was nothing his ancient and medieval predecessors could teach him about the meaning of Scripture; nor did it lead him to suspect that his own nineteenth-century mind might likewise “overflow on the meaning of the text” in such a way that his brand of biblical criticism made plausible to him his own Victorian thoughts or feelings.

This superior mindset of self-subsistently critical splendor, which until fairly recently ruled the organs of the biblical guild unchallenged, still persists in some places despite the lip-service now widely paid to the contextual and perspectival nature of all our knowing. By contrast, even for many Protestant interpreters David Steinmetz’s famous article in 1980,

⁸ Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews*, 7th ed. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, 1861), 330–433, here cited from Alister McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 601.

⁹ Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” 378; in McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 602.

¹⁰ Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” 384; in McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 605.

“The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” sounded a clarion call for a more properly historical awareness of the context of interpretation.¹¹ Along with the work of Brevard Childs and others, there gradually came about a sea change in the discussion—even if it still remains somewhat unclear exactly what is emerging instead.

Recent years, then, have indeed witnessed an influential and broadly based body of theological scholarship in which the Bible’s importance and even “authority” is affirmed—and yet found to be in need of articulation in the creedal terms of a catholic “rule of faith.” On the one hand, scholars in this area tend to agree that the Bible is properly understood *only* in the context of such a rule of faith—given that many of the most serious and worthwhile heretics throughout the ages have been biblicists. On the other hand, many would insist that this cannot be a one-way relationship: however unlikely or theoretical it may seem, the force of the biblical witness must in principle be capable of “pushing back” against ancillary doctrinal formulations, however well-meaning or appropriately formulated. The Church receives and recognizes and teaches the canon of Holy Scripture; but the Church in both its unity and its diversity is constituted by and in response to the Word of God—rather than the other way round.¹² Some of today’s most promising debates on Scripture and theology are taking place in relation to these topics, involving both Protestants and Catholics.

In the midst of this general development, the beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed the rise of a more particular trend in biblical scholarship that is self-consciously styled as “Theological Interpretation.” These initiatives are now busy servicing a monograph series, a new journal with a further monograph series in tow, a major dictionary, two or three commentary series,¹³ several degree programs, as well as unnumbered papers and seminars on the international conference and lecture circuit. As a topical point of reference in the present debate about Scripture and doctrine, this phenomenon seems an appropriate point of reference for the present discussion.¹⁴

¹¹ David Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 5 (1990): 27–38.

¹² Cf. e.g. John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 44–47 and *passim*.

¹³ Brazos, Church’s Bible, Ancient Christian Commentary, Two Horizons, etc.

¹⁴ Here it is worth stating from the outset that, as a sympathetic reader and occasional endorser of publications in this sector, I offer the following remarks necessarily as a balance both of critique and of self-critique. A few years ago I published a book that appeared as the first volume in a series entitled *Studies in Theological Interpretation* (see my volume, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006]). The history of that title is, however,

Here I wish to highlight just two of the most obvious and high-profile contributions of recent years: Kevin Vanhoozer's introduction to the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* and Daniel Treier's manifesto volume *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*. While I propose to ask critical questions of both and to some extent play devil's advocate in seeking to tease out the essence of this project, in what follows I would ask to be granted the presumption that I am a generally sympathetic observer with no hostile axe to grind.¹⁵

The Dictionary of Theological Interpretation

Kevin Vanhoozer begins by conceding that it is easier to define what theological interpretation is *not* than to say what it is. He stresses the need to overcome the separation between exegesis and theology in both modern and postmodern biblical interpretation. In a section promisingly entitled "What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?" we arrive at the statement "The *theological* interpretation of the Bible is characterized by a governing interest in God, the word and works of God, and by a governing intention to engage in what we might call 'theological criticism'" (22). Theological interpreters, we learn, want "to hear the word of God in Scripture and hence to be transformed by the renewing of their minds" (22). This is an edifying thought, but what does it mean for the task of interpretation? Among other things, it appears to mean that "theological criticism" seeks "to do justice to the priority of God." The aim is not to impose an ideology but to uncover the Bible's own "original governing interest." Such interpretation may indeed make critical use of a range of existing critical tools, methods, and approaches, but its aim is to illumine the text rather than what is "behind it" (what actually happened) or "before it" (an interpretative community's ideological concerns).

