Hearing God Speak from the First Testament: John Goldingay

If Hans Frei is right, the Fall took place in Biblical Studies in the eighteenth century.[[1]](#footnote-1) In theory, at least, until that time biblical scholars made two assumptions that then ceased to be taken for granted; two questions that they had not asked now came to be asked. One assumption was that the story the biblical text told, and the actual history of Israel, of Jesus, and of the beginnings of the church, were the same thing. The unasked question was thus whether there might be a difference between the two. The other assumption was that theology or faith or interpretation involves setting our story in the context of the biblical story and evaluating or reformulating our story in light of the biblical story. The second unasked question was thus whether our story might ask testing questions of the biblical story, whether we might question the convictions expressed in the biblical story in light of the convictions that emerge from our story.

The fall, then, involved asking about the difference between the story and the history, and recognizing that they were indeed different. That recognition implied a choice about whether greater significance attached to the story or to the history. In the short term the answer was inevitable; it’s the history not the story that counts. As John Reumann put it, “History is God nowadays.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The fall naturally led to a departure from the Garden of Eden and to a period of wandering in the country of Nod, which refers allegorically to biblical study’s focus for two centuries on uncovering the actual history of Israel, of Jesus, and of the infant church. The new unquestioned assumption was that this actual history is the locus of revelation.

But the attempt to trace the actual history turned out to be a period of fruitless wandering. There are two pieces of evidence for the conclusion that the journey led nowhere. One is that it generated no theology and no insight on the Scriptures’ significance for the thinking and life of the world and the church. It generated nothing that would preach. The uselessness for theologians and preachers of nearly all scholarly biblical commentaries written over these two centuries witnesses to the point. The commentaries were useless whether written by more liberal or more conservative scholars, because everyone shared the starting point that a story needed to be factual in order to have significance, to have authority, to be revelatory, and the starting point that interpretation consisted in investigating its having-happened-ness. Both liberals and conservatives worshiped the god history and their scholarship served this god. When people of either theological persuasion sought to do theology or to preach, their message came from somewhere other than the Scriptures as interpreted in the scholarly world.

The other evidence that the journey was one of fruitless wandering is the fact that the quest for historical actuality proved futile. No actuality was gained. Two centuries of work by great minds has hardly given birth even to a mouse. The wise assumption is that such study is never going to escape the country of Nod. As far as the Old Testament is concerned, there will never be a critically-justifiable consensus on key questions about the story of Israel’s ancestors, about the exodus, about how Israel became Israel in Canaan, and maybe about David and Solomon and much of the later history. It’s actually easy enough to see why it is so. The material in the Old Testament with which historical criticism has to work is not such as can answer the question that historical criticism asks.

The meetings and publications of the Society of Biblical Literature continue to pay much attention to historical investigation on the assumption that progress is possible, without considering the evidence that it’s not possible. One reason we continue is that scholars have to keep propounding new theories in order to get jobs and achieve tenure and promotion. But my hunch is that more broadly scholars are a bit like addicts, who continue to take their drug without asking why they do so.

If history is God, but progress in historical study of the Old Testament is a will-o’-the-wisp, we are screwed. Fortunately, the assumption that history is God was simply a culture-relative presupposition made by liberals and conservatives for a couple of centuries. It is not one we are bound to.

Now we stand on the shoulders of giants. When we put ourselves into the position of our theological great-grandfathers and imagine we are working in the context of the parameters of nineteenth-century debate and are confronted by the challenge of historical criticism, we could hardly have responded otherwise than they did. But the literary turn which came to affect scholarship half a century ago has made it possible to contemplate jumping the opposite way from the direction that was previously inevitable. It has made it possible to read Karl Barth, whose protests in the prefaces to his Roman commentary[[3]](#footnote-3) had previously been unreadable.

Let us now assume that for theological purposes the story counts for at least as much as the history. The basic historicity of the story indeed matters. If Christ is not raised, then our faith is vain, and I think it probably also matters that Yahweh did make some promises to Israel’s ancestors and did bring some Israelites out of Egypt. But the story about those events, the scriptural text, is what counts for theology and preaching.

