

Making the Shift to Theological Interpretation of Scripture

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Introduction

When first asked to contribute an essay to this issue of the *ATR* on theological interpretation of scripture, I began by reflecting upon some of the things that first drew my attention to the topic nearly a decade ago. Among other things, I had a growing concern that some of the more popularized versions of critical biblical scholarship had replaced the theological interpretation of scripture. In particular, views about first-century historical contexts began taking precedence in sermons and study groups over against theological concerns that have been central to Christian identity for centuries. Matters of the saving work of Christ, for example, were being presented in a much different form than those depicted in the fourfold Gospel accounts of Jesus of Nazareth.¹

At that time, I was fortunate to come across what was perhaps the most influential book for me at the time, Stephen E. Fowl's *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation*.² Reflecting similar concerns to my own, Fowl articulates a reemerging trend among biblical scholars and theologians whose aim is to prioritize theological concerns over against the historical critical paradigm of modern

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¹ Hans W. Frei, "The Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," in George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, ed., *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1993), 45–93. This essay by Frei is a straightforward account of his developing conviction that the Gospel narratives of Jesus represent his truest identity and should thus take precedence over historical reconstructions.

² Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

biblical studies. Moreover, he nicely traces several strands of his developing views about the theological interpretation of scripture, orienting readers to his understanding of it, and to his views in relation to what others were adding to the discussion about the role of scripture within the life of the church.³

The most important feature of *Engaging Scripture*, however, is the posture that Fowl proposes: as Christians come together to read and embody their interpretation of scripture, it is primarily for the sake of deeper communion with God, one another, and the world.⁴ This, it seems to me, orients readers toward the centrality of the Gospel depictions of Jesus of Nazareth and away from the dominant stream of modern biblical studies.⁵ Additionally, the posture reminds Christians of the important task of evaluating their views about God as they are formed in worship, liturgy, prayer, and scriptural interpretation. In sum, theological interpretation of scripture returns Christians to deeper reflection on first-order practices of the Christian faith, and subsequently brings theology home to the church, where interpreting scripture theologically was never fully lost, though often forgotten.⁶

Fortunately, as this article shows, there are presently numerous conversations taking place about the importance of the role of scripture and its interpretation for the life of the church. In light of these discussions it is certainly possible to generate healthy conversations about the relationship between church and academy, clergy and laypersons, and among fellow Christians. Further, it is important for those of us who engage in regular conversations about theological interpretation to approach scriptural interpretation with an emphasis on unifying over against divisive reading of scripture, even though much of Christian history shows that division occurs over differing

³ Ephraim Radner, *Time and Word: Figural Interpretation of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2016), 7–8. Radner reflects on his time as a divinity student at Yale and later as a doctoral candidate when Brevard Childs, George Lindbeck, and Hans Frei were having conversations about precritical interpretation.

⁴ The clause “deeper communion with God and one another” is found throughout Fowl’s extensive work on theological interpretation, and is one I have picked up on through conversations with him about the church and its relationship to scripture.

⁵ A. K. M. Adam, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology: Modern Problems and Prospects* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1995). Adam addresses several dominant modern problems with New Testament theology in particular.

⁶ Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas, eds., *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2016), 1–3.

interpretations of and approaches to scripture. Therefore, conversations about the theological interpretation of scripture should build up the body of Christ and its adherents should seek to offer a variety of avenues for discussing theology and its relationship to the interpretation of scripture.

With all that in mind, this essay unfolds in the following manner. In the first section I discuss the nature of theological interpretation in order to address the concerns and reluctance of many about joining theology and scriptural interpretation. In the following section I will identify one event during which the emerging German university system separated the historical-critical study from pastoral and theological concerns, and then offer one example of the influence this eighteenth century historical shift holds on prominent biblical scholars. Finally, prior to closing out the article it is perhaps most helpful to make note of several resources that are now available for having healthy conversations about theology, its role in scriptural interpretation, and in guiding Christians through such conversations. On the whole, my prayer is that this article will do the same.

