



INTRODUCING BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

A COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK
for HEARING GOD IN SCRIPTURE

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW

B
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Dedicated to Cal and Inés Seerveld
with gratitude and hope

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Preface

As I write the preface to this work, it is Lent in the church's calendar, a time in which we prepare for the great feast of Easter. It is an appropriate time in which to finish a book on biblical hermeneutics and evocative of George Steiner's description of Holy Saturday: "But ours is the long day's journey of the Saturday. Between suffering, aloneness, unutterable waste on the one hand and the dream of liberation, of rebirth on the other."¹ Holy Saturday is, if you like, the Lent of Holy Week.

We live in that interim between the coming of the King and the final consummation of the kingdom. Final liberation is assured, yet still, so often, "ours is the long day's journey of the Saturday." Scripture is given to us for *this* journey, and thus it feels appropriate to complete this work in the middle of Lent.

In one sense this book has been years in the making. My work in hermeneutics goes back to my doctoral dissertation, "Reading Ecclesiastes," supervised by Gordon Wenham and Christopher Norris, to whom I remain deeply grateful. Some fourteen years ago I started, with generous funding and help from the British and Foreign Bible Society, the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar (SAHS). In its initial nine-year phase it published eight volumes² and provided me with an opportunity to meet and learn from many of the major biblical and theological—and other—scholars of our day. The Seminar has since published *Hearing the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2012; coedited with David Beldman), and about the same time as this book is published, so too will be another SAHS volume: *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation*, coedited with Heath Thomas. I have drawn on my years of work on biblical hermeneutics, but writing this volume has enabled me to consolidate my work, draw it all together, and develop it in many fresh and new ways.

I owe a huge debt to the Bible Society; to all those who have participated in the SAHS throughout the years; to Rosemary Hales, who faithfully

1. G. Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), 232.

2. See www.stgeorgesonline.com/centre.

administered the project; and to the University of Gloucestershire, which provided a first home for it. SAHS is now housed in the St Georges Centre for Biblical and Public Theology.³ I am glad to acknowledge the help of my research assistant: Josh Walker. Redeemer University College also graciously provided me with a grant to help in the final stages of editing.

Many friends have read chapters and helped me to develop my thinking in this area. Special thanks go to Heath Thomas, Bruce Ashford, David Beldman, Justin Orr, Alan Mittleman, Bryan Dyer, Jim Kinney, and so many others. The deficiencies that remain are entirely mine. Chapter 3 of this book emerged in part from a chapter that Michael Goheen and I wrote together, and I acknowledge his missional expertise and input.⁴

Readers should note that throughout the book more detailed discussions of issues that arise are in a smaller font. Biblical hermeneutics is a vast domain and these sections allow me to go into more detail on particular issues. The text can be read without these but my hope is that you will find these forays of interest and that they will enhance your reading of the book.

In this past year I have gotten to know some of the staff of Logos Bible Software, and I appreciate their making available to me their product, an indispensable resource in the latter stages of this project. Faithlife is an amazing company, and their product is first rate. The Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Church, based in Hamilton, made their excellent library available to me, for which I am truly grateful.

It is a pleasure once again to work with Jim Kinney and his team at Baker Academic. Their editorial process and marketing are rigorous, and one is grateful for such practice.

I am delighted to dedicate this book to my good friends Calvin and Inés Seerveld. Cal is a philosopher and aesthetician but has a long-standing interest in biblical interpretation and enjoys few things more than working away at the Hebrew and Greek text.⁵ It was while working under Oscar Cullmann on a Fulbright scholarship that Cal experienced something of an epiphany when he was locked in his living quarters translating Romans from the Greek into German! That rigor and spirit pervades his work. He is also a great guy, and Inés is a lovely, quiet, and altogether genuine person. She bakes the best muffins! Their friendship is a blessing.

3. www.stgeorgesonline.com/centre.

4. C. G. Bartholomew and M.W. Goheen, "Story and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. C. G. Bartholomew et al., SAHS (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 144–71.

5. See most recently C. Seerveld, *Biblical Studies and Wisdom for Living* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2014). See also <http://www.seerveld.com/tuppence.html>.

Abbreviations

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	2 Chron.	2 Chronicles	Dan.	Daniel
Exod.	Exodus	Ezra	Ezra	Hosea	Hosea
Lev.	Leviticus	Neh.	Nehemiah	Joel	Joel
Num.	Numbers	Esther	Esther	Amos	Amos
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Job	Job	Obad.	Obadiah
Josh.	Joshua	Ps(s).	Psalms	Jon.	Jonah
Judg.	Judges	Prov.	Proverbs	Mic.	Micah
Ruth	Ruth	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Nahum	Nahum
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Songs	Song of Songs	Hab.	Habakkuk
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Isa.	Isaiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
1 Kings	1 Kings	Jer.	Jeremiah	Hag.	Haggai
2 Kings	2 Kings	Lam.	Lamentations	Zech.	Zechariah
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles	Ezek.	Ezekiel	Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	Eph.	Ephesians	Heb.	Hebrews
Mark	Mark	Phil.	Philippians	James	James
Luke	Luke	Col.	Colossians	1 Pet.	1 Peter
John	John	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians	2 Pet.	2 Peter
Acts	Acts of the Apostles	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
Rom.	Romans	1 Tim.	1 Timothy	2 John	2 John
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	2 Tim.	2 Timothy	3 John	3 John
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Titus	Titus	Jude	Jude
Gal.	Galatians	Philem.	Philemon	Rev.	Revelation

