

# A Theologian Who Reads the Bible

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**ABSTRACT:** In this essay the author traces her theological development from encountering Scripture in church as a child to a vocation in systematic theology to a later discovery of biblical studies. Donald H. Juel's work *Messianic Exegesis* is discussed at length, both for its insightful analysis of the pre-canonical apostolic exegesis of the Scriptures of Israel to account for the crucifixion and resurrection of God's Messiah, and for its implications for doctrinal theology accountable to Scripture as its normative standard. The author advances the thesis that theological work is principally exegeting the crucified and risen Jesus according to the Old Testament, with the New Testament writings serving as normative exemplars of just such an exegetical strategy. This also points toward the need for ongoing self-correction in the Christian theological tradition and a standard by which to judge proposed corrections.

I.

Theologians tend to compose in the key of Romans—understandably—but in so doing betray an innate disregard for other genres of Scripture. As a theologian, I love a good proposition, but I also know that propositions are not the only, and often not the best, way of bearing testimony to the living God. Hence what follows is a narrative recounting of my history with Scripture and theology. Propositions to inform the task of theological exegesis will emerge, but I beg the reader not to mistake the propositions for the point. The narrative is the point, too.

II.

By the time childhood drew to a close, I had figured the Bible out.

A lifetime in church had done it. No regrets: it formed me, gave shape to time, set apart a space, established wisdom for living. I never had the slightest doubt about God's love for me and his generous willingness to forgive when I went astray. I had hymns and liturgy committed to memory, also the Small Catechism, also a

store of happy memories about the peculiar and unique phenomenon that is a Christian congregation.

What I did not have—in an unbearably ironic twist for a Lutheran—is the Bible.

This is not a contradiction to the opening statement of this section. Having the Bible, and having the Bible figured out, are two entirely different matters. Fundamentalist and progressive have the Bible figured out. Religious and secular have the Bible figured out. The arguments are about who has figured it out correctly. These are sterile arguments.

I diagnose my own case of having the Bible figured out as the unintended consequence of the Common Lectionary (1983) and later the Revised Common Lectionary (1992), both of them ecumenical developments out of the Roman Lectionary (1969). Unintended indeed! The theory was sound: moving away from a one-year, New Testament-only cycle of readings to a three-year, both-Testaments cycle of readings was certainly a step in the right direction. It acknowledged the sheer social fact that people are not in church all the time anymore and thus will not hear the rotation of sermons through the week as the preacher works through Old Testament histories or New Testament Epistles. Sunday morning is the gathering of the faithful, therefore Sunday morning is the time to hear the whole counsel of God, from across the whole of Scripture. And certainly, the faithful were hearing a lot more Scripture in worship than ever before.

Or were they? This is where the unintended consequences start stacking up. So far as I can scry in the dark glass of the past, when the lessons were the same every year, the preacher was emboldened to scavenge the Scriptures himself for supplemental material. A time-honored homiletical strategy is to grab from here, there, and everywhere to support the main point. But once you had a three-year cycle, with four lessons each Sunday, there was an implicit demand to focus on the text at hand.

My guess is that a broad shift in exegetical approach reinforced this. A good scholar takes a portion of a biblical book on its own terms, trying to understand it in its own right. So, therefore, do not harmonize Luke 24's Ascension with Acts 1's Ascension, to say nothing of the implied Ascension of Matthew 28 or the lyrical non-narrative Ascensions all across the Gospel of John. A responsible, well-trained preacher sticks to the lection at hand instead of synthesizing for the sake of faith.

If, however, a single lection doesn't supply quite enough material for a sermon, there is a handy supplement printed right there in the bulletin, namely the Old Testament reading for the day. Again, the theory of the case was good: get the faithful hearing and reading the Old Testament again! The problem was in the specific choices. Again and again, the choices that the RL, CL, and RCL paired with the Gospel inadvertently continued to promote the age-old Christian rivalry with its estranged cousin, Judaism. Which is why I had the Bible figured out by the age of eighteen: Israel did it wrong, Jesus did it right. What more was there to say?

The irony is bitter, because all these lectionaries were post-Holocaust efforts, mindful of Christians' bad conscience toward the Jews. I am absolutely certain that I grew up without a whiff of deliberate supercessionism in any of the preaching or teaching I heard. It was not the interpretation of the texts, but the rule of faith implied by the pairing of the texts, that taught me the false lesson.

### III.

When I got to college, I had no intention of joining the family business. But by the end of my second day of introduction-to-theology class with Michael McDaniel at Lenoir-Rhyne College, I already knew that I'd never love anything else as much as theology. I'm sure nobody else who knew me was the slightest bit astounded by this development.

I got a good foundational education at L-R, most of all in learning to love doctrine as a lively thing, for faith and for life. And yet, looking back now, I realize again how little of it was attending to Scripture in its own right. I certainly learned the biblical reasoning and proof-texts, but the purpose was always to shore up doctrine, not to engage the Scriptures as such.

Much of this, I believe, is due to the retrospective glance inevitable at this point in the history of the church. We cannot help but look backwards, see what decisions were made (whether in early church councils or Reformation confessions), and unconsciously supply a progressive narrative of unfolding truth. I realize now it's the same underlying strategy as in narratives of decline, whether due to the Constantinian establishment or suppression of women or any other left-coded causes. For that matter, it's the same as ecumenical regrets over shattered unity—or confessional triumphalism at the expense of another church. It has taken me years and years to see how much a tacit theory of history drives almost everything. MacIntyre said we are all liberals now; I'd posit instead that we are all dispensationalists now. Perhaps that itself is a byproduct of biblical religion.

