

Does Biblical Interpretation Have A Prayer?

“As inhabitants of the modern world, we are religious now perhaps to the extent of our desire to crack open the coffin of materialism, and to give to reality a larger, freer definition than is allowed by the militant materialists of the corporate economy and their political servants, or by the mechanical paradigm of reductive science”
(Wendall Berry, *The Burden of the Gospels*, 22-27)

There is no monopoly in the current marketplace of modes and methods for the interpretation of the Bible. The priority that historical-critical method (as a family of approaches to texts and religious history) once had in mainline Protestantism and Post Vatican II Catholicism has been broken and it is now one approach in an interpretative free market.

That is not to say that historical-critical research and its tools have disappeared from the interpretative scene, nor is it to suggest that there was ever peaceful unanimity about the right use of its plurality of modes of analysis or the background beliefs that animated its use. It is to say that other approaches have arisen and they do not carry hat in hand to the historical-critic as the arbitrator of meanings of Holy Scripture for the life of the church. Most of these approaches do employ critical tools; however, they deploy these tools under a different configuration of the aims and nature of biblical interpretation.

What I want to argue today is that many of these newer approaches to biblical interpretation for the life of the church share a common deficit with historical-critical interpretation as it is practiced by many of its exponents: they marginalize the agency of God in the task of Scripture interpretation. The doctrine of God in relation to the generation, inscripturation, canonization and interpretation of the

Bible is often left to one side in deliberations of what the Bible *is* and what it *means*.

Historical-critical, literary and social-scientific tools are very important for biblical interpretation which acknowledges the humanity of the Bible and so can make the distinction between the witness of Scripture and that to which it witnesses. The Bible is, of course, a human document of great complexity produced and shaped by Israel and the church in particular times and places and inscribed in certain literary forms.

However, the reductive materialism - that is often imported into biblical interpretation by means of analysis that is 'critical' - abstracts the Bible out of its' relationship with the God by whose Spirit Holy Scripture is generated and illumined. In other words, there is a temptation common to a variety of contemporary interpretative approaches to conceive of the Bible as nothing more than human artefact, a book like any other book. Once you apply the appropriate hermeneutical solvent, the text dissolves into natural categories, even if superlative ones like 'classic' or 'paradigm' and is thus 'explained' without theological residue.

Theologian John Webster explains the consequence of this reduction: “interpretatively, it is a ruinous, even ludicrous assumption, because it leads to the absurdity of developing sophisticated critical apparatus to read biblical texts, not as what they are (texts which address the hearer in the name of God) but simply as textual clues in the business of reconstructing the matrices from which they emerged . . .” (*Holy Scripture*, 29).

What I want to attempt in the remainder of this lecture today is three-fold:

First, I want to survey the work of three representative and influential biblical interpreters. Their work represents something of the diversity of biblical interpretative options today. James Barr, Paul Ricoeur and Hans Frei each proposed a normative biblical hermeneutic for the life of the Christian church and each has been enormously influential on the present North American landscape. I won't engage in too much critical analysis of their respective approaches (you'll have to read my book for that), I simply want to demonstrate that God's relation to the Bible and God's agency by means of the Bible are left out of meaningful account.

Second, I want briefly to articulate the positive side of this argument. I want to explore some resources that will help us to conceive of Scripture as 'Holy' Scripture in a way that features divine agency by means of the Bible and yet is neither uncritical and pietistic or interpretatively over confident.

Finally, I want to make a point about interpretative disposition. How can we characterize our disposition toward Holy Scripture as an instrument in the saving economy of God in Jesus Christ without the malaise of modernity (which is the arrogance of mastery and control) or the pathos of post-modernity (which is, according to John Milbank, it's "false humility").

1. How to Interpret a Text about God without God's Involvement

What if we orient our discussion this way? Of the options for biblical interpretation currently out there, interpreters typically orient themselves to one of three worlds.

There is the world “behind the text” – that is, the social and historical world out of which and by which texts are generated. Historical researchers, of a certain stripe, track down the meaning of a given biblical text through an excavation of the intentional world out of which that text came. Meaning is constrained by circumstances of origin, the thought world of text and writer. One important person who espoused such an approach was Oxford Professor James Barr.