I am largely sympathetic to what Vanhoozer affirms, and on that basis was happy to write a dustjacket endorsement of his project. Yet I also find

a little more complex than it might appear: I signed a contract for the book before the series was conceived, and agreed after the fact that it might usefully form part of it. What I did not realize until later, however, was that the term "Theological Interpretation" would so rapidly develop into a technical term—let alone, as some have begun to suggest, a new "movement."

¹⁵ My selection here is inevitably somewhat arbitrary; other formative items could have been included. Thus the journal *Ex Auditu* has been claiming the label of "theological interpretation" for almost twenty-five years, while the Brazos commentary series is among the more recent high-profile contributions. For good or ill, *Ex Auditu* does not feature here, and I have commented on the commentary series elsewhere: see "Ruminative Overlay: Matthew's Hauerwas," *Pro Ecclesia* 17 (2008): 20–28.

myself more critically engaged by what he denies. In particular, it is not clear why concern for the priority of God should bypass an interest in what happened historically—or the extent to which readerly motivations may affect our understanding. Nevertheless, we are told, *only this* sort of theological interpretation “ultimately does justice to the subject matter of the text itself.”¹⁶ That seems a surprisingly tall claim for those who set sail under this particular flag.

A more apposite and defensible conviction, no doubt, is that “to read the biblical texts theologically is to read the texts as they wish to be read.” There is more than one way to pursue this sort of reading, as Vanhoozer concedes. But among the leading commitments are, for him, a stress on divine discourse, on the final form of the text read “intratextually” (with appeal to George Lindbeck), and on its Spirit-led reception as Scripture in the believing community today. All three emphases have in recent years rightly returned to prominence. Yet I am struck by the extent to which all three appear to highlight *hermeneutical* preoccupations rather than what one might wish to identify as more traditional interpretative concerns involving historical, linguistic, and exegetical pursuits. Is not the biblical divine discourse, like most of its history of interpretation, inalienably engaged with the *extratextual* connections between faith and the world we inhabit? It is that world of history and experience, after all, which is the only world of God’s redeeming. If so, “doing justice” to the texts, even theologically and ecclesially, may involve rather more critical homework than is encompassed by these three supposedly dominant commitments. Self-styled “theological” approaches that favor narrative or literary questions often assume they can achieve their aims without needing to engage critical questions about the text and its history (let alone in conversation with fellow interpreters writing in ancient or modern languages other than their own). Disregard of history does not characterize the *Dictionary* as a whole. Even so, it seems right to ask: What it is that makes an interpretation theological, and what makes it either a good or a bad theological interpretation?

Vanhoozer concludes that “Theological interpretation of the Bible . . . is biblical interpretation oriented to the knowledge of God.” In principle there can be no quibble here for the believing exegete—and perhaps indeed for any interpreter prepared to take seriously the implied readership of the biblical text. But it does seem that Vanhoozer goes further, in that he comes close to seeing theological interpretation as strictly an in-house exercise. It can be achieved only by practitioners of the theological

¹⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Introduction: What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 23.

virtues, “when readers enter into the world of the biblical texts with faith, hope and love” (24). That seems a reasonable and appropriate proposal for ecclesial communities of interpretation; but is biblical interpretation therefore closed to meaningful input from religious outsiders, or even from anyone with a different conception of how God speaks through the text? Why should not biblical interpretation “oriented to the knowledge of God” be something to which interpreters of other faiths, or sometimes even of no faith, may contribute, however modestly?

Another question concerns the focus of what is included or excluded methodologically. Vanhoozer writes: “The principal thrust of theological interpretation is to direct the interpreter’s attention to the subject matter of Scripture—God, the acts of God in history, the gospel—*rather than* to a particular theological tradition or, for that matter, to some other topic (e.g. the history of the text’s composition, the secular history “behind” the text, the structure of the text, etc.)” (24, *italics mine*). Although keenly sympathetic to this respect for the *object* of the text, I am left wondering if those acts of God in history can be separated quite so neatly, and without loss of meaning, from the history of their inscription or the wider historical setting in which they occurred.¹⁷