This, however, should not be laid at the feet of my college professors. I did in fact have a good professor of Bible, Rufus Moretz, who dispassionately walked us through theories of biblical composition. I was a little ruffled at first by JEPD, but then I didn't grow up calling Genesis through Deuteronomy "the five books of Moses," so the alarm wore off quickly enough. I think I must have skipped class the day we talked about the Exile, though, because it was quite literally not until late in my M.Div. that I even realized Israel had ever been in Exile. That points to the biggest hole in the RCL's readings, despite the fact that it is a truism of biblical studies that the Old Testament cannot be understood apart from the Exile.<sup>1</sup>

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1. For the full weight of my ire against the RCL, see "The Top Ten Reasons the Lectionary Sucks and Five Half-Assed Solutions," *Mockingbird* online, April 12, 2019. <https://mbird.com/religion/the-top-ten-reasons-the-lectionary-sucks-and-five-half-assed-solutions/>

At any rate, I graduated with my love of theology stronger than ever, and a particular fondness for primary texts of Christian history. Even if I was fated to write contemporary theology, I never particularly was drawn to reading it. I have always been a classicist at heart.

But still, the Bible was not a classic in my canon.

#### IV.

And then, Donald Juel happened to me.

He was one of the Lutheran minority (or as a jaundiced observer put it to me once, “Lutheran mafia”) at Princeton Theological Seminary in the early years of the twenty-first century, lured away from his long tenure at Luther Seminary. I took Juel’s class on the Gospel of Luke, not because of any particular interest in Luke at that time (we were always a Mark family) but because Juel was Lutheran.

The change came the day he taught the parable of the sower. My mostly Evangelical classmates were getting more and more worked up as Juel, simply by observing the contours of the text, robbed them of their independent agency *coram Deo*. I remember thinking at some point they were going to rush the podium and mob him. Juel was utterly unflapped by it, in fact quite obviously enjoying himself.

When class ended I stumbled up to him and said, “You just taught us *Luther’s Bondage of the Will!*”—which I happened to know far better than the Gospel of Luke.

He smiled.

That was the turning point. I’d known, as a fact, that Luther drew primarily on Paul and John, had an expressed preference for them, and therefore I should default to them as well. It had never occurred to me that the deep doctrinal insights of the Reformation could be found elsewhere in Scripture; that the canon-within-a-canon defense was not only a poor defense in any case, but inaccurate; that Luther’s explicit appeal to Paul and John didn’t mean that he was any less formed and informed by Luke (or I Peter or Hebrews or even Deuteronomy, for heaven’s sake!).

Moreover, as I slowly came to realize, what Paul dictates to his scribes in fervorous agony and passion for the gospel of the crucified, and John loops around in concentric circles of exalted christological poetry, Luke narrates in an elegant and restrained historian’s prose. But they are all talking about the same thing, the same Lord Jesus. Their distinct manners of communication are not meant to be collapsed into one correct format, or boiled down into propositions of formal logic. Moreover, their terms are not always directly correlative; comparisons are often odious; harmonization might disserve all parties.

There had to be a better way to get at all of these scriptural writings than by plundering them to shore up the theological point.

## V.

Reader, do not misunderstand: I did not stop loving theology or doctrine at this point. Rather, this was the beginning of my conscious engagement with the source of Christian doctrine, set on a whole new footing from where it had been before.

However, the story up to this point has been a little misleading, because I was primed for my reorientation to the Scriptures by—Luther. Of course. It's comical that I got to Luther first, then the Bible. I'm sure he'd be irritated by that.

Luther is tremendously fun to read, even after all these centuries. He is cantankerous and contemptuous, yes, though bear in mind I started reading him before internet nastiness colonized American church and society. Back then, I was amazed that anyone would dare to speak the way he did because he cared so much about what was at stake.

More to the point, Luther was head over heels in love with the gospel. His own fervorous agony and passion radiate off every page. As someone who benefited personally from his reforms—that is, as someone who has never suffered alienation from God the way he suffered—I learned from Luther, secondhand, why it mattered so much. Why God was so good. The fiery love of the Father's heart, the self-giving exchange of a Christ who rips my sins right out of my clenched hands, the Holy Spirit endlessly calling my name. Yes, Luther is erratic and occasional in his writing, but *you* try looking away from a blazing fire! I have stepped into the Luther-furnace again and again, and always come out of it further refined, if a little singed.

An Anglican friend observed to me recently how it odd it seems, from her perspective, that an entire confessional family can stem from one single theologian. I can see why, from the outside, it would look so strange. From the inside, all I can say is, it's akin to hearing the Beatles first: everyone else is a step down. I can enjoy Irenaeus or Barth, the Rolling Stones or the Who. But there is no surpassing either Luther or the Beatles.

More salient to this essay: what I did not consciously realize in my traverse through thousands of pages of Luther was how much Bible I was, in fact, taking in. Ironic once again to miss the point. What I factually knew was that Luther was a *sola Scriptura* theologian, which made him a great theologian, which made me loyal to him as a theologian. But this fact didn't consciously send me to the Bible myself, maybe because I thought he'd already done all the heavy lifting for me; or maybe because, until Don Juel, I didn't have the tools I needed to crack open the Bible myself.

But it is true that, once I finally got there, I was more than ready. I have continually had the ridiculous experience of reading something in Scripture and realizing—oh, that's where Luther got it from!

## VI.

And that lays the finger precisely on the problem.

