Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament

A Book-by-Book Survey

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SPCK

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Introduction

What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Of the making of books commenting on biblical books there would seem to be no end. There are now more *series* of biblical commentaries than there are books in the Bible. What, then, could possibly justify adding one more item to an already well-stocked inventory? Neither the editors nor the contributors are under the illusion that a new secondary text will change the world. Nevertheless, we believe that the time is ripe for a new kind of interpretation of Scripture that combines an interest in the academic study of the Bible with a passionate commitment to making this scholarship of use to the church. And we are not alone. The "theological interpretation of the Bible" has become a growth industry of late, spawning new journals, academic conferences, and commentary series.[1]

The race to recover a compelling mode of theological interpretation recalls the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1893 when settlers rushed into virgin territory to stake a claim. That event was, in the words of an eyewitness, one of the most noteworthy events of Western civilization. At that time there was an economic depression that made finding a habitable dwelling place especially urgent. The situation at the end of the twentieth century was not so different: for two centuries, biblical interpreters had been wandering in

1. For a good overview of the challenges that continue to attend this project, as well as a typology of the various ways in which people are responding to them, see D. J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Baker, 2008).

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what Paul Ricoeur called the "desert of criticism," unable to find spiritual nourishment in speculations about likely historical backgrounds, sources of composition, or etymological footnotes. The recovery of theological interpretation of Scripture is about emerging from the desert to settle in and inhabit the promised land.

Theological interpreters want to inhabit the text, but even more they want to dig. Perhaps the better analogy, then, would be the 1848 California gold rush. News spread slowly at first, but eventually that event drew prospectors from around the world. Textual prospectors are currently mining both Scripture and tradition for theological gold: the knowledge of God. The chapters in the present work display different sorts of gold recovery; more importantly, they display the nuggets discovered in the process.[2]

What Theological Interpretation Is *Not*

As to the process itself, however, initially it is easier to say what theological interpretation of the Bible is *not* rather than what it is.

Theological interpretation of the Bible is not an imposition of a theological system or confessional grid onto the biblical text. In speaking of theological interpretation, we do not mean to encourage readers merely to read their own theologies into the text. While it may be true that exegesis without theological presuppositions is not possible, it is not part of the present volume's remit to take sides with a specific confessional or denominational tradition. (On the other hand, we do affirm the ecumenical consensus of the church down through the ages and across confessional lines that the Bible should be read as a unity and as narrative testimony to the identities and actions of God and of Jesus Christ.)

Theological interpretation is not simply what dogmatic theologians do when they use the Bible to support their respective doctrinal positions. Although so-called precritical interpretations took biblical authority seriously and sought to read for the church's edification, they may be vulnerable at three points: They may fail to take the text seriously in its historical context. They may fail to integrate the text into the theology of the OT or NT as a whole. They may be insufficiently critical or aware of their own presuppositions and standpoints (Wright).

2. It should be noted that the chapters in the present work originally appeared (in alphabetical order) in K. J. Vanhoozer et al., eds., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Baker, 2005).

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Theological interpretation of the Bible is not an imposition of a general hermeneutic or theory of interpretation onto the biblical text. Theological interpretation is also not simply a matter of imposing a *general* hermeneutic on the Bible as if the Bible could be read "like any other book." There are properly theological questions, such as the relationship of the OT and NT, that require more than what is typically offered in a general hermeneutic (Watson). Stated more strongly, there are some interpretative questions that require theological, not hermeneutical, answers: "The turn to hermeneutics as a general discipline . . . has not so much offered a resolution of older theological questions, historically considered, as it has changed the subject" (Seitz 42). There is something left for interpreters to do after reading the Bible like any other book. At the same time, we believe that certain biblical and theological themes have implications not only for biblical interpretation, but for general hermeneutics as well.

Theological interpretation of the Bible is not a form of merely historical, literary, or sociological criticism preoccupied with (respectively) the world "behind," "of," or "in front of" the biblical text. Those who seek to renew biblical interpretation will incorporate whatever is true, noble, right, admirable, and useful in the various historical, literary, and sociological approaches used to describe the world "behind" the text (e.g., in the past), the world "of" the text (e.g., its plot and literary form), or the world "in front of" the text (e.g., the way in which readers receive and react to it). Theological interpretation may not be reduced to historical or to literary or to sociopolitical criticism, but it is not less than these either. For God has been active in history, in the composition of the biblical text, and in the formation of a people to reveal and redeem. Yet each of these disciplines, though ancillary to the project of interpreting the church's Scripture, stops short of a properly theological criticism to the extent that it brackets out a consideration of divine action.

Why "Theological" Interpretation of the Bible?

The present book of essays responds to two crises precipitated by Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment developments in biblical interpretation respectively: to the modern schism between biblical studies and theology, and to the postmodern proliferation of "advocacy" approaches to reading Scripture where each interpretative community does what is right in its own eyes. The primary purpose of the present volume is to provide biblical interpreters with examples of best interpretative practice: a display

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ranging across the canon of the state of the theological interpretative art. Our hope is that this work will encourage others to recover biblical studies as a properly theological discipline.

The "ugly ditch" in modern biblical interpretation: between exegesis and theology. The critical approach to biblical interpretation that has come to dominate the modern study of the Bible, especially in the university but also in seminaries, was developed in order to protect the Bible from what was thought to be its "dogmatic captivity" to confessional and theological traditions. For some two hundred years now, Christian faith has not been thought to be either necessary or relevant in the attempt to discover "what it meant." Theology thus came to be of only marginal importance for biblical studies as practiced in university and divinity school settings. Indeed, modern biblical studies has become a virtual "theology-free zone." Even scholars who identify themselves as Christians have to check their theological convictions at the door when they enter the academy (Fowl xii–xxx).