My first assumption about how we might expect to hear the voice of God coming to us in the Scriptures is thus that it happens textually. I will go on to talk about how it happens historically, spiritually, homiletically, and submissively.

## Being Textual

But first, it happens textually. There is a paradoxical aspect to historical-critical study. Its aim was to discover the text’s own meaning, not least over against the meaning that traditions of interpretation had given it, but it relocated the meaning of the text out from the text itself into the historical events to which it refers. It was the literary turn that made it possible to perceive this point and to consider alternatives.

It might seem self-evident that at least one aspect of the interpretation of a text would be to tease out the text’s own meaning, to consider the significance of the text in its own right. But historical criticism did not do so, and for that matter most biblical interpretation continues not to do so. As I have hinted, a look at the list of papers read at an SBL meeting provides evidence for the point, but so does one’s reading of student papers. In both cases, interest lies not in the text but either in what lies behind the text (the events to which it refers) or in what lies in front of the text (its relevance to questions that interest us). Both foci are troubling, and they have more in common with each other than is implied by contrast between the language of “behind the text” and “in front of the text,” because both foci take their agenda from what seems important to us. The interest in what lies behind the text, the events to which the text relates, is an interest that has its background in front of the text.

There is a further scandal to the focus on matters behind the text and on contemporary significance. An old story tells of a young assistant pastor arriving at a church and asking a senior church member what to preach about. The reply is, “Preach about God, and preach about twenty minutes.” The first half of the exhortation, at least, corresponds to the focus of the Scriptures themselves, but God is not much of a focus in biblical interpretation. Our agenda lies elsewhere.

Maybe it is not so surprising, therefore, that hearing the voice of God in the Scriptures will mean hearing God talk about himself. The Scriptures are the story of God working out his purpose to bring a world into being.

A look at the sermon topics advertised by churches suggests that God is not a major preoccupation in preaching. We are more interested in what we can be and in what we can do. The ethical turn at a philosophical level, which followed the literary turn, is accompanied by an ethical turn in priorities at an everyday level. You will get nowhere with millennials, I have heard it said, unless you talk about justice. The generation before the millennials, toward the end of the twentieth century, thought that God might be bringing renewal to the church, but the millennial generation spotted that God has left us, and it has inferred that we ourselves need to bring renewal to the church. It also spotted that the world is in a mess and that God isn’t doing much about it. God isn’t bringing in the reign of righteousness and justice, so we had better do so.

But the voice of God in the text of the Scriptures speaks of God working out a purpose, and of human beings not making much of a contribution. The Scriptures aren’t as interested in ethics as we are. Sure, they presuppose some ethics, but they don’t agonize over tricky ethical issues or about how to get the world to be more ethical. Their stance suggests that the appropriate response to God’s withdrawal is not to try to make up for the absence but to petition God to return.

We need to reflect on the way developments in biblical interpretation are inclined to mirror developments in the study of English literature and the wider critical environment. The literary turn, post-structuralism, post-colonial study, reception history, and so on, did not start as developments within biblical interpretation. They were brought into biblical interpretation from the cultural context. That fact doesn’t in itself make them wrong, and those approaches to interpretation make fruitful contributions to our hearing the voice of God in the Scriptures, but the dynamic of the process raises questions about the ease with which we sell our souls to the latest hermeneutical idea. This consideration might suggest another angle on the importance of the question, how do we hear the voice of God from the Scriptures. While the hearing may happen in part because approaches that emerge from our context are ones that speak to us, it will also happen because we are not confined to such approaches but are open to ones that correspond to the nature of our text.

At this point, biblical scholarship may be inclined to invoke the word *canonical*, as suggesting an approach to interpretation that does not emerge from the developments in the critical environment, but I do not invoke the word, for several reasons. One is that it is a boo word for some and a hurrah word for others. Another is that it has such a variety of implications, not least for the scholar who especially advocated its use. Another is that on average I don’t find that that people who use the word *canonical* are actually more illuminating on what God may be saying to us out of the Scriptures than people who have no great use for that word.