Our dear Doctor Luther has become *a*, if not *the*, scapegoat for what goes wrong when people read the Bible—with or without education, as lay or as clergy, with or against the grain of the church's long tradition and its keepers. Sooner or later it all leads back to Luther's vilification of his enemies, not least of all papists, Turks, and Anabaptists, but ultimately and supremely the Jews, enemies of God and his Christ.

It hardly matters that Luther was representative, not unique; that his fame and rhetorical fireworks made his anti-Judaic sentiments more historically memorable than others'; that, before he turned on them, he "did more than anyone else in the sixteenth century to further unconditional toleration of the Jews, indeed to further religious toleration in general";<sup>2</sup> or that his followers all but censored the worst of his writings to the point that nineteenth-century German Jews praised Luther as their hero.<sup>3</sup> But if Luther is representative, not unique, then the problem of Luther and Luther's reading of the Bible is so acute and unsettling that it cannot be dodged, even if you shelter behind tradition, magisterium, innovation, deconstruction, or any other strategy.

Luther got everything he got from the Scriptures. All the glorious stuff and all the opprobrious stuff, too. Everything you love in Luther, he got from the Bible. That part's easy. Everything you hate in Luther, he got from the Bible, too. Everything that makes you sick and uncomfortable lies there at the textual base of the Christian faith and, to make matters worse, just as much in the New Testament as in the Old.

So you have two options.

The first one is to try to extricate yourself from the difficulty by selective reading: pretending that these texts are not all tangled up with each other, that the ugly history of their interpretation is not interlaced with the lovely history, that you can get our good and gracious Jesus apart from the Scriptures of Israel and the apostolic interpretation of his death and resurrection and all that ensued in the church to come. This option is, at best, dishonest.

At worst, it is guaranteed to generate all over again the same horrors of these past two millennia. That is exactly what I started to perceive in the wake of the Juel-induced exegetical convulsions that were taking place (little though I realized it) in my mind. I finally started attending to the frequency of the tossed-off distinction between "the Old Testament God" and "the New Testament God" from people who

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2. Thomas Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism*, trans. Lesley Sharpe and Jeremy Noakes (Oxford University Press, 2017), 4.

3. Dorothea Wendebourg, "Jews Commemorating Luther in the Nineteenth Century," *Lutheran Quarterly* 26 (2012): 249–270.

had hardly read either Testament at all. Once I heard a sermon on the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8 where the preacher worked herself up to tears at how awful it was for sexual and racial minorities to be excluded from God's love for so many centuries and how beautiful it was that, because of Jesus, they were allowed back in—never mind that this is not the point of Acts 8, or for that matter of Leviticus 21, or that Isaiah included the eunuchs long before Jesus arrived on the scene (Is. 56:3–5). Every Pentecost without fail was preached as the festival of inclusion, as if mean old Israel had finally been forced to share God with us Gentiles, even though there is not a Gentile anywhere on the scene of Acts 2 (except for a handful of proselytes who had already come into Israel anyway). And if atonement theology ever reared its ugly head, the only reference to Israel's worship was to be happy for the animals, no longer bloodily sacrificed in the temple, as if such barbarity ever could have pleased God anyway—followed by a desperate search for meaning in the cross through any mythological, psychological, or sociological theory except the Scriptures of Israel, leaving a void filled only with a clucking tongue and wagging finger at empire, plus the bland reassurance that whatever was going on in Jesus' unjust death, God had nothing to do with it.

As scholar Brent Strawn potently observes in his searing book, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, if you kill off the Old Testament, the New Testament will be next up on the gallows.<sup>4</sup> I will add what Strawn didn't, which is that the killing off of first one Testament and then the other increases the likelihood of living Jews ending up on the gallows. I believe recent events have borne out this intuition.

## VII.

Or, you can disavow this intellectual and spiritual dishonesty, and take the bull of Bashan by the horns. That is what I learned to do from Don Juel.

I can't pretend that any of this was consciously on my mind after my courses with him; and I lost the chance for further conversation when he died an untimely death at only sixty years of age before I returned to PTS for my Ph.D. It is only retrospectively that I've come to understand. But for the sake of this essay, I'll walk you through the salient insights of his superb book *Messianic Exegesis* to demonstrate what is at stake and why it matters.<sup>5</sup>

Juel's investigation into what he terms "messianic exegesis" starts from the consensus position of modern New Testament studies: namely, that the resurrection of the crucified Jesus is ground zero for the Christian faith, church, preaching, writing, and interpretation. The event that detonates outward into what would be-

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4. Brent A. Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment* (Baker, 2017).

5. Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Fortress, 1988). Page numbers noted parenthetically in the text refer to this book.

come Christianity is that a particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth, was crucified under the charge of being a messianic pretender and purported king of the Jews, as the trial by temple leaders and Pilate's sign on the cross testify. And, further, this particular person executed for this specific reason was raised from the dead by the God he addressed as Father according to the Spirit of holiness. Thus the core confession of Romans 1:1–4.<sup>6</sup>

But no event is self-interpreting. You could describe the entire drama of Jesus' Passion as an interpretive drama. How is one to interpret Jesus' actions up to this point in his ministry? How is one to interpret the authorities in Jerusalem, both religious and political, turning on him so fiercely? And the mob, too? Above all, how is one to interpret his death on the cross? Until Easter morning, there was not the slightest reason to interpret death on a Roman cross as a divine good—or, only that it could be good to eliminate someone who spoke falsely in God's name, punishing the blasphemer. But the resurrection detonated that interpretation, too. Somehow, the cross was an event in and out of God's own life, truly if unexpectedly—and the resurrection not only confirmed that fact, but became its own fact in and out of the life of God.

