Reading the Bible Theologically

Theological interpretation of the Bible is one of the most significant debates within theology today. Yet what exactly is theological reading? Darren Sarisky proposes that it requires identification of the reader via a theological anthropology, an understanding of the text as a collection of signs, and reading the text with a view toward engaging with what it says of transcendence. Accounts of theological reading do not often give explicit focus to the place of the reader, but this work seeks to redress this neglect. Sarisky examines Augustine's approach to the Bible and how his theological insights into the reader and the text generate an aim for interpretation, which is fulfilled by fitting reading strategies. He also engages with Spinoza, showing that theological exegesis contrasts not with approaches that take history seriously, but with naturalistic approaches to reading.

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For David Ford and the late John Webster,
for whose guidance, encouragement,
and inspiring examples I will be forever grateful.
By the time I finished this book
David had retired and John had died,
but I could not have written it without both of them.

Contents

Preface

I was guided by two convictions when I began the research that stands behind this book about theological exegesis. The first conviction holds firm, while the other also remains with me, though in a qualified form. The belief that remains with me is that in the current discussion it is often quite unclear what *theological interpretation* signifies, even as its merits, demerits, history, and promise are all the subject of vigorous debate. As W. T. Dickens has recently and rightly said, "The term theological interpretation needs some explanation."[1] This book aims to explicate what theological reading entails with a view toward clarifying the issues at stake.

I also set out with the intuition that the main ideas underlying the current discussion of theological reading marked out a territory in which interesting and valuable work might be done.[2] From my point of view now, this still seems true, but with a caveat, namely that some of the principles animating aspects of the discussion need to be brought to light and critically examined.[3] A key issue needing

[1] W. T. Dickens, "The Uses of the Bible in Theology," in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. John Riches, Vol. 4: From 1750 to the Present (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 184.

[2] This is despite there being quite a variety of ideas in the debate, and in spite of the unfortunate reality that recently published theological commentaries are only sometimes compelling. For critique of both the commentaries themselves and the associated literature, see Mark W. Elliot, *The Heart of Biblical Theology: Providence Experienced* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 3–36.

[3] I thus do not entirely agree with Stephen E. Fowl when he says, "As a relatively recent arrival on the scholarly scene, there was a period of time when theological interpreters

reconsideration is the very understandings of theology that many in the discussion of theological exegesis are presupposing. Discussion about theological interpretation can advance by giving close attention to what theology is and what tasks it may properly perform within an account of interpretation. In this connection, John Webster is right to insist that it is crucial to attend to the way that debates about the Bible and its interpretation are framed and to give close examination to some of the assumptions that are most deeply embedded within them, all the while allowing oneself freedom to question the adequacy of the terms by which debates are conducted.[4] I intend to pursue such questions here. I consider the issues that the current ferment raises by setting the discussion in the larger context of the history of biblical interpretation and hermeneutical reflection, thus decentering the present discussion and offering new insights to it.[5]

needed to engage in a period of self-definition. A part of this self-definition included a good deal of criticism of other more established interpretive methods, as well as rigorous marking of disciplinary boundaries. It is my view that such a period is now over." See "Editor's Notes" *Anglican Theological Review* 99 (2017): 645. Fowl makes it clear that he does not see it as *entirely* out of place now to continue to reflect on what theological interpretation is, for he also says "the boundaries of theological interpretation should be contestable, flexible, and porous" ("Editor's Notes," 645). Yet his point seems to be that the *main* time during which it was necessary to consider fundamental questions of self-definition has passed. I concur that part of what makes necessary a discussion of the nature of theological reading is ensuring that there is institutional space in which it can be pursued, and it is good that there have been positive developments recently here – thanks in part to the efforts of Fowl himself. However, a major working assumption of this book is that further discussion of what theological reading is becomes justified if additional light can be shed on its nature.

[4] John Webster, "Biblical Reasoning," *Anglican Theological Review* 90 (2008): 734. The way this project is set up owes something to the suggestive remarks about the nature of theological reading in John Webster, "One Who Is Son: Theological Reflections on the Exordium to the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 69–70.

