

Hermeneutics as Apprenticeship



How the Bible Shapes Our Interpretive
Habits and Practices

DAVID I. STARLING



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For my family,
who first taught me to read,
and to read the Bible.

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Foreword

Dr. David Starling's fine book on evangelical hermeneutics makes a distinctive and creative contribution to current debates about how to interpret Scripture. While recognizing that Holy Scripture is a weighty, complex and multilayered unity, Dr. Starling presents a series of fourteen case studies in "inner-biblical hermeneutics" from a range of books in both the Old and New Testaments. His aim is to provide an introduction for learning the art of scriptural interpretation from the biblical writers themselves.

Instead of attempting to integrate the contents of Scripture overall or unlock all its mysteries, he focuses on one aspect of the interpretive work done by each of these biblical authors and relates it to a theological or ethical issue that has been confronted by Christians from previous centuries up to the present. This gaining of "hermeneutical wisdom" means receiving the biblical writings as Holy Scripture and knowing how to appropriate their words within our own situation.

Dr. Starling's presentation takes into account the literary, historical, and theological contexts the biblical authors address. His work is based on thorough exegesis within a salvation-historical and biblical theological framework. At the same time his chapters judiciously address the wider interpretive questions that systematicians rightly ask of the text. The answers that emerge are refreshing and challenging, whether one is learning the hermeneutics of delight from the Psalter, studying Job and the limits of wisdom, knowing Jesus as the truth from John's Gospel, interpreting allegory in relation to Paul's letter to the Galatians, or seeking to grasp the significance of empire that is integral to 1 Peter.

This important book wrestles with a wide range of interpretive issues that students of exegesis, biblical theology, and systematics have often raised. Its author is well qualified to address these interlocking, though often regarded as unconnected, fields. All can profit immensely from the “inner-biblical hermeneutics” that emerge from Dr. Starling’s insightful research. Strongly recommended.

Peter T. O’Brien,
Emeritus Faculty Member,
formerly Senior Research Fellow in New Testament,
Moore College, Sydney, Australia

Preface

This book could not have been written without the generous help and encouragement of many. Much of its content was written during a period of study leave that I was granted in the first half of 2013, which I spent at Tyndale House in Cambridge. I am most grateful to the friends and fellow researchers with whom I worked while I was there; to the trustees of the Morling Foundation, whose generosity made that visit possible; to my colleagues at Morling College who covered for me during the six months of my absence; and to my wife, Nicole, and our four children, who accompanied and supported me through all the upheavals of that delightful adventure. Other portions of this book had their genesis as papers presented at various meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, the Evangelical Theological Society, the Tyndale Fellowship, and the Trinity Symposium in Perth; my thanks are due to the University of Divinity, the Australian College of Theology, and the Morling Foundation for the part they played in enabling my participation in those conferences.

Earlier versions of chapters 3, 10, 11, and 13 of this book were previously published in the following places:

“Full and Empty Readers: Ruth and the Hermeneutics of Virtue.” *BiblInt* 24 (2016): 17–26.

“Nothing beyond What Is Written”? First Corinthians and the Hermeneutics of Early Christian *Theologia*.” *JTI* 8 (2014): 45–62.

“Justifying Allegory: Scripture, Rhetoric and Reason in Gal. 4:21–5:1.” *JTI* 9 (2015): 69–87.

“‘She Who Is in Babylon’: 1 Peter and the Hermeneutics of Empire.” In *Reactions to Empire: Sacred Texts in Their Socio-Political Contexts*, edited by John Anthony Dunne and Dan Batovici, 111–28. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014.

They are included in this volume with substantial revisions and with the kind permission of the original publishers.

No work of scholarship is ever an entirely solo enterprise. In my case, I am deeply indebted to the friends and colleagues at Morling College (particularly Andrew Sloane, Anthony Petterson, Edwina Murphy, and Tim MacBride) who read portions of this book and offered feedback and encouragement along the way that was immensely helpful in the shaping and refining of my own thoughts. In the earliest stages of the project, I received indispensable help and encouragement from colleagues and mentors further afield, including Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock, Stanley Hauerwas, Douglas Moo, Peter O’Brien, Jamie Smith, and Kevin Vanhoozer. Without their warm endorsements (and without the willingness of James Ernest and his colleagues at Baker Academic to take a risk on an unknown Australian) this book would have been unlikely to see the light of day. James Ernest, and more recently, his Baker colleague Jim Kinney and the other members of the Baker editorial team, contributed enormously to the project, not only through their continuing belief in the book’s usefulness but also through their wise advice on how it could be improved.

Among those various colleagues and mentors, I am glad to have the opportunity in this preface to express my particular gratitude to Peter O’Brien, whose wise and generous advice and example were a constant encouragement to me when I was first learning the craft of New Testament scholarship under his supervision. His willingness to write a foreword for this volume is a further instance of that generosity.

Soli Deo Gloria.

Abbreviations

Old Testament

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

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians
Mark	Mark	Gal.	Galatians
Luke	Luke	Eph.	Ephesians
John	John	Phil.	Philippians
Acts	Acts	Col.	Colossians
Rom.	Romans	1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians

1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Titus	Titus	1–3 John	1–3 John
Philem.	Philemon	Jude	Jude
Heb.	Hebrews	Rev.	Revelation
James	James		

Apocrypha

1 Kgdms.	1 Kingdoms (Septuagint)
Sir.	Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)
Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon

Ancient Sources

<i>Ag. Ap.</i>	Josephus, <i>Against Apion</i>
<i>Cherubim</i>	Philo, <i>On the Cherubim</i>
<i>Spec. Laws</i>	Philo, <i>On the Special Laws</i>

Bibliographic

AB	Anchor Bible
AcBib	Academia Biblica
AnBib	Anelecta Biblica
ANF	A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds. <i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> . 10 vols. 1867–72. Reprint. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
ASBT	Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology
AThR	Anglican Theological Review
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentary
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CNTC	Calvin's New Testament Commentaries
<i>ExAud</i>	<i>Ex Auditu</i>
HC	The Harvard Classics
HS	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary

Interpretation	Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
IVPNTC	IVP New Testament Commentary
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>JSPL</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters</i>
<i>JTI</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (Meyer-Kommentar)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LNTS	The Library of New Testament Studies
NAC	New American Commentary
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
NIBCOT	New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTM	New Testament Message
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
<i>RTR</i>	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
<i>SBET</i>	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
<i>SBJT</i>	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
UKHL	Reported Judgments of the United Kingdom House of Lords
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WA	<i>D. Martin Luthers Werke, Weimarer Ausgabe</i> (collected works of Martin Luther, Weimar edition)
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
WW	<i>Word and World</i>
YJS	Yale Judaica Series
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

Other Abbreviations

cf.	confer, compare	LXX	Septuagint
ch(s).	chapter(s)	MT	Masoretic Text
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example	NT	New Testament
ET	English Translation	OT	Old Testament
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is	v./vv.	verse/verses

Introduction

Scriptura Scripturae interpres—Scripture is the interpreter of Scripture. Of course we know this self-interpretation of Scripture at all times and in all places only as it is reflected in the human exposition visible in human opinions, resolutions, and actions of every kind. But everything depends on our recognizing this latter as something secondary, as the reflection of that real and genuine exposition, as the multiplicity of the attempts more or less successful to follow in the steps of that self-exposition of Scripture.

—Karl Barth, Gifford Lectures (1930),
quoted in Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology*, 108.

“What Is Written in the Law? . . . How Do You Read It?” (Luke 10:26)

Whenever we read Scripture we are interpreting. We do some of the work of interpreting as we decipher the inscriptions of the text and some as we reflect on and discuss it after reading. Much of the work is wrapped up already in the preunderstandings that we bring to the text before we even begin to read. Add it all up and the sum is clear: there is no such thing as “pure reading,” innocent of interpretation.

This is true not only in the obscurer reaches of Daniel or Revelation but also in the plainest and most familiar places. Any doubt that this is so can be dispelled by a few minutes’ reflection on one of the most familiar biblical texts of all, the commandment in Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (NRSV), and the multitude of questions that arise in the process of understanding it.

To begin with, there are questions about the meaning and reference of the words:

- Who is the (masculine singular) “you” addressed in the commandment? Is the commandment directed exclusively to the members of the particular Israelite congregation referred to in the opening verses of the chapter? Should it also be understood as addressing the Israelite reader who encounters the commandment in generations to come? Is this commandment, along with the others within the chapter, spoken equally to all of the people, or is it directed primarily to those particular (adult, male, landowning) Israelites who own farms and vineyards (19:9–10), breed animals (19:19), plant trees (19:23–25), grow beards (19:27), and exercise authority over the sexual conduct of their daughters (19:29)?
- Should we understand the “shall” of the English translation (and the Hebrew construction behind it) in the indicative mood, as a prediction that you will love your neighbor, or in the imperative mood, as a commandment that you must?¹
- Is the “love” that is commanded merely the absence of the vengeance and grudge-bearing referred to in the first part of the verse (along with, perhaps, the other behaviors prohibited in the surrounding verses), or does it also include a positive quest for the neighbor’s good?² And if it does, is that orientation toward the neighbor’s good to be understood as an affection of the heart, or a habit of conduct, or both?
- Who is the “neighbor” in view in the commandment? Is it (only) the fellow Israelite mentioned in the preceding line? Or does the category also include the “foreigner” referred to a few verses earlier and, in language almost identical to verse 18, in the command of verse 34? What about the neighboring nations? Does the category of “neighbor” include the enemy of the individual? Of the nation? Of God?
- What kind of relationship between self-love and neighbor love is indicated by the “as”? Is self-love assumed or commanded? And is neighbor love required to correspond merely to the fact of self-love, or also to the mode and the degree? Are you to love your neighbor the same way you love yourself? To the same degree that you love yourself?³

1. The Hebrew verb sequence (*lō -tiqqōm wēlō -ti ōr . . . wē āhbtā*), like the English of the NRSV (“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge . . . but you shall love”), can function with either indicative or imperative force. It is an interpretive decision, based on the context, that opts (validly) for the latter over the former.