Thus, Juel argues, the apostolic burden was to figure out how to interpret this astounding nexus that comprised the event of Jesus. That set the agenda for the earliest apostolic interpretation. If Jesus the Jew was crucified but rose again by the power of God, then this event could only be interpreted by and within one particular matrix, namely the Scriptures of Israel.<sup>7</sup>

This should be an obvious point. I find, though, that not only it is *not* obvious, it is obscured, forgotten, and possibly even rejected. Occasionally that is due to

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6. What is perhaps not immediately obvious to the reader is that the incarnation (or attendant events of conception and birth) is not ground zero of Christian faith. For understandable reasons, the incarnation is often taken to be the central claim about Jesus that gives rise to all else. Biblical studies has done doctrinal theology the invaluable service of challenging that assumption and reorienting it toward cross and resurrection. Wolfhart Pannenberg charted a Lutheran doctrinal theology built around this biblical studies insight in his *Jesus—God and Man* (Westminster, 1977); Paul R. Hinlicky's forthcoming *The Apocalypse of God in Christ: A Theology of Theology* (Cascade, 2026) likewise argues for the priority of the resurrection-of-the-crucified over incarnation in doctrinal theology.

7. I'll use the terms "Scriptures of Israel" and "Old Testament" interchangeably. I do not take the latter term to be pejorative or supercessionistic. I find "Hebrew Bible" less than ideal because even at Jesus' time a great many Jews did not understand Hebrew and did not hear or read their Scriptures in Hebrew at all. The New Testament authors regularly drew on the Septuagint, already several hundred years old at that point, for their scriptural citations, and often their theological intentions are clearer when looking at the LXX than at the Masoretic text. That itself raises all kinds of interesting questions about language and canonicity, but those will have to wait for another essay! For a parallel investigation of this nature, see the article by James Mauney in this issue, "Reading Paul from out of Habakkuk."

post-Holocaust Christian scruples about stealing or using the Scriptures of Israel against rabbinic Jewish interpretation. I applaud the scruples, but the conclusion reveals ignorance. For the same period of time that Christianity has existed, Judaism has brought other writings to bear on its own reception of its Scriptures, first the Mishnah and Talmud, later the Zohar and other kabbalistic writings. Christian interpretation can, with good conscience, be exactly that: because we believe the crucified Jew Jesus to have been raised from the dead, therefore we turn to his Scriptures, the Scriptures of Israel, to interpret him.

The point is, then, in order to understand at all what God intends by the resurrection of Jesus, we must turn to the Scriptures of Israel. There are lots of ways we *could* make sense of this event, but where and when and to whom it happened points materially and formally to this specific interpretive matrix. The Scriptures of Israel, in turn, only exist in a particular matrix of their own, that is, in the history that gave rise to and flowed out from them, in Israel's life of prayer and worship, in its acquired habits of wrestling prophetically and practically with its own scriptural legacy. This is the religious, cultural, political, and legal world that Jesus lived in. We are free to take the further providential step and say it was the divine will for this specific event to take place in this specific matrix. Everything about the event of Jesus demanded, and still demands, interpretation in and through Israel's Scriptures.<sup>8</sup>

So, as Juel observes at the outset of *Messianic Exegesis*, "Basic to all speech about Jesus ... is the language and imagery of the Old Testament" (23). To Christians ignorant or neglectful of the Old Testament, this is, once again, by no means obvious. Certainly, some Old Testament passages are quoted and labeled in the New Testament, but even that doesn't even begin to cover the wealth of allusions, images, and conceptual building blocks that the apostolic writers employed in assembling their confession. This matrix is so self-evident to apostolic interpretation that New Testament writings can assert that "Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the Scriptures*" (1 Cor. 15:3) and that "he was raised on the third day *in accordance with the Scriptures*" (1 Cor. 15:4) without further gloss or explanation. A Christian puzzled by this assertion—or, say, frustrated that Luke doesn't actually record the Emmaus conversation in which, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk. 24:27)—has not

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8. Which raises another question of canonicity, namely which of the writings of Israel really qualify as Scripture, whether to Jews or to Christians. As an heir of the Lutheran Reformation, I share its acceptance of the judgment of rabbinic Judaism on the books that they call the Tanakh and that we call the Old Testament. Catholics and Orthodox also accept this canon and assign a secondary status to the "deuterocanonical" Jewish writings; Lutheran and Anglican reformers allowed for the private study of the deuterocanon (usually called "apocrypha" by them) for edifying purposes but not to be definitive in matters of doctrine. It's worth recalling that in Jesus' self-interpretation at the end of Luke's Gospel, he singles out "everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" (24:44), which serves both as an orientation point for understanding the messianic exegesis of this Evangelist and as a departure point for later Christian exegesis.

been paying attention; or more likely, simply doesn't know the Scriptures of Israel very well. The interpretation of the Jesus event according to the Old Testament is ubiquitous in the New Testament.

Which leads to a further historical observation, the burden of Juél's book: the work of interpreting the death and resurrection of Jesus pre-dates most of the New Testament writings. Juél notes, "The notable absence of christological exegesis in [Paul's] letters reveals less a lack of interest in the topic than a general approval of the formulations he inherited from the tradition" (59). Juél makes the case for the role played by such texts as II Sam. 7 and Psalms 22, 31, 69, 89, and 110 at the root of apostolic interpretation of the crucified and risen Messiah.