We will have occasion return to some of these questions below. There is certainly wholesome and meaty fare here, but also perhaps occasion to wonder if this celebrated *Dictionary* really offers a sufficiently robust and convertible currency of what theological interpretation is or practically does. Nor can the articles following Vanhoozer’s introduction consistently be said to exemplify the editor’s principles. This is not to deny that some are excellent. But a good many arguably offer little more than a theologically conservative account of certain familiar topics of hermeneutics and biblical theology. Even in the book-by-book surveys of biblical articles extracted and re-published in two separate volumes, only a small minority of articles engage directly with the term “theological interpretation” at all. Few of those that do offer conceptual analysis or exegetical development; indeed, some contributors appear to run merrily against most of Vanhoozer’s guiding principles.¹⁸

¹⁷ In this respect, other recent formulations seem better apprised of the necessary historical dimensions of the scriptural witness; one thinks for instance of the Series Preface to the *Studies in Theological Interpretation* (Baker Academic; printed e.g. in Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*, 7–8), although its brevity also permits less methodological clarity.

¹⁸ John Rogerson’s advocacy, in his “Liberal Biblical Interpretation,” is only one of the more obvious examples. Vanhoozer’s subsequent two-volume *Theological Interpretation* survey of each book of the Bible, at 570 pages in total, is in fact a reprint of the relevant articles of the *Dictionary*, providing no new authorial or

A good deal more could be said of these matters, and Vanhoozer himself of course has offered much fuller accounts of his approach elsewhere.¹⁹ One of the lingering analytical problems this account raises for its reader is a generally nebulous sense of what exactly we are talking about. Some of those who are now among the key explicit advocates of Theological Interpretation did not use that terminology at all even in their relatively recent prior work on related topics.²⁰ Conversely, a number of writers whom one might have considered sympathetic to this exercise do not employ the terminology—for example, Matthew Levering recently presented a very illuminating theology of biblical interpretation, but he used the terminology of “theological interpretation” only when citing others.²¹ More confusing still, one finds several leading exponents of Theological Interpretation raked over the coals in the *Journal* of that name for interpreting Scripture in ways that the writer deems “modernist” and insufficiently “theological.”²²

editorial content. *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, and Daniel J. Treier (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

¹⁹ E.g. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998); *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002); *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); see also the substantive critical appraisal of Vanhoozer (and Fowl) on theological interpretation in Christopher D. Spinks, *The Bible and the Crisis of Meaning: Debates on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (London: T & T Clark, 2007).

²⁰ Joel B. Green, for example, the founding editor of the eponymous new *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, stresses the need for this approach in his opening editorial and other recent publications in this area. See e.g. Green, “The Bible, Theology, and Theological Interpretation,” *SBL Forum* (2004), n.p. Online at sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=308; Green, “Introducing the Journal of Theological Interpretation,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1 (2007): i–ii; Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007). But I can find no reference to the term in Green’s impressively wide-ranging edited volume *Hearing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), and the only apparent use of the phrase in his co-authored New Testament introduction of 2001 denotes an activity of the gospel writers themselves. See Paul Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

²¹ Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation. Reading the Scriptures* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 188, 190, 213, 218, 234, 240, 254, 256, etc.

²² Steven J. Koskie, “Seeking Comment: The Commentary and the Bible as Christian Scripture,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1 (2007): 243–44, 246, and

Daniel Treier's Introducing Theological Interpretation

A greater hope for clarity emerges in what is undoubtedly the fullest account to date of Theological Interpretation as a self-consciously identified school of thought: Daniel Treier's *Introducing Theological Interpretation*. His work has been warmly endorsed by Joel Green, Stephen Fowl, and others; and it provides perhaps the fullest survey to date of the major recent writers in the general area.

Treier offers a valuable guide to the body of scholarship revolving around the rekindled relationship between biblical study and theology. This is a concern many of us share, and in trying to see the forest for the trees we need all the help we can get. In this book and a related recent article in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*,²³ I found particularly encouraging the explicit engagement with reader-related issues of the global church and also with the "Biblical Theology" movement as a previous generation's attempt to read the Bible theologically. Treier puts his finger on some key neuralgic points that have sometimes been neglected in the discussion, even if his account of these and other matters tends perhaps to major on description and analytical annotation rather than on constructive synthesis. Here is not the place to offer a review, but two critical observations seem particularly pertinent for the wider issues here under discussion.

