

Promissio

A Journal of Confessing Theology

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Scripture as the Language of Faith

"I certainly grant that many *passages* in the Scriptures are obscure and hard to elucidate, but that is due, not the exalted nature of their subject, but to our own linguistic and grammatical ignorance; and it is not it does not in any way prevent our knowing all the *contents* of Scripture. For what solemn truth can the Scriptures still be concealing, now that the seals are broken, the stone rolled away from the door of the tomb, and that greatest of all mysteries brought to light—that Christ, God's Son, became man, that God is three and one, that Christ suffered for us, and will reign forever? And are not these things known, and sung in our streets? Take Christ from the Scriptures—and what more will you find in them? You see, then, that the entire content of the Scriptures has now been brought to light, even though some passages which contain unknown words remain obscure. . . . If you speak of *internal* perspicuity, the truth is that nobody who has not the Spirit of God sees a jot of what is in the Scriptures. All men have their hearts darkened, so that, even when they can discuss and quote all that is in Scripture, they do not understand or really know any of it. They do not believe in God, nor do they believe that they are God's creatures or anything else. . . . The Spirit is needed for the understanding of all Scripture and every part of Scripture. If, on the other hand, you speak of *external* perspicuity, the position is that nothing whatsoever is left obscure or ambiguous, but all that is in the Scripture is through the Word brought forth into the clearest light and proclaimed to the whole world" (Luther against Erasmus [*The Bondage of the Will*, Packer and Johnston, trans., p. 71, 73-74, italics in original]).

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Theology is not freethinking but “freed thinking” and therewith bound to its liberating Lord. Therefore, *Promissio* undertakes theology for the sake of informing and enabling the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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Holy Scripture, Holy Church, Holy Spirit

Paul R. Hinlicky

ABSTRACT: This editorial essay takes up Dietrich Bonhoeffer's correlation of Scripture as the book of the church and true church as the church of the holy Scriptures to argue for the salience of his reconceptualization of the Protestant doctrine of sola scriptura. Correlating scripture and church, Bonhoeffer put both under the saving Lordship of Jesus in the concrete circumstance of the German church struggle. At the same time, he legitimated historical critical scholarship so far as it was exercised in theological exegesis rather than history of religions scholarship at a time when the latter was producing an Aryan Christ coordinated with the Nazi world. Theological exegesis is then shown to be the way of Christian reading of the Bible giving form to the language of faith in confessing Christ alone today. As the work of the Spirit both in the production and canonization of the Bible as well as in its reception by theological exegesis, the Bible ministers the scandalous justification of the ungodly, promising life to the dead. When this work of the Spirit is neglected in reading the Bible, however, Scripture itself becomes an unholy work, a Spiritless letter dealing death with which to shame and exclude.

The church of Holy Scripture—and there is no other “church”—lives from the end. Therefore, it reads the whole of holy Scripture as the book of the end, of the new, of Christ.... The Bible is after all nothing other than the book of the church. It is this in its very essence, or it is nothing. It therefore needs to be read and proclaimed wholly from the viewpoint of the end. In the church, therefore, the story of creation must be read in a way that begins with Christ and only then moves on towards him as its goal; indeed one can read it as a book that looks for Christ only when one knows that Christ is the beginning, the new, the end of our whole world.... Theological exposition takes the Bible as the book of the church and interprets it as such. This is its presupposition and this presupposition constitutes its method; its method is a continual returning from the text (as determined by all the methods of philological and historical research) to this presupposition. That is the objectivity in the method of theological exposition. (*Creation and Fall in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works* III:22)

Bible as the Book of the Church— Church as Community of the Book

Bonhoeffer describes Christian “reading” of the Bible, based upon the Christian “presupposition,” as *brought* by the reader to engagement with Scripture just as the texts are otherwise understood to be historical human artifacts exegeted by relevant, though fallible, scholarly techniques. He makes no claim for a Bible that comes to life to speak for itself apart from definite presuppositions that readers bring. Acknowledging this reality certainly makes the Bible vulnerable to an almost infinite number of misreadings since one can, and many do, approach the Bible with other presuppositions connected to intentions other than faith’s knowledge of God in Christ in the communion of saints.

For Bonhoeffer, the presupposition of Christian “reading” simply is the church’s rule of faith concerning Christ, that this diverse collection from multitudinous authorships spanning over a millennium (thus without coordination between authors) nevertheless finds “dramatic coherence” (as Robert Jenson put it) in Christ. In this way, the predominance of the narrative genre in the Genesis-to-Revelation story is recognized even as the Christ event at the center provides the key that opens the lock on this literature, unveiling its plot and saving import. The gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed by the Spirit to create and sustain human faith in him as saving Lord provides the epistemic access through by which one properly reads the Spirit’s historic testimonies in the prophets and apostles. These testimonies have been written down, selected, collected, and so preserved as holy *writings* (literally, scriptures), preserving the traces of their historical occasions but transcending those immediate circumstances to speak to the continuing community of faith. Opened by the Spirit and read with this Christ key, canonical Scripture provides to the Christian reader the basic language of faith with which to navigate in this world and interpret experience.

Interestingly, a similar hermeneutical structure has been true for Judaism through the centuries, privileging the Torah with interpretive primacy just as Christianity privileges the proclaimed gospel of Christ, crucified and risen. Likewise, the highly revisionist Islamic “reading” of the Bible privileges Mohammed’s supposed recitation of the final revelation of God as recorded in the Qur’an, a claim accusing Jewish and Christian scriptures of having corrupted the primal Abrahamic revelation of submission to Allah. We could mention several other parallels, e.g. the Book of Mormon and other sectarian literature, as well as openly hostile readings of the canonical Bible by Deists, like Thomas Jefferson’s scissors and paste edition of the New Testament, or various modern portraits of “the historical Jesus” by questers. It is simply a fact of cultural pluralism that the Bible as such remains open to being read in many ways and that the Christian reading of it must make its way through this maelstrom, now more than ever. Neglecting this task in our circumstances only means that many other ways of reading the Bible than the Christian way will penetrate and subvert congregational life. As we shall see, Bonhoeffer’s Christian

“reading” of Scripture is well grounded in the fact that the selection of New Testament literature for canonization in union with the Scriptures of Israel was already guided by the primitive “rule of faith,” which itself had developed out of the baptismal renunciation of the kingdom of the devil and profession of allegiance to the triune God of salvation.

Significantly, Bonhoeffer, in 1933 Berlin, employed certain historical critical insights to overcome what Pannenberg would later call “the crisis of the Scripture principle” caused by the historical criticism of the Bible. Bonhoeffer utilized the insight that the account of creation by the sovereign word of God in Genesis I was composed during the Babylonian exile as a critique of creation by intra-divine combat in the myth of Marduk slaying Tiamat. This insight enabled Bonhoeffer to recognize the biblical doctrine of creation as “hope projected backwards” from Israel’s knowledge of the saving God of the Exodus even as Christ too finds us at the center between primordial beginning and eschatological end.

More immediately, however, Bonhoeffer’s enunciation of the Christian reading the Bible was announced at the beginning of his lectures on the opening chapters of the First Book of Moses in the Jewish Tanakh, re-framed as the Old Testament of canonical Christian Scripture; this selection of a lecture topic in theology executed a timely and provocative choice in 1933. A scientifically literal interpretation of Genesis I as in a creationist “young Earth made in seven 24-hour days” proposition claiming scientific truth had been widely discredited by contemporaneous geology and cosmology, reducing the chapter in the eyes of educated people of the time to little more than Jewish mythology; according to this cultural trend favoring Darwinism’s account of human origins, humans are not, as the saying went, “fallen angels, but rising beasts,” thus by nature fitted to claim sovereignty over themselves, over others, and over the earth in the natural struggle for domination and living space, invoking not the blessed shalom of Genesis I but the violence of Marduk’s slaying of Tiamat.

In the cultural milieu of rising Hitlerism, Bonhoeffer boldly undertook an expressly Christian theological “reading” of Genesis 1-3. He took up the Adam-Christ typology of the apostle Paul in Romans 5 to counteract the burgeoning anti-Judaism of his theological opponents, the German Christians allied with Nazism. These voices called for the complete eradication of all traces of Jewish influence on the Christian religion of Germany. Indeed, this call to purge Christianity of its scriptural origins was perceptive. Nothing more offended Nazi sensibilities in their social-Darwinian aspirations to sovereignty, enslavement, racial purgation and territorial conquest with corresponding demand for a racially “positive Christianity” than the portrait of *one* humanity *universally* fallen from paradisaical peace with God, nature, and among themselves into the recurring cycles of violence as portrayed in the ensuing narratives of Genesis. For Nazis, this biblical opening act of universal humanity in Adam inculcated an obsequious religion of crippling guilt by which the physically weaker but devilishly shrewd Jews exercised their own covert will-to-power to stricken the conscience of stronger but guileless Aryans, paralyzing them with imaginary fear

of divine retribution and so inhibiting them from asserting their own will against these cunning and malicious manipulators.

Bonhoeffer's lectures on *Creation and Fall* doubly provoked his detractors: he would overcome historical criticism with historical criticism by taking the biblical beginning of creation and fall as the indispensable starting point of the Christian reading of canonical Scripture. Indeed, Bonhoeffer placed himself in good company. Historically, Jesus, Paul, and the rest of the New Testament authors knew no other Bible than the Hebrew Bible, whether in the Hebrew language or in Greek translations. As a pupil of the Luther Renaissance, moreover, Bonhoeffer, undertook this nuanced restatement of the Reformation Scripture principle, by drawing upon certain well-known if precritical insights from Luther's lifelong scholarly engagement with Scripture. For Bonhoeffer, the Old Testament professor Luther might well be imagined to say to this present day: "Take Christ out of the Bible and what remains falls to pieces. What is canonical is what compels Christ as God's promised salvation of the fallen creation. For this cause of creation's redemption, Jesus Christ was born a Jew."

The Bible of Old and New Testaments exists as the canon ("rule") of the church where and when the church is ruled by the gospel proclamation that first creates this community of faith (*communio sanctorum*) and ever sustains it; likewise, the gospel of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus and his promised Parousia for the "redemption of our bodies" was the norm of its life prior to canonization, being formalized in early Christian creeds organically developing from the rite of baptism. This proto-creedal norm sieved literature and selected from multiple candidates to form the New Testament witness, now joined to the prophetic witness of the Hebrew Bible, rendering it in turn as the Christian "Old Testament."

The knowledge claim of Holy Scripture as rule of faith is not, consequently, *primarily* a reference to "what really happened" in the world and human history so far as that can be ascertained by methodologically atheistic modern historiography. As Jonathan Rowlands has recently shown in his *The Metaphysics of Historical Jesus Research*, historical criticism in the 19th century especially had argued in a vicious ideological circle when claiming to discover the absence or impossibility of the God who acts in human history in so far as this absence or impossibility has been presupposed methodologically in its reconstructions of what actually happened. This exemplifies how the Bible is factually vulnerable to readings other than Christian. In fact, during Bonhoeffer's time, such "history of religions" methodology was *au courant*. History of religions, which today appears as "religious studies," subsumed historical criticism to treat Christianity as a religion alongside other religions, repositioned today in the hermeneutical framework of the universal history of the "rise of man" from biological polygenesis and bestial barbarism to civilization. Henceforth Christianity with its literature and thought was to be studied in that secular framework "objectively," i.e. without privileging theological presuppositions of canonization, even though it was the process of canonization that prevented this

literature from falling into the dust heap of history, thus resulting in its preservation for modern scholars to study “objectively.”

So, the Christian religion was to be studied by a strictly historical method within the progressive Darwinian 19th century teleological framework in which the Christian *religion* was unsurprisingly still deemed supreme, unsurprisingly, since most of these scholars were the enlightened products of this religion. Christianity, in its liberal Protestant iteration, was coronated the evolutionary victor whereas, by comparison in today’s post-Christendom, religious studies repudiates this triumphalist claim rightly enough as Western ethnocentrism. In any event, this alternative framework of universal evolutionary progress in religion in Bonhoeffer’s time discredited itself and its self-professed pretensions to scientific objectivity and ideological neutrality. Indeed it was hard at work in Germany manufacturing an “Aryan Christ,” which it represented as the supposedly scientifically ascertained “historical Jesus of Nazareth,” the illegitimate child of a Roman centurion and a “Jew fighter,” a Gentile “Galilean” patriot who died battling the Jews and whose cause Adolf Hitler was now resuming. As Doris Bergen and Richard Steigman-Gall show, the ranks of the German Christians largely filled with such “anti-doctrinal” partisans of the history of religions school.

For Bonhoeffer, the Christian claim to truth lies in the knowledge of God whose kingdom comes, as Jesus taught disciples to pray, accessed by faith in him “as the beginning, the new, the end of our whole world,” who thusly invites disciples into his own relation to the Abba Father, the God of Israel. Just so, the first dogmatic decision of early Christianity was the canonical recognition of the unity of this New Testament gospel with its Old Testament prophecy, i.e. the Hebrew Bible. This “presupposition” of gospel proclamation and new covenant faith in it makes faithful community and holy scripture into correlative concepts. This is what Bonhoeffer affirmed by calling the Bible “the book of the church,” correlatively denoting “the—*only*—church” as the “church of the Holy Scripture.” Jesus is Lord of both scripture and church so that these together proclaim the coming fulfillment of God’s reconciling reign over the alienated creation as the public demonstration at the Parousia of this very claim to theological truth, that “Jesus is Lord.” Under the Lordship of Jesus, the *primary* reference of Scripture is thus to the One who is God truly, revealing who *this* God is and what is *His* will for us and towards us. The Bible is about God, or it is about nothing. God exists as its reality reference; knowledge of God is its claim to truth *in the world*. Because this is so the Bible demands theological exegesis for proper understanding. The Bible, to be sure, also narrates human history on the earth because this God speaks Himself into the human story in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. In this light, the Bible becomes a “world absorbing narrative” (Lindbeck), the language in terms of which Christian believers understand God, the world, and themselves.

Christian triumphalism dies hard, and triumphalist variations on this truth are frequent and notorious, ranging from medieval Christian crusaderism to American

manifest destiny. That is why Lindbeck told the cautionary tale of the Crusader who yelled “Christ is Lord!” as he lopped off the head of the infidel, pointing out that the ethical performance of the Crusader substantively contradicted the theologically exegeted proposition that Jesus is Lord. If the primary reference of the Bible is to the One who is God truly, that should remind and enable practices of *epistemic humility*—we can only know God in so far as God makes Himself known to us in the promise which elicits faith. If God makes Himself known to us through history-like narratives recognized as Scripture, culminating in the passion and resurrection of Jesus as a promise for us, we must test our practices by the measure of these representations of the crucified Son shrouded in the sin of the world. That is the self-critical function of theological exegesis.

Theological exegesis of Scripture is not backwards looking apologetics, which tries to establish Christian truth on the same rationalist basis as the putatively critical but ideological “history of religions” method. The Bible references events in human history, but these serve the primary purpose of the Exodus and Easter theological identification of the One and only who is God truly in the very acts of the rescue of the enslaved and the justification of the ungodly summoning a new creation into being. Theological exegesis, the critical Christian reading of the Bible, is accordingly the forward thinking from the historical event of Christ in the proclaimed gospel that takes Scripture as a narrative of hope in Christ for the sinful self, perishing humanity, and the groaning creation.

Scripture is so inculcated by the Spirit for faith that the unity of the Testaments that the gospel of Christ requires and effects works to provide the very language of it. The Bible yields the terms and their syntactical syntheses and so elicits in Christian theological exegesis explication of its grammar and semantics. Luther called this theological explication of Scripture the Spirit’s production of *nova lingua* in reference to the creedal formulas that regulate scriptural speech to properly refer to the gospel’s God who alone demonstrates the truth of Christ’s promises. Manifestly, this demonstration is not because supposedly neutral eyes already see a rationally compelling fulfillment of predictive prophecy but because the eyes in those captured by the gospel have been opened to read the Bible. “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). The Christian “reading” of the Scriptures therefore begins with the risen Christ himself!

This opening quite precisely identifies the difference between the Christian reading of the Hebrew Bible and continuing Judaism’s reading of the same. Beginning with the rabbis, post-Temple Jews read the Bible as the “Torah [‘instruction’] of our Rabbi Moses” with supporting narrative; following the risen Christ, Christians read the Bible as a promissory narrative supplemented by moral instruction from Moses and the prophets but parsed by the Spirit-given formulas of the ecumenical creeds and Reformation confessions. Consequently, neither Jews nor Christians can claim a direct ownership and unmediated reading of Scripture, but each approach-

es the Hebrew Bible as Scripture on the basis of its own originative theological presuppositions. Sound reading takes the Hebrew letters as the Spirit intends to accord with such definite theological presuppositions. The church is the place in the world where the originative event of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus for us and our salvation is ever proclaimed and actualized. For that reason, there is “no private interpretation of Scripture” (2 Peter 1:20), but the work of understanding is undertaken by Spirit-gathered disciples together across time and space in theological exegesis.

The Bible at Work in the Spirit's Hands

Canonical Scripture provides the sanctifying Spirit with linguistic means to cultivate the basic and irreplaceable language of faith invested in Christ by the grace of God. This entails lifelong Christian learning. For, by this specification, the chief message of the Bible gets fully and radically grasped as divine action in Christ to justify the ungodly, to dethrone satanic tyrannies, and to form disciples for following the Author and Pioneer of faith through many trials and tribulations on the way to entering the eternal kingdom.

It is important to differentiate Bonhoeffer's foregoing theological program for biblical exegesis from the modern distortion of fundamentalism (the Bible as direct object of *human* faith rather than the Spirit's instrument of providing for *divine* faith). The slogan, *sola scriptura*, accordingly, needs Bonhoeffer's nuanced reconceptualization insofar as the slogan was conformed in the modern period to the foundationalist aspirations of rationalist epistemology as if somehow the Bible presented evidence that demands from the rational reader a verdict of assent to geological, biological, astrophysical, and/or sundry other scientific truth claims. The modern biblicists asked, in reference to the unique and perfect revelation of a perfect Being, how could the Bible be otherwise? Scripture was conceived a priori as a uniquely miraculous text providing a fully modern epistemological foundation on which to construct a “positive” theology, but this approach entailed that all its individual propositions must also be credible as scientific propositions.

Just as Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, such a Bible with its representations of history being seriously and increasingly queried seemingly *had* to disintegrate under the modern knowledge regime of empirical science. Certainly, this elicited apologetic counterthrusts, yet they were to no avail. The very act of questioning, no matter the results, unveiled and forced not only a plausibility crisis but a recognition of the undeniable variety of genres within Scripture, all systematically ignored in their diverse semantics and forced into the Procrustean bed of across-the-board propositionalism claiming scientific validity. Hermeneutically, Jonah's days in the belly of the whale bore the same propositional weight as the entombment of Jesus, which it foreshadowed. Tortuous claims to truth stand and fall together on this rationalist schematization and hermeneutical malpractice, but this bad faith belief

in Scripture not only *had* to be but *deserved* to be discredited “as determined by all the methods of philological and historical research” that it had provoked for clumsy and misleading readings of biblical texts and for putting, in Luther’s words, dialectics (logical analysis) before grammar (syntactical parsing, i.e. theological exegesis). In modern form, this approach only yielded a Protestant recrudescence of medieval scholasticism (at its hermeneutical worst).

The Islamic reference above is relevant because the model of revelation as divine dictation strictly connected to unadulterated human recitation without any interference from human receptivity accompanied the Qur’an’s polemical attack on the supposed corruption of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. This polemic increasingly impressed Western Christendom as an ideological advantage with Islam’s advance and apparent success in forging a unified culture in support of imperialist expansion. Historians have often remarked that articulate theories of plenary inspiration arose and predominated only in the post-Reformation authority dispute between Protestantism and Catholicism, a time of acute pressure also from advancing Islam. These polemical pressures coupled with the correlation between perfect being metaphysics (“ontotheology”) produced a corresponding notion of inerrancy as a criterion of putative divine revelation in a written book.

With this background in mind, it is not surprising that contemporary practitioners of history of religions scholarship have turned their critical eyes upon the Qur’an. Stephen J. Shoemaker, in *Creating the Qur’an: A Historical-Critical Study*, unabashedly articulates the secularist and progressivist ideology of the method (he likens his approach to that of Bart Ehrman, a post-Christian and post-theological scholar of early Christianity) in his pioneering deconstruction of Islam’s holy book. He argues that the text we have emerged as a later, standardized edition superseding diverse early Muslim textual traditions of the Qur’an to support the imperial ambitions of the caliphate. What matters from this is the disestablishment of *any* conceit to possess a miraculously produced and protected human text beyond the reach of “philological and historical research.” Christian faith need not fear such research into the humanity of the Bible any more than sober inquiry into the historical profile of Jesus. As we have argued, what matters is the gospel presupposition on the basis of which we read the Bible, the resurrection knowledge that makes remembrance of Jesus as necessary as it is integral to the sense of resurrection as His vindication. For Bonhoeffer’s “church of the Scripture” to become functional again, biblicist disillusionment, *so understood* as disillusionment regarding the covert modern epistemological foundationalism hidden behind the biblicist boast of “orthodoxy,” must take place. This disillusionment has in fact much afflicted liberal Lutheranism which has largely given up on Bible teaching and catechesis because no alternative to discredited biblicism is available. Polling shows specifically that young men leaving for nondenominational Christianity account for the move with the complaint that they never learned the Bible in the Lutheran church. What an indictment! The alternative is Bonhoeffer’s theological exegesis!

However, the antecedent disillusionment was created *not only* by the history of religions method of historical criticism but also by failed defenses against this criticism in the doctrine of inerrancy and its Procrustean bed propositionalism in Protestant biblicism. Overcoming biblicism to learn the Bible anew as the very language of faith will not come about by sheer contradiction or an aloof disregard for the very real “crisis of the Scripture principle.” Rather, the gospel must take the initiative to reframe the very question of truth by reasserting *the saving Word of God* in the Easter report of the resurrection of Jesus as articulated in “word of the cross” in I Cor 1-2, the “folly of God that is wiser than the wisdom of men,” this reframing figured in the Johannine confrontation of Jesus and Pilate.

As NT Wright has correctly insisted, incredulity about resurrection is not an objection to the Easter kerygma but an essential component of its meaning. How so? The resurrection claim to truth concerns the knowledge *of God* “who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that are not.” This apocalyptic reframing to require knowledge *of the saving God* forces Pilate helplessly to ask, “What is truth?” His worldly certainties, even at their best, are now made moot. Likewise, unbelieving defenses of the Bible premised on worldly methodological presuppositions must also be abandoned. The animating anxiety for such apologists has been the desire for recognition as a modern person of science. Historically, the consequent reduction of the Bible to an archaeological artifact can only be weakly contradicted, not met and overcome, by asserting a priori the Bible’s inerrancy against the evidence of its own pages while in the process absurdly reducing faith to a dogmatic dismissal of contrary evidence while claiming to be scientific. Indeed, it has been a fool’s errand to defend the Bible on such Qur’anic grounds of unfiltered divine dictation flawlessly recorded since the very presupposition of Christian reading of Scripture is a perduring folly to Greeks and a stumbling block to Jews. The Christian reading of the Bible does not transcend this scandal of “Christ crucified” but insists upon it as the only proper way to read the Bible at all. The folly of God truly is wiser than human wisdom as the folly of God is the crucified Christ risen for the creative destruction of the self-certain world so that it be created anew for the clean fresh air of self-entrusting faith in its rectification and redemption. Such is the gospel’s claim to truth, and its claim on the Bible yields the language of faith.

The problem herein originated in early Protestantism, which, in a subtle but profound distortion of its original meaning, took “Scripture alone” to mean the sole miraculously given source and ground of authority over Roman claims to papal magisterium. This is a subtle but profound distortion of its original meaning. *Sola scriptura*, in paralleling *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, is in the Latin ablative case with an instrumental meaning modifying the *solus Christus*, in the Latin nominative case. *Sola scriptura* does *not* mean that we read *only* the perfect Bible from which we then deduce *perfectly lucid* propositions to systematize in constructing a revealed worldview. Indeed, the originative, intentionally *paradoxical* gospel proclamation of the “Christ crucified,” or what is the same, “this crucified body raised from the dead and exalted to lordship,” can easily be lost amid Scripture’s diverse testimo-

nies through many centuries. The Gospel's paradoxical assertion of divine truth to confound Pilate was thus obscured from the view of theologians busy harmonizing discrepancies between propositions to preserve biblical "inerrancy."

Sola scriptura means that we know God in Christ solely by means of the apostolic and prophetic testimonies to Him and in which, as the risen One, He ever presents *Himself* bearing the ignominious bodily scars as trophies of surpassing love for us and for our salvation. Apart from this key, the Bible becomes a closed and locked book, no matter how wildly it is swung about or how dramatically it is pounded. Usually lying dusty and unread on a bookshelf or opportunistically invoked to sanction some secular politics, the text is rarely studied seriously on its own terms and in its own voice in the Christian reading of it, but is censored by frightened religious authorities, falsified in revisionist makeovers, or even superseded by supposedly new revelations. However, when Christ-keyed and Spirit-opened, the Bible is actually read in Bonhoeffer's way for the holy communion of Christian faith, serving the content of the proclaimed word of God in the Holy Spirit's sanctifying action of opening minds and hearts to the saving Lordship of Jesus.

The New Battle over the Bible

Perceiving this integral and dynamic relation of the sanctifying Spirit to the Bible allows us to see clearly how the battle line has shifted in the recent generation from the increasingly passé rationalist challenge to biblical historicity to the contemporary assault on its *holiness*. Professor Jeff Kloha drew attention to this challenge in his January 2026 article in *Promissio* by exhibiting a revolting billboard image of an enslaved person alongside the biblical citation, "Slaves, obey your masters." An Association of Atheists erected the propaganda to defame and discredit the Bible. The Bible, which can be read in many ways, is indeed dynamite; it is to be handled with care, for the *closed Bible is unholy* and indeed works *unholiness*, exploding in the hands of misusers.

The proper name for the Bible is the *Holy Scriptures*, the product once given and ever utilized for our reception by the *Holy Spirit*, the Lord and giver of life to the dying, grace to the disgraced, and righteousness to the sinner—*only* the dying, the disgraced, the sinner in whose fellowship the holy Church of Christ consists. Truthfully, the only proper Scriptural defense occurs via opening the text with its Christ key for its Spirit-proper use, to articulate a proper and saving work of surpassing love. When this proper designation of the sanctifying Spirit's book for the Spirit's sanctified community in this still contested and unredeemed world gets grasped, we become acutely aware of how the Bible has come under assault today as the *unholy* source of all sorts of *evils*: ecclesiastical triumphalism, know-nothing fundamentalism, inferiorizing stratagems of cruel racism, and sexism and/or class elitism.

"Indeed, yes! How good of you to notice," children of the Reformation might respond to this new line of attack, *if only* they recalled how controversial was the

Spirit-driven Jesus—by public reputation, “a drunkard and a glutton” for initiating fellowship with “tax collectors and sinners” and at length *legally* crucified as an apparent antinomian and blasphemer, a would-be insurrectionist mockingly crucified as “King of the Jews.” Such narrative material filling the Bible is as *scandalous* as the lonely loaf and mere wine cup seated on the Christian altar, profane things no longer bloodied by animal sacrifice but repurposed as a table at which the Spirit provides the same fellowship of Jesus with his forgiven sinners. Like the Holy Spirit at work in both author and reader of the Bible to convict concerning sin, righteousness and judgment, the Spirit’s scandalously “holy” Bible is, therefore, materially *dangerous*; like the Lord’s Supper it is poison for those, whether would-be friend or self-understood foe, who do not discern the body of Christ hidden at the cross but now present in the loaf. Here we witness a six-shooter Bible brandished about, a closed book weaponized to beat down others, *as if* Bible-toting Christians had swallowed the Holy Spirit as if to make the Bible come alive and come true. In the hands of such *unbelieving believers* trying to make the Bible do *something, anything*, the Bible becomes a weapon advancing the very unholiness the sanctifying Spirit would expose and uproot what is at root, namely, we who read. Manifestly, we have here a *bad fact*: the Bible can be, and too often has been, used as a *closed* book by closed-minded Christians to build themselves up by putting others down, and so in *unholy* ways when the Christ-key to its actual holiness is unknown because his Spirit is neglected in our reading.

Indeed, the foregoing list of biblical abuse could continue as it characterizes much of the toxic Christianity today, although it does not need to do so to convince those with genuine Reformation insight into the serious problem caused by imposing on the Bible alien notions of holiness with which to keep it closed and weaponized. By shutting out the Spirit in whom alone the “literal” sense of the biblical text is given and found, the reference ever and only to God in Christ befriending sinners gets lost. Heirs of the Reformation, though, should know better about the Bible’s real material problematic: the Holy Spirit’s convicting narratives of Adam’s disobedience and despicable scapegoating of Eve, Cain’s murderous envy, naked Noah’s hungover cursing of his son, the hubris of the tower builders of Babel, Abraham’s cowardice at the expense of Sarah, the pious near murder of Isaac, cheating Jacob’s conniving, and the treachery of Joseph’s envious brothers in a brief list of only the brutally realistic narratives about common sense morality in post-paradisiacal history. The holiness of Scriptures does not consist in the alien presumption that the narrative provides a unique and perfect treasure chest of admirable portraits of human behavior providing readers with ethical models.

The actual holiness of the Bible is shown in the sanctifying Spirit’s scandalous election of such unmistakably fallen humans: the creator clothing the guilty and exposed Adam and promising to Eve the seed that will crush the serpent’s head, preserving the murderer Cain’s life from vengeance with a mark, giving aged Abraham and Sarah the promised child in spite of infirmity and barrenness crowned with mocking doubt, preserving Isaac’s life by repeal of God’s own command,

wrestling with the rascal Jacob until he is made new, blessed and renamed Israel, even preserving the lives of Joseph's wicked brothers who had sold him into slavery, exposing him to death, but now are saved from starvation by this very brother whom they had cruelly betrayed. In neglecting such saving acts of God for humans on behalf of Luther's "real, not fictitious sinners," we no longer find in this biblical narrative the point of the election of grace that sanctifies the disgraced. Apart from this key, the supposed Morality Play that remains in the Bible cannot but function as a toxic recommendation to a perverse morality of divinely sanctioned status and authority. As such, the closed Bible is rendered an *unholy* Scripture. Consequently, Kant thought he could do Christian ethics better without the confusing Bible, especially the Scriptures of Israel, without dogma, and without theological exegesis. He actually had to get rid of these to distill an ethic of duty and claim it as the rational legacy of Christian religion for an enlightened age. However, one cannot do Christian ethics apart from Christian doctrine, the saving knowledge of the justifying God of sinful humanity.

The *Christian* problem of taking the Scriptures literally in primary reference to human history but not spiritually in primary reference to the saving God in action in the darkness of human history is an ancient issue. The same scandal offended ancient Gnostics from the earliest times through Augustine's autobiographical account of the decade he spent in the Manichaean sect. We have ample evidence of it in the moralistic revisionism attempted in the early apocryphal gospels, as Simon Gathercole demonstrates in his *The Genuine Jesus and the Counterfeit Christs*. Indeed, when the media a decade ago sensationalized the scholarly rediscovery of the third century apocryphal *Gospel of Judas*, which suggested that Judas alone understood the captivity of the divine spark in the physical body and soul of Jesus and came to its rescue by betraying physical Jesus to crucifixion in order to liberate the divine spark from its material and social imprisonment, I wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper chastising the sensationalist reporting, countering that no responsible "philological and historical" scholar gives a lick of historical credibility to the *Gospel of Judas*. To my amazement, a relative newcomer to the congregation I was serving vigorously complained to me about his disillusionment by my letter—he had hoped the *Gospel of Judas* would give us the truth about Jesus, set us free from Christian dogma, indeed expose the biblical *canon* as the retroactive imposition of an exclusionary rule upon the healthy diversity of early Christianity and its gloriously heterodox literature.

The attack on the holiness of the Bible comes in a variety of forms. From a conservative direction, it comes from a puritanical "don't drink, don't smoke, and don't dance" hygienic regimen that privileges personal self-control over social responsibility, not to mention impugning simple Ecclesiastes-joy in created life, including the erotic celebration of the Song of Solomon. From a liberal sensibility, "inclusivity" works as an ironically exclusionary trump card which gets played ultimately against the particularities of the human body, the people of Israel, and

the apocalyptic Jew Jesus. From the more radical revisionist perspective, freedom to reimagine a supposedly more relevant Jesus than the biblical version to be the symbol of our emancipatory struggles is the very task undertaken in much so-called “public” theology. Each of these assaults turn on the same axiomatic, *Spiritless* literalism of decaying modernism, cherry-picking their ways through the closed Bible to stitch together usable facts with which to take sides rather than make sides in the identity wars of contemporary culture.

Central for Scriptural holiness is the scandalous particularity of the crucified Jew Jesus, who was made to be ugly as sin under the dreadful curse for the sake of the saving deed of God. By His resurrection from the pollution of death, the correspondingly scandalous justification of the ungodly is proclaimed to those who put away idols to put their trust in this risen Jesus. This complex event of the Holy Spirit spiritually effecting the cross and resurrection of Jesus in believers is nothing other than the true holiness of the life-giving Spirit of Jesus and His Father who for this cause inspired, elected, collected, and united prophetic and apostolic writings around this saving deed, the Spirit who as well continually provides for proper interpretation in the linguistic matrix of Christian faith. If we neglect this work of the Spirit, the Bible undoubtedly falls into the hands of impenitent, unforgiven, and unforgiving sinners to be used for unholy self-justification and scapegoating, making the Bible doubly unholy precisely by “burying Christ” contrary to the Spirit’s purpose. In the hands of the sanctifying Spirit, though, the Bible gets deployed to articulate the risen Christ bringing divine justification of the ungodly, the dethronement of satanic tyrannies and formation in discipleship. In order for the Bible to be the holy matrix of faith, this crucial differentiation must be observed. The letters of Scripture can be read either according to the Spirit who raised crucified Jesus from the dead or spiritlessly according to the letter in many different ways. So Paul, Augustine, and Luther insisted. Ironically, then, contemporary critics of the Bible’s alleged holiness are right, although they do not understand why—the letter *in fact* kills. The Spirit *actually* gives life, above all to these letters!

The Letter Must Also Be Known

Attack on the holiness of the Bible forms a contemporary battle line that supersedes while still presupposing the previous attack on the Bible’s credibility that came from *untheological* historical criticism. The same difficulty emerges when defenders of the Bible’s historicity give its critics further ammunition with which to attack. Basically, historical criticism proposed to illuminate and also critique the literary representations of biblical narrative by reconstructing the history of what actually happened. Supplied with this reconstruction, one could deconstruct biblical representations and reveal ideological motivations. Such criticism of Scripture by historical reconstruction is how theology experienced the rise of the sciences within its own domain.

We see today after several centuries, however, that the grand ambition of historical criticism has come to a dead-end because, given the nature of the sources, the reconstruction of what really happened lies beyond scholarly grasp. Still, the destabilization of the doctrine of inerrancy in the process elicited witless defenses of the Bible in arguments on exactly the same lines that one could demonstrate with historical evidence sufficiently to lend credence to the biblical narratives. “Evidence that demands a verdict” apologetics provided an endless supply for mockery: remnants of Noah’s Ark or the Tower of Babel, sea monsters that could have swallowed and regurgitated Jonah, astronomic singularities that could account for Joshua’s sun standing still or the star of Bethlehem, and young Earth theories of God planting dinosaur fossils in the earth to try the faith the Bible believers. All of this amounts to so much bad faith distraction because biblical history is not about history in any modern sense but about the knowledge of God in humanity’s history with God. Anyone who is rigorously concerned with what the text says sees this focus of the literature.

When I researched the biblical Book of Joshua in preparation for writing my Brazos theological commentary, I quite deliberately chose to study a variety of scholars spanning the usual spectrum. What I was quite surprised by, however, is how many of the so-called “conservative” biblical scholars freely employed not only the results of historical criticism but, within their theological limits or commitments, the method itself. This is because in spite of the method’s classical conceit that the history of “what really happened” can be so securely reconstructed and then deployed to criticize the biblical narrative, the very critical questioning of the text by the “philological and historical” inquiry opened up to understanding much of what was actually going on in the many genres of the Bible.

For instance, the Book of Joshua, which is seemingly a “genocidal” narrative of the extermination of the Canaanites by divine command, actually narrates the failure of *herem* warfare to accomplish the extermination of the Canaanites and instead highlights the paradoxical inclusion of Canaanites, paradigmatically the *prostitute* Rahab who confessed YHWH who fights for us, a confession noticeably superior to that of the Israelite spies whom she concealed and saved. Rather than nervously looking for archaeological evidence of the collapsed walls of Jericho or the slaughtered remnants of the Canaanites, attention is redirected instead to the biblical author’s sober realization that Israel under the subsequent monarchies had re-duplicated the very system of malice and injustice that prevailed in the Canaanite city states in cahoots with Imperial Egypt which Joshua was commissioned to replace with a covenant federation of the chosen people under the kingship of YHWH. The gospel message of the book—“Fear not. It is the Lord who fights for you!”—certainly makes a cognitive claim both historically and theologically by referring to the historical fact of Israel’s pre-monarchal occupation of Canaan, even if the varying representations of this serve the predominantly theological claim with a characteristic twist: the free God who fights for you as His chosen can also fight against you if you defect from his covenant purposes. That very twist was employed

by canonical Joshua to interpret Israel's history under judgment, thus leading to the present plight of the postexilic community now made into "slaves in our own land," as Ezra bitterly lamented.

Bible's Best Defense? The Resurrection Gospel Offense!

What holds theological primacy, and thus theologically determines our reading of Scripture, is the proclaimed gospel of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, powerfully revealing Him as the true Son of his Abba Father, the God of Israel, hence making him both Lord and Christ. In its rudiments, this is the basic language of faith, the content of which is discovered in studying the Scriptures that speak of Him. In just this faith, we come to read the Scriptures for instruction in true holiness by the sanctifying Spirit of Jesus and His Father, the very One who inspired, gathered, preserved, and united the prophetic and apostolic witnesses as the church's primary rule of faith. Accordingly, the criterion of New Testament canonicity was not, as often suggested in modern scholarship, either real or presumed "historicity," i.e. closeness to the historical apostles, just as historicity had not been the criterion of selection for the Hebrew Scriptures inherited by Jesus and the apostles. Rather, both the Shema in Israel and the baptismal rule of faith in the church provided the measuring stick by which the early communities of faith recognized which writings were authoritative, just as Luther intuited centuries later that what is apostolic is what compels Christ as saving Lord. Thus, the hermeneutical primacy of the proclaimed gospel is acknowledged as the "canon" (Greek: "rule") by which literature was canonized as Holy Scripture.

Opened up this way to attack unholy sanctimony by unveiling the true sanctification of Luther's "real, not fictitious" sinners by the election of the sanctifying Spirit to justifying faith in the risen Christ, the Bible becomes contemporary to believers of every time and place, providing the master narrative of human history with God and the language with which faith becomes articulate in the contested and groaning creation, readied for apocalyptic combat against sin, death, and the power of the devil. The Bible delivers the terms, the exclusive particles, and the purpose clauses with which to differentiate the juridical action of God in the law to reveal sin and execute judgment from the electing, rectifying, and sanctifying work of the promising God to give righteousness, life, and peace in the gospel proclamation. Enlightened by the Spirit in this way, we are keen to identify and repudiate unholy, human-all-too-human uses of the Bible to shame, humiliate, exclude, even exterminate others "not of our fold." Taught by the Spirit in the school of the Bible, however, we grow into the Spirit's work of uniting contrite sinners to the true and just judgment of the cross for the sake their vindication, exaltation, and inclusion in union with Christ to true and eternal life.