General

AD	anno Domini, in the year of the Lord	IVP	InterVarsity Press
BC	before Christ	JEDP	hypothetical sources of the Pentateuch: Jahwist/Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, Priestly
BT	biblical theology	KJV	King James Version
BTM	Biblical Theology Movement	loc.	location/s (in an ebook)
ca.	circa, approximately	LXX	Septuagint, Greek translation of the Old Testament
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare	MT	Masoretic Text (versification for the Hebrew)
chap(s).	chapter(s)	NC	New Criticism
CTH	contemporary traditional homiletics	NIV	New International Version
d.	died	NKJV	New King James Version
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by, edition(s)	NT	New Testament
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example	OG	Old Greek
esp.	especially, page/s referenced	OT	Old Testament
ET	English translation/versification	pbk.	paperback
et al.	<i>et alii</i> , and others	PN	Patriarchal Narratives
etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , other things of this sort	rev.	revised (by)
exp.	expanded	SAHS	Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar
fl.	flourished	SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
FS	Festschrift	trans.	translated by, translator(s)
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same place (as immediately preceding)	v(v).	verse, verses
idem	the same (author as just mentioned)		
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is		

Series, Collections, and Reference Works

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antikum Judentums und des Urchristentums
ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> . Edited by A. Robertson and J. Donaldson. Buffalo: Christian Literature Co., 1885–96. http://www.ccel.org/index/title/A
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BDAG	W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, eds. <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1907

BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
BIOSCS	<i>Bulletin of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies</i>
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca sacra</i>
BTIC	B. S. Childs. <i>Biblical Theology in Crisis</i> . Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970
BTONT	B. S. Childs. <i>Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible</i> . Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993
BZAW	Beihfte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CCSG	Corpus Christianorum: Series graeca. Turnhout: Brepols, 1977–
CD	Karl Barth. <i>Church Dogmatics</i> . Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Translated by G. W. Bromiley et al. First pbk. ed. 4 vols. in 14. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004
ConBOT	Coniectanea biblica: Old Testament Series
DDC	Augustine of Hippo. <i>De doctrina christiana</i> . In <i>On Christian Teaching</i> . Translated by R. P. H. Green. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997
EJT	<i>European Journal of Theology</i>
ExpTim	<i>Expository Times</i>
FC	Fathers of the Church. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947–
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
HAR	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HB/OT	M. Saebo, ed. <i>Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation</i> . Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996–
HPE	C. Kannengiesser, ed. <i>Handbook of Patristic Exegesis</i> . 2 vols. The Bible in Ancient Christianity. Leiden: Brill, 2004. 2 vols. in 1, 2006
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>
IOTS	B. S. Childs. <i>Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture</i> . Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979
ISBE	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i> . Edited by G. W. Bromiley. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–88
ITS	<i>Indian Theological Studies</i> (Bangalore)
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSJSup	Journal for the Study of Judaism: Supplement Series
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament

KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
NAC	New American Commentary
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
PNPF ²	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> . Second Series. Edited by P. Schaff and H. Wace. Translated by W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley. Buffalo: Christian Literature Co., 1893. http://www.ccel.org/search/fulltext/post-nicene
NTPG	N. T. Wright. <i>The New Testament and the People of God</i> . Christian Origins and the Question of God 1. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992
PG	Patrologia graeca. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–66; index, 1912
PSB	<i>Princeton Seminary Bulletin</i>
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
SAHS	Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SCS	Septuagint and Cognate Studies
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
TCW	<i>Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap</i> . Bloemfontein, South Africa
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, and H.-J. Fabry. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006
TTZ	<i>Trierer theologische Zeitschrift</i>
TWOG	C. H. H. Scobie. <i>The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology</i> . Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WA	D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Weimarer Ausgabe]. Edited by J. K. F. Knaake, G. Kawerau, et al. 127 vols. Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–
WA BR	<i>Briefwechsel</i> . Correspondence
WA DB	<i>Die deutsche Bibel</i> . The German Bible and its prefaces
WA TR	<i>Tischreden</i> . Table talk
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

A decorative flourish consisting of a vertical line on the right side with several small circles and scroll-like shapes at the top and bottom. A horizontal line extends from the top scroll to the left.