The Nature of Theological Interpretation

Over the last decade or so, I have been privileged to walk with many Christians through various pastoral situations within the context of two very distinct communities of faith. The first was a non-denominational community where thousands, including myself for a time, came to heal from the various ways we had become disillusioned with the church. More than half of us were raised in either Roman Catholic or Christian Reformed churches. Often these were third- or fourth-generation Christians. The other half was made up of former Baptists, nondenominationalists, and several other small denominational churches, or of those who had never regularly attended church at all. One of the unique features of this community was its leaders' willingness to regularly share their own skepticisms about theology, scripture, its interpretation, and the role of the church in the world. In this environment I learned that Christians, and Jewish people before them, had for thousands of years struggled together with scripture and one another in order to become more faithful to their God and each other. Asking questions, debating and discussing with one another, were treated as essential elements of Christianity rather than failures of faith.

Over the course of the next several years my family's ecclesial home became the Episcopal Church. There I eventually entered a discernment process for ordination to the priesthood. Prior to that, I was asked to join a commission for congregational development that sought to motivate Christians toward missional objectives.⁷ Often this meant bringing Christians from around the diocese into shared times of prayer, worship, conversation, and reflection upon scripture. What soon became clear as I observed these conversations was that scripture and their understanding of it became a guiding force behind the renewed emphasis on mission. Whatever the project, scripture came to guide participants beyond the social initiative toward a realization that their action in the world brought them into greater communion with one another and God.

Yet the narrative circulating among many North American Christian leaders is quite the opposite. They see theology and serious engagement with scripture as abstract and irrelevant to the life of the church; as a result, churches relegate scriptural and theological concerns to academic theology. This is due at least in part to various misconceptions about the role of theology and its relationship to scriptural interpretation in the life of the church. It is therefore necessary to discuss some of the misconceptions as well as the unfortunate lack of scriptural and theological interest among the church's leaders.

Fortunately, there are several Anglican theologians to whom one might turn in order to resist this pattern. For example, the following comes from Ellen Charry, whose *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* is written in a similar posture to that of Fowl's noted above. She says,

The beauty of life with God for the people of God will require attending to the practice of life with God. What is called for is not only expanding our grasp of what doctrine does but also attending to how Christians can best utilize it. Whatever the intellectual adjustments that must be made in order to do so, the reclamation of the pastoral functions of doctrine will fail unless theology is reconnected to devotional

⁷ Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2015).

life. For theology is not just an intellectual art; it cultivates the skill of living well.⁸

Charry continues her assessment with a concern that “the assumption of academic theology has often been that doctrine is the theory of Christian belief.”⁹ Enter those discussions taking place about the theological interpretation of scripture where theology is more accurately described as a second-order discipline reflecting on first-order Christian practices, such as worship, prayer, forgiveness, and Eucharist.¹⁰

In addition, consider the late John Webster’s inaugural lecture as the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford. Webster considers the approach to theology of Rowan Williams, whose theology, he argues, is best described as “above all, *prayerful*.”¹¹ Further, in the introduction to a collection of essays, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, Webster describes his personal views on the nature and importance of theology: it is “that delightful activity in which the church praises God by ordering its thinking toward the gospel of Christ.”¹²

Other theologians are interested in reinvigorating scripture’s place in theological reasoning. For example, Kevin Vanhoozer attends to concerns about theological interpretation of scripture in his article introducing the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation for the Bible*, “What Is Theological Interpretation?” Vanhoozer reminds us that “theological interpretation is not an imposition of a theological system or confessional grid onto the biblical text.”¹³ He then further clarifies this by noting that the interpreting of scripture theologically is not a “return to a time when one’s interpretation was largely dominated by one’s particular confessional theology (e.g. Lutheran, Baptist, Roman

⁸ Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹ Charry, *Renewing*, 239–240.

¹⁰ Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹¹ John Webster, “Theological Theology,” in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 11.

¹² John Webster, “Introduction” in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2001), 1.

¹³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What Is Theological Interpretation?” in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 19–25, at 19.