The divide separating biblical studies and theology was nothing less than Lessing's famous "ugly ditch": the gap between reason and faith, between publicly ascertainable history on the one hand and privately valued belief on the other. The goal of biblical studies for the typical modern scholar was to understand the texts by restoring them to their original historical contexts and by reading them on their own terms, namely, as (human) products of particular times and places, cultures and societies. In this interpretative framework, the Bible tended to be studied as evidence of a historically developing "religion," as evidence of how ancient Israelites—and later, Jesus and his followers—tended to think about God, the world, and themselves. To study "religion," however, is to study human beings and human history—in contrast to "theology" as the study of God and the mighty acts of God.

The problem was not so much with modern biblical scholarship's interest in reconstructing historical contexts and the history of the text's composition. The bigger problem was its tendency to treat the biblical texts as sources for reconstructing human history and religion rather than as texts that testify to God's presence and action in history. To treat the Bible as a source—as evidence for some natural phenomenon "behind" it—is to deflect attention away from what the texts are saying (as testimony) in favor of a hypothetical reconstruction of "what actually happened." History here trumps exegesis.

Further, it is likely that modern critics are working with an overly "thin" conception of history, as a self-enclosed, linear set of temporal events whose

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causal explanation is to be found in the relation of earlier to later events in the same horizontal space-time spectrum. The Bible, however, announces events that partake of the "fulness" of time, events that are the result of divine as well as human agency, events in which the future breaks in, as it were, from above. This way of viewing the ugly ditch posits a gap between thin (reductionist) descriptions of biblical history and thick descriptions that take account of the text's own appeals to divine agency.

Interpreted theologically, the ugly ditch may be nothing less than the perceived gap between "nature" and "grace." Reason, together with its many critical children—source, form, tradition, redaction criticism, and so on—is qualified to interpret the Bible as a historical and human text. But to read the Bible as the word of God is to make a leap into the realm of "grace" that either opposes, crowns, or outflanks reason (Wolters).

The "muddy ditch" in postmodern biblical interpretation: between exegesis and ideology. The Bible-theology relation in the late modern or postmodern era is less an ugly ditch, across which it is impossible to leap, than it is a "muddy ditch"—the quagmire of history, language, tradition, and culture—out of which it is impossible ever to extricate oneself. Postmoderns typically deny that we can escape our location in history, culture, class, and gender. Our readings of the biblical text will be shaped, perhaps decisively so, by our particular location and identity. The goal of interpretation is therefore to discover "what it means to my community, to those with my interpretative interest." Postmodern readers come to Scripture with a plurality of interpretative interests, including (perhaps) the theological, though no one interest may claim more authority than another. The postmodern situation of biblical interpretation gives rise to a pluralism of interpretative approaches and hence to a legitimation crisis: Whose interpretation of the Bible counts, and why?

Biblical interpretation in postmodernity means that independent standards and universal criteria for determining which of many rival interpretations is the "right" or "true" one will be met with no little suspicion. A host of postmodern thinkers has slain the giant assumption behind much modern biblical scholarship that there can be objective, neutral, and value-free reading of biblical texts. Postmodern thinkers have charged modernity's vaunted historical-critical method with being just one more example of an ideologically motivated approach. The critical approach only pretends to be objective, neutral, and value free. Modern biblical critics are as rooted in the contingencies of history and tradition as everyone else. Indeed, biblical criticism is itself a *confessional* tradition that begins with a faith in reason's unprejudiced ability to discover truth. The question

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postmoderns raise for historical critics is whether, in exorcising the spirit of faith from biblical studies, they have not inadvertently admitted even more ideological demons into the academic house.

Whereas the temptation of historical criticism is to offer only thin descriptions of the world behind the text or of the process of the text's composition, the temptation of ideological criticism is to offer only thinly veiled echoes of one's own voice. To be distracted by what is "behind" or "before" the text, however, is to miss its message; such nontheological biblical criticism is like music criticism by the deaf and art criticism by the blind.

What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?

Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament and its companion *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament* attempt to provide models for proceeding toward a more constructive engagement with Scripture. While the authors are not working from a single methodological template, three premises undergird the approaches represented herein.

The theological interpretation of the Bible is not the exclusive property of biblical scholars but the joint responsibility of all the theological disciplines and of the whole people of God, a peculiar fruit of the communion of the saints. It was Gerhard Ebeling who once declared that church history is essentially the history of biblical interpretation. To the extent that this is so, the present crisis in biblical interpretation—the confusion not only over what the Bible means but also over how to read it—is also a crisis for the church. The study of church history can itself be a theological discipline insofar as it helps the present church to learn from previous ways of interpreting Scripture. Indeed, one reason for the increased interest in theological interpretation of the Bible is the recent rehabilitation of the reputation of the church fathers as profound exegetes. Some have even touted "the superiority of pre-critical exegesis" (Steinmetz).

Is biblical studies a theological discipline? By and large, the resounding answer, at least in the setting of the modern university, has been *Nein!* Modern biblical scholars insist that biblical studies must be autonomous in order to be critical (Barr). Yet some degree of involvement with theology seems to be inevitable, for three reasons. First, biblical scholars must have recourse to theology in order to make sense of the Bible's main subject matter, God (Jeanrond). Readings that remain on the historical, literary, or sociological levels cannot ultimately do justice to what the texts are

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actually about. Second, biblical studies needs theology (especially the latter's analysis of contemporary culture) in order to be aware of the aims, intentions, and presuppositions that readers invariably bring to the biblical text (Wright). Third, biblical studies needs theology in order to provide a sufficient reason for the academy's continued engagement with the biblical text. Only the assumption that these texts say something of unique importance can ultimately justify the depth of the exegete's engagement (Levenson).

A word about biblical theology is in order, for on the surface this discipline seems a likely candidate to mediate the divide between biblical studies and theology. However, some (e.g., Barr; Fowl) see biblical theology as one more symptom of modern biblical scholarship's assumption that it is possible neutrally and objectively to describe the religious beliefs of the biblical writers. The results of this study—"what it meant" to *them*, back then—are of more antiquarian than ecclesial interest and are offered to the academy, not the church. Yet others (e.g., Watson; Rosner) view biblical theology as an activity that is practically identical with the theological interpretation of the Bible in its concern for hearing the word of God in the church today.