Barr proposed that consideration of God's agency (revelation) with respect to the generation of the Bible ought to be bracketed out when interpreting the Bible. Such heavy theological freight would only encumber “free” and “critical” inquiry into the Bible. Working in the academy where there is freedom from “denominational prejudice” scholars discern meaning as the facts dictate and not as the church requires. Doctrines of revelation function, on his view, to insulate the Bible from examination as a human and historical product. Insofar as Barr permits a consideration of divine involvement in the generation of the Bible, he considers it descriptively confluent with human action. The generation of the Bible is portrayed under human and historical description without recourse to what Barr calls “supernatural intervention.”

Moreover, as the church listens to the Bible today in the context of proclamation, it is responsible to the academy. Barr goes so far as to claim that “the effectiveness of the Bible as a document of the believing community is related to the extent to which the study of it is shared with the academic world.” If the church wishes the

Bible to speak afresh then the church must be open to listening to the academy: that is; the conversation of biblical critics.

Please note what happens to divine agency on this account of how to interpret. First, one holds in suspension God's involvement with the generation of the Bible, for the sake of "critical" interpretation – as though criticism is inconsistent with engaged belief, and therefore that interpreters must be estranged from what they believe in order to read about what they believe. The social location of biblical interpretation is outside the church (to whom the Spirit is promised) for the sake of objectivity since in the academy there is freedom from denominational prejudice. Human action absorbs divine action completely – no account of inspiration is given in which divine and human action are related without confusing them. And finally, the ability of the Bible to speak afresh is tied up, not with God's action, but with the generative conversation between church and academy. Agency is ascribed to the interplay between prejudiced church and objective free and critical scholars.

We could spend some time challenging Barr's proposals to be sure. We might ask about the hostility of the academy to any notion of divine agency and so about Barr's optimism regarding 'objectivity' and 'dispassionate rationality.' It may be that Barr simply accepts without argument, what Charles Taylor calls, "the closed or horizontal world" of the scholarly guild, which leaves no place for the vertical or transcendent world, even rendering them inaccessible or unimaginable.

We might also ask whether biblical scholars can even have a subject matter without theological help. "Bible" after all is a theological reality – the idea that all this material belongs between the same two covers and is ordered One Testament then the next, Gospels and Epistles is a theological construct which implies a great

deal about the God who reveals and is revealed. The point I make, however, is that revelation is marginalized, prescinded from in order to interpret the Bible “critically” for the life of the people of God.

Paul Ricoeur represents an alternative to the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation. While he draws on aspects of historical-critical inquiry in his own hermeneutical musings, the drive implicit within his program is toward “the world in front of the text.” The textual ensemble that is the Bible through its inscription in writing has separated itself from the intentional world of original authors. It now proposes and projects itineraries of meaning to contemporary readers through the interplay of its various genres. Through generic friction, produced in the act of reading, the imagination is stoked with possible worlds which might be inhabited.

Ricoeur maintains that the textual ensemble that is the Bible names God, but also that no particular genre ought to be privileged or the others will be suppressed. God is named in the various kinds of literature that the Bible contains, and each ought to be heard. What is revealed in the Bible however is not so much God as possible ways of being in the world. Revelation is more the disclosure of a solicitous world and a corresponding manner in which I might dispose my own subjectivity.

In the course of his exposition of this hermeneutic program, Ricoeur unilaterally dismisses as “opaque and authoritarian” the doctrinal heritage of the church (“heavy alluvia”) and understandings of revelation as “insufflation” – “the Spirit whispering in the prophet’s ear.” God is a subject of the biblical writings, but agency in this interpretative proposal is ascribed to textual interplay. Sparks of meaning, possible worlds, imaginative variations for the ego are proposed by the

texts themselves. Options that might be inhabited are brokered by conscience in the one to whom those possible worlds are disclosed.

Once again, divine agency is marginalized. The interpretative fellowship of the saints is flanked for the sake of letting theologically unordered texts emerge in their fullness out from under the accretions of church confession. The result is that while God is implicit in the texts of the Bible as the one being named, God is no longer either the “whom” that is revealed or the “who” that reveals or speaks: revelation is “agentless.”

Again a critique of this program could and has been mounted; not least on the grounds that Ricoeur narrows inspiration to “God whispering in the prophets’ ear” and that while he says he wants to restore a concept of revelation that coheres with “the language of the community of faith” he skirts the doctrinal heritage of the church to do so. We might also want to inquire into the Pelagian tendencies of Ricoeur’s confidence in the revelatory capacity of human imagination and conscience unaided by grace. The point to be made here, however, is that the agency of God in his interpretative program almost disappears from view.