[5] I draw the term *decentering* from Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past?: The Quest for the Historical Church* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2005), 110.

This book is distinctive in that it is (at the time of writing this preface) the first monograph to deal with theological reading against the background of the current discussion. More importantly, the substance of my argument is distinctive: I argue that understanding theological reading requires coming to grips with the deep difference it makes for biblical interpretation to be based on a theological construal of reality itself. If one understands existing things, and especially the realities involved most directly in reading – the reader and the text above all else – in the light of their relation to God, rather than eliminating theological description in order to think from an exclusively immanent point of view, then certain entailments follow as a matter of course. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor rightly says: "Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives."[6] I contend that the direction reading takes is a consequence of the reader's beliefs about God (or denial of God's existence): one's stance here carries implications for the aim of interpretation as well as for the interpretive strategies that seek to fulfill that goal. Theological exegesis is an interpretive response to the Bible that is the product of construing the reading subject and the object to be read in connection with God. A crucial aim of this book is to argue that there are such entailments, and therefore that the doctrinal perspective on the reader and text is not simply pious language invoked at the outset of thinking about interpretation, but a way of understanding the reading subject and the interpreted object that has substantial hermeneutical implications.

The case I make in this book should be of interest to anyone wanting to think about theological reading, whether or not such readers think of themselves as part of the Christian tradition. Offering a proleptic summary of the argument in the form of three bare-bones propositions will assist in explaining how this is so. I contend, first, that the reader is one who responds to the text's

[6] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

mediation of divine self-disclosure in faith; second, that the text of the Bible constitutes a set of signs pointing beyond itself to the God who opens the eyes of the interpreting subject; and third, *because* of the prior two points, the text should be read with reference to God. Quite a bit more than this needs to be said, and is in fact said, in the following pages to unpack and defend each of the three propositions that form the core of the constructive argument; this bald summary will not accomplish a great deal by itself. Yet what I intend for this summary to do is simply to indicate something crucial about the *form* of the overall argument. In the constructive chapters of this work, I argue for both of the first two propositions, and I seek to demonstrate that norms for reading do indeed follow from these ontological affirmations. One reading audience, then, is those who themselves have a faith commitment matching up to the initial two affirmations, or at least something very much like them. Such readers will be engaged by the argument I am making because they can identify with its starting points: they see them as true or at least verisimilitudinous, for they operate within the same tradition of thought. However, anyone can engage in what I am saying about the first two propositions with a view toward critically considering whether the interpretive entailments actually do follow from them. Anyone can assess whether the hermeneutical implications are genuinely implications. Readers seeking to evaluate the argument in this way will at least learn how one proposal for a Christian biblical hermeneutic works. Both of these audiences are important for me, just as in writing this book I have learned important things from those who are within my own tradition as well as those who are not.

This project is a sequel to my first monograph, *Scriptural Interpretation: A Theological Exploration*.[7] In this second book, I am building on some of the research into patristic and modern theology that I did for the first volume, and in both I make a

[7] Darren Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation: A Theological Account*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

determined effort to think theologically about reading the Bible. However, the two books deal with different focal questions, and this second one does more to develop its constructive position. In *Scriptural Interpretation*, the query is: What is happening, in theological terms, when the Bible is read in the church, and what presuppositions does this make about the text and the reader? In the present book, I ask what theological reading is and pursue questions of how reading strategies ought to fulfill the aim of interpretation.

To be sure, a great deal more remains to be done in the whole area of theological exegesis. Roughly thirty years ago, Joseph Ratzinger said that giving theology a greater role in exegesis, while not falling into a docetic view of the Bible – in his words, finding "a better synthesis between the historical and theological methods" – was the work of at least a generation.[8] My inclination is to say that this will surely take several generations. It is no easy task. I hope that the proposal here to anchor reading strategies in theological ontology represents one step forward along that path. There are some signs that theological interpretation is entering a new phase, in which it is less reactive to perceived opponents and increasingly able to speak constructively. Only time will tell what this will finally amount to, but this book is written with the confidence that, however much this or that venture appears to be a mere fad, the ultimate issues at stake are worthy of careful attention and deep consideration.