If exegesis without presuppositions is impossible, and if some of these presuppositions concern the nature and activity of God, then it would appear to go without saying that biblical interpretation is always/already theological. One's view of God, for instance, will influence which biblical statements about God one considers literal and which statements one takes as figurative. The inevitability of employing theological categories, however, does not automatically license a wholesale appropriation of any one theological system. Nevertheless, readers with a theological interest, whether in the academy or the church, will at least seek to go further than describing what *others* have said or thought about God. Theological interpreters want to know, on the basis of Scripture and in light of contemporary concerns, what *we* should say and think about God.

Finally, practical theology takes part in biblical interpretation when it inquires into how the people of God should respond to the biblical texts. The way in which the church witnesses, through its language and life, is perhaps the most important form of theological interpretation of the Bible.

The theological interpretation of the Bible is characterized by a governing interest in God, the word and works of God, and by a governing intention to engage in what we might call "theological criticism." Can theological interpretation be "critical," and if so, in what sense? Historical

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and literary criticism we know, but with regard to theological criticism, we may be tempted to ask, "Who are you?"

A theological interpretation of the Bible is more likely to be critical of readers than of biblical authors or biblical texts. It is not that text criticism and other forms of criticism have no role; it is rather a matter of the ultimate aim of reading. Those who seek to interpret Scripture theologically want to hear the word of God in Scripture and hence to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:2). In this respect, it is important to note that God must not be an "afterthought" in biblical interpretation. God is not simply a function of a certain community's interpretative interest; instead, God is prior to both the community and the biblical texts themselves. A properly theological criticism will therefore seek to do justice to the priority of the living and active triune God. One way to do so is to guard against idols: images of God manufactured by the interpretative communities.

We believe that the principal interest of the Bible's authors, of the text itself, and of the original community of readers was theological: reading the Scriptures therefore meant coming to hear God's word and to know God better. Our aim therefore is not to impose yet another agenda or ideology onto the Bible, but rather to recover the Bible's original governing interest. On this view, biblical interpretation takes the form of a *confession* or acknowledgment of the work and word of God in and through Scripture.

One should not abandon scholarly tools and approaches in order to interpret the Bible theologically. On the contrary, modern and postmodern tools and methods may be usefully employed in theological interpretation to the extent that they are oriented to illumining the text rather than something that lay "behind" it (e.g., what actually happened) or "before" it (e.g., the ideological concerns of an interpretative community). At the same time, a theological vantage point calls into question the autonomy of the realm of "nature," and the autonomy of so-called critical approaches to reading the Bible, in the first place. Neither "nature" nor "knowledge" is ever religiously neutral; from the standpoint of Christian doctrine, "nature" is a divine creation, and "knowledge" is inseparable from some kind of faith. The challenge, therefore, is to employ critical methods, but not uncritically. Critical tools have a ministerial, not magisterial, function in biblical interpretation. The aim of a properly "confessional criticism" (Wolters) is to hear the word of God; theological criticism is governed by the conviction that God speaks in and through the biblical texts.

The strongest claim to be made for theological interpretation is that only such reading ultimately does justice to the subject matter of the text itself.

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Because biblical texts are ultimately concerned with the reality of God, readers must have a similar theological interest (Jeanrond). Theological *text* genres (e.g., Gospels, prophecies, apocalyptic, etc.) call for theological *reading* genres, for styles of reading that proceed from faith and yet seek theological understanding. To read the biblical texts theologically is to read the texts as they wish to be read, and as they should be read in order to do them justice.

The theological interpretation of the Bible names a broad ecclesial concern that embraces a number of academic approaches. At present, no one model of theological interpretation of the Bible holds sway in the church.[3] The contributors to the present work recognize that there is more than one way of pursuing an interest in theological criticism. Because we are only in the initial stages of recovering a distinctly theological interpretation of Scripture, it would be unwise to preempt discussion of how best to read the Bible in the church. In choosing the various contributors, the editors were careful to invite representatives of different theological backgrounds, denominations, and interpretative approaches. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern at least three distinct emphases, more complementary than contradictory, that help us begin to distinguish types of theological interpretation.

Some interpreters have an interest in divine authorship, in the God-world relation "behind" the text as it were. This first type recognizes that our doctrine of God affects the way we interpret the Scriptures, while simultaneously acknowledging that our interpretation of Scripture affects our doctrine of God. Indeed, this two-sided problematic has been designated a matter of "first theology" (Vanhoozer). The focus here is less on establishing "what actually happened" than on reading the Bible in terms of divine authorship or as divinely appropriated human discourse (Wolterstorff). Interpreting Scripture as divine discourse opens up interesting possibilities for discerning the unity among the diversity of biblical books and for relating the two Testaments. Theological assumptions about God's involvement with the production of Scripture play an important role in how interpreters take or construe the text and in how they deal with thematic developments as well as apparent historical inconsistencies.

A second group of theological interpreters focuses on the final form of the text rather than on questions of human or divine authorship. For these interpreters, it is the text as a finished literary work or narrative that serves as the prime theological witness. One discovers who God is

3. See Davis and Hays pp. 1–5 for a statement of the Princeton Scripture Project's "Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture."

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by indwelling the symbolic world of the Bible. Proponents of this second approach seek to interpret the Bible on its own terms, whether these terms be literary (e.g., narrative) or properly religious (e.g., canon). Theology is a matter of "intratextual" reading (Lindbeck) that patiently unfolds the world of the text in order to learn what God was doing in Israel and in Jesus Christ. The God-world relation as depicted in the text thus becomes the framework for understanding today's world too.