2. Cf. Goodman, *Love Thy Neighbor*, 18–23.

3. Cf. Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*, 82–84, 97–99.

Second, in addition to questions of this sort about the meaning and reference of the words and phrases, questions could be asked about what the speaker intends to do in uttering the commandment and to accomplish through it in the understanding and action of the hearers—this is what speech-act theorists call the commandment’s intended “illocutionary” and “perlocutionary” force:⁴

- Is the intention of the commandment to *legislate* a certain standard of neighborly love as an enforceable requirement of Israelite law?⁵ Or is the commandment given to provide moral instruction that *guides* conduct, without necessarily creating legal rights and duties?⁶
- Is the commandment intended to produce in the hearer a confident, joyful obedience or a heartbroken, contrite confession of sin? Is it given (along with the whole law in which it is embedded) as a path to life? As a criterion for justification? As an unfulfillable, impossible demand, leaving us no option but to rely on divine grace?
- When we speak of the intention behind the commandment, can a valid distinction be drawn between the intention of God in giving the commandment to Moses to speak to Israel, the intention of Moses in speaking it, and the intention of the redactor of the final form of Leviticus in preserving it? Can we validly infer multiple divine intentions for the original and subsequent hearers of the commandment?

And then, third, questions arise quite specifically and directly out of the situation of the twenty-first-century Christian interpreter. Some of these are questions about how to understand the text which arise when it is read as Christian Scripture by a twenty-first-century reader. Other questions concern how to understand ourselves and our world in the light of the text. But both of these dimensions of the interpretive task are essential and inseparable if the text is to be read and understood not merely as an object of antiquarian

4. Cf. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, and the brief explanation in Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 32–35.

5. In the landmark case of *Donoghue v. Stevenson*, Lord Atkin famously wrestled with the question of what the “neighbour principle” might mean if translated into an enforceable legal obligation: “The rule that you are to love your neighbour becomes in law you must not injure your neighbour; and the lawyer’s question: Who is my neighbour? receives a restricted reply. You must take reasonable care to avoid acts or omissions which you can reasonably foresee would be likely to injure your neighbour.” *Donoghue v. Stevenson* [1932] UKHL 100.

6. Cf. the discussion of “apodeictic laws” and their likely function in Alt, “Origins of Israelite Law,” 103–32; and the reflections on the original and contemporary political functions of Lev. 19 in Bauckham, *Bible in Politics*, 20–40. See more generally the discussion of law as the shaping of wisdom in decision making in Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*; and Andrew Sloane’s discussion of law as the shaping of a moral vision in *At Home in a Strange Land*.

curiosity but as a guide to Christian understanding and existence in our contemporary context. Many questions belong to this third category, but a few of the more obvious stand out:

- Should Christian readers consider themselves included, by some valid mode of extension, among the addressees of the commandment—the “you” to whom the commandment is spoken—or is the commandment given exclusively to the nation of Israel?
- What happens to the “neighbor” category (or, for that matter, the “foreigner” category of Lev. 19:34) when the people of God are no longer constituted geographically or ethnically? Is my neighbor my fellow believer? Is the concept defined by proximity, so that my neighbor is the person I live alongside or bump into, or whose actions are most directly affected by my own? In our contemporary context of economic globalization, is anyone *not* my neighbor?⁷ Does the technology that extends the reach of my vision and communication expand the scope of the “neighbor” category beyond what might have occurred to the original readers of the commandment in Leviticus, or to Christian interpreters in previous generations? Should the television screen that shows me the face of a stranger on the other side of the globe or the ultrasound screen that shows me the face of a fetus in the womb give me a new intuitive insight into the scope of the biblical commandment and its implications?⁸
- In a culture that has its own collection of widely diverse (and mutually inconsistent) ways of understanding what “love” means, can I adequately understand and obey the biblical commandment without exposing and unpicking some of my own inherited assumptions about the meaning of love?⁹ Does the very word “love” still mean something close enough to what was understood by the original hearers of the biblical commandment for it to serve as an adequate English rendition of the intended concept? Do we have an alternative? And even if we do, does the continuous tradition of a thousand years of English translation in which the same word

7. See especially Andrew Sloane’s exploration of this question in “Love and Justice,” 16–18.

8. Oliver O’Donovan pushes the question even further: “Earlier generations had perfectly legitimate difficulties in recognizing an unborn child (in embryo stage) as a human being. . . . Scientific study of embryology has laid to rest the notion of a major physiological discontinuity in human development between embryo and fetal stage. . . . Our generation cannot avoid the implications of this knowledge. Our recognition of the human face is improved, and we can now see it in the embryo, even in the invisible blastocyte and zygote, where our ancestors could not.” “Again: Who Is a Person?,” 135–36.

9. Cf. the comments offered by way of a “protracted introduction” in Carson, *Love in Hard Places*, 11–34.

has been used provide a reason to stay with the old, familiar, four-letter word, and clarify its meaning in the gloss rather than in the translation?¹⁰

The End of Interpretation

A list of questions strung together like this does not prove that the commandment is obscure or incomprehensible. Many of the questions, after all, can be readily and confidently answered, and the answers to some are so obvious that it hardly occurs to most readers to ask them. Frequently, the questions that might occur to us are marginal to the meaning and intention of the commandment, and some result more from the complexity of our circumstances than from any obscurity in the text.

But the fact remains that questions arise, and pondering the text often involves thinking of new questions as much as answering old ones. And if answering one question leads to another, the path to comprehensive and certain understanding stretches on, it seems, forever. Medieval writers played with the metaphor of an endless interpretive labyrinth, or *laborintus*, punning on the Latin phrase *labor intus* as a description of the inward labors of the interpreter.¹¹

But interpretation is not an end in itself, and endless interpretation, in quest of an elusive perfect understanding, can actually work against the intentions of the author. Søren Kierkegaard depicts this perverse possibility in his parable of a royal ordinance. The king's subjects, rather than faithfully and promptly obeying the ordinance, endlessly and earnestly speculate as to its meaning: "Everything is interpretation—but no one reads the royal ordinance in such a way that he acts accordingly."¹²

Of course not all communications are royal decrees, asking for a click of the heels and immediate obedience. Some texts are sent out into the world precisely in the hope that they will become fodder for rumination. But interpretation still serves an end beyond itself, even in the case of texts that call for a fair bit of digesting. In the case of Scripture, as Augustine famously declared, the goal of interpretation is love: "Anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding

10. The tradition goes back at least as far as the eleventh-century Old English Hexateuch, which renders the commandment "lufa þinne freond swa ðe sylfne," choosing the Old English verb *lufian* to translate the Vulgate's *diligo*.

11. E.g., Hugh of St. Victor, *De arca Noe morali* 4.9, in Hugh of St. Victor, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, 151; Geoffrey Chaucer, *House of Fame*, 2103–7. Cf. the history of the metaphor in Doob, *Idea of the Labyrinth*.

12. Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 36.

them.”¹³ And if there was ever a text in which it was transparently obvious that this was so, the commandment of Leviticus 19:18 must surely be that text.

If we read this commandment as Christian Scripture, then we read it (at least in part) in order to be spurred on to love our neighbors and to do the good works that visibly express that love.¹⁴ Some hermeneutical reflection is warranted if that love is to be informed by wisdom; zeal that is not “based on knowledge” may be full of works, but the chances are that those works will be the wrong works done for the wrong reasons.¹⁵ But the time properly allocated to such reflection is not infinite; eventually we reach a point when we must put the unresolved interpretive questions to one side, adjourn the conversations, and decide at least provisionally how we will interpret what the commandment is calling for.

Under some circumstances, the interpretation adopted may be a collective understanding decided on by the consensus of an interpretive community. Sometimes it may be an authoritative interpretation handed down to a community by those who are granted the right to make such pronouncements. And sometimes the interpretive decision—for good or for ill—is made by an individual who feels at liberty (or under compulsion) to adopt an understanding of his or her own.

Because of the multiple possible meanings of the text itself, because of the diversity of motives and preunderstandings that different readers bring to the text, because of the sinful dysfunctions that distort our understanding and communication, and because of the finite amount of time that can be allotted to the interpretive conversation, comprehensive and universal consensus is an elusive goal. And even within a particular, given community, we are typically left to choose between a single common understanding, determined by an interpretive authority, and a multiplicity of understandings adopted by the various individuals and subcommunities that make up the group.

The Plight of the Evangelical Interpreter

This predicament is particularly acute for evangelical Protestants, who claim the Bible as their supreme authority for faith and conduct and approach the

13. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* 1.36.40, 27, trans. R. P. H. Green.

14. This is not the only possible function that the commandment ought to have for a Christian reader. We also read it, e.g., in order that we might be reminded of our failures to love, provoked to contrition, driven back to the grace of God in the gospel, and increased in our thankfulness for the forgiveness of God and the renewing work of the Spirit.

15. Cf. Rom. 10:2 and the comments on “malformed care” in Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*, 102–3.

task of Bible reading without the direction of an infallible church tradition to govern their interpretive decisions. The plight of the evangelical interpreter has been discussed often in recent years. Two realities have been highlighted in the discussion. The first is the reality of *interpretation* itself: evangelicals have been urged to own up to the fact that they are involved in interpreting Scripture, not merely discovering and restating an uninterpreted, transparent, and universally obvious meaning.