[8] Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today," in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus, The Encounter Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 5–6.

Acknowledgments

I started this project during a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Cambridge. I discussed the ideas around which the book revolves in a number of seminars there, and I extend my thanks to the members of these seminars for the intellectual stimulation they provided. Daniel Weiss and I co-led a seminar called "Scripture and Modernity," which was originally envisaged to take only a single term but which ended up expanding into three because of all the interest the topics generated among the participants, who came from an interesting mix of disciplinary and religious backgrounds. The rigor of Daniel's thinking was a continual and helpful challenge for me to clarify my take on the texts we were discussing. In addition, it was my privilege to organize a series of MPhil seminars with Janet Soskice around the theme of "Text and Interpretation." We designed the new seminars with a view to offering our postgraduates additional teaching, but I am sure that I gained as much from the sessions as any of the students, especially because of Janet's wise guidance of the discussions. Finally, exploring John's Gospel with David Ford and Simeon Zahl, in connection with David's excellent undergraduate course "Theological Interpretation of the Gospel of John," helped me see what theological exegesis can look like in practice. In the midst of writing a book oriented toward theory, it was good to engage in the practice of biblical interpretation. I am glad that I had this opportunity to work with David, and a valued postdoctoral colleague who has now become a lecturer, as David was preparing his commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the set of Bampton lectures he gave in Oxford. I have plans to write my

own theological commentary in due course, and I will be better able to do so because I have both seen good examples and settled in my own mind what the nature of the task is.[1]

I also benefited from being able to talk through relevant texts and themes with students who enrolled in courses I taught during a brief stint as a fixed-term lecturer in Systematic Theology at King's College London. I appreciate Susannah Ticciati entrusting me with her courses while she was away on leave. The seminars at King's, together with all of the seminars in Cambridge, provided me with indispensable opportunities to plough up the ground and to prepare for writing this book.

Many less formal but still quite instructive discussions in recent years have also helped my thoughts about Augustine and theological exegesis to mature. David Ford pointed out some of the major conceptual obstacles that would need to be overcome for this book to prove successful. James Andrews and Jonathan Teubner were helpful in orienting me to Augustine and Augustine scholarship at the outset of my research; as I progressed, they were both constant dialogue partners with whom I could mull over slowly developing ideas. I appreciate the conversations I have been able to have about how to think in light of Augustine with a few senior scholars: Michel Barnes, Ivor Davidson, Paul Griffiths, Andrew

[1] There is a parallel here with what David Tracy says about theology: "*The* problem of the contemporary systematic theologian, as has often been remarked, is actually to *do* systematic theology. The major attempt of this book has been to propose a model which may perform some initial spadework for that larger enterprise and to interpret certain familiar instances of contemporary theologizing in what one hopes is the clarifying light of the model proposed." See *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 238. As with theology, so with theological interpretation of the Bible: what is offered here is a formal account or a prolegomenon, which can serve the practice of theological reading by clarifying the nature of the endeavor. With Robert Morgan and John Barton, who speak with reference to theological interpretation of Scripture as they see it, I thus say, "The aim of this book is to clarify the task, not actually to perform it." See their *Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 274.

Louth, and Charles Mathewes. Karla Pollmann graciously sent me a scan of one of her essays that was proving terribly difficult to track down. Though we did not discuss Augustine, but rather other aspects of biblical exegesis and the history of reception, Markus Bockmuehl, Clayton Croy, Nathan Eubank, Joel Rasmussen, Ross Wagner, Kevin Vanhoozer, and N. T. Wright have all been illuminating interlocutors for me.

I owe a debt of gratitude to all of those who heard me present pilot papers at conferences and at university seminars, and who spurred me to hone my ideas before setting them down in final form. I presented material related to this book at conferences of the Society for the Study of Theology, the Society of Biblical Literature, and the British Early Career Association for Theologians. I also appreciate the invitation to present research at Duke University, King's College London, Trinity College Bristol, the University of Aberdeen, Wheaton College, the University of Virginia, and the University of Oxford. This book is far better than it would otherwise have been because I was able to float a number of trial balloons.