Still other interpreters of Scripture identify the theologically significant moment with the reading and reception of the Bible in the believing community today. The divine action that counts for these interpreters is the work of the Holy Spirit, which they locate as much in the present as, if not more than, in the past. What makes biblical interpretation theological is a function of the aims and interests of the community of readers for which the Bible is "Scripture" (Fowl). The focus here is on the world of the Christian community and its members, who seek to live before God and to worship faithfully. The theological interpretation of Scripture is a distinct practice *of the church,* and hence it is regulated by the goods at which that practice aims. The primary concern with the *outcome* of biblical interpretation affords an interesting vantage point from which to assess the relative contribution of various types of biblical criticism and interpretative approaches.

The Purpose of a Book-by-Book Survey

Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament and its companion *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament* are intended as resources for all readers interested in the theological interpretation of Scripture, not merely for those who advocate a particular approach. The three emphases mentioned above are by no means mutually exclusive. One purpose of these books is to heal the debilitating breach that all too often prevents biblical scholars and theologians from talking to each other, or even from using the same reference books. If these books, together with their original host, the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, accomplish the purpose for which they were originally commissioned, they should appeal to biblical scholars, theologians, pastors, and laypeople alike.

The present work may prove an indispensable resource for any serious student of the Bible who also regards it as Scripture—a word from God about God. And this leads to the second purpose: to provide a resource for scholars in other disciplines to employ as they seek to promote biblical wisdom in

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and for their own disciplinary domains. The theological interpretation of Scripture is as important for scientists and sociologists as it is for exegetes and theologians proper—for all of us need a biblically and theologically informed framework for understanding God, the world, and ourselves.

The chapters of *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament* and *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament* interpret every book of the Bible, focusing on the message rather than the historical background or process of composition that often make up the bulk of biblical commentaries. Each author was asked to discuss something of the history of interpretation, the theological message of the book, its relation to the whole canon, its unique contribution to the people of God, and to provide a brief bibliography for readers who may wish to probe further. Not all authors answered this editorial call in the same way. Some highlight special problems and/or contributions that particular books of the Bible make with regard to doctrine and theology. By and large, however, what is of special value in these pages is "canon sense" and "catholic sensibility." First, canon sense: authors are keen to discuss what each book contributes to Scripture as a whole and how its place in the canon affects its interpretation. Second, catholic sensibility: a bird's-eye view of the history of interpretation of a particular book provides a wealth of ecclesial wisdom in a nutshell.

Truth be told, our contributors are not representative of the whole width and breadth of the one true church. With some notable exceptions, they represent different shades of North American and British Protestant evangelicalism. It would therefore be interesting to read this book in conjunction with, say, the *Africa Bible Commentary* (Adeyemo).

Finally, let me repeat my initial point: the present volume is less a manifesto for a single way of interpreting the Bible theologically than it is a call to theological interpretation and a display of its best practice. Yet no single "best practice" is defined nor is one method mandated. Instead, the authors set about the various tasks of theological interpretation—tracing the history of interpretation, putting the text in canonical context, analyzing what the text says about God, reflecting on the text in light of the Rule of Faith—without saying which task is most important. Again, this is intentional; we are only at the beginning stages of recovering this complex practice. What this book presents is not a seamless garment, then, so much as a coat of many methodological colors.[4]

4. My reference to "seamless garment" alludes to M. J. Gorman's review of the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* ("A 'Seamless Garment' Approach to Biblical Interpretation?" *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1 [2007]: 117–28).

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Conclusion: Reading to Know and Love God

Of the making of books about the Book there is no end. Quite so! Yet the "end" of the present work, its most important raison d'être, is to help promote the knowledge of God, the good, and the gospel via a recovery of the practice of theological interpretation. The ultimate justification for yet another book about the Bible is its utility in helping to promote the knowledge of what God has done in Israel and in Jesus Christ for the good of the world.

The principal thrust of theological interpretation is to direct the interpreter's attention to the subject matter of Scripture—God, the acts of God in history, the gospel—rather than to a particular theological tradition or, for that matter, to some other topic (e.g., the history of the text's composition, the secular history "behind" the text, the structure of the text, etc.). These other elements are included, however, to the extent that they help the reader grow in the knowledge of God.

Theological interpretation of the Bible, we suggest, is biblical interpretation oriented to the knowledge of God. For much of their history, biblical studies, theology, and spirituality were all aspects of a single enterprise, that of knowing God (McIntosh). Knowing God is more than a merely academic exercise. On the contrary, knowing God, like theological interpretation of the Bible itself, is at once an intellectual, imaginative, and spiritual exercise. To know God as the author and subject of Scripture requires more than intellectual acknowledgment. To know God is to love and obey him, for the knowledge of God is both restorative and transformative. The saving knowledge of God results in the transformation of the reader into the likeness of Jesus Christ. In the final analysis, theological interpretation of the Bible may be less a matter of knowing God than of engaging with the living God and being known by God (Gal. 4:9).

Theological interpretation of the Bible achieves its end when readers enter into the world of the biblical texts with faith, hope, and love. When we make God's thoughts become our thoughts and God's word become our word, we begin to participate in the world of the text, in the grand drama of divine redemption. This is perhaps the ultimate aim of theological interpretation of the Bible: to know the triune God by participating in the triune life, in the triune mission to creation.[5]

5. Matthew Levering is even more succinct: "the goal of exegesis is union with God" ("Principles of Exegesis: Toward a Participatory Biblical Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 17 [2008]: 50).

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No one denomination, school of interpretation, or hermeneutical approach has a monopoly on reading the Bible for the word of God. Insights from the whole body of Christ—a body animated and guided by the Spirit of Christ—are needed if Christians are to display the mind of Jesus Christ.

In sum, the aim of this book-by-book survey is to provide the resources necessary to respond to what for Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752) was the biblical interpreter's prime directive: "Apply yourself wholly to the text; apply the text wholly to yourself." Interpreting Scripture theologically is the way to read the Bible "for a blessing" (Kierkegaard), for the sake of human flourishing, for the individual and social "good." Commentaries are not schools of sanctification, of course; yet the ultimate aim of the present work is to commend ways of reading Scripture that lead to the blessing of knowing God and of being formed unto godliness.