The best defense of the Bible is a good offense! We read the Bible in the conviction of Spirit-gifted faith that Christ is risen for us as for all sinners in the sight of

God. In this Easter light, we read the Bible rightly and use it for the holy purposes of consolation and new life. If we must, we rebuke unholy abuse of the Bible as a human weapon deployed against fellows rather than the Spirit's weapon against the "father of lies." Likewise, we commit the holy rebuke of sin to the only One competent to issue it, the sanctifying Spirit who instructs the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. We are to know as martyr-witnesses that defensiveness betrays little faith. We do not get trapped, therefore, into defending the Bible on the basis of alien frameworks of supposed perfection or holiness, other than ad hoc public interventions to correct egregious and malicious falsehoods. Rather, the Scriptures are to be used to equip the people of God for living faith, articulate hope, and winsome love. —PRH

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Guest Editorial

Before the Commandments Were Written, There Was Singing

Amy Schifrin

ABSTRACT: In the liturgies of the church, generation after generation have been drawn into the foundational events by which God's promises have been made known in the Holy Scriptures through a performative doxological eucharistic hermeneutic that is fundamental to the shape and function of Word and Sacrament worship practices. This editorial essay reflects upon the Ordinary of the historic Mass, the Proper Prefaces, and the development of hymnody as the eucharistic *ordo* sings the scriptures doxologically. The ritual performance of the eucharistic liturgy that leads to the canonization of the scriptures and the canonization of the patterning of the *ordo*, brings the living Word of God repeatedly into the eucharistic assembly. As the church gathered in the Triune name experiences the presence of God where he has promised to be, it is unified in its life as *homo adorans*, for such a glorious sounding leads the assembly forward in faith to their final destination, the heart of God.

Before the commandments were written, there was singing, dancing, praying, and the retelling of life-giving stories. There were events through which people received the presence of God in His majesty and mercy, which brought about both awe and liberation. They could have died, but like the first human who was formed from the dust and received the breath of life in his nostrils, they found themselves breathing. Remembrance, and repeated expressions of the remembrance of such events (anamnesis), grew as ritual enactments in word and sign led to the conjoined forms of the holy scriptures and the patterning of the eucharistic *ordos*. Both of these structures developed forms of canonization in the 4th century. The liturgy, as the place for the public reading and chanting of texts, became a performative doxological eucharistic hermeneutic for the decisions as to what would be included in the canon. Within the sounding of these remembrances and their proximity to the Eucharist the assembly received the scriptural words as canon, true witnesses to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Before the commandments were written in stone, Miriam sang. As she voiced in the most joyous way that God had saved her and her people from drowning in the sea, being slaughtered by riders on horseback, as well as from the hunger and exhaustion of forced labor, she led the women in an exuberant proclamation of praise and thanksgiving through song, dance, and timbrel. My Lord, what a sight they must have been; what a sound they must have made! In that moment, Miriam was the quintessential *homo adorans*, giving glory to God with her whole being and leading others to join in such stunning praise.

About three months later, the Commandments were given on Mt. Sinai. This is how we hear of the event being recalled in the Book of Exodus. Then, when the scriptures were at last written down, after having been passed on orally/aurally for a number of centuries, we see/read and, more pointedly, hear in the first commandment an echo of Miriam's act of devotion to the one God who is who He is, and who promises to be where He has promised to be. *Promissio*... and he has promised to be *with us*, Emmanuel!

In event, remembrance, elaboration, translation, ritualizing, script, the passing of generations, the correlation of ancient events within later contexts, and the sounded remembrances of what we know in our bones, having heard it while even yet in the womb, (think of the baby Jesus hearing Mary's voice as she sang the Magnificat), the church in its birth within Judaism still sings God's promises to be where He has promised to be, doing so with all those whom He has created in His image and likeness. For God has made the human race to be stewards of one another and of this world that He loves so dearly.

We might think of it in this way: a kairotic event happens, God making Himself known to a person or to a people, leading to the broad category of prayer on the part of those who have had such an encounter. This prayer can be anywhere on the spectrum from lament to praise since the recipients of such a divine experience can run the gamut from overwhelming terror to uncontainable elation. There is a desire within the human heart to both remember and to voice that experience in relationship to the source of this divine power at the same time as we express such feelings to the community in which we dwell. We seek to communicate that we have, in some way, received from the creator of this unexpected experience what was hitherto unknowable.

In the new and now rightfully ordered desire to communicate with the one who may yet be revealed as God, the participants/recipients use their voices to cry out in whatever language is in their hearts, leading to an invocation, a supplication, or even a sigh too deep for words, trusting that such divine power will be benevolent. *Have mercy on me, O Lord, have mercy*.... Over time such prayers take on a pattern that can be repeated long after the initial kairotic experience. That pattern includes a spectrum of prayer genres that are intertwined with elements of narration. It is from such a pattern, one that is defined by actions that are accompanied now by words spoken or chanted, that the nascent community's

rituals arose. And it is from the desire for such rituals to be repeated that what we come to know as holy scripture emerges, develops, and spreads from within this ritual frame. Mirroring God's cosmic design, these rituals are patterned with repeated events of remembrance, hope, and faith that lead to the formation and strengthening of a new community, a community whose identity is rooted in the one God whose promises are trustworthy and true. Each Christian community or group of communities develops distinctive yet often broadly recognizable rituals, whether a community's self-description would be in a sacramental/liturgical, free church, or somewhere in-between. In each enclave, the rituals that one receives by which one is grafted into the community are the patterning by which the assembly makes meaning out of human existence *coram deo*. Through the assembly's rituals, each of us experiences why we were made for love, for mercy, for joy, for praise, and for community.

St. Paul's correspondence with individual congregations could be copied and shared with other assemblies as they gathered "for supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings/*eucharistia*" (1 Timothy 2:1). As early as C.E. 150, Justyn Martyr's work tells of the memoirs of the apostles and the workings of the prophets being sounded in the eucharistic assembly to bring the assembly to that same act through which Cleopas and his companion's eyes were opened in the breaking of bread (Luke 24). Implicitly, a new layer of meaning is brought forth by a text or memoir's ritual placement. "Private" readings of sacred texts could not have been easily imagined, as the readings were given their status constituent of the eucharistic rite enacted and enfolded in the gathered assembly. The texts themselves were being given an identity as the Word of the One who said "I am" through their proximity to the breaking of bread in the earliest eucharistic liturgies. The writings that formed the canon of the New Testament were those that were voiced as the early church came together to give thanks (*eucharistia*) following the pattern of Jesus on the road to Emmaus, a pattern that has its own roots in the worship of the first temple along with the paschal remembrance of the Seder that was the custom of Jesus in his public ministry.

In the life of the church, the Word's home is in the eucharistic *ordo*. By the 4th century, the shape of the liturgy grew into a continuous conversation between the performed (usually sung) scriptural and historic texts of the ordinary of the mass (*kyrie, gloria, credo, sanctus, and agnus dei*) and a cycle of scriptural lessons, spoken/chanted and heard, that become the scaffolding of the doxological catechism that comes to us in the liturgical year. It should not be a surprise to us that our reverence for the witness of the Holy Scriptures was born and nurtured in a doxological frame through which the Holy Spirit binds the people to the Word incarnate. Using a model of Eucharistic praying as far back as *Apostolic Tradition*, we hear, "Remembering, then, his death and resurrection, we lift (*offerimus tibi est*) this bread and cup before you, giving you thanks that you have made us worthy to stand before you and to serve you as your priestly people. And we ask you: Send your Spirit upon these gifts of your church; gather into one all who share this bread and wine; fill us

with your Holy Spirit to establish our faith in truth, that we may praise and glorify you through your Son Jesus Christ” (Eucharistic Prayer IV, LBW). Such a sacrifice of praise is how the assembly responds to God’s self-giving.

For Christians, this unity of Word and Sacrament continually reinforces the identity of the gathered assembly in defining who they are in relationship to God, to one another, and to the created world. Such ritual enactment also tells the participants how they will be guided as they journey through any and every wilderness. This journey is now marked by an eschatological sense of direction that connects the baptized as the body of Christ to the marriage supper of the Lamb, when joy will lead us from promise to its glorious fulfillment. Such a vision has the power to shape our attitudes towards a common liturgical life. With the Risen Christ ever present (“Join our prayers with those of our servants of every time and everyplace and unite them with the ceaseless petitions of our great high priest until he comes again”), we are moved again and again from death to life. The Word of the Lord coming to us through the appointed lections, preaching, prayers, and hymnody, as ordered through the Mass and professed in the assembly’s acclamation that “Christ has died, Christ is risen. Christ will come again,” is how God, who is ever-present, is making Himself known for us.

The language of the scriptures (for the writers of the New Testament authors, the Old Testament was their scripture) and the ritual and calendar of synagogue and temple shaped how the church sought to express and receive God’s presence. The assembly, gathered in the name of the Holy One who ruled the universe, was the place (think *Gnadenstuhl*/mercy seat) from which they received the language of the Lord God, the language of doxology that formed their doxologies. Through the sounding of the Word of the One, whose mercy and presence knew no end, the yet fragmentary scriptures were received through the vocalizing of chant, song, and speech of humans made in the image and likeness of God. When they prayed and sang and danced...and loved in memory of Christ’s command to “Do this,” they endured through occupying forces, terror, imprisonment, and at last, martyrdom. Death has no dominion over this community, a community that has been converted, not in the triumphalist way that conversion is now spoken of as when a Jew comes to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, but in an existential conversion from violence to suffering love, like Paul on the road to Damascus (Act 9: 1-22). This community is now being gathered in the name of the One who, risen from the dead, lives and rules eternally.

The ritualizing that forms the ordinary of the mass, seasonal propers, growth of appointed lectionaries, and hymnody carry us through the church year as a doxological catechism, which is imbued with the power to give us strength to walk into every new day. We cry for mercy in the *kyrie* in solidarity with all those who live in fear, guilt, isolation, or shame. From the echo of the prophet Isaiah in the face of the Assyrians (Is 33:2), and King David, whose sins are now known to all (Psalm 51:1), and the lepers on the road, who had no earthly hope of living with the larger

human community (Luke 17:11-19), we cry out in the *kyrie* for that mercy which only God can fully give. We sing with the angels of every age in the *gloria*, praising the God who laid the foundations of the earth (Job 38:7) as we simultaneously praise God for the birth of the Emmanuel (Luke 2:13). We lift our eyes with the psalmist as we confess a historic yet living *credo*, recalling the One who created heaven and earth (Ps. 121:1) and the Son of God, crucified and Risen, and the breath of the Spirit (John 20:19-22;26-28) along with the works of the Spirit in whom we are formed as we were cleansed in the baptismal waters (Mt. 28:19-20). We bow deeply, just as Isaiah had taught us to do in the *sanctus*, through which our whole bodies receive again the resonance of the *gloria* as we confess the true name of the Triune God, "Holy, Holy, Holy" (Isaiah 6:3). Only then, as our eyes are opened in the breaking of bread, do we come to understand a ram in the thicket (Genesis 22:13) as John the Baptist had understood it (John 1:29) when we sing the *agnus dei*. It's all there for us, week after week, Sunday after Sunday. God, through the doxological performance of his Word, makes himself known to every generation.

Between the *sursum corda*, in which even the voices of Boaz and Ruth are remembered (Ruth 2:4), and the *sanctus*, which gives us multiple to reasons to bow (as in a dance move) before the LORD not only through Isaiah but also Psalm 118 and its later appearance in Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we come to the proper preface. The preface directly relates to a liturgical season or festival day, explicitly giving us a biblical text that sounds the performative doxological eucharistic hermeneutic that helps us understand the appointed texts that have been proclaimed. This is done in the same manner by which Jesus told of all that happened in Jerusalem in that holiest of weeks. Just as the with the Prayer of the Day (the "Collect"), which precedes the texts, collects the thoughts of our hearts and calls us to attention to the proclamation of the biblical texts soon to be heard, the preface links that which has been proclaimed to the breaking of bread by which our hearts will also be broken open to receive the presence of the One who is right where He has promised to be.

Each preface opens with an expansion of the last versicle of the *sursum corda*: "It is right to give [Him/our] thanks and praise" in such a way that the assembly is led to give thanks and praise when its voices are joined to the seraphim and cherubim in the *sanctus*. The preface will echo and expand the congregation's response, whether "it is indeed right and salutary" or "it is our duty and delight," for those who want to hear a little law/gospel dialectic before we are given the words of a particular witness to a foundational event recorded in the scriptures. Through the prefaces, we are repeatedly grafted into the salvific events that are witnessed to in the written scriptures, which are, in so many ways, the holy residue of the speaking of God.

In his "Sermon on Christmas Day," John Donne once wrote that "His birth and death but were one continual act, and his Christmas-Day and Good Friday are but the evening and morning of the one and same day." If we examine the prefaces, we

are woven into this unified thread that carries us from conception to ascension and then to the Holy Spirit alive in the whole earth. Every preface is woven through with connected threads, both implicitly and explicitly, which tie us to the confession of faith in the historic creeds.

In the words of Prosper of Aquitaine, who, in his argument against the semi-Pelagians in the 5th century took 1 Timothy 2:1 for his inspiration of *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*, we learn that what is prayed is what is and what has been believed. These prefaces date back to the Gregorian and/or Gelasian Sacramentaries that were codified in the 6th and 7th centuries. The following five prefaces for festival days, some of which are also used seasonally, come into English through Cranmer's translation, with a bit of editing. Each preface is addressed to the Father, then is centered by showing forth by the Son, and, while not named explicitly, is emboldened to be sung in the power of the Spirit. Each one opens in the same manner: "It is indeed right and salutary that we should at all times and places offer thanks and praise to you, O Lord, holy Father, through Christ our Lord." Here, they are presented together so we can hear what John Donne bequeathed to the church in defining all that has happened to our Lord as evening and morning of the one and same day.

Christmas

...In the wonder and mystery of the Word made flesh you have opened the eyes of faith to a new and radiant vision of your glory; that, beholding the God made visible, we may be drawn to love the God whom we cannot see...

Easter

...But chiefly we are bound to praise you for the glorious resurrection of our Lord; for he is the true passover Lamb who gave himself to take away our sin, who by his death has destroyed death, and by his rising has brought us to eternal life. And so with Mary Magdalene...

Ascension

...who, after his resurrection, appeared openly to his disciples and, in their sight, was taken up into heaven, that he might make us partners in his divine nature...

Pentecost

...who rose beyond the bounds of death and [on this day] as he had promised, poured out your Spirit of life and power upon the chosen disciples. At this the whole earth exults in boundless joy...

The Holy Trinity

...You have revealed your glory as the glory also of your Son and of the Holy Spirit: three persons, equal in majesty, undivided in splendor, yet one Lord, one God, ever to be adored in your everlasting glory...

Afterwards, depending on the season, we are led with simplicity or elaboration to the *sanctus* to praise God's name and join the unending song of the church on earth and in heaven.

The Ascension, since like all holy days that fall on a Thursday, can often be overlooked, so it entails further consideration. Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus is taken up into the heavens, and the preface, in the words of 2 Peter 1:4, tells us why—*so that he might make us partakers of His divine nature*. On Ascension Day we celebrate the completion of His work of salvation for the sake of whole world. As we hear and believe the promise of His Ascension, we understand that our own lives are now lived leaning into kingdom time, eternal time, the time where God's glory has no end. All that we are and all that we do is to give God glory, for this is what we are created to be—creaturely partakers of His divine nature. The doxological proclamation of the Biblical text is the key to experiencing the unity of scripture and liturgy.

Now we know that there is also much singing of scripture through the hymns that is integral to the liturgy. Processional, *de tempore*, offertory, distribution, and recessional hymns have carried the faith from the gathered assembly into homes, fields, hospitals, prisons, campgrounds, nursing homes, and even pubs. Their portability and memorability, either in strophic or cyclic form, has filled out the scaffolding of the *ordo*. Christian communities were singing before the New Testament was written. "Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus" quotes St. Paul in Philippians 2. He will also urge us to sing hymns, chants, and spiritual songs in Colossians, as will the writer of Ephesians.

In some ways, just as much of the New Testament is *midrashic* with regard to the Old Testament, so Christian hymnody continues the same *midrashic* pattern, a pattern that grows out of the history of conversation between the written *Torah* (*Torah Shebiktav*) and the oral *Torah* (*Torah Sheb'al Peh*) in which the later narrative opens up older, often succinct, scriptural verses, connecting the written teachings to how people are called to live faithfully in ever-new circumstances. The *Torah Sheb'al Peh* is much of the basis of the written *Mishnah* (c. 200 CE) and *Jerusalem (Palestinian) Talmud* (c. 350-400 CE) and the *Babylonian Talmud* (c. 500-550 CE). Our singing of hymns, especially strophic hymns, within the *ordo* continues this pattern as it grows ever more reflective as both *kerygma* and *anamnesis*, opening up the life of God among his people. Unfortunately, when the church has privileged texts over tunes without understanding that the text and tune exegete each other or, we could simply say, read each other in the event of singing, we have missed how truly essential a musical/textual fittingness is to the joy that God intends for us in receiving His Word.

Music, as a non-discursive language, holds the possibility and power to open up our understandings of the written text as well as being capable of gifting the human heart with surprising power, releasing joy and healing sorrows. There may not be just one right tune and text that match, but some tunes and texts become

wedded to each other in delightful ways, though some will always be out of sorts with each other in ways that do justice to neither partner. The fittingness of the text and tune happens as text (discursive language) and music (non-discursive language) interpret and enhance each other as equal partners. Different tunes and texts can be paired in ways that run the gamut from sublime to absurd. The music, itself sung as vocalization (i.e., without text), has the power to reveal many layers of a hymnal text. Take Luther's ERHALT UNS HERR / "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word." Try pairing Luther's text with DEO GRACIAS / "O Love, How Deep" (LBW 88), or DET KILMER NUTIL JULEFEST / "The Bells of Christmas (LBW 62). *How* something is done becomes *what* is done.

With the written scriptures in hand, hymnody will develop from the non-metrical singing or chanting (a form of sung speech) of texts—from the psalms that evolve into the Gregorian Chants of the medieval church and centuries later come to new life in Anglican Chant, the metrical settings of the psalms as in the Genevan Psalter and Luther's earliest compositions, to a dutiful yet reflective use of scriptural texts, then a thematic use of scripture, and finally to the free composition that is generally Christological and often quite homiletic. The *de tempore* hymn of the day within the structure of the *ordo* is a way for the whole assembly to preach/proclaim in the power of the Holy Spirit what is the bedrock of their faith. (These musical developments do not always happen in a straight line for cross-pollination and the creativity that comes from the breath of the Holy Spirit is ever at work.) Think of the myriad ways that we are given to sing Psalm 23, for example, be it single line chant, Anglican Chant, metrical hymn ("The Lord's My Shepherd"), reflectively with Christological interpretation ("The King of Love My Shepherd Is"), imitated in the language of the New Testament (My Shepherd, You Supply My Need), mingling with Johannine texts ("Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us"), or finally with a refrain alternating between the straight biblical text and free composition ("Shepherd Me O God, beyond my thoughts, beyond my fears, from death into life").

We become the body of Christ through the baptismal waters and ever more so as we receive his very life into ours when we eat and drink His body and blood. However, our identity is also given emphatically in the form of collectively singing of what God has done for us, both in directly quoting scripture and in joining with the church through the ages as new hymns have continued to be composed. Through the centuries of singing hymns, we are bound to one another on the journey, the destination of which is the heart of God. Communal singing of the church's hymns embeds the scriptural witness in our bodies. We may be capable of knowing a philosophical assertion or theological proposition without saying it is our own, but the ritual performance of hymn singing, of breath, rhythm, pitch, and words issuing forth from our bodies—particularly in the sacramental context of the eucharistic *ordo*—engages our humanity in such a way that it takes on personal significance while also creating new relationships with others with whom we join in song, with the saints who have gone before us, and with the One to whom we direct our singing.

In such singing where the music and text are of equal importance, the text and tune are reading and exegeting each other. Through this doxological hermeneutic, our lives are also being interpreted. God, who is the primary audience of our hymn singing, simultaneously reads the human heart as he is continually creating us anew as we engage in acts of praise and thanksgiving in his name. *Ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*. This mutual reading is also true when our laments fill our sanctuaries (e.g. “O God our Lord of heav’n and earth, your living fingers never wrote that life should be an endless mote, a deathward drift from futile birth...”).¹ Our singing is an act of trust in the One who made us for such singing. In this act of performing our faith, we become what we perform. We become the freedom that we sing, for we become what we sing, a living vessel of God’s word.

Here might I stay and sing-
 No story so divine!
 Never was love dear King,
 Never was grief like thine.
 This is my friend, in whose sweet praise
 I all my days could gladly spend!
 I all my days could gladly spend!²

As the psalmist continually calls us to “Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness” (Ps. 29:2; 96:9), we become *partakers in His divine nature* through this beauty. This a beauty that is heard even more than it is seen, for “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have to believe” (John 20:29). Voices that in other times could be heard hurling threats at neighbors or whispering gossip are being transformed as the church joins the beauty of the whole creation, the work of God that has been singing since the beginning of time. The place where God’s glory dwells (Ps. 26:8) comes to us filled with the sound of women’s, men’s, and children’s voices. “We are God’s house of living stones built for his own habitation”³ (1 Peter 2:4-5). This life comes from the breath of God. Our breath now made into song is the sound that is yet a sign of God’s glorious and holy presence. We are alive. We are alive in Christ. We are, like Miriam, who he has made us to be, *homo adorans*.

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1. “O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth” / WITTENBERG NEW, LBW 396.

2. “My Song is Love Unknown” / RHOSYMEDRE, LBW 94.

3. “Built on a Rock” / KIRKEN DEN ER ET GAMMELT HUS, LBW 365.

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A Theologian Who Reads the Bible

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

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.¹

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”;² 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.³ 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

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.⁴ 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.⁵

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-

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 1:1–4.⁶

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.⁷

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

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.⁸

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

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.⁹ "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

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?¹⁰

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).

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.¹¹ 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.”¹² 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-

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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

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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

To do the topic justice, my own work on the ascension had to take a different approach.²⁰ 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

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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When God Speaks

Reclaiming Scripture as the Generative Word of Faith

Dan Liroy

ABSTRACT: This essay argues that biblical authority is best understood as generative rather than merely descriptive or evocative. It critiques both fundamentalist propositionalism and liberal experientialism for grounding Scripture's authority in human capacities rather than in God's active address. Drawing on the Lutheran theological tradition, the essay emphasizes the external Word (*verbum externum*), the Law-Gospel distinction, and a Christological reading of the entire canon. Through an examination of Deuteronomy 6:4–9, Luke 24:13–35, and Romans 10:5–17, it shows how the biblical Word calls a covenant community into existence, interprets the crucified and risen Christ, and creates justifying faith through public proclamation. These exegetical findings then yield theological implications concerning Scripture's living power, its clarity, and reason's ministerial role before the essay engages objections from various other perspectives. Ultimately, the essay concludes that Scripture is not a static archive but the living instrument through which God addresses, forms, and sustains the redeemed.

Introduction:

The Crisis of Authority and the External Word

Any account of Christian theology that takes Scripture seriously must eventually face a prior question: why should the Bible be regarded as authoritative at all? That query presses upon every congregation, pastor, and believer who opens the text and asks what claim it makes upon them. This introduction proceeds by diagnosing two competing accounts of biblical authority, thereby advancing this essay's central thesis and identifying the Lutheran resources that make that line of argumentation possible.

The Contemporary Crisis of Biblical Authority

Something has gone awry in the way Christians speak about biblical authority, and the problem crosses denominational lines. Two rival positions have hardened into opposing camps, each convinced the other has misunderstood Scripture. However, both share a deeper weakness—each ultimately grounds the Bible's authority in the human subject rather than in the living God who speaks through the text (2 Tim 3:16–17; Heb 4:12–13; 2 Pet 1:20–21).

The first approach, widespread in conservative evangelical and fundamentalist circles, tends in practice to ground the Bible's authority in its historical accuracy and factual verifiability. Here, exactitude becomes the precondition of faith rather than a consequence of trusting the God who speaks through the text. In turn, Scripture becomes a fragile object in constant need of defense, and faith is effectively redefined as intellectual assent that must wait on sufficient evidence.¹

The second broadly liberal approach rejects that demand and relocates authority in Scripture's power to evoke religious experience. The Bible is understood less as divine address than as a witness to humanity's encounters with the sacred. Here, its authority resides not in historical facts but in its capacity to resonate with what the human spirit already senses. While this view correctly insists that Scripture addresses the whole person, it makes individual experience the final judge of meaning.²

The irony is that these apparent opposites share the same assumption. Specifically, both measure Scripture by human standards, one by reason and verification, the other by feeling and personal meaning. What both views fail to preserve is the possibility that Scripture's authority rests not in human capacities at all but in the God who actively addresses the redeemed through Scripture.

The Central Claim: Scriptural Authority as Generative

This essay proposes a different account rooted in Lutheran theology. Scripture's authority is generative rather than merely descriptive or evocative. The Bible is neither a static archive awaiting historical verification nor a reservoir of symbols, myths, and metaphors to be appropriated by readers to express their experiences. Instead, Scripture is the living instrument through which God creates faith, gathers and forms His children, interprets the saving work of Christ, and delivers the righteousness that justifies sinners.³

1. For a critique of the philosophical foundations that shaped early biblical fundamentalism, see Matthew C. Ogilvie, "Early Biblical Fundamentalism's Xenophobic Rejection of the Subject in European Philosophy: How Rejecting the Knowing Subject Formed Fundamentalism's Way of Thinking," *Religions* 15, no. 7 (2024): Article 790, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15070790>.

2. For a scholarly framework to understand why the interplay between religious experience and the Bible is a recurring and contested issue in Christian theology, see A. Holder, "Religious Experience and Sacred Text," *Acta Theologica* (June 20, 2022): 1–16, <https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at/article/view/6442>.

3. For an explanation of Scripture as the active means through which God produces faith, communicates Christ, and bestows righteousness, see the following: Lucas J. Admiraal, "The Sacramentality of Scripture in the Writings of Johann Gerhard," *Lutheran Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2023): 407–23, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lut.2023.a911859>; Samantha Gilmore, "Christ for You and Me: A Lutheran Theology of Proclamation and the Presence of the Preacher," *Religions* 15, no. 3 (2024): 272, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030272>.

This distinction is crucial because historical reliability alone cannot explain what Scripture actually accomplishes. Accurate records do not create faith where none existed, absolve troubled consciences, or sustain hope in the face of death. Such effects belong to God's own action. Scripture possesses authority precisely because God uses it as His chosen instrument of address. Its authority is therefore not established from below by human judgment but exercised from above through God's ongoing speech.⁴

The generative power of Scripture rests in the God-breathed character of the written Word (2 Tim 3:16–17). Indeed, the biblical writings are the work of human authors whom the Holy Spirit moved to speak and record God's declarations (2 Pet 1:20–21). For this reason, the decisive category for biblical authority is not simply information but divine address. Scripture confronts its hearers not as an inert deposit of religious truths but as the living voice of God. The same Creator who spoke in the past now speaks through these writings (Heb 1:1–2). Wherever this Word is proclaimed and received, the Holy Spirit is at work, renewing God's claim upon His children and calling faith into being.

The Lutheran Contribution: Word, Christ, and Authority

The Lutheran tradition is uniquely positioned to articulate this account. Two governing principles define its approach: *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) and *solus Christus* (Christ alone). These are not competing emphases but a single, integrated claim about how God's Word operates.⁵ *Sola scriptura* affirms that the Bible is the Church's sole rule and norm for teaching and life. It is the standard by which all others, including tradition, reason, and experience, are measured, each with genuine supporting roles but none equal to the Word. *Solus Christus* identifies that Word's center. Christ crucified and risen is the interpretive key to all of Scripture, the fulfillment of Israel's historical narrative, and the full disclosure about who God is.

Together, these dual commitments yield a theology of the Word that is both scripturally grounded and doctrinally coherent, approaching the Judeo-Christian canon as a unified divine address whose authority derives from the God who speaks and whose heart is the saving work of Christ. In the sections that follow, this claim is examined through three foundational texts: Deuteronomy 6:4–9, Luke

4. For a robust argument that Scripture's authority is exercised from above by divine action, not derived by human tradition, historical evaluation, or ecclesial judgment, see Phaswane S. Makuwa, "The Authority of God Takes Precedence over Scripture and Tradition," *In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi* 58, no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v58i1.3012>.

5. For a consideration of the Christological reading of Scripture as the distinctive Lutheran contribution to ongoing debates about biblical authority, see Francisco Sabotsy, *Sola Scriptura Unlocked—The Scriptural Legacy of Sola Scriptura for the Lutheran Generations in a Constantly Changing Context over Time*, *Open Access Library Journal* 11 (2024): e11197, <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111197>.

24:13–35, and Romans 10:5–17. Each respectively illuminates a distinct dimension of the Bible’s generative power: to call a redeemed people into existence, to interpret the Christ-event, and to create justifying faith.

Hermeneutical Orientation: Scripture as the *Prius* (Predecessor) of Faith

The interpretive framework guiding this essay is not imposed on Scripture from outside but arises from the Lutheran tradition’s attentive listening to the biblical text. These commitments are not simply methodological rules. They are theological claims about how God speaks and how human beings receive that communication. Three dimensions form the foundation from which the biblical texts in subsequent sections are engaged.

The Priority of the Word

One of Lutheran theology’s most counterintuitive yet foundational claims is that the Word of God does not respond to faith but produces it. Faith is not a prior disposition the hearer brings to Scripture. Rather, the proclaimed Gospel of Christ opens Scripture and creates the faith by which it is rightly heard as well as addresses the fallen human being before any capacity for openness exists, and then through the Word, the Holy Spirit calls forth faith. Theologians use the Latin term *prius* to name this priority. The Word is what precedes and makes faith possible in the first place (Rom 10:17; Gal 3:2).⁶

The above claim finds consistent expression in traditional Lutheran theology. For example, Article V of the *Augsburg Confession* grounds faith’s origin entirely in the Spirit’s work through the proclaimed Word and sacraments.⁷ Meanwhile, Luther’s catechisms consistently present the Word as the active agent and the human being as its recipient.⁸ The eternally self-existent God freely chooses the external Word as the instrument of His self-disclosure. It is not because His being depends upon speaking but because He has graciously bound His saving address to this appointed means. The Word is therefore always prior to any human act of thought or reception, and the initiative rests entirely with God. The mind genuinely receives the Word but does not produce it.

6. For a deliberation of the theological claim that God’s Word precedes faith, the Word is an active address rather than a passive text, and faith is generated by God’s initiative, see Jens Wolff, “The Word of God in Martin Luther’s Theology,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, March 29, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.339>.

7. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 40.

8. For example, in Article III of the *Small Catechism*, Luther affirms that faith is created by the Gospel and not by human strength or decision. See Kolb, Wengert, and Arand, *Book of Concord*, 355.

This priority of the Word carries a necessary corollary about human nature. Lutheran theology teaches that in their fallen condition, people orient life around themselves rather than their Creator, so faith cannot arise spontaneously from within. It is the response of the human creature to the specific address of the living God, and where that address falls silent, faith withers.⁹ This is why the Reformers insisted with such urgency that Scripture must be proclaimed, read aloud, and taught with care. Scripture is not a resource believers employ for their own purposes but the place where God speaks and an encounter with Him occurs. The reader who comes to the text in this posture does not stand over it in judgment but under it in expectation.

The External Word

If the Word precedes faith, it must also come from genuinely outside the believer, not from within the interior life of the reader. The Lutheran tradition calls this the *verbum externum*, or “external Word.”¹⁰ The concept addresses a recurring temptation in Christian spirituality, which is to seek God through private impressions, mystical feelings, or inner voices rather than through the public means God has actually appointed. Luther encountered this danger among those he called “Enthusiasts” who alleged direct access to divine revelation apart from the written, proclaimed, and enacted Word. His concern was not that inner experience is valueless but that, taken as its own validation, it offers no protection against self-deception. When the self both receives and confirms its own religious experience, the result is a closed circle with no external check.¹¹

The external Word breaks that circularity. Because Scripture stands outside the reader and comes as address, it carries a content and a claim that the reader did not generate and cannot simply dismiss. The Bible can correct as well as comfort, disturb, as well as reassure. Far from making Scripture cold or impersonal, its external character is precisely what enables it to function as genuine address rather than mere information. The congregation gathers around the external Word

9. For an affirmation that trust in God comes into being solely through his proclaimed Word, and that whenever this divine speaking ceases, such trust inevitably fades, see Ndzi Leonard, “Justification by Faith: The Heart of the Gospel and Its Relevance Today,” *Greener Journal of Social Sciences* 15, no. 1 (2025): 205–12, <https://doi.org/10.15580/gjss.2025.1.052725094>.

10. In support of the Lutheran *verbum externum* logic (Word precedes and creates faith), see Sasja Emilie Mathiasen Stopa, “‘Ich Werdend Spreche Ich Du’: Creative Dialogue in the Relational Anthropologies of Martin Luther and Martin Buber,” *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 564, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050564>.

11. For an overview of how Luther’s engagements with the Zwickau prophets, sacramentarians, and other spiritualist groups helped solidify his conviction that saving revelation comes through the external Word and the sacraments rather than through private illumination, see Amy Nelson Burnett, “Luther and the Schwärmer,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 511–24, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199604708.013.030>.

because that is where God has promised to be present. In this sense, the Church is not the guardian of the Word but its creature. Called into being and sustained by the divine address, it is consequently and subsequently made a mediator of that Word, especially in the pastoral office.¹²

Theological Grammar: Law and Gospel, Christ and Canon

That the Word is prior and external raises an immediate question: how does it actually function? The Lutheran tradition answers through two interrelated interpretive principles. The first is the distinction between Law and Gospel, and the second is the Christological reading of the whole canon.

Law and Gospel are not two successive stages of salvation history, as though the Old Testament dealt in demands and the New Testament in grace. They are two ways the Word operates on the reader at every point and across every portion of Scripture. The Law exposes the depth of human failure, bringing the conscience into honest reckoning with the gap between what God requires and what fallen human beings produce. The Gospel then announces the closure of that gap. It is not through compulsive human effort but through Christ's death and resurrection on behalf of sinners. Both movements are acts of grace from the same God, and both serve the single purpose of bringing the human creature into genuine relationship with Him. Separating them, either by preaching grace without judgment or judgment without grace, distorts the Word and leaves hearers either complacent or despairing.¹³

The Christological principle holds that Scripture is not a loose anthology of religious writings but a unified address in which diverse voices converge on a single center, the Messiah. In Luther's memorable phrase, the purpose of all Scripture is to *treiben Christum*, namely, to drive Christ upon the reader.¹⁴ The parts of Scripture are properly understood only in relation to the whole, and the whole is properly understood only in relation to its climax in the person and work of Christ. This

12. For an account that grounds scriptural interpretation in the external proclamation of the Word within the covenant community, rather than in autonomous private interpretation, see Morne Diedericks, "Bullinger's Expression—*praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei*, within His View of Scripture," *In die Skriflig* 58, no. 1 (2024): a3079, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v58i1.3079>.

13. For an elaboration of the Law/Gospel dialectic as an interpretive grammar operating across the entire Judeo-Christian canon, rather than as a dichotomy between the Old and New Testaments, see Francisco Sabotsy, "Freedom from Legalism in Christ—Law and Gospel Dialectic in Luther's Theology," *Open Access Library Journal* 11 (2024): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111272>.

14. For a synopsis of Luther's hermeneutic, particularly his use of *Christum treibet* as the governing criterion by which every scriptural text is interpreted in relation to Christ, see Matheus Rodrigo Lubki and Claus Schwambach, "Was *Christum treibet*: A Study of Luther's Hermeneutics," *Vox Scripturae* 27, no. 3 (2019): 495–524, <https://doi.org/10.25188/2447.7443.2019v27n3.12>.

principle does not collapse the richness of the Old Testament into a single pattern or reduce the New Testament to a proof-text collection. Rather, it insists that every text yields its deepest meaning only when read in relation to the one toward whom the entire canon moves.

Taken together, the Law-Gospel distinction and the Christological canon describe the internal logic of Scripture. It is a Word designed to expose human need and supply divine answer, to strip away the pretense of self-sufficiency and raise up the new creature who lives by grace. This is not a framework imported from the sixteenth century and imposed on ancient texts. It is the hermeneutic the texts themselves put forward. God does His alien work through the Law in order to do His proper work through the Gospel, thereby revealing the Father's heart in the Son and giving believers the peace and full assurance that come from knowing the mind of Christ. With this grammar in place, the biblical texts themselves can be examined, and the full generative force of the living Word put on display.

Deuteronomy 6:4–9,

The Word That Constitutes the Redeemed, Chosen People

Of the three biblical texts examined in this essay, Deuteronomy 6:4–9 stands at the beginning. Here, the Word of God addresses a people in the act of constituting them as a covenant community. It is before they have entered the promised land, established a monarchy, or built a temple. The passage thus offers a clear window into what it means for a people to exist through divine address rather than by their own initiative or achievement.¹⁵

The Shema as Divine Convocation

When Israel recited, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God. The Lord is one!” (Deut 6:4),¹⁶ it was not merely reporting information about monotheism. Israel was being

15. The discourse in this section has been informed by the exegetical and theological discussions of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 appearing in the following: Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1–21:9*, rev. ed., vol. 6A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 142–43; Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 168–71; Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 162–68; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 331–35, 337–43.

16. Deuteronomy 6:4 has been translated in a number of ways, including the following: (1) “the LORD our God, the LORD is one” (NIV, NKJV, ESV, CSB); (2) “the LORD is our God, the LORD is one” (NET, NASB); (3) “the LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Tanakh, NRSV, NLT); (4) “the LORD our God is one LORD” (KJV); and, (5) “Yahweh our God, Yahweh is unique” (Lexham). Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Evangelical Heritage Version, 2019 Wartburg Project, Inc. All rights reserved.

summoned by the urgent and exclusive claim of the God who had elected, liberated, and bound this people to Himself. The Hebrew verb *shema'* carries a weight the English "hear" does not fully convey. To *shema'* is not merely to perceive a sound but to attend, to receive, and to be formed by what one receives. The imperative is not an invitation but a summons. It is an address that calls its recipients into a particular existence. Israel does not first form as a community and then receive this Word as an additional religious supplement. Rather, the Word that says "Hear, O Israel" is the proclamation by which Israel's identity as a covenant people is renewed and defined.¹⁷

This is what it means to describe the Shema as both divine convocation and instruction. A convocation is a calling together, a word that assembles the people it addresses. God does not speak to an audience that already exists independently of His speech. Instead, He calls that audience into being through the act of speaking. Stripped of this Word, Israel ceases to be the covenant community and becomes simply another ethnic grouping, indistinguishable from the surrounding nations.

The theological depth of the Shema becomes clearer when its wider canonical context is considered (for example, 1 Cor 8:6). Deuteronomy does not begin with the Shema. It begins with a rehearsal of God's saving acts, namely, the Exodus, Sinai, and the wilderness years (chaps 1–5). Israel is addressed as a people already redeemed. The Shema is therefore not an invitation to seek a previously unknown God but a declaration that names and claims a people whom God has already acted to rescue. Every time these words were spoken, Israel was drawn back into the reality of its own election. It is not because that election was uncertain but because the Word that gave it shape required continued hearing to sustain its ongoing work.

