Introduction

All responsible readers of Scripture attend closely to the words on the page, learning what they can about the text's vocabulary and grammar; they also look into the historical background of biblical books in order to illuminate their meaning. "In this sense interpreting a biblical text is no special and exceptional hermeneutical situation."[1] The present work considers whether the many readers of the Bible who have a Christian theological commitment read differently for this very reason. Does such allegiance affect the interpretation that they give to texts? If so, what difference does belief make? How does faith relate to studying a text's vocabulary, grammar, and historical background? Christians, as such, come to the text with a web of theological convictions about the nature of God and his revelatory activity as well as about Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, and a great many other things. The claim at the heart of this work is that a reader's faith in such matters does indeed (properly) alter the way in which she reasons exegetically. This means that the doctrine of God, together with the whole package of related beliefs about how God reveals himself and so on, is not simply dormant in interpretation. Within biblical interpretation, the doctrine of God should not hold "a rather isolated position" in an interpreter's outlook on reading; once the topic is raised, it should not be the case that the subject "is never brought up again"; it ought not be that "even after it has been made known to us, it

[1] Hans Georg Gadamer, "Religious and Poetical Speaking," in *Myth, Symbol, and Reality*, ed. Alan M. Olson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 96.

remains, *as a reality*, locked up within itself," as Karl Rahner says with reference to how the Trinity is irrelevant to the outlook of many Christians.[2] Instead, God actually matters.

How so? This book considers the place of commitment within interpretation, proposing an account of theological interpretation of Scripture from the vantage point of systematic theology. Systematics explores not simply the content of Christian beliefs, but the logical interconnection between different articles of belief. That is, it traces out the links between discrete theological loci, attending to each item of belief as if it were a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, one shaped such that it interlocks with other pieces to form a full picture.[3] In a limited sense, this book concerns itself with quite a wide range of convictions and how they impinge on reading, yet the book is, of course, by no means about everything. The interlocking topics that come into focus here, and are the book's main concern, are the reader of Scripture, the text itself, and the practice of interpretation – as all three are seen in light of God. When the reader is understood theologically, the interpreter has the capacity to exercise faith in the God who discloses himself through the text of the Bible. The correlative view of Scripture is that it consists of a set of signs directing the reader's attention to its subject matter, the triune God. Reading with commitment generates a trajectory or an aim for interpretation, within the context of which it makes sense to consider what reading strategies are most fitting to employ. This purpose is to ascertain what the text signifies about divine reality and how this reality enfolds readers themselves. That interpretation has this aim or purpose is not to comment at all on what certain readers *can* or *cannot* do; rather, it

[2] Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (London: Burns & Oates, 1970), 14.

[3] See A. N. Williams's compelling point that theology is not systematic only when it is found in a genre of work that treats Christian doctrine comprehensively locus by locus, but whenever it traces out the logical interrelationship between doctrines: *The Architecture of Theology: Structure, System, and Ratio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1–4.

pertains to what interpreters with theological commitment *should* or *must* do. There is a parallel here with the way that material commitments generate styles of writing: for example, of course anyone can write so as to unsettle the status quo or challenge the establishment, but there is a certain necessity to do so for those committed to liberation theologies. Likewise, anyone can read with the aim of engaging with what the text says about God. However, those committed to the views of the reader and the text on which this book concentrates should, as a matter of course, interpret the Bible with this aim in view.[4]

This work thus explores the consequences for reading of believers believing their own beliefs and thinking their own thoughts about interpretation. The book foregrounds theological thinking, rather than forcing it to remain forever only in the background; it aims to put theological ideas to work such that they are active at the most important points in the account of reading. The project assumes a doctrine of the Trinity right from the beginning, working *from* it rather than trying to get *to* it by establishing its legitimacy. It starts from a doctrine of God in the sense that it frames the notions of the reader and the text in relation to God: the reader is one who expresses faith in the triune God who discloses himself through the text, which is itself a pointer to divine reality. An account of these created realities is thus incomplete without reference to God: this makes the