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1

Genesis

Gordon J. Wenham

Introduction

By its very position as the first book of the Bible, Genesis (Greek: "origin") has been the focus of more attention than most other parts of the OT. It sets the scene for the rest of Scripture and is one of the books most quoted in the NT. Genesis orients the Bible reader to study the following books with appropriate assumptions about their context and theology. Its narratives have been an inspiration to countless authors and artists. Even in today's secular West, its stories and themes are still familiar.

But familiarity is no guarantee of interpretative integrity. Texts used out of context are liable to be misunderstood and misused, so here, as elsewhere in this dictionary, the aim is to understand Genesis both as a text of its time and as a key witness in the canon of Holy Scripture.

History of Interpretation

"The early chapters of Genesis had arguably a greater influence on the development of Christian theology than did any other part of the Old Testament" (Louth xxxix). Early Christian writers, following the lead of

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the NT, drew heavily on the opening chapters of Genesis to explain the doctrines of creation and the fall. The typology of Christ as the second Adam, who triumphed where the first Adam failed, was very important in patristic theology. Vital too was the understanding of humanity created in the image of God. Though this image was marred in the fall, God's ultimate purpose was its restoration in the new creation.

Symbolism was important in early Christian interpretation of Genesis, but that is not to say that they took the stories allegorically. They were accepted as literal accounts of the origin of the cosmos, just as the patriarchal narratives that follow them were understood historically. The problems posed by modern science did not trouble Christian interpreters till the nineteenth century. The Reformers and their immediate successors continued the same essentially literal approach to Genesis, with less emphasis on the symbolic dimensions of the book. Throughout this time it was assumed that Moses was the author of Genesis.

From the seventeenth century and the dawn of the Enlightenment, however, these traditional views began to be questioned. Spinoza in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670) suggested that Ezra had compiled the Pentateuch from Mosaic materials. A landmark for the discussion of Genesis was Astruc's *Conjectures on the Memoires Used by Moses to Compile Genesis* (1753), which proposed that Genesis was compiled from several parallel sources. This idea that Genesis and the other books of the Pentateuch were composed of various sources was intensely debated throughout the nineteenth century. Thanks to the brilliant advocacy of Julius Wellhausen in *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (1878), a form of the documentary hypothesis came to be widely accepted by biblical scholars. This approach distributes Genesis into three main sources, J (Yahwist, 950 BCE), E (Elohist, 850 BCE), and P (Priestly, 500 BCE). These three sources were combined successively, so that Genesis reached its final form in the fifth century BCE, about 800 years after Moses. This entailed a quite skeptical approach to the content of Genesis. The accounts of the patriarchs do not reflect their own historical situation, "but only of the time when the stories about them arose. . . . This later age is here unconsciously projected . . . into hoar antiquity, and is reflected there like a glorified mirage" (Wellhausen 319).

While historical skepticism was battering the patriarchs, scientific discovery was undermining the traditional understanding of Gen. 1–11. Early Christian writers read these chapters more as narrative theology than as history, but nevertheless tended to assume that the chronology of Genesis was credible. But the development of geology indicated that the

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earth originated much earlier than 4004 BCE, as Archbishop Ussher had supposed in the seventeenth century. This made the interpretation of the genealogies of Gen. 5 and 11 problematic. Further discovery showed that the processes of creation had probably taken many millions of years, not six days. And Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) led many to conclude not only that the timescale of Genesis was wrong, but also that its ultimate assertion, "God created the heavens and the earth" (1:1), was misleading. Chance mutation was a sufficient explanation of the diversity of life on earth: the idea of a creator was superfluous and indeed just the superstition of a less-enlightened era.

This dismissal of Genesis and its theology as just the misguided notions of an ignorant age seemed to be confirmed by texts from ancient Nineveh of a flood story similar to Gen. 6–9. G. A. Smith deciphered and announced the Gilgamesh tablet 11 in 1872 and published it the next year. Though Smith was no skeptic, works by him and others led many to regard Gen. 1–11 as just another ancient oriental myth, with no more credibility or authority than the creation myths of any other people. The nineteenth-century intelligentsia concluded that Western science is the source of real truth.

The twentieth century was kinder to Genesis. Although for most of the century the documentary hypothesis with its late dating of the sources reigned supreme, there was a concerted attempt by scholars to find early authentic elements in these sources. Alt and Westermann argued that elements of the promises to the patriarchs went back to very early times. Scholars well-versed in archaeology and comparative Semitics (Albright; Speiser; de Vaux) found many parallels between the names and customs of Genesis and those of early-second-millennium Mesopotamia. This allowed them to argue that the stories of Genesis contain more historical information than their date of composition might have led one to expect. Though more skeptical voices (Van Seters; Thompson) have been raised in the late twentieth century, the archaeological evidence still tends to speak in support of Genesis (Millard and Wiseman).

The discovery of yet more ancient texts paralleling Gen. 1–11 (Sumerian King List, Flood Story, and the Atrahasis epic, among others) has led to the recognition that Genesis is not simply reproducing the ideas of surrounding cultures. At least at the theological level, it is contesting them fiercely (see below on "The Message of Genesis").

Finally, the last quarter of the twentieth century has witnessed many assaults on the documentary hypothesis (e.g., Whybray), so that it is now widely agreed that a better explanation of the growth of the Pentateuch

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ought to be found. Meanwhile, a vogue for final-form canonical readings has swept through biblical studies, including work on Genesis. This has bypassed much of the debate about sources and led to scholars asking about the structure and message of the books in their extant form. Though some of this work is driven more by literary concerns than by theological interest, it has often revealed some very instructive points about the theology of the book.