Catechesis and the First Table

The Shema does not stand alone. It is followed immediately by the great commandment—"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut 6:5)—and then by a cascade of pedagogical instructions. The Word is to be taught diligently to one's children, spoken about at home and on the road, at bedtime and at rising, bound on the hand and fixed between the eyes, and written on the doorposts and gates (vv. 7–9). This accumulation of bodily, spatial, and temporal images describes how a generative Word is intended to function as a way of life for a people who exist in the realm of space-time reality.

What the text presents is an early picture of catechesis in the biblical canon. In its most basic sense, catechesis is the process by which the living voice of the faith

17. See William S. Kervin, "Dimensions of Worship in the Shema: Resources for Christian Liturgical Theology," *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 48, no. 1 (March 2019): 115–137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008429819828670>. Kervin argues that the role and significance of the Shema in Jewish daily prayer, liturgy, and performative ritualization points to dimensions of worship in which text and action, liturgy and life, prayer and politics converge.

community passes from one generation to the next. This is not about transmitting static, clinical information about God. The instructions of verses 7–9 envision something far more embodied. It is the Word woven into the fabric of daily life, accompanying Israel through every transition and marking every space as a place where God’s address remains active and transformative.¹⁸

From a Lutheran perspective, the commands of Deuteronomy 6 belong to the First Table of the Law, a key distinction within that tradition. It is those commandments governing the relationship between God and his children rather than between neighbors. Luther placed the Shema at the heart of the First Commandment, insisting that the call to have no other gods is fulfilled only where the heart trusts wholly in the one, true, and living God who has first spoken and saved.¹⁹ The pedagogical commands that follow serve this same end. It is not merely to ensure children memorize correct doctrine but more importantly to form within them a posture of life entirely oriented around the Word that called Israel into being.

Lutheran theology also speaks about a third use of the Law (*tertius usus legis*), namely, its role in shaping the ongoing life of the redeemed community. Properly understood, this use does not undermine the Law-Gospel distinction.²⁰ Israel does not transmit the Shema across generations to earn its election but because that election has already been secured by God’s faithful, prior action. As such, the catechetical instructions of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 are best understood not as a program of moral self-improvement but as the ordered passing on of a promise-shaped identity. It is the handing down of the Word that keeps a redeemed people alive.

Ecclesiological Implication

This reading of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 carries a direct and far-reaching implication for what the Church is meant to be. Israel comes into existence as a covenant community through divine address, and its continued life depends on the ongoing

18. See Michael Kodzo Mensah, “Shema as Paradigm (Dt. 6:4–9): The Bible, Education, and the Quest for Development in Contemporary Ghana,” *Scriptura* 122, no. 1 (2023): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.7833/122-1-21> 17. Mensah argues that Deuteronomy 6:4–9 presents a holistic, formative model of instruction in which Israel’s covenantal identity is embodied in daily life rather than conveyed as abstract information, offering a paradigm of transformative, lived catechesis.

19. See Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 9: *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 65–69.

20. See Kolb, Wengert, and Arand, *Book of Concord*, 502–3, where the FC SD VI’s careful framing grounds the third use specifically in the regenerate, for whom the Law functions as a guide in sanctification. Also, see Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 168–73, where he argues that the Law teaches Christians how to live in their callings, even though it cannot justify them.

reception and transmission of that Word. The Church is no different. It is not fundamentally a voluntary association, a cultural tradition, or an institution that happens to use Scripture in its activities. At its most basic level, the Church is the creature of the Word (*creatura verbi*), a people called into being and sustained by a speech that comes from outside itself.²¹

This means the community does not possess the Word as a property it controls. Rather, the Word possesses the community. When ancient Israel drifted from God's ongoing address, as the prophets record with painful regularity, it did not simply experience spiritual decline but also lost its defining identity as the covenant people. The prophets' relentless calls to return were a summons back to the Word that alone could reconstitute what sin and unfaithfulness had dismantled.

The same logic applies to the Church. It does not precede the Gospel and then choose to organize itself around Scripture. The Church is brought into existence by the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen, and by the Holy Spirit is taught to speak the new language of faith. In articulating that faith scripturally, the Spirit sustains the community in the Word that first called it into being. This is the fulfillment of the divine address that began with Israel at Sinai and reached its definitive expression in the Word made flesh.

Furthermore, to displace the proclaimed Word, whether through human tradition, institutional authority, or experiential preference, is to cut the Church off from the source of its existence. This is why the Lutheran Reformers understood renewal not primarily as structural or moral reform but as a recovery of the Word in its full generative power. It must be preached, read aloud, taught to children,²² and allowed to do what God promises in it. Deuteronomy 6:4–9 stands at the beginning of this tradition because it states with remarkable brevity what centuries of reflection have never exhausted. The people of God exist only where he continues to speak, and that speaking is always, at its core, an address of grace to those called to hear.

21. See Leo J. Koffeman, "'Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda': Church Renewal from a Reformed Perspective," *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): a2875, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2875>. Koffeman grounds ecclesiology in the Reformation idea that the Church exists because of God's Word rather than human initiative.

22. The emphasis on teaching the Word to children also points to the need for a reform of the children's sermon. Too often it has become neither truly age-appropriate nor genuinely catechetical, but instead an adult-directed performance. A more fitting approach is a simple scriptural practice: a single verse from the Sunday readings, repeated for memorization, briefly explained, and concluded with prayer. On this point, see David M. Friel, "The Children's Liturgy of the Word: An Appraisal," *International Journal of Evangelization and Catechetics* 4, no. 2 (2024): 121–139, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jec.2024.a939335>. Friel's analysis encourages a reorientation of children's liturgical formation away from entertainment and toward an encounter with the Word that is age-appropriate and Scripture-centered. It is proclaimed clearly, received intelligibly, catechetically deepened, and returned to God in prayer.

Luke 24:13–35,
The Word That Interprets the Christ Event

The road to Emmaus is among the most carefully constructed narratives in the Gospel tradition, and its theological reach extends well beyond the account's immediate setting. What Luke depicts is a paradigm for how the risen Christ continues to make Himself known. It is not through direct physical presence but through the opened Scriptures and the broken bread. This passage illuminates a dimension of the Word's generative power distinct from either Deuteronomy 6:4–9 or Romans 10:5–17, specifically its capacity to interpret events that, left to themselves, yield only confusion and grief.²³

The Crisis of Uninterpreted Experience

In one sense, the two disciples walking to Emmaus on the first Easter afternoon are the most theologically informed travelers on the road.²⁴ They know what happened in Jerusalem. They heard the women's report about the empty tomb and the angelic announcement that Jesus was alive (Luke 24:13–14, 18–23). Even so, for all that, they walk away from Jerusalem in grief, their faces downcast (v. 17), and their expectations shattered: "We were hoping that he was going to redeem Israel" (v. 21). The past tense is telling. For these two, Jesus' death has already foreclosed the future. The facts are in their possession, but those facts have produced despair, not faith.

The theological weight of this observation should not be underestimated. Experience, however vivid and recent, does not interpret itself. What the two disciples lack is not more information but a framework capable of making sense of what they witnessed. Events, no matter how dramatic, do not carry their own meaning. They

23. The discourse in this section has been informed by the exegetical and theological discussions of Luke 24:13–35 appearing in the following: Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1907–22; Joseph A. Fitzmyer S.J., *The Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 28A, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 1554–69; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 840–51; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 889–900.

24. For the possibility that Luke's "Cleopas" (Luke 24:18) is the same figure as the "Clopas" mentioned in John's Gospel (John 19:25), making "Mary of Clopas" the most likely candidate for the unnamed companion on the road to Emmaus, and thereby supporting a husband-and-wife reading of the pair, see Marc Rastoin, "Cléophas (Lc 24, 18): un indice de la créativité littéraire et théologique de Luc?," *New Testament Studies* 67, no. 1 (2021): 22–37, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688520000211>. On the narrative plausibility of interpreting the two travelers as sharing a home and a meal (Luke 24:28–35), see Michal Beth Dinkler, "Building Character on the Road to Emmaus: Lukan Characterization in Contemporary Literary Perspective," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136, no. 3 (2017): 687–706, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1363.2017.292918>.

arrive requiring a word from outside themselves to render them intelligible. This is not merely an observation about two discouraged followers but a claim about the structure of knowledge and faith as such. The Lutheran tradition, insisting on the priority of the Word over human experience, finds in this passage a vivid narrative confirmation of that principle. No human being, regardless of sincerity or proximity to the events, can derive the meaning of Jesus's death and resurrection from those events alone. It requires a speaker who stands outside them and interprets them, and that speaker is the risen Messiah.²⁵

Christ as the Supreme Interpreter

Jesus, the unidentified traveler who joins the two disciples on the road, does not offer consolation. Instead, he listens to their account and then “explains” the prophetic import of the Hebrew sacred writings (vv. 13–27). The underlying Greek verb *diermēneuō* (v. 27) is the root from which the English word “hermeneutics” derives. Luke is not using it casually. The risen Messiah is presented as the supreme interpreter not of a few select passages but of Israel's entire canonical inheritance as a unified address whose center is Himself.

This moment crystallizes what Luther would later express memorably. To reiterate what was noted in §2.3, the purpose of all Scripture is to *treiben Christum*, namely, to drive or impel Christ upon the reader.²⁶ What Jesus does on the Emmaus road is far more than selective proof-texting. He interprets Israel's history, recorded in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, as a cohesive narrative moving toward his suffering and glorification. The Cross is not an interruption of Scripture's redemptive arc but its climax.

This is why the Cross, in the disciples' uninterpreted experience, registers as scandal rather than triumph. Nothing in the event itself signals victory. It requires Scripture, read in light of its Christological center, to reveal what the Cross actually accomplishes. Jesus's rhetorical question makes this plain: “Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and to enter his glory?” (v. 26). The Greek verb *dei*—“have to”—is not the language of fatalism but of scriptural fulfillment.

For the Church, this exchange carries a direct implication. The proclamation of Christ crucified and risen is not a supplement to an experience that might otherwise speak for itself. It is the very condition under which that experience becomes intelligible. When the Church abandons the Christological center of its preaching, it does not merely become bland but instead becomes like the two disciples before the unidentified traveler joined them, a people who possess the facts but lack the Word that renders those facts life-giving.

25. See Martin Luther, “Gospel for Easter Monday (Luke 24:13–35),” in *Luther's Works*, vol. 77, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, James L. Langebartels, and Christopher Boyd Brown (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 44–45.

26. See Luther, *Luther's Works*, 35:123, 396.

 Word and Sacrament

The Emmaus narrative does not end with Jesus's biblical exposition. When the three reach the village, the two disciples urge the unidentified traveler to stay with them (vv. 28–29). At the table, He takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them. At that moment their eyes are opened and they recognize Him (vv. 30–31). The language carries unmistakable liturgical resonance. Luke uses the same sequence of verbs—take, bless, break, give—that appears in his account of the Last Supper (22:19). Significantly, recognition does not occur during the scriptural exposition, as revelatory as that is—it takes place at the table.

This sequence is theologically deliberate. The opening of the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread are not two unrelated events. They are two dimensions of a single encounter with the risen Christ, neither complete without the other. The preached Word opens the ears and prepares the heart. Meanwhile, the sacramental action opens the eyes and delivers the Messiah's real presence. Lutheran theology has consistently held that the sacraments are a "visible word" (*verbum visibile*). It is the Gospel made tangible for the body as the proclaimed Word addresses the ear.²⁷ The Emmaus meal illustrates this unity with striking narrative economy.

When the pair recognize Jesus, He vanishes from their sight (v. 31). What remains is the realization that while Jesus spoke to them "along the road" (v. 32), their "hearts" were "burning" within them. Indeed, the ascended Lord is not absent but is present precisely where he has promised, in the proclaimed Word, in the waters of baptism, and in the elements of the Supper. The text is not a relic of past revelation but the living instrument through which the glorified Redeemer continues to address and sustain His people. Cleopas and his companion "returned to Jerusalem" (v. 33) that "very hour." It was not with a vague feeling that might be doubted but with a real encounter mediated by the opened Scriptures and the broken bread. This is the pattern the Church has followed ever since.

Romans 10:5–17,
The Word That Generates Justifying Faith

Romans 10:5–17 explores how the Word of Christ reaches an individual sinner and creates the faith by which that person stands acquitted before God. Paul's answer is neither abstract nor theoretical. It follows a clear sequence of claims that

27. This understanding is Luther's adaptation of Augustine's famous formula, "*Accedit verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*" ("The word comes to the element, and it becomes a sacrament"). See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 36: *Word and Sacrament II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 123–25.

illuminate the way in which the saving Word moves from its divine source to the specific conscience it addresses.²⁸

The Two Kinds of Righteousness

Paul opens Romans 10:5–17 by drawing a sharp contrast between two fundamentally different accounts about how a human being stands in a right relationship with God. The apostle calls the first the “righteousness that comes by the law” (v. 5). This mindset is found in Leviticus 18:5, “Anyone who does them will have life through them.” The focus is on God’s “regulations” and “ordinances,” and the logic is one of performance.

The Mosaic legal code demands that the human being supply, through sustained obedience, the righteous standing God requires. Every commandment must be kept, and every debt must be paid (Rom 2:13; 7:10; 10:5; Gal 3:12, 21; Jas 2:10–11). The Law does not grade on a curve but speaks to what human beings must do, and in this way declares the truth about what they have failed to do (Rom 3:9, 23). This is precisely the Law’s purpose. It is not to save but to expose the depth of the human predicament with a clarity that no self-assessment could match (Rom 3:20; 5:20; 7:7; Gal 2:21; 3:24; 1 Tim 1:8–9).

In Romans 10:6–8, Paul quoted from Deuteronomy 30:12–13, which included part of Moses’s final charge to the Israelites as they were about to enter Canaan. The Israelites did not need to ask for God’s message to be brought down again from Mount Sinai or for someone to cross the vast ocean to get it. After all, they already possessed the Torah, which the Lord clearly revealed to Moses. In Paul’s Christological application of this passage, he noted that people did not have to bring the Son down from “heaven” (referring to his incarnation; Rom 10:6). Nor did He need to be brought up from the “abyss” or the realm of the dead (referring to his resurrection; v. 7) for people to obtain the Father’s acquittal. After all, the Creator’s declaration of innocence was received only by “faith” (v. 8). This good news was nearby, both on the lips and in the hearts of repentant, believing sinners.

In verse 9, Paul elaborated on the core message of the Gospel. The first part was an affirmation of Christ’s supreme lordship (Acts 2:36; 10:36; Phil 2:11). The second part was the Father’s resurrection of the Son (Rev 1:18). Paul explained

28. The discourse in this section has been informed by the exegetical and theological discussions of Romans 10:5–17 appearing in the following: C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 520–37; Robert Jewett and Roy David Kotansky, *Romans: A Commentary*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 622–42; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 644–66; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, vol. 6, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 550–75.

that the Spirit enlivened the mind of the lost to believe the Gospel and receive God's pardon. Likewise, the Spirit enabled them to openly declare that their faith in Christ as the basis for their "salvation" (Rom 10:10). These were two closely related aspects. One facet was inward (taking place in one's "heart") while the other was outward (occurring through one's public confession).

Next, Paul quoted from Isaiah 28:16 to declare that despite what pagans thought, God would acquit and vindicate rather than disgrace and dishonor anyone who trusted in the Messiah (Rom 9:33; 10:11). The apostle noted that irrespective of a person's ethnicity and heritage (whether "Jew or Greek"; 10:12), there was only one supreme Creator. He remained impartial in richly blessing those who called upon Him. Joel 2:32 confirmed that anyone who cried out to the "Lord" (Rom 10:13) for help would be rescued from the final, end-time judgment.

For Lutheran theology, the contrast Paul drew maps directly onto the Law-Gospel distinction that governs the Word's movement through Scripture. The Law-righteousness corresponds to everything the human being must do and has failed to accomplish. Meanwhile, the faith-righteousness corresponds to everything God has done in Christ and now delivers through speech. The two are not complementary halves of a single spiritual program but mutually exclusive in terms of the basis of enjoying an upright standing before God. The one demands whereas the other bestows. This is why Luther insisted that confusing Law and Gospel (such as presenting God's demands as the ground of acceptance or reducing the Gospel to moral instruction) is not a minor theological imprecision but a fundamental distortion of the Christian message.²⁹

The Chain of Salvation

Having established that the "righteousness that comes by faith" (Rom 10:6) arrives through the "word" (v. 8) that is "near," Paul moves in verses 14–17 to trace the chain by which that declaration reaches its hearers. His argument unfolds as a sequence of rhetorical questions running deliberately backward from faith to its ultimate source.

Specifically, people cannot call on someone in whom they do not believe. Likewise, they cannot believe in someone about whom they have never heard. Furthermore, the lost cannot hear about Christ without someone heralding the gospel. Consequently, preachers must be sent to announce the wonderful message of salvation. Isaiah 52:7 confirms the importance of these priorities as well as adds a note of joy and beauty to the act of evangelism. Here, the movement from sending to preaching to hearing to faith is not incidental to Paul's point—it is the

29. See Francisco Sabotsy, "Freedom from Legalism in Christ—Law and Gospel Dialectic in Luther's Theology," *Open Access Library Journal* 11 (2024): e11272, <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111272>. Sabotsy emphasizes that confusing Law and Gospel inevitably obscures the gratuitous character of justification and undermines the heart of Lutheran theology.

point. Each step depends on the one before it, and the entire salvific chain is not anchored in human initiative but in divine sending.

In Romans 10:16, Paul acknowledged that many of his fellow Jews neither welcomed nor heeded the “gospel.” In support of this observation, the apostle quoted from Isaiah 53:1. The passage’s rhetorical question implied that an untold number of people would reject the message about the coming Messiah, yet a lack of acceptance did not invalidate the Gospel, for this outcome was foretold in the Jewish Scriptures.

The theological weight of the above sequence has been appreciated with particular depth in the Lutheran tradition.³⁰ On Paul’s account, preaching is not a human activity that conveys information about salvation existing independently of its proclamation but is the means by which salvation is extended to its recipients. When Paul states that “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through the word of Christ” (v. 17), the Greek noun he uses for “hearing” is *akoē*. This carries the dual sense of the act of hearing as well as the content of what is heard. What reaches the ear is not merely a message about what the Messiah has done but His actual word. It is the living address from the Redeemer conveyed through those whom he has sent to proclaim it. Consequently, the preacher who announces the Gospel is not offering an opinion about salvation. This person is the instrument through whom the saving word reaches its destination.

The above understanding is what Luther captured in his emphasis on the *viva vox evangelii*, the living voice of the Gospel. The Reformation insistence on preaching was not motivated by a preference for verbal communication over other forms of religious expression. It was incentivized by the conviction, thoroughly Pauline in its basis, that the Word must be spoken aloud because the living God has chosen speech as the instrument of his saving work.³¹ As such, the congregation gathered around the proclaimed Word is not an audience receiving a lecture but the holy community the Spirit creates in the world into which he draws people so that there the Gospel may be preached to them and God’s promised work accomplished among them. The sending that Paul describes in verse 15 is grounded in Isaiah’s announcement about those who bring good news. It is also an apostolic commission that continues wherever the Church faithfully heralds what it has been entrusted to declare.

30. See Samuel J. Dubbelman, “‘Faith From Hearing’ in Luther’s Sermons on the Visitation,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (Autumn 2019): 276–86, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lut.2019.0057>. Dubbelman analyzes Luther’s Visitation sermons to show his mature emphasis on the external, preached Word as the means through which faith is created.

31. See Clara Wepener and Cas Wepener, “Cura Vocalis: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of Voice Care in Service of Preaching,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 9, no. 2 (2023): 1–18, https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2413-94672023000200007. The authors maintain that God, in the exercise of his sovereign will, has designated spoken proclamation as the means through which he accomplishes his saving work.

Pro Me (“For Me”): The Promise as Personal Address

The redemptive arc traced in Romans 10 reaches its destination not in a theological abstraction but in a specific act. It involves individuals hearing themselves addressed by God’s promise and receiving it as directed to them personally. Verse 8 reveals that the “word” is not “near” in some general or impersonal sense. Furthermore, according to verses 9–10, the saving message arrives at the specific location of the individual listener. It addresses them as sinners for whom Christ died and before whom His resurrection has been announced.

Luther gave precise expression to this dimension of the Gospel through what he called the *pro me*, the “for me.” The good news is not properly heard until it is spoken directly to the hearer. It is not a general announcement about the entire human race but a specific declaration.³² The saving message heralds that Jesus’s death was for this sinner, and His resurrection is this person’s ground of hope. Here, faith is not reducible to an intellectual conclusion drawn from historical evidence. More importantly, faith is the response of the conscience and volition to a Word that has arrived as personal address. The Lutheran Confessions capture this with precision. Faith is trust (*fiducia*), not just intellectual acknowledgment (*assensus*). It is the act of relying upon the divine promise as one’s own, not simply affirming it as true in principle.³³

This is why Romans 10 places such an emphasis on the auditory character of faith. The proclamation is made vocally so that belief can take root in the heart (vv. 8–10). Hearing precedes believing because the message must arrive from outside the self before it can take up residence within. What Paul describes as the acoustic reception of the divine promise is precisely what the broader argument of this essay has identified as the defining feature of the external Word. Specifically, faith is not self-generated but awakened by an address. It strikes the conscience with its claim while simultaneously extending the mercy it announces.

Theological Implications: Authority as Efficacy

Taken together, these texts indicate that Scripture’s authority is not exhausted by juridical categories. As God’s prophetic and apostolic Word, Scripture is the appointed instrument through which He continues to act (for example, binding,

32. See Theodor Dieter, “*Promissio* as Oswald Bayer’s Key to Luther’s Reformational Theology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2025): 249–335, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lut.2025.a967535>. Dieter explains how Luther’s *promissio* functions as a concrete, individualizing “for me” address that is spoken directly to the hearer, thereby bestowing Christ personally and creating the very faith by which the sinner is justified.

33. See Thomas W. Simpson, “Faith as Trust,” *The Monist* 106, no. 1 (January 2023): 83–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onac025>. Simpson affirms that the Lutheran Confessions—especially Melancthon’s *Apology*—define authentic faith as *fiducia* (personal, trusting reliance on the divine promise for oneself) rather than mere intellectual *assensus* (assent, agreement, or approval).

commanding, accusing, and consoling). Thus *sola scriptura* should be heard alongside *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. Scripture, faith, and grace are the means by which the Spirit brings us to *solus Christus*. He is the crucified Jesus whom the Father vindicated in the resurrection as His beloved Son, delivered up for our sins and raised for our justification. This section draws out the implications of that claim, beginning with the nature of Scripture's living power.

Beyond Juridical Authority: Scripture's Living Power

It is natural to think about authority in legal terms. A law is authoritative because an institution with the recognized right to legislate has enacted it. Applied to Scripture, this framework yields a view of the Bible as a divinely issued code whose commands bind the conscience because God, the supreme legislator, has spoken. On one level, Scripture does bind the conscience, for God speaks through it. However, on another level, its authority cannot be reduced to a merely juridical model. *Sola scriptura*, in parallel with *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, is instrumental. It is by Scripture, faith, and grace alone we are brought to *solus Christus*. This is the crucified Jesus whom the Father vindicated in the resurrection as His beloved Son. He was "handed over to death because of our trespasses and was raised to life because of our justification" (Rom 4:25).

Consider Isaiah 55:11, which states that the "word" proceeding from God's "mouth" does not "return" to him "empty." Instead, it brings to pass the "purpose" for which it was sent. At stake here is not only the reliability of God's promises in the abstract. More importantly, it is the claim that His declaration is inherently productive. The oracle does not merely describe a state of affairs or announce a decision reached elsewhere. The Word is the instrument God employs to achieve what he intends to accomplish in the world. Hebrews 4:12 confirms this truth by describing the "word of God" as "living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword." Moreover, it "penetrates even to the point of dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, even being able to judge the ideas and thoughts of the heart."³⁴

A merely juridical model fails to account for this dynamic quality. Scripture's authority is not that of a civil code. Luther's disputes with the Zwickau prophets, Karlstadt and Müntzer, exposed the danger of confusing Scripture with civil law or

34. See Jacob R. Randolph, "Salvation and Speech Act: Reading Luther with the Aid of Searle's Analysis of Declarations," *Perichoresis* 15, no. 1 (2017): 101–16. <https://doi.org/10.1515/perc-2017-0006>. Randolph reads Luther's theology of the Word as a performative declaration (Searle's category). God's speech—especially Gospel promise and absolution—does not merely inform but actively accomplishes what it declares, granting the reality it signifies. Scriptural proclamation and sacramental words thereby create new realities: sins forgiven, faith created, and believers incorporated into Christ. Efficacy derives from God's sovereign authority, not human convention. Here, the creative "Let there be..." of Genesis 1 and the heralded Gospel are the same divine speech-act that creates, re-creates, and saves.

even with the natural law written on the human heart, most clearly expressed in the Decalogue.³⁵ The Law can restrain and accuse, but only the Gospel gives inward trust, repentance, and new life.

Scripture, operating through the Holy Spirit, accomplishes both. It not only demands repentance but also establishes the conditions necessary for a turnaround. God's Word does not merely proclaim forgiveness; it actually delivers it. This is what the Lutheran tradition means by describing the Bible's authority as indivisible from its efficacy. The two cannot be separated without distorting both. Scripture unmoored from its generative power becomes a rulebook. The Spirit detached from the external Word becomes an interior impression answerable to no one. Together, Word and Spirit constitute the living address through which God has chosen to accomplish his purposes in the lives of the redeemed.³⁶

Scriptural Clarity: The Public Word and the Proclaimed Christ

One consequence of the generative account of scriptural authority is that the Bible's central message must be genuinely accessible. If Scripture is the instrument through which God acts upon the world, then it cannot be a text available only to specialists, mystics, or those possessed of unusual spiritual sensitivity. The Reformers called this the clarity or "perspicuity" of Scripture, and it remains one of the most practically significant claims in the Lutheran theological heritage.³⁷

35. See John Witte Jr., "From Gospel to Law: The Lutheran Reformation and Its Impact on Legal Culture," *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 19, no. 3 (2017): 271–291, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956618X17000461>. Witte argues that Luther's encounters with radical reformers forced him to clarify the distinction between the Gospel's governance of the conscience and the role of civil and natural law in ordering temporal life. Luther insisted that Scripture must not be reduced to a coercive legal program, even when framed in terms of Moses, the Decalogue, or the law written on the heart. See also Amy Nelson Burnett, "Karlstadt and the Zwickau Prophets: A Reevaluation," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 114, no. 1 (2023): 105–128, <https://doi.org/10.14315/arg-2023-1140106>. Burnett's re-assessment shows that Luther opposed Karlstadt and the Zwickau prophets not only for their claims to revelation but also for the disruptive implications of their program. Luther contended that it blurred the line between scriptural authority and radical social reform, thereby destabilizing the proper distinction between the divine Word and the structures of earthly order.

36. See Will Willimon, "Preaching as Protest against the Apophatic Silencing of God's People," *Religions* 15, no. 2 (2024): Article 233, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020233>. Willimon ties the Word's authority to its productive power (creating faith, communion, and protest against silence), while warning that detaching it from this efficacy (or from the Spirit's public work) reduces it to ineffectual silence or subjectivism.

37. See Philip G. Ziegler, "On the Present Possibility of *Sola Scriptura*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 24, no. 2 (2022): 569–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12568>. Ziegler argues for the continuing viability of the Lutheran *sola scriptura* program by grounding Scripture's authority in Luther's own claim that the biblical message is, in and of itself, certain, accessible, intelligible, and self-interpreting.

This clarity is not the claim that every passage of the Bible is equally transparent or that no text requires sustained exegetical effort. Rather, it is the assertion that Scripture's central message—what God has done for sinners in Christ's life, death, and resurrection—is not hidden (1 Cor 15:1–11). Knowing the Gospel does not require access to an authoritative interpretive tradition, a mystical experience, or a specialized technique to unlock. The good news is open to anyone who hears it proclaimed, reads it in a reliable translation, or receives it through the catechesis of the faith community. This is what Luther meant when he distinguished between the “external clarity” of Scripture, which is centered on the text and remains the focus of public proclamation, and the “internal clarity” that the Spirit works in the heart of the hearer.³⁸

Luke 24:13–35 illustrates this distinction with narrative precision. The two disciples who walked to the “village named Emmaus” possessed all the relevant facts. What they lacked was not esoteric knowledge but the Christological framework that allowed those facts to become good news. Once the risen Messiah opened the Scriptures and set the cross-resurrection event within its proper canonical context, the meaning was evident. The burning of the duo's hearts was not the experience of initiation into a mystery reserved for the few but the recognition of something that had been there in the text all along, waiting to be heard with open ears.

Scripture is not clear because isolated verses explain themselves. Rather, it is clear because the Bible tells one unified account centered on Christ crucified and risen. The Church recognized this unity through the Spirit's guidance as it received the canonical writings. These faithfully confessed the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the true incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, the Gospel tradition did not rival Scripture. Instead, it helped the Church recognize the Scriptures through which that same Gospel would be proclaimed. Apart from this Christ-centered Gospel, Scripture becomes obscure, just as it was for the disciples on the Emmaus road until the risen Messiah opened the Scriptures to them.

Reason as Ministerial: Serving the Word Rather Than Judging It

The final implication concerns the role of human reason in relation to Scripture. Nothing in the generative account of biblical authority dismisses reason or treats intellectual engagement with the text as spiritually suspect. The Lutheran tradition has never been anti-intellectual, and the Reformers were formidable scholars who insisted on careful attention to languages, literary genres, historical contexts, and the internal logic of the biblical argument. What the tradition has resisted, however,

38. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 33: *Career of the Reformer III*, eds. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 24–27, 89–99.

is a particular misuse of reason. It is the tendency to place the human intellect in the position of judge over the Word rather than servant to it.³⁹

The distinction at stake here is between what Luther called the “magisterial” and the “ministerial” uses of reason. Reason becomes magisterial when it sets itself above Scripture, reducing the text’s meaning to a reconstructed history behind it and then judging the biblical witness as more or less mistaken or false. That is the danger of historical criticism when it is governed by assumptions alien to the Gospel. Scripture, though, is also a human text and artifact of history, and therefore it rightly invites careful historical, linguistic, and literary study. The question is whether such study serves the text or rules over it.

Reason operates ministerially when it brings its God-given capacities into humble service under the authority of the Word of God as revealed in Scripture.⁴⁰ In that role, reason helps distinguish the treasure from the clay vessel by attending to genre, grammar, argument, historical setting, and canonical context. It does not decide in advance what Scripture may say. Instead, it asks what the text actually says and how the Spirit uses this written witness to deliver Christ, accuse sin, console sinners, and sustain faith.⁴¹

This ministerial use of reason is not a diminishment of the intellect. Rather, it is the intellect functioning at its best: rigorously and carefully in service of a purpose larger than its own self-justification. The entire exegetical effort of this essay has been an exercise of exactly this kind of reason. The point has not been to establish whether the biblical texts are credible by some external standard but to allow them to disclose their own inner logic and thereby show what the living God does through them. This is the posture that makes genuine interpretation possible, and it reflects the deepest conviction of the Lutheran theological tradition. Specifically, the Word does not need reason to validate it, but it does need reason to receive,

39. See John B. Webster, “What Makes Theology Theological?” *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3 (May 2015): 17–28, <https://doi.org/10.12978/jat.2015-3.091413220417>. Webster maintains that the human mind plays a supporting role in theology. The mind receives and responds to what God reveals rather than sitting in judgment over it, and is therefore properly positioned beneath divine revelation rather than above it.

40. See Daniël J. Maritz, “By Scripture and Plain Reason: A Historical Retrieval of the Relationship between Faith and Reason to Better Engage with Present-Day Secularism,” *In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi* 57, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v57i1.2905>. Maritz argues that rightly ordered Christian reason is neither autonomous judge nor fideistic casualty. Instead, it is a God-given servant that discerns, clarifies, defends, and submits to the revealed Word of God, thereby placing its intellectual gifts ministerially in service to Scripture’s authoritative witness.

41. Modern Lutheran scholarship emphasizes that Luther did not reject rational inquiry but distinguished between a magisterial use of reason, which places human judgment over revelation, and a ministerial use, in which reason functions as an interpretive servant of Scripture. For example, see H. Ashley Hall, “The Development of Doctrine: A Lutheran Examination,” *Pro Ecclesia* 16, no. 3 (2007): 326–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106385120701600302>.

understand, and pass it on. Reason in this mode is not the master of the text. It is the skilled and attentive servant through which the text continues to do its redemptive work in the world.⁴²

The preceding analysis has attempted to demonstrate across three biblical texts and three dimensions of theological implication that the authority of Scripture is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be inhabited. It is neither established by marshaling sufficient evidence nor earned by the intensity of personal experience. It is repeatedly exercised wherever the living God addresses His creatures through the written, proclaimed, and enacted Word. The Spirit uses Scripture to call the lost into covenant existence and open their understanding to the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. The proclamation of the Gospel becomes the effective agent to create trust in repentant, believing sinners. This enables them to stand before the Creator not as defendants but as those whom He has acquitted at infinite cost to Himself (Rom 8:31–39; Rev 12:10–12). In the end, Scripture's authority originates from the God who speaks and has never fallen silent. By the Spirit, he teaches the faithful to inhabit Scripture as their own language. They learn to pray God's promises back to Him, confess His Word in trial, and answer His grace with praise.

Addressing Potential Objections

Any theological account that departs from familiar positions will attract criticism from multiple directions. The argument advanced in this essay is no exception. Six objections deserve direct engagement, not as threats to be neutralized but as genuine questions that sharpen and clarify the position itself.⁴³

42. Lutheran theology treats the work of interpretation as an act of service to the Word rather than a judgment over it, with theological reasoning functioning within the Church as *ministerium verbi*, a ministry that clarifies and proclaims Scripture rather than authorizing it. For example, see E. M. Wiberg Pedersen, "Radical Incarnation and Creative Ambiguity: Luther's View of Ministry and Gender," *Studia Theologica* 73, no. 1 (2019): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2019.1587642>.

43. See comparable deliberations in the following: Pablo Blanco-Sarto, "Catholics and Lutherans on Scripture. A Proposal by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI," *Verbum Vitae* 42 (2024): 47–62, <https://doi.org/10.31743/vv.16754>; Mark Alan Bowald, "The Character of Theological Interpretation of Scripture," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 2 (April 2010): 162–83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2009.00448.x>; James R. A. Merrick, "*Sola scriptura* and the *regula fidei*: the Reformation scripture principle and early oral tradition in Martin Chemnitz' *Examination of the Council of Trent*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63, no. 3 (2010): 253–71, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000359>; Peter-Ben Smit, "Canonical Criticism: On the Road Towards Ecumenical Hermeneutics?," in *From Canonical Criticism to Ecumenical Exegesis?* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), 139–72, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004301016_005; Philipp Stoellger, "Martin Luther on Faith," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, March 29, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.331>.

The Inerrantist Objection:

Does Efficacy Compromise Propositional Truth?

Critics from the broadly propositionalist camp may contend that grounding scriptural authority in the Word's generative power quietly abandons the commitment to Scripture's historical and factual reliability. Allegedly, if the Bible's authority rests on what it does rather than on the accuracy of what it reports, then propositional truth has been traded for something more functional and therefore less stable.

This objection rests on a false binary. The external Word account does not deny that Scripture speaks truthfully about the events it narrates. Rather, it insists that historical credibility cannot by itself account for all that Scripture accomplishes. Accurate records do not create faith, absolve guilty consciences, or call a community into existence. These effects belong to divine action working through the text. To locate Scripture's authority in God's ongoing address is not to undermine the text's truthfulness but to place it within its proper purpose. The two commitments are not rivals but complementary dimensions of a single account.

The Liberal-Experiential Objection:

Is the External Word Simply a Form of Religious Experience?

From the opposite direction, critics in the experientialist tradition may argue that speaking about a "living Word" or a "divine address" is a more sophisticated way of appealing to interior religious experience. Therefore, the Lutheran account has not escaped the subjectivism it set out to correct. This objection misreads the logic of the external Word. As the argument of §2.1 makes clear, the external word does not originate within the interior of the human person. Rather, it approaches from without, reaching the hearer before any receptive posture toward it has yet formed.

This is precisely the distinction the experientialist model cannot make: between an interior impression the self generates and an address it receives from outside its own domain. Because the external word is genuinely prior to and constitutive of experience by creating the faith it calls forth, it cannot be reduced to a religious feeling, however intense. The Word does not confirm what is already sensed within but announces what could never be derived from within.

The Roman Catholic Objection:

Scripture Without Tradition?

Catholic interlocutors will press a different concern. They claim that Scripture cannot interpret itself. It requires the authoritative guidance of the Church's teaching office to be read correctly. Without this external governance, *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone") dissolves into a multiplicity of competing private interpretations, each claiming biblical warrant.

The Lutheran response does not deny that Scripture is always read within a faith community shaped by tradition. To revisit what was noted in §1.3, there

is a distinction between Scripture as the ruling norm and tradition as a derived and accountable norm. It is one that remains answerable to the Word rather than coordinate with it. More importantly, the Christological reading principle examined in §4.2 is not an external criterion imposed upon the text from without. It is the interpretive logic the canonical text generates. The risen Christ on the Emmaus road did not appeal to an institution to interpret the Scriptures. He opened them, and doing so was an act of the Word, not a supplementary authority alongside it.

The Reformed Objection:

Is the Lutheran Framework Too Restrictive?

Reformed theologians may question whether binding the Spirit's work so tightly to the proclaimed Word and the sacraments (§4.3) unnecessarily constrains the sovereign freedom of God. On this view, the Spirit moves where He wills, and the insistence on the external Word risks making the Spirit a prisoner of ecclesial practice.

The Lutheran tradition does not deny the Spirit's sovereignty. It insists that the Spirit has freely chosen to work through specific means (preaching, baptism, and the Supper) as a gift to the Church, not a limitation on God. The external Word is not a safeguard against divine freedom but against human self-deception. The alternative to grounding the Spirit's work in the external Word is not greater spiritual freedom but a closed circle in which the self's impulses serve as its own validation. The shared Reformed commitment to the Spirit's work through Scripture remains genuine common ground, even where the two traditions diverge on the scope of those appointed means.

The Historical-Critical Objection:

Does This Framework Flatten the Text's Human History?

Historical-critical scholars may challenge the canonical and Christological reading of Scripture on the grounds that it ignores the complex editorial history behind the text and is therefore methodologically naive. Engaging with this objection requires acknowledging the genuine contribution of historical inquiry without conceding the claim that such inquiry governs all interpretation.

Canonical exegesis does not pretend the text has no human history. It affirms both the historical particularity of each biblical text and the theological authority of the Scriptures the Church has received and transmitted. Still, even the shape of the received text involves historical judgment, as textual criticism shows, and such judgments are always probable rather than absolute.

Historical and textual criticism therefore serve theological exegesis when they function ministerially: helping readers know the saving God who addresses sinful humanity through the scriptural text. Attention to compositional background, textual history, and canonical reception may clarify and deepen the

reading, but it must not stand over the text as judge. Scripture's authority does not depend on resolving every question of authorship, provenance, or textual history but on the God who addresses His Church through these prophetic and apostolic witnesses.

The Postmodern Objection:
Who Controls the Meaning of the Word?