In other words, by the time the New Testament writings were being composed, such interpretation of Jesus was *not* being worked out on the page for the first time. Nor was it a mad scramble to find proof-texts for late-arriving conclusions. Quite the reverse. In the wake of the crucified king of the Jews' resurrection, the apostles were forced to reconsider passages from the Scriptures that had already been understood as messianic across the Jewish landscape; they had to evaluate, by means of already well established hermeneutical strategies, other possible passages to illumine the event of Jesus; and by this steady cumulative process, they strove to gain a deeper understanding of what God did and intended by letting his Messiah die in such a way and nevertheless vindicating him.<sup>9</sup> "In accordance with the Scriptures" was, plain and simple, another way of saying "in accordance with the will of God." Understand the event of Jesus in the light of the Scriptures, and you understand God's will.

Juél thus describes for the Christian reader the contours of midrash, pesher, and other strategies of interpretation common in postbiblical Judaism, Jesus' time, and (with appropriate caution against anachronism) early rabbinic exegesis as seen in the Mishnah and Talmud. These strategies were necessary for the earliest believers in Jesus, precisely because the suffering and death of the Messiah had *not* been foreseen or expected. The opponents of Jesus and his apostles were not misguided in raising fierce objections to their interpretations! But the apostolic rebuttal was always the resurrection of Jesus, not the centuries-in-advance planting of plain forecasts in the Scriptures. The Lord God of Israel *did* raise up his Christ, Jesus of Nazareth: therefore, whatever we may have thought about Messiah up until now requires reevaluation.

A consequent apostolic discovery was that such interpretive strategies were fruitful for faith. They opened up new pathways of understanding, such as using the Psalms to recount the story of Jesus' Passion. As Juél summarizes, "The targumist reads

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9. Juél writes, "The confession of Jesus as Messiah is not a goal toward which scriptural interpretation moves but the presupposition for the interpretive tradition. It is not the solution to some problem generated by earlier exegesis but in large measure the generative problem itself" (117).

the Isaiah passage in light of traditional Jewish conceptions of the Messiah; Christians came to the text with a very different messianic conception, modeled after Jesus the Messiah. Christians were no less careful in their exegesis, no less concerned about words and verbal associations than their contemporaries in the Jewish community. . . . What motivated them to make use of the passage was the need to rethink traditional conceptions of messiahship in light of Jesus' death and resurrection" (131).

However, as Juél points out, the interpretive strategies at hand in this period are not necessarily the strategies of today. Even when grasped for what they are, they aren't particularly convincing to a modern reader. But the expectation of being convinced is part of the problem. Juél points out that the writings of the New Testament and for that matter of the Qumran community are insider exegesis. They elaborate from and for faith. They presume it; they do not establish it. There will be apologetics—but not yet. *Because* the apostles were witnesses to the crucifixion of the king of the Jews and likewise his resurrection, *therefore* they scoured the Scriptures to understand better what they already had come to believe about Jesus, who had been "declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). There was no reason to expect an outsider to believe in Jesus anyway, apart from the direct and revelatory work of God ("For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven," Matt. 16:17), so why should an outsider's standards be necessary for insider growth in understanding?<sup>10</sup>

That is not to say there was never any interest in making the case to outsiders. The missionary movement of the primitive church swiftly became intrinsic to its witness—though, from what traces remain, this appears to have been a surprise development, not the result of tactical proselytism of Gentiles. Juél's argument, however, is that the base layer of interpretation was never oriented toward outsiders but for insiders; not to prove the inevitability of this particular Messiah in advance of the event, but to grasp its meaning after the fact. Juél characterizes the relationship between insider and outsider exegesis this way: "The earliest use of Scripture was internal, though this does not exclude the need to formulate arguments. The Bible provided the data for reflection on the gospel and its implications, as well as the language of prayer and praise. Exegesis was the matrix for theologizing. Carefully structured arguments, particularly of the sort found in Acts, are subsequent developments" (140).

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10. Juél contrasts New Testament and Qumran exegesis with rabbinic exegesis, which moves toward the apologetic and rational, making the case for Jewish particularity by appeal to universality: "Rabbinic Judaism was a rationalizing enterprise," in which "[t]he self-conscious use of interpretive principles and discussions of hermeneutics display a confidence in reason and logic to disclose the truth within the Scriptures that is not found at Qumran and rarely in the New Testament" (48). As an interesting historical analogue, it is precisely after the wild success of the rationalizing work of Maimonides that practitioners of esoteric Judaism sought to make public their private mystical writings. See Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford University Press, 2004).

For instance, Juel points out that Psalm 16 is quoted by Peter building his multi-part scriptural case on the day of Pentecost in Acts, a later New Testament writing oriented in large part toward the mission of the church into Gentile territory, yet this psalm is never mentioned elsewhere, in the older strata of the New Testament (147). Perhaps more surprising for contemporary Christians quite sure of the most foundational Old Testament text for understanding Jesus, Isaiah 52–53 is something of a latecomer in the New Testament writings, nowhere quoted or alluded to in Paul or the Passion narratives. Only in I Peter is the Suffering Servant invoked to explain Jesus' vicarious suffering (127–133). Or, to take another example, Psalm 110's fingerprints are all over the New Testament, and Juel (following his own teacher Nils Dahl) conjectures that it allowed the apostles to build a link to Daniel 7: "...Ps. 110:1 is the only verse in the Bible which depicts another figure enthroned in God's presence," who is also called Lord; this draws in the previously non-messianically-interpreted Dan. 7:13–14, about the one like "a son of man" who has dominion on behalf of the Ancient of Days (167).

### VIII.

This kind of probing into the substratum of christological interpretation is fascinating in its own right. It also offers impulses and correctives to the ongoing Christian exegetical enterprise.