Finally, in the hermeneutic work of Hans Frei, interpreters are directed to the “world within the text.” Together with colleagues at Yale, Frei led an attempt to retrieve pre-critical hermeneutics in a post-critical mode. He understood post-modernity, and a variety of literary and social-scientific tools, as conducive to a chastened retrieval of classical Christian Christocentric readings of the Bible as Scripture.

Frei argued that the Bible as a whole was like a vast loosely structured non-fiction novel. It consists of a broad-ranging “creation to eschaton” story, the centre of

which is the Gospels- since they are the “manger in which Christ is laid.” The means whereby the two testaments are held together in one book around Christ is typology and figuration. Without losing the specificity of Old Testament persons and events in their own right (Jonah for example), Frei noted that the New Testament itself is one large literary expropriation of these same persons and events in the light of Christ (what the Reformers call the *sensus plenior*); and so Jonah in the belly of the fish for three days prefigures or is a type of Christ in the grave for three days.

What made Frei different from the naïve (just the facts please) interpreters of the past was that he didn't regard the Gospels as reporting dispassionate chronological biography of Jesus. The Gospels, while speaking truly of Jesus and his identity, were stylized accounts, history-like narrative or as he liked to put it “realistic narrative.” He distinguished “historical literal,” from “literary literal” in the gospels' depictions of Jesus. He did not say that there is no history in the Gospels; only that what moderns call “history” is not always the crucial category for understanding the way the gospels function to narrate Jesus' identity.

The really odd part of his hermeneutic program is that when asked about the oughtness of this kind of reading of the Bible, he tends to switch out of the theological idiom into literary and social scientific description. He followed literary scholar Eric Auerbach (*Mimesis*) in ascribing almost revelatory properties to realistic narrative. Grasping the meaning of the Bible with reference to the depiction of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the one risen from the dead, was a matter of following character and circumstance and grasping the literary ascriptions to Jesus offered by the evangelists. Jesus, and not everyone in general or no one is particular, is the one about whom these stories and descriptions are recorded (they are not myth).

In his later work, he shifts the ground from what the text requires to what the community embodies. He moves to the work of social scientist Clifford Geertz and talks about the “plain sense” of the Bible as the one that is “common sense” for the community for which the Bible functions religiously. Coming to understand and inhabit the Scriptural world, at times, seems more a matter of socialization than sanctification into the community that reads the Bible in a certain way. In any case, the agency of God, of the risen Christ or Holy Spirit, almost seems to collapse into a literary features or one-dimensional communal dynamics. Textual constraint and community decision stand in the place of divinity activity. As Ronald Thiemann, of Harvard Divinity School, put it in relation to the so-called Yale School: “At times talk about the text [and we might add: the community] replaces talk about God.”

2. Putting the “Holy” Back into “Holy” Scripture

On my view, one of the most interesting and promising movements regarding biblical interpretation in North America and Britain is what has been called theological hermeneutics. Journals have been founded (*Journal for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*) and a great body of literature is arising (*Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*) including more and more biblical commentary (*Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*), that puts forward the notion that theology – that is, central Christian convictions about God and God’s agency in the world – cannot be laid to one side, rendered generic or left tacit when the interpretative field is described and the Bible interpreted for the life of the Church. Biblical interpretation is theological all the way down. It turns out that we’ve been playing our game by someone else’s ‘secular’ rules.

Perhaps the post-modern recognition that there is no God's eye point, or at least that while there is, none of us have it, and that all starting points are interested starting points, has caused us to recognize that bracketing Christian profession out in order to interpret the Bible has not meant "critical objectivity" at all - other, usually agnostic convictions, about God and the world just rush in to fill the gap vacated by such hollow pretence. And while it is also recognized that there are a variety of modes for the interpretation of the Bible, the point has also been made that whether interpretative effort is oriented to source or discourse there is only one Bible. Meir Sternberg in his masterful, *The Poetics of Biblical Literature* writes,

It is not possible to speak as if there were one Bible for the historian, another for the theologian, and another for the linguist, another for the geneticist, and still another for the literary critic . . . There are not enough Bibles to go around, and even Solomon's wisdom cannot divide the only one we do possess among the various claimants. Its discourse remains indivisible for all, and so does its source. (14, 17)

Theological interpretation represents a constructive protest against the impotence of critical "history of religions" study of the Bible. And rather than satisfy themselves with polemic, many theologians and biblical scholars have begun to do theological interpretation of Holy Scripture.

