

Exegesis and Hermeneutics

Introduction

How should one read the Bible so as to discover its theology? Because the task of biblical theology is to describe the theology of the Bible, it is vital for the biblical theologian to distinguish the theology of the text from the theology of this or that ecclesial reading, the message of the text from the tradition of its interpretation. Whether or not it is possible to recover the original meaning of a text on its own terms is the abiding question of hermeneutics. Questions about textual meaning and interpretation therefore lie at the centre of debates concerning the nature and method of biblical theology. To attempt biblical theology apart from reflection on hermeneutics and exegesis – the theory and practice of interpretation, respectively – is to risk a potentially idolatrous identification of one's own doctrine with that of the text.

Biblical theology and hermeneutics achieved the status of independent academic disciplines at roughly the same time, in the 18th century. Yet the connection between the two disciplines is much more than an accident of history. For biblical interpretation without biblical theology is (theologically speaking) empty; and biblical theology without biblical interpretation is (hermeneutically speaking) naive. It is thus no exaggeration to say that the fate of biblical theology at the turn of the new millennium is inseparably related to developments in hermeneutics, and to the fate of textual meaning in particular.

The viability of biblical theology as a discipline depends on the ability to interpret the biblical texts 'on their own terms'. It was this that set biblical theology apart from dogmatic theology insofar as the latter began from church confessions rather than the biblical canon. It remains to be seen, however, how the interpretation of the biblical theologian differs from that of the exegete and the systematic theologian. Hermeneutics both complicates and contributes to the project of biblical theology. The complication arises because of the historical distance that separates the text from readers today. How can interpreters know that they are recovering the

original message rather than imposing their own ideas and agenda on the text? Yet hermeneutics also contributes to the project of biblical theology by showing more clearly how texts, thanks in large part to their literary forms, nevertheless communicate across distances in complex and often subtle ways.

The task of biblical hermeneutics, and hence of biblical theology, is to understand the biblical witness on its own terms. Despite the postmodern suspicion of all claims to correct interpretation, a number of recent developments in hermeneutics show how biblical theology might fulfil its role as a crucial mediating discipline between biblical studies and systematic theology.

Biblical theology and interpretation: meaning and method

If biblical theology is a form of biblical interpretation, how does it differ from other interpretative approaches? Specifically, does the interpretative method of the biblical theologian have more in common with that of the biblical scholar or that of the systematic theologian? Should the biblical theologian attend more to the original sense of particular passages, to the larger emerging patterns that cut across individual books, or to the Bible's overall message? On the one hand, the books of the Bible are historical documents; on the other hand, they are also the church's Scripture.

To be sure, the very name 'biblical theology' suggests the possibility (and actuality) of theologies that are *not* biblical, and of studies of the Bible that are less than theological. Where, then, does the biblical theologian stand with regard to the 'ugly ditch' that separates the work of the academic exegete from that of the confessing theologian? The challenge, and the hope, in thinking about hermeneutics and biblical theology together is to find a way of reading the Bible that will neither distort Scripture by reading it merely to confirm one's dogmatic theology, nor drain Scripture of theological significance by reading it in a historical-critical manner only. At its best, biblical theology bridges the yawning gap (an open wound, actually) between a

theologically impoverished historical criticism of the Bible on the one hand, and an ecclesiastically motivated reading of the Christian Scripture on the other.

Why biblical theology is a hermeneutical discipline: meaning and interpretation

The task of biblical theology, as traditionally understood and as defined in this volume, is to present the theology of the Bible – the parts and the whole – in a manner that lets the texts, in all their peculiarity and particularity, set the agenda. In short, biblical theology is the attempt to provide a holistic yet historical account of the biblical testimony to the God of Israel and Jesus Christ. But what exactly is involved in this attempt? How does one set about presenting the theology of the Bible? Does it matter, for instance, whether one is a historian or a believer oneself? To paraphrase Bultmann's question to the exegete: is biblical theology without presuppositions possible?

J. P. Gabler

'Christian theology through the Middle Ages did not try to think the thoughts of the biblical writers *as distinct from their own*' (H. Boers, *What is NT Theology?* [Philadelphia, 1979], p. 16). By and large, medieval Christians did not take note of the cultural-historical distance separating the Bible from their lived faith. The Reformers' recognition that text and Christian tradition could come apart implied a distinction between the thought of the biblical authors and the thought of later theologians. In modern biblical studies, this conceptual distinction gave rise to a problem that has dominated the scholarly agenda, namely, how to overcome the cultural and historical distance that separates present-day readers from the original situation of the authors.

It is Gabler's 1787 lecture on the distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology, however, that is usually credited with the separation of the theological disciplines, and hence with the birth of biblical theology proper. Gabler sought to 'free' biblical study from the chains of church tradition and especially from the categories of dogmatic theology. He saw the goal of biblical theology as historical and descriptive, distinct from the didactic and normative goal of dogmatic theology. He thus called for an inductive approach that would yield a historically accu-

rate description of the religious thought-world of the biblical authors. At the same time, he wished to make biblical theology the foundation of dogmatics by uncovering the unchanging, divine concepts in the Bible. Hence he distinguished the objective description of its historical data ('true' biblical theology) from the attempt to sift out what was of permanent value for dogmatics ('pure' biblical theology).