But the most important reason is that canonical interpretation simply means interpreting the scriptural text that we actually have, in light of its own nature, and there is nothing especially theological about the idea that one should interpret a story or any other kind of text in light of its own nature. To treat Shakespeare’s plays as a source for information about the periods of English history to which they refer, or about things that were going on in the playwright’s own day, is quite legitimate, but it surely doesn’t count as interpreting Shakespeare’s plays.

I do like Brevard Childs’s observation in his Isaiah commentary that the Book of Isaiah is not merely a repository of expressions of the faith of Israel but a repository of material about God.[[4]](#footnote-4) And reading Isaiah as a repository of material about God is not so complicated. Interpreting the Scriptures needs to be textual in the sense that it asks that simple question, what is this text about? And quite often the answer is, “God.”

I could have given the impression that being canonical or textual implies an antithesis over against being historical. I do not imply such an antithesis, and I come now to affirm that we should expect the word of God to come to us through reading the Scriptures historically.

## Being Historical

The Scriptures result from God’s speaking and acting in relationship to people in a way that linked with their historical contexts and circumstances, as is the case with God’s speaking and acting with us, and their accounts of God’s speaking and acting also related to the historical contexts and circumstances of these accounts. My assumption is that the works we have in the Scriptures are ones that the people of God received at different times because they recognized that they were expressions of remarkable smartness, and my further assumption is that they are ones that the people of God then held onto when others fell away because they perceived them to possess a smartness that spoke beyond that immediate context. I am prepared to believe that Childs is right that in some cases the very form of the work (for instance, the Torah-like structure of the Book of Psalms) indicates this assumption or claim.

The meaning of the Scriptures is then time-related and history-related, and in this sense it is not timeless. The Scriptures are timeless in the sense of transcending time and speaking to times other than their own. But one reason why they are time-transcending in significance is that they were timely. And one appreciates their meaning by understanding them in their historical context. Seeing how they were timely can aid an appreciation of how they are time-transcendent and can be timely for us.

A contemporary way to make the point is to note that they are speech acts. Although we ourselves have them as written works and we may mostly get to know them by reading them silently, they began life as expressions of communication that would mostly get home to people through being read aloud and as expressions of communication whereby one party sought to do something to another party. Another way of formulating the process whereby they became the Scriptures would be to infer that their aim of seeking to do something to people was effective in relation to some of their hearers, and that this fact led to their being preserved. So the aim of the Books of Kings was to get people in Judah to own the books’ account of their history and therefore to turn from their rebellion against Yahweh, and the presence of the books in the Scriptures indicates that some people did so turn. The speech act worked, for them. The aim of the psalms was to get people to worship God, pray to God, trust God, and give thanks to God in certain ways (as well as to live faithful lives and to hope in God’s promises), and the presence of the Book of Psalms in the Scriptures indicates that some people accepted that challenge. The book of Isaiah is a prophetic vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem (Isa 1:1), and this description marks it as designed to get people in the Judahite community much later than Isaiah’s own day to live in hope and commitment; the presence of the Book of Isaiah in the Scriptures indicates that some people responded to it with hope and commitment. An implication of the fact that the Scriptures started off as speech acts is that we come to appreciate them through discovering our way into the historical speech-act.

The implicit invitation to future generations of the people of God is then, “In the context of our lives we heard God and we heard our brothers and sisters speaking to us in these writings, and we urge you to do so.”

Preserving those works had two contrasting implications. It both liberated them from their historical context and bound them to their historical context. A parable of its liberating effect is the omission on the part of most of the works to provide us with information on their precise historical context. Yet there is no doubt about the general fact that the First Testament Scriptures come from the life of Israel between (say) 800 and 150 B.C. Their preservation also binds them to their context, because they come with an implicit label saying, “God spoke to us through these writings in the particular context of our lives.”