First, Treier's picture shares with Vanhoozer's *Dictionary* project the flavor of a highly hermeneuticized undertaking—deliberately and primarily second-order in nature. For a project that bears "Theological Interpretation of Scripture" in its title, it is disappointing how little Scripture is in fact interpreted, even in case studies. The Scripture index of this two-hundred-page book seems remarkably bare, amounting as it does to eighteen references to the Old Testament and twenty-three to the New. Aside from a recurring stress on the *imago Dei* theme in Genesis 1:26–27, these index entries tend to offer passing citations, often of whole chapters, rather than any specific exegetical engagement. (Treier's book cover illustration features a seventeenth-century Swedish painting entitled *Young Man Reading by Candle Light*. I was struck by that title's intransitive participle and lack of an object: to what extent does self-styled Theological Interpretation concern the *fact and manner* of that act of reading, at least as much as what is in fact read?)²⁴

passim—in relation to commentaries by Stephen Fowl, Marianne Meye Thompson, and Jaroslav Pelikan.

²³ "Biblical Theology and/or Theological Interpretation of Scripture?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61 (2008): 16–31.

²⁴ Reviewing Christopher D. Spinks's *The Bible and the Crisis of Meaning: Debates on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), R. W. Moberly similarly observes (in *Journal of Theological Studies* 59 [2008]: 710–12, at 711),

A second feature of Treier's account arises from his welcome clarification of what exactly is meant by the heading "Theological Interpretation." One might have thought of this term as a strictly functional descriptor of diverse ways of engaging with the Bible theologically. (That was my own assumption when I first encountered the term spelled with capital letters.) Treier, however, repeatedly identifies Theological Interpretation as a scholarly *movement*, beginning in the very first sentence ("a movement that I care about" [9]), and building momentum as the book progresses. We soon learn that his aim is to present Theological Interpretation as a movement that can be "mapped" and which has its own "story" and "internal arguments" (11, 14). This movement "seeks to reverse the dominance of historical criticism" and to "redefine the role of hermeneutics" in Christian reading of Scripture (14). Eventually we do discover that the "theological interpretation movement" does face problems of self-identification (96); it is marked by diversity and disagreement about the hermeneutical significance of extra-biblical texts and of global reading cultures (90n, 100, 161). But the conclusion leaves no doubt that, for all its continuing tensions, Theological Interpretation is an identifiable *movement* (187, 188).

I do not presume to assess the accuracy of that view, although it does not seem to me self-evidently shared by most theologically engaged interpreters, some of whom even prefer to use different terminology. Yet it raises a question for all self-understood participants in Theological Interpretation, however defined: are we dealing with an identifiable movement, united at least in seeking to combat various enemies including historical criticism? Or is there not a much more loosely defined sense that the terminology may encompass any and all attempts to do justice to the theological dimensions of the text?

Concluding Observations

Where then does all this leave our opening question about biblical studies and theology? We shall proceed not so much to formal conclusions as to a recapitulation of the above concerns in the form of two questions for further discussion, raised in ascending order of importance.

"Although it seems accepted practice to write books about biblical interpretation that do not interpret the Bible, I am increasingly doubtful about the value of the exercise. Unless I am shown how the discussions of principle help enable recognition, or even production, of good and bad readings of the biblical text in practice, I can find myself wondering what difference it all really makes." Cf. further R. W. Moberly, "What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?" *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3 (2009): 161–78.

*Is Theological Interpretation's Object
the Text or the Interpreter?*

The first is perhaps a musing rather than a proper question; indeed at one level the question implies a false alternative. From my admittedly limited reading in the recent secondary literature, I am not clear whether Theological Interpretation concerns, first and foremost, what the *text* is about, or rather what the *interpreter* is about. Obviously we need to be clear on both counts, but I wonder to what extent the second-order engagement in this exercise is distinctly in danger of overwhelming the first order.²⁵

But is this worry simply a New Testament scholar's predictable resistance to what others might regard as hermeneutical hair-splitting or complexification? On the contrary, I would insist that it is the first-order engagement with the text that makes biblical interpretation properly theological. Ninety years ago Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* was not opposed to historical criticism per se, but he did find that method's application in contemporary New Testament scholarship to be essentially trivial.²⁶ In Barth's view, "the Word ought to be exposed in the words. Intelligent comment means that I am driven on till I stand with nothing before me but the enigma of the matter."²⁷ For Barth, this means in effect that the commentator's job is in the end to articulate not the words of the commentators, nor even primarily the words of Paul, but rather "the Word itself" that is inscripturated in those words.²⁸

Firstly, then: Is "Theological Interpretation" primarily concerned with the *text* of Scripture or primarily with the identity and conduct of its interpreter?