Anthony Thiselton has recently called attention to an interesting parallel between biblical theology and hermeneutics at this point. Just as Gabler resists the captivity of exegesis to the categories of dogmatic theology, so H.-G. Gadamer resists the captivity of understanding to a single scientific method. Gadamer argues that human life invites understanding on its own terms, 'not in terms of some prior method predetermined in advance of engaging with the material' (A. Thiselton, in *The Modern Theologians*, p. 533). In other words, Gadamer gives properly *hermeneutical* rather than theological grounds for insisting on the primacy of the text.

Krister Stendahl

Some two hundred years after Gabler, Krister Stendahl reinforced the distinction between biblical and systematic theology with the hermeneutical distinction between 'what it meant' and 'what it means' (K. Stendahl, in *IDB* 1, pp. 418–432). It is the role of biblical theology, he argued, to describe 'what it meant' to the original author and to the original audience. The task of systematic theology is to say 'what it means' in a language and conceptuality intelligible to people living today. This division of interpretative labour represents a methodological schism in theology and hermeneutics alike. In theology, the net effect of this division of labour is to suggest that exegesis is somehow 'neutral' and 'objective' whereas dogmatics is 'biased' and 'subjective'.

Stendahl appears to have translated Kant's distinction between public fact and private values into the practice of biblical interpretation, with fateful results. The impact on hermeneutics is no less damaging. Once one distinguishes 'past facts' from 'present values', how may one then relate them? Stendahl's distinction between 'what it meant' and 'what it means' opens up a rift in biblical interpretation and hermeneutics alike, for it is not at all

clear how one can move from description of the past to present or future application. It is one thing to say what the prophet Isaiah thought about God, quite another to say what present-day believers should think about God.

Truth and method in biblical theology: 'the descriptive task'

The idea of biblical theology as the task of giving historical descriptions of the biblical testimony gives rise to three important questions, all of which have become problematic. First, just what are we describing? What is the proper context within which to locate the meaning of the biblical text? Secondly, how do we get from historical descriptions of 'what it meant' – exegesis – to theological prescriptions of 'what it means'? And thirdly, is objective historical description really possible? Does not the interpreter always get in the way?

What are we describing?

It is not enough to define biblical theology in terms of ascertaining 'what it meant', for two reasons. In the first place, one must first specify the meaning of meaning, which is no small part of the task of hermeneutics. Just as importantly, one must also specify just what 'it' is. Is 'it' a word, a sentence, an event, a text, a group of texts, an entire Testament, or the whole canon? What exactly does biblical theology describe? The present article will first review various 20th-century options and then put forward an integrative model.

Can we move from historical descriptions of religion to norms for faith?

Can interpreters combine a descriptive-historical reading of the Bible with one that is prescriptive-theological? Solutions as to how to reconcile the descriptive and prescriptive have been in short supply. To a great extent, scholars in the academy have read the Bible in one way, while church members have read it in another. It has been far from apparent whether, and how, 'what it meant' to Moses, or Ezekiel, or even John and Paul should be considered authoritative for Christians today. While historians may be content with describing human religious experience, believers come to Scripture with the aim of knowing God. Indeed, the main tension in modern biblical studies results from a clash of two interpretative frameworks, the historian's and

the believer's. The ultimate goal of biblical theology, of course, is not to impose an alien framework onto Scripture but rather to let the Bible's own theological framework come to light.

Some biblical critics seek to locate authority in the historically-reconstructed religious experience that comes to expression in the text. This approach gives rise to two problems, however. First, it locates authority behind the text, that is, elsewhere than in the text. Secondly, it does not explain why the religious experiences and beliefs of an ancient people should be considered binding for contemporary people. True, the Bible is full of fascinating grist for the historian's or cultural anthropologist's mill, but how are believers looking for the word of God to separate the wheat from the chaff?

Modern biblical scholars have thus sought a hermeneutical alchemy that would somehow change the dross of historically conditioned religion to the gold of pure theology. R. Bultmann's 'demythologizing', for instance, was a hermeneutical process that restated and repackaged the kerygma in terms of existentialist philosophy, abstracting timeless truths of human existence from the 'primitive' stories that make up much of the NT. Such alchemy has more hermeneutical magic than science about it, however, and Bultmann's demythologizing sometimes appears as arbitrary as early Christian allegorizing (yet another attempt to extract a universally relevant 'what it means' from a historically conditioned particular 'what it meant').

Is biblical theology without presuppositions possible?

Since the Enlightenment, biblical exegesis has largely operated on the assumption that a neutral and objective description of 'what it meant' is both desirable and possible, at least in the academy. Upon closer inspection, this assumption is tied up with epistemological foundationalism and with the concomitant notion that the result of exegesis is objective knowledge. Any capable biblical scholar, in contemplating the historical evidence, should in principle reach the same conclusion. With the advent of modern hermeneutics, however, these unstated epistemological assumptions have now been challenged, if not wholly overturned. Today, hermeneutics deals with the

general problem of human understanding, a problem that includes the historicity of the reader as well as the historicity of the text. Theories of textual interpretation now deal not only with questions of method (e.g. how to do exegesis) but also with questions about the interpreter. Hermeneutic philosophers such as Gadamer and P. Ricoeur, for instance, deny the objectivity and neutrality of historical description, preferring rather to speak of a 'fusion of two horizons' (text and reader). Two hundred years on, the fates of biblical theology and hermeneutics remain intertwined.

It was Bultmann himself who suggested that exegesis without presuppositions is impossible. Every reader of the Bible makes certain assumptions (presuppositions) about what is being said and about the right way of questioning the material so as to get understanding. For Bultmann, the true subject matter of the Bible concerns human existence, both sinful and faithful. He therefore read the text expecting to find existential truths. Indeed, his *Theology of the New Testament* is essentially an existential interpretation of the writings of John and Paul. For Bultmann, then, biblical theology is a matter of interpreting the Bible with categories drawn largely from outside the biblical text (e.g. existence, temporality, inauthenticity).