A particularly acute articulation of this challenge can be found in Jamie Smith's book *The Fall of Interpretation*.¹⁶ One of the principal themes of the book is a sharp criticism of what Smith calls the "present immediacy model" presupposed or argued for in much contemporary evangelical theology. According to this model, as he describes it, "interpretation . . . is a mediation that is to be overcome, restoring a prelapsarian (pre-Fall) immediacy." The typical evangelical approach to Bible reading is, Smith argues, "something of a realized eschatology: the curse of interpretation is lifted here and now (for the evangelical Christian, that is)."¹⁷

Against this assumption, Smith argues that "the conditions of hermeneutics—tradition, culture, history"—should not be viewed merely as distortions and barriers to true understanding but rather as constitutive dimensions of created human existence.¹⁸ We interpret not only because we are alienated, blinded, and confused but also because we are finite, situated, and human. There is no escape from interpretation, and that is a good thing.

The second reality of the plight of the evangelical interpreter is the *plurality* of evangelical interpretations. This, again, is a major theme in Jamie Smith's work:

There is always already interpretation in every relationship, which means that there is also room for plurality, or rather, plurality is the necessary result of irreducible difference. We abandon, in addition to the myth of "objectivity," the monologic of a hermeneutics of immediacy that claims to deliver the one, true interpretation. But if interpretation is part of being human, then its analogue is a creational diversity: a multitude of ways to "read" the world.¹⁹

A more polemical statement of this theme as a problem for evangelical Protestantism can be found in a book by another Smith: Christian Smith's popular and controversial *The Bible Made Impossible*. After outlining what

16. J. K. A. Smith, *Fall of Interpretation*, 210.

17. *Ibid.*, 17.

18. *Ibid.*, 61.

19. *Ibid.*, 167.

he understands to be the “biblicist” hermeneutics of most contemporary evangelical Protestants,²⁰ Smith attempts to demonstrate that the biblicist approach to the interpretation and use of the Bible in the church manifestly fails to do what it ought to be able to do, if the theory were a sound one:

The very same Bible—which biblicists insist is perspicuous and harmonious—gives rise to divergent understandings among intelligent, sincere, committed readers about what it says about most topics of interest. Knowledge of “biblical” teachings, in short, is characterized by *pervasive interpretive pluralism*. What that means in consequence is this: in a crucial sense it simply does not matter whether the Bible is everything that biblicists claim theoretically concerning its authority, infallibility, inner consistency, perspicuity, and so on, since in actual functioning the Bible produces a pluralism of interpretations.²¹

Christian Smith’s criticism of the “pervasive interpretive pluralism” that is generated by the hermeneutical practices of evangelical Protestantism is not, of course, a new complaint. It was there at the very birth of Protestantism, in the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*, which Leo XIII published in response to the proscribed writings of Martin Luther:

Some, putting aside her [i.e., the Roman Catholic Church’s] true interpretation of Sacred Scripture, are blinded in mind by the father of lies. Wise in their own eyes, according to the ancient practice of heretics, they interpret these same Scriptures otherwise than the Holy Spirit demands, inspired only by their own sense of ambition. . . . We have found that these errors or theses are not

20. Christian Smith’s concept of what counts as “biblicism” is a constellation of ten mutually interrelated beliefs: (1) that “the Bible, down to the details of its words, consists of and is identical with God’s very own words written inerrantly in human language”; (2) that “the Bible represents the totality of God’s communication to and will for humanity”; (3) that “the divine will about all of the issues relevant to Christian belief and life are [*sic*] contained in the Bible”; (4) that “any reasonably intelligent person can read the Bible in his or her own language and correctly understand the plain meaning of the text”; (5) that “the best way to understand biblical texts is by reading them in their explicit, plain, most obvious, literal sense, as the author intended them”; (6) that “the significance of any given biblical text can be understood without reliance on creeds, confessions, historical church traditions, or other forms of larger theological hermeneutical frameworks”; (7) that “all related passages of the Bible on any given subject fit together almost like puzzle pieces into single, unified, internally consistent bodies of instruction”; (8) that “what the biblical authors taught God’s people at any point in history remains universally valid for all Christians at every other time, unless explicitly revoked by subsequent scriptural teaching”; (9) that “all matters of Christian belief and practice can be learned by sitting down with the Bible and piecing together through careful study the clear ‘biblical’ truths that it teaches”; and (10) that “the Bible teaches doctrine and morals with every affirmation that it makes, so that together those affirmations comprise something like a handbook or textbook for Christian belief and living.” *Bible Made Impossible*, 4–5.

21. *Ibid.*, 17.

Catholic, as mentioned above, and are not to be taught, as such; but rather are against the doctrine and tradition of the Catholic Church, and against the true interpretation of the sacred Scriptures received from the Church.²²

Numerous similar criticisms of Luther's approach have been voiced across the subsequent centuries—for example, from closer to our own time, the searing critique in Joseph Lortz's history of the German Reformation, in which Lortz insists that “no religious objectivity is possible unless [one is] accompanied step by step by a living interpreter” and holds Luther responsible for the triumph of the subjectivism that “split up Germany,” dissolved “the unity of the Church, of Christianity, of the world,” and led to “the chaos of unfettered, modern life.”²³

Scripture as Its Own Interpreter

Luther responded to such criticisms by vigorously asserting the self-interpreting clarity of Scripture itself, articulating a principle that was to become a fundamental rule of Protestant hermeneutics:

Tell me, if you are able, by whose judgment is the question settled if the statements of the fathers are in conflict with one another? Scripture ought to deliver this judgment, which cannot be delivered unless we give to Scripture the principal place in all things, which is acknowledged by the fathers: so that it might be, in and of itself, of all things the most certain, the most simple, the most clear, interpreting itself [*sui ipsius interpres*], testing, judging and illuminating all things.²⁴

Answering the accusation that he was guilty of interpreting Scripture according to his own private spirit (*proprio spiritu*),²⁵ “inspired only by [his] own sense of ambition,”²⁶ Luther insisted that his desire was for Scripture to be interpreted neither by his own spirit nor by any human spirit but *suo spiritu*—by its own spirit: “I do not want to be boasted of as more learned than all, but Scripture alone to rule: nor for it to be interpreted by my spirit

22. Leo XXIII, *Exsurge Domine*, Papal Encyclicals Online, available at <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Leo10/110exdom.htm>.

23. Lortz, *Reformation in Germany*, 1:448–58.

24. *Assertio Omnium Articulorum M. Lutheri per Bullam Leonis X. novissimam damnatorum*, WA 7, 97.19–24 (my translation).

25. *Assertio Omnium Articulorum*, WA 7, 96.10. Luther is clearly quoting his accusers at this point, but the phrase itself is not taken directly from the language of the papal bull.

26. Leo XXIII, *Exsurge Domine*.

or by any human spirit, but understood through itself and by its own spirit [*per seipsam et suo spiritu intelligi*].²⁷

The claim that Scripture is its own interpreter (*Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*, as the maxim came to be formulated)²⁸ can itself be understood in a variety of senses. Most commonly, the meaning of the maxim is unpacked in a passive sense, as a claim about the perspicuity of the text in the hands of the interpreter. Kevin Vanhoozer's paraphrase is typical:

Luther claimed that any Christian had the right to interpret the Bible. He also affirmed the "perspicuity" or clarity of the Bible, claiming that its meaning was clear for those who attended to the grammar of the text and to the leading of the Spirit. Calvin, similarly, argued that the meaning and authority of Scripture did not depend on the church. Rather, "Scripture interprets Scripture." By this latter phrase the Reformers indicated that obscure passages should be read in the light of clearer ones.²⁹

There is support for this passive sense of the maxim in Luther's own language—for example, in his claim that Scripture is "to be interpreted . . . [and] understood through itself and by its own spirit," and in his depiction of Scripture as "of all things the most certain, the most simple, the most clear." The idea that Scripture contains "obscure passages" that "should be read in the light of clearer ones" can also find some support in Luther's writings,³⁰ as well as in a long line of precedent going back as far as Augustine and Irenaeus,³¹ to which Luther explicitly appealed.³²

27. *Assertio Omnium Articulorum*, WA 7, 98.4–6 (my translation).

28. James Bretzke claims that "Thomas Aquinas used this expression [*Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*] to indicate that one part of Scripture could be used to interpret or clarify another part of Scripture." *Consecrated Phrases*, 127. He supplies no citations in support, however, and I was unable to find any instances myself in the works of Aquinas. The idea that "one part of Scripture could be used to interpret or clarify another part of Scripture" was certainly not original to Luther, of course.

29. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, 171.

30. E.g., the assertion in Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 26, trans. Philip S. Watson, that "if the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another."

31. E.g., Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* 2.9.14, 37, trans. R. P. H. Green: "After gaining a familiarity with the language of the divine scriptures, one should proceed to explore and analyse the obscure passages, by taking examples from the more obvious parts to illuminate obscure expressions and by using the evidence of indisputable passages to remove the uncertainty of ambiguous ones." See also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.10; 2.28.

32. E.g., *Da diese Wort Christi "Das ist mein Leib" noch fest stehen wider die Schwärmgeister*, WA 23, 225: "The holy teachers had the practice in the exposition of Scripture to take distinct and clear statements and use these to make clear the obscure and uncertain ones." Translation in Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, 128.

But this passive sense of the maxim does not exhaust its meaning. Alongside these depictions of Scripture as the clear, accessible object of interpretation, Luther's prose also contains intimations of Scripture as an active subject, "interpreting . . . testing, judging and illuminating."

In part, what Luther has in mind here is the agency of Scripture in relation to the reader and his or her circumstances.³³ In the imagery of the psalm to which Luther immediately turns, the implied object of the "interpreting . . . testing, judging and illuminating" activity of the word is the psalmist and his world: "my feet" and "my path" (Ps. 119:105). This aspect of Luther's language is helpfully emphasized by Gerhard Forde: "The interpreter does not remain standing simply as subject over against the text as object to be interpreted. Rather, in the engagement with scripture, it is the scripture that comes to interpret the exegete. It is the task of the exegete to allow the Spirit of the scripture, the matter itself, to speak."³⁴

There is still more to be said, however. At the intersection between the passive sense of the maxim (which speaks of Scripture as an accessible and clear object of interpretation) and the active sense (which speaks of the agency of Scripture itself in illuminating and interpreting the world of the reader), there is a third, reflexive sense—arguably the primary sense of Luther's phrase—which speaks of the agency of Scripture in interpreting *itself*.