A basic conviction in this enterprise has been that the Bible is related **presently** to the one about whom it witnesses. Some have given great effort to the articulation of what the Bible most properly is: *Holy Scripture*. A protest has been raised against a one dimensional understanding which dictates that what the Bible most basically is can be captured by relating it solely to the activity of human agents in their acts of constituting a cultural and religious world. Without denying that Scripture is an artefact generated and used by particular religious communities, Christian theology urges that Scripture *is* Holy Scripture: that is, related to God's

historical and continuing communicative and reconciling activity through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. What Scripture is ought to be related to an account of how it is generated and used in the saving economy of God. To quote John Webster, “In sum: the biblical text *is* Scripture; its being is defined, not simply by its membership in the class ‘texts,’ but by the fact that it is *this* text – sanctified, that is, Spirit- generated and preserved [and illumined] – in this field of action – the communicative economy of God’s merciful friendship with God’s lost creatures.” (*Holy Scripture*, 29)

Theological interpretation of the Bible is strongly influenced by recovery of interest in classical, especially patristic exegesis and early Christian “rule of faith” readings of Scripture, which functioned to support reading the Bible together in a unity. Hans Frei’s retrieval of classical Christian Christocentric and typological reading of Scripture as a single creation to end of history story has been given theological density in recent scholarship. Robert Jenson argues for example: “Time as we see it framing biblical narrative, is neither linear nor cyclical, but perhaps more like a helix, and what it spirals around is the Risen Christ.”

Moreover, Christian liturgical practice surrounding the reading of the Bible together with the confessional heritage of the church catholic have been put forward, not as unmitigated distortion or accretion through which the interpreter must penetrate to get to the real meaning of the Bible, but as aspects of the interpretative ‘communion of the saints.’ John Calvin in a letter to Simon Grynaeus makes the point that biblical study requires humility but also study within the community of brothers “in which one helps the others, corrects them, engages them in a dialogue that leads to better understanding” (CR38, 405). The communion of the saints is a means the Spirit uses to support, sanctify and form us

for and by the reading of the Bible. Theological hermeneutics is interested in “God’s use of the church’s use of the Bible” (David Kelsey).

Early Christian creedal statements, “rule of faith” formulations – which George Lindbeck argues grew up at the same time as the formation of the canon function as Coles notes on the Bible, guiding readers to get the story line right. Patristic Scholar Paul Blowers argues that the Christian contest against Gnostics was not at the level what each believed about small doctrinal matters, but a collision between metanarratives – an argument about who properly discerned the plot of Scripture and performed in accordance with it.” (“Regula Fidei,” *Pro Ecclesia*, 6/2:202) It is these texts (both testaments) read according to a Trinitarian and Christological pattern held together by typology and figuration that constitute Scriptural reading of the Bible for the life of the Church.

Critical tools are engaged in theological reading of Scripture, but so as to trace the theological pressures exerted in canon formation, which in turn help exegetes better to comprehend the final form of the text and then to follow that same trajectory as they seek to interpret the current life of the church and the world.

While various theological convictions may be held up for critical examination (reformation) in the light of exegetical work and broad construals of the Bible, it is never the case that the whole of Christian confession is laid aside in order to grasp the meaning of the text. Theological preunderstanding is often, not always but often, formed by previous readings by means of which the Holy Spirit sanctifies and illumines the imagination of readers such that they enhance scriptural interpretation.

Finally, theological hermeneutics recognizes that the conversation between Holy Scripture and reader or community is not between equals. There is a relation of

super and subordination in the reading. The Spirit not only builds up and encourages in the faith by means of Bible reading, the Spirit also accosts and breaks up sinful “status quo” in the life of the community that reads Scripture. There is the criticism of the church by means of the Bible – a certain death and resurrection pattern in the lives of Christians is ingredient to reading and hearing Scripture as the Word of God.

A Spirited Hermeneutic

Finally, what is the appropriate interpretative disposition of an interpreter who would be a listener for the Word of God in the interpretation of the Bible?

Before I launch into a couple of suggestions, let me say again that none of this means that historical, literary, philosophical and sociological investigations are unimportant to the task of Scripture interpretation. On the contrary, these investigations have been and are crucial for the churchly reading of the Scripture. Attention to grammar, syntax and the form of the best text of the Bible we can establish is attention to the means God uses in the life of the people of God. It is this text (the Bible) read this way (scripturally) among these people (the church) that God graciously employs to constitute and sustain a people for Gods’ self.

However, when and where interpretative tools and theoretically freighted approaches function to lay out the ground work for Biblical interpretation, as though the church is somehow first responsible to imperious versions of ‘reality’ shorn of God that we are obliged for Christ’s sake to resist. How on earth can the church, which is a creature of the Word, assume a world bereft of God when reading a text that witnesses to the words and works of God?