PART 1

Approaching Biblical Interpretation

Craig G. Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*
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1

Biblical Interpretation *Coram Deo*

In this way I hope to be able to show most clearly to my readers that hermeneutics is no esoteric teaching but the theory of a practice.

Hans Robert Jauss¹

Introduction

It is hard to overestimate what is at stake in biblical interpretation. According to Hebrews, “in these last days he [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds” (Heb. 1:2). Similarly in 1 John we read:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1–3)

1. H. R. Jauss, *Wege des Verstehens* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1994): “Auf diese Weise hoffe ich, meinen Lesern am klarsten darlegen zu können, dass Hermeneutik keine esoterische Lehre, sondern die Theorie einer Praxis ist” (8).

If for a moment we defamiliarize ourselves with these texts, step back, and quietly reflect on them, we begin to sense the enormity of their claims:

In these last days . . . God has spoken . . . by a Son . . . through whom he created the worlds . . . what was from the beginning . . . what we have seen . . . what we have touched . . . the word of life . . . we declare to you.

If these claims are true, then their implications are huge, and they connect with our deepest needs. In *Ecclesiastes*, Qohelet observes in chapter 3 that God has put eternity in our hearts, but we cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.² We are creatures who need to know the true, grand story of which we are part, and Qohelet fingers the frustration and despair that follow when this need is not met. Hebrews and 1 John tell us, however, that it has been met.

This is truly good news, and not least for the present. We live amid turbulent times, and some in the West would have us embrace and celebrate the nihilism that postmodernism has brought in its wake. Roy Brassier in his *Nihil Unbound*, for example, asserts that

the disenchantment of the world deserves to be celebrated as an achievement of intellectual maturity, not bewailed as a debilitating impoverishment. . . . Nature is not our or anyone's "home," nor a particularly beneficent progenitor. Philosophers would do well to desist from issuing any further injunctions about the need to re-establish the meaningfulness of existence, the purposefulness of life, or mend the shattered concord between man and nature. . . . Nihilism is not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity.³

One needs to reflect on this statement in relation to the above passages. In my opinion such a shocking view is possible only amid the bloated comfort of the West, which has enjoyed some seventy years of relative peace and affluence. By comparison, the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff evokes the experience of far too many in our world: "There is a suffering humanity whose way of the cross has as many stations as that of the Lord when he suffered among us in Palestine."⁴ Boff is equally clear that it is not just humanity but the entire creation that groans amid these stations of the cross. For the poor of our world, an increasing number

2. See C. G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 166–67.

3. R. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), xi.

4. L. Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the Word: The Facts, Their Interpretation, and Their Meaning Yesterday and Today*, trans. R. R. Barr, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), ix.

of whom are found in the West, whose lives are already characterized by disenchantment, meaninglessness, and displacement, it would be absurd and evil to encourage them cheerfully to embrace nihilism as a “speculative opportunity.”

There is much darkness in our world, and Jesus, John tells us, is the light of the world. He dispels the darkness, brings healing, and helps our world find its way toward the goal of rest that God has in mind for it. It is in the Bible that we find the authoritative witness to Jesus. Indeed, the great joy of the Spirit is to use Scripture to open us up to the reality of the Lord Christ. If, as I like to think of it, Scripture is that field in which is hid the pearl of great price, then healthy biblical interpretation that keeps on excavating this pearl is vital not just for the life of the church but also for the life of the world. Thus, there is indeed much at stake in biblical interpretation.

What does healthy biblical interpretation look like?

A Trinitarian Hermeneutic

I assume—although this can no longer be taken for granted—that (Christian) biblical scholars aim to excavate “the truth” when they interpret the Bible. However, “truth” is not as simple as it may seem. It has become common to hear the view expressed that one must pursue the truth wherever it takes one. While a real openness to the evidence is indispensable, the problem with this approach is that the view of truth involved is rarely explicit and tends to presuppose a view of truth as autonomous, value-free research. Postmodernism has rightly helped us to see that such a view is a myth: all of us approach the world in particular ways and with particular foundational commitments. In my view, true progress would be made if scholars brought their foundational commitments out into the open and if the academy, including such organizations as the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, fostered a *genuine pluralism* in which different foundational commitments were allowed to come to expression so that the real, in-depth dialogue could begin.

So, what are my foundational commitments? I take it for granted that, for Christians, our understanding of the world must take as its starting point the God revealed in Scripture and articulated in the tradition. This means that any biblical hermeneutic worth its salt must be *christocentric*. One cannot take seriously the quotes from Hebrews and 1 John above and avoid this. As Karl Barth says of Jesus: “This man is the secret of heaven and earth, of the cosmos created by God.”⁵ Similarly Lesslie Newbigin asserts that Christ is the

5. K. Barth, *CD* III/1:21.

clue to the whole of creation.⁶ And as Thomas Aquinas put it, “He was also full of truth, because the human nature in Christ attained to the divine truth itself, that is, *that this man should be the divine Truth itself*. In other men we find many participated truths, insofar as the First Truth gleams back into their minds through many likenesses; but Christ is Truth itself.”⁷ However, precisely because such a hermeneutic is christocentric, it will be *trinitarian*. In Jesus’s Jewish context of monotheism, the New Testament awareness of him as “truly God” made the postcanonical development of the doctrine of the Trinity inevitable.