What this third, reflexive sense refers to is not the activity of the reader in using one text of Scripture (a "clear" text) to interpret another (an "obscure" one). Nor is it principally concerned with the interpretive agency of the particular text, or the Scripture as a whole, interpreting the reader and the reader's world. In addition to these senses, and integrally connected with both of them, this third, reflexive sense of the maxim appeals to the plural, human authorship of Scripture and speaks of the interpretive work that the biblical authors themselves perform in understanding and appropriating the antecedent texts and traditions that functioned for them as Scripture does for us.³⁵

Gerald Bruns makes the point well:

The beginnings of scriptural interpretation are to be looked for within the Scriptures themselves. Scholars now recognize that the making of the Scriptures

33. Strictly speaking, of course, "the agency of Scripture" is functioning here as a metonymy for the agency of God as the one who spoke and speaks through Scripture.

34. Forde, "*Scriptura Sacra*," 71. See also the similar comments in Forde, "Normative Character of Scripture," 305; Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 68–72.

35. Hans-Joachim Kraus argues that it was a commitment to this third sense of "Scripture interpreting Scripture" that provided the primary impetus for the historical development of the discipline of biblical theology. Cf. Kraus, *Die biblische Theologie*, 17, cited in Sailhamer, *Introduction*, 118–20.

was a hermeneutical process in which earlier biblical materials were rewritten in order to make them intelligible and applicable to later situations. . . . This helps to explain an ancient hermeneutical insight. As the rabbis, Augustine, and Luther knew, the Bible, despite its textual heterogeneity, can be read as a self-glossing book. One learns to study it by following the ways in which one portion of the text illuminates another. The generations of scribes who shaped and reshaped the Scriptures appear to have designed them to be studied in just this way.³⁶

A similar claim can be found in the justification that Brevard Childs offers for taking a canonical approach to the interpretation of the Old Testament:

A corpus of religious writings which has been transmitted within a community for over a thousand years cannot properly be compared to inert shreds which have lain in the ground for centuries. This observation is especially in order when one recognizes that Israel's developing religious understanding—the Bible speaks of God's encounter with Israel—left its mark on the literature in a continuing process of reshaping and growth. . . . The canonical method . . . seeks to work within that interpretive structure which the Bible has received from those who formed and used it as sacred scripture.³⁷

Attention to this third sense of the maxim is crucial if the claim that Scripture is *sui ipsius interpret* is to carry its full force and validity as a principle of hermeneutics.

The first, passive sense is a legitimate inference from the unity and coherence of Scripture as the product of a single divine author, and this sense functions in obvious and well-recognized ways as a guide to interpretation. But if left to stand on its own, the maxim's passive sense runs the risk of a certain arbitrariness in the way in which it is applied. Who is to say which texts are "obscure" and which are "clear"? What is to prevent the interpreter from using a "clear" (and congenial) text to stifle the voice of an "obscure" (and uncongenial) one? When Luther, for example, appeals to John 6:27 ("on him [i.e., the Son of Man] God the Father has placed his seal of approval" as the one on whom our salvation depends) as a "clear and explicit text" which ought to control our understanding of other texts that seem to make almsgiving a condition of salvation (Dan. 4:27; Luke 6:37–38; Luke 16:9),³⁸ he leaves himself open to questions of this sort. Have the almsgiving texts really been *interpreted* or merely sidelined? And does the function of the "clear" text within its original context in John 6 really suggest its use as a pronouncement

36. Bruns, "Midrash and Allegory," 626–27.

37. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 73.

38. Luther, *Sermon on John 6:27*, 16–18, trans. Martin H. Bertram.

against the necessity of almsgiving for salvation, or is it being pressed into service by Luther as a vehicle for his own dogmatic precommitments?³⁹

While it can be an entirely legitimate exercise of theological interpretation to seek an understanding of one text that harmonizes with the meaning of another, the decisions made by the interpreter in doing so ought to be informed (as I will argue below) by a prior discipline of attentiveness to the interpretive work that the biblical writers themselves do when they invoke the words of other biblical texts, interpreting them and, in turn, asking to be interpreted in light of them.

The second, active sense is likewise a legitimate inference from the nature of Scripture as divine communication, and Forde makes an important point when he insists that the hearer (and preacher) of Scripture must be concerned not only to discover “what scripture means” but also to experience “what the Word does.”⁴⁰ But the two tasks of the hearer should never be divorced: experiencing what the Word does goes hand in hand with determining what Scripture means. If we are to understand the scriptural text itself—the very text that illumines our world—without standing over it as if it were an inert object for our examination, then we need to pay attention not only to the way in which Scripture interprets *us* but also to the way in which Scripture interprets *itself*.⁴¹

If we are to take seriously the form in which Scripture has been given to us, as a canonical collection of the work of multiple human authors across a thousand years or more within a single (albeit, at times, complex) interpretive tradition, there must be more to the doctrine of Scripture’s self-interpretation than just the use of clear biblical texts to interpret obscure ones and an openness to the agency of Scripture in interpreting us. Crucial to the claim that “Scripture interprets Scripture” is an awareness of and attention to the significance of the intertextual relationships between the biblical books and the interpretive work of the biblical authors themselves.

Circles, Spirals, and Snowballs

In order for our imaginations to capture the importance of this dynamic for the discipline of hermeneutics, a new metaphor may be required, sitting alongside

39. Cf. the discussions in Mitchell, *Justification of Religious Belief*, 46–47; Starling, “Analogy of Faith.”

40. Forde, “*Scriptura Sacra*,” 71.

41. As I have argued above, these two dimensions of textual interpretation are inseparably related, particularly in the case of a text that is being read as “a lamp for my feet” and “a light on my path” (Ps. 119:105).

the traditional images that theorists have used to describe the interpretive task. Writers on hermeneutics have for centuries used the metaphor of the hermeneutical circle to speak of the recursive relationship between analyzing the parts and apprehending the whole,⁴² or between the preunderstandings of the reader and the disclosures of the text.⁴³ In recent years, Grant Osborne (among others) has sought to modify the image of the hermeneutical circle, reconfiguring it as something more like a spiral:

A spiral is a better metaphor because it is not a closed circle but rather an open-ended movement from the horizon of the text to the horizon of the reader. I am not going round and round a closed circle that can never detect the true meaning but am spiraling nearer and nearer to the text's intended meaning as I refine my hypotheses and allow the text to continue to challenge and correct those alternative interpretations, then to guide my delineation of its significance for my situation today. In this sense it is also critical to note that the spiral is a cone, not twirling upward forever with no ending in sight but moving ever narrower to the meaning of the text and its significance for today.⁴⁴

Without wishing to detract from the usefulness of either of those metaphors, I wish to place alongside them a third image, of Scripture as a kind of snowball. Unlike the other metaphors of the circle and the spiral, both of which focus on the relationship between the biblical text and the contemporary reader, the image of Scripture as snowball aims to say something about the interpretive relationships between Scripture's constituent parts. It is not a metaphor for the reader's way into the text but rather a metaphor for (one aspect of) the nature of the text itself, with implications for the way in which we are to read and understand it.

While Christian theology and hermeneutics rightly speak of Scripture as a unity, it is a weighty, complex, multilayered unity. The Bible did not fall from the sky like a single snowflake; it rolled down the hill of salvation history, adding layers as it went. Each new layer of the accumulating collection presupposes what comes before and wraps itself around it; in so doing it offers direction in how to read it and asks, in turn, to be interpreted in light of it.

The meaning we gain when we read the Bible is derived not only from the circular movements between analysis and synthesis, preunderstanding and disclosure, or from our own spiraling approach toward the text, as helpful as those images can be. The text we are approaching is also a text that came

42. E.g., Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, 195–96.

43. See especially Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 268–73.

44. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 22.

into existence through a history in which it was already approaching us, rolling down the hill toward us for hundreds of years, accumulating layers of self-interpretation on its way.

Like all metaphors, the image of Scripture as a “hermeneutical snowball” does not tell the whole story. Among the many limits of the metaphor, two are worth particular notice. First, the image should not be read as implying a simple, one-dimensional “progressive revelation” model for the way in which the internal structures of the canon are configured. While Jesus and the writers of the New Testament do undoubtedly claim a certain finality and conclusiveness for the way in which God’s self-revelation in Christ relates to the Scriptures of the Old Testament, they do not wrap their words around the Old Testament in such a way as to make its original message inaccessible or to rob it of a voice of its own that is capable of addressing the Christian reader directly.⁴⁵ Nor do they articulate the relationship between what God said “in the past . . . to our ancestors through the prophets” and what God has said “in these last days . . . to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1–2) simply as a particular instance of a general principle of the superiority of new wine over old.⁴⁶

Second, the image of Scripture as snowball does not readily provide a way of picturing the continuities and discontinuities between inner-biblical and postbiblical interpretation. Should we picture the snowball that rolls down the hill of salvation history continuing in its downward path across the centuries of its reception history within the church, accumulating further layers of interpretation as it goes? Or should we imagine it as reaching the bottom of the hill at the point of the closure of the canon and picture the history of its use in the church through some other metaphor—perhaps, for the sake of the exercise, through the metaphor of the fully formed snowball being picked up, patted down, and thrown around?⁴⁷

Both of these possible extensions of the metaphor have their attractions. It is true that our contemporary interpretations of Scripture are inescapably situated at the end of a twenty-century-long tradition of the completed Bible’s reception history and that the church within which we read and interpret the Bible today claims a catholic unity with the church of the

45. See especially Seitz, *Character of Christian Scripture*, 17–25.

46. Cf. the reservations regarding a “progressive revelation” framework expressed in C. Smith, *Bible Made Impossible*, 210; Vanhoozer, “Into the Great ‘Beyond’”; Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture*, 104–9.