[4] The main aim of this text is to consider such commitments as affirmations of faith that individuals or communities make more or less consciously. I note a few times in the text, however, that differentiating cleanly between this sense of commitment and a reader simply having Christianity as their cultural or intellectual language is not particularly easy. In this connection, see the comments of Hans Georg Gadamer, "Kant and the Question of God," in *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 4. This project is not heavily invested in any such differentiation, so I do not pursue this issue extensively. The book is more focused on the content of theological commitment and the work that it does than precisely how it is acquired.

operative view of the reader and text specifically Christian rather than secular in its orientation. This work nowhere seeks to justify or provide warrant for the doctrine of God to which its exposition of the reader and the text is intrinsically related, and this is for two reasons. Partly, it is because no book, including this one, is about its own assumptions. And partly, this is impossible even in principle – at least if justifying a Christian doctrine of God means generating an argument for subscribing to it that appeals to something else that itself carries more weight or is more ultimate than God himself. Nothing can have that status. Since it starts with a doctrine of God, the whole book depends on an assumption for which no argument is ever presented, though that is as it must be. The only question then is about the precise role of language about God, and this introductory chapter dwells at length on that query.

What this book does is to suggest that theological reading be conceived differently than it usually is, as an interpretive response that inevitably results from thinking theologically about the reader and the text, thus challenging readers to reconsider their self-conception, their view of Scripture, and how both impinge on interpretation. By outlining a whole account starting from a theological ontology, this book proposes that reality itself sets the conditions for interpretation and impels the reader to proceed in a certain way. The book does not ask the entire Christian tradition to reconstitute itself around a set of novel interpretive methods that are being proposed here for the first time. It is necessary to face the critique that committed reading is not genuinely *reading*. Perhaps, as the objection goes, the reader's beliefs corrupt the effort to understand, such that the degree to which commitment is present is the extent to which an engagement with a text should be considered an exercise in self-assertion as opposed to listening. After developing the positive proposal, this work entertains and responds to this question. The book as a whole asks what entailments follow, not from readers identifying in a facile way the text being read with

theological views they hold, but from belief functioning as a substructure that deeply shapes the course of interpretation.[5]

Varieties of Theological Interpretation

This work frames the above issue against the backdrop of the current discussion of theological interpretation of Scripture, as well as the much longer history of interpretation in which it is a recent episode. The book makes a contribution to or an intervention in the lively current debate about theological reading of Scripture, and it comes into dialogue with major participants in this discussion. As the ongoing discussion forms the background of the present work, it is worth surveying it at the outset as a way to set the stage for the positive proposal this book develops. The examples of theological reading from the debate canvassed immediately below count as instances of theological exegesis in a rough-and-ready sense that would be broadly recognized within scholarly discussion. The cases all have a special concern to focus biblical interpretation around an overriding interest in what the Bible says about God, that is, how the text has been, can be, and even perhaps should be read with special reference to him. My own more precise analysis of the meaning of theological reading will come in due course.

The current discussion includes a whole range of different approaches, which makes it misleading to describe the debate using terms such as *movement*; such language could easily suggest it is unified by strong methodological or substantive commitments. For

[5] As I have said above, I offer this work as a systematic theological account of theological reading of the Bible. It is not an effort in phenomenology in any strong sense, though the theological description of reader and text is given from the point of view of Christian belief. In that way, it is thus, unavoidably, a book about the realities involved in reading as they appear within a certain perspective. Later in this chapter, in the section on the functions of theological discourse, I further distinguish my position on theological ontology from phenomenology.

instance, the glossary to a work considering how to marry theological and historical reading in a number of religious traditions defines theological exegesis as "a recent *movement* to recapture the theological relevance of Scripture for the church rather than focusing exclusively on historical-critical and other academic issues."[6] Perhaps this definition is trying, with the unfortunate word *movement*, to convey the intense level of energy surrounding the discussion of these issues.[7] Still, terms like *debate* or *discussion* are preferable because the phenomenon is so diffuse and varied. This brief explanation may also be misleading, were readers to construe it as claiming that the current discussion is *only* a recent phenomenon, one that does not connect to a long previous history of debate. At minimum, it is important to underline the variety of current thinking on this topic and even the conflict between genuinely different paradigms. It is possible to indicate some of the variety in the discussion with a brief mapping of key points of divergence within it and upon it.