There are many biblical entrances into the concept of truth, but here I will follow several theologians in entering through John’s Gospel.⁸ The question of truth comes famously to the fore in Pilate’s interrogation of Jesus in John 18:28–19:16a. At stake is whether Jesus is “king of the Jews.” Jesus replies that he “came into the world to testify to the truth” and that “everyone who belongs to the truth listens to *his* voice” (18:37 altered). As Herman Ridderbos notes:

Jesus’ kingship consists in the utterly unique authority with which he represents the truth in the world. His birth and coming has no other purpose than to “bear witness” to the truth, in the absolute sense in which the Fourth Gospel continually speaks of the truth: Jesus testifies to what “he has seen and heard of the Father” (cf. 3:31–36), indeed to the truth that he himself is (14:6) and for which he answers with his life, person, and work. By speaking of himself as “witness,” Jesus—standing before the judgment seat of Pilate—is using the language of the courtroom (cf. 1 Tim. 6:13), but not as the accused testifying on his own behalf but as the one who, in the suit that God brings against the world, has come to testify against the rule of the lie and for the “truth,” that is, for God and for God’s claim on the world. In that testimony Jesus’ kingship consists.⁹

In postmodern idiom, Pilate replies, “What is truth?” Doubtless, many today, in the tradition of Nietzsche, would see Pilate as the winner of this debate. However, Jesus, by reversing his role in the interrogation and thus reframing Pilate’s

6. L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 103–15.

7. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John*, 8, 188 (Kindle edition), Kindle loc. 1576–78, with added emphasis.

8. So, e.g., B. D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–3; H. U. von Balthasar, *Theologik*, vol. 2, *Wahrheit Gottes* (Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1985), 13–23; idem, *Theologik*, vol. 3, *Der Geist der Wahrheit* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1987), 61–75; L. Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

9. H. N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 596.

court case in the context of a larger narrative,¹⁰ alerts us unequivocally to the resistance that a trinitarian view of truth affords to the relativism of so much postmodernism.¹¹ The reader of John's Gospel knows the answer to Pilate's question: Jesus himself is the answer. "Truth is not simply personal; for John truth is a person. Even this is too weak: truth is not just any person, but this human being in particular: Jesus of Nazareth, and among human beings only he. Knowing what truth is and deciding about truth, so this Gospel suggests, finally depend on becoming adequately acquainted with this person."¹² However, Jesus is not the truth all by himself but by virtue of his unique relationship with the Father (John 5:30) who sent him into the world and by his unique relationship with the Spirit whom he sends into the world (16:13–14). "So as John's Gospel and Letters depict it, 'truth' is an attribute of the triune God. Indeed, truth is in some deep sense identical with the persons of the Trinity. Apparently both saying what truth is and deciding what is true depend on identifying the triune God, and on being the subject of his community-forming action."¹³

It is this trinitarian view of God that distinguishes the Christian church from other communities. The post-Enlightenment legacy in theology was to marginalize the doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁴ The latter half of the twentieth century, however, partially in the context of the reaction to modernity signified by postmodernism, witnessed a remarkable flowering of trinitarian theology. Undoubtedly the father of this renaissance was Karl Barth,¹⁵ but major contributions were also made by Jürgen Moltmann, John Zizioulas, Colin Gunton, and many others. This renaissance is of great importance to biblical hermeneutics because "prime reality" for the Christian is the God who has come to us in Jesus, and epistemologically it is essential that a biblical hermeneutic take

10. A. Lincoln (*Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000]) examines the centrality of the lawsuit to John's Gospel; see esp. 123–38. He also comments that "Jesus' assertion to Pilate, then, puts his judge on trial regarding the truth" (129). Regarding Pilate's famous question, P. Duke (*Irony in the Fourth Gospel* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1985]) writes, "The dramatic irony of the question lies in our knowledge that the one to whom the question about truth is asked is himself the Truth" (130).

11. See B. D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*, 168–69, for a cogent defense of the view that Scripture does indeed provide us with a God's-eye view of our world.

12. *Ibid.*, 2.

13. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

14. This is esp. true of twentieth-century English theology. According to B. Hebblethwaite ("Recent British Theology," in *One God in Trinity: An Analysis of the Primary Dogma of Christianity*, ed. P. Toon and J. D. Spiceland [London: Samuel Bagster, 1980]): "The most striking feature of recent British trinitarian theology—at least where England is concerned—is the frankness with which orthodox trinitarianism is being questioned or even rejected. . . . Indeed the collapse of trinitarian theology is an inevitable consequence of the abandonment of incarnational Christology" (158).