Is Theological Interpretation for Members Only?

My second query is more complex and probably more controversial. One feels on the one hand reassured to discover the diversity of approaches, methods, and conclusions that can evidently be accommodated under the

²⁵ Cognate concerns have occasionally been raised about the lack of exegetical seriousness, and hence (on the Christian side) the potentially deficient Christology, emanating from the otherwise well-intentioned "Scriptural Reasoning" enterprise pioneered by Peter Ochs and David Ford.

²⁶ So rightly Robin S. Barbour, "Biblical Classics, 10: Karl Barth: the Epistle to the Romans," *Expository Times* 90 (1979): 264–68 on Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Kaiser, 1922).

²⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 8.

²⁸ As Robin Barbour puts it ("Biblical Classics, 10: Karl Barth: the Epistle to the Romans," 267): "If he cannot hear the Word itself, and report it in his own dialectical but also extremely eloquent way, Barth's whole enterprise crashes to the ground."

heading “Theological Interpretation.” And yet on the other hand the evidence to date suggests that there may be a tendency here to favor a decidedly in-house approach, which places biblical exegesis a little too comfortably under a confessional umbrella that names in advance both its presuppositions and its conclusions: “necessarily theological, scriptural and ecclesiastical,” as another recent contributor puts it.²⁹ I do not here wish to question the undeniable kerygmatic, pastoral, or pedagogical advantages of such an approach. It merely seems worth noting what is probably self-evident: to walk down this road must by definition exclude, or at least impede, the chances of an exegetically and theologically productive conversation about Paul’s idea of Israel with a Jew, say, or about Johannine ideas of divine Sonship with a Muslim—let alone about the meaning of Joshua’s victories at Jericho or Ai with a secular archaeologist. Yet don’t all of these conversations concern interpretation—and aren’t all three of these topics by implication resolutely and inescapably theological? We should not forget the extent to which the biblical interpretation of Origen, Jerome, and others benefited from precisely such discussions with ecclesial outsiders.

One question I feel impelled to ask is whether an emphatically creedal and Trinitarian hermeneutical frame advocated by several of these recent writers is for them an absolute hermeneutical *sine qua non* for all biblical interpretation, or whether it is a subject-appropriate advantage to bring to the table. That is to say, does it pertain to Theological Interpretation’s *esse* or its *bene esse*? If the latter, one would deliberately leave open the possibility that such interpretation might actually engage with benefit in conversations involving those of other faiths or of none. That is certainly my point of view. If, however, the specific creedal framework is the *sine qua non* of *all* valid interpretation, then it would seem hard to escape the danger of a narrow and potentially regressive circularity.

Readers of this journal may resonate with Roy Harrisville’s statement more than thirty years ago, “Once faith was reckoned to be disadvantageous to the descriptive task, seven devils worse than the first assumed its place.”³⁰ Many have spent decades battling these demons and wishing there were a way that intellectually serious and accountable scholarship could once again allow the Bible to bear fruit as word of life for the

²⁹ Steven A. Cummins, “The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recent Contributions by Stephen E. Fowl, Christopher R. Seitz and Francis Watson,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 2 (2004): 180.