First, theological reading can proceed in markedly different modes depending on the relative weight assigned to concepts and ideas that derive from within the Christian tradition vis-à-vis frameworks of thought drawn from the broader culture. For instance, Gordon Kaufman allows philosophical concepts and other contemporary modes of thought to have complete priority over the theological language which is the native tongue of the Christian church, such that the former displaces the latter whenever conflicts

[6] Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 200; cf. 12. Emphasis added.

[7] The discussion is especially vigorous in English-speaking theology. For a few examples of discussions in German, see a loose collection of essays concerned with the openness of the biblical text to various sorts of reception: Stephen Chapman, Christine Helmer, and Christof Landmesser, eds., *Biblischer Text und theologische Theoriebildung*, Biblisch-theologishche Studien (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2001); and the more doctrinally focused reflections from a Roman Catholic point of view: Adel Théodore Khoury and Ludwig Muth, eds., *Glauben durch Lesen? Für eine christliche Lesekultur*, Quaestiones Disputatae (Freiburg: Herder, 1990).

occur. For Kaufman, the Bible is a special text in that its representations of God have wielded an unparalleled influence over Western culture for many centuries. The Bible is the text par excellence for the quest to discover the sources for our culture's thinking about the divine. This gives theological questions an undeniable importance in the interpretation of the Bible. Yet can a modern reader actually believe the things that the Bible says about God? Kaufman boldly and forthrightly answers in the negative, "Talk of God's historical activity cannot be made intelligible so long as, and in the respects that, we appropriate our experience and attempt to conceive our world (both nature and history) without reference to him. Our customary modes of thought – scientific, historical, philosophical – make no reference to God or his activity and seemingly find no need to do so."[8] He continues: "For a world totally secular (i.e., grasped entirely in this-worldly terms), God is dead,"[9] which is to say that a modern thinker cannot believe in God as he has traditionally been conceived. There is thus a direct clash between the way God is portrayed within the biblical text, on the one hand, and the way that reality is understood by modern forms of knowledge, on the other. The proper conclusion to draw, given the priority of the latter over the former, is that God does not exist: belief (in any traditional form) becomes literally unbelievable. This volume takes theological commitment much more seriously, not ceding entirely to secular disciplines the fundamental task of depicting all of reality, but allowing theology to play a key part in conversations about what reality is like, with the result that other forms of knowledge may be reshaped in light of theology's influence. Kaufman's approach to biblical interpretation is admirably clear and deeply thoughtful, but his first principles differ from the ideas at the heart of this book.

[8] Gordon D. Kaufman, "What Shall We Do with the Bible?," *Interpretation* 25 (1971): 110–11.

[9] Kaufman, "What Shall We Do with the Bible?," 111.

David Tracy, by contrast, insists that both the Christian-specific content of Scripture and the conceptuality of the reader's culture have a significant place within the interpretation of the Bible. On his view, which displays a significant debt to general hermeneutical theory, the text makes a theological claim to truth that arrests the attention of the reader. At the same time, the reader also comes to the text with a certain understanding of the questions the text addresses, a set of views delimiting the possibilities for how he might construe what the Bible says. Both the subject matter of the text and the reader's prior commitments are constitutive elements of interpretation, and neither has a clear priority over the other, such that it can dominate the practice of reading. Interpretation thus takes the form of a conversation between text and reader, in which both partners can question the views of the other. For Tracy, the task of biblical interpretation involves establishing "*mutually critical correlations* between an interpretation of the Christian tradition and an interpretation of the contemporary situation,"[10] so that "neither text nor interpreter, but only the conversation between both can rule."[11] Readings of the Bible have to be both fitting to the text and intelligible to the reader and his culture because scriptural interpretation is an ongoing negotiation between these two poles.[12] While no theologian can demur from the truth that all theology is marked by the context in which it originated, this book is not based on an in-principle commitment to give so much relative weight to whatever ideas are current in one's context. The strategy behind this version of theological reading is to invest heavily in the resources theology provides and to draw in ad hoc ways on other disciplines.