The Message of Genesis

Like many other books, Genesis has suffered from attempts to read its parts separately. This is most obvious among commentators who accept the documentary hypothesis. The Yahwist's (J) love of simple anthropomorphic descriptions of God is contrasted with the Priestly writer's (P) lofty transcendental approach. Whereas P tells of God speaking, in the Elohistic (E) source God tends to reveal himself in dreams. In commentators wedded to this theory of distinct sources, it is unusual to find much attempt to describe the theology of the book as a whole, to see these different emphases in polyphonic harmony as opposed to clashing dissonance.

More traditional readers of Genesis have also been guilty of directing more attention to one portion of the book than another. Christian commentators tend to devote disproportionate attention to Gen. 1–11 because of its importance in NT and later theologies. Jewish readers, on the other hand, are more interested in the stories of the patriarchs because they tell of the origins of the Jewish people and their claim to the land of Israel.

If we are to be fair to the text, however, we must be wary of privileging one part of the book over another. We should look at individual parts, but it is necessary to integrate the message of one part into the overall picture.

The Structure of Genesis

The coherence of the book is demonstrated by its carefully articulated structure. The opening creation account (1:1–2:3) is followed by ten sections, each headed by the same (*toledoth*) title: "These are the generations/descendants of" (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1; "story," 37:2 NRSV). The sections alternate between extended narratives, such as chapters 2–4 and 37–50, and terse genealogies, such as chapters 5 and 36. If extended narratives

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are compared, such as the career of Abraham (chs. 12–25) alongside that of Jacob (chs. 25–35), certain similarities emerge, suggesting a typological reading. This is particularly evident in the comparison of Adam and Noah, where the latter is clearly a second-Adam figure. Like Adam, he is the father of the whole human race; and like Adam, he sins (9:20–27).

Keywords form another device linking and unifying the book of Genesis. The terms "bless" and "blessing" are used more often in Genesis than in any other book of the Bible. At creation, God blesses birds, fish, humankind, and the Sabbath, but it is preeminently the patriarchs who are blessed. Indeed, Abraham's name contains two of the three consonants in the word "bless" (*barakh*), suggesting that he is the incarnation of blessing. A second key term in Genesis is "seed" or "offspring" (*zera'*), first used of human seed in 3:15 and then frequently in the promises to the patriarchs. The third important word is "land/earth," first occurring in 1:1 and often again in the patriarchal promises.

These keywords tie the introductory eleven chapters to the following stories about the patriarchs. They cluster thickly in 12:1–3: "bless/ing" occurs five times, "land/earth" three times, and the whole passage revolves round the promise of descendants: "a great nation." Genesis 1–11 tells of the disarray between the nations; 12:3 declares that in Abraham all the nations will find blessing. The call of Abraham is the answer to the problems of the world.

The Sections of Genesis

To grasp the message of Genesis more exactly, however, we need to examine the contribution of each section in more detail. It falls into three distinct sections:

1. First Exposition: The Hexaemeron, 1:1–2:3
2. Second Exposition: The Protohistory, 2:4–11:26
3. The Core: The Patriarchs, 11:27–50:26

The opening expositions not only give the background to the core; they also foreshadow its themes.

The Hexaemeron

The magnificent overture tells of God creating the cosmos in six days (hence the Greek title "Hexaemeron," "six days [of creation]") and gives the

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first exposition of the theology of Genesis. Its first verse, "In the beginning God," mentions not a pantheon but only one God, who takes the initiative and orders the whole of creation. Implicitly, this rules out polytheism, the general belief of antiquity.

Second, this one God is sovereign. There is no fight with competing deities, as in other creation myths. God simply speaks, and there is light, dry land appears, and fish swarm in the sea. This is a God whose word effects what is spoken. The God who spoke in creation is the God who spoke to the patriarchs and who will do what he promised them.

Third, not only is this one God almighty, but also the celestial bodies—such as the sun, moon, and stars, worshipped by much of the ancient world—are merely creatures. Indeed, the significance of the attention given to the creation of these bodies and the dry land is that they are vital for human existence.

Fourth, the Hexaemeron climaxes with the creation of human beings in the image of God. Everything builds to this point, and God himself draws the attention of the rest of creation to it by inviting the heavenly host to watch the creation of the human race: "Let us make man in our image" (1:26). Humankind is not only blessed but also encouraged to propagate: "Be fruitful and multiply" (1:28 NRSV).

Here the contrast with Babylonian thought is again evident. In the Atrahasis epic, the creation of humanity is an afterthought, to supply the gods with food; later the gods regret making humans and therefore curb human fertility. Genesis, on the contrary, sees God supplying human beings with food and encouraging their proliferation.

Finally, the Hexaemeron concludes with God resting on the seventh day, another unique feature of this account. The implication is clear: since human beings are made in God's image, they too should rest on the seventh day. The erratic patterns of ancient pagan festivals and holidays are replaced by a weekly Sabbath, on which not only God rests but also his creatures, humankind and beasts (Exod. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:14), must rest as well. The goal of creation is thus rest and peace, not ceaseless activity: this is a vision reaffirmed in Jacob's blessing (Gen. 49).

The Protohistory

The second exposition, or Protohistory (2:4–11:26), simultaneously reaffirms the ideals of Gen. 1 and explains how the present sin-dominated world emerged. The Garden of Eden was a place of harmony, where a benevolent Creator provided all humankind's needs: water, food, animals, and

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companionship. First, 1:28 urges humankind to be fruitful and multiply; then, 2:21–25 portrays the archetypal marriage, in which God creates the perfect bride and presents her to Adam. Yet in a world where humanity lacks nothing, Adam and Eve break the one injunction given to them, and their cosmos turns to chaos.

Their relationship of mutual help and companionship turns sour. The harmony between humankind and beast now becomes a deadly struggle: "He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (3:15 RSV). Since the serpent will suffer in the head and the man only in his heel, the text clearly predicts the eventual triumph of man over beast, of humankind over the power of evil; but the focus of the text is on the ongoing violence within creation. Humankind will battle not just with animals, but also with plant life while struggling to grow food rather than weeds (3:18). And the result of it all is death (3:19).