³⁰ R.A. Harrisville in Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent*, trans. R. A. Harrisville (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 9.

people of God. Instead, biblical scholarship has too often spent its time debating how many Amalekites there were or how best in a postcolonial world to expose subversive cultural power plays behind the coded symbolism of the Gospel of Mark. The biblical guilds' reluctance to articulate and engage squarely with the theological object of the biblical text is rather like G. K. Chesterton's image of the literary guilds of his day, "leaving three-quarters of the poem inside the poet with the rest of it hanging out, generally tail-foremost."³¹

This secular constipation of biblical scholarship, including what Adolf Schlatter famously called its "atheistic methodology," has accounted for much of its sterile, death-dealing effect on academy and church alike. Here the "Theological Interpretation" movement rightly insists on the need for change. But equally vital, I believe, is the need for its advocates to go on to dispel the potential for intellectual obscurantism—not just by issuing denials but by actively demonstrating superior critical procedures and criteria, and by a depth of historical and theological learning that alone can confute the errors of the day. Otherwise there is a danger that "Theological Interpretation" becomes the methodological fig leaf for a circular progression, from conservative Christian presuppositions to conservative Christian conclusions, that bypasses history.³² The task of reading the Bible is far too important theologically for this to be an acceptable perspective. As Adolf von Harnack provocatively insisted, it is in fact precisely the historical method (rightly handled, to be sure) that is intrinsically conservative in the best sense, inasmuch as it undergirds an uncompromising reverence for the facts.³³

The idea of a purely in-house exercise for creedal and Bible-believing Christians was rightly rejected several decades ago by Peter Stuhlmacher (in many ways an explicit advocate of theological interpretation), during the drawn-out and at times acrimonious debate of the 1970s and 1980s with his former student Gerhard Maier. We do perhaps need rather *more* than Stuhlmacher's somewhat thinly articulated hermeneutics of "consent" and openness to transcendence. In particular, we certainly need more of a conversation with two millennia of critical and *ecclesial* engagement with the text. But contra Maier and perhaps some of the current advocates of

³¹ G. K. Chesterton, "On Literary Cliques," in *Essays* (London: Collins, 1939), 345.

³² In that sense it is reminiscent of Oxford's Turl Street, famously (if ironically) said to emulate the Church of England's movement from the "High" (Street) to the "Broad" (Street) while bypassing "Jesus" (College).

³³ Adolf von Harnack, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1906), 2.166: "Die historische Methode ist konservativ; denn sie sichert die Ehrfurcht—nicht vor der Überlieferung, sondern vor den Tatsachen."

Theological Interpretation, critical openness does not require critical detachment from the historical and theological object of the text.³⁴

It may be that in the end Theological Interpretation is primarily a flag of convenience under which all manner of vessels may set sail. In that case much of what I have said by way of critique could be easily swept aside. If, on the other hand, "Theological Interpretation" is understood in Treier's terms as "a movement," then it needs to ask some acute questions about where it positions itself vis-à-vis the classic historical disciplines, including those that may demand a measure of critical detachment or ideological criticism. On this front we might do well to ponder Joseph A. Fitzmyer's admittedly somewhat hackneyed warning about covert fundamentalists: they include for him "those who call for a return to a 'precritical' mode of interpretation, or for a return to a theological interpretation of the Bible."³⁵ At one level, to be sure, this judgment primarily showcases Fitzmyer's characteristic (almost Cato-like) execration of the straw man of "fundamentalism," in season and out of season.³⁶ In my view he does, however, raise a

³⁴ On a related note, it seems to me worth pondering whether the hermeneutical passions of decidedly anti-creedal or even anti-Christian interpreters may not sometimes be equally theological in their claims or at least in their scope. The *Dictionary's* article "Feminist Biblical Interpretation" offers a sympathetic critical survey of diverse feminist approaches, but it does not indicate which (if any) of them might rightly be viewed as theological. The approach of Jane Schaberg, by contrast, a feminist who explicitly lays claim to "theological interpretation" in her description of Jesus's "illegitimate" birth, is cited only once in another article, where her approach is said to be in "breathhtaking" contrast to the Roman Catholic scholarship of Raymond E. Brown. See Edith Humphrey, "Infancy Narratives," *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation*, 326; cf. Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006).

³⁵ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Scripture, the Soul of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994) 59.