Finally, critics shaped by postmodern approaches will question whether any stable, authoritative meaning can be assigned to Scripture at all. It is asserted that all interpretation is shaped by particular cultural and ideological commitments that inevitably influence what readers find in a text. The Lutheran tradition does not respond to this challenge by maintaining a naive interpretive objectivism, as though readers bring no assumptions to the text. It responds by pointing to the public, Christological center of Scripture described in §6.2.

The clarity of Scripture is not the transparency of every verse in isolation but the public intelligibility of the Gospel—Christ crucified and risen for sinners—as the center of the canon. Because communities and traditions shape how Scripture is received, theological exegesis must practice real epistemic humility. This means it remains capable of self-criticism, even toward its own most venerable interpretive traditions, including those stemming from Luther.

Ministerial reason serves the text; it does not make any inherited exegetical judgment immune from correction. At the same time, such humility does not mean interpretation collapses into relativism. Theological exegesis may also expose the hidden assumptions of postmodern readings that reduce all traditions to struggles for power between oppressor and oppressed. Where the publicly proclaimed, Christ-centered Word is heard, tested, and returned to across generations and cultures, that Word—not the reader's horizon, the Church's habit, or the culture's ideology—remains the final court of appeal.

Conclusion

The Arc of the Argument

Three texts, drawn from across the canonical breadth of Scripture, have together illuminated a single, coherent claim. Deuteronomy 6:4–9 established that the covenant people do not precede the Word that forms them. Instead, Israel comes into existence through divine address and remains a distinct community only by continuing to receive it. Luke 24:13–35 demonstrated that even the most dramatic event in human history—the death and resurrection of God's own Son—does not carry its meaning on its surface. It required the risen Messiah to open the Scriptures and set His crucifixion within its proper canonical frame before grief could yield to living faith. Romans 10:5–17 then traced the chain from divine sending to public proclamation to the specific conscience that hears itself addressed, showing that

the Word does not merely report salvation but delivers it. Across all three texts, the same movement unfolds. God speaks a people into being, explains through Scripture what he has accomplished in Christ, and applies that completed work through the proclaimed Gospel.

The Authority of the Speaking God

The argument converges on a conclusion that is straightforward to state yet demanding to inhabit. The authority of Scripture rests in the fact that the living God addresses His creatures through the prophetic and apostolic Word. It is not a property the Bible holds independently of its source, like the binding force of a statute, nor is it a quality believers confer upon it through faithful reading. When Scripture is proclaimed, taught, and received, the voice of the God who created, redeemed, and sustains the world is genuinely heard.

To hear Scripture rightly is therefore to hear the risen Christ: the crucified Jesus whom the Father has vindicated, declared to be His Son in power, and exalted as Lord. This is not a pious sentiment but a claim with exegetical weight. The Shema that summoned Israel into covenant existence, the risen Lord opening Israel's Scriptures on the Emmaus road, and the Word near the lips of Paul's hearers are not separate events. They are the activity of the one God who addresses His creation through the means He has freely chosen.

The Distinctive Lutheran Contribution

Lutheran theology names and defends what other traditions often sense but struggle to articulate consistently. The insistence on the external Word resists the subjectivism that weakens both propositionalist and experientialist accounts of biblical authority. The Law-Gospel distinction preserves the proclaimed message against complacency on one side and despair on the other. The Christological reading principle holds the canon together without flattening its diversity or reducing it to proof texts. Luther's doctrine of the Holy Spirit then gives this vision concrete form. The Gospel creates a faithful community, and within that community the Spirit continues to preach the Gospel so that faith is generated by the Word. These are not merely sixteenth-century positions. They are living instruments for reading Scripture in a way that lets it do what God promises.

The Road Ahead

These convictions press upon the Church with urgency. In a cultural moment when inherited commitments are widely questioned and sustained attention is increasingly rare, the temptation is to trade substance for accessibility. However, the Lutheran tradition examined in this essay suggests that the Church's renewal depends not on accommodation but on recovery. This includes catechesis that forms genuine faith across generations rather than transmitting bare information. It also involves liturgical practice that keeps the Word and sacraments at the center rather than

at the margins. A community that understands itself as the creature of the Word will worship, teach, and live from that conviction outward. The God who has never fallen silent continues to speak. The question for the Church in every age is whether it remains ready to hear and heed that Word, along with speaking Scripture aptly and intelligently as the language of its faith.

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Scripture, Semantics, and Ontology

A Philosophical Map of Biblical Hermeneutics

Dennis Bielfeldt

ABSTRACT: This essay offers a philosophical map of biblical hermeneutics, tracing the major intellectual trajectories that have shaped the interpretation of Scripture from the classical Christian tradition to the present. The ultimate argument presented claims that disputes about interpretation are never merely disputes about method. Beneath the familiar debates over historical criticism, literary analysis, narrative reading, and theological interpretation lies a more fundamental question: how does theological language relate to reality? The essay surveys the premodern integration of exegesis and theology, Luther's account of the *nova lingua* of scriptural discourse, the Enlightenment displacement of theology by method, the rise of nineteenth-century historicism, the emergence of philosophical hermeneutics in Heidegger and Gadamer, and the Anglo-American trajectory through literary criticism, canonical approaches, and speech-act theory. Additionally, an examination of Hans Frei's recovery of the plain sense of biblical narrative occurs before the argument that even the most sophisticated theological responses to modern hermeneutics leave unresolved basic semantic questions: how do biblical terms denote, how do theological predicates apply, and under what conditions do scriptural sentences bear truth? Drawing on model theory in the technical sense developed within modern logic, the essay proposes that hermeneutics opens onto semantics and semantics in turn onto ontology. The interpretation of Scripture belongs not merely within biblical studies but within the wider vocation of philosophical theology where questions of reference, predication, truth, and reality cannot be avoided. The essay concludes firstly by connecting the model-theoretic argument to Luther's insistence that the *nova lingua* of theology demands not semantic indeterminacy but semantic seriousness, and secondly to the classical claim that the intelligibility of scriptural language is grounded in the Logos as the ontological condition under which language, world, and truth belong together.

A Philosophical Map of Biblical Hermeneutics

Few questions in theology have generated more persistent disagreement than the one pertaining to how Scripture should be interpreted. Contemporary discussion presents a crowded and often bewildering field of approaches: historical-critical analysis, literary and narrative readings, canonical interpretation, theological interpretation, and a wide range of postmodern strategies that stress the instability of meaning and the contingency of interpretation. Each brings a characteristic method, vocabulary, and implied account of what the interpreter is actually doing when reading the biblical text. The result is not merely a plurality of exegetical procedures but also a deeper conflict over the nature of interpretation itself.

However, debates over interpretive method often begin too late. By the time interpreters argue over procedure, more fundamental judgments have usually already been made, whether explicitly or not. Hermeneutical strategies do not arise in a philosophical vacuum.¹ Every account of interpretation presupposes some prior understanding of language, meaning, history, truth, and the conditions under which understanding becomes possible. Privileging authorial intention, narrative coherence, readerly response, communal reception, or historical reconstruction indicates a prefixed stand within a determinate conception of how texts signify, how meaning is rendered accessible, and how discourse may bear upon reality.

For that reason, the interpretation of Scripture cannot be reduced to the application of a neutral technique. Interpretation is never simply a matter of selecting the proper method and applying it with sufficient care. Interpreting always takes place within a broader intellectual horizon that governs, often beneath the level of explicit awareness, the relation between language and world, text and meaning, as well as history and truth. What first appears to be a disagreement about exegetical procedure is often, at a deeper level, a disagreement about the very conditions under which meaning can emerge and claims to truth can be sustained. As such, hermeneutics is never merely methodological but rather inescapably philosophical.²

1. For the classic account of hermeneutics as grounded in prior assumptions about language, understanding, and history, see Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989); and Anthony C. Thiselton, *Why Hermeneutics?* (London: SPCK, 2019).

2. On the transition from methodological to philosophical hermeneutics, see Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), esp. 1–20; and Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 1–40. Against the modern tendency to locate intelligibility primarily in the subject's conditions of knowing, this essay suggests that intelligibility belongs first to reality itself. Theological semantics therefore cannot stop with the analysis of language use, readerly horizon, or historical consciousness. It presses toward ontology, and ultimately toward the Logos as the ground of a world capable of truthful speech about God.

Modern biblical scholarship has at times obscured this point by treating hermeneutics chiefly as a specialized technical discipline concerned with the rules by which texts are analyzed. On this view, interpretation becomes a sequence of operations performed upon a textual object—sources get identified, genres classified, redactional layers reconstructed, literary patterns traced, and historical settings described. Such work is often necessary and frequently illuminating, but it does not exhaust the task of interpretation nor does it answer the more basic question of what Scripture is and what kind of understanding is demanded by a text the church confesses to be divine speech. A method may govern how one handles a text while leaving unresolved the deeper issue of how the discourse of that text relates to the reality it claims to disclose.

Historically, the interpretation of Scripture belonged to a much larger intellectual and theological enterprise.³ Being inseparable from reflection on God, revelation, language, and reality, to interpret Scripture meant not merely analyzing a text but asking how divine truth may be communicated through human words, how language may bear meaning that exceeds immediate historical intention without dissolving into arbitrariness, and how the reader stands before a text that addresses not only the intellect but the whole life of faith. In this older vision, hermeneutics was not a discipline standing alongside theology but an internal moment of theology itself. The deeper concern was never method alone but the possibility of receiving scriptural discourse as meaningful, truthful, and answerable to the reality of God.

The fragmentation of modern hermeneutics cannot, therefore, be understood apart from the larger intellectual history from which it emerged. Changes in biblical interpretation were bound up with changes in philosophical outlook. The shift from the classical and medieval synthesis to the epistemological anxieties of modernity, the rise of Enlightenment criticism, the development of nineteenth-century historicism, the emergence of phenomenology and existentialism, and the later turn toward language, subjectivity, and postmodern suspicion all reshaped the conditions under which Scripture could be read. What counted as meaning, what qualified as legitimate understanding, and what sort of truth biblical interpretation was expected to yield changed along with these broader intellectual transformations. Modern hermeneutics did not merely add new tools to an otherwise stable practice but arose from a deeper reconfiguration of the intellectual world within which Scripture was being interpreted.⁴

3. For the premodern integration of scriptural interpretation with theology and doctrine, see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. I, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1–40; Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 1–30; and Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 73–112.

4. For major accounts of this larger intellectual history, see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); and David E. Klemm, ed., *Hermeneutical Inquiry*, vol. I (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

In sketching the major philosophical trajectories that have shaped modern biblical interpretation by tracing the development of hermeneutics from the classical Christian tradition through the transformations of the Enlightenment, the rise of nineteenth-century historicism, the emergence of philosophical hermeneutics, and the contested debates of the contemporary period, we may see more clearly the assumptions that continue to govern present approaches to Scripture. Such a survey proves necessarily selective and does not pretend to resolve the many disputes that divide interpreters. It can, though, illuminate the deeper sources of those disputes by placing them within the broader history of ideas.

This clarification matters because many contemporary disagreements in biblical studies rest upon philosophical assumptions that remain largely unexamined. Methods often get debated as though they were neutral procedures available for simple comparison when in fact they are embedded within larger accounts of reason, language, history, and reality. To ask whether Scripture should be interpreted historically, literarily, canonically, or theologically never means to only ask about method. Asking what Scripture is, what kind of meaning a text can possess, whether truth is discovered or constructed, and whether interpretation aims at explanation, understanding, judgment, or obedience must also happen. More deeply still, it is to ask within what framework of intelligibility scriptural judgments become meaningful at all and how theological language may relate to reality in a way that is not merely expressive but truth-bearing. The issue is never merely how one reads but what must be presupposed about language, world, and the ordered forms through which discourse renders reality intelligible if scriptural speech is to speak meaningfully of God, promise, judgment, reconciliation, and hope.

A map of these philosophical developments cannot settle the disagreements surrounding biblical interpretation, dissolve the tensions between competing schools, nor supply a final method capable of universal assent. What it can do, however, is make those disagreements more intelligible by showing why modern debates so often appear intractable, why interpreters frequently speak past one another, and why disputes about exegesis so easily become disputes about truth, authority, and the possibility of theological knowledge. More importantly, it can help bring into view the often hidden frameworks within which different interpretive judgments acquire their force.

Once bringing the philosophical foundations of hermeneutics to light, a more fundamental question emerges. Should the interpretation of Scripture remain primarily a technical activity governed by the procedural frameworks of modern biblical studies, or should it be recovered as a task belonging properly within the wider vocation of philosophical theology? The questions lie beneath many of the most important debates in contemporary interpretation, and once pressed with sufficient seriousness, they open onto questions modern hermeneutics has circled without naming precisely: how does scriptural language relate to reality, under what conditions it can be truth-bearing, and what kind of intelligible order must be pre-

supposed if theology is to speak meaningfully at all? These specific questions—not merely about method but about reference, predication, and the semantic anchoring of theological discourse—give the present inquiry its urgency.

The Classical Tradition

For most of Christian history, the interpretation of Scripture was inseparable from theology itself. What modern scholarship calls “hermeneutics” had not yet emerged as an independent discipline. Interpreting the biblical text belonged to the larger theological task of articulating the truth of the Christian faith as carried out within the doctrinal, liturgical, and contemplative life of the church. The biblical writings were not regarded as a collection of ancient religious documents and still less as a loose archive of historically conditioned voices. They were understood as the textual form of God’s redemptive self-disclosure in history, ordered toward Christ and received within the fellowship of the church. Interpretation, therefore, proceeded under the guidance of what the early tradition called the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith, not as an arbitrary constraint imposed from outside the text but as the theological horizon within which Scripture was believed to possess its proper coherence.⁵

Augustine offers one of the most influential articulations of this classical vision. In *De doctrina christiana*, he argues that the interpretation of Scripture must ultimately serve the knowledge and love of God. The biblical text communicates divine truth through human signs, and the task of the reader is to discern how those signs direct the mind beyond themselves toward the realities they signify. Scripture gets read not merely to gather information nor simply to reconstruct the intentions of an ancient author but to form the reader in wisdom and charity.

Augustine’s hermeneutic is theological in the strongest sense: interpretation is ordered toward participation in the truth to which the text bears witness. Speaking from within the economy of salvation, Scripture cannot be rightly understood apart from the theological reality that grounds it.⁶

This Augustinian framework remained decisive for the medieval tradition, though it was developed with increasing conceptual precision. Medieval theology

5. On the *regula fidei* and its function in patristic interpretation, see Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.10.1, where the rule of faith receives one of its earliest and most explicit formulations; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 108–120; and Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. 9–38.

6. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.35–36. On Augustine’s semiotics and its hermeneutical implications, see Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

did not treat the biblical text as a flat repository of propositions but understood Scripture instead as a divinely ordered discourse with historical and verbal dimensions participating in a providential pattern of meaning established by God. Thomas Aquinas, for example, insisted on the primacy of the literal sense, which did not mean crude literalism but instead the sense intended through the words of Scripture as they signify historical realities. However, Aquinas also affirmed that because God is the ultimate author both of Scripture and of the history it narrates, the realities signified by the words may themselves function as signs of further realities. Within this framework, the traditional doctrine of the fourfold sense of Scripture—literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical—expressed the belief that the biblical text participates in the wider drama of creation, redemption, and consummation.⁷

Modern readers often miss that this interpretive vision rested on a broader metaphysical and theological framework. Language was assumed to be capable of referring to reality while history was assumed to possess intelligible form because it unfolded within divine providence. The events narrated in Scripture were therefore not merely occasions for religious reflection. They were themselves moments within the divine economy and could bear theological significance without ceasing to be historical. Text, world, and divine action were not placed in competition with one another. Because God was understood to be the author of both creation and redemption, the world itself could signify beyond its immediately visible surface. Scripture could be read as truthful discourse about God's action in history, and the question of whether language might fail to mediate reality did not yet arise as a theoretical problem.⁸

Luther and the *Nova Lingua* of Theology

Luther's contribution to hermeneutics reaches deeper than the familiar Reformation principle that Scripture interprets itself. Beneath that methodological affirmation lies a more fundamental insight: the language of Scripture operates according to a distinctive grammar, one not reducible to the categories of ordinary discourse or to the conceptual habits of philosophical reasoning. This becomes especially visible in *De servo arbitrio* wherein Luther deploys formulations that strike the reader as paradoxical: strength disclosed in weakness, righteousness appearing in the midst

7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 10. On the fourfold sense and its theological rationale, see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 1, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 75–165, where de Lubac develops the theological logic underlying the plurality of scriptural senses.

8. On the metaphysical presuppositions of classical biblical interpretation and their erosion in modernity, see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 1–50; Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 73–112; and Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 33–67, which traces the broader metaphysical dissolution within which scriptural interpretation was progressively detached from its theological ground.

of sin, freedom found under the form of bondage, and life emerging through death. These are not ornaments of style but disclosures of theological form.

These formulations reveal that theological language does not simply borrow its meaning from common usage and apply it to sacred subject matter. Within the proclamation of the gospel, familiar terms undergo a profound semantic reordering. Words such as freedom, righteousness, power, and life do not retain the meanings assigned by ordinary moral intuition or philosophical reflection. They receive their proper sense only within the history of God's action in Christ.

Luther gestures toward this phenomenon by speaking of a *nova lingua*—a new language. The gospel does not introduce new vocabulary so much as it reconstitutes the semantic field within which theological predicates can be truthfully spoken. Terms already present in human discourse are transformed by being placed within the drama of sin, judgment, grace, cross, and resurrection.⁹

Luther's distinctiveness within the classical tradition lies not in multiplying the senses of Scripture but in sharpening attention to how the biblical proclamation reshapes the conceptual framework within which theological speech becomes possible. He directs attention not only to what Scripture means but to how scriptural language can mean at all. Theological discourse is not ordinary language extended toward divine objects but is rather a form of speech generated by the event of revelation itself. Because God is known in the crucified Christ, theological language inevitably bears the marks of that revelation: reversal, paradox, concealment, and disclosure. The grammar of theology is inseparable from the manner of which God gives himself to be known.

If hermeneutics concerns the conditions under which understanding becomes possible, Luther's importance lies not in offering a rule of interpretation but in exposing the deeper relation between revelation and language itself. Interpretation begins not with method alone but with the acquisition of a theological grammar given not by speculative philosophy but by the gospel.¹⁰

The Enlightenment Transformation

The Enlightenment did not merely introduce new interpretive techniques. It altered the philosophical conditions under which interpretation itself was understood. What had long been treated as an internal task of theology was

9. On Luther's account of theological language and the semantic transformation of ordinary terms within the gospel, see Dennis Bielfeldt, "Luther, Metaphor, and Theological Language," *Modern Theology* 6, no. 4 (1990): 249–273; and Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 35–60.

10. For a broader account of Luther's theological language as shaped by paradox, cross, and revelation rather than by autonomous rational categories, see Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 25–54; and Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R.A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 180–210.

gradually recast as a problem of method, governed by principles thought to be universally accessible apart from ecclesial authority or confessional commitment. As confidence in tradition eroded, interpreters increasingly sought foundations for judgment that could be justified by reason, grammar, and historical inquiry alone.

Within this climate, Johann August Ernesti formulated the principle that would become foundational for modern biblical interpretation: the Bible must be interpreted like any other book.¹¹ The force of the claim lay in its methodological neutrality. If Scripture is governed by the same linguistic and historical rules as all other texts, its interpretation can no longer depend upon the doctrinal judgments of the church. The interpreter's task became the recovery of what the human author intended to say in a particular historical setting. Once meaning was located in historical-linguistic process rather than in participation in a theological reality, the classical framework was no longer constitutive. It might remain a matter of belief, but it no longer governed method.¹²

Friedrich Schleiermacher carried this development further, transforming exegetical principles into a comprehensive philosophical account of understanding itself. Hermeneutics ceased to be a specialized concern of biblical interpretation and became a universal discipline, a general theory of the conditions under which any act of textual understanding becomes possible. According to Schleiermacher, interpretation involves two interrelated moments: grammatical interpretation, which attends to linguistic structure, and psychological interpretation, defined as reconstructing the interior act of thought from which the text emerged.¹³ To fully understand a text is not only to parse its words correctly but to re-enter the mental world of its author. Interpretation no longer aims to hear Scripture as the church's witness to divine revelation but to understand an author better than he understood himself.¹⁴ Sacred

11. Johann August Ernesti, *Institutio Interpretis Novi Testamenti* (Leipzig, 1761). On Ernesti's significance for the emergence of modern biblical hermeneutics, see Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: SCM, 1991), 30–35; and Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 132–138.

12. On the displacement of theology by method in Enlightenment hermeneutics, see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 51–65; Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 51–84; and Peter Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 1–30, which traces the broader intellectual conditions under which theological authority gave way to historical and grammatical method.

13. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5–10. For Schleiermacher's hermeneutics in broader context, see Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 85–105; and Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 84–97.

14. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 23. The phrase “understand an author better than he understood himself” derives from Schleiermacher's account of psychological

and secular texts are now treated within the same formal horizon, and Scripture becomes one instance of the broader problem of textual understanding rather than a unique kind of discourse bearing divine truth.

Hermeneutics became autonomous because theology was no longer permitted to provide its unquestioned ground. The consequences of that shift would deepen in the nineteenth century as the rise of historical consciousness transformed biblical studies further still.

Historicism and the Rise of Historical Consciousness

During the nineteenth century, hermeneutics underwent a decisive transformation as European thought came increasingly under the influence of historical consciousness. The growing recognition of human ideas, institutions, and texts being products of particular historical conditions fundamentally altered the way interpretation was conceived. Meaning was no longer assumed to stand above history in the form of timeless rational or theological principles but was increasingly understood as something mediated by the historical worlds in which human beings live, speak, and think.

This development was closely connected to the rise of modern philology. Scholars such as Friedrich August Wolf and Friedrich Ast argued that texts can be understood only through careful reconstruction of the linguistic, cultural, and intellectual worlds from which they emerged.¹⁵ Ast gave this a broader theoretical form by emphasizing the organic unity of historical cultures: an individual text expresses a wider spiritual totality, and interpretation must situate the text within the total life of the community from which it emerged. Meaning arises from the whole, and the whole can be grasped only through its particular expressions, the familiar hermeneutical circle of part and whole.¹⁶

interpretation and became programmatic for nineteenth-century hermeneutics. For discussion, see Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 84–87; and Paul Ricoeur, “Schleiermacher’s Hermeneutics,” *The Monist* 61, no. 1 (1977): 73–84.

15. On Friedrich August Wolf, Friedrich Ast, and the historicization of interpretation through philology, see B. H. McLean, *Biblical Interpretation and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 33–58; and Günter Scholtz, “Ast and Schleiermacher: Hermeneutics and Critical Philosophy,” in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 76–86.

16. On the rise of historical consciousness and its significance for hermeneutics, see Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works*, vol. 4: *Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. 235–260, where Dilthey develops his account of the rise of hermeneutics as the methodological core of the human sciences; and John H. Zammito, “Hermeneutics and History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Michael N. Forster and Kristin Gjesdal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 173–192.

Wilhelm Dilthey sought to provide a philosophical foundation for this approach in his account of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the human sciences. Unlike the natural sciences, which explain phenomena by causal laws, the human sciences aim to understand the meaningful expressions through which human life becomes visible to itself. Texts, institutions, works of art, and historical events are all embodiments of what Dilthey called lived experience (*Erlebnis*), not inert objects but expressions of life. Hermeneutics thus becomes the methodological core of the human sciences, providing the means by which the inner structures of historical life can be reconstructed from their outward expressions.

The influence of this orientation on biblical studies was immense. Scripture came to be treated as a historical artifact whose significance could be explained only by reconstructing the processes of composition, transmission, editing, and reception. From this setting emerged the major forms of modern historical criticism: source criticism identifying written strata behind the biblical books, form criticism classifying units of tradition by genre and social setting, and redaction criticism examining the theological intentions of editors. Different as these were, they shared a common conviction—the meaning of Scripture could not be adequately understood without historical explanation of the conditions under which it came into being.

The consequences were far-reaching. Earlier interpreters had attended to history within an overarching theological framework in which Scripture was read primarily as a witness to divine revelation. Historicism altered this order of priority. The biblical text appeared first as an object of historical analysis and only secondarily, if at all, as an authoritative theological word.

Revelation, doctrine, and ecclesial authority were drawn into the same historical field as every other human product.

Historicism also generated tensions it could not finally resolve. If all meaning is historically conditioned, the interpreter is no less conditioned than the text. By what means can the present interpreter overcome the distance separating one historical horizon from another? That question opens the way to philosophical hermeneutics in the twentieth century.

Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Problem of Situated Understanding

By the early twentieth century, historical consciousness had become the dominant framework for interpreting texts. Soon, this historicist model became the object of philosophical criticism. The problem was not merely whether historical reconstruction could be carried out with sufficient rigor but more fundamentally whether interpretation could ever be reduced to method at all.

The most decisive challenge came from Martin Heidegger, who transformed the discussion by shifting the focus of hermeneutics from epistemology and method to

ontology. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argued that understanding is not first a specialized scholarly procedure applied to texts but instead a basic structure of human existence itself. Human beings do not begin as detached observers confronting a world of neutral objects. Rather, they always already find themselves situated within a world that is meaningful in advance of explicit reflection.¹⁷ Understanding is not the overcoming of situatedness but its enactment. One does not first achieve a position outside all assumptions and then begin to understand—one understands from within a prior horizon of meaning never fully chosen nor never wholly escaped. Heidegger thus transformed hermeneutics from a regional discipline into a philosophical account of existence. The question was no longer merely how texts should be interpreted but how understanding belongs to the mode of being proper to finite and historical creatures.

Hans-Georg Gadamer developed this Heideggerian insight into what he called philosophical hermeneutics. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argues that the modern search for an objective interpretive method capable of neutralizing the interpreter's historical situation rests on a misunderstanding of how understanding actually occurs.¹⁸ Understanding does not arise by escaping one's historical situation but by working within it. The interpreter does not stand over against the text as a neutral consciousness; he stands within a tradition of language, concepts, and expectations that makes understanding possible in the first place.

This is why Gadamer rehabilitates the notion of prejudice. Prejudgments are not obstacles to interpretation but its very conditions. The task is not to eliminate them but to allow them to be tested, corrected, and transformed in dialogue with the text.¹⁹ Gadamer describes the resulting process as a *fusion of horizons* (*Horizontverschmelzung*): the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter meet, and in that meeting understanding becomes possible. Meaning is not extracted from the past as a fixed object but comes to presence in the event of interpretation itself.

Gadamer's concept of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*—historically effected consciousness—names the recognition that interpreters do not confront history

17. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), esp. §§31–32. On Heidegger's transformation of hermeneutics from method to ontology, see Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 124–154; and Theodore Kisiel, "Heidegger," in *A Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 223–231.

18. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), esp. 265–285, where Gadamer develops his critique of the Enlightenment prejudice against prejudice and argues that method cannot serve as the sole guarantor of truth in the human sciences.

19. On prejudice, dialogue, and the fusion of horizons, see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295–307, where the fusion of horizons and historically effected consciousness are developed; and Jean Grondin, 'Hans-Georg Gadamer,' in *A Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 155–163.

from outside history. The past is not a distant object laid before the interpreter for inspection but is active in the present, shaping the very categories through which the present understands itself.²⁰ Tradition is therefore not an impediment to knowledge but the medium in which understanding becomes possible at all. Human beings do not invent the language through which they think or the concepts by which they judge. They receive them.

This entire development stands within the trajectory inaugurated by Kant who argued that human knowledge does not simply mirror an independent reality. Experience is possible only because the knowing subject contributes the formal conditions under which objects can appear. Heidegger radicalized this insight by relocating it from transcendental subjectivity into concrete human existence. Gadamer extended it further by showing that these conditions are mediated through language, tradition, and historical life.²¹ The result is a conception of interpretation in which understanding always occurs within historically conditioned horizons that cannot be bypassed in the name of pure method.

The implications for biblical interpretation proved profound. Every reading of Scripture arises from within a particular horizon of questions, traditions, and communal practices. Interpretation became reflexive: the reader must account not only for the historical world of the text but for the world from which the reading itself proceeds. The question is no longer only what the text once meant but how its meaning comes to address the present through the conditions of understanding itself.

Philosophical hermeneutics also introduced questions it could not fully resolve. If meaning arises through historically conditioned horizons, what becomes of truth? If understanding is always mediated by language and tradition, how can revelation claim authority over the interpreter rather than being absorbed into the interpreter's own horizon? The problem had shifted once again. Hermeneutics was no longer simply about recovering the past but had become the question of how truth, language, history, and human finitude belong together in the act of understanding itself. The question about the conditions under which discourse can be not merely

20. On *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* ("historically effected consciousness"), see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300–307; Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 75–100, which provides the clearest English-language analysis of the concept and its implications; and Donatella Di Cesare, *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, trans. Niall Keane (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 120–135.

21. On the Kant–Heidegger–Gadamer trajectory in modern hermeneutics, see Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 88–123; Sebastian Gardner, *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–30, for the Kantian background of the subject's constitutive role in knowledge and David Linge, introduction to Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), xi–lviii, which traces the Kant–Heidegger–Gadamer line with unusual clarity and remains one of the best introductory accounts of the trajectory in English.

meaningful but genuinely truth-bearing points beyond philosophical hermeneutics toward a more precise account of how theological language relates to reality. It is there that the model-theoretic approach begins to take shape.

The Anglo-American Trajectory

While continental hermeneutics developed through the philosophical work of figures such as Heidegger and Gadamer, a different trajectory unfolded in the Anglo-American world. Therein, reflection on interpretation was shaped less by a unified philosophical account of understanding and more by developments within biblical scholarship, literary criticism, and analytic philosophy.²²

For much of the twentieth century, biblical studies in English-speaking universities remained dominated by the historical-critical method. Building on the nineteenth-century legacy of German scholarship, interpreters sought to reconstruct the processes through which the biblical texts had come into being. Source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism treated the biblical writings primarily as historical documents whose meaning was to be explained in relation to the conditions of their production. The central task of interpretation became historical reconstruction rather than theological reflection. Biblical studies increasingly aligned itself with the wider practices of historical scholarship and with adjacent disciplines, such as religious studies and ancient Near Eastern history.

At the same time, a different development was taking place within literary criticism. Movements such as New Criticism shifted attention away from authorial intention and historical background toward the internal structure of the text itself.²³ Utilizing this view, meaning arises through the interplay of formal elements—imagery, narrative design, metaphor, irony, and rhetorical pattern. The text got treated less as a historical artifact to be explained and more as a literary object to be read closely. This turn entailed important consequences for biblical interpretation, encouraging scholars to regard the Bible not simply as a collection of historical sources but as a

22. For broad accounts of the interaction between biblical scholarship, literary criticism, and analytic philosophy in the Anglo-American context, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 1–30; and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 1–40, which surveys the Anglo-American landscape with particular attention to the intersection of literary theory, analytic philosophy, and biblical interpretation.

23. On the New Critical turn from author and history to the internal structure of the text, see W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *Sewanee Review* 54 (1946): 468–488, the locus classicus of the New Critical rejection of authorial intention; Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), which exemplifies the close reading method in practice; and René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), 139–158, for a systematic account of the text-internal approach to meaning.

body of texts possessing literary shape, narrative coherence, and rhetorical force. Narrative criticism examined the structure of biblical stories and the ways narrative form itself carries theological significance. Canonical criticism asked how the final form of the canon functions as a theological whole rather than as a mere repository of earlier traditions.²⁴ Reader-response approaches extended the discussion further by emphasizing the role of the reader in the production of meaning, specifically the recognition that interpretation is shaped not only by what a text contains but by the expectations and interpretive strategies that readers bring to it.²⁵

Alongside these developments, another influence entered from analytic philosophy. Wittgenstein's later work emphasized that language functions within forms of life while Austin and Searle showed that utterances do not merely describe states of affairs but perform actions.

Speech-act theory proved especially suggestive for theology and biblical studies²⁶ in claiming that language is not exhausted by its descriptive content. Promises, commands, blessings, warnings, and declarations accomplish something in the very act of being spoken. When applied to Scripture, this perspective opened the possibility of understanding biblical language not merely as the communication of information but as a form of discourse that acts upon its hearers by summoning, judging, promising, commanding, and forming the community that receives it.

The result was an increasingly complex interpretive landscape wherein historical, literary, and philosophical approaches intersected without being integrated into a single theoretical framework. Unlike the continental tradition, which sought a comprehensive philosophical account of understanding, the Anglo-American world tended to produce a plurality of methods shaped by different disciplinary concerns. Historical critics asked how texts came to be, literary critics asked how texts function in their final form, and reader-oriented approaches asked how meaning emerges in the act of reading. Philosophers of language asked what kind of activity language performs when it is used.

24. For narrative and canonical approaches in biblical studies, see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); and Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

25. On reader-oriented theories and their impact on hermeneutics, see Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 20–50, which provides the foundational account of the reader's constitutive role in the production of meaning; Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1–17, for the more radical reader-response position; and Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 503–615, for the implications of reader-oriented theories specifically for biblical interpretation.

26. On speech-act theory in biblical interpretation, see Richard Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001/2004); and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Beneath this methodological diversity a common question gradually came into view: how should the relation between language, meaning, and reality be understood in the interpretation of Scripture? Historical criticism located meaning in the past, literary approaches drew attention to the integrity of the text in its final form, reader-oriented theories emphasized the conditions of reception, and analytic philosophy reopened the question of what language itself accomplishes.

Taken together, these developments made it increasingly difficult to treat interpretation as merely a technical procedure. They converged from different directions on the same underlying problem: not simply how texts are read but what must be presupposed about the relation between language and reality if scriptural discourse is to be truth-bearing at all.

At precisely that point, the possibility of reconnecting biblical interpretation with philosophical theology begins to re-emerge. Once the central issue is recognized to concern the nature of language, the conditions of meaning, and the relation of textual discourse to reality, interpretation can no longer remain simply a matter of disciplinary technique but is drawn back toward the larger philosophical and theological questions from which modern hermeneutics had once attempted to detach itself. Therein, in the questions of how theological language is anchored to reality and how scriptural models disclose the structures of a world ordered by divine action, that a model-theoretic approach to interpretation finds its proper footing.

The Contemporary Landscape and the Frei Proposal

By the late twentieth century, many theologians had begun to question the dominance of historical-critical interpretation. The issue was not simply whether historical criticism had produced valuable results—it plainly had. The deeper question was whether its underlying assumptions had come to shape the meaning of Scripture in ways that displaced the theological function of the text itself.

One of the most important voices in this discussion was Hans Frei. Frei argued that modern biblical interpretation had gradually subordinated the narrative world of Scripture to explanatory frameworks external to the text.²⁷ In the premodern tradition, the biblical narrative had functioned as the primary framework within which Christian identity and understanding were formed.

Modern hermeneutics altered this relation decisively. Historical criticism directed attention behind the text toward the events and sources from which it emerged. Philosophical hermeneutics drew attention to the role of the interpreter and the conditions under which meaning arises in the present. As different as these approaches were, both tended to marginalize the narrative coherence of Scripture itself, treating the text either as a window to view a historical reality lying behind

27. Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, esp. 1–16, where Frei diagnoses the modern displacement of the biblical narrative's plain sense by external explanatory frameworks.

it or as a site in which meaning is generated through encounter with the reader. In either case, the plain sense of the biblical narrative as narrative was displaced.²⁸

Frei's response was neither a retreat into pre-critical naïveté nor a rejection of modern hermeneutics. He pointed out that the meaning of biblical narrative is not finally secured by recovering events behind the text but by attending to the world the text itself renders. The literal sense, in Frei's account, is not a minimal residue of historical reference but a sense generated by the narrative shape of Scripture as it identifies its subject matter.²⁹ The Gospels do not merely provide materials from which a historical figure may be reconstructed. They identify Jesus Christ through the exclusive shape of the narrative itself. Frei accepts the irreversibility of historical consciousness yet resists the conclusion that Scripture's theological significance must therefore be subordinated to historical method.

Frei's work helped prepare the way for what would later be called the theological interpretation of Scripture, a movement seeking to recover the reading of Scripture within the doctrinal and ecclesial life of the church without abandoning the gains of modern scholarship.³⁰ Within Lutheran contexts, his proposal has been received in different ways, generating divergent hermeneutical trajectories visible in figures such as Voelz and Schmitt.³¹ What these debates make clear is that hermeneutics remains a live issue within confessional theology. The question became no longer whether Scripture should be interpreted theologically but how such interpretation can be articulated under modern conditions.

However, Frei's proposal leaves a further question unresolved. To insist on the priority of the narrative's plain sense is to say something significant about where meaning is located rather than to say how the language of that narrative is anchored

28. On Frei's argument that modern interpretation displaced the plain sense of biblical narrative, see Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, esp. 1–16 and 323–357; and George Hunsinger, "Hans Frei as Theologian: The Vision and the Verdict," *Modern Theology* 8, no. 2 (1992): 103–128, which provides the best secondary account of Frei's central argument and its theological significance.

29. On Frei's account of the literal sense as the unsubstitutable sense generated by the narrative depiction of its subject matter, see Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 11–35; and Frei, "The Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?" in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. Frank McConnell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 36–77, where Frei develops his account of the literal sense most explicitly and responds to critics.

30. For representative statements of the theological interpretation movement, see Stephen E. Fowl, ed., *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

31. On differing Lutheran hermeneutical trajectories, compare James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2020); and David Schmitt, "Preaching and the Hermeneutical Task," *Concordia Journal* 38, no. 2 (2012): 108–126.

to reality, particularly how scriptural discourse refers, predicates, and makes truth-claims about God, world, and human existence. The narrative renders a world, but what is the relation between that rendered world and the reality theology seeks to articulate? It is at this juncture that a model-theoretic account of theological language becomes indispensable. The question is no longer only where meaning resides but how scriptural language is structured so as to be genuinely truth-bearing.

Model Theory and the Reference of Theological Language

The developments surveyed above disclose a recurring problem—modern hermeneutics has generated powerful insights into the historical, linguistic, and existential dimensions of interpretation, yet it has consistently left unresolved a more basic question: how does theological language relate to reality? While historical criticism clarifies the conditions under which texts arose, philosophical hermeneutics illuminates the situated character of understanding, literary approaches attend to the shape and force of texts as texts, and speech-act theory identifies what language performs, none of these, taken individually, fully answers the question of how biblical discourse refers to God, world, and history—how its terms denote, its predicates apply, and its sentences bear truth.

This is not merely a methodological deficit; it is a semantic one. When Scripture says “God is righteous,” “The Lord remembers his covenant,” or “Christ is risen,” what are the logical statuses of such claims? What sort of terms are “God,” “covenant,” and “Christ?” How do predicates such as “righteous,” “merciful,” or “judge” function when attributed to God? What kind of domain must be presupposed if such discourse is to be intelligible at all? These are not questions about piety or literary texture. They are questions about reference and predication, and they are questions that historical criticism, philosophical hermeneutics, and narrative theology each approach but do not decisively answer.