One way whereby we may hope to hear God speak through them, then, is to put ourselves into the position of the Israelites who were on the receiving end of these speech acts in order to see what they do to us. We may then find that the gap between centuries and cultures dissolves because God is the same God for us as for the people whom these Scriptures first addressed, and that we are the same human beings relating to that same God.

In a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature that was discussing the sense in which we may find Jesus in the Old Testament, I allowed myself the opinion that the rule of faith is a disaster for interpretation of the Old Testament. A gasp ran round the room. I didn’t realize how directly I was challenging a conviction held by many people present. Many people who are committed to theological interpretation of the Scriptures hold the view that such interpretation does or can involve bringing to the Scriptures the rule of the faith (embodied, for instance, in the Nicene Creed), and associated convictions such as the doctrine of the Trinity, and interpreting the Scriptures in their light.

If this assumption means that the rule of the faith and the doctrine of the Trinity can be a lens that enables us to see some things that are actually there in the Scriptures, I have no objection, though I don’t know of many examples of their having that effect. Even if it means we build some extra meaning on the scriptural text, I might have no objection. But neither of these processes should count as constituting theological interpretation of Scripture, period. The Scriptures themselves are theological texts affirming truths about God as these truths were preached in historical contexts, and we would be foolish to miss what emerges from focusing resolutely and expectantly on the way the writings functioned in those contexts.

In this connection, our danger with regard to hearing the voice of God from the Scriptures is as follows. The voice of God and truth about God are there in the Scriptures. But I have noted how a century of historical interpretation of the Scriptures ignored that voice. I don’t imply that the interpreters didn’t believe that the voice was there; many certainly did so believe. But they got stuck in that narrower set of historical questions. The last quarter-century has seen a reaction on the part of people who know that there is something about God in the Scriptures and who want to articulate it. The problem is that it is a reaction that has understandably inferred, from the way historical study has been conducted, that historical study cannot make it possible to hear that voice. So it brings those convictions about God that emerged in the church’s tradition and uses them as the basis for articulating the statements about God that are present in the text. But it is thereby involved in reading into the text as much as reading out of it.

What we require is not a move from a non-theological historical reading of the Scriptures to a non-historical theological reading of the Scriptures. What we require is a move from a non-theological historical reading to a theological historical reading, which will be a fuller historical reading because it articulates the text’s own theology. Our theological interpretation needs to avoid anachronism. It requires us to be seriously canonical, or rather seriously textual, and therefore to be seriously historical. It requires it because that is the way we can hear how God was actually speaking then, rather than being confined in our listening to things that the people of God have articulated since.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Yet I have hinted that I don’t necessarily object in principle to our building things on the scriptural text that aren’t there. And I guess my major reason for restraining that objection is that God sometimes builds things onto the scriptural text that aren’t there. I will discuss it in terms of being spiritual, because it involves the activity of the Holy Spirit.

## Being Spiritual

Fifty years ago, as a seminary student in England, I went through a religious crisis that didn’t involve wondering whether the Christian faith was true but involved wondering whether I belonged to the elect. During this crisis I went to the regular seminary chapel service one morning, and the Old Testament lesson came from Deuteronomy 17, where Moses recalls Israel’s having come from Egypt and says to the people’s potential king, “You shall not return that way again” (Deut 17:16). This declaration came to me as a promise that God had taken hold of me and would not let me go. That morning I had gone to chapel unsure of my position; I left chapel sure of it. The significance of this experience in our present context is that Moses’ words to the king are not a promise but a challenge; “You *are* *not* to return that way again.” God used the scripture to minister to me by ascribing to it a significance that was not its own meaning.