47. Readers familiar with snow and snowballs will know how artificial that sort of extension of the metaphor would be; the kind of snowballs that roll down hills are not, of course, the kind one picks up and throws around.

apostolic era and the intervening centuries. Recent calls for an “evangelical renaissance”⁴⁸ that includes a renewed acquaintance with Protestantism’s patristic and medieval heritage are a welcome corrective to the various ahistorical, sectarian, and modernist tendencies that have plagued much evangelical exegesis and theology. But the line of ecclesial continuity between the New Testament church and our own is not the only reality that a theological hermeneutic needs to take account of. If the distinctiveness of Scripture as the written word of God is to be honored, our understanding of the hermeneutical task needs also to acknowledge the discontinuity between inner-biblical and postbiblical interpretation and the uniquely authoritative role played by the former.⁴⁹

Rather than side with one of these realities against the other by extending the reach of the metaphor in either of the two ways suggested, a better approach is simply to acknowledge the metaphor’s limits and look for a different imaginative language with which to speak of the theological significance of the Bible’s reception history in (and outside) the church across the last twenty centuries. Without for a moment wanting to suggest that that history can be dismissed or disregarded as irrelevant, this book will focus on the dynamics of *inner*-biblical hermeneutics and their significance for Scripture’s theological interpretation.

The Apprenticed Interpreter

The fact that Scripture is a self-interpreting book (in the reflexive sense I have argued for above, or indeed in either of the other senses of the phrase) does not relieve the contemporary interpreter of any responsibility to work at understanding it. Luther himself—for all his protestations about Scripture’s self-interpreting clarity—can still write graphically of the “sweat” and “assiduous endeavor” that are required of the faithful interpreter:

There is therefore effort to be expended—not, setting aside the Sacred Scriptures, that we might crane our necks only toward the human writings of the

48. E.g., Williams, *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation*, 7–8. The term “renaissance” is borrowed from the language of the mid-twentieth-century French Roman Catholic theologians who sought to renew the theology of the Catholic Church by returning to its sources in the teachings of Scripture and the interpretive tradition of the church fathers.

49. Henri Blocher speaks of “the neat canonical boundary which sets apart the Word of God among human writings”—a boundary that functions as “a sign of God’s real involvement in history: his Word comes down to earth without ceasing to be his Word.” “Analogy of Faith,” 33.

Fathers—but on the contrary, first and foremost, setting aside all the writings of men, all the more steadfastly to soak with our sweat the Holy Scriptures alone, in order that, where the danger is present that one might understand them by one’s own spirit, the exercise of this assiduous endeavor, having conquered the danger of whatever kind, might make us certain of the Spirit of Scripture, which is absolutely nowhere to be found except in Scripture.⁵⁰

But good interpretation requires not just sweat but skill, and not just skill but character. Interpretation of the Scriptures is like a craft or a trade that must be learned if we are to draw the right connections, make the right intuitive leaps, and bring to bear on the task the right dispositions, affections, and virtues.⁵¹ Among the various exemplars from which we might learn the habits and practices that are necessary for wise and faithful interpretation, Scripture itself is supreme and uniquely authoritative.

Kevin Vanhoozer’s notion of “apprenticeship” is a useful image for the way in which the inner-biblical interpretive practices of the writers of Scripture shape the judgment of the contemporary interpreter:

The primary conversation that leads to understanding, then, is the Spirit-enabled conversation that takes place within and between the canonical books themselves. . . . Good theological judgment is largely, though not exclusively, a matter of being apprenticed to the canon: of having one’s capacity for judging (a capacity that involves imagination, reason, emotion, and volition alike) formed and transformed by the ensemble of canonical practices that constitute Scripture.⁵²

Henri Blocher, in a discussion of the closely related principle of the “analogy of faith” to which the Reformers frequently appealed, makes a similar point, arguing that the self-interpreting nature of Scripture should be appealed to not only as a negative criterion of judgment, operating at the end of the interpretive process like a kind of guillotine that trims off the ragged edges. A limited, negative application of the principle, brought to bear case-by-case on individual exegetical judgments, pays insufficient regard to the role played by preunderstanding, disposition, and habit in the work of interpretation. Reaching beyond that more limited application of the principle, Blocher appeals for a more expansive account of the positive, formative role played by Scripture’s self-interpretation in shaping the instincts and expectations of the contemporary interpreter:

50. Luther, *Assertio Omnium Articulorum*, WA 7, 97.3–9 (my translation).

51. See especially Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*; Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*.

52. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 331. On apprenticeship, wisdom, and intellectual tradition more broadly, see MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 58–81.

We would hesitate to restrict application of the analogy of faith to the end of the process of study; it also yields precious benefits in shaping our expectations, in stimulating our scientific imagination, in balancing our horizons. . . . Our help comes from the general control of scriptural teachings, if we care diligently to enquire about it, and, especially, from hermeneutical lessons and hints offered by the biblical books themselves: “meta-language” in Scripture and preliminary syntheses taught by divine inspiration provide us with invaluable aid. The New Testament writers’ use and handling of the Old Testament, if we know how properly to assess it, is part of their authoritative teaching, and best educates our exegetical mind.⁵³

In speaking of the contemporary interpreter of Scripture as “apprenticed” to the inner-biblical interpreters, I do not want to reduce the role of the contemporary interpreter to an unthinking, unimaginative mimicry. The distinction between inner-biblical interpretation and our own hermeneutical task is important to acknowledge, even if we put to one side the issues raised by the salvation-historical differences between the situation of the Old Testament writers and our own, and focus exclusively on the interpretive practices of the New Testament. The answer that I would offer to Richard Longenecker’s question, “Can we reproduce the exegesis of the New Testament?” lies somewhere between Longenecker’s “No” and Richard Hays’s “Yes.”⁵⁴

On the one hand, Hays is correct to insist that “Scripture interpretation is the theological matrix within which the kerygma took shape” and to warn against the naive assumption that it is possible to “pluck and preserve the flower of apostolic doctrine” while severing it from its “generative hermeneutical roots.”⁵⁵ But Longenecker, for his part, is correct in pointing to the “revela-

53. Blocher, “Analogy of Faith,” 37–38.

54. See Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (1st ed.), 214–20; Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 178–92; Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (2nd ed.), xxiv–xxix. In fairness to both of these writers, it should be acknowledged that the position argued for by each of them is considerably more nuanced than the one-word summaries in the preceding paragraph might suggest. Hays, for his part, hastens to add that it is “in a sense to be specified carefully” that Paul’s readings are normative for contemporary Christian readers (Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 183), and the kind of hermeneutical practice that he goes on to advocate could not for a moment be characterized as an “unthinking, unimaginative mimicry” of Pauline interpretation. And Longenecker, in the rejoinder to Hays that he includes in the second edition of *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, takes care to specify the common ground that he and Hays share in how they understand the theologically normative dimensions of Paul’s approach to Scripture—“reading it as a narrative of election and promise, reading it ecclesiocentrically, reading it in the service of proclamation, reading it as participants in the eschatological drama of redemption, and appreciating the metaphorical relation between the text and our own reading of it.” Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (2nd ed.), xxxv (emphasis original).

55. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 182.

tory stance” of the New Testament writers and the “circumstantial [and] *ad hominem*” dimensions involved in their contextualization and application of the biblical texts they cite.⁵⁶

The writers of the New Testament (and Jesus himself, for that matter) are interpreters, but what they write and preach is never presented as *just* interpretation, either in the narrower sense of grammatico-historical exegesis or in the broader sense of contextualizing exposition. They have something of their own to say—testimony of their own to bear, arguments of their own to make, exhortations of their own to offer—and their interaction with Old Testament Scripture is embedded in textual genres that serve as vehicles for these other concerns. More than that: in what they have to say, they themselves are speaking as witnesses and mouthpieces of divine revelation in a sense that contemporary preachers and writers are not.⁵⁷ In citing Old Testament Scripture they are rarely offering up texts as “proofs” for theological assertions that would otherwise hang suspended in the air without foundation,⁵⁸ and the rhetorical effect that they intend the citations to have is directed toward a particular situation into which they are writing, which will never correspond totally with our own. Nor is the interpretive authority that they claim the authority of superior technical expertise in the methods of grammatico-historical exegesis.

Nevertheless (as Hays rightly stresses) the gospel they proclaim is still an irreducibly hermeneutical announcement; they are not simply relaying brute, uninterpreted facts but preaching Jesus as “Christ” and “Lord,” “in accordance with the Scriptures,” seeking to induct their readers into “the mind of Christ” and (in him) into “all wisdom.”⁵⁹ To that extent—and it is no small extent indeed, given the breadth and boldness of such claims—their stance and method as interpreters are normative for us; we are their apprentices in the art of reading Scripture, learning from them how to understand Christ (and all things) in the light of Scripture and Scripture (and all things) in the light of Christ.

The apprenticed interpreter is not an infallible interpreter; nor do we ever graduate out of our indenture to the canon into some sort of magisterial

56. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (1st ed.), 219.

57. This claim is sometimes, though not always, explicit within what they speak and write. Whether or not that is the case, the inclusion of the NT writings within the canon of Christian Scripture carries the implication that they are to be read by the church as uniquely authoritative vehicles of divine speech.