Karl Barth agrees with Bultmann that a purely 'historical' exegesis, unaffected by presuppositions, is a will o' the wisp. Yet he criticizes Bultmann, along with other historical critics, for not being critical enough, in that their historical reconstructions and existentialist applications ultimately fall short of engaging the real subject matter of the text. Understanding the book of Romans involves more than a disinterested knowledge of its language and composition; it involves a personal response to the object of the text's witness, the word of God. Barth here echoes the concern of Adolf Schlatter, for whom biblical interpretation is *historically* inadequate if it fails to recognize the personal address of God. *Contra* Gabler, one does not first do one's historical homework and only then begin to do theology. On the contrary, one's exegesis is already affected by one's dogmatic beliefs. The relationship between exegesis and theology is more a dialogical conversation than it is a linear or unidirectional process. Hermeneutics, in calling atten-

tion to the assumptions readers bring to the text, reminds us that theology is involved in the task of exegesis from the outset.

So-called postmodern thinkers (i.e. those who no longer trust reason's power to give us universal truths or a universal point of view) have intensified these doubts about the possibility of objective description, so much so that many deny the validity of historical criticism altogether. For postmoderns, the way one reads, and the meaning one finds, is thought more to reflect the *reader's* interests, aims and context than those of the author. Some feminist biblical scholars, for instance, use women's experience or the norm of equality for women as a criterion for evaluating the biblical text. They expose and decry the patriarchal ideology that lies behind many of the explicit laws and unspoken assumptions in Scripture. Do such exegetes hear the voice, and theology, of the text, or do they hear only their own voices, their own ideologies? Modernity's so-called hermeneutics of suspicion (i.e. the critical questioning of traditional interpretations) has now hardened into the postmodern suspicion of hermeneutics itself. Henceforth, all attempts to interpret – to say 'what it meant' – are seen as wilful impositions, on the text and on other readers. Postmodern exegesis has become a thoroughly pluralistic and political affair where no one is able to say why one interpretative community's reading should count more than another's.

What is at stake: the integrity of the theological disciplines

The postmodern challenge is simply stated: every attempt to describe 'what it meant' is in fact only an assertion of *what it means to me*, or worse, *what we will it to mean*. Stated in these terms, the real issue comes to light: the question of authority and the locus of the word of God. If all words are historically conditioned, and if all readings are ideologically conditioned, it is difficult, if not impossible, to believe in a word from God.

The postmodern suspicion of hermeneutics leads inexorably to the suspicion of biblical theology. The contemporary crisis in interpretation is simply the last stage of the story in which biblical studies and Christian theology have gone their separate ways. The rift that divides biblical studies from theology will be bridged only if we develop a theological

hermeneutic – a theory of interpretation informed by Christian doctrine – and if we simultaneously recover the distinctive contribution of biblical theology to the project of biblical interpretation.

It is helpful to see the various theological disciplines in relation to their common interpretative task. 'Biblical theology' is the name of an interpretative approach to the Bible which assumes that the word of God is textually mediated through the diverse literary, and historically-conditioned, words of human beings. It is therefore an intrinsically hermeneutical endeavour, having to do with the interpretation of the variety of biblical witnesses that communicate the word of God. If theology is indeed largely a matter of biblical interpretation, what is the place of biblical theology among the theological disciplines? Just where do we situate biblical theology on the 'hermeneutical arch' from explanation to understanding? How can we move beyond the sterile dichotomy between historical exegesis and theological interpretation?

One way forward is to introduce the notion of different kinds and levels of textual description. There is an important *via media* between the critical fragmentation of the Bible into a hodgepodge of cultural and theological diversity on the one hand, and a simplistic systematization of the Bible into a single conceptual scheme on the other. It is important not to say that only some readers should read the Bible with a theological interest. To say this would be to make biblical theologians simply one more interpretative interest group. Biblical theology must be more than 'theologically motivated interpretation'. It would be to make a stronger claim to argue that any description that fell short of describing a text's theology remains incomplete. To state the claim more positively, biblical theology corresponds to the interests of the texts themselves (W. Jeanron, *Text and Interpretation*).

New developments in hermeneutics (e.g. communicative action, genre criticism, narrative studies) have prepared the way for the 'second coming' of biblical theology in the 21st century by enabling us to attend to a level of textual meaning of which traditional historical-criticism was largely ignorant: the literary. Biblical theology, reinvigorated by a new appreciation of what it is to interpret texts, provides the missing link that permits

the theological lion to lie down with the exegetical lamb. The promise of biblical theology lies in its ability to reconcile the systematic 'one' with the exegetical 'many'.

Levels of biblical theological description

Though biblical theologians have been adamant in distinguishing their own work from the more external interpretations of dogmatic and systematic theology, many believe that a description of biblical faith should also be normative for the faith community today. As we have seen, however, their difficulty lies in explaining how to proceed smoothly from a description of 'what it meant' to 'what it means' for the church today. Yet it is the text, considered at certain higher levels of description, which itself provides the decisive clue as to its continuing significance.

Describing biblical words: theology by dictionary

On its most basic level, exegesis consists in expounding linguistic meaning in its appropriate historical context. The aim of the exegete is, in the first instance, philological and historical: the recovery of what words meant in their original context.