Catholic, et al.).¹⁴ Rather, leading to “ecumenical consensus,”¹⁵ theological interpretation of the Bible begins “as a unity and as narrative testimony to the identities and actions of God and of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶ Instead of, therefore, it creating dividing lines between Christians, Vanhoozer claims that the theological interpretation of scripture is jointly the responsibility of the people of God, and is governed by an interest to engage and develop a practice of *theological criticism*, which broadly includes a number of ecclesial concerns and academic interests.¹⁷

In the broader biblical studies discipline, however, theology and theological interpretation of scripture is often kept at arm’s length. Instead, the reconstruction of historical events and social worldviews guide the interpreter of scripture. One way I have come to describe such models is to say that theology is made subservient to history. In the following section, the distinction between theology and biblical studies becomes a standardized feature of academic biblical scholarship. To this day, much of biblical scholarship remains under the influence of these distinctions. It will be helpful, then, to shed some light upon when the distinction came to prominence, and its lasting influence upon biblical scholars.

Biblical Studies

Academic biblical scholars primarily seek to uncover the context in which various biblical texts *might* have been written. This focus often overpowers and disables attempts to interpret scripture theologically. This emphasis on a unique academic discipline known as biblical studies came to prominence in the German university system throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as scholars shifted biblical studies toward becoming a historical discipline.¹⁸ The rise of critical biblical scholarship ultimately led to scripture’s demise,

¹⁴ Vanhoozer, “What Is Theological Interpretation?,” 19.

¹⁵ Vanhoozer, “What Is Theological Interpretation?,” 19.

¹⁶ Vanhoozer, “What Is Theological Interpretation?,” 19.

¹⁷ Vanhoozer, “What Is Theological Interpretation?,” 21–23.

¹⁸ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). The author argues that, for a large part of its history, nearly 1700 years, the church read scripture with a consensus. One might then say the church would not have recognized a separation between theology and biblical studies.

as shown in *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*,¹⁹ Michael Legaspi's excellent historical treatment of the period.

One of the more important points in history that helped to shape the modern academic system as it is known today is the inaugural address given in 1787 by Johann Gabler at the University of Altdorf in Germany, who issued a call for making a clearer distinction between the disciplines. In his address, titled "On the Correct Distinction between Dogmatic and Biblical Theology and the Right Definition of Their Goals,"²⁰ Gabler insists on the one hand that biblical theology should be treated primarily as a historical discipline, where the investigation of the beliefs and thoughts of the biblical authors dominate the interpretive agenda. The historically reconstructed context thus becomes the most important feature discussed among biblical scholars. On the other hand, dogmatic theology, which in modern parlance categorizes beliefs around philosophical assumptions, for Gabler will only be constructed after the proper historical investigation is complete, or at least taken as far as possible given the relevant evidence. Therefore, each of the disciplines would have its own task and the latter would proceed only after the proper historical reconstruction of the first.

In graduate studies, I sat through seminars in New Testament theology, modern hermeneutics, and the doctrine of scripture. Mentors and advisors would point out on a regular basis that theological interpretation of scripture, and the role of God's economy of grace in it, were continually made to be the servant of historical reconstruction of the first century, instead of theology guiding the interpretation of scripture. Whether it was through critical literary or sociological disciplines, any clarity that was gained through biblical scholarship became the primary material for instructing church leaders how best to interpret scripture. In this setting, some of my concerns about historical reconstruction and its theological relationship with the church led to even greater concerns about the pastoral practices of preaching

¹⁹ Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²⁰ J. P. Gabler, "On the Proper Distinction between Biblical Theology and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objective and the Specific Objective of Each," in John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, trans., "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980): 134.

and pastoral care, as they were being influenced by biblical scholarship. One contemporary example will have to suffice.

I will admit that it was originally refreshing to learn how historical knowledge of first-century Judaism, for example, could subvert the fundamentalist upbringing of one's youth. For myself and several friends, Christianity seemingly began to make historical sense. This was especially true for those of us discussing the historical-critical approach of N. T. Wright, who is perhaps the most prominent figure who appropriates historical reconstruction for apologetic aims.²¹ Unlike earlier critical scholarship that calls the scriptural narrative into question, Wright correlates historical reconstruction of social worldviews with scriptural narrative. Through a correlative method he calls critical realism, Wright makes scripture one of the many sources biblical scholars might use for reconstructing history.²² Here a critical shift takes place in Wright's methodology. Through his critical reflection on historical events, based primarily upon the greatest amount of empirical evidence available at the time, he provides a social context in which to fit the scriptural narrative. That is, Wright seems concerned first with the historically reconstructed narrative or the social worldview and the scriptural narrative only secondarily, or as another source for reconstruction. By and large, in contrast, theological interpretation will contend that the primary context for scripture should be an ecclesial one, and within the ecclesial context, the church is part of the ongoing narrative embodied by those who are formed by the scriptural witness.