58. See, e.g., the instances discussed in Starling, *Not My People*, 44–46, 47–48, 121–22, 213.

59. Observant readers will note that the language of all the quotations within this sentence is uniformly Pauline, but the claims expressed are not unique to Paul; parallel claims (though in a different idiom) could have been harvested from any of the writers of the NT, or indeed from the words of Jesus himself.

interpretive authority of our own. Apprenticeship to the self-interpreting practices of Scripture is not the comprehensive solution to the problem of evangelical Protestantism's "pervasive interpretive pluralism"; a certain amount of plurality in interpretation is (as Jamie Smith argues) a valuable expression of our created, human diversity,⁶⁰ and a further measure is an inevitable consequence of our fallibility, our sinful misuse of the text, and the interpretive discords that arise in the absence of an authoritative magisterium. But an increase in our attentiveness to the interpretive practices of the biblical writers and a readiness to educate our interpretive faculties in light of these practices should work as a healthy corrective to the worst excesses of interpretive arbitrariness and foster a healthier and more faithful interpretive conversation.

This Book

What I have in mind for this book, then, is not a system to integrate all the contents of Scripture or a key to unlock all its mysteries, but a few brief exercises of apprenticeship to its interpretive practices. There is a place for theological systems and hermeneutical keys, as long as they are sketched in pencil (in the case of the systems) and provided they are not jammed forcibly into every lock (in the case of keys). But the aim of this book is somewhat less ambitious.

What follows in the remaining chapters is a series of case studies in inner-biblical hermeneutics, focusing in each case on one aspect of the interpretive work done in a particular biblical book and relating it to a theological or ethical issue the church has confronted today or in the intervening centuries. Each chapter will focus on one book of the Bible and on one key interpretive issue that arises in it, tracing the interpretive work of the biblical author, redactor, or compiler against the horizons of the text's first readers,⁶¹ before seeking to draw out the implications of that case study in inner-biblical interpretation for Christian theological hermeneutics. This book will focus principally, then, not on the advancement of exegetical science (worthy as that goal is) but on the getting of hermeneutical wisdom—on what it means to receive the biblical writings as Holy Scripture and how we are to appropriate their words in our own situation. The latter task (i.e., the task of theological hermeneutics)

60. J. K. A. Smith, *Fall of Interpretation*, 167, 196.

61. In general, where the issue arises, I will be focusing primarily on the final, canonical form of the biblical text rather than attempting to dig back into the tradition history that lies behind it (except to the extent that an inquiry along those lines might shed light on the interpretive work done by the redactors or compilers of the text in its final form).

cannot, of course, be undertaken satisfactorily without paying proper attention to the former (i.e., the task of biblical exegesis). But neither can the former task be regarded as sufficient, at least for the purposes of the church, unless it is informed by and contributes to the latter.

The aim is not for comprehensiveness, either in the number of biblical books suggested or in the coverage of the hermeneutical issues raised in each book. But I hope that the range of books examined and the range of issues discussed will be sufficiently broad and representative to at least introduce the possibilities of learning the art of biblical interpretation from the biblical writers themselves and to give us a glimpse into the habits of mind and heart that informed their reading of Scripture and that ought to shape our own.

1

“Who Meditates on His Law”

The Psalter and the Hermeneutics of Delight

A Pathway into the Holy Scripture

Sometime between 1525 and 1532, William Tyndale published a pamphlet (based on the prologue to his 1525 translation of the New Testament) under the title *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*. Its content deliberately focused on the controversial issues of the day—“above all, to put you in remembrance of certain points, which are, that ye well understand what these words mean; the Old Testament; the New Testament; the law; the gospel; Moses; Christ; nature; grace; working and believing; deeds and faith.”¹ For Tyndale and his intended readers, blazing a pathway into Scripture involved the polemical task of hacking away the tangle of vines and brambles that had previously impaired their access—or, to change the metaphor, ripping away the “veil of false glosses on Moses’ face” that had been nailed up by the prelates of the church.²

Tyndale’s controversy with the church’s “false teachers and blind leaders” over the specific issues of grace, faith, and works—along with the very act of translating the New Testament and putting it into the hands of the proverbial plowboy—raised the broader issue of the relationship between the Bible and the church, which became the topic of a heated debate between Tyndale

1. Tyndale, *Pathway*, 4.

2. *Ibid.*, 24. Cf. the reference to “false teachers and blind leaders,” p. 4.

and England's Lord Chancellor, Thomas More. For More, Scripture was the church's book, and the only proper way to "wade" into the Scriptures was via the authoritative teachings of the church.³

Amid the many fierce and noisy disagreements between Tyndale and More, there was at least one point of implicit agreement: readers of Scripture do not begin within the text but *approach* the text via a pathway of expectations and preunderstandings. This much is true for all readers of Scripture, at all times and in all places. For some, the journey into Scripture begins in infancy, when they are inducted into the practices of Bible reading by parents and grandparents, within the fellowship of the church; others are introduced to Scripture as adolescent or adult converts, or make their first approaches to Scripture along a path of skeptical or curious inquiry. None of us is born within the pages of the Bible.

The fact that we approach the Scriptures with expectations and preunderstandings of our own does not mean that our reading of Scripture is imprisoned in the cage of our own subjectivity or trapped incorrigibly in the traditions in which we were raised. Scripture itself offers "pathways" of its own, inviting us into the text—pathways that variously confirm and challenge the ways in which we approach it. Those who come seeking find, but not always exactly the thing that they thought they would.

The convergence of all such paths is in the person of Christ—he himself is the "one Instructor" of his people (Matt. 23:10) and the single "way" to the Father (John 14:6). But the presence of Christ at the junction of all the scriptural paths does not do away with the necessity of the paths themselves; there is no true knowledge of Christ that is not "according to the Scriptures," just as there is no true knowledge of the Scriptures that does not accord with Christ. Our approach to the Scriptures—not just our first approach but the whole set of purposes and expectations with which we return to the Scriptures each day—needs to be tested and renewed by Scripture itself, so that our feet walk along the pathways that Scripture opens up to us.

Psalter as Torah

Within the Old Testament, one of the most spacious and well-traveled pathways into Scripture is to be found in the Psalter. The praises of Israel, as they were offered up in the earliest shrines, in the first and second temples, and in the synagogues of the exile and diaspora, played a crucial role in teaching those who worshiped how they were to regard and receive the various words

3. More, *Dialogue concerning Tyndale*, 102.

of law, prophecy, narrative, poetry, and wisdom that came to be collected as the Scriptures of Israel. Among the disciples of Jesus and the members of the early church, too, the psalms continued to be read, sung, and remembered as a means by which believers were encouraged to “teach and admonish one another” when they gathered (Col. 3:16; cf. Eph. 5:19; 1 Cor. 14:26; Heb. 3:7–4:13). Within the psalms they found both a prophetic testimony to Jesus and a liturgy of prayers and praises which Jesus himself had used; when they prayed and sang the psalms, they were teaching one another to trust in Christ, and to join their prayers and praises with his.

This teaching function of the psalms is emphasized by the way in which they are gathered together and given canonical shape within the Psalter. The five-book structure of the Psalter mimics the five-book structure of the Pentateuch, hinting at its function as a kind of “Torah of David.”⁴ The songs which are sung by day within the assembly are to be meditated upon alone, in the night (Ps. 77:6, 12; cf. Pss. 16:7; 42:8; 63:2–6); a maskil of Asaph, reciting the ancient story of YHWH’s works, is presented as “teaching [*tôrâ*]” for God’s people (Ps. 78:1), suggesting a similar function for the other historical psalms;⁵ a string of wisdom psalms, scattered across the Psalter (e.g., Pss. 1; 32; 34; 37; 49; 112; 127; 128; 133), seek to inculcate in those who read them a sense of the blessedness of fearing YHWH and shunning evil. Within the canonical structure of the Psalter, the categories of private and public, liturgical and instructive, overlap and interpenetrate: “One cannot distinguish absolutely the liturgical psalms from the wisdom or didactic poems. . . . Private prayers were adapted for public use; liturgical songs became a personal prayer.”⁶

The instructive function of the Psalter does not overwhelm or displace its liturgical form; it is precisely as a collection of prayers and praises that it does its teaching. The worshipers who hear and speak its words are invited to learn not only from its precepts and propositions but also from its practices—when we pray the psalms we are being taught how to sing, how to give thanks, how to lament, how to protest, and how to praise, along with the psalmist and in company with the whole people of God.

Psalter and Torah

While the Psalter’s language and structure suggest its use as a book of instruction, it does not present itself as a self-contained curriculum, encapsulating

4. See Braude, *Midrash on Psalms*, 1:5.

5. Mays, *Psalms*, 254.

6. Vesco, *Le psautier de David*, 31, as translated in Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 40.

within its 150 psalms all that its readers need to learn; the “Torah of David” directs its readers’ attention not away from but toward the “Torah of Moses” and the other various oral and written conduits of the word of YHWH to Israel.