If the aim of biblical theology is to derive theology from the Bible on the Bible's own terms, what better way to accomplish this task than to derive theology from the actual terms – that is, *words* – of the Bible? Surely on this level, one might think, the biblical theologian could attain to 'pure description'. The so-called Biblical Theology Movement, popular in North America in the 1940s and 1950s, was preoccupied with the notion that word studies and etymologies gave access to the distinctive mentality and theology of the biblical authors. The Hebrew language was evidence of the peculiarly Hebrew (biblical) way of thinking about God, it was claimed. Members of the Biblical Theology Movement argued, on the basis of word studies, that the biblical notions of time, history, and divine action were dynamic and concrete, in contrast to the static and abstract concepts of the Greeks. Members of the Biblical Theology Movement had a tendency to view theology as philology.

James Barr's *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London and New York, 1961) is a formidable critique of the linguistic and hermeneutical presuppositions that lay behind

several of the articles in the early volumes of G. Kittel's *TDNT*, a work that, like the Biblical Theology Movement, looked to words as the primary locus of the Bible's theology. First, Barr attacks the assumption that words have certain root meanings that remain constant, even across centuries of use. It is simply not the case that the 'basic' meaning of a word is present in each individual use of it. Many of the entries in *TDNT* were also guilty of what Barr called 'illegitimate totality transfer'. This refers to the error of reading all possible meanings of a particular term into a single occurrence of the word. While it is true that some words can have several meanings (e.g. in the phrase 'he's hot', the word 'hot' could refer to his temperature, anger, or tennis), it is wrong to think that the many possibilities are always contained in the one use.

Closely related to this first mistake is a second error: the etymological fallacy. The meaning of a word cannot be deduced from its etymology or origin. Instead, the meaning of a word must be determined in the concrete *context* of its use. Barr's work demonstrated that it is fallacious to move too quickly from word to concept (e.g. from biblical words to theological doctrines). The moral is clear; one cannot move from a study of words (e.g. 'salvation', 'to save') to biblical theology (e.g. soteriology).

Barr correctly observes that meaning is expressed at the level of a sentence (*i.e.* in the author's particular *use* of words) rather than at the level of the sign (*i.e.* in the individual words considered apart from the context of their use). The Biblical Theology Movement, we may conclude, ultimately foundered on a misleading picture of language and an inadequate theory of meaning. It is one thing to study the etymology of a word, another to study what an author meant when using it on a particular occasion. 'What it meant' has less to do with the origins or history of a word than with the circumstances of its actual use.

The lesson to be drawn from the short-lived Biblical Theology Movement is that, in Barr's words, 'It is the sentence (and of course the still larger literary complex ...) which is the linguistic bearer of the usual theological statement, and not the word (the lexical unit)' (*Semantics of Biblical Language*, p. 263). In short, the smallest unit of linguistic communication is not the isolated word but words as

used in the performance of 'speech acts' (see K. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, pp. 218-229).

Describing biblical events: revelation and historical interpretation

A second possibility is that biblical theology describes either revelatory events or religious experiences. Modern biblical critics, having discarded the assumption of supernatural inspiration, came to see the Bible as a collection of fallible human documents. The new theological presupposition (not always acknowledged) was that knowledge of God is mediated through the religious experience to which the Bible bears witness. As Hans Frei brilliantly demonstrated, the inevitable result was that theological significance was relocated *behind* the text (see H. Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*).

According to a number of biblical critics, what we have in the Bible is an interpretation of salvation history from the perspective of the faith community. However, interpretations that substitute a description of events *behind* the text for a description of what the texts are actually saying generally teach only *religion*, not *theology*. Be that as it may, modern biblical critics are more interested in what may be found behind the text and in explaining the processes of the text's composition rather than in describing what lies in the text and its processes of communication. The result: critical interpretations that allegedly reconstruct 'what actually happened', but only at the cost of losing the perspectives of the biblical witnesses themselves.

Describing biblical books: literary genres and 'word views'

The Biblical Theology Movement failed in its attempt to derive theology from words. Similarly, modern biblical criticism has failed in its attempt to derive theology from extra-biblical events or experience. In each case, the error was as much hermeneutical as theological. To be precise, biblical scholars in the tradition of Stendahl failed to answer two vital questions: 1. what is the 'it' being described? 2. what is the meaning of 'meant'? Any adequate biblical theology must engage with hermeneutics at least long enough to answer the questions 'What is a text?' and 'How do we determine textual meaning?' For how one approaches an object of study de-

pend in large part on the nature of the object to be known.

Modern biblical criticism, while professing to study the text scientifically, in fact approached the text with the anti-theological presuppositions of secular reason and hence with a bias against the unity of the text and an anti-narrative hermeneutic. Perhaps nothing is so typical of the historical-critical method than its tendency to fragment the text. By contrast, the most exciting developments in biblical theology are those that approach the texts with a sense of their literary integrity, a sense that stems from a postcritical hermeneutic which is open to being shaped by Christian perspectives (*cf.* Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, Part Two).

1. *What is a text?* A text is an extended piece of discourse – something said by someone to someone else about something – fixed by writing. Literary texts are thus best viewed as communicative actions performed on a variety of levels for the reader's contemplation. To understand a text, one needs to do more than parse every verb. One needs to know what an author is doing. For texts have both matter (a message, a topic) and energy (the use to which an author puts his message).

J. Barr and P. Ricoeur agree; the basic unit of meaning is not the individual sign or word but the sentence. For words are ambiguous until they are used in concrete instances of discourse. If biblical theology involves description, then it behooves the biblical theologian to use the right categories to describe the ways in which authors communicate their theologies. Biblical theologians need, first, categories for describing communicative action, and second, categories for describing different kinds of communicative action.