Death comes quickly in chapter 4: Cain kills Abel, and Lamech promises seventy-sevenfold vengeance on those who attack him. Fratricidal strife will characterize the families of the patriarchs too (Jacob-Esau in chs. 25–33, and Joseph in ch. 37). But the avalanche of sin continues in Gen. 3–11, culminating in God's remark that "the earth is filled with violence" (6:11, 13). This state of affairs prompts God to send the flood to wipe out all flesh, both humans and animals.

Again, this is an example of Genesis rejecting the theology of the Near East. The Gilgamesh and Atrahasis epics tell of the gods sending a flood simply because there were too many people making too much noise! In Genesis, however, sin, not pique, motivates the divine judgment. Gilgamesh portrays the gods as scared by the catastrophe they have unleashed and as quite unable to halt it; Genesis presents matters as always under God's sovereign control. When God remembered Noah, the flood started to subside (8:1).

The flood is portrayed as a great act of decreation. Not only are all living creatures destroyed, but the water also covered the earth, just as it did before God declared, "Let the dry land appear" (1:2, 9 RSV). This act of decreation is followed by an act of re-creation. Once again, the dry land appears, plants and trees are seen, and the animals and Noah leave the ark to repopulate the earth. Indeed, like Adam and Eve, Noah is told to "be fruitful and multiply" (8:17; 9:1, 7 RSV). He is the new Adam, who by his obedience and sacrifice has transformed divine wrath into mercy (8:21; cf. 6:5–6).

Unfortunately, Noah, the one perfectly righteous man, also falls (9:20–21), and his sin is compounded by his son's behavior (cf. Cain). So the world enters a downward spiral again, which culminates in another universal act of judgment at the Tower of Babel (11:1–9).

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The Patriarchs

The stories of the patriarchs (Gen. 12–50) are five times as long as the opening chapters of the book. This clearly shows where the author's interests lie: he wants to trace the origins of Israel and the twelve tribes. However, he wants to show more than that. He is putting forward the call of Abraham and his offspring as the answer to the problems of humankind set out in Gen. 3–11. The promises in 12:1–3 are more than a conglomeration of keywords such as "blessing"; they declare God's intention to deal with the effects of sin on the human race.

There are four elements to the promises in Gen. 12 and following chapters. First, a land is promised (12:1, 7; 13:14–17). Second, this land will be inhabited by numerous descendants of Abraham (12:2; 13:15–16; 17:4–6). Third, Abraham and his descendants will enjoy a special covenant relationship with God (12:3; 17:4–13). Fourth, through Abraham and his descendants all the families of the earth will be blessed (12:3; 18:18; 22:18). A close reading of all the promise passages shows how the promises develop each time they are repeated. These repetitions make the promises more detailed and specific: "a land" (12:1) becomes "this land" (12:7) and "all the land . . . forever" (13:15). Similar developments are discernible in the other elements of the promise.

The promises are so central to the message of Genesis that David Clines (29) is right in defining the theme of the Pentateuch: "the partial fulfillment—which implies the partial non-fulfillment—of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs." Nearly all the episodes in Gen. 12–50 may be related to these promises. The patriarchs gradually acquire land rights in Canaan (21:22–33; 23:1–20; 33:19). Slowly and with difficulty they have children (21:1–7; 25:21; 30:1). God's blessing is evident in his protection of the patriarchs despite their folly (12:10–20; 20:1–18; 28:1–22; 34:1–35:5). Finally, through them some foreigners are blessed (14:15–24; 20:17–18; 21:22–24; 39:3–23; 47:13–25). As Clines observes, the fulfillment of these promises within the book of Genesis is but partial: subsequent books of the Pentateuch show a yet more complete fulfillment, and it is not until the book of Joshua that the Israelites eventually acquire the land. Running through the story line is openness to the future, a mood alternating between hope and disappointment.

The promises announce God's solution to the problems painted so graphically in Gen. 3–11. They also reaffirm his original intentions for creation. Abraham, like Noah before him, is a second-Adam figure. Adam was given the Garden of Eden; Abraham is promised the land of Canaan. God told

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Adam to be fruitful and multiply; Abraham is assured that God will make his descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth (13:16) and the stars of heaven (15:5). In Eden, God walked with Adam and Eve; Abraham is told to walk before God and be perfect (3:8; 17:1; cf. 6:9). Through his obedient and faithful response to these promises, the promise is turned into a divine oath guaranteeing its ultimate fulfillment (22:16–18; cf. 50:24).

The length and detail of the patriarchal narratives show that the origin of Israel and the twelve tribes is the chief concern of Genesis. However, this analysis of the promises and their relationship to the story line shows that Israel's special relationship with God—and through that relationship their connection with land and to the nations—is even more important. It justifies Israel's claim to the land: God promised it to them, and the Canaanites forfeited their right to it through their misbehavior (Gen. 19).

However, a subsidiary theme is particularly apparent in the second half of the book. The two longest stories are about feuds between Jacob and Esau in chapters 25–33 and between Joseph and his brothers in 37–50. Fratricidal strife is also prominent in the Cain and Abel episode of the Protohistory (4:1–16). There is no resolution of the conflict in chapter 4; indeed, the situation degenerates until the whole earth is filled with violence (6:11, 13). But in the case of the later patriarchs, there are quite different endings. Both stories present moving scenes of reconciliation. Esau runs to meet Jacob and throws his arms around him. Joseph declares he has forgiven his brothers: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. . . . So do not fear; I will provide for you and for your little ones" (33:4; 50:20–21 RSV). On a number of occasions Abraham and Isaac act as peacemakers in disputes (13:8–10; 26:17–33).