Eighteen years ago I had given in my notice from my job in another seminary in England and I was contemplating an invitation to come to Fuller. My first wife was wheelchair-bound, and there were various ways in which such a move might therefore be hazardous. During this period, in the regular chapel service at that seminary, one morning God told a student, “Tell John ‘Judges 18:6.’” The passage reads, “Go in peace. Your journey has the LORD’s approval”; or in another translation, “Go in peace. The mission you are on is under the eye of the LORD.” There is no real analogy between my position and that of the person who is given that message in Judges. Once again, God used a scripture to minister to me by giving it a significance that was unrelated to its meaning.

Many Christians have experiences of this kind. They are analogous to a feature of the way the New Testament refers to the Scriptures. The opening chapter of Acts records such an appeal to verses from Psalms 69 and 109. These psalms are protests and prayers appealing to God for deliverance from attackers and for the punishment of the attackers; amusingly, they are the kind of psalms that embarrass modern Christians. In Acts, Peter appeals to them to support his conviction that the believers need to appoint someone to take Judas’s place in the Twelve. His use of the psalms is unrelated to their own meaning. The same judgment applies to subsequent appeals in Acts to psalms and other texts, and more generally to many New Testament appeals to the Scriptures. Some New Testament appeals to the Scriptures do work with the texts’ inherent meaning, but here I focus on ones that provide an analogy for that later Christian experience to which I have referred.

There are a number of Christian approaches to this aspect of the New Testament’s use of the Scriptures. It is possible to argue that typology implicitly underlies much New Testament interpretation. Whether typology actually does underlie it or not, it can be used to provide some justification for it. Raymond Brown included this consideration in arguing that texts may have a fuller sense not intended by the human author but intended by the divine author of the Scriptures, and Paul Ricoeur argued more generally that texts may have a surplus meaning, partly because once texts escape their (human) author, their meaning is no longer limited to what that author envisaged.[[6]](#footnote-6) I have had that notion in mind in my comments about texts gaining liberation from their historical context.

But I am not clear that these approaches help a great deal our understanding of those experiences of mine to which I have referred, or our understanding of what Acts does with the texts it quotes. These experiences and interpretations didn’t involve typology except in the thinnest of senses. And they didn’t involve appeal to a fuller sense in the text. The nearest thing one could say along those lines is that they possibly appealed to something that was in the back of the Holy Spirit’s mind in inspiring those texts. But in any case I think it’s worthwhile to continue to preserve the difference between the meaning of texts and the significance of texts, which I associate especially with E. D. Hirsch.[[7]](#footnote-7) Texts have an inherent *meaning* as an act of communication between some parties but they can also gain limitless further *significance* in new contexts.

It then seems to me helpful simply to recognize that the Holy Spirit sometimes takes up lines from the Scriptures in order to provide answers to questions we have, in light of which they gain new significance that’s not necessarily related to their inherent meaning.[[8]](#footnote-8) It’s a theologically interesting question why the Holy Spirit should use the Scriptures in the way he does. God could easily enough have spoken to me in those two tricky contexts with a message through a prophet, and God could have done the same in Acts. And God does do so speak via prophets. In between those two experiences, at the service when I was installed as Principal of the seminary in England, and when my wife was well on the way to her disabled state with all the pressure that was bringing to me, through one of my colleagues God gave me the promise, “I will make the north wind your warmth, the snow your purity, the frost your brightness, and the night sky of winter your illumination.” It has meant as much to me as those reapplied scriptural verses.

In Acts 1, Peter himself describes the verses from the two psalms as ones that the Holy Spirit spoke, and such formulations appear elsewhere in the New Testament. Their idea seems to be that the extraordinary significance that a passage turns out to have in a context quite other than that in which it arose (and a significance that seems to have nothing much to do with its intrinsic meaning) is explained by the fact that the Holy Spirit was involved in its original coming into being. The Letter to the Hebrews makes a related point when it declares that the Holy Spirit *says* (present tense) a certain thing, and goes on to quote a scripture. The Holy Spirit is speaking those scriptural words now. The fact that the Holy Spirit was involved with the people of God then and is also involved now makes it not hard to believe that words from back then can speak now. God’s reuse of scriptural verses perhaps also affirms for God and for us that we live in the context of the Scriptures and in the context of the relationship between God and us that they describe.