Model theory becomes relevant at this point, though not in the looser sense in which theologians have sometimes spoken of “models” of divine action but in the technical sense developed within modern logic.³² Model theory is the branch of mathematical logic that studies the relation between formal languages and the

32. Model theory in the strict logical sense was developed in the work of Alfred Tarski; see Alfred Tarski, “The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages,” in *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics*, trans. J. H. Woodger (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), 152–278; and Alfred Tarski, “On the Concept of Logical Consequence,” in the same volume, 409–420. For accessible introductions to model theory and its philosophical significance, see Wilfrid Hodges, *Model Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Michael Glanzberg, “Truth,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth/>. For the theological appropriation of semantic and model-theoretic concepts, see Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); and William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

structures in which their sentences receive interpretation. A structure, in this technical sense, consists of a domain of objects together with assignments of referents to singular terms, extensions to predicates, and truth conditions to sentences. Model theory asks what must be the case for a term to denote, for a predicate to apply, for a sentence to be satisfied in a structure, and for a set of sentences—a theory—to have a model at all. These questions are not identical with those of theology, yet they are illuminating because they shift attention from the mere occurrence of religious language to the conditions under which that language could count as referring, predicating, and bearing truth. The issue is not whether theological discourse is reducible to formal logic. The issue is whether the conceptual precision achieved in formal semantics can clarify the problem of theological reference.³³

The key insight is this: a formal language, taken by itself, does not yet speak about anything. Syntax alone, however well-formed, is semantically inert. A language requires an interpretation: a domain of objects, referents assigned to its singular terms, extensions assigned to its predicates, and truth conditions specified for its sentences. Only then does one move from inscription to meaning, from sentence-form to truth-apt discourse.³⁴ Once this point is seen, a parallel theological question comes into view. Biblical language cannot be understood simply as a sequence of historically conditioned utterances or as a self-contained literary world. Such language raises the question of what would count as a viable interpretation of that language; specifically, what sort of reality, order, or structure must obtain for biblical discourse to bear truth?

This reframes the hermeneutical problem in a precise way. Historical criticism can tell us when particular terms emerged and how they were used. Literary criticism can show how they function in narrative. Philosophical hermeneutics can describe the horizon within which they are received. Model-theoretic reflection, though, asks a different and more fundamental question: what interpretation

33. On theological language as world-disclosing and conceptually ordered rather than merely empirically descriptive, see Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 86–95; Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 216–256; Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

34. For the philosophical background of reference, predication, and truth as they bear on theological language, see Alfred Tarski, “The Semantic Conception of Truth,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 4, no. 3 (1944): 341–376, the foundational modern account of truth as semantic relation between language and structure; Wilfrid Hodges, *Model Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–24, for the technical development; William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 17–63, which applies the philosophical account of predication directly to theological language; and Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (London: SCM, 1957), was an early influential Anglo-American discussion of how theological terms refer and function.

makes such predicates intelligible as predicates of their subject? It asks not only how discourse is produced or received but how it is semantically anchored or how it is interpreted relative to a domain. When biblical language speaks of God, Israel, Christ, sin, promise, kingdom, and new creation, it does not merely arrange symbols within a textual field but purports to identify subjects, ascribe predicates, and articulate relations. More succinctly, it invites semantic analysis.³⁵

Such analysis need not imply naïve literalism. One advantage of model-theoretic precision is that it allows sharper distinctions among different semantic functions. Not all terms refer in the same way, not all predicates apply univocally, and not all sentences are interpreted by the same standards as ordinary empirical description.³⁶ However, this does not mean theological discourse is nonreferential. It instead means the logic of theological language must be clarified. The central question is not whether scriptural language refers but under what interpretation it refers and how its predications are to be understood.

Here the issue of predication becomes decisive. Biblical discourse does not only mention God; it says things about God. It predicates righteousness, holiness, mercy, patience, creative power, judgment, and faithfulness. It predicates actions: God creates, elects, commands, promises, delivers, raises, judges, and reconciles. A hermeneutical account adequate to Scripture must therefore explain not only the historical provenance of these predicates and their literary resonance but how such predications function as predications of their subject. What makes “God is righteous” more than an expressive formula? In technical semantics, to predicate is to attribute a property or relation within an interpretation—the predicate has application only in relation to a structure. Transposed into theology, this means one must ask what sort of ordered reality is presupposed when Scripture predicates justice or mercy of God. If those conditions are left wholly unspecified, theological

35. For accounts of models, metaphor, and analogy as cognitively serious and world-disclosing rather than merely decorative, see Mary Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 1–50; Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 216–256; Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 99–117; and William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 17–63. For the broader debate about the cognitive status of theoretical models, see Bas van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 43–82.

36. On the cognitive and referential force of metaphorical and model-like theological language, see Max Black, “Models and Archetypes,” in *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 219–243, the foundational philosophical account of models as genuinely cognitive rather than merely decorative; Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 216–256, on the referential and truth-bearing dimensions of metaphorical discourse; and Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 99–144, which applies these insights specifically to theological language.

discourse risks becoming semantically indeterminate—evocative perhaps, but not genuinely truth-apt.

The same issue arises with divine naming. Scriptural discourse employs names and titles: God, Lord, Father, Holy One of Israel, Messiah, Son of God, and Spirit. A name in semantic terms, though, is not simply a sound or inscription but functions by picking out a referent. The question is not only what connotations attach to divine names but what referential role they play across the full range of biblical discourse. How is continuity of reference maintained across narrative, prophecy, prayer, doctrine, and liturgy? In what sense does “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” identify the same referent as the one confessed in later Christian theological language? These are not merely philological questions; they are semantic questions at the heart of theology.

A further consequence concerns the relation between individual claims and their wider context. In model theory, single formulas receive their interpretation within a larger structure. As such, their respective truths depends on the whole semantic arrangement in which they stand. Something similar holds for theology. Biblical predicates and claims do not function atomistically. Their meanings depend upon a wider ordered field: creation, covenant, election, exodus, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, Spirit, church, and/or kingdom. These are not merely themes placed side by side but form an interconnected semantic order within which central claims about God and the world become intelligible. The move toward semantic rigor does not force one away from narrative or canonical shape but rather helps explain why such larger forms matter and why the meaning of any particular predication depends upon the whole within which it stands.

This also deepens, and presses somewhat beyond, the concerns associated with Frei. Frei was right to resist moving behind the text too quickly in search of some allegedly more basic explanatory level,³⁷ but the reason one cannot simply extract a neutral content from scriptural discourse is not only that meaning is narratively rendered but also that the discourse receives its semantic force within a determinate interpretive order. Terms and predicates are not detachable from the structure within which they function. Narrative is, therefore, not just the vehicle of meaning—it is one of the principal modes by which theological discourse becomes semantically ordered.

A theological appropriation of model theory must nonetheless proceed with caution. Standard first-order model theory presupposes a domain with members being available for quantification and predication within a common logical space. Theological language strains these assumptions, especially where God is not one entity among others. This does not invalidate model-theoretic reflection for theology. It means that theological semantics may have to adapt, qualify, or extend

37. On the irreducibility of biblical narrative form to some supposedly more basic explanatory substrate, see Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); and *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

the assumptions of ordinary formal treatment. The value of model theory lies not in supplying a ready-made theological system but in forcing one to confront with greater clarity the problems of reference, predication, identity, and truth.³⁸

That clarification has direct consequences for hermeneutics. If scriptural language is semantically serious, then interpretation cannot be limited to reconstructing past meanings or cataloguing literary effects. To read Scripture is not only to recover what ancient authors intended nor only to describe how later readers respond but to confront a body of discourse that purports to identify subjects, ascribe predicates, and speak truly of reality under theological description.

Hermeneutics opens into semantics, and semantics in turn opens into ontology.

Within Christian theology, this especially matters because revelation is not given apart from discourse. God is known, if known at all, in and through forms of language that identify divine action and characterize divine being. Creation, covenant, exodus, incarnation, cross, resurrection, Pentecost, and kingdom are not merely topics for religious reflection but constitute the semantic field within which theological judgments are made. The question of interpretation is inseparable from the question of what kind of reality makes such judgments true.

Model theory does not replace the concerns of modern hermeneutics. It gathers them within a more fundamental inquiry. Historical context still matters because the language of Scripture arose within determinate linguistic settings. The interpreter's horizon still matters because understanding is historically situated. Narrative form still matters because scriptural meaning is carried through discourse larger than isolated propositions. Beneath all of this lies the more basic semantic question: how is biblical language interpreted so that its claims about God's action, promise, judgment, and reconciliation are intelligible as claims, not merely as expressions of a communal form of life but as discourse that is about something satisfied or unsatisfied relative to a reality that theology seeks to articulate?

The interpretation of Scripture is therefore not simply a regional problem within biblical studies. It belongs within the wider vocation of philosophical theology because the deepest issues at stake concern reference, predication, truth, and reality. Model theory matters not because it resolves every hermeneutical dispute but because it provides a more exact conceptual framework within which those disputes can be posed and within which a theological account of scriptural language can be at once historically responsible, semantically disciplined, and metaphysically serious.

38. On the possibility of genuinely referential theological discourse not reducible to flat empirical description, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 130–170; William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 64–102, on literal predication and its application to theological claims; and Max Black, "Models and Archetypes," in *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 219–243, whose interaction model of metaphor provides relevant background for the account of theological reference developed here.

Conclusion: Hermeneutics, Theological Meaning, and the Future of Interpretation

The history of biblical hermeneutics shows that disputes about interpretation are never merely disputes about method. Beneath the familiar debates over historical criticism, literary analysis, narrative reading, and theological interpretation lie more basic philosophical and theological questions: what kind of discourse is Scripture, and how does its language relate to reality? The deepest issue has never been only how Scripture should be read. It has also been how scriptural language can refer, how its predicates function, and under what conditions its claims may be understood as true.

In the classical Christian tradition, this problem did not arise in its full modern form because exegesis remained internal to theology. Scripture was received as a unified witness to the divine economy, and its interpretation unfolded within the rule of faith, the life of the church, and a broadly shared metaphysical horizon. The relation between biblical language and divine reality was not treated as a separate problem requiring independent demonstration but was already assumed within a sacramental, doctrinal, and ecclesial understanding of the world.

The Enlightenment decisively altered this situation. As interpreters sought foundations independent of confessional authority, meaning increasingly came to be located in grammar, authorial intention, and historical reconstruction. The nineteenth century radicalized this development through historical consciousness, treating texts as products of particular cultural and intellectual worlds. The twentieth century deepened the problem further by showing that interpretation is not simply a scholarly technique but a basic feature of human existence: all understanding takes place within historically conditioned horizons. For all their force, though, these developments left unresolved the fundamental question of how theological language relates to the realities it claims to name, describe, and predicate.

That unresolved question remained visible even in the most sophisticated theological responses to modern hermeneutics. Frei's recovery of the literal sense of biblical narrative was a powerful protest against reducing Scripture either to a quarry for historical reconstruction or to an occasion for readerly subjectivity. He rightly insisted that the biblical text itself shapes the world within which Christian understanding is formed. However, a further issue remains. If scriptural meaning is carried through narrative and if understanding is always historically situated, how is one to account for the reference of theological language itself? How do biblical names identify their subjects? How do theological predicates apply? What makes scriptural discourse more than a closed textual world or a historically conditioned religious idiom?

Hermeneutics becomes inseparable from philosophical theology. Every construal of Scripture presupposes some account, whether acknowledged or not, of how language relates to reality. Historical criticism, philosophical hermeneutics, literary

approaches, and theological interpretation differ not only in procedure but also in the semantic and ontological assumptions they bring to texts. Their disagreements are therefore not simply methodological but concern reference, predication, truth, and the kind of reality within which biblical discourse is to be interpreted.

Model theory becomes important here, not in the loose sense of “models” as heuristic images but in the technical sense developed within modern logic, which asks how a language is interpreted in a structure, how terms denote, how predicates apply, and under what conditions sentences are satisfied or true. Its importance for theology lies not in reducing Scripture to a formal calculus but in recovering precision about the semantic issues that hermeneutics has often left implicit.

Theological discourse is not merely expressive, evocative, or communal—it purports to refer as well as predicates, makes judgments, and claims truth.

Once this point is seen, the central debates of modern hermeneutics appear in a new light. Historical criticism remains indispensable, but explaining the genesis of a statement is not the same as clarifying its reference. Literary analysis remains indispensable, but describing textual function is not the same as explaining truth-conditions. Philosophical hermeneutics remains indispensable, but showing that understanding is historically situated is not the same as showing how theological language speaks of God. Each of these approaches identifies something real and necessary. None alone resolves the semantic question at the heart of theological interpretation.

A suggestive theological analogue appears in Luther’s insistence on the *nova lingua* of theology. Luther recognized that scriptural language frequently appears paradoxical when judged by ordinary reasoning: life through death, strength through weakness, and glory through the cross. Such formulations are not merely ornamental. They indicate that theological discourse cannot be measured by the expectations of ordinary descriptive language. Neither are they meaningless. Their very distinctiveness demands more exact reflection on how theological language means, how it orders judgment, and how it speaks truly of God’s action. The *nova lingua* does not license semantic indeterminacy but demands semantic seriousness.

The future of biblical hermeneutics lies not in abandoning the gains of modern interpretation but in carrying them into a more fundamental inquiry. Historical method, literary and narrative sensitivity, and philosophical attentiveness to the situatedness of understanding must all be retained. These must now be gathered within a more explicit account of theological language itself. The interpretation of Scripture cannot remain merely a regional concern within biblical studies because the deepest issues it raises are questions of philosophical theology, questions of language, reference, predication, truth, and reality.

At the furthest point of this inquiry, semantics drives to ontology. The problem is not only how language is interpreted but why language and reality stand in relation at all. To ask how Scripture can speak truthfully of God is finally to ask why

truth, reference, and intelligibility are possible. Christian theology has traditionally named the ground of that possibility the Logos—the ontological condition under which language, world, and truth belong together in the first place. If Scripture can speak truthfully of God, it can do so only because reality is not mute, irrational, or self-enclosed but already ordered toward intelligibility. The oldest question therefore remains the decisive one: how can human language speak truthfully of God? The history of hermeneutics has not dissolved that question. It has made clearer its difficulty, its depth, and its inescapability. The task of biblical interpretation must therefore remain larger than method. It belongs to the unfinished work of theology itself—to think with precision about how Scripture means, how it refers, and how, through its human words, it may speak truly of divine reality.

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Reading Paul from out of Habakkuk, both Hebrew and Greek

James Mauney

ABSTRACT: Sacred scrolls of the Hebrew Bible translated into the Greek language and proclaimed to the communities of Paul's churches were intentionally used by Paul to instruct those looking for the return of their risen Lord in final glory. Without the awareness of the Greek translation of Habakkuk, we miss the aspect that for Paul's original listeners, the Greek rendering of the divine promise in Habakkuk 2:4, "the one who is righteous from out of *my* faithfulness shall live," is what leads into the arguments that Paul makes about justification by faith (or "faithfulness" as Greek *pistos* may be translated). To the congregation that *knows* the Greek Habakkuk promise of God, Paul gets freed up to talk about the faithfulness of God demonstrated and exhibited in the faithfulness of Christ and communicated by the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit to be poured into the faithfulness of the church and the faithfulness of the believer so that they are connected by the undergirding divine promise from Habakkuk "from out my faithfulness." "From out of faithfulness" (ἐκ πιστεως) can include both God's "My faithfulness" and my personal human faith since both occur at the same time. This double resonance is allowed because the already known foundational faithfulness comes from the divinely promised "My faithfulness." Therefore, in Christ the righteousness of God is revealed—from out of faithfulness into faithfulness.

God's Promise of Faithfulness in Paul according to Greek Habakkuk

In Romans, an excited Paul chose the verse from the Greek Septuagint Habakkuk 2:4: "the one who is righteous from out of *my* faithfulness shall live." Why? The risen Christ had actually appeared to him: "the One who was righteous from out of the *faithfulness of God* actually lived!" The wording of Greek Habakkuk 2:4 had come true in his life.

The pre-Damascus trip Saul, who became the post-Damascus trip Paul, wrote, “It is now no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And this life I now live in the flesh, I live *in faith of the Son of God* who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20-21). This was a testimony of praise, heartfelt and life changing. The risen Lord now lived in Paul, and Paul now lived for him because Christ “died for all that they might live no longer for themselves, but for him who had died for them” (2 Cor 5:15).

In I Corinthians, Paul wrote that the risen Lord appeared to him. Acts declares that the appearance hit him all at once in a voice he heard and a brightness so intense it blinded him! Paul writes in Galatians that God revealed Jesus to him—interestingly, to the very one who was seeking to destroy the church of the Lord did the Lord of the church reveal Himself. Thereafter was fulfilled the statement, “God’s wrath remembered mercy” (Greek Habakkuk 3:2), which inspired Paul to write, “the life I now live in the flesh I live in *faith of the Son of God* who loved me and gave himself for me.” God’s faithfulness to Jesus in raising Him from the dead had given life to the dead. God then reveals to Paul and the world that the dead, crucified, and accursed one was the risen and righteous One.

Saint Paul experienced the faithfulness of God in the appearance of the truly resurrected Jesus Christ to him! Paul never imagined such a transforming new understanding of God’s faithfulness. He recognized that if he now had any human righteousness at all, it paled compared to the divine faithfulness and righteousness of Jesus Christ and His obedience to his Father. The event turned Paul’s life around. He went from persecuting the gospel to running for the gospel.

Additionally, Paul remembered that wonderful promise of “*my faithfulness*”; he intentionally chose that phrase from the Greek text of Habakkuk 2:4 to become a foundation in his faith-filled writing because that personal promise Habakkuk seemed thoroughly to apply in his new life. From that point forward, Paul would have a righteousness based on that which comes from God’s righteousness revealed and given in Jesus Christ’s faithfulness.

Able to read and understand both the Hebrew and the Greek, Paul recognized the usefulness of both. As a Hebrew reader looking at the Hebrew translation of Hebrew Habakkuk 2:4, he recognized that he could use either the Hebrew letter “vav” or the Hebrew letter “ioda” to write: “*my faithfulness*” or “*his faithfulness*.” Having been rescued with his life changed by the faithfulness of God in the revelation of the resurrected Jesus, there was no way he could understand the faithfulness in Habakkuk 2:4 other than via a God who rescued him in spite of Paul’s righteous zeal. It was now all about the Greek Habakkuk’s, “*my faithfulness*,” i.e., God’s, that had rescued him! Paul went from being a man with a foundation in the law based on his own righteousness to knowing a foundation of faithfulness lived from out of the righteousness of God, who was Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead. He went from being a Pharisee who knew of a hope in the resurrection to a Christian knowing the One who was actually resurrected.

Habakkuk's Prophecy in Paul's Letters

Paul witnessed the actual appearing of the Risen Christ, and, as such, the prophecy of Habakkuk is present in the letters of Paul. The prophecy in the Septuagint (LXX) scroll¹ inspired verses and images that Paul remembered as he wrote letters to the Galatians, Romans, and Philippians, and that text also influenced how he preached and wrote with the communities of his missionary journeys and likely even with most of the Jews he dialogued with outside of Jerusalem. The circulating scrolls of the Septuagint served as the primary and, in most places, only form of scripture, especially for the early church throughout the Roman Empire. It is most likely on his missionary journeys into Asia Minor and Greece that Paul's reading of the text of Habakkuk was likely from a Greek scroll. Additionally, it was unlikely that the people he encountered would have even understood a sentence of Hebrew any more than Christian congregations today.

Of particular note from the Greek Septuagint Habakkuk is one specific, unique phrase in 2:4b: "But the one who is righteous from out of *my* faithfulness shall live." In the Greek, it is a powerful promise of God. Paul uses it as his opening theme in Romans 1:17: "For in it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed *from out of* faithfulness *into* faith, as it is written, "the one who is righteous from out of faithfulness shall live."

In the Greek verse of Romans 1:17, πιστεως, *pisteos*, or in English, "of faithfulness" in the genitive case, appears twice: "from out of faithfulness into faith," and "for the one who is righteous from out of faithfulness shall live." In the translation of Romans 3:21-5:2, this peculiar form, *pisteos*, occurred 14 more times. It is a peculiar form because in what eventually became the entire Septuagint (4th century), which is more than four times as large as the New Testament, the phrase "ἐκ πιστεως,"

1. When I use the term Septuagint as a term of convenience for the time frame of Paul, I use it as a catch-all term for the Greek scrolls read as translations of the Hebrew Pentateuch, prophets, psalms, and wisdom that were in circulation during the time of Paul. The Septuagint of many scrolls written in Greek were gathered into great manuscripts in the fourth century, 325-360 CE. Eusebius of Caesarea wrote that Emperor Constantine commissioned fifty copies. People have wondered if the ancient manuscripts of Sinaiticus or Vaticanus were a part of this project. Greek scrolls that eventually were included in these gathered manuscripts of the fourth century CE were circulating from the mid third century BCE. These were primarily of the Pentateuch though the texts of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the book of the twelve prophets were circulating in the early second century BCE. Ben Sirach in his prologue in 132 BCE writes of his grandfather creating a Hebrew scroll of the twelve prophets. I will suggest that the Greek translation of Habakkuk could make sense to me translated during the harsh reign of Ptolemy Antiochus Epiphanies IV, 175-164 BCE. Apocalyptic literature like Daniel and I Enoch would begin arising in this time. The prophecy of the Hebrew prophet, Habakkuk, written in 603 BCE or so, offered a model of hope in a most difficult time for faith. I will be asserting that Greek scrolls of scripture would have been what was read and known to Paul's churches in 48-65 CE. "Septuagint" is not a fixed document but a term of convenience.

or “from out of my faithfulness,” only appears once in the Greek Habakkuk 2:4. Paul will use the rare Greek word form πιστεως 54 times in his letters and the rare phrase εκ πιστεως 17 times. The Romans 1:17 phrase “from out of faithfulness into faith” brings to mind an image of a great pitcher pouring (εκ: “from out of”) *from out of* its very contents (εις: “into”) *into* another pitcher, and the originating pitcher (εκ: another meaning of its use) is the God who in Habakkuk 2:4 promises that “the one who is righteous from out of *my* faithfulness shall live.”

The Hebrew text apparently appealed to the general human persistence in faith: “the one who is righteous in *his* faith shall live.” Alternatively, the Septuagint Greek text seemed to me the most powerful promise that God makes as it is a personal promise: “the one who is righteous from out of *my* faithfulness shall live.” That reading in the Greek Habakkuk 2:4 pertained also to reading Romans 3:21-5:11 and Galatians 1-3 and Philippians 3. Taking in view the whole book of Habakkuk in the Septuagint, other places appear in Habakkuk that seem to have caught Paul’s attention. Knowing that Paul would have known the whole prophecy of Habakkuk as well as the one verse 2:4, some connections of verses, phrases, and words from the whole prophecy of Habakkuk in Galatians and Romans become apparent. For Paul, the Septuagint’s image in Habakkuk 2:2-4 of a “vision” at a “kairos time,” of “one who runs with the vision” and thusly of “one who is righteous” by virtue of this powerful promise by God, and the reading of “from out of *my* faithfulness” as found only in the Greek Habakkuk 2:2-4 all stood out as meaningful scriptures for Paul.

Paul twice used the verse from Greek Habakkuk 2:4, once in Romans 1:17 and once in Galatians 3:11. Paul had in mind the whole verse of Habakkuk 2:4 from the Greek in the second chapter of Galatians. Paul was likely also impacted by the prophecy of Greek Habakkuk because of the frequency of his use of the genitive form, πιστεως. It appears twice in the whole Septuagint but 54 times in Paul’s letters. Four aspects regarding this usage become apparent and worth analyzing.

First is the reminder that in the time and place wherein Paul lived, the Septuagint scrolls were the primary Bible for the listeners of his letters in his churches. It would remain that way in the early church until the time of Jerome in the fifth century. Since the fifth century, the Western tradition of the Catholic Church has studied and translated almost exclusively from the Hebrew. The Septuagint is now seen as a secondary translation, but before the fifth century, the Christian churches outside of Judea and west of Syria most likely read from the Septuagint Greek scrolls that were available to them.

That fact changes how the original listeners of Paul’s letters heard “from out of faithfulness” from Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11. Upon hearing this read aloud in worship, they could likely have been reminded of “from out of *my* faithfulness” from Greek scrolls of Habakkuk 2:4. In Paul’s churches, whether from his preaching or his letter, Christians may have already known or heard that “the one who is righteous from out of *my* faithfulness shall live” as the default, familiar Greek rendering of Habakkuk 2:4. Paul was possibly banking on that familiar Greek translation of the Septuagint.

Second, certain parts within the Greek Habakkuk seem to appear within Paul's letters. There is not only the last half of a single verse (Habakkuk 2:4b) but large sections from all three chapters of Greek Habakkuk. As such, Paul was certainly influenced by the entire Habakkuk rather than just the second half of one verse.

Third is the πιστεως of God in the letters of Paul. The phrase εκ πιστεως μου, "the one who is righteous *from out of my faithfulness* shall live," was the commonly read and heard Habakkuk 2:4b. The Septuagint phrase εκ πιστεως, "from out of faithfulness," appears 18 times in the New Testament. The phrase does not appear in any of the four gospels, Acts, Letters of Peter, Letters of John, James, Jude, or Revelation. It appears 17 times in Paul's letters: nine times in Romans, seven times in Galatians, and one time in Philippians. It appears in only one other place in the New Testament, in Hebrews 10:38 as the writer recalls, unsurprisingly, Habakkuk 2:4.

Fourth is πιστεως in the life of God, the theological implications.

A History of Reception Reminder

The scrolls of the Septuagint were the main sources of scripture in the days of Paul across the vast majority of the Roman Empire. To know Paul as author is to read him just as a child raised in Tarsus, Cilicia, as a Greek speaker in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. It is possible that his mother, her mother, and perhaps four prior generations of his Jewish family had been hearing, reading, and worshipping the same scrolls that evolved into the Greek Septuagint. Perhaps, "from out of my faithfulness" from the Greek Habakkuk 2:4 had been a cherished promise of God for generations by the time of Paul's letters sent to Galatia and Rome.

Paul wrote letters to Christians with scriptures he believed would have been helpful to their circumstances. He picked from the available scrolls of the Septuagint for what inspired and informed him. It was Paul who found the promise from the Septuagint Habakkuk personally inspiring. The Greek of πιστεως μου, "of my faithfulness," provided to Paul the undergirding text of the divine fountainhead of faithfulness.

Members of his congregations knew Greek, so he had to make his arguments and his points in Greek. In order to ensure the opportunity for full understanding, Paul had to use Greek scrolls for people in the Greek language, culture, and context. "Jewish communities of the Diaspora considered the Greek text of the Septuagint (LXX) rather than the Hebrew text to be authoritative scripture. By the middle of the first century CE, large segments of the Christian Church employed this Greek translation as their Bible."² For Paul's original listeners, then, the Greek Septuagint scrolls were the default texts people would have known, read, and used.

2. George W. E. Nickelsburg, "The Jewish Context of the New Testament," *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in 12 Volumes*, vol. VIII, p. 29. "The process for the Septuagint probably began not long after the time of Alexander the Great and continued with various

According to Acts 22:3, the young Pharisee Saul learned from Gamaliel in Jerusalem. Such a renowned rabbi enabled him to become a proficient reader of the Hebrew scrolls and a learned, zealous Pharisee who wrote and preached with a Hebrew covenantal Torah eye. Conversely, Paul the Apostle of Christ wrote and preached to his congregations often in the Greek rhetoric and always with the Greek language. His knowledge of both Greek and Hebrew enabled him to richly see in a double way every verse of scripture that he read and memorized. This knowledge allowed him to choose from both languages of scripture as he primarily preached while present among them. One-on-one conversations likely included excited and engaging phrases like, “the Hebrew scriptures actually say here in this verse.” In his letters and preaching, though, he could not use the Hebrew without having to stop and explain his reason for using it, just as a preacher would today. The normal written text was by far the Greek Septuagint scrolls. Today, we look to the Hebrew tradition as the known primary text, but Paul’s listeners came to Christian understanding through their dependable Spirit-inspired Septuagint scrolls.

Paul wants to intentionally use the Greek Habakkuk 2:4 with its essential $\epsilon\kappa$ $\pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\omega\varsigma$ $\mu\omicron\upsilon$ to carry his message about the faithfulness and justifying righteousness of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This gets reinforced with the interesting fact that this language occurs predominantly in places where Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith is controversial. Significantly, human righteousness became an issue in Galatia, Philippi, and perhaps in Rome. Paul proclaimed to them that God’s righteousness had been revealed “through” ($\delta\iota\alpha$) the faithfulness and “from out of” ($\epsilon\kappa$) the faithfulness of Jesus Christ! *It is the faithfulness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ that is setting things right* (Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:21-22). Divine faithfulness and divine righteousness are at stake in Paul’s writings where Paul quotes from Habakkuk from which Paul wrote that Jesus Christ may be seen as the One who is Righteous, or as the One who is Faithful. He who has been crucified and raised is the Righteous One as the Faithful One.

In Paul writing the familiar $\epsilon\kappa$ $\pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\omega\varsigma$ of Habakkuk 2:4 in the heart of his opening chapters of Romans and Galatians without the pronoun my, he might have grabbed his listeners’ attention regarding its absence. This may have also caused

revisions, (Theodotion and Aquila) into the second century CE. Although one purpose of the translation may have been to give access to the Jewish scriptures to non-Jews, the primary beneficiaries were Greek-speaking Jews, living outside the land of Israel. The Greek Bible, or Septuagint (meaning 70 for the 72 translators of the Aristis legend), was the Bible of the early Christians. While Jesus and the first Palestinian Christians probably did use the Hebrew Bible, as soon as Christianity moved beyond the land of Israel, the Greek Septuagint became the church’s Bible. However, there is evidence from Qumran of the use of the Greek Bible, even within the boundaries of Palestine. Most New Testament writers quoted the Bible according to the Septuagint version. And very quickly the early Christian evangelists and apologists use the Septuagint as the ‘quarry’ for their arguments to prove the truth of Christianity.” Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., “Introduction to the Canon,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in 12 Volumes*, vol. 1, p. 11.

surprise when he wrote of Jesus Christ as the visible, fleshly, faithfulness of God in Galatians 2:16 and Romans 3:22, which was grounded within their known scripture of LXX Habakkuk 2:4. Certainly, Paul's uses of the Greek Habakkuk 2:4 in Galatians 2 and of "from out of faithfulness into faith" in Romans 1:17 reveal his being influenced by its special wording. "From out of *my* faithfulness" is a promise from God now enacted and so revealed in Jesus Christ who was publicly exhibited as crucified. The crucified One now lives!

Paul's churches' view of the unique form of the Greek word for "of faithfulness," *pisteos*, as primarily a "faithfulness from out of Jesus Christ" is deeply dependent on the Greek understanding of Habakkuk 2:4. As such, the growing use of the Hebrew text in the Christian church from Jerome forward facilitated a shift toward an objective-genitive reading of *pistis Christou* in the Western Church tradition, as "faith in Christ." However, places of intense persecution, such as Thessalonica, required public commendation of their steadfastness, thus to the *πιστεως* that filled them with courage and witness in word and deed. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:24, Paul sought to assure them that they were yet in the faithfulness of God.

"My faithfulness" as used in the Greek Septuagint was the likely the translation known to Paul's congregations that he served, but I am also proposing that Paul represents Jesus to be the incarnation of "my faithfulness" promised by God in Habakkuk 2:4. Therefore, "ἐκ πιστεως μου" may also have been the well-known and default Greek text understanding that Paul brought to his preaching that his churches used, knew, believed, and served as the background understanding for his letters. Paul even likely wanted that common Greek understanding among his listeners to be the familiar promise of God's faithfulness even though the pronoun is omitted in both Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11. Paul wanted to insert Jesus Christ into the very place in Habakkuk 2:4 where the "my" pronoun designated a divinely powerful promiser. Jesus Christ is the "my faithfulness" of God, and the text of Greek Habakkuk becomes a true source for Paul's writing. This has been a history of reception reminder about the Greek language context of the Pauline congregations 40-65 AD. It is also an argument that Paul has been impacted by the prophecy of Habakkuk, and chooses the Greek Habakkuk translation to serve as background for some of his writing in Romans 1-8, Galatians 1-3, and Philippians 3.

How Greek Habakkuk Influenced Paul in His Ministry and Writing

The Habakkuk prophecy can be likened to an Oreo cookie, so to speak, with a promise about the faithfulness of God set between a coming invasion of judgement from the God of wrath and a coming invasion by the faithful God of hope. Between the imminent invasion of the Chaldeans in chapter 1 and the coming invasion of the saving God in chapter 3, Habakkuk speaks of a vision coming that the one who sees it should run with it. The present appears to be the time to be living by God's faithfulness in the interim time of chapter 2.

One wonders whether the translator of what became the Greek Habakkuk could have been translating within the violent reign of Ptolemy Antiochus Epiphanies IV (175-164 BCE) where receptivity for a Greek text in a Greek Jerusalem culture might provide hope for a difficult time bordering on the apocalyptic. Not only did Antiochus IV's invasion cause Judea to cry out to God for deliverance from such injustice, but Habakkuk 1 also provided much about a ruler's unjust cruelty. Afterward came the promise of a vision from God that seemed to point toward the tarrying amidst the rule of an arrogant one (Antiochus IV) against whom five woes in Habakkuk 2 would seem spot on, whose abominations in the holy of holies would surely call for a counter-invasion of a righteous, faithful YHWH in Habakkuk 3. Is the Greek translator making much of the Holy God's promised faithfulness versus an arrogant pagan king who believes himself divine, especially shown in the placing of swine upon the altar in the Jerusalem temple? Could the apocalyptic Paul have thought of these two invasions in Habakkuk for his time? Is not the prophecy about the justice and righteousness and faithfulness of God meant for just such an evil age? (Gal. 1:4).

That vision in Habakkuk 2 is of God looking for a runner to run with God's vision in the anticipation of a righteous one. Paul, in Philippians 3, employed the same Greek verb "pressing on to make it his own." Paul had more than a vision; he had a revelation of a risen Son of God. Perhaps Paul felt himself in an evil age between human invasions and awaiting the coming invasion of God to set all things right as his Lord returns in glory. J. Louis Martyn comments on Galatians 3:23-25:

To explicate the verb *apokalyphthenai*, "to reveal," Paul uses as a synonym the verb *erchomai*, "to come on the scene." And the result is startling, for it shows that Paul's apocalyptic theology, especially in Galatians, is focused on the motif of invasive movement from beyond ... in short, it is not as though, provided with a good religious foundation for a good religious ladder, one could ascend from the wrong to the right. Things are the other way around. God has elected to invade the realm of the wrong, the present evil age, by sending God's Son and the Spirit of the Son into it from outside. And it is in this apocalyptic invasion that God has liberated us from the powers of the present evil age again to deliver from slavery. Galatians is a particularly clear witness to one of Paul's basic convictions: the gospel is not about human movement into blessedness; it is about God's liberating invasion of the cosmos.³

Paul's revelation of apocalypse is not a disclosure of information in answering an epistemological question but a divine deed answering a burning question of theodicy: where on the earth is the righteousness/faithfulness of God?

Psalms 143:2—"for no one living is righteous before you"—was confessed in the temple, but the temple prophet in Habakkuk 1:1-13 doesn't sound like he

3. J. Louis Martyn, "The Apocalyptic Gospel in Galatians," *Interpretation* 53 (2000), pp. 254-255.

understands it yet. He cried to God about all the unrighteousness of others. “For the ungodly man prevails over the just; therefore perverse judgment will proceed” (1:4). “Wilt thou be silent when the ungodly swallows up the just” (1:13)? “Are you not from the beginning, O Lord God, my holy one? And surely we shall not die. Oh Lord, thou has established it for judgment, and he has formed me to chasten with his correction.” The Lord tells Habakkuk that the prophet’s land and temple are about to be invaded by the Chaldeans because of the very unrighteousness that Habakkuk described. God was indeed very aware of the ungodliness within Judea. Although a temple prophet, Habakkuk fails to see that even he is within the problem. Habakkuk, like Paul, is “living in this present evil age.” (Galatians 1:3). Romans 1:18-3:19 reads like Paul notices Habakkuk’s blindness: “We are all in league with the corrupted entities of this world and age deserving the wrath of God. Even the most righteous are not so before God” (Psalm 143:1-2, Romans 2:17-24). Paul turned to a solution apart from the Law (Romans 3:21-26), including a reminder in 3:23 that states, “for there is no distinction since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Chapter 1 of Habakkuk has three verbs of confinement:

1:4: περιέχω means to encircle or to besiege—“For the ungodly encompass, encircle the righteous.”

1:15: αγγρεύω means to be caught or trapped—“They catch them in their net.”

1:9: αιχμαλωσια means captivity or imprisonment in 1:9—“They shall gather the captivity like sand.”

The present power of the ungodly and unrighteous in the land of Judah now encompass the righteous. The approaching invasion and reign of the Chaldeans will indeed encircle, besiege, catch, capture, take into captivity.

Paul also writes of two kinds of invasion as well. For Paul, scripture had imprisoned people under the power of sin (Galatians 3:22), and sin reigned in death (Romans 5:17). Also, people were guarded and shut in by their guardian, the Law. Additionally, God had imprisoned all in disobedience so that he could be merciful to all (Romans 11:33). Those like Paul caught in the apocalyptic certainty of God’s coming wrath can identify with the writer of Habakkuk who knew of the coming wrath of the Chaldean invasion. They, too, were trapped in their land with nowhere to go to avoid the coming inescapable horror when it finally came.

“Behold you despisers and look, and wonder marvelously, and vanish: for I work a work in your days, which you will in nowise believe, though a man declare it to you.” Paul appears to be also making this point with excitement in Romans 1:1-4: “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David, according to the flesh, and was declared to be Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ, our Lord, through whom we

have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ!" Is this not a proclamation that makes one wonder marvelously? Is it not so wonderful that "you will in nowise believe" unless "from out of (my) faithfulness into (your) faith," faith is declared and given (Romans 1:17)?

Compare the Greek and Hebrew of Habakkuk 2:2-3:

Hebrew: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay."

Greek: "Write the vision, plainly on a tablet, that he that reads it may run (διωκω). For the vision is yet for a time (καιρος), and it shall shoot forth at the end, and not in vain; though he tarry, wait for him: for *he will surely come* and will not tarry."

In considering how Paul appropriated these ideas, one must ask if he was drawn by a vision (gospel) to an appointed time as he had been personally encountered by the coming (righteous) one (Galatians 1:12; 1 Cor 15:8) and so he had been running with a new vision of God (Phil 3:12-14). With his apocalyptic hope, Paul made the most of both translations as he named God's *kairos* time in Jesus Christ. It was more than a vision; it was a gospel that "is the power of salvation for the Jew first and then the Gentile" (Romans 1:16). Paul knew the faithfulness of God in the "revelation" (Galatians 1:12, 16) of the crucified and *risen* Lord of Life to him. Paul *knows* the one who has been *raised* from the dead who had appeared to him (1 Cor 15:8) and who is coming again in the end time (1 Corinthians 15). And Paul saw himself as one who was sent to run/pursue/press on (διωκω) with this gospel (Philippians 3:12-14) because the first installment of the *kairos*, the appointed time, had come (Romans 3:25).

Thus, Habakkuk 2:4 is more than a proof text. Paul used it twice, once in Romans 1:17 and once in Galatians 3:11. It is a lens through which Paul sees the gospel. "The one who is righteous from out of *my* faithfulness shall live." Greek Habakkuk 2:4b is a covenantal promise of hope. It is an image of receiving, like a larger pitcher of faithfulness pouring into a lesser pitcher that can then also be a pitcher for another. "For in it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from out of faithfulness (*ek*) into faith (*eis*)" (Romans 1:17). If only such a promise of God's faithfulness could be seen, embodied, and revealed! "Paul wrote that it was being revealed "from out of Jesus Christ's faithfulness" (Galatians 2:16).