Reformed Philosopher Alvin Plantinga made the point in his Gifford Lectures, *Warranted Christian Belief*, that various forms of the practice of historical-critical

research (all of which proceed on the basis of reason alone, without employing theological assumptions or anything known by faith) are not neutral with respect to God. They are insufficiently realist, dogmatically delimiting the field of inquiry by a prior declaration regarding the realities with which the Bible is concerned and how best to account for them.

What then are some hermeneutic practices consistent with an understanding of the Bible as 'Holy' Scripture of the Church? One way of doing this under a single rubric is to talk about prayer.

Prayer, says Karl Barth, is preliminary to exegesis. "Because it is the decisive activity prayer must take precedence even of exegesis . . ." 1/II. 695. And for Barth prayer is always what the saints do in response to and for the gift of the Spirit. The same Spirit who generated these texts and the community that reads these texts makes them luminous for us. Prayer is the disposition of dependence upon and openness to the God who draws us into the saving work of Christ by means of Holy Scripture. Barth says of Holy Scripture, "It is the testimony of this revelation inspired by the Holy Spirit, and it can become luminous for us only through the same Spirit."

This is not a retreat into uncritical pietism. Rather this is both the chastening of uncritical trust in readerly competence and our mastery of meaning through technique (interpretative works righteousness) and at the same time a refusal of postmodern interpretative perspectivalism (interpretative cynicism). For as Luther said to Erasmus: "The Holy Spirit is no skeptic." The Holy Spirit is the Lord and giver of life, who awakens slumbering human listeners, redeems and sanctifies reason; that is, creates genuine acknowledgement and response to divine summons, a genuine capacity to hear and see. This is what the Reformers meant by "the

perspicuity of Scripture.” The Bible as it is caught up in the economy of God’s reconciling action in Jesus Christ is clear enough to be understood in the power of the Spirit in the fellowship of the saints. “Sometimes Aunt Jane on her knees can get more truth than the philosopher on his/her tiptoes.” (“The American Dream,” *A Knock at Midnight*, 94.) so said, Martin Luther King Jr.

Prayerful reading of the Bible implies a graced humility; that is, a willingness to relent before the witness of the text, a dying and rising with Christ if you will, in the life of the one who would hear the Word of God in the power of the Spirit. Reading the Bible as the event of God’s self-communication involves the death of mastery and of “false modesty” since both of these interpretative dispositions (the modern and post-modern) refuse to meet God within the economy of God’s reconciling action in Jesus Christ, and so are defiance of grace.

Commenting on the sources from which Calvin drew his understanding of the reading of the Bible, Wesley Kort in his *Take, Read*, notes Calvin’s appropriations from the monastic practice of *lectio divina*. It was a way of reading designed to allow biblical texts to have their maximum effect on the reader, even to be inscribed on the reader’s body. Reading he says, “Is an act of communication with God, first of all with words, concepts and images: *lectio* is inseparable from meditation, from prayer and contemplation. Reading is not reduced to communicating information; it is likened to eating and digestion. The Bible is, as one of Calvin’s favourite authors, Bernard of Clairvaux, put it, “the wine cellar of the Holy Spirit” (*spiritus santi apotheca*). By reading one receives the text with the *palatum cordis* (the palate of the heart). And because of God’s effective agency by means of the Bible, scriptural reading is “inexhaustible fecund”

“intoxicating” and the Bible can never be “discarded or dominated.” On the other hand, most academic readers, says Paul Griffiths, “are consumerist in their reading habits and are rewarded for doing so” (*Religious Reading*). Prayerful reading, which lingers to discern the life-giving “Word in the words” (Barth) is, on the other hand, non-consumerist in habit: it lingers and caresses, smells and savours the words on the page.

I conclude with a brief summation from Karl Barth:

Whatever else can and must happen,
 in the special responsibility laid upon members of the church
 for the understanding of Scripture,
at least there must always happen in it that which actually does happen in prayer:
 confession and faith,
 awestruck shrinking and
 comforted appropriation,
in which faith and appropriation are only obedience
 to the grace which always precedes
 and which will only constantly suggest
 that confession and shrinking.

And it hardly needs to be said **that**:
 it is true everywhere that the judgment
 whether all of this happens rightly
 does not belong to us,
that our freedom is only true freedom
 when the Holy Spirit intercedes for us
 to enable us to accomplish
 what out of our own resources
 we certainly cannot do (*Church Dogmatics*, 1/2: 698).