I have already noted a variety of material about the theological interpretation of scripture in this article. However, it is important to mention some of the resources that are helping Christians to consider their ecclesial and theological context in the following section.

Several Resources

Although commentaries are still being written and published in the traditional academic manner, where uncovering matters of historical reliability and authorial intent remain central, a number of

²¹ Hans W. Frei argues that such an emphasis on history reconfigures the scriptural narrative. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974).

²² See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1992), 1–143.

important figures from within the theological disciplines are showing how their own shifts of priority are leading them toward theological concerns. Many of these figures have completed or are preparing to complete their theological commentary in the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible,²³ which specifically asks theologians to interpret scripture in light of the creedal church. Additionally, there are commentary series emerging from a variety of other publishers. Eerdmans is set to examine scripture theologically through The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary²⁴ and its counterpart the The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary.²⁵ Westminster John Knox, even in its strongly historical series The New Testament Library, has recently published scholars, with more to come, who have particular interests in bringing the discipline of academic theology and biblical studies into meaningful dialogue.²⁶

For those interested in seeing how scholars are describing the recent interest in the theological interpretation of scripture, Daniel J. Treier's *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* comes readily to mind. Stephen Fowl's Cascade Companion *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*²⁷ welcomes new conversation partners into the discussion. The *Manifesto of Theological Interpretation* enlists an ecumenical partnership of scholars from both Reformed and Roman Catholic backgrounds to address a variety of concerns related to the nature of theological interpretation. Furthermore, scholars are finding in precritical interpretation differing approaches to reading scripture. This includes *Scriptural Interpretation: A Theological Appraisal*²⁸ by Darren Sarisky, as well as his forthcoming edited collection titled *Theologies of Retrieval: An*

²³ R. R. Reno, ed., *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2005–2017).

²⁴ Stephen E. Fowl and Robert W. Wall, eds., *The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005–2017).

²⁵ Gordon McConville and Craig Bartholomew, eds., *The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008–2017).

²⁶ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2015) and Stephen E. Fowl, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

²⁷ Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2009) and Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008).

²⁸ Darren Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation: A Theological Exploration* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

Exploration and Appraisal,²⁹ which seeks to include confessional approaches, evaluate the influence of certain twentieth-century figures, as well as discuss theological sources and major doctrines. It concludes with two critical appraisals. Finally, in addition to *Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal*,³⁰ Angus Paddison has recently collated several essays from important theologians conversing about how scripture is often at risk of being eclipsed by the academic separation of various theological disciplines.³¹

Conclusion

It was my aim in this article to address some personal and pastoral concerns about the influence of modern biblical scholarship on the church's practice of scriptural interpretation and to clarify some aspects of the nature of theological interpretation of scripture by attending to some of the scholarly reluctance about joining theology and scriptural interpretation. In light of the shift that took place in theology and biblical studies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I offered one example of a more recent and popular biblical scholar whose primary goal is to reconstruct the social historical worldview in which the texts of scripture might have been written—N. T. Wright. In search of fresh exegetical insight, Wright builds his reconstruction of the scriptural worldview on the greatest amount of empirical evidence, offering up a theory of knowledge known as critical realism to keep any theological interests at bay. Finally, in order to show that interpreting scripture theologically is not principally an academic discipline nor an interpretive method,³² I offered some examples of projects that seek to guide Christians through healthy conversations about the indisputable renewed interest in the theological interpretation of scripture.

²⁹ Darren Sarisky, *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal* (London: T&T Clark, forthcoming).

³⁰ Angus Paddison, *Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

³¹ Angus Paddison, ed., *Theologians on Scripture* (London: T&T Clark, 2016).

³² Radner, *Time and Word*, 7–8.