The first point is that, seeing as we do in Juel's work the layers, explorations, and judicious additions to messianic exegesis already at work in the New Testament, we have both a basis and a set of criteria for further interpretation. As noted, Isaiah's Suffering Servant was evidently *not* the first place the apostles went to understand their crucified Messiah; on the other hand, once the connection was made, it proved tremendously fruitful and illuminating. We may take it as a legitimate devotional and intellectual endeavor to continue making such discoveries.

However, and at the same time, we must acknowledge: not all interpretations are good interpretations! A Christian today may regret some of the ways here-sy-hunting played out in the history of the church, but real matters are at stake in the interpretation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, as should be beyond dispute by now, any interpretive move that saws off the branch we're sitting on—namely, tries to interpret the crucified and risen Jesus apart from or without or in opposition to the Scriptures of Israel—is definitionally flawed. The nations may judiciously graft their own family trees onto the rootstock of Israel, as we see taking place among the early church fathers with regard to Hellenistic culture. But it must be a cautious enterprise, lest the wild olive shoot overrun and kill off its own source of life. The church fathers did not always make the right call. We may have to prune off some of what they grafted in.

However, to take the Old Testament seriously does not automatically result in taking it rightly. Consider the age-old but not particularly illuminating prediction-

fulfillment schema—the one that inadvertently convinced me I had the Bible figured out. A Christian reader can make a *providential* argument about the Scriptures of Israel pointing forward to Jesus as the always-intended Messiah. Indeed, the kind of messianic exegesis Juel advocates is built on the assumption that it is only through the Scriptures of Israel that what God has done in his Christ makes any sense at all: both the shock of his condemnation (“And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God,” Deut. 21:22–23b) and the glory of his vindication (“The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool,’” Ps. 110:1).

But that is not the same as arguing, even providentially, that predictions or other clues were laid down in the Scriptures, awaiting a very precise kind of fulfillment in the future, which thereby become proof of the Christian cause, due to the axiomatic divine sovereignty over time: in other words, since only God can see into the future, then only God could’ve put those clues there in the first place. While providence and sovereignty over time are qualities that believers may attribute to God, that has to be an axiom of insider exegesis, not a proof in outsider apologetic. It presumes its conclusion, therefore in fact proves nothing.<sup>11</sup> It is not a wise or fruitful *apologetic* approach. Also, as Juel’s work demonstrates, it badly misunderstands how the apostles themselves went about their interpretive business—hardly a good lookout for those who would be faithful to the apostolic witness!

For example, consider Justin Martyr’s debate with Trypho over the virginal conception of Jesus. Justin appeals to the Greek translation of Isaiah, which speaks of a *parthenos* conceiving and bearing a son. Nine times out of ten, in LXX Greek, *parthenos* does indeed mean a woman who has never had sexual relations. It doesn’t imply that she won’t ever, only that she has not yet. Trypho, however, knows the Hebrew of Isaiah 7, which reads *almah*—a term for a young woman without reference to her sexual status—and not *bethulah*, the obvious Hebrew term for a virgin. In other words, Justin is backing his case with a bad translation. Moreover, Trypho continues, “the prophecy as a whole refers to Hezekiah, and it can be shown that the events described in the prophecy were fulfilled in him.”<sup>12</sup> The argument over translation continues between Justin and Trypho for some time. Later Justin returns to this topic but chiefly to assert the core of the Christian faith, very much focused on the incarnation (§100.2–6).

Justin’s insider exegesis is fine; in most cases, unimpeachable. But honestly compels us to admit that Trypho had the better argument where Isaiah 7 was concerned! Indeed, the gap between the Greek and the Hebrew has been a sore point for Christian apologists, centuries upon centuries. But it has been so con-

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11. David Bentley Hart makes an analogous argument eviscerating John Henry Newman’s circular reasoning about the development of doctrine in *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* (Baker, 2022).

12. Justin Martyr, *St. Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, rev. Thomas B. Halton, ed. Michael Slusser (Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 67.1, p. 102.

tentious precisely because of the faulty way in which it was forced to serve as a foundation for outsider apologetics, which in turn forced it to be a foundation for insider exegesis—and it could not bear the weight, in either case. The wiser course would have been to re-evaluate the role of this text in Matthew 1:23, and the possible but not indisputable role it plays in Luke 1:27 and 34; beyond that, to reckon seriously with both the biblical studies and the doctrinal insight that it is the cross and resurrection of Jesus that gives rise to Christian belief in the incarnation, not the other way around.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, such self-correction, even to a long-established course, was already present in the strategies of interpretation of Jews at Jesus' time, and for that matter in analogous works in the Greco-Roman world. It is inherent to literary culture and text-oriented religion.<sup>14</sup> And it is why Christian theologians still have work to do, even after two thousand years!

Let's press the point further. Juel summarizes the impact of his work for Christian theology thus: "[I]t is the task of biblical scholars to make available the results of historical and exegetical work as well as evidence to substantiate such proposals, in order to hold theology accountable to history and the biblical witness. I understand my historical analysis of christological exegesis to be part of a larger proposal with particular consequences for systematic theologians" (174). With this in mind, he expresses his appreciation for theologians like Ernst Käsemann and Edward Schillebeeckx who recognize the need to "make the historical Jesus a major criterion for systematic constructions" because "Christian theology cannot dispense with the historical Jesus" (173). Yet while the intention is sound, Juel takes issue with Schillebeeckx's decision to center his theology on "the ministry of Jesus" and "Jesus' unique God-consciousness" (174). That is not, in fact, the central event or the spur to interpretation by the apostles. Rather, "[t]he interpretation of the Scriptures is far more a response to the shocking events of Good Friday than to Jesus' teaching or healing ministry" (174). Or, we might add with reference to the long argument over Isaiah 7, the virginal conception or even incarnation of Jesus.