Properly to interpret biblical discourse requires one to develop an awareness of what authors are doing in their texts, of what the philosophers J. L. Austin and John Searle call 'speech acts' (J. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* [New York and Cambridge, 1969]). In particular, one needs to attend not only to the words themselves but to what authors are *doing* with their words (the 'illocution'). One needs also to appreciate the way in which speech acts can be put together to form more sophisticated 'text acts' (*e.g.* stories, psalms, epistles). The discipline of biblical theology thus in-

volves not only linguistic and historical but also *literary* competence. In the words of N. T. Wright: 'If we are to be historians and theologians, we must also be literary critics' (*The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 25).

Biblical theology aims to give theological interpretations of the Bible on its own terms. It is precisely this aim that links the fate of biblical theology and that of hermeneutics. Far from being inimical to biblical theology, recent work in hermeneutics may provide the conditions for its contemporary renaissance. What is needed is a biblical theology that attends precisely to the level of the text as a complex communicative act, as a structured literary act with a certain kind of wholeness. The 'it' in Stendahl's 'what it meant', in other words, is the text, taken in all its literary integrity as a complex written communication.

2. *Literary genre and the forms of biblical discourse.* To focus on the higher, textual level of communicative action is to come to appreciate the importance of literary form. Only by attending to a text's literary form or genre does one learn what kind of thing, or communicative act, it is. Note that a number of exegetical approaches are necessary to accomplish the task of understanding the text as a whole. What interpreters ultimately seek to determine, however, is what an author is *doing* in a text: making a promise; giving a warning; stating how things are; expressing a personal preference; telling a story; or whatever. It follows that biblical theology should not treat biblical words out of their literary context, but rather describe how they are used in the context of the literary whole of which they are part. It also follows that our only access to the events to which the Bible bears witness is *in* and *through* the literary form, not apart from it. If the literary form of the Bible is essential to its theological and historical content, then biblical theology ignores the diverse literary genres of the Bible at its peril.

Hans Frei has argued that the significance of the Bible's literary forms was lost as modern biblical scholars, in their haste to find the truth (*e.g.* 'what actually happened', or a theological proposition) used the text as evidence for something *else*. The Bible gradually came to be read in the light of extrabiblical evidence, leading to what Frei terms the 'great reversal' in biblical hermeneutics, where the

literary form of the text was eclipsed in favour of recovering its historical or doctrinal content. Such biblical interpretation, Frei argued, fails spectacularly to study the Bible on its own literary terms. By contrast, a hermeneutical approach that attends to the literary form of the biblical text reverses the 'great reversal' in biblical hermeneutics, and restores the possibility of theological interpretation. The traditional goal of biblical theology may be best achieved by attending to the diverse literary genres of the Bible – by describing the 'text acts' of Scripture. Every text is a kind of something, a particular kind of communicative act, and the genre of the text is often the best indication of the kind of point the author is making.

The concept of literary genre is much more than a device for classifying kinds of texts. Each literary genre represents a way of experiencing and representing some aspect of reality. Each genre is a communicative strategy that employs language to engage readers and render reality in different ways. Literary genres are language games, each with its own set of rules for making sense. For example, the rules for history differ from those for story, apocalyptic, proverb and myth. Indeed, genres are as much cognitive as communicative strategies, that 'map' reality in diverse ways. The Bible's theology is textually mediated, and together the rainbow of literary forms comprise the white light of truth. Biblical theology thus concerns not only words and concepts, not only narrated acts and witnessed events, but also the 'poetics' – the 'systematic working or study of literature as such' – of Scripture (Meir Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* [Bloomington, 1985]).

The urgent task of biblical theology is to undertake a biblical poetics in which the theology of the Bible would be described not primarily by means of etymology or history, but rather by interpreting the biblical message in terms of its communicative integrity as a particular kind of literature (e.g. apocalyptic, narrative, praise chorus, law, letter, etc.). In thus describing the Bible's 'word views', biblical theology serves as an indispensable tool for helping readers to indwell the words, and the worlds, of the Bible. Calvin was right to call Scripture the 'spectacles of faith', though we need to add that these spectacles are made up of a plurality of lenses.

Perhaps no single genre illustrates the sig-

nificance of literary form better than narrative. Narrative is a unique cognitive instrument that is especially good at viewing a heterogeneous collection of people and events as evincing a certain wholeness. Indeed, with narrative we may have to say that the medium is the message; there is simply no way to identify the meaning (or referent) of the narrative apart from the narrative form. Readers can view the history of Israel, or of Jesus, as the story of divine providence, for example, only thanks to the narrative lenses of certain biblical books. Narratives communicate ways of seeing and thinking about God's involvement with the world that cannot be reduced to a set of concepts.

What precisely would a biblical theology that attends to the significance of literary form describe in dealing with the theology of, say, biblical narrative? The particular contribution of the narrative genre is that authors who employ it display worlds. A narrative displays a worldview, an interpreted world. In addition to relating a series of events, authors take up an attitude towards it. What the author communicates is a perspective on the world displayed in the text. The events displayed may be accompanied by any number of evaluative stances (e.g. praise, mockery, condemnation). The point is that narrative not only informs one about historical events, but also aids in the formation of one's attitude towards them. Narratives are powerful instruments for shaping the way we see, imagine and think about the world. Without the biblical narratives, for instance, we might not be able to see the world in its created and covenantal ordering. And just as we learn what it is to be a virtuous human by reading stories of heroes and villains, so we learn what it is to be a genuine follower of Jesus through the Gospel narratives.