In all these episodes the patriarchs are depicted as being anxious to make peace and forgive past wrongs. This goodwill shines all the more brightly when set against the unrepentant callousness of Cain and Lamech. The experience of the patriarchs, on the other hand, suggests that forgiveness and reconciliation within families and between nations is not only possible but also desirable. It is an appeal to its readers to forgive and make up with their enemies, whether they be close relatives or people of other races, for it is by so doing that the fulfillment of the promise comes that "through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed" (22:18).

Genesis in the Canon

As the first book of the Hebrew and Christian canon, Genesis inevitably occupies a most important place. It sets the tone and agenda for the rest of

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Scripture. The book sets out in clear and simple terms some of the basic affirmations of the Bible. Direct allusion and quotation from it are rare in the OT, but its ideology is pervasive. In the NT direct quotation from it is quite frequent, and its ideas are treated as even more fundamental than the law.

Within the OT canon it heads the first section, the Torah, which is often translated as "the Law." But this English term is too narrow a rendering of the Hebrew: "Instruction" would be better. The narratives of Genesis are profoundly instructive: they explain the nature of God, the role of humankind, God's ideals for human behavior, and so on. Similarly, in the following books of the Pentateuch, it is not just the laws that instruct, but also the narratives in which the laws are given.

There is a particularly close relationship between Genesis and the next four books of the canon: Genesis gives essential background information for readers of Exodus to Deuteronomy. Without Genesis the plot of Exodus to Deuteronomy would be difficult to follow. In particular, the frequent references to the patriarchs and the promises made to them would be most obscure. However, it is difficult to define the relationship between the books of the Pentateuch more decisively.

Exodus to Deuteronomy does look like a biography of Moses. Exodus 2 tells of his birth, and Deut. 34 of his death, while in between he is the most important human character in the story. But Genesis seems almost superfluous to a biography of Moses. On closer reading more connections emerge between Genesis and the following books. The promises to the patriarchs constitute the foundation of Moses' ministry (Exod. 3:6–22). Other experiences of the patriarchs foreshadow episodes in Moses' life. For instance, Abraham's expulsion from Egypt is described in terms suggesting that it was like the exodus. The patriarchal encounters with their future brides at wells prefigure Moses' meeting with his future wife (Gen. 12:20–13:3; 24:15–28; 29:1–14). These features make Genesis more than mere background to the life of Moses: they show his continuity with Israel's founding fathers.

In other ways Genesis sheds light on the teaching of the later books and complements them. Sacrifice figures quite importantly in Exodus to Deuteronomy, and in Genesis the patriarchs are depicted as offering sacrifice at various turning points in their careers. Furthermore, the sacrifices of Cain and Abel, Noah, and Isaac (Gen. 4; 8; 22) serve to teach key principles of sacrifice through narrative, just as the later books of the Law make similar points through precept. Genesis 1 teaches monotheism: the later laws insist that Israelites may worship only "the LORD." Genesis 2 sets out

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the Pentateuch's approach to relations between the sexes: passages such as Lev. 18 and 20 and Deut. 22 show how these ethical principles apply in some controversial situations.

Themes and personalities from Genesis reappear in many parts of Scripture. Psalms celebrate creation (e.g., 104), lament the sinfulness of God's people (e.g., 106), and retell the patriarchal story (e.g., 105). The same themes reappear in the prophets, who also occasionally mention the patriarchs (Isa. 41:8; Hos. 12). The whole book of Ecclesiastes is a reflection on the state of humankind after the fall, which has made death universal and inevitable (Gen. 3:19).

The NT's debt to Genesis is also huge. In defining his views on marriage, Jesus appeals to Gen. 1:27 and 2:24 (Matt. 19:5). In a similar way Paul uses Gen. 3 to explain the nature of sin and to develop his doctrine of Christ as the second Adam (Rom. 3; 5; 7). Several writers hold up Abraham as a model of faith and obedience (Rom. 4; Heb. 11:17–22; James 2:21–23). And the Bible ends with Revelation's vision of the new Jerusalem, some of whose most notable features—a river, tree of life, gold, and jewels—all hark back to the original Garden of Eden (Rev. 21:1–22:5).

Genesis and Theology

The pervasive influence of Genesis on the rest of Scripture and on early Christian theology has already been mentioned, and it can hardly be explored further here. Suffice it to say that the themes of Genesis are both fundamental and central to biblical theology. That there is but one sovereign God, who created the world and continues to rule it by his power, is apparent from Gen. 1 and is foundational to the whole of Scripture and the theologies that have sprung from it.

Also apparent in the early chapters of Genesis is God's concern for humankind. Inverting the beliefs of the ancient world that humans were designed to supply the gods with food, Genesis declares that God provides both the human and the beast with food. His concern for human well-being is also apparent in Gen. 2. This divine care for God's creatures runs through the OT and in the NT climaxes in the incarnation.

Contrasting with the immorality of ancient deities and the permissiveness of modern gods, however, the God of Genesis is stern in his moral demands. Humanity's sinfulness and particularly its violence lead to three massive acts of judgment: the flood, the scattering of the nations at Babel, and the destruction of Sodom. The rest of Scripture affirms God's moral

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character: "You are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look on wrong" (Hab. 1:13 AT). This divine intolerance of sin is at once both the hope of the world and its greatest problem. It is its hope, in that God will not permit evil ultimately to triumph. It is its greatest problem: Genesis shows that even the most righteous are liable to sin, with disastrous consequences.

Yet Genesis looks forward in hope; the promise to the patriarchs comes to its climax: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3 NRSV). The book affirms that the offspring of Abraham will ultimately bruise the serpent's head. From pre-Christian times this verse (3:15) has rightly been read messianically. The grim realism of Genesis about the present human condition is lightened by the firm hope of redemption in the future.

Finally, through its accounts of forgiveness and reconciliation in chapters 33 and 50, Genesis points the way forward for human societies. It anticipates our Lord's demand that we should forgive our enemies and demonstrate our discipleship by loving one another.

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