The spiritual and intellectual virtue brought to Christian faith, doctrine, and theology by biblical studies, even in the latter's most skeptical and deconstructive mode, is that it forces us back on the right order of things. The confession of Jesus, crucified as Messiah and raised again by God, gave rise to everything else. In a strict sense, "the Bible tells me so" is a false statement, because it gets the order wrong. *Because* Jesus was crucified and raised, the apostles turned to the Scriptures of Israel to make sense of this astonishing work of God. They formulated interpretations and answers, fielded questions and replied to skepticism, using the Scriptures of Israel. At some point, some of these interpretations got written down. Sooner or

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13. I intend to tackle this very problem in a forthcoming book on the Lutheran doctrine of Mary.

14. A similar point is made by Bruce McCormack in his proposal for the "repair of doctrine" in *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

later another genre got written down, a variety of biography called Gospel, which became the principal accounts of the event of Jesus-crucified-and-raised and all that led up to that event. These and other canonical New Testament writings are not the source, but rather the product, of that event.

Therefore, I would argue as a Christian theologian, our discipline demands something of a reorientation, which is this: the interpretive matrix for our understanding of the crucified and risen Jesus is *not* the collection of writings we call the New Testament. It is, instead, the collection of writings we call the Old Testament. The New Testament is a secondhand literary record of the firsthand attempt at interpretation by the earliest disciples and apostles, very likely following certain lines of thought already laid down by Jesus himself. The New Testament, then, is an authoritative guide—a rule, a *canon*—for the task of interpreting Old Testament writings correctly, in order to understand Christ more deeply, more wisely, more faithfully. The New Testament’s own initial findings are indispensable for understanding the event of Jesus Christ; but without the Old Testament writings, they are incomprehensible. Worse than that, they are dead.

As theology moves outward in time and space, bearing the good news of the crucified and raised Jesus, it will continually encounter, absorb, and adjust other interpretive matrices for understanding the core event—the kerygma of Christ crucified and raised. We see that practice at work in the New Testament, too, in initial attempts at outsider apologetic, as Luke, for instance, illustrates in Paul’s Areopagus sermon (Acts 17). In our post-apostolic times, we need both Testaments, rightly related to one another, for venturing and vetting new expressions of faith in the same Jesus Christ. Yet it is not the Testaments that authorize Christ. It is the event of God’s Christ being killed and raised again, in the time and in the place of the people of Israel and their Scriptures, that authorizes the Testaments, first the Old and subsequently the New (“to the Jew first and also to the Greek,” Rom. 1:16). Jesus Christ will not be known, believed, trusted, and loved rightly without these two Testaments interpreting for us who he is, what he means, and where he is taking us.

This approach has the added virtue of reconfiguring the ongoing disagreement with living Israel over Jesus. It is fruitless and faithless to continue in the prediction-and-fulfillment mode, or to assert that anyone could’ve moved logically from the Scriptures of Israel to the crucified-and-risen Messiah Jesus. Faith that God raised his crucified Christ is a gift, not a logical necessity. If the gift is withheld, it is beyond the rights and knowledge of believers to judge—hence the ever-necessary restraint on Christian triumphalism in Romans 9–11.

## IX.

Again, I certainly could not have articulated any of this by the time I finished my M.Div. My own interests, and later my work in ecumenism, took me in all sorts of interesting directions, theologically speaking. It was not by design that I found my way back to biblical studies.

So far as I can reconstruct it, the prompting came from my work on the International Lutheran-Pentecostal Dialogue. While undertaking the massive amount of remedial reading necessary to become useful to the task at hand, I encountered the Pentecostal belief in “baptism in the Spirit,” which in turn had consequences for the Pentecostal understanding of baptism in water. While as in any Christian tradition a large theological edifice had been built to support Pentecostal convictions, they too claimed to be a *sola Scriptura* kind of movement. Disputes would have to take place in the arena of the Bible. More specifically, in the arena of Acts.

Now here’s a funny thing: after my fantastic class on Luke with Don Juel, I realized with a jolt of delight that Luke had a sequel! Which, of course, I’d never read through; I only knew the lections that would appear to displace the Old Testament reading in Easter season. So I sat down, read through it—and hated it. The lens I brought to it convinced me that after the rich, nuanced, subtle, and Lutheran-friendly theology of Luke, Acts gave the game away with its onward-and-upward trajectory of success. I asked Juel what he thought about it; he more or less agreed. I realize now that he had probably inherited the long twentieth-century disdain of Acts.

Fast-forward again to my ecumenical work with Pentecostals. It was not an option to dismiss or ignore Acts, so I went back to it again. And again. And again. Each time, peeling off a layer of my accumulated theological bias. This proved to be an incredibly important experience: discovering how hard it is to hear familiar Scripture in its own right.<sup>15</sup> I would never sacrifice the deep formation I had in the language and images of the Bible, but it is true that the longer you’re in it, the harder it is to come at it afresh. I’m sure I never would have, especially with Acts, if I hadn’t been forced into it.