The whole verse includes the warning about "shrinking back." God will not be pleased by a runner who "shrinks back" from running with the vision. Paul used this verb for shrinking back (υποστειλλω) only one time in all of his letters to his congregations, in Galatians 2:12: "but when Cephus came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came

from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he *shrank back* (υποστειλλω) and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction.” Paul used this very verb to describe Peter’s apostolic failure. Two verses later comes the second half of the verse: “but we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so *that we may be made righteous from out of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.*”

The two phrases within Greek Habakkuk 2:4 had been used most powerfully by Paul in Galatians 2:12-2:16. This was a purely Greek Septuagint reading. The Hebrew of Habakkuk 2:4 reads, “Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the one who is righteous lives in his faithfulness.” However, the literal Greek wording reads, “If he should shrink back (υποστειλλω), my soul has no pleasure in him: but the one who is righteous from out of *my* faithfulness shall live.” Peter was a “runner” of the vision/gospel who was “shrinking back” from fear. Paul had intentionally used the first half of the Greek Habakkuk 2:4, the shrinking back, but in the Greek Habakkuk 2:4, there is either retreat or advance. There is retreating under God’s displeasure or advancing with life by the faithfulness of God. Paul, therefore, decided to be a runner advancing the gospel to all. Two verses later, Paul wrote the second half of Habakkuk 2:4 with a surprising new twist in Galatians 2:16: “We ourselves are Jews by birth, and not Gentile sinners, yet we know that a man [the issue is circumcision] *is made righteous* not from out of doing works but through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, because one will not be made righteous from out of doing works, but *from out of Jesus Christ’s faithfulness!*” The pronoun “my” has been embodied with *Jesus Christ* in the promising of God’s faithfulness through the gospel.

The full Septuagint Greek verse of Habakkuk 2:4 gets enacted in Galatians 2:11-16 but with a surprise ending. The listeners may even know Paul is inserting “Jesus Christ” into a beloved verse, as if John 3:16 now began, “for Jesus Christ so loved the world.” Paul’s listeners, hearing the verse from God promising “the one who is righteous from out of my faithfulness shall live” hear instead as Paul’s letter is read that “the one who is righteous from out of Jesus Christ’s faithfulness shall live.”

Paul’s whole intent in Galatians 2:16 in employing Habakkuk 2:4 concerns being made righteous from out of faithfulness and to live righteously because of faithfulness. Paul had the full attention of his listeners with this surprising change. With the preposition *δια*, they are hearing of “divine faithfulness” relocated in a Christologically historical and visible agent whose name is Jesus the Christ through whom the same divine source of God’s promise of faithfulness in Habakkuk 2:4 comes to the world. Paul was not replacing God’s faithfulness; he was naming its historical embodiment. Paul intended a movement within Galatians 2:16. God is mediating His own faithfulness through/by the means of Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection is of the same divine faithfulness that comes from out of *my faithfulness* in Habakkuk 2:4. Faith has a divine source, as in Psalm 36:10: “For with you is the fountain of Life, in your Light we see light.”

Jesus did not shrink back but “gave himself for our sins” (Galatians 1:4), “was publicly exhibited as crucified” (Galatians 3:1), “redeemed us from the curse of the

Law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13), and was “raised from the dead” (Galatians 1:1) and now lives as the enacted faithfulness of God of Habakkuk’s 2:4. Jesus is very God from very God, poured from one pitcher into another pouring pitcher from the very source of life as in Romans 1:17: “from out of faithfulness into faith.” Paul interpreted Habakkuk 2:4’s “from out of my faithfulness” as “from out of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ;” this is a “very God of very God” proclamation. In Romans 3:21-26, Paul named Jesus as the revealed righteousness of God, as the holy Ark of the Covenant’s mercy seat, effective through the faithfulness effective in his blood, and providing the redemption of God for ones who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The Son of God was faithfully obedient for sinners. Romans 1:17 proclaims that this divine faithfulness of Jesus Christ) is poured from out of that faithfulness into our faith. Our personal faith is not independently made by us but has a divine source as it is a divine gift. Like Galatians 2:20, it has a life that fills us. Like Romans 5:5, it has been poured into us. At the appointed time, the *kairos*, Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6). As in Galatians 3:24–26, “therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be made righteous (ἐκ πίστεως) from out of (Jesus’) faithfulness. Now that the faith (of Jesus) has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus, all are children of God (ἐκ πίστεως) from out of (Jesus’) faithfulness in this evil age between the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus to His coming again in glory.

Note the sudden shift between LXX Habakkuk 2:4 and 2:5. 2:4 ends: “But the one who is righteous from out of my faithfulness shall live.” 2:5 begins, “ But the arrogant man and the scorner, the boastful man, shall not finish anything; who has enlarged his desire as the grave, and like death, he is never satisfied, and he will gather to himself all the nations, and will receive to himself all the peoples.” What then follows in chapter 2 of Habakkuk are five woes. This verse is jarring and is a shocking change from a most positive, hopeful, heartwarming message to the dire opposite. Paul used just such a sudden shift with Romans 1:16-18: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is God’s saving power for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is being revealed from out of faithfulness into faith, as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith. For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and injustice of those who by their injustice suppress the truth.’” Is this a literary technique learned from Habakkuk?

The Prayer or Psalm of Habakkuk 3:2-19 is a masterful song recalling the faithfulness of God. The temple prophet before the people of Judah rallied their hope in the faithfulness of their God by quoting phrases from verses of the nation’s scriptural history. God, the warrior for Judah, was on the move coming up from the south, from out of the wilderness, out of Sinai, with reminders of God’s mighty plagues, the Red Sea, the blessing of Moses, Deuteronomy 32, the Song of Moses, the Deuteronomy 30 blessing, the Song of Deborah, the Song of Hannah, the rout of Gideon, the Song of David, Psalm 18 and the rescue of David, Psalm 114 and the wonders of the Exodus, Psalm 77 and the deliverance from Egypt, Psalm 44, and

a prayer of national lament. It compressed the wilderness march with Sinai, the Exodus, the Conquest, Judges, and David's Royal victory in only 19 verses. It is a psalm about the righteous who shall live from out "of my faithfulness." Paul could see in this prayer of Habakkuk how the quoting of scripture from all its variety of settings, history, events, songs, prayers, laments, triumphs, images, and characters of faith not only moved the soul of the reader but centered the reader within the faithfulness of a living, rescuing God and in the tradition of the faithful.

The greatest diversion of the Greek from the Hebrew takes place in Habakkuk 3:2. The Hebrew reads: "Oh Lord, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. In our own time, revive it; in our own time, make it known; in wrath, may you remember mercy." The Greek reads: "Oh, Lord, I have heard your report, and was afraid: I considered your works, and was amazed: you will be known in the midst of the two living creatures, you will be acknowledged when the years draw nigh; you will be manifested when the time is come; when my soul is troubled, you will in wrath remember mercy."

In the unpointed ancient text, the Hebrew word, שנים, looks the same for "years" and the number, "two." The Hebrew letters in ancient texts have no break between letters and words. Averselooklikethis. The Hebrew verb meaning "to revive" and the Hebrew adjective "living" are thought to have been changed by a misreading or a miscopying of a text. The beginning of Habakkuk's psalm describing a theophany. Could that call to mind theophonic words and images from Ezekiel 1 (ζωωνη) "living ones" and Exodus 25 (the description of the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant as between two cherubim) to influence a Jewish scribe translating Hebrew Habakkuk (603 BC) into Greek Habakkuk (180-150 BC)? While the Hebrew text used for translation is now unknown, the three primary uncials (Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, and Alexandrinus) provide a unanimous witness to a Greek tradition that replaces the Hebrew temporal reference ("midst of years") with a specific theophanic image: God being revealed "between two living beings." While they contain minor scribal variations, they are in total agreement regarding the expanded liturgical structure of the prayer and its emphasis on God's manifestation in the midst of turmoil. This section could certainly be a reference to the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. Habakkuk 3 is a psalm about Yahweh, the faithful warrior for Israel. When leading soldiers into the fray of battles Joshua, the tribes of Israel, and King David all brought the Ark of the Covenant.

A Jewish scribe/teacher of scripture from Jerusalem, who was called to be a translator of the Hebrew scriptures for the coming project of the Septuagint, remembered the Ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies, perhaps that it had even disappeared following the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians during the prophet Habakkuk's time. It was this translator, therefore, who noticed that the phrase "in the midst of the years" could also be translated "in the midst of the two living ones." Did a resident of Jerusalem seeing the reference to the temple in possession of God's Ark of power in Habakkuk's time (603 BC) but knowing the

sadness of that Ark of the Covenant with its mercy seat gone in 180 BC recognize within the Hebrew a possible wording about the hope of the return of such a mercy seat in the coming faithful movement of God? Did it not make sense for the coming invasion of God to have the Ark of the Covenant involved since the psalm of Habakkuk includes the hallmarks of Israel's great moments of victory over its enemies as the Ark was carried into its battles, thus revealing the very presence of God going before the army of Israel? Did Paul see the wording as a lamentation and a defiant word about the mercy seat of the Ark of the covenant?

In Romans 3:22-25, Paul wrote, "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a *mercy seat* by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to demonstrate at the present time his own righteousness, so that he is righteous and he justifies the one who has the faithfulness from out of Jesus." The evangelist John, in all his "I Am" statements, referenced Jesus as the navel of the earth, the place where heaven and earth touch. Paul did the same when he named Jesus as the mercy seat of the Ark of the covenant where God revealed himself, spoke with Moses/high priest, and forgave the sins of Israel between the two cherubim (Exodus 25:17-22; Leviticus 16:13-15; Numbers 7:89). Thus, I Corinthians 1:30, "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

A gut wrenching appearance of God in Habakkuk's life is found in Habakkuk 3:16: "I watched, and my belly trembled at the sound of the prayer of my lips, and trembling/terror entered into my bones, and my frame was troubled within me; I will rest in the day of affliction, from going up to the people of my sojourning." Did such a verse cause St. Paul to reflect upon "the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:12) made known to him? Did it recall an incident as in the book of Acts 9? What was the appearance of Jesus to Paul like (I Corinthians 15:8; I Corinthians 9:1)? Would he have contrasted such an episode of Habakkuk with his own glorious experience (2 Corinthians 12:1-7)? Was it such an experience that he wrote of it as Jesus "making me his own" (Philippians 3:12)? Did Habakkuk's own experience with God remind Paul of his own revelation from his risen Lord Jesus?

The closing of LXX Habakkuk 3:18-19 reads: "The Lord God is my strength, and he will perfectly strengthen my feet; he mounts me upon high places, that I may conquer by his song." This glorious statement of God's faithfulness undergirding hope is prefaced by "for the fig tree shall bear no fruit, and there shall be no produce on the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall produce no food: the sheep have failed from the pasture, and there are no oxen at the cribs" (Habakkuk 3:17). The joy following this verse prefaced by such hardship reminds of the way Paul wrote in Romans 8:36-37. Romans 8:36 quotes Psalm 44:22 from the Septuagint: "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted

as sheep to be slaughtered.” Romans 8:37 follows: “No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” LXX Habakkuk says “that I may conquer by His song.” Romans 8:37 says “we are *more* than conquerors” as Paul seems to take the prophet’s “conquer” νικαω and ramp it up: “we are υπερνικαω,” hyper-conquerors through him who loved us. This is the only place in the New Testament where υπερνικαω appears.

Habakkuk 3:19 in the Hebrew makes no mention about conquering by a “song.” Rather, the verse reads: “God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me tread upon the height. To the leader: with stringed instruments.” Paul, therefore, uses the Septuagint verse, “that I may conquer by His song,” instead of referring to the “stringed instruments.”

Many have noticed that Paul was influenced by the last half of Habakkuk 2:4. But we have now seen much from Habakkuk’s three chapters that may have caught Paul’s eye, heart, and faith.

In three places from LXX Habakkuk, the Greek and Hebrew are very different: Habakkuk 2:2-4, 3:2, and 3:19. In all three, Paul uses the imagery or words from the Greek Habakkuk translation within his letters. Habakkuk 2:4 will serve as background for Romans 1:17; Habakkuk 3:2 for Romans 3:21-26; and Habakkuk 3:18-19 for Romans 8:31-38. They are part of the scaffolding of Romans. How, then, does Paul make use of the Greek word, πιστεως, from Habakkuk 2:4 in the Septuagint translation?

Πιστεως in the Letters of Paul

“The one who is righteous from out of *my* faithfulness shall live.” Paul presupposes the Greek Habakkuk 2:4b as his grounding verse of promise for everyone. God is the source of righteousness, faithfulness, and life. God is the headwaters of the faithfulness that flows (εκ) from pitcher (εις) to pitcher. Humans are not creating faith on their own. It is infused as they are responding to the call of the God who calls into being what does not as yet exist (Romans 4:15) through the preached gospel as described in Galatians 3:2 and 3:5. More than Habakkuk’s assertion of a promise, though, it is now an accomplished rescue in the midst of the present evil age for all those believing, those clothed in the faithfully righteous Christ, and even all those consigned to disobedience who shall live from out of God’s great mercy through and from out of Jesus Christ (Romans 11:32).

While εκ πιστεως μου (from out of my faithfulness) never appears in any of his letters, Paul presents faithfulness in multiple connected ways, articulating the faithfulness that originates in God to reach the otherwise faithless. Paul wrote about the faithfulness of God, the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit, the faithfulness of the church, the faithfulness of believers, and the obedience of faith, all of which originated from the promise in the Greek Habakkuk 2:4b εκ πιστεως μου.

Paul clearly did not lift up a new cultural religion because to Paul, God is God for all (Romans 1:19-21). The risen Jesus actually encountered Paul. Paul experienced the true new reality that Jesus Christ, who was crucified, is alive and appeared in order to forgive him, save him, and call him. In Romans 3:3-5 Paul, therefore, asked, “what if some (what if ALL) are faithless? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? Certainly not! Although every human is a liar, let God be proved true.” God fulfills God’s promises!

Paul recognized that the Greek Habakkuk 2:4b expressed that *the One who was truly righteous lived from out of the very faithfulness of the Father and Holy Spirit*, and by his resurrection is indeed now alive. Knowing that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead changed everything for Paul, and Paul believed that was true for everyone. Likewise, because Jesus Christ is Lord and risen from the dead, the meanings of all the verses of scripture that he quotes are reframed. They no longer mean the same because now there is the only God of this universe, revealed among us in the truly risen Lord, a crucified and risen Lord. God has invaded this world with a “No!” to sin, evil, and death and a “Yes!” to the redemption of those imprisoned under their powers. In the world of evil, Jesus is for Jew and Gentile, slave or free, women and men. Each person is no longer an idle tale but part of the story and reality from God’s faithfulness through Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thence through the church. For Paul, then, Habakkuk 2:4 connected God’s faithfulness coming through the gospel into the believer’s faithfulness in every part and every second of life.

For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is now revealed, from out of faithfulness into faith:

- From out of the faithfulness of God the Father into Christ, very God of very God
- From out of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ’s obedience and
- From out of the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit,
- In order to save us from sin and the the wrath of God and to reconcile us to God
- Poured into the faithfulness of Paul
- From out of Paul’s preaching the faithfulness of God
- Poured into his congregations, the church,
- all the way down to me, generation upon generation.

In Paul’s personal letters, in each occurrence of this unique Greek scripture word “πιστεως,” it is possible that Paul takes readers back to Habakkuk’s originating and grounding. For Paul, πιστεως remains a unique and pregnant Greek word used intentionally to proclaim the “my faithfulness” of God obediently embodied in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, *happening now*. In the hearing of it, God forgives, redeems, encounters, loves, and beckons listeners to respond and participate with “faithfulness” (both God’s and mine) in the gospelizing of others with the same

divine intention of calling neighbors into the blessing of Abraham and the promise of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3:14). ΠΙΣΤΕΩΣ is the preached gospel word, revealed, handed down, heard, participated within, and confessing the originating faithfulness of God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus, Christians see “the One who is righteous,” but His death also reveals our truly being part of the daily ongoing crucifying, the ongoing sin, and the ongoing killing of God’s love. The cross of Christ reveals the ongoing failure to love God and love one’s neighbor, those “other” than the self. His death was a death for all our rejection of the “other” in thought, word, and deed. The divine died for all mortals to give them eternal life yet the love for God and regard for “others” constantly comes up lacking in our own thoughts, words, and deeds.

In this daily, difficult time of living, in this evil age, wherever it is difficult to see the justice of God, wherever it is difficult to talk about the righteousness of God, Habakkuk 1 persists: “why *do* the ungodly prevail over the One who is righteous?” How will the divine faithfulness give life to my own faithlessness? Paul writes that *now* the sought for righteousness of God comes on the scene to be revealed in the faithfulness of Jesus, effective through his blood, to save us from the wrath of God, Jesus, whom God in faithfulness raised from the dead so that Jesus shall forever surely live in us and for the world (Galatians 2:16, Romans 3:22-26; Romans 5:5-10)! Jesus, the my faithfulness from God, becomes my faithfulness even as my own life reveals far more of my own faithlessness than a corresponding faithfulness. Yet sinful children of Adam become children of God in Christ (Romans 5:12-21). In Adam, we were of dust, but in Christ, we are of heaven (1 Cor 15:42-49).

We see in Jesus’s life the love of God and love of neighbor faithfully lived out even to His death for our sin under deserved wrath so that in his surprising resurrection, the very faithfulness of God in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit provided the vision of Habakkuk, the embodied remedy by God in our experience of sinful mortality. The promise is vouchsafed that through the faithfulness and righteousness of Jesus, the Son emptying himself in order to truly die our sinful death. From out of God’s faithfulness, “for our sake, he who knew no sin became sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21), the Lord gave His life that we might finally live.

Romans 10:6, with its apparently active faithfulness in English, offers a righteousness that comes “ἐκ πίστεως,” from a pitcher already filled with another’s faith. “The word of faithfulness (πίστεως) that we already proclaimed to you, is poured into you” (Romans 10:8). Therefore, 10:9 is not an “if” one believes but rather a strong “since” one believes, he will be saved. It is not humanly generated but a “πίστεως,” the faithfulness from out of God pouring in the believer’s faith. 10:17, “so the faith is coming from what is being heard because the hearing is through the word of Christ.” Just so in Galatians 3:2 and 3:5, it is “from out of hearing faithfulness” (ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως). The gospel has externally come to us in the news of the saving

faithfulness/obedience for us of Jesus, even to his death on the cross and vindicated by his resurrection and exaltation.

The mystery concerns those who do not believe from hearing. From God's faithfulness, faith is poured into a believer. For Paul, the mystery lies in the failure to receive faith, but Paul ends his argument with this articulation of the mystery: "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that God may be merciful to all" (Romans 11:32). This is a direct quote from the Greek Isaiah 55, but could this also allude to Greek Habakkuk 3:2? "O Lord, I have heard your report, and was afraid: I considered your works, and was amazed: you will be known between the two living creatures, you will be acknowledged when the years draw nigh; you will be manifested when the kairos is come; when my soul is troubled, you will in wrath remember mercy."

ΠΙΣΤΕΩΣ is a gospel word pregnant with the faithfulness of God as the fountain of faithfulness establishing divine presence through the Son and Spirit for Paul and for all who believe and hear. As there is something in the pouring pitcher, there is someone in the preaching. The illustrating image is the pouring "from out of" a pitcher "into" another pitcher, then "into" another pitcher, then "into" another pitcher right up to right now, this appointed time. For in this gospel, the righteousness of God is being revealed "from out of faithfulness into faithfulness." Paul certainly sustains Habakkuk's promise of divine faithfulness, calling God "faithful" five more times in his letters: in Romans 3:3, the faithfulness of God will prevail; in 1 Corinthians 1:9, from God's faithfulness, you were called, drawn into the fellowship of Jesus Christ; in 1 Corinthians 10:13, God is faithful and will not be absent in the testing and trials in this world; in 2 Corinthians 1:18, as God is faithful, who rescued us over and over, so we are faithful to you; and in 1 Thessalonians 5:1, the One who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

In Romans, Paul would quote this verse, "the one who is righteous from out of faithfulness shall live." Maybe some of his Greek speaking listeners would hear the phrase and wonder why the pronoun "my" was dropped when Paul was quoting that familiar phrase. Certainly, it could catch their attention that the my was missing from faithfulness, and the surprising wording within Romans 1:17 would have likely made them suspicious. So, the question about that missing "my" remained in their minds until they heard at length that even with the help of the Law, we shall never be righteous or faithful enough. Indeed, "For no human will be justified before him by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). Yet only to continue: "But now! Apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made revealed to us and is witnessed to by the Law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ into all who are believing" (Romans 3:21-22).

Is Paul is attempting to describe the experience of "Aha! Ohhhhh!" when the gospel hits home and is heard in the heart? Paul lets the familiar Greek Habakkuk 2:4b "ΕΚ ΠΙΣΤΕΩΣ ΜΟΥ" remain an undergirding divine promise so that the omission

of the divine “my” allows for the concrete specification of it. Habakkuk’s divine promise gets lived out among us in Jesus as the One who is righteous for us in the living out the promised “my faithfulness” of God. Paul wants Christians who already know their faith is being built upon the faithfulness of God to also know that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, for in Him we are more than conquerors on account of his loving enactment of divine faithfulness.

The ΠΙΣΤΕΩΣ of God

From his own words, there was a special divine revelation (Galatians 1:12; 1:15-16), a seeing, an appearance of the risen Lord (1 Corinthians 1:9; 15:8) such that a zealous Jew based in the Law (Philippians 3:4-6) now became filled with the life of Jesus, thus wanting to know more deeply this crucified and risen Lord Jesus (Philippians 3:7-14; Galatians 2:19-20). Paul lived from out of that divine faithfulness with great joy and certainty (2 Corinthians 12:1-4) in that it was grounded from out of the faithfulness of God through and by means of Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:16; Galatians 2:20; Romans 3:21-26), whose enacted love had poured into the heart of Paul (1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Romans 1:16-17; Romans 3:21-26; Romans 5:1-11) so that he was now pouring the faithful love of God into his listeners by his gospelizing preaching and presence among them: *ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν*, from out of the faithfulness of God/through Jesus Christ into believers (Romans 1:17; Galatians 2:16, 3:22-27; 2 Corinthians 4:7-15; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21).

The apostle would have thusly confessed: “My faithfulness comes from your faithfulness, O God (LXX Habakkuk 2:4). Your faithfulness in Jesus Christ has been revealed to me (Galatians 1:12, 1:15-16, 2:16). I now know that Jesus is not dead, but is alive and even has appeared to me (1 Corinthians 15:8), who now lives in me (Galatians 2:20), who is your wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30), who loves me, and whose Spirit has been poured into me (Romans 5). You, Lord, have sent me running with more than a vision (Habakkuk 2:3, Galatians 2:2) for it is also a gospel declaration (Galatians 2:16, Romans 3:21-26), the word of God that creates human participation in it (2 Corinthians 5:21; 4:7-15). For you have called us into your life and service and you will keep us sound in spirit and body and blameless until the coming of our Lord. You are faithful, and you will do this! (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24). From out of your faithfulness into my faithfulness, I shall live (Romans 1:17, LXX Habakkuk 2:4). And I will exult and conquer in your song (LXX Habakkuk 3:18-19). For in you, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.... Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord!” (Romans 8:37-39).

Scripture as Language of Faith

David K. Delaney

ABSTRACT: Given that finite humans must use words to express both gratitude for and description of the gospel we have received, we must ask how best to locate and utilize such words and phrases. The task comes with multiple challenges, including navigating the ambiguities involved with translation from ancient biblical languages and guarding against the misappropriation of those biblical terms for purposes foreign to God's intent. This paper intends to reassure believers and adjure church leaders that the scriptures are a reliable source for our language of praise and articulation of the gospel when any such language is consistent with God's overall purpose as shown through the history of Israel and the life Jesus lived for us.

Biblical Language, Theological Exegesis, and Translation Problems

In 1830, James Waddell Alexander created the most enduring English translation of the 13th century Latin hymn *Salve caput cruentatum*, one section of a seven-part poetic ode to the crucified Christ.¹ Alexander insightfully renders the beginning of the third stanza as “What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest friend?”² therewith acknowledging the inherent inadequacy of human speech for expressing not only the glory of God's presence and activity in the humble creation, especially in the mystery of Christ's saving work, but our gratitude for it as well. It echoes St. Paul's assertion in Romans 8 that “the Spirit intercedes for us with groans too deep for words,” a reminder that when speaking *about* transcendent things, or speaking to the God of the heavens, language has its limits.

1. *Salve Mundi Salutare*, often attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux, but more likely originating from Arnulf of Louvain (d. 1250).

2. A phrase which has come down to us via the interpretive German translation of Paul Gerhardt in his 1656 rendition of the *Salve* ... as the hymn “O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden,” regularly translated into English as “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” (e.g. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, hymn # 352).

How were the teachers, psalmists, and prophets of Ancient Israel and the first followers of Jesus to give adequate expression to what they had seen, heard and experienced? Furthermore, if it was a challenge for them, how then are we to presently speak a compelling account of the Christian faith into our own setting given the temporal, linguistic, and cultural distances from ancient believers? Nearly everything in our lives is different from those who had the inaugural experiences that gave rise to the faith we hold.

In truth, it is a question we must answer if the Christian faith is to be held at all, let alone transmitted to others, and today's churches face something of a crisis wherein many seem to have lost confidence in our original vocabulary of the Christian story and have gone looking for terms, concepts, and neologisms supposedly more suitable to the 21st century ear, whether they be corporate, therapeutic, aesthetic, political, or even religious. Alternatively, to note an equally troubling phenomenon, we see self-professed Christians in the 21st century populating more than ever the received vocabulary of faith with ideologies and stories that are sometimes quite foreign to the gospel's guiding focus, resulting in all manner of self-serving religious practices that call themselves "Christian" but often bespeak a very different story from the one inherited from the prophets and apostles. As a result, young people have recently been telling me that unless they are in a specifically Christian setting, they are hesitant to identify themselves as "Christian." This hesitation is not because they are fearful of being attacked for following the compassionate and life-giving Christ in defying the hegemonic impulses of a social framework that is on one side idolatrous and on the other side vulgar and libertine; it is because "Christian" has come in our faith-hostile time to mean something frightfully different from following the Christ of the Bible and the canonical confessions. The ones engaging in those distortions have justly earned that hostility, yet they believe they are being persecuted for the Christian faith. Christian vocabulary has been hijacked from every angle³ with the resulting damage being loss of faith in Christ and suspicion regarding His church.

Four observations regarding this challenge exist, and though they are not new ideas in general, they are rather important principles that deserve restatement:

1. The language of Scripture does and should provide the essential primary components for our articulation of the Christian faith, but the use of that language⁴ must be governed by its faithfulness to the gospel story of Israel's Jesus that gave rise to it.

3. This is the same experience that has been reported by Muslims in the United States for much longer.

4. *Usus* was a primary concern of the Reformers and is critical to the proper distinction between law and gospel which can deploy the same term, say, "the love of God," but use it to make a demand that accuses or a promise that freely gives. See Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian*, the section on "What the Word of God Is" and other places.

2. The language of Scripture in relation to the experience of gospel faith is not for providing a description for the uninterested or even for the seekers but so believers are equipped with an integrating and doxological resource for articulating what has happened and continues to happen to them and to all of God's people in response to the living God and His gospel. Only when we have a story in which the content both echoes the millennia of tradition, conveys its claim over us in the present day, and helps us make sense of all things does it then become a valid and valuable resource for presenting the gospel to others.⁵

3. One need not have settled on a fully developed theory of language to be able to speak about God or the gospel. Anyone who has occasion to be thankful to God for anything has a very present resource in the Scriptures of Israel and the Church. Anyone who has encountered the living Lord Jesus Christ in His people, His word, and His sacraments will find examples to follow in the two Testaments.

4. Nourishing the mind and the soul with the Bible's most important words and passages in light of its good news should be formally encouraged in our churches through private contemplation, communal reflection, pastoral teaching, and real-life participation in the church's mission. Doing so leads to a believer's ever-growing internal curiosity about the Scriptures as well as a greater impulse toward engagement with a hurting, discouraged and pessimistic world. Leading the faithful to learn and dwell on these and other implications of the strong vocabulary of faith avoids the creation of an insiders-only discourse, a "bible-speak," or even a "faith-speak" that does no good for the neighbor.

I will not necessarily treat these distinctly and in order because they work together, but by the conclusion, I hope to have illustrated the importance of all four. The goal is to stress the all-important connection of the Christian words we use to the overall story of God's saving purposes while at the same time reassuring the faithful that they should not hesitate to use the vocabulary of the Scriptures to express faith, even if they do not feel qualified to do so in every detail.

Faithfulness in the Reproduction of Biblical Language

The first part of assertion number one may seem self-evident but it is not by any means. Whatever terminology and phraseology we select to represent the Christian message to ourselves as well as to those outside the believing community, we must always remain closely tethered not only to the *vocabulary* of the Scriptures as the native language of faith but also to the *aim* or *purpose* of that language. Simply appropriating the words of the Bible without reference to God's entire intent for

5. This is an old concept, early articulated in Prosper of Aquitaine's *On the Authority of the Past Bishops of the Apostolic See Concerning the Grace of God and Free Will*, 8th chapter, then retained as the maxim *lex orandi lex credendi*, "the rule of what is prayed [matches] the rule of what is believed."

those who hear Scripture not only fails to guarantee the articulation of the gospel but carries with it profound risk. Like the man in Jesus's parable of the swept house (Matthew 12:45), if one adopts the Bible's terms and concepts only then to distort them in a direction away from God's overall determination to reconcile the beloved and fallen creation, demons come pouring in to seize the moment, and the latter condition is worse than the former.

This challenge gets exacerbated, oddly enough, by cultural overfamiliarity with our Christian jargon. If we may confine ourselves for a moment to Europe and North America, one would have to dig deep to find a term in the standard Christian confession that would be utterly unfamiliar to the average secular adult, if only because of repeated exposure. No one in the formerly Christian Western world would fail to recognize the name of Jesus, the idea of religion, or the term "amen." However, an invitation to those same adults to define the content of those terms and dozens of others like them in any fashion, let alone theologically, might very well be met with hesitation but more likely a mess of speculation, suspicion, and muddled content that will perpetuate a distorted understanding of Christianity. Therefore, it must be the task of the church and its members, the custodians of the gospel's claims, to know with some precision the content, contours, and boundaries of the key terms and the larger story that supplies their meaning.

Again, we could legitimately be accused of having stated the obvious just now, but why is this seemingly elementary task so difficult, even for some of the most saintly among us? Our proclamation of how God is active in the world is God's incarnate Word, none other than the historical man Jesus, about whom we have identifiable and compelling stories and well-crafted confessional identifiers, not to mention an endless number of hymns and reflective writings. Why is talking about Him and His gospel a challenge?

To begin with, the plain answer is also the correct one: the proclamation of the gospel about the Word of God and the stories that give that gospel substance must consist of words, and for the most part we are stuck with that. We cannot recreate the experiences of the Israelites crossing the sea or the women at the empty tomb. Even the Exodus generation of Israelites and those gathered on Easter evening needed words to make sense of what they had seen. For us today, our actions of counterintuitive love and gathering for a foretaste of heaven do communicate important truths,⁶ but eventually we will need to *talk* about them as well.

It is a short journey, then, to seeing the basic dilemma: language is imprecise. Even people who speak the same language can misunderstand each other. We see a word and say to ourselves, "I know what *that* means," but if that word has multiple usages for various contexts, we can never be sure which usage is intended unless we are fully immersed in the life, mind, and specific circumstance of the one who

6. These, to be sure, can convey a powerful story even without words!

used it.⁷ At least since ancient Greece, careful thinkers have known that spoken and written words are not “things” in themselves. Rather, words refer beyond themselves to something in the life of the body, the mind, or the world that has required identification. As such, a created word is meaningless to anyone else until the speaker explains it using already familiar words or exposes the hearer to the same experience. As long as we are confined to language in our expression of the good news we’ve experienced, some ambiguity must be risked because it is inevitable.⁸

This is not, however, the only or even primary problem involved with using words to talk about God in ways that will ensure continuity with ancient origins. To expand on the notion mentioned above, no one in all of time and space “owns” all of the words and phrases that Christians and their scriptures use nor does any governing authority protect anyone’s copyright on the content of the apostolic inheritance. “Christianity,” the belief system, does not comprise any one person’s or organization’s protectable intellectual property. For any random individual, terms like “Christian,” “faith,” or “God” can mean whatever that individual says they mean, and the only available counteraction is the persuasiveness of someone who can effectively argue otherwise.

When we begin to speak about “the language of Scripture,” we should soon realize that we must contend with several complicated historical realities. The first is we do not completely understand the language of classical Israel, or “Hebrew.”⁹ Although we possess significant understanding of all the really important terms and concepts of Israel’s Bible, there are as many as 20% of all the words in the ancient Hebrew language for which our translation into English ranges from ambiguous to completely conjectural.¹⁰ We can make well-informed proposals because we have ancient Greek, Latin, and other translations with words we *do* understand, and we can only hope that those long-gone translators were careful in their work. In the end, however, we are forced to hold any firm conclusions we have in abeyance,

7. This is why Hebrew and Greek lexicons, improperly understood, can be deceptive. They are catalogs of usage, not linguistic equivalence.

8. See the opening of Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione*. This also brings to mind Wittgenstein’s “language games” wherein linguistic meaning is basically formed on-the-fly, only in the association of a spoken or written something with all the multi-dimensional interactive features that surround any given articulation.

9. Two interesting details ought to be noted here. Properly, one should refer to Hebrew as a set or a series of ancient languages rather than one unified system. The composition of the Hebrew Bible likely spans a stunning one thousand years, so no one should be surprised to learn that it is possible to distinguish various stages of the language. Having said that, it is equally stunning that the language could remain so consistent, relatively speaking. It is not unlikely that the Israelites of the first temple period would have been able to read the writings of the monks of Qumran a thousand years later.

10. In a typical edition of the NRSV, for example, one needs simply to go through the Old Testament and note the number of times when a footnote says, “Meaning of Hebrew uncertain.”

realizing that while we must trust that the Spirit is making these things as clear as possible to us, nuance and the aforementioned cultural distance prevent us from diving headlong into certainty.

In my work of teaching biblical languages to students, I always emphasize that the goal of translation is to make a text intelligible for a community of hearers or readers. Therefore, every act of translation is a work of interpretation and often an approximate one at that. We may be able to get our minds wrapped around an ancient word and its range of uses, but we are often unable to identify a modern English word that serves as an exact equivalent of that ancient word in all its various uses. We must settle in many cases for a term that provides the maximum amount of overlap in use with the result that the same Hebrew or Greek term might be translated in very different ways depending on where and how it appears in the original. Furthermore, there will always be limitations in the so-called “target language” beyond discreet words: syntax, structure, idiom, and so on.

Here, though, is a first essential point: this uncertainty should by no means cast doubt on the general reliability of the English Bibles we all use or shake our confidence in employing our biblical faith vocabulary. In focused church-based Bible studies led by an educated pastor, parishioners will hear their teachers note some of those ambiguities in play when one renders Greek and Hebrew into English and worry that they should not be trying to read their Bibles at all without knowing about these issues. These faithful students should not worry. Although translators employ various methods, theological views, and linguistic prejudices in executing their work, not a single major translation has ever been done by people or teams who did not bring expertise to the task or who did not hope for the absolutely most accurate translation possible for the particular audience who would receive it. This goes for the legendary seventy-two in ancient Alexandria through Theodotion and Jerome down through Wycliffe and Luther and into the present day.¹¹

Fluctuating Language in Historical Transitions and in Cultural Dynamisms

For the first disciples, the crucifixion and resurrection of their beloved rabbi left them with a wholly new situation, a language vacuum. Of course, they knew the contents of their own law, prophets, and writings, but when Jesus fulfilled *none* of the messianic roles they and their contemporaries expected (a divine priest restoring pure temple worship, a new David riding in to rout the Romans before them, a

11. I would be remiss if I did not nuance this statement somewhat. This does not mean that all translations are simply interchangeable. Students of the Bible are well-served if they are informed about how translations range from paraphrase to hyper-literal, and that some are smoothed for public reading while others are left more wooden for detailed study or that some traditions and sects have their own idiosyncratic translations.

leader of angelic armies bringing judgment to the earth, etc.) but instead appeared to have been abandoned or even cursed by God,¹² they clearly did not know what to think or say, if we presume that the gospels, Acts, and snippets of proto-church life in Paul's letters are any indication.¹³ This public humiliation of the Jewish God by the Romans had no precedent, or so they thought, in the faith constructs of their ancestors. In other words, they faced the same problem in their own way as we face in reading and translating their accounts—"what language shall I borrow?"

What they did have was the Scriptures of Israel, what Christians later came to call The Old Testament; this was their "Bible," even if those writings had not quite yet been formally defined as a canon. In light of what they had experienced, and especially, as the crucifixion and resurrection narratives portray, as things came to mind that Jesus had said and done, they connected passages from their knowledge of Israel's scriptures to the extraordinary story they had lived with Jesus. Perhaps this Jesus had not brought about the literal realization of Psalm 110 where enemies (the Romans) were reduced to slave attendants, but what about Isaiah 53 wherein the suffering servant, the friend of transgressors, makes the effective intercession? Over and over again, Christians discovered in the writings before them a language for faith that not only linked them with their ancestors but also clarified and resonated with the puzzling mode by which Jesus of Nazareth lived out his messiahship.

The first followers of Jesus during his ministry were exclusively Jews from *eretz-yisrael*, mostly from Galilee, who would thereby have almost certainly been functionally literate in at least three languages: some version of Hebrew, its sister language Aramaic, and koine Greek, if not others, perhaps Latin.¹⁴ Debate regarding this has swirled in many directions over the last several generations of scholarship, but this seems to be the current settlement that most scholars are at least willing to teach their students and place in textbooks. That someone without years of formal education could easily and confidently converse beyond the language of their childhood family may seem like a hard sell to Americans, but it is obvious to many if not most people beyond American borders who must contend with English as the world's *lingua franca*. Any street vendor in Mexico City, Rome, or Shanghai would soon be out of business without the ability to communicate with people who have the money but do not know the local language. An American missionary who lived and served in a multi-lingual context once told me, "I have to be able to work in at least four languages. Otherwise I won't know what they're saying when people

12. Which St. Paul makes clear in Galatians 3:1, 13. Cf. Deut. 21:23, Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34.

13. Mark 16:8 should not be overlooked here! "...they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."

14. Even though not everyone would have been equally multilingual. See the work of Hughson Ong, *The Multilingual Jesus and the Sociolinguistic World of the New Testament with Special Reference to the Gospel of Matthew* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. xii + 422. See also Bruce D. Chilton, *Aramaic Jesus: Tradition, Identity, and Christianity's Mother Tongue* (Baylor, 2025), *passim*.

talk about me.” What language was Jesus using when he delivered the Sermon on the Mount? Who knows? Essentially, it doesn’t matter because the truths he was promulgating were received quickly and naturally by those who were already thinking in multi-linguistic terms.