Several people have read at least part of this work, and I am greatly in their debt for them doing so. Never one to shy away from a task of forbidding difficulty, Daniel Treier waded through an early draft of the entire book and offered copious and spiritedly critical feedback, which convinced me that the manuscript was not as far along then as I had hoped. Lewis Ayres, on returning from literally circumnavigating the globe speaking at various conferences, managed to work through the introduction as well as the Augustine chapters and encouraged me to undertake one more round of revisions to sharpen and clarify my presentation. Brad East, Michael Legaspi, Angus Paddison, and Susannah Ticciati each read a chapter and asked many perceptive questions. I also received feedback on draft material from two research assistants, Julian Borda and Nikolaas Deketelaere. Colleen Sarisky's comments greatly improved the text. Mine is the only name on the cover of

this book, but I am keenly aware of just how much I have learned from others in writing it.

Receiving a Junior Research Fellowship from Homerton College, Cambridge made possible much of the research for this book, as well as the writing of its initial chapters. Though it is a secular college, and the college community does not join together for services of worship, I am grateful for the significant investment that Homerton is making in the field of Theology and Religious Studies, not only by virtue of having had two theologians as part of its fellowship, but also by having the largest contingent of theology students of any Cambridge college. I also appreciate the many opportunities I have had to discuss theology with Thomas Graumann, Peter O'Donnell, Olivier Tonneau, and many others at high table. I have wonderful memories of walking around the apple orchards of Homerton during the summer months thinking about this book. Who would not feel fortunate to have had a position where they are given three years to do whatever they wanted to do? Though in many ways my situation was different, I resonated with what Augustine says about being able to study and think without the pressure of having to attend to other responsibilities: "Nobody could outdo me in enjoying such anxiety-free leisure. There's nothing better, nothing more pleasant than to search through the divine treasure chest with nobody making a commotion."[2]

I owe a great deal to the many people who helped me craft the original research proposal that was the blueprint for this book and part of the Cambridge fellowship application. Thanks are due to John Webster for suggesting that I work on this topic. Sadly, he suddenly died as I was revising a draft of the manuscript. His absence leaves a large void in the theological scene. I am particularly disappointed that I could not get his opinion on the completed version of a work he commissioned, so to speak. However, I will be

[2] *Sermon* 339.4 (SPM 1, 115; WSA III/9, 282).

forever grateful for all that he taught me when I was his student and for his support as I began my academic career; I appreciate the comments he offered on a very early draft of the conclusion, to the effect that it was original in content and "calmly confident" in tone. I also appreciate the feedback I received on proposal drafts from Carol Harrison, Paul Dafydd Jones, Andrew Louth, Nathan MacDonald, Walter Moberly, Angus Paddison, Joachim Schaper, and Phil Ziegler. Their critical questions have been ringing in my ears as I have worked on the book. I must leave it to them to render judgment on the extent to which I have successfully addressed the objections they raised to the project's initial conceptualization. What I can say for certain is that this book is much better because I received their input at an early stage.

I wrote the final chapters of this book as I took up a position at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford and put the finishing touches on the manuscript as a Departmental Lecturer in the Faculty of Theology and Religion. It has been a boon to me to discuss the argument and related issues with both teaching staff at Wycliffe and with other members of the Oxford Faculty. I appreciate the warm welcome they have all given me, and I have profited from my discussions with them.

I appreciate Beatrice Rehl and Ian Torrance accepting this book into the Current Issues in Theology series with Cambridge University Press. They are a truly outstanding team, and it was my pleasure to be able to work with them as my manuscript underwent review and entered the production process.

Finally, I must thank my family. Working through the early years of an academic career can be a wild ride at times – or, it would be more accurate and forthright to say that it can occasionally be calm and peaceful, because it ends up being a wild ride most of the time in the current economic and political climate. My wife and children have tolerated admirably well the difficulties and uncertainties of being on this journey with me. I also very much appreciate the help that my parents have provided along the way.

Abbreviations

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
FOC	Fathers of the Church
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
OWC	Oxford World's Classics
SPM	Stromata Patristica et Mediaevalia
WSA	Works of Saint Augustine