15. See K. Barth, *CD I/1, The Doctrine of the Word of God*, chap. 2.

this prime reality as its starting point. An exciting development of our time is that a multitude of scholars have come to this view via a variety of theological traditions. Some, like Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and B. D. Marshall, have journeyed to this point via the Barthian tradition; others, like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, via the neo-Calvinist tradition; others via the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. All of this group that I am referring to have in common Marshall's point that "Christians can and should have their own ways of thinking about truth and about deciding what to believe."¹⁶

For Christians, "God" is the prime reality from which everything else is to be understood. And in Christian thought the doctrine of the Trinity specifies the meaning and reference of "God"; as such, it is the primary Christian doctrine with major epistemic significance, and not least in relation to the Bible.¹⁷ The link between the Trinity and the Bible is unavoidable:

The action whereby the Spirit induces us to love God by sharing in the mutual love of the Father and the Son is epistemically decisive: from it ultimately stems our willingness *to hold true the narratives which identify Jesus and the triune God, and to order the rest of our beliefs accordingly*. We cannot love the triune God, let alone love him with his own love, unless we hold a complex collection of beliefs which together pick out and describe the actions in time by which this God identifies himself in the world, and thereby makes his life available to our desires.¹⁸

James Barr articulates this quite clearly: "All Christian use of the Old Testament seems to depend on the belief that the one God who is the God of Israel is also the God and Father of Jesus Christ."¹⁹ Again: "All our use of the Old Testament goes back to this belief. What is said there that relates to 'God' relates to our God. Consequently that which can be known of our God is known only when we consider the Old Testament as a place in which he is known."²⁰

How then does the doctrine of the Trinity shape a biblical hermeneutic?

1. *A trinitarian hermeneutic approaches the Bible as authoritative Scripture.*

The doctrine of the Trinity commits us to the view that Scripture as a whole is authoritative in that it adequately renders Jesus Christ and thus God to us.²¹

16. B. D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*, xi.

17. I take it that the "immanent" and the "economic" Trinity are one and the same.

18. B. D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*, 209, with added emphasis.

19. J. Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of the Two Testaments*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 1982), 149.

20. *Ibid.*, 153–55; cf. C. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 4–6.

21. See K. J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 286–88.

2. *A trinitarian hermeneutic approaches the Bible as a whole as Scripture.* The Old Testament by itself is not Christian Scripture, nor is the New Testament by itself; they function as such only within *tota Scriptura*. We do not read the Old Testament truthfully unless we read it as the Old Testament, which is “fulfilled” in the New. Thus a trinitarian hermeneutic commits us to biblical theology and typology, with their quest for the inner unity of the Bible. In chapter 3 (below) I will argue for the primacy of a narrative approach to biblical theology, on the basis of which (in chap. 4) a variety of other approaches find their place.

3. *A trinitarian hermeneutic views ecclesial reception of Scripture as primary.* B. D. Marshall, quoted above, states, “Knowing what truth is and deciding about truth, so this Gospel suggests, finally depend on becoming adequately acquainted with this person.” It is above all through Scripture in the context of the ecclesia that we become acquainted with “this person.” Scripture is primarily God’s Word to God’s people, and thus communal, ecclesial reception is primary, as I will argue in chapter 2. This alerts us to the importance of tradition and the reception history of the Bible (chaps. 5–7) and also raises, as we will see, the question of the relationship between ecclesial interpretation and academic interpretation. In my view *both*, and this follows logically from the above quote, should operate out of a trinitarian hermeneutic, with the aim of academic interpretation being to deepen ecclesial reception. This envisages a healthy relationship between the two, with each potentially correcting the other, but *not* with one being committed and the other “neutral.”

4. *A trinitarian hermeneutic exalts and humbles academic interpretation.* As is true throughout the history of the church, academic work in the service of biblical interpretation is vital and indispensable, a holy endeavor. But it is not the royal route to the truth of the Bible apart from the ecclesia. I like to think of biblical scholars hunched over their desks as akin to those who worked so hard to break the Enigma code in World War II; indispensable work, but only part of a larger endeavor, and probably not the front line of the battle. Academic interpretation is a partner to ecclesial reception of the Bible, which operates at the front line of its reception. Historically such an understanding has not detracted from the best and most rigorous scholarship; rather, it has been its *raison d’être*. It has spurred scholars on to extraordinary achievements, and we need to recover such rigor and courage in our day. At its best, Christianity has produced scholars and exegetes of the caliber of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Barth, and Bonhoeffer; it is scholarship of this caliber that a trinitarian hermeneutic will embody.