Historians of the age have routinely, and possibly carelessly and dismissively, described Jesus’s early followers as undoubtedly “illiterate.” That claim could only be accurate in its plain sense if one adopts a modern and privileged definition of “literacy.” Two points must be made: the first is that so-called “working-class illiterate fishermen” would be unable to function in their Galilean business context without being able to conduct business in multiple languages. The fishing and olive oil enterprise in early first century Galilee had moved far beyond a subsistence economy. Fresh-water fish from the Tiberian Lake were a Roman delicacy, so the demand likely contributed to the construction of an imperial city on its western shore. The imperial highway ran through the center of Capernaum, and Magdala boasted one of the most active fish processing and export concerns in the region. To imagine that the fishermen of the call stories in all four gospels were not fully competent in multi-lingual transactions is to vastly misunderstand the culture of first-century Galilee. As business perpetually depends on the practice of relationship-building, the fishermen among Jesus’s disciples should likely be considered street-level sophisticates, quickly able to associate words and intentions when their clients from distant lands would have stories to tell or claim that some discount was due them. Receipts and manifests preserved on pottery shards and other materials from Phoenician times show that business people displayed a working if rudimentary knowledge of the alphabets of the languages they had to use. A basic ability to convey even complicated ideas could be done by someone with only an elementary familiarity with the written form of a language.¹⁵ For this reason, we can safely imagine that in the international business setting of Galilee, multilingual conversation was normal. We should view the disciples as linguistically curious and fully capable of understanding and experimenting with ways of putting experiences into words.¹⁶

The second point to be made is that literacy scholars have long noted that people who cannot read and write are by no means excluded from “literature,” that is, the opportunity to participate in literacy by listening and repeating stories that come their way, even full-length works of Greek masters. There is evidence

15. As an example, look no further than the gospel of John, which one Johannine scholar described as “kid Greek” when compared with Luke or Hebrews or the Pauline compilations Ephesians and Colossians. Yet John has been regarded for ages as the gospel with the most spiritual depth.

16. To repeat the caveat in note 13 above, not everyone would have had equal facility in these various languages, but they would all have been part of that multilingual culture. Among Jesus’ disciples, we also acknowledge beyond the fishing industry the equivalent of today’s border control (Matthew the tax-collector), Dikapolis businessmen (Philip) and accountants (Judas of Ishkariot), for which multilinguality would be assumed.

for “circles of readers” wherein one person in the group was able to read from a literary text so that others could follow along and even expand their respective vocabularies without necessarily having to have scribal skills. One thinks of “the reader” (ὁ ἀναγινῶσκων, *ho anaginōskōn*) who is parenthetically addressed in Mark 13:14 and Matthew 24:15. Could this be an imbedded instruction to the group reader to make sure a certain pronunciation or tone is correct so that the hearers in the circle get the correct idea?

What all of this means is that the disciples could have easily decided that their wholly disruptive encounter with Jesus required entirely new words or was impossible to communicate at all.¹⁷ However, when the standard passages and promises they already knew did not finally seem to be equal to the experience, they did not toss the scrolls away but read all the more broadly and discovered other passages that closed the loop. The richness of the Bible’s vocabulary in its account of God’s activity in ancient Israel was available to those who were charged with crafting some sort of narrative about the ministry of Jesus, and they found it suitable enough to employ it in repeating the story they had to tell. Furthermore, they found that they could do so in more than one language.¹⁸

Ultimately, the Scriptures of Israel and the Church spring from a highly motivated desire to find the right language for their experiences and should therefore become the primary source for bringing those individual and communal encounters with the divine into our own time and experience, even if the entire narrative and its vocabulary must be recontextualized. When we translate those terms into our modern languages, we may find them to be insufficient for expressing the full majesty for which they aim, but so were the originals. Nevertheless, both cases point readers and hearers in the direction of understanding God and His activity. The apostles and even the earliest interpreters did not (with a few important exceptions)¹⁹ make up completely new words for the phenomena they witnessed. All of the language they employed was “borrowed.”

In the second half of the first point, the use of the language we have received must be tested by its faithfulness to the gospel story of Israel’s Jesus that gave

17. We might be reminded of Paul’s note in II Cor. 12:4, where the experience of Paradise was so indescribable that even trying to do so would divest it of its force. Furthermore, the phenomenon of glossolalia (Acts 10 and 19, I Cor. 14:18) signals the realization among the apostles that only the language of the angels could satisfy the doxological impulse of those overcome by the good news of Jesus.

18. Contrast Islam, whose holy book is believed to be pure dictation, so precise that any “translation” from Arabic can only be called an “interpretation.”

19. A good example is ἐπιούσιον (*epiousion*) from the Lord’s prayer (Matt. 6 and Luke 11) which we translate “daily,” but is found nowhere else in all of Greek literature unless the writer is discussing the Lord’s Prayer, which means that all we have to go on is the tradition, including translations. It could easily mean “for the [coming] day,” which would create a clearer connection to, say, the manna in the wilderness story.

rise to it. Where does one even begin to describe the unholy wreckage that has resulted over the centuries by Christians, let alone the church's opponents, misappropriating scriptural stories and terms for self-glorifying ends or the purposes of one-or-another antichrist?

This dynamic of terminological fraud has been with us from the beginning. In Genesis 3, the serpent's interrogation of the woman was an attempt to redirect the meaning of God's phrase "you shall surely die" to its opposite, you will truly live as gods.²⁰ Abandoning God's assurance that avoiding the tree of knowledge would ensure fruitful multiplication of both creation and humankind, a story rich with hope and purpose, the woman and man adopt instead the serpent's redefinition of "life" as the static notion of knowledge or, perhaps better, "information." All sense of purpose beyond the self is lost, and what follows, usually overshadowed by interpreters' penchants for making depth of shame the major point,²¹ should likely instead be seen as an almost comical moment where the first thing their newly-acquired "information" shows them is their nakedness, hardly an insight that rises to the level of "smart as God," as the serpent had promised. This quintessential cautionary tale to end all cautionary tales illustrates what happens when language and vocabulary of faith are isolated from the greater story of which they are supposed to be a part. "Live," "die," and "know" are thoroughly jumbled in the serpent's rhetoric when removed from God's clear command and the destiny God had envisioned for humankind and the creation.

For a parallel example, we find in earlier Christianity the mirror opposite of the Genesis 3 conversation in Jesus's dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3,²² a story that could not possibly have been simply a set-up for the punch lines of verses 16 and 17 but surely must have been preserved to record the experience of ambiguity that ensues in Christian vocabulary when separated from its saving narrative. Jesus says that one must be born "anew" (Gk. *ἀνωθεν*, *anōthen*), which Nicodemus hears as "again," but Jesus intends to mean "from above." When Nicodemus expresses puzzlement, there is no terminological explanation from Jesus but an invitation into the activity of God's Spirit. Furthermore, as if to teach us how integral as well as how challenging this can be, there is no epilogue to this incident wherein we hear Nicodemus say, "Ah—I get it now." We only know that he potentially started

20. Space prohibits us from noting how stunning this incident is from the standpoint of how one interprets the "Word of God." We have made it barely three chapters into the Bible when there is a debate about the real meaning of something God has said. Some interpreters have said that this passage only works if the reader sidesteps the traditional association of the serpent with the Satan of the New Testament and gravitates more toward the Satan of Job as a kind of quality-control character, which would make this really about a test exercise gone horribly wrong.

21. Presumably because of the need to read 3:7 solely in light of 2:25.

22. As some have noted but very few have absorbed, the opening chapters of John map astonishingly onto the opening chapters of Genesis when read through rabbinic eyes. See Bruce E. Schein, *Following the Way: The Geography of John's Gospel*.

to catch on by his subsequent appearances in John 7 and 19. Once again, we have vocabulary to get the job done, but that must be developed in story and experience form in order to take on any persuasive force with the hearer.²³

We may look also at Acts 1 where Luke punctures the celebratory balloon of the Ascension with a question from the disciples who, after all that they had seen and heard, *still* ask “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” One might well have expected John 11:35, “Jesus wept,” to have appeared here rather than in the Lazarus story. Whether he may have been responding through tears or not, Jesus’s answer does not consist of redefining “kingdom” for his hearers but describing what will soon happen to them—the endowment of power from the Spirit and their global mission of witness. The term finds its meaning in a narrative promise.

We are already beginning to see a pattern of ambiguously understood language in these three examples from the scriptures. Terms and phrases, even if lifted directly from the Bible in the original language as readers of every age have been wont to do, cannot stand on their own but acquire the ability to convey accurate meaning only when they are attached to the particular claim or experience that God’s prophets and His Messiah have enacted and revealed.

This might be a good point to note that the word “context” has become rather profligate in its modern and post-modern usage by those contending that they are providing a more accurate account or critique of the meaning of a particular word or phrase than someone else is. If someone wants to lodge an objection to another person’s interpretation of a word or passage on any subject, including the Bible, the claim that it is being “taken out of context” has become a favorite rebuttal. To be sure, decontextualized quotes, weaponized as propaganda, are the bane of church teachers’ existences. “Context” is not, however, the idea we are aiming for here.²⁴ The important concept we must identify is *intent*. Classical Christian interpreters used the word σκοπός (*skopos*, “aim” or “intent” or “main point”) to refer to the overall message a passage intended to convey. They would identify the center of gravity, so to speak, of the passage so that each phrase and term in the pericope would necessarily be read in light of its overall purpose.²⁵ This proved to be a keystone move in the goal of keeping scriptural interpretation within the purview of its founding purposes.

23. This is not to exclude another major parallel story, Jesus’ testing in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13), where much the same attempt is made to wrest the connection of terms and phrases from their defining stories.

24. Nor does simply going back and reading the surrounding verses, the supposed “context,” necessarily conclude any debate.

25. *Skopos* (σκοπός) is a term Christian writers inherited from Greek philosophers and orators. Aristotle, for example, used *skopos* and *telos* to distinguish between the ideas of “target” and “outcome.” Among Christian orators, John Chrysostom wrote, ἄνευ τῆς εὐρέσεως τοῦ σκοποῦ οὐκ ὠφελεῖ ἡ γραφή (exp. in Ps.3 [5.2a]) – “scripture is of no use unless one finds the point.” The terms “aim” or “main point” are preferable translations rather than “scope” which in modern usage carries a different connotation.

The Development and Justification of Christian Scholarship

Once Christianity moved beyond the apostolic era and into its next phase when the primary opponents were no longer Greek mythological religions and rivalry from growth of the synagogue movement after the destruction of the Temple in 70AD,²⁶ its leaders found themselves having to contend with fugitive visionaries determined to transform the very words, teachings, and actions of Jesus into another generic mystery cult of the Mediterranean basin. The first grand example was Gnosticism.²⁷ Gnosticism was a particularly challenging counterpoint to Christianity precisely because the movement utilized so much vocabulary also common to apostolic Christianity. The parade example of how things could be misread or even fully taken over by a completely non-Christian aim is the Gospel of John, enthusiastically received by Gnostic teachers such as Valentinus (d. 160). They were thrilled at how nicely the basic framework of Gnosticism mapped so naturally to the first chapter of John. They viewed the prologue of John (1:1-18) as a representation of the “divine realm” (πλήρωμα, *plerōma*) and many key terms in John—“word” (λόγος, *logos*), “light” (φῶς, *phōs*), “life” (ζωή, *zōē*), “truth” (ἀλήθεια, *alētheia*), “grace” (χάρις, *chāris*)—as individual “aeons” (divine emanations) of “the one” rather than what John intends, which are the identifiers of the Messiah. Much Gnostic vocabulary was arguably “biblical,” yet their account of God and His work markedly contrasted the Christian account of the cosmos and the God whose purposes were being realized therein.

Early Christianity’s most important defender against Gnosticism was Irenaeus of Lyon (c.125-202 CE) who passionately believed that the continuity of God’s people from apostolic times was essential to the continuity of the gospel story that had been received.²⁸ For that reason, it was essential to only read scripture in light of that story and under the guidance and authority of the community which is its custodian, the church.²⁹

Because the issue was the reading of biblical vocabulary as redefined according to an alternative mythological narrative, Irenaeus knew that a simple war of words would accomplish nothing. Merely countering Gnostic appropriations with “that word doesn’t mean so-and-so, it means this” would have been pointless. Instead, he had to reposition the terms confiscated by the Gnostics into a gospel account to convince his readers (including, or maybe especially, the church faithful who had

26. See the work of Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (Yale, 2005).

27. Gnosticism is a blanket term for a family of movements, teachings, and communities whose common feature was the claim that esoteric knowledge was the key to everything from superior, first-hand knowledge of God to the complexities of human nature to the key to eternal life. It was not an organized philosophical school, so we should be thinking “Gnosticisms.”

28. Following the model in 1 Cor. 15:1-2, 11.

29. Irenaeus’s most influential work, “Against Heresies” contains many references which illustrate this view, including Book IV, ch. 26.

been lured by the elegance of the Gnostic myth) that the apostolic usage of this vocabulary was the only correct way to read and use it if one wanted to remain authentically Christian and faithful to the apostolic witness, as well as to enjoy the saving gifts of union with Christ.

By the time of the early 4th century, with the major persecutions largely behind them, Christian teachers were forced to contend with the heresy of Arianism. This represented not so much an importation of pagan philosophy as a short-cut through the challenge posed by the Christian doctrine of the relation of the Father and the Son in order to avoid a conflict with an established public worldview that could not abide co-equality at the top of the “great chain of being.” This became a debate over scripture as Arians quoted verse after verse in an effort to prove that the ontological and temporal subordination of the Son to the Father was a thoroughly scriptural idea that would spare them from that supposed absurdity.³⁰ Although there were plenty of arguments about words and terms, the defenders of existing orthodoxy once again found that attempting a standard proof-texting duel would not win this debate. Athanasius of Alexandria initiated the response with his magisterial *On the Incarnation*, and then later in the fourth century, the Cappadocian theologians Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus continued the refutation of Arianism, which by that time had gained several defenders far more erudite than Arius himself.

Athanasius (c. 328-373) moved right to the heart of the matter by insisting that all interpretive work regarding Jesus the Son and Word of God must be organized around the central point of the gospel, the purpose of the incarnation, which he articulated in his famous phrase, “God became human in order that humans might become divine.” In doing so, he was able to return passages like Hebrews 2:9-10, a pillar passage in the Arian claim that Christ had a beginning, to their proper position in the saving narrative.³¹

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-394), writing two generations after Athanasius, understood better than most that correcting the Arian thinkers on a biblical term-by-term or verse-by-verse basis would have no effect. To be sure, Gregory and his companions went to the Bible to gather the substance of their claims, but the overall argument could only be won by representing the various passages in a way that would in turn make the best sense of the whole Bible, thereby identifying and serving the *skopos* of the entire scriptural witness. In that way, the scriptures acted as arbiter and judge of the dispute. Gregory and the others had to demonstrate that only by adhering to the same economy of salvation they had received would the

30. Even a partial catalog of Arian citations numbers more than a dozen passages: Exodus 7:1; Deuteronomy 6:4; Proverbs 8:22; Psalm 82:6; Isaiah 53; Matthew 26:39; Mark 10:18; Mark 13:32; John 14:28; Romans 16:27; 1 Cor. 1:4; 1 Cor. 15:24-28; 1 Tim. 2:5; Hebrews 5:5-9, and so on.

31. See Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, section 10. A fine modern introduction and translation by John Behr is available in the Popular Patristics series from St. Vladimir Seminary Press.

entire canon enjoy full internal coherence. What follows is an extended quote from Gregory's *Refutation to the Claims of Eunomius*.³² We should take particular note of the biblical language that is strategically arranged throughout Gregory's comment.

It is clear beyond question that because we are by birth flesh and blood ... [he] himself led the way in this birth, drawing down the Holy Spirit upon the water by his own baptism, so that in all things he became the first-born of those who are spiritually born again, and gave the name of brethren to those who partook in a birth like his own by water and the Spirit. But since it was also necessary that he should implant in our nature the power to rise again from the dead, he becomes the "first-fruits of those who slept"³³ and the "first-born from the dead,"³⁴ in that he first by his own act "loosed the pains of death."³⁵ ... Thus, just as by having shared in the washing of regeneration he became "the first-born among many brethren,"³⁶ and again by having made himself the first fruits of the resurrection, he obtains the name of the "first-born from the dead," thereby having preeminence in all things. Just as "all old things," as the apostle says, "have passed away,"³⁷ he becomes the first-born of the new creation of humanity in Christ by the two-fold regeneration—Holy Baptism and the resurrection from the dead—becoming for us in these two things at once the Prince of Life, the first-fruits, the first-born. ... In these words he sums up (ἀνακεφαλαιουται, *anakephalaioutai*)³⁸ the whole aim (σκοπόν, *skoron*) of his dispensation (οἰκονομία, *oikonomia*) as a human person. For humankind turned away from God, and "served those which by nature were no gods,"³⁹ and even though they were the children of God, they became attached to an evil so-called "father." For this cause ... [he] sends to his brethren the announcement of himself not in his *divine* character, but in that which he shares with us, saying, "I am departing in order to make—through my own self—that true Father, from whom you were separated, to be your Father,

32. This work somehow got spliced into Gregory's "Against Eunomius" (*Contra Eunomium* [CE]) as early as the sixth century as a substitute for book 2 of CE, which was apparently too speculative. The correct order of the CE was only restored with Werner Jaeger's critical edition of Gregory's works in the mid-20th century, which means that an accessible English translation of *Refutation* appears as "Book II" of CE in the Gregory of Nyssa volume of *NPNF*, which had been based on the earlier pre-critical Migne edition. A more recent translation became available in 2018 from Brill Press, edited by Miguel Brugarolas. The translation presented here is by this essay's author, based on the Jaeger edition.

33. I Cor. 15:20.

34. Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5.

35. Acts 2:24.

36. Romans 8:29.

37. II Cor. 5:17.

38. Or "recapitulates," a term that sits at the heart of Irenaeus' work.

39. Gal. 4:8.

and—through my own self—to make that *true* God, from whom you had turned away, to be *your* God, for by that first-fruits which I have assumed, I am in myself presenting all humanity to its God and Father.⁴⁰

Gregory repositions this broad array of passages—many of which were Arian favorites!—within a larger Christological framework that restores them to their proper role. He even states near the end of this passage “In these words, [Christ] sums up the whole aim of his dispensation as human” as a way of explaining why there is apostolic language that could be misinterpreted ontologically as subordinating the Son to the Father. He identifies the purpose of these words and passages as pertaining to Christ’s voluntary humiliation in order to bring humanity to God, and in doing so, he deprives the Arian framework of its ability to use these passages to prove the inferior nature of the Son with respect to the Father. We are reminded, perhaps, of Irenaeus’s love for *recapitulation* as an organizing idea for the drama of redemption or Athanasius’ use of *skopos* to refer not only to the scriptures but to the Incarnation itself; both authors made moves similar to what we see Gregory doing. Arius exploited a loophole of sorts in Christianity’s heretofore imprecise Christology by claiming that identifying the Son as a post-temporal creation of the Father was a perfectly acceptable way of talking about the godhead. In responding, Gregory does not, as noted before, simply gainsay the Arians’ terminological faults but follows the pattern of Jesus in John 3 and Acts 1 by reiterating the grand story of God’s determination to reconcile all things, weaving those key terms and phrases back in to demonstrate their true place in that story and telling the story in such a way that it only makes sense if the Son is coeternal with the Father.⁴¹ In doing so, Gregory in addition to those before and after him, in defending their usage of the various biblical terms, also move forward to give fresh expression to things to which they were already deeply convinced.

This, then, is an interesting instance of not rhetorical-philosophical but homiletical-evangelical strategy. In the Arian controversy, the orthodox defenders cannot avoid addressing the gaps in the received account of the apostolic witness, so they must employ terms that do not derive directly from scripture. In doing so, they demonstrate

40. Emphases and quotation marks added by translator for clarity.

41. An example is the term Gregory uses here (*ἀνακεφαλαιούνται*, *anakephalaiouta*: “sums up”), picking it up from Romans 13:9 and Ephesians 1:10 and combining it with *skopos* (“goal,” Philippians 3:14) and *oikonomia* (1 Tim. 1:4, *et passim*) to bring fresh precision to these terms. Here we might well include a somewhat anachronistic critique, but it still bears note: In the last 2/3 of the 20th century, it became fashionable among preachers to zero in on individual words and their broad historical backgrounds. Among church bodies where an educated clergy was and is valued, the approach to meaning that was exemplified by “Kittel,” aka, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, was widespread. Millions heard sermons that included claims about what a particular word “really” means because its usage was traced backwards to some supposedly more fundamental inherent meaning. This was methodologically flawed on a number of levels, but the primary concern was that it represented the opposite of the approach described here, wherein words are endowed with meaningful content by virtue of their placement in the overall narrative of salvation.

how these ideas work in service to the *existing* vocabulary and in turn to the overall story (see the Greek words pointed out in the extended quote above). One could say that they were following the admonition of Jesus in Matthew 13:52 where he states, “every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his treasure that which is new and that which is old.”

It was up to Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and others to bring out of their treasure “what is new” (for example, the *homoousios* formulations, the defense of infinity as a proper postulate of God, the fullest account of the purpose of the Incarnation) in an effort to newly showcase and stabilize “what is old.” Enriching the gospel story, the *skopos*, allowed the biblical language to retain its original force and even strengthened it against new challenges.

This is precisely what our present-day preachers and teachers must do to provide competent leadership for God’s people in employing the scriptures as the language of the faith. It should be familiar enough territory if for no other reason than it imitates the rhetorical pattern of Jesus who would set the stage for his hearers with parabolic stories or divine acts of mercy and healing, then only in conclusion reveal what he was really talking about, such as a text from Israel’s scriptures or a reality about life in God’s kingdom.⁴² The Matthew 13:52 dictum cited above concludes not with a biblical text but with a new dominical pronouncement that will itself become scripture. Effective sermons often do not necessarily begin with the pericope itself but with a gradual explication of the point the preacher wants to make and then ends with, “and *that’s* why the scripture says” that which it says. The interpreter has done exactly what Jesus and the patristic thinkers did: set up the description of the faith in such a way that the scriptures make sense when read or heard. In other words, when someone asks for a definition, respond with a story.

Contemporary Problems, Creating Solutions

This discipline must have an internal objective of informing, preparing, and strengthening the believers to make our external witness most authentic and effective. To address that objective, another seemingly-obvious question arises: why is any of this important or even useful? If any given person desires an enhanced spiritual life or a more effective walk of discipleship, why should she or he not be allowed to construct or adopt whatever system or object-of-faith that best suits him with whatever comfy language seems to fit? Why insist that we stick close to or at least begin with the Bible and the relatively few extra-biblical terms that have by necessity arisen to support it? Furthermore, why must we insist that those terms must be bracketed in their potential use by one special story and not another?

As with all things in this discussion, the answer requires more nuance than might be initially presumed. In reality, no one has an enforceable copyright on Christian

42. See, for example, the parable of the vineyard (Luke 20:9-19) and eating with sinners (Matthew 9:9-13).

vocabulary or on the brand “Christian,” the long, tragic upshot of this has been almost continuous disunity among Christians since the dawn of the Church, with periods of sanctioned atrocities that were often defended using biblical language. We must also concede that there is much at stake at every level of this conflict. In the current decade, the co-option of the Christian vision and the scriptures that attest to it has reached a pinnacle rarely seen since the Middle Ages, reaching all the way from the Russian Orthodox blessing of the Ukraine invasion to the re-assertion of Christian Nationalism in the United States, to the failure of bishops to discipline congregations employing thoroughly pagan creeds in violation of confessions as well as constitutions. Once again, can the average in-the-pew believer be blamed for throwing up hands in despair at ever sorting out this blatant repudiation of John 17 that is the current church? Can we blame the average preacher for throwing up hands in despair because of the repulsive baggage that Christianity and its signature words has hanging around its neck? This adds to that same pew-sitter’s insecurity about whether he or she knows enough to trust the Bible translation that has been handed to them.

As much as pastors might love to mollify that distressed pew-sitter with disarming language, they cannot escape that the struggle is real. The church’s life is often a symptom of the phenomenon it is attempting to identify, which is why pastors must not shy away from this language but lean into it. The gospel, whose centerpiece is “the risen Jesus is Lord of all,” only makes sense if one pairs it with the New Testament’s diagnosis of this present life and the sin that comes with it, thereby acknowledging that there are powers at work beyond the ability of ordinary humans to face that if ignored could yield a repeat of the 20th century, the deadliest epoch in human history, with plenty of blame to go around. Paul, in Romans 3, says what all people eventually realize if they are being honest—“all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” This verse is not a scolding moralism about quotidian misbehaviors but is rather an admission: we are all *dying*, we are *all dying together* and are even *helping each other get there*.

Eventually, when this truth hits (as it should each time we gather as community), we, first, need language to identify and describe it and, second, to make sure it is accompanied by language about the alternate story that assures us of an outcome that is different from the one that anyone with eyes can see is inevitable. As Jesus said in his appeal for his followers to come to terms with the gravity of his words, “let anyone who has ears listen.”⁴³

I contend, however, that one is not required to resolve or even face all of these uncertainties before adopting the language of Scripture as the language of faith. If that were necessary, no one would ever come to faith. We do not have to burden our brains with complex theories about how language works. Rather, when we

43. Matt. 11:15, Mark 4:9, Revelation 2. In my work with teens, I will often compliment their honest expressions of hopelessness, reminding them that they are wise to be seeing through the thin promises of the world around them. Our task then, of course, is to articulate a more reliable hope based on grounded promises rather than wishful thinking.

locate the *skopos* of the Scriptures in the apocalyptic good news of God's repeated and persistent self-revelatory in-breaking, we find that God engages us at all the levels of our own complicated and frustrating relationships to ourselves, others, the community around us, and the wide world beyond us, as well as the moments of joy, growth, hope, and peace. We need neither to completely settle on what all of these Christian words officially mean before we begin to live as God's person or God's people. We might very well ask, and *ought* to ask, what various terms mean, how they function, and what claim they lay upon us. We are *first*, though, in the business of knowing and proclaiming the larger story in which God wants to include each of us and, in response to that, engaging in thanksgiving and service. Does anyone lack adequate words for even expressing gratitude let alone describing what God has done? Certainly. However, that longing in the asking of the question "what language shall I borrow" is the very thing that places the believer in the position of being able to come to any kind of position, even a provisional one, regarding God's deeply gracious action in one's life. Doxology and confession are the foundational prerequisites to any further appropriation of vocabulary for the telling of the Christian story. We learn what the language means by using the language in a live setting.

Of note is the number of times in the scriptures where the response to God's activity in Israel or Jesus's healing work is not initially reflection or analysis but thanksgiving. Additionally, the nearly physical center of the gospel of John chapter 9 where, aside from the words of Jesus, some locate the entire center of gravity of John's gospel: "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.'... 'Lord, I believe,' and he worshiped him."⁴⁴ The boldness of this man in rejecting the requirement that he first rise to the level of expert in the law before confessing his faith exemplifies the very perspective proposed here. Other examples where praise and thanksgiving are highlighted are to be found in Exodus 15, Judges 5, Luke 5, 17, and 18, and Mark 5. The Apostle Paul is, in fact, something of an outlier in New Testament stories of meeting Jesus.⁴⁵ His immediate response is not humble gratitude but immediately and aggressively proclaiming Jesus as Son of God, which earns him in fewer than a dozen verses a trip back to Tarsus so that he won't cause any more trouble.⁴⁶

The lesson we take from these and many other stories from both Old and New Testaments is that new or seasoned believers need not be shy about beginning to talk about faith with words of praise, thanksgiving, confession, confusion, frustration, and hope. This is the perfect opportunity to recall the well-trodden path of recommending the Psalms, for all of those sentiments and more are found there. Pastoral consolation of the distraught, the angry, or the arrogant, or even celebration with the overjoyed, gets enhanced if the conversation becomes triadic by including the Scriptures and calling in the witnesses of old to lead in song and letting their words

44. John 9:25 and 9:38.

45. Acts 9:1-9.

46. Acts 9:30.

carry us beyond the liturgy and the pastor's study into the tasks and routines of our weekday vocation. We can easily get lost in the theoretical and philosophical detail of what constitutes an adequate and appropriate expression of God's entire enterprise, but the permission we grant to our parishioners to learn and repeat the sturdy words of our faith, as drawn from Scripture, can lead to the very fulfillment of the whole church's mission: go and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them.

The flip side of providing congregations with robust words for understanding the world's situation and God's address to it is the task of resisting the winsome but thin analyses of human sciences and two-dimensional critiques regarding the human situation, not because they are incorrect in every sense but because they are not comprehensive enough to get the job done. Friedrich Nietzsche famously predicted that art would replace religion, and multiple theorists from Christopher Lasch to Phillip Rieff have predicted that the language of therapy would eventually replace the language of faith. Though no one has famously issued a similar warning that the language of corporate management might replace the language of the church, such a concern would not be unwarranted because it has been happening. A disagreement with all three of these thinkers is this: their predictions were uniformly based on the supposed inability of the existing religious (specifically Christian) language to comprehend the real situations of people, systems, and cultures, both in their shortcomings and their vision. In contrast, the Christian language was and is in fact superior, except that local interpreters have not always fully met the challenge of continuously populating those terms with grand and specific descriptors so that they continue to unfold the patterns of the lives of the faithful and God's aims as well as keep them tethered to the centuries-old ability of the Christian narrative to make sense of nonsense,⁴⁷ thus providing people with hope that overcomes both despair and injustice.⁴⁸

A great example centers on the word "sin." People are told that this word should be avoided in sermons because it has become too enmeshed with a message of shame, which may be true. There has yet to be a term coined, however, that can so readily serve the story Christians really want to tell—the creation has been left on its own in isolation from God and does not even quite understand its own purpose, and humans, charged with stewardship of the world and its inhabitants, have instead created a juggernaut of self-interest into which every newborn person is swept up and from which none can escape. Catechists and preachers have the opportunity with those who come with hard questions to confirm this malfunction in what should have been paradise. Compassionate listening, resonance with the downtrodden, and the unmasking of wickedness's arrogant defenders can provide terms like "sin" with their content so that when people gather on the Lord's Day, they do indeed hear a bigger story and find themselves to be a part of it.

47. "Making sense out of nonsense" – an exact quote from a recent 8th grade Virginia Synod youth event planner when describing what the Christian faith does.

48. Alas, it cannot be taken for granted that theological education will make this an explicit goal that should be common to all its endeavors across the range of disciplines that constitute preparation for pastors.

The challenge of translating experiences into words and then expecting them to endure through the changes of time and place certainly faces congregations and leaders in general. Over my five decades in youth and young adult ministry, though, I have seen it in sharp relief when it comes to conversing with teens and young adults whose childhood faith formation, if they had any at all, was not sturdy enough to last them into adulthood. I sometimes refer to this population as “feral believers” as they are perhaps not completely unchurched in terms of their family history but are often untethered by the kinds of loyalties that in past generations might have bound them to a church body or at least a confessional core as a kind of traveling home. These young people may have been expertly catechized, but they also frequently discovered that the situation they encountered on typical Sunday mornings did not manage to convince them that they were part of a larger story in which they were an essential player wherein everything is at stake. Instead, they had come to see themselves as customers, testing the wares being presented to see if they might like to make a purchase.

Of importance in countering such practices, biblical story and vocabulary are just as much a matter of communicating the distinctive call of Christian community as they are communicating a compelling truth. Presuming that at least some of that is true, the homilist might well shudder from fear because she or he faces multiple dangers. Even the richest examples of biblical vocabulary may find themselves commandeered for shallow purposes, the smoothing over of harsh realities in the name of providing comfort. To be sure, proclaimers must be wise, compassionate, and fiercely protective of the dimly burning wicks that routinely populate the pews. Those same qualities, however, should drive the catechist, the preacher, and the liturgist to tell the truth in ways that grant permission to the hearers to be dissatisfied with their personal or the world’s status quo and to see God’s people as having a thoroughly unique handle on that situation. The question “What language shall I borrow” is not just a question about which words to choose to talk about things impossible to describe but is also a question about what overall message one intends to send and how to frame the proclamation so that the faithful end up with an effective structure in which the words they speak to themselves and eventually to others befit the claim of the Christian message to be a thoroughgoing account of things and a vision for what is to come. When anyone hears a sermon, he or she is justified in asking a critical question, “Is this my story or not,” and the follow-up question, “Are these my people or not?”

Alongside this risk of misuse by both homilists and catechists is the hazard that Christian language will become so circumscribed and self-referential that it will become at once unintelligible to outsiders and unaffected by one’s neighbors’ and the world’s suffering. This can happen when something as simple as the word “sin” begins to connote exclusively the individual’s ledger of improper actions and “salvation” becomes no more than their divine erasure. This private transaction isolates the follower of Christ from any necessity to respond to God’s action by acknowledging the world’s brokenness and the Christian’s call to join in the work

of repair. The same thing happens in particularly personal-righteousness-oriented expressions of Christianity with terms like “biblical.”⁴⁹ Its referent depends almost entirely on the cultural-linguistic setting in which it is used and, in the practices criticized herein, actually functions as much as a shibboleth or a call to guard boundaries as it does a shorthand for being faithfully consistent with Scripture.

Forward in the Language of Faith

What language, then, shall Christians borrow? It is not simply a matter of going to the Bible and cherry-picking words, although the aforementioned recommendation of mining the Psalms remains a good practice. Christians must find how those terms, phrases, and passages have been used to tell God’s distinctive story. Often in youth ministry, when young people are invited to describe their faith, they will often reference the songs they have sung in their most exuberant moments at a campfire experience or a fully relational eucharistic celebration, those times when they are most aware of the ineffable presence of God in a community in the context of a sacramental (or other holy) action under the authority of a powerful gospel word. These young saints deserve a word of encouragement and commission: this language is yours! Take it! Own it! Tell it!

Finally, how could Christians possibly reflect on Scripture as the language of faith and fail to say more about Jesus as the Word of God? Beyond the reflecting on the role of language and vocabulary in the construction of an integrated gospel proclamation, there is another side. Of course, Christians proclaim Jesus himself, but it can become this odd situation where one introduces the main character of the story but allows him to fade into the background like John the Baptist.

There is another angle to this story—the irony that the Word of God was the consummate listener. The gospels provide examples, particularly where Jesus asks questions and listens for answers, the entire purpose of which being to lead His conversation partner onward. Perhaps the most well-known example is the Emmaus Way story from Luke 24. The pericope begins with verse 13, and Jesus’s first words in verse 17—“What are you discussing with each other while you walk along”—elicit a low-key testy response from Cleopas and his companion, which might well be paraphrased as “what in the world do you *think* we might be discussing?” When Jesus follows with “what things,” a proto-creed from the pair that nevertheless remains incomplete comes next. In what is the key lesson for the Christian, Jesus listens before speaking, then expands on what they have said, tying it back to everything that they already knew but had not been organized for them.

To help seekers and seasoned believers alike own the richness of the biblical vocabulary, leaders need to listen and know the stories of their flocks and know the scriptures intimately so that they can make connections that people can receive in

49. This essay’s author is writing in the southern tier of Virginia, which has contributed more than its share of such practices to the world.

order to interpret themselves, the world, and then, ideally, gradually become skilled at doing the same thing for others. This is the mechanism by which the language of scripture takes on new life for a new generation. This could even be thought of as the means by which scripture—particularly the New Testament—became scripture. Although Paul was surely writing with the intent of being authoritative, it is unlikely that he anticipated his words becoming on par with Israel's Bible. The writing, however, was only the first step of the process because we also know of letters and gospels that were written that did not become scripture. The crucial step was that these were reread, shared, and found to be useful, authoritative, and resonant with the orally received gospel by communities beyond the original audience. As those writings gained importance with these new audiences, so did the language that was contained therein, thus creating a catalog of core terms and ideas that could be taught to newcomers and handed down to succeeding generations as representing the apostolic witness. New believers could develop new vocabulary as they needed it, knowing that they were answerable not only to the terms, concepts, and stories of their forebears but also to the intent, the *skopos*, of those terms, stories, and concepts. They had found an answer of sorts to the question "What language shall I borrow?" by fully realizing the breadth of meaning contained in the writings they had received, and then, giving thanks to God with those words, inviting others to do the same.

Near the end of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* is a hymn whose text begins: "Voices raised to you we offer; tune them, God, for songs of praise."⁵⁰ These words demonstrate the author's recognition that all of this talk is finally for God's glory and the redemption of earth's peoples. After a set of stanzas honoring the three persons of the Trinity, the hymn then concludes with words similar to the passage quoted at the outset from "O Sacred Head": "How can any praise we offer measure all the thanks we owe?" We may ask that question somewhat rhetorically, knowing that through eternity we will always lack the full ability to express God's glory, but we also know that we have the perfect place to begin with the language of Scripture.

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A Book Worth Discussing

In the Spirit

Candace Kohli, *In the Spirit: Human Subjectivity under Law and Gospel*, Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology.

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024.

Geoff Evans

ABSTRACT: This essay examines Candace L. Kohli's *In the Spirit: Human Subjectivity Under Law and Gospel*, part of the Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology series. Kohli's work is focused on the life of the Christian in the wake of divine grace in Luther's later theology and his dispute with Johann Agricola over the role of the law in salvation. The review traces Kohli's central argument that Luther made a significant pneumatological discovery in his study of the Gospel of John, identifying the Holy Spirit as the author of the law and the animating power of penitence in the life of the justified sinner. Particular attention is given to Kohli's recovery of the medieval framework of penitence as reinterpreted by Luther. The review also situates Kohli's work alongside Simeon Zahl's *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* as part of a broader movement recovering affective experience as a legitimate category for theological inquiry. The essay concludes with pastoral reflections on the implications of Kohli's argument for congregational formation, confirmation ministry, and the spiritual development of young people, drawing on the author's experience in parish ministry in the Episcopal tradition.

Introduction

What spiritual resources are available to the Christian for moral and ethical life? Given that God does everything in justification, what is the role of human subjectivity? What is the character of human agency in the light of divine grace? Such recurrent questions in Christian life are particularly pressing for those who do theology following the legacy of Martin Luther. *In the Spirit: Human Subjectivity under Law and Gospel* by Candace L. Kohli, published as part of the Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology series, makes a substantive effort to address these questions and has the potential to be a rich resource for theological discourse, pastoral

ministry, and theological formation at both the individual church and parish levels.

Summary

The book focuses on Luther's later work and particularly on his dispute with his former student and friend, Johann Agricola, over the place of the law in the order of God's saving action in Christian life. Kohli argues that in the course of this controversy Luther "made a significant pneumatological discovery" in the Gospel of John in that Luther discovered that the Spirit is the "author of the law" and acts through the law in both justification and the Christian life which follows justification.¹ The Spirit is both the originator and the active power of the law. The Spirit uses the law to direct and guide the Christian at the point of the interior life and the affections. Kohli argues that Luther developed a nuanced view of penitence which focused on the role of Spirit driving the Christian to a continual life of repentance and reliance on Christ. The Spirit uses the law to direct the Christian to the gospel before and after justification.

Method

Kohli's method partly situates Luther within the world of Renaissance and medieval theology.² She carefully reads Luther not as a modern or premodern thinker but as both representative and innovative within the theological framework that he inherited. She charts how the Holy Spirit began to take a more prominent role in Luther's theology during the course of the 1530s based on study of John's Gospel. This more pronounced pneumatology allowed Luther to locate a role for human agency "between the anthropological and moral philosophical extremes of the medieval Scholastics and the Antinomians."³ Spurred by Agricola and fueled by fresh insights from his study of John, Luther clarifies rather than abandons the Scholastic tradition regarding theological anthropology.

Human Agency as Penitence

Kohli illuminates Luther's later work by highlighting the connection and interplay between the Holy Spirit, the law, and "human moral capacity."⁴ Kohli maintains that the observance of the law does not justify the sinner nor is the will of the sinner capable of keeping the law. Her concern lies in how the Spirit, as author of the law, uses God's commands for sanctification after justification. Observance of the law

1. Kohli, Candace L. *In the Spirit: Human Subjectivity Under Law and Gospel*, Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024. pg. 96.