The result of my wrestling with Acts was not to adopt a Pentecostal perspective on it—though they did help me see, and take seriously, what I’d been incapable of seeing and taking seriously beforehand. Unsurprisingly, Pentecostals too bring their own lenses to the text. What I finally spotted was the subtle connection point between “baptism in the Spirit” and “baptism in water” in, of all peculiar things, the polemic against John the Baptist. I won’t reconstruct the whole argument here, but in short, if you lay over top the mission movement to the nations in Acts the broader Lukan concern to assert the priority of Jesus and his baptism over John and *his* baptism, then all the other pieces fall into place. My work on this topic was eventually published in *Pneuma*, a major Pentecostal theological journal, with implications for Pentecostal theology and practice. Personally, I think it’s the most important piece of scholarship I’ve ever done.<sup>16</sup>

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15. This is also what led to my little book *Sermon on the Mount: A Poetic Paraphrase* (Thornbush, 2020)—the effort simply to hear some of the most overfamiliar words of Scripture.

16. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, “Water Baptism and Spirit Baptism in Luke-Acts: Another Reading of the Evidence,” *Pneuma* 38 (2016): 476–501. See also my book *A Guide to Pentecostal Movements for Lutherans* (Wipf & Stock, 2016).

That was a very satisfying undertaking; it also changed me irrevocably. It was a case study in theologians and faithful church people taking their cues from the Bible—and yet somehow managing to misread it. Hardly a new problem, honestly. But it put the issue of the interpretive matrix of Scripture in a whole new light.

The taste for biblical studies informing theological work prompted a later project. Back in the pulpit in Tokyo, I faced the yearly crisis of Transfiguration Sunday. I have since learned it is the most-skipped Sunday for pastors, even more than Trinity! After three years, I was completely dry: nothing left to say. Yet any reader of Mark's Gospel can't fail to see that this is a supremely momentous christological event, the hinge point of his story. There *had* to be more to it than I was seeing. However, the theological tradition was unilluminating. I found hardly any serious contemporary or Reformation christology that incorporated the transfiguration in any meaningful way, and the church fathers almost entirely assimilated the transfiguration into Hellenistic speculation on uncreated light and the like. As an extension of that story seeking to be faithful, sure, why not. But that couldn't possibly be what Mark meant by it.

Thus, hoping to solve my own preaching problem and curious about the theological void, I started probing, and a few months later *Seven Ways of Looking at the Transfiguration* popped out.<sup>17</sup> At this point, the reader should not be surprised to learn that it was tracing out the Old Testament backdrop that finally cracked open the christology. And I once again learned a lesson about what becomes of theology when it forgets to take exegesis of the Scripture as its own proper matrix.

Pleased by my findings there, I turned my attention to the third-hardest festival to preach, namely Ascension Day; particularly hard for Lutherans who have conceded the event to the Reformed out of fear of compromising our theology of the Lord's Supper. Again, I found much the same thing: a lot of high-flown theorizing, barely tethered to the biblical sources at all. For example, Douglas Farrow's *Ascension Theology* is, in a word, a travesty: a naked exercise in Catholic supremacism, which evidently the ascended Christ exists chiefly to endorse.<sup>18</sup> T. F. Torrance's work is much more sober, theologically speaking, and wise in its engagement with questions of science and philosophy; still, it does not read as a work that arises primarily out of engagement with the Scriptures but assumes a few theses that emerge from them.<sup>19</sup>

To do the topic justice, my own work on the ascension had to take a different approach.<sup>20</sup> While the transfiguration is a strictly delimited event with four clear New Testament accounts and only a handful of probable allusions, the ascension is scattered all over the place, much less in focus, except for in Luke-Acts, where it is so literally central to the story that is recounted twice, at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts. It simply wouldn't do to approach the ascension in the

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17. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, *Seven Ways of Looking at the Transfiguration* (Thornbush, 2024).

18. Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (T&T Clark, 2011).

19. Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Handsel, 1976).

20. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, *Forty Facets of the Ascension* (Thornbush, 2025).

same way as the transfiguration—or, for that matter, the passion or resurrection. Whatever the Scripture gives us, in whatever way, demands that we first of all take it on its own terms.

Theology may explore far afield, of course. That's one of the creative pleasures of the discipline. I think it's fair to say that Luke does exactly that, addressing not only Jewish but also Gentile believers—or doubters—in the way he crafts his stories. So again we have a template already within the Bible for faithful outward exploration. But without rigorous return to the event of the crucified and risen Christ Jesus, as interpreted by the apostles, from the matrix of the Scriptures of Israel, our explorations will leave us in the dark, not guide us into the light.

The implications for doctrinal theology today should be clear. A lot passes as theology that can and does exist without reference to or interest in the Scriptures (or even God). Again, it's fine for theology to explore, tease out implications, address heartfelt needs and urgencies; but the temptation to do all of this apart from the resurrection kerygma and its interpretive matrix is overwhelmingly strong. The centuries-old divorce of theology from biblical studies bears a good deal of the blame. But there's nothing to stop theologians from retrieving the Scriptures right now. *Ad fontes!*

X.

Toward the end of my senior year at PTS, I was having lunch in the cafeteria with Don Juel and New Testament doctoral student Meda Stamper—she'd been the teaching assistant in the Luke class I took. Meda asked me what I planned to do after seminary, expressing hope I'd continue my studies. I said yes, I wanted to get a Ph.D. in systematic theology. Meda looked horrified. She turned to Juel and exclaimed, "Did you hear that? Sarah wants to go into theology, not Bible!"

Don Juel turned his inscrutable gaze on me. I felt I was being sized up. Then he nodded gravely and pronounced, "She will be a theologian who reads the Bible."

I felt that a charge had been laid upon me. I hope I have been found worthy of the calling.

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