5. *A trinitarian hermeneutic will attend to the discrete witness of the Testaments.* Too often a christological hermeneutic has been imposed on the Old

Testament, thus restricting its voice from being heard on its own terms.²² A trinitarian hermeneutic alerts us to the historical unfolding of God's revelation in the economy of his world and does full justice to his revelation of himself in and through the life of his elect, the ancient Near Eastern people Israel, culminating in Jesus. The emphasis on perichoresis in trinitarian doctrine similarly points in this direction as it stresses that while all three persons of the Trinity are involved in all their acts, the Father is particularly associated with creation and Israel, the Son with the fulfillment of redemption, and the Spirit with mission. In this area Barr rightly declares: "It is an illusory position to think of ourselves as in a position where the New Testament is clear, is known and accepted, and where therefore from this secure position we start out to explore the much more doubtful and dangerous territory of the Old Testament. . . . Insofar as a position is Christian it is related to the Old Testament from the beginning."²³

As Brevard Childs therefore observes, a trinitarian hermeneutic will attend to what he calls the discrete witness of the Testaments.²⁴ God's revelation of himself in the life of Israel, an ancient Near Eastern nation, will be taken with full seriousness, and all critical tools will be brought to bear in articulating this witness. Critical tools are, however, never neutral, and their underpinnings may require reconfiguration in relation to the epistemic priority of the Trinity; yet the historical dimension of Israel's life and Jesus's life will be open to rigorous scrutiny.

Does this mean that Christians should read the Old Testament with no sense of the further acts in the story? This is simply not possible, but it does mean that we should be sensitive to the "otherness" of the Old Testament where it does not fit easily with our New Testament sensibilities. Vanhoozer states: "Of all the canonical dialogues, perhaps the most important is that between the Old and New Testaments. Bakhtin rightly cautions us against thinking of dialogue as the merging of two or more voices into one. . . . In a genuine dialogue, each voice retains its integrity, yet each is also mutually enriched."²⁵ "Dialogue" is, however, a limited metaphor for the relationship

22. On this issue, see C. R. Seitz, "Christological Interpretation of Texts and Trinitarian Claims to Truth," *SJT* 52 (1999): 209–26; and F. Watson, "The Old Testament as Christian Scripture: A Response to Professor Seitz," *SJT* 52 (1999): 227–32.

23. Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation*, 153–55.

24. B. S. Childs, *BTONT* 95–118; see also idem, "The Nature of the Christian Bible: One Book, Two Testaments," in *The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon and Creed in a Critical Age*, ed. E. Radner and G. Sumner (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1998), 115–26.

25. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 290–91. B. S. Childs ("On Reclaiming the Bible for Christian Theology," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jensen [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995], 1–19) also makes use of the metaphor of dialogue: "The

between the Testaments because the doctrine of the Trinity implies that in the canon of Scripture (the subject of chap. 8) God speaks with one voice, not two. But Vanhoozer's point is well taken: a trinitarian hermeneutic will listen to the Old Testament on its own terms, trusting that the voice of the Father will be found to be in concord with that of the Son and of the Spirit. McCann's work on the Psalter is an excellent example of this sort of hermeneutic in practice.²⁶

The notion of reconfiguring critical approaches (referred to above) is important. Methods are never philosophically and theologically neutral, and we should avoid uncritically importing methods of interpretation that at root are in epistemological conflict with the epistemic primacy of the Trinity.²⁷ Thus Tom Wright, for example, in his *The New Testament and the People of God*, notes that we need a more Jewish and less Greek form criticism for the Gospels.²⁸ The bifurcation between biblical studies and theology has often meant that methods are regularly applied to the Bible with the built-in assumption that God can neither act nor speak; clearly this sort of emphasis is ruled out by a trinitarian hermeneutic.

This is not to suggest that a trinitarian hermeneutic provides an easy option out of the many issues that historical criticism, literary analysis, and postmodern interpretation have raised in relation to the Bible. At their best all these approaches involve *very* close readings of the Bible, and the data they point to cannot and should not be ignored. But data is never neutral: it always comes within a particular framework or paradigm so that, as philosophers of science have declared, all theory is underdetermined. A trinitarian hermeneutic should not avoid any of these issues, but as Stephen Neill noted of a theology of history in relation to New Testament interpretation, it provides the appropriate ring within which solutions may and should be found.²⁹

Chapter 10 deals with biblical interpretation and history, and chapters 11–12 with literature and theology. Chapter 9 deals with philosophy and biblical interpretation. A distinctive of this volume is its insistence that theology and

dialogical move of theological reflection that is being suggested traverses the partial and fragmentary grasp of reality found in both Testaments to the full reality that the church confesses to have found in Jesus Christ" (15).

26. J. C. McCann Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

27. See C. G. Bartholomew, "Uncharted Waters: Philosophy, Theology, and the Crisis in Biblical Interpretation," in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, ed. C. G. Bartholomew, C. Greene, and K. Möller, SAHS 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 1–39.