A recent collection of essays called the *Art of Reading Scripture*, which is the work of a group of scholars and pastors called the

[10] Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 170. Emphasis added.
[11] Ibid., 172.
[12] Ibid., 175–76.

"Scripture Project," gives a more determinative role to theological conceptuality in its account of interpretation. The collection opens with a frequently discussed set of theses providing parameters for theological interpretation,[13] the first of which gives biblical interpretation a definite theocentric aim by stating that the subject matter of the Bible is God's creation, judgment, and salvation of the world.[14] Most of the essays in the volume are written by authors who think forthrightly on the basis of a Christian theological framework, without an a priori commitment to correlate their beliefs with the broader culture,[15] or to allow the thought forms from outside the tradition to trump and reconstitute it. Indeed, some of the contributors are quite sanguine about utilizing resources found in ancient tracts of the Christian tradition to train readers today in the practice of biblical interpretation. According to the seventh thesis, "The saints of the church provide guidance in how to interpret and perform Scripture."[16] The volume is animated by the conviction that today's interpreters have a great deal to learn from their forebears, and there is little anxious hand-wringing about whether thinking with the tradition about the topic of biblical interpretation remains possible in the

[13] The Scripture Project, "Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1–5. Lewis Ayres develops a tenth thesis in his "The Soul and the Reading of Scripture: A Note on Henri de Lubac," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61 (2008): 188–90. David F. Ford works a set of variations on all of the theses and contributes his own tenth principle in *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 79–89.

[14] Scripture Project, "Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture," 1.

[15] The collection is by no means monolithic, however. For instance, William Stacy Johnson expounds some key postmodern themes – opposition to foundationalism, skepticism toward metanarratives, and an orientation toward the other – and Christian doctrinal teachings with a view toward bring the two into harmony with each other. See his "Reading the Scriptures Faithfully in a Postmodern Age," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 109–24.

[16] Scripture Project, "Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture," 4.

contemporary world. The authors contributing to this volume write in conversation with various "others" from outside of the church (see thesis eight[17]), yet their contribution is framed as a helpful auxiliary, rather than as an utterly crucial resource for establishing the aim of interpretation or for determining which reading strategies are appropriate.

As this example and the previous two show, contemporary culture may subordinate itself to specifically Christian testimony (Scripture Project), or today's milieu may have a clear priority over biblical testimony (Kaufman), or the two can be brought together in an interplay where neither partner has a decided precedence over the other (Tracy). It will become clear as the introduction unfolds that the present work is closest in ethos to that of the Scripture Project, because of the role it affords theological language and because of the way its constructive proposal builds on past tracts of the Christian tradition.

The above authors are all examples of theological readers from a single community of faith, the Christian tradition, despite their divergent views on how the tradition should relate to the broader culture. A second distinction, then, which will provide further orientation to the current discussion, is between intrafaith and interfaith reading. There are now significant works that have come out of the discussion of Scriptural Reasoning, an interfaith venture in which Christians, Jews, and Muslims read and debate the implications of each other's scriptures. Scriptural Reasoning does not presume that distinct religious traditions – here the three major traditions that look back to Abraham as a leading figure – share a great deal of common ground below the surface of putative disagreements. Instead, Scriptural Reasoning revolves around an exploration and articulation of abiding differences, which are preserved in the respective scriptures of each tradition and in the

[17] Ibid., 4–5.