The main point here is that the Bible is made up of a variety of texts that need to be described not only at the linguistic but also at the literary level. Each of the major genres to be found in Scripture – narrative, prophecy, apocalyptic, didactic, hymnic – contributes in its own way to the larger project of testifying to the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ. The recognition that the diversity of literary forms is essential to the content of the Bible need not prevent the biblical theologian from studying particular theological themes. Ricoeur, for example, has explored the ways in

which the diverse literary forms of Scripture treat the topic of *time*, a well-known theme in biblical theology. The contrast between Greek and Hebrew concepts of time was a mainstay of the Biblical Theology Movement. What is most striking about Ricoeur's study, however, is that he is less interested in biblical words for time than in how the major biblical genres *depict* time (P. Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred* [ET, Minneapolis, 1995], pp. 167–180). Each genre configures or construes time in a distinctive way: as time immemorial; as historical time; as 'ripe' or 'eschatological' time. Attending to the level of genre allows us to pursue longitudinal themes across Scripture, then, with less danger of analyzing them out of (literary) context.

Describing the whole Bible: two Testaments, one testimony?

The remit of biblical theology – to understand the theology of the text on its own terms – leads us to attend to the nature of the biblical texts as literary wholes. There are other levels of wholeness, however, that are of great interest to the biblical theologian: the level of the Testament (*i.e.* OT theology, NT theology), and beyond that, still higher and all-encompassing, the level of the canon (*i.e.* biblical theology proper). On this level, the 'it' of 'what it meant' refers to the Christian Scriptures taken as a unified whole. With regard to interpreting the Bible as Scripture, perhaps the most important question with regard to literary context is: one lump or two? To be precise, what theological assumptions legitimate reading the two Testaments as *one* Scripture? Reading the Testaments together involves taking hermeneutical as well as theological positions. Most importantly, it means deciding that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is the same God who brought Israel out of Egypt. To read the Bible typologically or intertextually is to let Christian theology transform the presuppositions one brings to the text.

What new problems or possibilities does the concept of canon raise for the exegesis and hermeneutics of the Bible? What happens when one tries to describe the key themes or the message of the Bible considered as a unified whole? The problem is quickly stated: *diversity*. According to Walter Brueggemann, the canon represents a collection of such widely diverse ideas that all attempts to

perceive a coherent theological message results in interpretative violence and reductionism (*Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* [Minneapolis, 1997]). On the one hand, linguistic, historical, and cultural diversity hardens into what appears to be a theological discontinuity: old vs. new covenant. Christian hermeneutics is here stretched to the breaking point; is it really possible to read both Testaments *together*? On the other hand, the hermeneutic process bridging two Testaments was already the subject of explicit reflection by the authors of the NT. The appropriate hermeneutical question to ask is this: what is the significance for biblical theology of a theological exegesis of Scripture that takes seriously the canonical context?

1. *Brevard Childs's canonical approach.* For Childs, canonization refers to the process by which the traditions of Israel and the early church came to be shaped in a way that enabled them to function authoritatively for future generations, much like a *regula fidei* (rule of faith). What Childs sets out to describe, then, is the way in which texts have been shaped in order to function authoritatively in the life of the believing community.

In their final form, the Christian Scriptures include two Testaments, each of which is to be read in the light of the other. For Childs, it follows that the OT must not be described in abstraction from its connection to the NT. It is precisely this interdependence of OT and NT interpretation that constitutes the unique remit of biblical theology according to Childs. To interpret the OT as if it were an autonomous text is to *misinterpret* it; at the very least, it is to interpret it out of its proper (*i.e.* canonical) context. In speaking of a canonical context, Childs is referring both to the final form of each individual biblical book and to their position in relation to one another. Note that on Childs's view, 'what it meant' (*e.g.* the servant songs of Isaiah) shades into 'what it means' (*e.g.* Jesus Christ as servant of the Lord), precisely because the final form in its *canonical intention* serves as a rule of faith – as *Scripture* – for past, present, and future church members. This is the canonical version of the hermeneutical circle: read intertextually, the old in light of the new and new in light of the old. Childs has followed his own hermeneutical advice in his commentary on the Exodus (*The Book of Exodus*, OTL

[Philadelphia and London, 1974, 1979]), in which he deals with the 'NT context' of the story of Moses.

The most frequent criticism of Childs is that he exaggerates the importance of the final form. Some exegetes balk at carrying description to this level. Why, asks the biblical critic, should we describe OT words and texts in their canonical rather than their historical context? J. Barr and H. Räisänen, for instance, believe that it is arbitrary to limit the scholar's work to intra-canonical description; they prefer to march around the canonical walls, looking for extrabiblical information and parallels that might shed light on the text. Childs, for his part, is trying to mediate between the critical approach of the academy and the confessional approach of the church. He presents his canonical approach as a hermeneutic common to both saints and scholars. However, he does not provide an adequate argument to support his notion that the final form alone is theologically authoritative.

Childs has recently supplemented his literary argument about the canon's structure with a more properly theological argument about the canon's substance. Childs speaks of the 'hermeneutical role' of biblical theology, namely, to understand the 'two choirs' of voices within the Christian Bible 'in relation to the divine reality [Jesus Christ] to which they point in such diverse ways' (*Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, p. 85). Childs is not always clear, however, as to whether reading the Bible for its witness to Christ is a matter of the literary shape of the text or the interpretative interests of the community. Is 'canon' a fact about the text or about the interpreting community that looks to it for guidance? Stephen Fowler speaks for reader-oriented critics today when he suggests that we eliminate the concept 'meaning' and instead admit that we read the Bible with certain aims and interests (*Engaging Scripture* [Oxford, 1998], p. vii). The issue is whether the canonical reading is mandated by the text itself or arbitrarily chosen by an interpretative community.