28. N. T. Wright, *NTPG* 427.

29. S. Neill and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 366.

philosophy cannot be bracketed out of biblical interpretation. As I hope to show, such bracketing simply leaves unnamed theologies and philosophies to shape one's scholarship unconsciously. As the quote from Jauss at the outset of this chapter indicates, properly understood hermeneutics is no esoteric teaching but the theory of a practice. Done well, hermeneutics deepens and enriches our practice of engagement with the Bible as Scripture.

6. *A trinitarian hermeneutic rightly discerns the goal of reading the Bible.* So much academic exegesis falls short of what *must* be the goal of a trinitarian hermeneutic: obedient attention to God's address through his Word. From a trinitarian perspective any hermeneutic that fails to make this its goal is woefully inadequate. Athanasius makes the point that God is not incommunicative; he is always speaking!³⁰ The Trinity reveals God to us as the living and true God: "God is fullness of being: 'ocean of essence.'"³¹ And as Charles Wood rightly states, "To read the Bible, at least if one is properly prepared and disposed toward the task, is, on this view, to be addressed by God."³² This is not for a moment to shortchange the rigor of biblical scholarship, but it does position all the hard work within the trajectory between an initial receptive listening and a final receptive listening. In chapter 2 I discuss ecclesial reception and *lectio divina*. The final chapter (15) is about preaching the Bible. Such an academic trinitarian hermeneutic begins with, proceeds with, and is consummated in communion: "To fall in love with this God, to be drawn into the love of this Father and this Son for one another, seems an outcome which only their Spirit can bring about."³³ Thus prayer and being present to God should accompany the hermeneutical process, both academic and ecclesial, from beginning to end and back again. It is the Spirit who leads ordinary Christian readers *as well as* the academic into the truth of Scripture.³⁴ Trinitarian biblical interpretation will proceed from him, through him, and to him.

30. H. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. W. Hendriksen (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978), 282.

31. *Ibid.*, 330.

32. C. M. Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding: Theological Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 39.

33. B. D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*, 208.

34. B. D. Marshall (*ibid.*, 180–216) and J. B. Webster (*Word and Church: Essays in Church Dogmatics* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001], 80) both notice the sinful resistance to approaching Scripture as God's address. Webster writes, "Crucially, this means that to read Scripture well is to undergo a chastening of the will, even, perhaps, 'the death of the subject and of the will.' Anything less would fail to take seriously the eschatological character of Christian life and therefore of Christian reading" (*Word and Church*, 80). For analyses of the role of the Spirit in interpretation, see B. D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*, 180–216; and K. J. Vanhoozer, "The Spirit of Understanding: Special Revelation and General Hermeneutics," in *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective*, ed. R. Lundin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

As Jean Vanier poignantly expresses it,

At one moment in time
the “Logos”
became flesh
and entered history.
He came to lead us all
into this communion,
which is the very life of God.³⁵

A trinitarian hermeneutic will therefore always have as its goal to hear God’s address, to facilitate communion. This is not to deny the cognitive, propositional element in God’s communication but instead to insist that “an important aspect of truth gets lost when testimony is ‘objectified.’ Simply to preserve the content is to catch only half the sacred fish.”³⁶ As Magrassi explains, “The passage that leads to the understanding of Scripture leads to life in Christ. When the Scriptures are opened, he admits us to his private domain. Every deeper reading of the text is a movement toward him. The essential task of exegesis . . . is to apply everything to the mystery of Christ. . . . He is the one center where all the lines of the biblical universe meet.”³⁷

7. *A trinitarian hermeneutic does not close down but opens up interpretation of the Bible.* A trinitarian hermeneutic is one among many approaches to the Bible in our increasingly pluralistic academy. However, we should not take this to imply that from a Christian perspective one approach is as valid as another, so that a trinitarian hermeneutic is simply a matter of personal preference. From a Christian perspective a trinitarian hermeneutic is the right and truthful way to read Scripture, the way that will yield a truthful understanding of the Bible.

But this way is spacious and fecund and creates room for a variety of genuinely theological readings of the Bible. As Seitz says,

Concern with the figural linguistic world of Scripture did not mean single-meaning exegesis! No one reading Justin, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, the Antiochenes, or Athanasius should expect anything like uniformity, yet all of them,

1997). H. de Lubac (*Scripture in the Tradition* [New York: Crossroad, 2000]) asserts, “Just as he is the exegesis of Scripture, Jesus Christ is also its exegete. . . . It is he and he alone who explains it to us, and in explaining it to us he is himself explained” (106–7).

35. J. Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004), 17.

36. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 288.