The encouragement in Psalm 1:2 to meditate day and night on the law echoes the charge to Joshua in Joshua 1:8 to meditate on the law of Moses, and is emphatically reinforced in the other two “Torah psalms” that occupy such a prominent place in the collection—Psalm 19, sitting at the center of the first book, and Psalm 119, acting as a kind of hinge between the Egyptian Hallel (Pss. 113–18) and the Songs of Ascent (Pss. 120–34) and dominating the whole fifth book by its sheer size. These three psalms and their placing in the Psalter powerfully express the importance of biblical law for editors of the collection.⁷

But it is not only in the “Torah psalms” that readers’ attention is directed beyond the Psalter toward the rest of Scripture and its constituent traditions, or toward the living voice of YHWH encountered in the oracles of the prophets. The commandments and statutes of YHWH are celebrated throughout the psalms as a way for the worshipers to walk in (e.g., Pss. 17:4–5; 18:21–22; 37:30–31; 111:10), in imagery that closely parallels the language in which the psalmists ask for God to guide their steps (e.g., Pss. 5:8; 25:5; 27:11; 86:11) or express their confidence that this is what he does (e.g., Pss. 16:11; 23:3; 25:8–10). The contents of particular, individual commandments are also specifically drawn upon in the Psalter’s ethical teaching and in the psalmists’ protests of innocence.⁸

The psalmists also appeal frequently to the covenant of YHWH with the nation, with Abraham, and with David the king as the basis for petitions and laments (e.g., Pss. 44:18; 89:19–37; 132:10–12), and they celebrate the covenant as the framework within which the faithfulness of YHWH is experienced (e.g., Pss. 103:7–18; 105:8–11; 111:5, 9). They refer to the saving deeds of YHWH for the individual and the nation over and over again; in some cases they retell the story of YHWH’s dealings with Israel at length (e.g., Pss. 78; 105; 106; 107), but in others they make fleeting allusions to the narratives of the Pentateuch (e.g., Ps. 95:8, alluding to Exod. 17:1–7 and Num. 20:1–13; Ps. 103:7–12, alluding to Exod. 32–34) that presuppose a readership familiar with a fuller version to be found elsewhere.

Finally, there is the “voice” of YHWH, which is frequently referred to within the Psalter (e.g., Pss. 18:13; 29:3–9; 46:6; 68:33)—sometimes with echoes of

7. Cf. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 78.

8. See especially the examples cited in *ibid.*, 97–118.

the theophany at Sinai and apparent reference to the rumblings of a thunderstorm, and sometimes in a way that represents YHWH as speaking, or as having spoken, within the sanctuary, in a form that enabled his words to be heard and preserved (e.g., Pss. 60:6–8; 81:5–16; 108:7–9). The prophetic oracle spoken in the name of YHWH in Psalm 95:7 urges its hearers to open their hearts to receive his voice, not only in the words of the psalm itself but also “if [they] . . . hear his voice” through some other vehicle of revelation.⁹

More broadly—behind and beneath all of these explicit references in the Psalter to the voice of YHWH, his laws and covenants, the story of his saving deeds, and the oracles of the prophets—the categories of relationship in which the Psalter frames Israel’s dealings with YHWH imply experiences of speech and story, reading and remembering. The praises of YHWH for his faithfulness and steadfast love imply covenant and promise, even where the words “covenant” and “promise” are not used;¹⁰ the categories of “righteous” and “wicked” imply a distinction that is defined, at least in part, by the differing stances that people take toward the laws of YHWH, even where those laws are not mentioned; the appeal to YHWH’s name and the decision to hope in him, trust in him, and wait for him imply some knowledge of his ways and some revelation of his intentions.

In a multiplicity of ways, therefore, across all the various categories of psalms and all five books of the collection, the Psalter implies a community of intended readers who have heard God speak, who are familiar with the story of his saving deeds, who possess his laws, and whose ears are (or ought to be) open to his voice.

Rightly Perceiving the Scriptures

How, then, do the prayers and praises of the Psalter train those who use them to perceive the Scriptures (or, in the case of the earliest users of the psalms,

9. The way in which the wording of the oracle echoes the language of Deut. 4–6 suggests the likelihood that the most obvious form in which the worshipers could expect to “hear his voice . . . today” would be in the restatement of the covenant promises and stipulations within the context of the worshiping assembly; alternatively, given the direct divine address embedded within the psalm itself, the experience envisaged as a further possibility for the worshipers may have been a fresh prophetic oracle spoken for the first time “today.” Cf. the discussion in Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 94–96, and his argument in favor of reading the “if” of v. 7 as an ordinary condition, not as a pessimistic “if only . . .”

10. The language of *esed* (“steadfast love”) within the Psalter and elsewhere in the OT is not limited to contexts where there is already a preexisting covenantal relationship, or to behaviors that merely fulfill covenantal obligations, but it is still in keeping with the character of steadfast, enduring *esed* (including the *esed* of God) to create and keep covenants.

to perceive the various oracles, laws, proverbs, and stories that later came to be written and collected as the Scriptures)? With what expectations and preunderstandings do we approach the Scriptures, if we come trained by the worship of the psalms? Much could be said in answer to that question, but four observations stand out.

Many and One

First, and perhaps most obviously, the psalms present the Scriptures as both a vast diversity and a coherent unity. On the one hand, much of the time, the language that the Psalter uses for Scripture is explicitly and emphatically plural. This is most strikingly the case in Psalm 119, where the massive, acrostic architecture of the psalm implies that something comprehensive and encyclopedic is being said about a vast and multifaceted subject.¹¹ Within the psalm, eight different words are used for the utterances of YHWH, and the psalmist rings the changes on them in a seemingly endless round of repetitions: *tôrâ* (25x, always in the singular, translated in the English versions as “law” or “instruction”); *dābār* (23x, usually in the singular, translated in the English versions as “word,” and referring sometimes to YHWH’s commands and sometimes to his promises); *mišpā im* (23x, usually in the plural, referring to the decisions and pronouncements of YHWH as judge); *ēdōt* (23x, always in the plural, probably referring to the stipulations of the covenant); *uqqim* (22x, always in the plural, referring to the binding and permanent statutes of YHWH’s law); *mi wōt* (22x, usually in the plural, referring to the commandments of YHWH); *piqqûdîm* (22x, always in the plural, referring to YHWH’s authoritative utterances); *imrâ* (19x, usually singular, translated in the English versions as “word,” and referring to YHWH’s word of promise).¹² The psalmist repeatedly declares that he is speaking about “all” God’s words of one kind or another: “all your commands” (vv. 6, 86, 151, 172), “all the laws that come from your mouth” (v. 13), “all your precepts” (v. 128), “all your righteous laws” (v. 160), “all my ways” (v. 168).

On the other hand, however, the Torah psalms all speak of the law of YHWH in a way that encourages their readers to see this vast array of promises, statutes, ordinances, and decrees as cohering together in a single “law” or “word.” In Psalm 1, it is the one “law” of YHWH that is in view as the object of meditation (in implied contrast with the multitude of “wicked,” “sinners,” and “mockers” who offer their rival counsels). In Psalm 19, the “statutes,” “precepts,” “commands,” and “decrees” of verses 7b–9 sit under

11. Cf. W. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 198.

12. Cf. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 88; Ash, *Bible Delight*, 32–34.

the banner of the single “law” referred to in verse 7a. And in Psalm 119, the psalm’s two favorite terms, *tôrâ* and *dābār*, are used almost exclusively in the singular and function broadly as umbrella terms for the whole of YHWH’s revelation, given as a promise to trust and a path to walk in.¹³ Both the unity and the plurality of Scripture are important to the psalmists:

That teaching is both one coherent whole (teaching, word) and something made concrete in many specific injunctions and promises (statements, declarations, orders, decisions, laws, commands). I am concerned for both my way and my ways, both to walk in Yhwh’s way and to walk in Yhwh’s ways. Both the unity and coherence of that teaching and the detailed injunctions and promises are designed to shape my life.¹⁴

Luminous and Illumining

Among the various images that the Torah psalms use for the word of YHWH, one recurring pattern that stands out is the imagery of light and illumination. It is present, strikingly, in Psalm 19, where the depictions of the stars and the sun in the first half of the psalm echo in the depiction of the law of YHWH in the second half: “The commands of the LORD are radiant,” declares the psalmist, “giving light to the eyes” (v. 8). It also occurs repeatedly in Psalm 119 (e.g., vv. 105, 130, 135), in combination with an intersecting pattern of references to eyes, sight, and watching. The two psalms depict the radiance of God’s word in terms of both its brilliance as an object to gaze upon and its power to shed light on other things. Thus, in Psalm 19, the law of YHWH is both an object of beauty to be delighted in (vv. 7–10), expressing God’s glory like the stars of the sky (cf. vv. 1–4a), and a searchlight on the heart, exposing hidden faults like the hot, glaring rays of the sun (vv. 11–14; cf. vv. 4b–6). In Psalm 119, similarly, the law of YHWH is both a book in which “wonderful things” are to be seen (v. 18) and a lamp by which the psalmist hopes to see his world and find his way (vv. 105, 130). These two functions of the law are closely interconnected; the guidance which the psalmist hopes to find in YHWH’s decrees is a function of the gracious shining of YHWH’s face (v. 135).

The psalmist does not present these claims about the radiance of YHWH’s law as easy or obvious empirical observations; the experiential context which the psalm describes is shot through with tension and perplexity. The psalmist wakes in the earliest hours of the morning to pore over YHWH’s word in the

13. Cf. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 86.

14. Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 444.

darkness (v. 148); he has “sought out” (*dārāštī*) YHWH’s precepts (v. 94) and prays that the commandment might not be hidden from him (v. 19); his eyes are worn out from looking for YHWH’s promise and waiting for its fulfillment (vv. 82, 123); his assertions about the nearness of YHWH and the truth of his commands are made in the face of the threatening and very visible nearness of “those who devise wicked schemes . . . [and] are far from [YHWH’s] law” (v. 150). And yet he insists, nonetheless, that the law of YHWH is the light by which he lives, and he prays that his eyes would be opened to see it and to perceive it as “wonderful” (v. 18).¹⁵

Demanding and Gracious

The fact that the Torah psalms express such longing for and delight in YHWH’s law does not mean that the psalmists are blind to its functions of threat and demand, or that these are to be perceived as negatives that are compensated for by the law’s more positive functions. All of YHWH’s words—the statutes and precepts as much as the promises and assurances—are received by the psalmist as gifts from God and esteemed as precious. The *statutes* teach wisdom (Ps. 19:7); the *precepts* give joy to the heart (Ps. 19:8); the *commands* give light to the eyes (Ps. 19:8); together they warn YHWH’s servants away from the paths of destruction and point them toward the paths of blessing and reward (Ps. 19:11). Torah obedience is not the fine print on the back of the salvation contract, the deferred payments on a divine loan scheme. The revelation that the psalmists celebrate is a word of grace from first to last, but it is a converting, transforming grace; it is the kind of grace that seeks out a straying sheep and brings it back to the way of the commandments (Ps. 119:176).