Paul Noble believes that Childs's preference for the final form of the biblical text must ultimately be grounded in a doctrine of inspiration. What Childs calls 'canonical biblical theology of the Old and New Testaments' is more properly understood in

terms of *divine* authorship. Childs's claim that the meaning of the text can only be arrived at in the context of the canon as a whole 'is formally equivalent to believing that the Bible is so inspired as to be ultimately the work of a single Author' (P. Noble, *The Canonical Approach*, p. 340). This idea is very significant for hermeneutics and biblical theology.

2. *Thick description: Scripture interprets Scripture.* If the 'it' in 'what it meant' refers to the whole Christian Bible, Old and New Testaments, then we cannot claim to have adequately described the text if we ignore the canonical level. To interpret isolated passages of the OT as evidence of the religious or cultural history of Israel is to give 'thin' descriptions only. Similarly, the use of NT texts to reconstruct the historical Jesus yields diluted descriptions only. Childs, along with his mentor Karl Barth, is absolutely right to insist on this point.

To read the Bible canonically is to read the Bible as a unified communicative act, that is, as the complex, multi-levelled speech act of a single divine author. It follows that biblical theology – not just OT or NT theology but the theology of the whole Bible – is the attempt to read Scripture as the word of God. To read the Bible canonically may be to read it according to its truest, fullest, *divine* intention. This is a most important point; the canonical approach is a matter not of how the church reads the Bible but of what the Bible *is*. To read the Bible as unified Scripture is not just one interpretative interest among others, but the interpretative strategy that best corresponds to the nature of the text itself, given its divine inspiration.

It is possible to describe texts, like actions, at various levels of complexity. One can speak of neural firings, of the movement of an index finger, of pulling the trigger, of assassinating a President – all might be descriptions of the same act, though they work on different explanatory levels. However, the first description is 'thin' when compared to the last. Thin descriptions are the result of using too narrow a context to interpret an intended action. A description fails to generate understanding if something essential is left out of the story. It is one thing to describe the biological mechanism of the tear duct, quite another to describe *why* someone is crying. Similarly, it is not enough to describe biblical

words, events, or even books taken in isolation.

Thin descriptions of the text suffer from a poverty of meaning. While each level yields helpful descriptions, we cannot claim to have understood the true meaning of the action – what an author (human or divine) is doing – until we contemplate it in its final form, as a complete act. To remain on the level of words and concepts, or even of literary genres, does not yield a sufficiently ‘thick’ description of the message of Scripture. Only the final form of the text displays the divine communicative act in its completeness; hence the final form is the best evidence for determining what the authors, human and divine, are ultimately doing.

The canon, as a collection of divinely inspired texts, describes the unified communicative act of God as it takes up and coordinates the diverse human communicative acts performed at the comparatively lower levels of sentences and books. The canon is a great hall of witnesses in which different voices all testify to the Lord Jesus Christ. Over and above the laws and promises, the warnings and commands, the stories and the songs, is an all-embracing act, that of witnessing to what God was and is doing in Christ. When described at this higher level, the canon mediates the subject matter that unifies Scripture and emerges from, but cannot be reduced to, the smaller, less complex speech acts that comprise both Testaments (*e.g.* telling a story, prophesying, promising, *etc.*). Thanks to their overarching canonical context, the smaller communicative acts are caught up and reoriented to the larger purpose of ‘making wise unto salvation’.

What biblical theology should describe is the multi-levelled, human/divine discourse of the Bible – the canonical texts as complex communicative acts (*cf.* C. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, esp. ch. 7). When describing ‘what it meant/means’, it is perhaps best to think of a series of expanding interpretative frameworks. There is first the semantic range of what words could possibly have meant in their historical situation, then the historical context of what authors could have meant at a particular point in the history of redemption, then the literary context of what the words could have meant as part of a particular kind of literature, and finally what the words at a certain time in a certain kind of

text mean today when read as part of a unified canon that, taken as a whole, points to Jesus Christ.

In the final analysis, the best way to describe ‘what it meant’ is to interpret a given passage of Scripture in its linguistic-historical, literary, and canonical context. It is noteworthy that at the highest level, the Bible itself constitutes its own most adequate context. Hence the Reformation principle for biblical interpretation applies to biblical theology too; Scripture interprets Scripture.

Biblical theology and theological hermeneutics

One of the most prominent emphases of contemporary hermeneutics concerns the role of the reader in interpretation. Virtually no one in the field of hermeneutics today believes in the possibility of value-neutral interpretation. Biblical theology, however, despite its having achieved the status of an independent academic discipline about the same time as hermeneutics, has for most of its history made *pure description* of linguistic and historical data its goal. Can biblical theology survive in a hermeneutical age?

The inevitability of hermeneutics

To raise the question of hermeneutics is to raise the question of *who* it is that is undertaking the task of interpretation, and *why*. To be sure, communities of interpreters approach the Bible with diverse ideological interests. Is it possible, however, to approach the text with the interest of *understanding* it? This is the ultimate aim of biblical theology, and of interpretation in general: to receive the text on its own terms, not in terms of some method or scheme determined in advance. If one did have such an interest – of understanding the biblical text on its own terms – would it be primarily *historical* rather than *theological*? The suggestion of the present article is that having a theological interest, far from being arbitrary, is rather required if one is to do justice to the nature of the Bible itself, taken not only as a collection of human speech acts but also as a unified divine canonical act.