2. Kohli, 3.

3. Kohli, 4.

4. Kohli, 5.

after justification does not get based on will or reason but rather the work of the Holy Spirit in the internal life of the Christian. Thus, Kohli “rehabilitates” Spirit-directed human agency in Luther’s thought.⁵

Kohli does this by mapping how Luther upholds and clarifies the medieval focus on penitence (*poenitentia*) as inner and affective experience in response to God’s commands. Penitence, as such, manifests as both sorrow and good intention.⁶ The medieval theology that Luther inherited regarded penitence in terms of three sacramental actions—contrition, confession, and satisfaction. These three actions were required for absolution before it was spoken by a priest. Andreas Stegman argues that as early as 1519, Luther worked to revise this medieval framework.⁷ Luther relocates the gift of divine grace earlier in the sequence at the point of contrition. As Luther determined, divine grace occurred not due to satisfaction of priestly absolution but in the experience of contrition in the sinner. Absolution comes as the explicit communication of the work of God in contrition, and satisfaction gets discovered in the daily activity of the sinner’s life after justification. Luther avoids abandoning the medieval tradition, and instead redefines it with greater attention and deference to the work of the Spirit.

Throughout the work, Kohli defines *poenitentia* as “penitence” to acknowledge that Luther has in mind the medieval inheritance of penance in his arguments for what Stegmann calls “evangelical penitence.”⁸ The language, actions, and even the order of penance are retained, but the intervention of divine grace occurs earlier in the order with the emphasis on the action of the Spirit in the heart of the Christian. Luther significantly modifies the medieval framework while maintaining a useful way of understanding Christian life after justification.

As the first part of this affective experience of contrition, sorrow is the sinner’s internal response to the accusation of the law.⁹ As Luther writes, “The first part of penitence, sorrow, is caused solely by the law.”¹⁰ Luther responds to Agricola who separates sorrow from contrition. For Luther, the law drives the sinner to the gospel in the continual experience of sorrow. The law escalates the suffering of the sinner, which compels the sinner to seek Christ.

Good intention follows sorrow. As in the case of sorrow, Luther understands good intention in affective terms: “to hate sin out of love of God truly is a good intention.”¹¹ Good intention subsists as an expression of faith when one desires to

5. Kohli, 20.

6. Kohli, 63.

7. Stegmann, Andreas. *Luthers Auffassung vom christlichen Leben*. Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 175. Tübingen: Mohr/Stiebeck, 2014. pg. 249.

8. Stegmann, 251.

9. Kohli, 66.

10. *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Schriften*. 65 vols. Weimar: H. Bohlau, 1883-1993.39/1:345.22-3.

be more aligned with Christ in thought, feeling, and action. Luther states that “faith is the principal good intention from which afterwards the rest of the good works flow as fruits and endure for the entire life.”¹² As law operates in sorrow, faith operates in good intention. Thus, as Kohli points out, Luther describes a nuanced view of good intention, which gets lived out over the whole of the Christian life. Faith not only operates in good intention but also necessitates a renewed “epistemic need for the law” as the Christian puts their trust in God’s determination of the good and the bad. Good intention includes both negative (being repelled by what God hates) and positive effects, which results as a desire to seek what God commands.¹³

Kohli makes clear that this positive affective desire does not emerge as a function of the intellect, which remains blind in Luther’s theology. The blind intellect must have a guide toward the good. The role of human agency in this understanding is passive in that the Spirit is working through the law while also being active as the Christian responds to the prompting of the law in a repulsion to the bad, which is part of the same chain of affection as the faithful desire toward the good. Before justification, the law accuses, but after justification, the law has a different function for the justified: “it encourages them to the good.”¹⁴

Third Use?

Kohli’s interpretation of Luther regarding the law and good intention inevitably evokes the perennial and contentious debates about the third use of the law. She addresses this by citing Norman Lund’s *Luther’s “Third Use of the Law”*: “Luther’s comments here problematize the dogmatic rejection of a third use of the law in Luther scholarship. Complicating the entrenched position among Luther scholars, Lund identified 12 distinct positive uses of the *salutarum usus legis* for sanctification in the Christian life in Luther’s arguments.”¹⁵ She implies that the traditional debates about the third use hinder the Luther’s exploration of the Spirit in the antinomian controversies. Relying on Luther himself and Lund’s positive use of the law described as *lex hortetur ad bonum*, she proceeds to describe in detail how the law functions after justification.¹⁶

In Kohli’s view, law does not disappear under the gospel but “is transformed in human experience through the move from law to gospel. Law no longer terrifies. Instead, it serves an epistemic purpose to reorient the good intention toward good.”¹⁷ Law and gospel operate in the good intention of the Christian not by

11. WA/ 1:393.5-6.

12. WA 39/1:472.9-11.

13. Kohli, 68.

14. WA 39/1:474.21-22.

15. Lund, Norman. *Luther’s ‘Third Use of the Law’ and Melancthon’s Tertius Usus Legis in the Antinomian Controversy with Agricola (1537-1540)*. PhD diss., University of St. Michael’s College, 1985. pg. 199.

16. Kohli, 68.

means of intellect, will, or good work but rather as the experience of sorrow and good intention as manifested by the work of the Spirit through the instrument of law and in gospel faith. She describes not the strength or ability of the Christian but rather the reorienting action of the Spirit within the heart and personality of the Christian. As such, one wonders how Kohli's argument could be countered without reducing the role of the Spirit in Christian life.

Kohli makes clear that as Luther carried forward the medieval language and progression of penitence, he also maintained that all people are born with a corrupted nature. All people contain within them the *fomes peccati*, or the "tinder of sin."¹⁸ Luther inherited Lombard's distinction between original sin and actual sin. Luther describes this inheritance of sinful inclination as an "ember" of sin that continues to burn after justification.¹⁹ Kohli remains interested in how the Spirit guides and empowers the Christian to confront this "ember" of sin, which is always a threat to flame up into actual sin. Overall, Kohli avoids dwelling on the "third use" question in what seems a wise attempt to focus on direct engagement with Luther and his revision of the medieval doctrine of penance.

A Christian Youth

Kohli utilizes a story that Luther tells about a "Christian youth" who grapples with the ongoing inclination to sin. Luther creates this character and then welcomes the reader into the character's interior life as the youth considers his inclinations and the commandments of God against fornication, adultery, and passion. This character encounters a beautiful young woman, and Luther invites the reader into the character's thoughts. First, the young man pragmatically acknowledges that if "still strong in his youth" if he meets a beautiful young woman, he will have strong feelings toward her. This survives as an involuntary response "unless I were a total tree trunk." As this story details, Luther doesn't get enough credit for being funny.

Upon acknowledgement of this inevitable attraction to the beautiful young woman, the youth becomes compelled to reckon with God's injunction against sexual sin. Struggling with this contradiction between sinful inclination and God's command, the youth exclaims in prayer:

Get behind me, Satan! Do not speak! No, do not rule, flesh! Be completely silent! You should not persuade me or incite me to fornication, adultery, passion, or to do any other shameful acts against my God in this way. Instead, I will wait until God will give a woman to me whom I love! I will make an end with her! I will leave her to her bridegroom and family.

Luther interprets this prayer as "Christ's and the Holy Spirit's." The youth prays

17. Kohli, 69.

18. Kohli, 104.

19. WA 39/1:501.8

“that he might not enter into temptation,”²⁰ certainly an evocative example of the purgative power of the Spirit that confronts the sinner with the disjunction between his sinful inclination and God’s command. The pain of this contradiction generates in the heart a genuine desire not to sin, which occurs as a genuine desire to avoid sin in obedience to God. Of course, the sinner often fails to convert this desire into action, but the desire remains real and as a form of agency. Kohli displays concern with the inner world of affection rather than the production of good deeds or moral action. The story of the Christian youth demonstrates Luther’s introduction of “the sanctifying law” into the antinomian controversies. The sanctifying law orients the sinner to the discontinuity of his inclinations and exhorts the sinner to the good. This arises as a function of the law that occurs after justification and is different from the accusing law, which is operative before justification.²¹

Thus, the Holy Spirit possesses the capacity to recreate the will and fill “it with new affections aligned to the law.”²² The Holy Spirit enters into the personality of the Christian and empowers the Christian to attempt to resist the lingering temptation to sin. Where before the Spirit worked by imputation before justification, the Spirit now works in purgation,²³ or the daily experience of dying to sin that cannot be done by the will but rather by the operation of the Spirit in the personality of the sinner as the Spirit spurs the Christian to battle against sin.²⁴ This results in a pastorally rich recovery of prayer as the locus of the Spirit’s purgative work within the personality of the Christian.

Context

In the Spirit comes as part of a larger move to defend and examine the interaction between doctrine and experience. Other works, such as Simeon Zahl’s *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, argue for the affective aspect of Christian doctrine and the relevance of the Spirit’s affective presence in Christian experience, or what Zahl calls “the affective salience of doctrines.”²⁵ Zahl argues for the requirement of this reexamination of experience in our time as Christian doctrines become increasingly unknown or remote for an increasing number of people. Of particular criticality for theology in the legacy of Luther against the dominant theological consensus that fundamental doctrines such as justification by faith are “inherently cold and rationalistic” and legal fictions have no bearing on the contemporary experience of Christians, Zahl and Kohli defend such fundamental doctrines by

20. WA 39/1:500.16 - 501.6,9-11

21. Kohli, 111.

22. Kohli, 114.

23. Kohli, 118.

24. Kohli, 119.

25. Zahl, Simeon. *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. pg. 4.

recovering experience as a valid area for theological investigation. Both show tremendous interest in how the Christian responds to the guidance of the Spirit and approaches the law and gospel in an emotional register.²⁶

Conclusion

The author organized this book well and offers precise writing; however, one does wish that the argument might progress at a somewhat more deliberate pace instead of simply leaving the reader wanting more at times. Like the larger series to which it belongs, *In the Spirit* does not intend to read as a defense of Luther or a work of nostalgia but rather a “critical retrieval” of how Luther contributes to our understanding of human nature and how the Spirit guides the Christian after justification.²⁷ As such, Kohli has created a vital book for anyone interested in how the Lutheran tradition has influenced our understanding of theological anthropology.

As a pastor, I find this work helpful in guiding parishioners to be attuned to their experience of the Spirit. The most helpful pastoral insight from *In the Spirit* may be the positive nature of penance, grief, and sadness over sin. Our culture wants to deny, wish away, or overcome these essential experiences of Christian life, and too many of us suffer with our sin in isolation. For those of us who habitually seek to stifle or externalize supposedly negative feelings, we may take solace in the powerful good news that considering these negative experiences may be evidence of the work of the Spirit in our innermost self. This development of theological language for negative experiences may be especially useful for ministry with young people, a factor not lost on Luther, especially when realizing that Luther interestingly deploys the dramatized experience of a young person as an example of how the Spirit works through the law in the life of a Christian.

At St. James’s Episcopal Church in Jackson, we continue to work to develop and expand our Confirmation program, which has been shortened and marginalized within the life of the congregation over several decades. Recently, we convened about twenty leaders to study the Confirmation service in the *Book of Common Prayer* and the definition of Confirmation in the Catechism of the Prayer Book. The requirements for Confirmation outlined in the Catechism are that: “...those to be confirmed ... are sufficiently instructed in the Christian Faith, are penitent for their sins, and are ready to affirm their confession of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.”²⁸ We were surprised that penitence resides in such a prominent place in the requirements for Confirmation.

26. Zahl, 46.

27. Kohli, x.

28. *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), pg. 860.

That surprise does not come due to a lack of clarity in the Prayer Book tradition, which gives penitence a prominent place in public worship, daily devotion, historical documents, and the Catechism. I suspect that we are like many congregations who have forgotten this aspect of the theological inheritance shared among Lutherans and Anglicans. In our Confirmation project, we do the kind of critical retrieval that the Reconstructions series also pursues. In this case, what we try to retrieve is the role of the Spirit in nurturing penitence in Christians following justification.

While the youth of St. James's have different lives than the youth that Luther imagines, their interior life and their affections remain much the same. They exist as adolescent human beings coming into greater consciousness about themselves, the world around them, and all the factors that shape their thoughts and experience. Like the youth of Luther's imagination, they struggle with the discontinuity between their inclinations, their actions, and the people that they want to be. Candace Kohli's interpretation of Luther's role of the Spirit possesses the potential to help them develop a theological grounding for their experience and reliable language for a lifetime of penitence and, most importantly, an understanding of the Spirit's relationship to human experience to guide them toward Christ.

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Symposium—Continued

Response to the Symposium

on

*God's Most Earnest Purpose*¹

Dennis Ngien

I am grateful to the gentleness and generosity extended to the author by respondents Jonathan Sorum, Drew Christiansen, and Erik Hermann. My reflections may be summed up as follows:

Antinomy between Curse and Blessing:
Resolved by the Triune God

“God’s most earnest purpose” is, Jonathan Sorum recognizes, “that God should finally succeed in being our God” (124). Which God? The monotheistic deity or the Trinity? Sorum captures Luther’s thought: it takes the Triune God to *succeed* in being our God. The doctrine of justification is to be framed within the paradoxical distinction between law and gospel. The law serves as an agent exposing sin, curse, and wrath, the opposites of justification, in order to prepare us to be the recipients of the gospel—righteousness, blessing, and mercy. To appreciate the gravity of *how* God succeeds in winning us, one must recognize in Luther’s theology the antinomy between the curse of God’s distance from us and the blessing of God’s reconciliation with us; the former is set opposite the latter. The conquering of the antinomy comes purely from God, not us; salvation rests on the “who,” namely that God in Christ enters the opposites of justification—sin, curse, and wrath—to suffer the contraries and conquer them to constitute a people under his righteousness, blessing, and mercy. The epistemic cognition of the triumph that blessing has over curse, of mercy over wrath, gets attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit. No mortal souls could succeed in resolving the impasse between God’s love and His wrath except God, that is the Triune God. In this context, Sorum rightly notes that “a recovery of the church’s confession of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is at the heart of Luther’s reformation” (Sorum 124).

1. This symposium appeared previously in *Promissio*, volume 1, number 2 (2026), and can be accessed at <https://promissio.ilt.edu/index.php/pj/article/view/97>.

The Trinity as “a Differentiated Unity”: Pannenberg and Luther

Chapter I of my book locates Luther within the early church tradition in which the doctrine of the Trinity got upheld. Andrew Christiansen states: “In particular, Luther’s extensive corpus offers rich resources for sustained reflection on God as Trinity in ways that can be meaningfully engaged” (128). All three respondents recognized the trinitarian grammar of faith in Luther’s theological enterprise. Luther interprets the Creed in trinitarian terms, portraying the threefold self-giving of God: The Father gives Himself by creating, the Son by redeeming, and the Spirit by sanctifying. Each work is distinctive to the person rather than exclusive of that person. Where one person of the Trinity gets mentioned, the other two are included. As such, one could say the Trinity is the subject of salvation. In the tradition of Augustine, Luther affirms the unity and distinction between the immanent Trinity—God as He is in Himself—and the economic Trinity—God as He is for us. Nevertheless, there exists one God, the Triune God. However, the starting point of Luther’s theological task begins with the economic Trinity, from which the immanent Trinity gets deduced. The chief exercise of *God’s Most Earnest Purpose*, Christiansen rightly points out, “is to articulate how God relates to us—us as members of God’s creation and as sinners whom God redeems. This relation is constituted by God’s activity: God acts upon and toward us through the persons of the Trinity. The grammar of this trinitarian activity ... is given in the words of the Creed, and the logic of this trinitarian grammar ... undergirds Luther’s theology as a whole” (128). The author underscores Luther’s understanding of God’s way of being God “for us” in such a manner that draws us into the perichoretic unity of the Trinity. Through God’s trinitarian activity we are enabled to fear, trust, and love God above all else. Faith restores the responsivity to God lost in Adam’s fall, an instrumental grasping of God’s fatherly action in Christ through the efficacy of the Spirit. The gracious descent of God—from the Father through the Son in the Spirit—is the abiding presupposition of the effectual ascent to God, by the Holy Spirit through the Son to the Father. Both movements, descending and ascending, are of God’s grace.

The usage of Pannenberg’s phrase—“a differentiated unity”—as a predicate of the Trinity helps shed lights on each person’s action, yet that action does not exclude the other two. For instance, when we say the Son is the redeemer, this includes the other persons, thus making the Trinity the subject of redemption. The patristic doctrine of appropriation sits in view: that which is appropriate or distinctive to each individual person is not exclusive to that person. The word “differentiation” accentuates the distinctiveness of each person while the word “unity” accentuates the oneness of being or essence. A worthy project may deal with the reception of Luther’s trinitarian grammar of faith in Pannenberg’s trinitarian ontology, featuring how Luther’s catechetical materials may be read “*through* a Pannenbergian framework, especially in his treatment of the three articles of the Creed” (134). The authentic knowledge of God springs not from ourselves or from some external authority but solely from

God as He is towards us. Our understanding of God, shaped by our experience of the economic Trinity (Creed), must be grounded in the eternal nature of God (the immanent Trinity) to reflect His true being. The knowledge of God's external relationship with humanity corresponds to our knowledge of God's internal relationship with Himself. Luther's articulation of the Trinity proves basically economic and soteriological, thereby focusing on how the three persons of the Godhead work together *ad extra* as one God to achieve God's reconciliation with us, which we apprehend by faith.

The Christian Life:

Paradoxical Tension between Old Self and New Self

The doctrine of *ex nihilo* is the doctrine of "incongruous grace" (John Barclay's phrase). Grace does not annihilate humanity but animates it. The author appreciates Hermann's comparative but perceptive remark: "Ngien helps us observe and perhaps pine for a theology that moves from 'faith to faith'—from belief in the *truth* of divine things to the 'living, busy, active' faith that lives *truthfully*. Perhaps God creating *ex nihilo* is precisely what we need in our day of 'normal nihilism'" (139). Before God, we are not nihil; as Christiansen quotes Ngien, "We are endowed with an orientation toward God. This *Godward-ness* is constitutive of our created nature; it is not ours by merits or rewards but is God's gift of grace" (132). Out of sheer mercy, God endows his creatures with the power of turning to God, fearing, trusting, and loving God. God-wardness ontologically constitutes our creaturely status. In the innocent state, the innate life of communion and belonging to God remains a God-given reality until sin enters. God's most earnest purpose is that God may be ours and that we may be God's. God belongs to us even as we belong to Him. That belongingness, however, got severed by Adam's sin but reinstated by Christ's righteousness. This brings into sharp focus Luther's *theologia crucis*, which is a theology of "radical reversal" (Forde's phrase): Adam's fall as the movement from life to death is set opposite Christ's redemption as the movement from death to life. The language of dying and rising in Christ underscores salvation as "a discontinuity" (Daphne Hampson's phrase) with the old creature to whom we die in exchange for "the recreation" (Steven Chester's phrase) or "reconstitution" (John Barclay's phrase) of the new creature who now lives to God. The identity of true humanity is not a byproduct of human actions but Christ's redemptive action on the cross. Christ lives in us, imparting his power to us by the Spirit so that the power of nothingness—the world and all its vices—loses its grip on us. Both creation and redemption occur *ex nihilo*, purely by divine agency, not out of human agency.

The Christ whom faith grasps makes our existence anew; we are no longer enslaved by the sinful flesh but are instead enlivened by the life of God. The gospel is hidden in the paradoxical tension between the two poles: negatively, the passing away of the old self, and positively, the coming to life of the new self. Neither can the old "I" (self) predispose itself to the kingdom of God nor prepare itself for a reception of God's grace unless he is united to Christ through baptism and renewed

into Christ's life in which he now lives. The old self gets annihilated, as does the world. Both are crucified through the cross so that Christ alone remains Lord of all. We are most truly ourselves when we have Christ as Lord, and we falsify our identity when we have the world or ourselves as the lord instead. To live out of the old "I" is death while to live out of the new "I" is life. The Christian life is one of paradox: we must die by the annihilating power of the law in order to live by the animating power of the gospel. We are most crucified when our old Adam is most crucified; conversely, our old Adam is most dead when we are most edified. The cruciform life shapes the identity of the justified self where the old Adam undergoes death, and is not permitted to have free rein, and the new person undergoes resurrection and lives again in holiness and righteousness. Self-obsession or self-incurvature means we are dead to God; conversely, by dying to it, we are alive to God. The "I" of the justified self is identical to the "I" of the pristine self. Apart from human actions or merits, Christ's justifying action effects a return of the renewed "I" to Eden to partake of the eternal bliss of communion with God, the very purpose for which humanity had originally been created.

Erik Hermann rightly observes that *God's Most Earnest Purpose* favors forensic justification; however, an engagement with the monastic and mystical elements, as stressed in the works of Bernd Hamm and Volker Leppin (139), might be a way forward for the next project, as I deal with the theme of passive affectivity of an effective faith in Luther.

To sum up, in embracing that God's most earnest purpose is to be our God means to cling to God alone, declaring that He is the source of our being, the sustenance of our well-being, the quickening of our willing, the dynamic of our performance, and the power of our epistemic perception of God, thereby nurturing a piety focused not on self-fulfillment but on fearing, trusting, and loving God above all else. In all this, God remains the causative factor, the active agent of all activities. We are the passive recipients of these actions that benefit us. My book aims not only at being instructive but evocative, meant to stir up in readers a simple yet relatively doxological response, as recognized and elaborated upon in the elegant conclusion by Hermann:

In the end, *God's Most Earnest Purpose* gives us a robust experience of Luther's thought. With a second naiveté, I found myself saying, "So this is what it can look like when we believe that the God who saves me is triune, when redemption from sin and death is grace from beginning to end, and when life with God is a pouring out of the creator's love in Christ and a gathering back into communion with God and one another" (139).

Opinion outside the Theme

Taking advantage of the American anniversary being observed now, we introduce a new feature in *Promissio* for the expression of theologically informed opinion on the open questions of third order theology. Readers are invited to submit on topics of concern on the model of the following essay.

What Is Freedom?

The Declaration of Independence on its 250th Anniversary

Paul R. Hinlicky

Conundrums of American Freedom

Abundant historical and political commentary surrounds the July 4 Independence Day holiday this year in the USA, the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. By the printing of this editorial, the dust will have settled somewhat from the polemical back and forth, though the heat still radiating from it will not have abated. The American experiment in “constitutional democracy” and/or “democratic republicanism” survives under considerable strain today from growing polarization. I have often likened this to the breakdown of the post-World War I German democracy and called it “Weimarization,” as street battles between the Reds and the Browns facilitated the Nazi pitch of Adolf Hitler who declared he would bring an end to “the chaos of parliamentarianism.” There is much food for thought to be found in the German philosopher Carl Schmitt who wrote at that time about the “perpetual state of emergency,” necessitating the lawless imposition of a legal order, a paradox that he named “a permanent state of exception.” Schmitt thought that these dynamics of “political theology” would increasingly characterize 20th century politics.

Indeed, when we think back to the American Civil War, this very complaint about executive overreach was lodged against the Lincoln administration even as Lincoln’s initial purpose was to save the Union during the “state of emergency”

created by Southern secession. *Sic semper tyrannis* was not by accident the motto of rebel Virginia voiced in the assassin's triumphant cry as he jumped from the balcony of the Ford Theater, leaving behind a mortally wounded Lincoln. The mutual exchange of accusations about creeping authoritarianism in the name of saving "our democracy" shouted from both sides of our partisan divide today displays a similar dynamic. The best theological contribution at this moment would be to try to shed greater light (and emit less heat) on a persisting contradiction from the origins of the nation in the Declaration's privileging of *negative* freedom, of liberty as "freedom from," as in the Declaration's rousing brief against tyranny—an inherited conceptual problem at the root of our present polarization. Negative freedom has become a zero-sum game in which each side plays the *sic semper tyrannis* card on the other.

Interestingly, a similar diagnosis of our current malaise could be read out of the 28th article of the Augsburg Confession, which protested the tyranny that comes from the fusion of temporal (the Holy Roman Empire) and spiritual power (the Roman papacy). Lutheran confessors did not utterly separate these spiritual and temporal powers into segregated spheres but rather allowed for their jurisdictional overlap and functional interaction. This qualification importantly permits the spiritual power's civic advocacy of positive freedom, of "freedom for," even as it delimits the competence of secular power to securing negative freedoms by protecting the innocent from evildoers. This reflects the confessors' law-gospel distinction: the law can only secure negative freedom with the commandment "thou shalt not..." trespass against your neighbor. It is the gospel that spiritually enables the positive freedom of forgiven and forgiving love that is the fulfillment of the law as in Jesus's amplifications of the commandments in the Sermon on the Mount. These two words, *both* of God, in governance of the fallen and unruly creation collaborate so long as they are not confused. By contrast, an utterly secular conception of temporal power will know only "freedom from" without any sense for its ultimate purposes. In knowing only that, a radically secularized political culture cannot but succumb to the lethal syndrome of Lincoln's factionalized "house divided, which cannot stand." The axis around which contemporary American polarization turns is precisely mutually antagonistic claims of "freedom from" that divide the house.

The Lutheran Reformation, in response to the papal claim to jurisdiction over the temporal power, upheld the teaching of Romans 13—for the sake of conscience, believers are to submit to the governing authority, be it of ancient Romans, the conquering Turks, or the threatened Holy Roman Empire. But this immediately involved them in difficult considerations, if not Jesuitical casuistry, over the degree to which temporal authority is to be obeyed and subsequently concerning the right of lesser magistrates to resist manifest authoritarianism of a superior estate. Of course, any act of rebellion or insurrection must be profoundly troubling where Romans 13 is taken seriously, which seems to grant to the powers-that-be significant autonomy and uncritical deference. We shall see that this appearance is mistaken. Still, where this Scripture about the divine institution of governing authority is honored, even the vitriolic partisan contestation for political power that characterizes "our" de-

mocracy is and must be troubling. Many of my age will remember being taught that whatever disagreement we might have with an elected official, we are nevertheless to honor the office. In our vulgar culture, that kind of respect has long vanished.

However, in being taken aback by the murderous history of 20th century Europe, our contemporary disorientation in political theology is compounded by honest confrontation with Luther's overreaction to the Peasants' Revolt in Germany: he needlessly egged on the ferocious violence of the nobility in suppressing the peasants (the temporal justice of whose cause he had acknowledged and advocated to the nobility). The legacy here sits heavily upon the conscience of Lutheran theologians. Today, witnessing the breakdown of the liberal order and the postwar settlement on which it was based, many of us are on the cusp of political despair. We honestly question whether our Lutheran legacy is part of the problem rather than offering any help or solution.

Pauline Conscience and Political Liberty

Let us therefore return to the sources! A more careful look at what the apostle actually teaches in Romans 13 uncovers some nuances that have largely been neglected. In the context of this section of Romans, Paul addresses the Christian *conscience* that is bound to God and His institution of powers and authorities. One submits to the governing authority not because of any regime's claim to allegiance but because of the divine institution supervening the regime. That divine purpose alone can bind Christian conscience. The divine institution grants the power of the sword to enforce rough justice and tolerable peace upon the alienated creation fraught with destructive conflicts between human sinners contending for power. In this apocalyptic scenario, obedience to any regime is a matter of conscience responsible to God where God's purpose is for the protection of the innocent and the punishment—only—of manifest offenders.

That divine institution provides believers with a criterion for discernment. When the state violates its own divine institution, conscientious submission to it as a matter of obedience to God's purpose becomes a conscientious duty before God to resist (as Luther called for resistance when the imperial power banned his translation of the Bible) or *publicly* to disobey, even rebel, just as later Lutherans (Luther reluctantly concurring) justified the armed resistance of the Smalcald League against counterreformation aggression. Public disobedience as a matter of conscience is distinguished (although not yet justified) from private criminality by the very fact that a rationale is publicly submitted for the justice of taking up arms.

As I recently reread the Declaration of Independence, it struck me that the opening paragraph reproduces this very argument. The necessity created in the course of human history to dissolve a political relation of fealty by publicly declaring the institution of a new form of government, an action "which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle," must be explained and justified out of a "decent respect

to the opinions of mankind.” Justifying revolutionary war thus entails a conscientious public appeal to a higher authority. Has the Pauline teaching on conscience bound to divine law, as I just took it, trickled down through the centuries until this formulation of it in the Declaration of Independence?

Propagandizing the Idealist Vision

Recent historians, however, want to deflate the lofty idealism of the preamble concerning equality and rights in that it has never fully corresponded to American reality, either before, during, or after the Revolutionary War. Jefferson’s enlightenment idealism soars rhetorically in the preamble, as Joseph Ellis has written to deflate its pretensions: “crav[ing] for a world in which all behavior was voluntary and therefore all coercion unnecessary, where independence and equality never collided, where the sources of all authority were invisible because they had already been internalized.” Nonetheless, this vision of beloved community, eclipsing the actual grievances articulated in the Declaration, echoed through the centuries to play its role prodding this nation (and others!) forward; alas, like most utopianisms, however, that role has not been altogether salutary.

The Declaration’s utopian aspiration for beloved community did triple duty, masking for present purposes the hypocrisy of the American colonists who oppressed the enslaved Africans and aggressed against the indigenous Americans while at the same time raising the standard of an aspirational morality for ever greater inclusion, which became historically effective in Frederick Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. Perhaps above all, however, from our theological perspective, it *muted* crucial and specific dependence on the Protestant Christian cultural tradition for its affirmation of the Creator’s endowment of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, *muted* when it characterized the truth of this endowment as “self-evident.” Such equality and rights have been anything but self-evident in human history wherein the master-slave dynamics of superiority and inferiority have driven the human story.

Accordingly, contemporary historians want to deflate Jefferson’s overblown oratory and reframe the Declaration as ideology-cum-propaganda, i.e. the “down on the ground” sales pitch executed in the long list of grievances against the British Crown that fill up most of the Declaration. We need a historian to help us understand all these grievances; they amount to a laundry list of fact and fiction, but they can be sorted into several basic bundles.

First, they indict the Crown for creeping tyranny; second, they allege and elaborate specific crimes committed against the colonies; third, and probably most telling, so far as the Declaration is an act of propaganda whipping up support for armed rebellion, a concluding but incoherent race card is played, blaming the crown for the slave trade while accusing the crown of inciting slave rebellions within the colonies along with aggression against the colonies by the “merciless Indian savages” on the Western frontier.

Like any act of propaganda, the list of grievances was carefully edited by the Continental Congress to be persuasive in mustering support across the colonies and so also to avoid a potential split between slaveholding and abolitionist forces. Tragically in hindsight, Jefferson had composed a stinging indictment of slavery as “cruel war against human nature itself” (a critique that he could’ve lifted straight from John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*), but his sharp language was deleted by the Continental Congress *not only* because it threatened the material interests of colonial slaveholders (many of whom incidentally were well supplied and wanted the trade *ended* because a threatened surplus from continued importation from Africa would flood the market and devalue their human property) but *also* because Jefferson’s language reflected badly on the moral standing of colonial slaveholders signing on to the ballyhooed cause of liberty. As such, they mitigated his indictment while retaining his incoherent case, blaming the slave trade on King George III and at the same time accusing the King of inciting revolts against the colonists. Of course, as history would show “four score and seven years later,” deleting the language about the contradiction of slavery to liberty did not make the reality of a house divided disappear.

In any event, the argument the Declaration makes for American independence expressly concedes that “mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.” Something so grave as sundering historical bonds in a call to arms should not be undertaken for “light or transient reasons.” Nevertheless, if persistent historical experience “evinces a design to reduce [the people] under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.” This is an iteration of John Locke’s “appeal to heaven,” when there is no earthly tribunal able and available to adjudicate justice in a state of emergency.

That “appeal to heaven” precisely concluded the Declaration: “appealing to the supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions....With a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.” The birth of the nation is thus an act of covenant-making, appealing to heaven for the vindication of divinely endowed right. The echoes of the biblical tradition are unmistakable.

Historians are nevertheless right to point out that despite its unmistakable and indeed deep dependence on Christian tradition, particularly the English Protestant tradition represented in the Enlightenment by the philosophy of John Locke, the United States was *not* founded as a “Christian nation.” The deliberately Deist language appealing to Nature’s God in the Declaration was presupposed in the United States Constitution to exclude any sectarian establishment of a religion of state. Moreover, its abstract and minimalist theology has made the Declaration amenable through the centuries to many different peoples and religions. Why, Ho Chi Minh modeled the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence from the French colonial regime upon the American Declaration of Independence! Nonetheless, while it

is right to insist that the Declaration and its signatories did not intend to create a “Christian” nation-state, it is equally ahistorical to deny the profound cultural influence of Protestant Christianity. Just as the 19th century abolitionist movement was fueled culturally by the Second Great Awakening, the revolutionary movement of the 18th century was fueled by the First Great Awakening.

Does Freedom Have a Future?

Today the argument rages, however, over this complicated legacy. Those nostalgic for the medieval synthesis argue that “liberalism failed” because it created a “naked public square” where values of the common good could only be greeted with suspicion as fronts for some covert hegemony. Our rising band of cynics left and right, offended by American hypocrisy (without recognizing the “irony of American history” [Niebuhr], i.e., how hypocrisy is “the tribute vice plays to virtue”), seem to be increasingly happy to see the whole damn thing burn down. The former “main-line” WASP establishment has long abandoned its cultural role as the Christian custodian of American values while the evangelicals who have replaced them are tempted to White Christian Nationalism. That would be dangerous overreach on the precedent of the Ku Klux Klan. Nonetheless, the evangelicals have truth on their side when they point to the cultural context of Protestant Christian inspiration for the American Revolution (e.g. the revolutionary slogan in South Carolina, “We have no king but Jesus”). However, evangelicals represent, as Bonhoeffer put it, “Protestantism without Reformation;” they are in urgent need today of the sharper theological analysis of Reformation theology.

A sharper theological analysis can point to the root of our polarization in the deep self-contradiction borne by the negative notion of American freedom, e.g. the rattlesnake motto, “don’t tread on me.” This is a one-sided notion of freedom, absent any thicker account of positive goods, truly good and truly common. As such, I have observed that the right to bear arms for self-defense and the right to an abortion to eliminate an unwanted pregnancy are exactly the same civil right to assert and secure my life, liberty, and happiness against trespasses according to my sovereign desire for personal happiness. Americans are rich with such “freedom from” but poor in “freedom for,” although our better lights pointed forward to the beloved community as the purpose for which rights of negative freedom are given and preserved: “With malice towards none, with charity towards all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.” Lincoln’s appeal here to *caritas* richly drips with Christian theology even if it goes unnamed in this concluding moment of his speech. But a scriptural theology of divine governance and judgment is explicitly invoked in the foregoing to set the rhetorical stage redemptively supplying an articulation of America’s sorely needed “freedom for.”

America, free and independent among the nations of the earth, is not a Christian nation if only because no nation-state in this age can be qualified by the adjective Christian that properly modifies only the polity that is the ecclesia living under the saving Lordship of Jesus. Fractured Christianity in America has a lot of work to do in setting its own house in order before presuming to pontificate about secular political disorder. Troubled as we are, though, ours is still a national polity that Christians are able to support, thanks to the negative freedoms guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, just as we bear the promise and hope of the beloved community of God into our polarized politics, particularly against the many forces today pronouncing and even willing a death sentence upon liberty, both political and spiritual.

Christian Freedom in Support of Political Liberty

I recently discovered an instructive sermon by one Samuel Miller, a Presbyterian preacher in New York City who went on to teach at Princeton Seminary; he delivered it on the July 4 anniversary of the Declaration in 1793. The preacher rightly maintained historically “the important influence of the Christian religion in promoting political freedom” while expressly differentiating that Christian freedom is “liberty of a different kind,” namely “glorious deliverance from the power, and the ignoble chains of sin and Satan, which is affected by the Spirit of the Lord in every soul in which his special and saving influences are found.” Relying on the Spirit in this way is also deliverance from legalism that fosters self-righteousness and scapegoating rather than humility and charity. With this baseline theology established, Miller sets out to show in the sermon that the “general prevalence of real Christianity [as he had just described], in any government, has a direct and immediate tendency to promote, and to confirm therein, political liberty.”

A fundamental claim to truth Miller elaborates against the secularist temptation in the Deist theology of his day, evident in debates about the new constitution, states that “political liberty does not rest, solely, on the form of government, under which a nation may happen to live. It does not consist, altogether, in the arrangement or in the balance of power; not even in the rights and privileges which the Constitution offers to every citizen.” The force for good of such institutional mechanisms is not negligible, of course, but “human laws are too imperfect, in themselves, to secure completely this inestimable blessing. It must have its seat in the hearts and dispositions of those individuals which compose the body politic; and it is with the hearts and dispositions of men that Christianity is conversant.” Thus, Miller’s sermon aims at capturing hearts and minds for the freedom for which Christ has set us free.

Miller, as a good Calvinist, calls attention to countervailing desire, an innate “love of dominion” (Augustine’s *libido dominandi*) in fallen humanity against which he poses the Christian reminder “to those who are placed at the helm of government, to remember, that they are called to preside over equals and friends, whose best interest, and not the demands of selfishness, is to be the object of their first

and highest care.” This in turn enjoins upon every citizen the liberating duty “to reverence himself, to cherish a free and manly spirit—to think with boldness and energy—to form his principles upon fair inquiry, and to resign neither his conscience nor his person to the capricious will of men. It teaches, and it creates in the mind, a noble contempt for that abject submission to the encroachment of despotism, to which the ignorant and the unprincipled readily yield.... [But] knowing that we have a Master in heaven, to whom both rulers and those whom they govern are equally accountable,” one acknowledges no master on this earth.

The sermon lifts up the neglected nurturing of Christian culture that can foster free and independent life (e.g. “My conscience is captive to the word of God. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me”). Beloved community comes about as love’s harmonization of such free and independent lives for new forms of interdependence. Miller affirms that Christianity has its most salutary political impact by attending to the pre-political realm of culture. The truth of the Declaration is in fact not “self-evident” but must be revealed by the God who is Creator of all that is not God, so that in reality recognition of the rights of human persons may prevail universally, whether we be Greek or Jew, slave or free, married or single, Christian or not. This apocalypse of the truly human in Jesus Christ must be taught, catechized, and ingrained in the communion of the church so that in the midst of the conflicted society of Adam, the ecclesia of Christ exists as a zone of freedom, populated by the freed-thinkers of their liberating Lord. Thus, “Christianity, more powerful than human strength, and more efficacious than human law, regulates the passions, and roots out the corruptions of men” by inculcating positive freedom, the “freedom for.”

Miller accordingly concluded his sermon with a powerful attack on American slavery: “Humanity, indeed, is still left to deplore the continuance of domestic slavery, in countries blessed with Christian knowledge, and political freedom. The American patriot must heave an involuntary sigh, at the recollection, that, even in these happy and singularly favored republics, this offspring of infernal malice, and parent of human debasement, is yet suffered to reside. Alas, that we should so soon forget the principles, upon which our wonderful revolution was founded!”

What the Declaration *is* depends in large part upon what each generation takes it to mean. Miller’s sermon points American Christians in the right direction to make this meaning: we are freed from political despotism to be freed for love expressing itself socially in justice. We do not passively inherit a liberty secured once and for all by a morally *ambiguous* past, but as justified sinners whose faith is operative in love, we actively appropriate the aspiration intimated in the Declaration when we surrender neither conscience nor intellect to any other master than Christ Jesus. In the liberty for which he has set us free, we nurture a culture of people to live *both* freely *and* interdependently as indispensable preparation for the beloved community of God to come.

For Further Reading

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