³⁶ Patent in relation to Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church": Text and Commentary*, Subsidia Biblica 18 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1995). Cf. Peter Williamson, *Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Subsidia Biblica 22 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2001). See Max Turner's review of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989) in *New Blackfriars* 72 (1991): 298–300, at 299, where he notes: "Fitzmyer's determination to avoid what he regards as the twin pitfalls of 'the fundamentalism of the fearful' . . . and 'the cynicism of the foolish' . . . though some may feel that in avoiding the first danger he has himself sometimes come uncomfortably close to the second." Cato the Elder (234–149 B.C.) in his later years famously developed the habit of ending all his speeches on any subject with the words *Ceterum censeo Carthaginem esse delendam*, which might be informally rendered "And in any case I propose that Carthage must be destroyed."

vital warning about how theological interpretation will be viewed if it becomes, either in reality or even just in perception, merely a convenient tag for an in-house conversation among the confessionally like-minded. It seems vital to ask, for example, to what extent this approach is either practiced or practicable in secular university departments of religion. Is Theological Interpretation for Members Only?

In what circumstances might Theological Interpretation as here described rise to a *critique* of ecclesial doctrine or praxis, not only of universally accepted excesses and abuses at the margins (though that is obviously important) but also perhaps of occasional errors or misjudgments discerned at the very heart of the interpretative tradition?³⁷ And perhaps the most basic question: What role does history, and historical criticism, play for Theological Interpretation? Is it bracketed out, or perhaps strictly ancillary at best?

I am reminded of a favorite quotation from the patristic commentator Theodore of Mopsuestia, objecting to the notion that the Bible must be interpreted through an elaborate “spiritual” code intelligible only to the initiated:

Some people, however, make everything into its opposite, wanting the entire account (*historia*) of Holy Scripture to be no different from nightly dreams. When they turn to expounding divine Scripture ‘spiritually’—‘spiritual interpretation’ is what they would like their folly to be called—they say Adam is not Adam, paradise is not paradise, the serpent is not the serpent. To these people I should say that if they distort *historia*, they will have no *historia* left.³⁸

My suggestion here is that we will do well to insist that biblical study must take seriously the theological object of its inquiry—but also that in

³⁷ I have argued for one such issue in relation to the tradition’s assessment of Jesus and Israel, in Bockmuehl, “God’s Life as a Jew: Remembering the Son of God as Son of David,” in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, ed. B. R. Gaventa and R. B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 60–78. Also cf. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*, 189–228.

³⁸ Quoted in H. B. Swete, *Theodori Episcopi Mopsuertenensis in Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii: The Latin Version with the Greek Fragments*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: University Press, 1880), 2.74–75: isti uero omnia e contrario faciunt, omnem de diuina scriptura historiam somniorum nocturnorum nihil differre uolentes; nec enim Adam, Adam esse dicunt, quando maxime eos de diuina scriptura ‘spiritaliter’ enarrare acciderit—spiritalem etiam interpretationem suam | uolunt uocari desipientiam—neque paradysum, paradysum, neque colubrum, colubrum esse dicentes. Ad quos uolebam illud dicere, ut historiam intercipientes, ultra non habuerint historiam. Cf. also Harnack, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 167 (“Man bricht nicht mit der Geschichte, ohne sie zu verdunkeln”).

doing so, it will be crucial to sustain an intellectually serious and open conversation in which insiders and outsiders can learn from each other.

What might that look like? To tease this out would require a much longer study. But part of my vision would include something more reminiscent of a scene I saw when I first visited Istanbul's indescribably fragrant spice bazaar a couple of years ago: a huge buzz of activity consisting not of franchised mall outlets selling largely the same standard goods in the same way, but of hundreds of different original traders—all of them faithfully re-enacting the tradition of the bazaar while pursuing many different ways of sourcing, pricing, packaging, and display.

Why should not theologically worthwhile interpretation be seen in any pursuit of biblical studies as theological, and theology as biblical—and to that end open to a thousand legitimate ways of critically receiving and dispensing the riches of the East? Patristic reception history and literary-grammatical analysis could be theological; but so could historical questions about the text and its external reference. And what we regard as theological would comprise not only the history of what the text produced but *also* the history of what produced the text. For that reason there is no need to trumpet the demise of historical criticism, or to seek to exclude it from theological conversation. In that connection, any interpretation vibrant with the theological heart of what the text is about would inevitably thrive and rise to the top. Hawkers of genetically modified substitutes or artificial flavor enhancers might still exist, but they would self-evidently exclude themselves from the trade in the real thing. In principle, an open converse between authentic sellers and buyers of every faith and nation would surely make for a more theologically interesting and truthful interpretation.