For Israel and the World

The psalmists’ emphasis on the law of YHWH as a gracious gift goes hand in hand with their convictions about the particular, electing kindness of God to the people of Israel. It is “to Moses” that YHWH made known his ways, and “to the people of Israel” that he revealed his deeds (Ps. 103:7). “He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws” (Ps. 147:19–20).

When we come to Scripture via the pathway of the psalms, we cannot help but notice that the Bible we are learning to read is a book that belongs to a worshipping community of God’s people, a book that was originally given to

15. Cf. Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 136–38.

the particular community that was descended from Abraham and constituted as a nation at the foot of Mount Sinai. The “law” that is celebrated is not, in the first instance at least, a universally accessible “moral law within me”¹⁶ but the particular law that was given to Moses at Sinai. The story of God’s mighty deeds (upon which the psalmists urge their readers to meditate) is the story of YHWH’s dealings with Israel (e.g., Pss. 78; 105; 106; 111), and the reasons for which it is to be written and read, remembered and retold, have to do—in part, at least—with the purposes of YHWH for the nation: “so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds” (Ps. 78:6–7).

In the psalms that speak in the first person singular—the individual thanksgivings and laments, for example, and many of the wisdom psalms—the “I” of the psalm is still located, implicitly or explicitly, within the “we” of the nation. The poignant, personal testimony of Psalm 116, for example, is still articulated in terms of the creedal traditions of the nation (v. 5, alluding to Exod. 34:6–7) and recounted “in the presence of all his people” (vv. 14, 18). Frequently, though not always, the speaker in the psalms is not only among the people but also a representative of them and a ruler over them. The editorial title that describes Psalm 19, for example, as “a psalm of David” encourages us to read the psalmist’s devoted attention to the law of YHWH not only as an expression of the private piety of an individual but also as an articulation of the proper stance to be taken by a ruler of God’s people; blessed is the nation whose king (“your servant”) is warned by God’s decrees, who broods earnestly over his hidden faults, and who longs that he might not be ruled over by his willful sins (Ps. 19:11–13). Even in the untitled Psalm 119, with its pervasive, incessant first person singulars, there are hints that the psalmist is not speaking simply as a private believer but as “your servant” (11x within the psalm)—a ruler of YHWH’s people, threatened by the conspiracies of princes, chastened by YHWH for his wanderings, but longing that he might be brought back to the right paths and do justice among YHWH’s people.¹⁷

The fact that the Psalter depicts the Scriptures as belonging to the community of God’s people does not mean that it encourages its readers to interpret the Scriptures simply as a projection of the voice and will of the nation.¹⁸ According to the Psalter, the law of Moses is to be received as YHWH’s word (or, in the second person pronouns of prayer and praise, “your” word), addressing

16. Cf. Kant, *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, 5:161–62 (my translation).

17. See especially the argument in Soll, *Psalm 119*, 126–54, in favor of reading the “I” of Ps. 119 as a royal figure, perhaps a chastened Jehoiachin in exile in Babylon.

18. See Billings, *Word of God*, 199.

and confronting the nation and (at times) driving a painful wedge between the individual who listens and the “princes” and “teachers” who do not (e.g., Ps. 119:23, 99, 161). The scriptural story of YHWH’s mighty works, likewise, is not recounted simply as a piece of triumphalist patriotic propaganda but as a call to national repentance, or as an expression of YHWH’s covenantal commitment that is taken up by the community in order to call on YHWH to remember and honor his promises (e.g., Pss. 78; 89; 95; 105; 106).¹⁹

Nor does the Psalter encourage its readers to regard the Scriptures as if they were intended for Israel’s exclusive benefit. The God whose word is celebrated and recounted in the Psalter is the God by whose word the heavens were made (Ps. 33:6); he is not only the God of Israel but also the God of all the earth. The story of his mighty works is to be told not only to the future generations of Israel but also to all the nations of the world (e.g., Pss. 22:27–31; 45:17; 67:2; 96:3–10; 105:1), and his decree concerning his anointed king is to be proclaimed to their kings and rulers (Ps. 2:7–12).²⁰

Rightly Receiving the Scriptures

The Psalter teaches its readers not only how to perceive what Scripture is but also how to receive what Scripture does—with what purposes to approach Scripture, and how rightly to anticipate and respond to its various speech-acts. When we approach the Scriptures via the pathway of the Psalter, we are not only learning a theoretical doctrine of Scripture’s perfections but also being trained in the sort of practices and dispositions that are to characterize our use of the text.²¹

The opening psalm encourages its readers to approach Scripture not just with attentiveness or acquiescence but with “delight,”²² and the activity that is depicted as the blessed person’s daily and nightly occupation is that of “meditat[ing]” on the law of YHWH. The kind of meditation that is in view in the Psalter, here and elsewhere, is not a dispassionate, wordless contemplation but a heartfelt, vocalized muttering and murmuring that expresses intense and protracted engagement with the text.²³

19. Cf. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 99, ch. 7.

20. Cf. the account of “Scripture’s cosmic mission to Israel” in Work, *Living and Active*, 130–67.

21. See especially O’Donovan, “Reading Church.”

22. The context (and the way in which the verb is used elsewhere in the OT) implies a delight that is as much a function of the will as of the emotions—not just the reactive delight that the reader experiences in the encounter with the Scriptures but also the active delight that takes the reader (back) to the Scriptures to read them.

23. Cf. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 81–82; Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 758.

The psalmists depict this meditation as taking place not only in the public light of day but also in the solitary darkness of the night; the law of YHWH is a text that is not only to be studied, discussed, and comprehended but also to be memorized and internalized—in the language of the psalms, it is to be “hidden” in the heart (e.g., Ps. 119:11),²⁴ among the subterranean springs of character and conduct.

The kind of formative internalization that the psalmists commend is strikingly depicted in Psalms 111 and 112, a pair of acrostic psalms that focus, respectively, on the works of YHWH and the conduct of those who fear him. According to Psalm 111, YHWH has “caused his wonders to be remembered” (v. 4), enabling his works to be “pondered” by those who delight in them (v. 2). The faithfulness of his works is paralleled with the trustworthiness of his precepts (vv. 7–8), suggesting a further connection between pondering God’s works and delighting in his words. This implication is picked up in the following psalm, which depicts the blessedness of those who “fear the LORD” and “find great delight in his commands” (v. 1). The righteousness of YHWH, which is celebrated in Psalm 111, is echoed and manifested in the righteousness of those who fear him (Ps. 112:2–9); their works become a lived echo of Israel’s creedal affirmation about the graciousness and compassion of YHWH (Pss. 111:4–5; 112:4–5; cf. Exod. 34:6).

The psalmists are under no illusion, however, that this kind of virtuous circle of piety, delight, and prosperity is the normal way in which God’s people encounter his word. Again and again, throughout the Psalter, scriptural traditions are evoked in contexts of sin, suffering, and injustice; the law and covenant of YHWH and the story of his mighty works are recalled as a summons to repentance or as a background against which the psalmists lament their situation and cry out for YHWH to act in mercy and justice (e.g., Pss. 78; 89; 95; 105; 106). The depictions of the blessedness of the pious and obedient reader of YHWH’s law in Psalm 1 and Psalm 112 sit alongside the testimony of the forgiven and instructed sinner in Psalm 32, the lamenting petitions of the chastened wanderer in Psalm 119, and the anguished recital of YHWH’s deeds and commitments in Psalm 89.

But confession and lament are not the last words of the Psalter. All the reading and remembering, pondering and meditating, repenting and petitioning enjoined and depicted within the Psalter are directed toward the crescendo of praise with which the collection concludes. The Psalter’s closing sequence commences with Psalm 145, the last Davidic psalm of the collection, in which the psalmist recalls YHWH’s mighty works, placing his own praises within the

24. Cf. P. Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, 41–47.

joyful narration where one generation tells of those works to the next (vv. 4–6) and the whole creation declares God’s praise, “so that all people may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom” (vv. 10–12). The remaining five psalms of the Psalter follow this psalmist’s lead, drawing together the threads of the story of God’s mighty works and summoning his people and the whole creation to sing his praise. And so the Psalter concludes, with a summons to universal praise and an answering doxology that neatly summarize the chief end of all Bible reading: “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.”

Traveling the Pathway of the Psalter

The prayers and praises of the Psalter—both as private meditations and as public praises—play an indispensable role in forming the way that God’s people approach and receive his word. Christian beliefs about Scripture and dispositions toward it are sustained not only by logical argument and earnest exhortation but also by the practices—like singing and praying the psalms—that train us in how to articulate those beliefs and dispositions. The Psalter is a powerful reminder that a living and active doctrine of Scripture needs to be prayed and sung and practiced, not merely defined and defended. Within the Sunday gatherings of much contemporary evangelicalism, the Psalter has faded almost completely from view, except for the occasional cheerful sentiment plucked from a psalm as a call to worship or a line in a song lyric, hanging in the air like the Cheshire cat’s smile. As individuals too, I suspect that—for many of us at least—there is little room in the frenetic and distracting patterns of life that we have constructed for ourselves (or have passively acquiesced to) for the kind of reading, recitation, and meditation on the Psalter in our private and household devotion that might help to remedy that deficiency. But a church that has forgotten the Psalter is a church that has abandoned one of the Bible’s chief pathways into the understanding and experience of God’s Word. Perhaps it is time for us to rededicate ourselves to the kind of practices and disciplines that apprentice us to the psalmists and join us with the church across the ages—and the people of Israel before them—in order that we might begin traveling that pathway again.