37. M. Magrassi, *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*, trans. E. Hagman (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 44.

including Origen, bear a decided family resemblance. The dynamic character of scripture in its two-testament form does not allow for propositional or technical flattening, given that this witness is received in faith, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, disciplined by prayer, eucharistic fellowship, and the teaching of the church in its baptismal interrogatories and creedal affirmations.³⁸

Similarly Thiselton declares, “The inexhaustible, multilayered, multifunctional polyphony of biblical texts transcends repeatedly any single way of saying it; but this does not, need not, and should not invite the disastrous hospitality to radical pluralism that brings anarchy.”³⁹ A trinitarian hermeneutic is radical in that it does exclude certain readings of the Old Testament: Seitz notes how a trinitarian hermeneutic opposes the “historicism” rampant in contemporary Old Testament studies;⁴⁰ Achtemeier shows how a theological hermeneutic is incompatible with the “developmentalism” of so much Old Testament study;⁴¹ and we have noticed above how a trinitarian hermeneutics resists any theological move that disengages with Scripture as Scripture. Having said this, a trinitarian hermeneutic invites us to the feast of Scripture with its endless possibility of theological interpretation. In chapter 14 we will focus on the Epistle to the Hebrews as an example of such interpretation. As Neuhaus comments in his foreword to Oden’s *Requiem*,

Origen, Irenaeus, Cyril of Alexandria, Thomas Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley—the names fall trippingly from Oden’s tongue like a gourmet surveying a most spectacular table. Here are arguments [and we would say interpretations of the Bible] you can sink your teeth into, conceptual flights of intoxicating complexity, and truths to die for. Far from the table, over there, *way* over there, is American theological education, where prodigal academics feed starving students on the dry husks of their clever unbelief.⁴²

8. *A trinitarian hermeneutic takes God’s address for all of life seriously.* It is astonishing how much content of the Old Testament is filtered out by commentators or simply overlooked. Take politics, for example: the Old Testament is jam-packed with political content, but commentators rarely engage

38. Seitz, *Figured Out*, 8–9.

39. A. C. Thiselton, “Communicative Action and Promise in Interdisciplinary, Biblical, and Theological Hermeneutics,” in *The Promise of Hermeneutics*, by R. Lundin, C. Walhout, and A. C. Thiselton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 138.

40. Seitz, *Figured Out*, 82–86.

41. E. Achtemeier, “The Canon as the Voice of the Living God,” in Braaten and Jenson, *Reclaiming the Bible*, 123–24.

42. R. Neuhaus, “Foreword,” in *Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements*, by T. C. Oden (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 10.

this in depth.⁴³ Acts (3:15) describes Jesus as the “Author of life”! With Jesus as the creator-redeemer, we would expect a trinitarian hermeneutic to open our eyes to find God addressing the whole of life as he has made it. Bavinck explains that

the thoughtful person places the doctrine of the Trinity in the very center of the full-orbed life of nature and mankind. The confession of the Christian is not an island in mid-ocean but a mountain-top overlooking the entire creation. And it is the task of the Christian theologian to set forth clearly the great significance of God’s revelation for (and the relation of that revelation to) the whole realm of existence. The mind of the Christian is not satisfied until every form of existence has been referred to the Triune God and until the confession of the Trinity has received the place of prominence in our thought and life.⁴⁴

Trinitarian interpretation will take with the utmost seriousness what John Stott has called double listening: one ear to the Scripture, and the other to our cultures, with a view to discerning God’s address to all of life today.⁴⁵ This is not nearly as common as it should be among Christian commentators. In this volume we attend to this issue in chapter 13, on the ecology of Christian scholarship and the role of the Bible in such work.

Conclusion

Isaiah 55 is an extraordinary chapter, ranging from an invitation to a feast, to the Davidic king and the nations, the transcendence of Yahweh, the word that goes out from Yahweh’s mouth, and going forth with joy. How does one answer the invitation to this feast? Isaiah 55:2–3 provides the answer: “Listen carefully to me. . . . Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.” It is as biblical hermeneutics inhabits the trajectory *from* listening to listening that it finds its place and is enabled to flourish. Thus Jean-Louis Chrétien poignantly testifies in his engagement with Augustine’s *Sermon* 288, on John the Baptist:

43. O. O’Donovan in *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) is exemplary in this respect.

44. Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 329. On a trinitarian worldview, see B. D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*, chap. 5. B. D. Marshall states, “Believing the gospel (that is, the narratives which identify Jesus and the triune God), therefore, necessarily commits believers to a comprehensive view of the world centered epistemically on the gospel narrative itself. On such a view there will be no region of belief and practice which can isolate itself from the epistemic reach of the gospel” (118).

45. J. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 29.

The voice cries out in truth when it lifts itself incandescently towards its own silence, so that “the voice of the Bridegroom” may be heard. Its ultimate joy, its perfect and plenary fulfillment, which is therefore to fail and be broken, is to fall silent in order to listen, after having invited others to be silent and listen, after having resounded and thrown the flames of its cry only for the sake of silence’s excess over the cry. “Voices fade away in proportion as the Word increases,” adds Saint Augustine.⁴⁶

46. J.-L. Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. A. A. Davenport (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2004), 64.