It is commonplace to be asked to choose between rival interpretative interests: ‘I belong to Childs’; ‘I belong to Eichrodt’; ‘I belong to Ladd’. Or again: ‘I belong to feminism’; ‘I belong to liberalism’; ‘I belong to

evangelicalism'. Faced with such diversity, the postmodern reflex is to tolerate them all; to each exegete his or her own hermeneutics. In the face of such interpretative plurality, it is important to ensure that one's interpretative interest corresponds to the communicative intent of the text. Otherwise interpreters will describe not the theology of the text but only their own agendas and ideologies.

The biblical texts themselves have a theological interest, an interest in mediating the knowledge of God. To undertake theological exegesis is not a matter of arbitrarily deciding to read theologically rather than historically, but rather of specifying and respecting the appropriate context for 'thick' description. To do biblical theology is to take a multi-level, integrative approach to the text as a complex communicative act involving words, events, texts and Testaments.

Hermeneutics is inevitable, not because the biblical texts are unclear but because the aims and interests of the interpreter often are. One's readings, even the purported objective historical descriptions, are always governed by certain assumptions: about the kind of text one is reading, about the extent of its coherence or unity, about its relationship to other texts, about whether it is a human word only or also the word of God. If neither exegesis nor pure historical description without presuppositions is possible, then it is important to approach the biblical text with the right preliminary assumptions. It is important to develop a properly *theological* hermeneutic.

Biblical theology as theological interpretation

Christopher Seitz and Francis Watson, OT and NT theologians respectively, agree that the real issue behind the decision to read the Bible canonically is a theological one. For Seitz, it is a question concerning how confident modern liberal biblical critics are that the Scriptures of the OT and NT 'have the power to witness to divine reality' (C. Seitz, *Word without End*, p. 108). For Watson, it is a matter of the Christian conviction that the truth of Jesus Christ is textually mediated through both Testaments, 'according to the Scriptures'. No other justification is adequate for reading the OT and NT together than the theological conviction that these texts mediate the truth of the one God.

As we have seen, attempts to offer pure

historical descriptions of the biblical texts in fact yield only thin descriptions with respect to theology. If one construes the 'it' of 'what it meant' too narrowly, one gets no further than non-theological exegesis. To limit biblical theology to historical description is to abandon the attempt to read the Bible as theologically normative for the church and to reject the notion of divine inspiration and divine authorship, and thus to refuse to read the Bible as the word of God. It is impossible to read the Hebrew Scriptures as OT without taking a stand on the relation between the two Testaments, a stand that ultimately follows from one's view of God and Jesus Christ: 'Where theological concerns are marginalized, the two Testaments fall apart almost automatically' (Watson, *Text and Truth*, p. 5). In short, neither exegesis nor biblical theology is possible apart from explicitly theological presuppositions, assumptions about the nature and identity of God. The academy has its assumptions too, but they are all too often either a-theological or based on radical revisions of Christian orthodoxy. Thanks to the postmodern critiques of objectivism, however, Christians need no longer fear the rhetoric of the academy which says that only its assumptions are rational ones.

As presented here, biblical theology is that approach which describes the 'word views' and literary shapes of the Bible, and especially that 'thick' description of the canon as a divine communicative act. Biblical theology is a description of the biblical texts on levels that display their theological significance. Accordingly, biblical theology is nothing less than a theological hermeneutic: an interpretative approach to the Bible informed by Christian doctrine. The biblical theologian reads for the theological message communicated by the texts taken individually and as a whole collection.

'Biblical theology is a theological, hermeneutical, and exegetical discipline, and its hermeneutical and exegetical dimensions are placed at the disposal of its overriding theological concern' (Watson, *Text and Truth*, p. vii). The theology of the texts is mediated through various kinds and levels of communicative action, all of which need to be acknowledged and described. Theological exegesis aims at recovering an intention that is historical, embodied in literary forms, and

which ultimately aims (*i.e.* at the canonical level) at testifying to Jesus Christ.

Rather than take a stand with either the exegete or the systematician exclusively, then, the biblical theologian seeks instead to foster an interdisciplinary approach to biblical interpretation which aims at textually mediated theological truth. Biblical theology is nothing less than a theological hermeneutic, a *regula legeri* (a rule of reading). As such, biblical theology is not merely a matter of repackaging the conceptual content of the Scriptures, but a way of having one's heart, mind, and imagination alike schooled in the ways of seeing and experiencing the world according to the many literary forms and the one canon, which together constitute the word of God written.

See also: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY; UNITY AND DIVERSITY OF SCRIPTURE; RELATIONSHIP OF OLD TESTAMENT AND NEW TESTAMENT.

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The Unity and Diversity of Scripture

Introduction

Throughout most of the history of the church, the unity of *Scripture has been assumed and its diversity taken less seriously. Apparent contradictions or tensions between one part of Scripture and another have been harmonized. Typology has been seen as a key to understanding the NT use of the OT. Difficult

passages have been allegorized, and the principle of the *regula fidei* ('the rule of faith') has led to clearer texts being used to interpret more opaque ones. Since the Enlightenment, however, much of this has changed. A salutary emphasis on biblical theology – hearing the message of each book and each author in its own terms – has developed, but in consequence the unity of the Bible has often been