Whatever the Holy Spirit’s reasons for using the Scriptures in this way, the implications for thinking about hearing “The Voice of God and the Text of Scripture” are at least twofold. On one hand, we cannot control the process whereby we come to be addressed by God through the Scriptures. God controls whether and when and how his own voice comes to us in the text of the Scriptures. Thus one aspect of the answer to that question about the voice of God and the text of Scripture is that the voice comes on God’s initiative by God’s sovereignty in accordance with God’s timing and in a way that God controls. What is true about prophecy also applies to this speaking. We can long for God to speak or ask God to speak and we can listen, but we cannot make speaking happen. God’s speaking in the way I have described suggests that point.

The second implication is that, when it happens, it’s not amenable to being tested in any finally conclusive way. It’s a speaking that raises the same tricky questions as the evaluation of prophecy, over which Jeremiah agonizes in Jeremiah 23. Jeremiah is perhaps well aware that he is vulnerable to one test of the authenticity of prophecy, that prophecies that don’t come true are shown not to have come from God. Jeremiah’s prophecies keep not coming true, so he has to sidestep that test. He rather affirms there that there are also moral and theological tests whereby one may prove that a prophecy is not from God, and these tests are all that he needs in order to demonstrate that Hananiah’s prophecies came from elsewhere. But the moral and theological tests do not quite prove that Jeremiah’s own words come from God, and at another level, Jeremiah is reduced to the simple declaration that he knows he has listened in on a meeting of Yahweh’s cabinet and that other prophets haven’t. For me, with hindsight I can declare that the way Deuteronomy spoke to me passes the theological test. The way Judges spoke to me I had to accept on the basis that it came from God’s cabinet. Some pretty big coincidences would otherwise have been required to make this particular speaking happen. But I was reduced to trusting God over the matter; I made the comment that God himself was going to look silly if our move didn’t work out, And of course it did work out, and the student’s word passed the “Does it come true” test.

The kind of interpretation that I am calling spiritual involves starting from a question that we have and finding God speaking to that question through a scripture in a way that has nothing much to do with its own meaning. But there is also a kind of interpretation that starts from a question we have and has God speaking to that question through a scripture in a way that does work with its own meaning.

## Being Homiletical

The Sunday before I write, the Episcopal lectionary presented me with Proverbs 31, Psalm 1, James 2, and Mark 10. More often than not I talk for five minutes after each of the set scriptures rather than for fifteen or twenty minutes after the Gospel, and I don’t feel obliged to link the passages, but the collocation sometimes stimulates thought and awareness.

In this case, wondering how God spoke to Israel through Proverbs 31, I realized that the dynamic of that speaking might not be so different than it is for modern Westerners. The Old Testament as a whole begins by declaring that women as much as men are made in God’s image and it portrays a series of active, enterprising, and confident women who embody something that anticipates the portrait of the resourceful woman of Proverbs 31, people such as Sarah, Miriam, Aksah, Deborah, Ruth, and Abigail. At the same time the Old Testament is realistic about the fact that such women’s menfolk can stop them being assertive, active, and enterprising. Proverbs 31 could then have functioned to remind men and women of the scriptural vision of womanhood and to urge them not to give up on it. And maybe it does the same in our context, because we too both assume women’s equality and also know about glass ceilings and about women doing the same work as men but not getting the same pay.

There was something else about that vision that closes Proverbs. At the other end of the book, the opening paragraph of Proverbs describes the book’s aim. It exists to help its readers be smart people. But this opening description of smartness includes on one hand a commitment to what is right, to what is faithful, and to what is fair, and on the other hand a commendation of living in awe of Yahweh, in submission to Yahweh. Indeed, it says, such submission to Yahweh is the first principle of being smart.

So the first paragraph of Proverbs. Smartness involves ethics and spirituality. Lo and behold, the vision of the resourceful, smart, woman with which the book closes incorporates the same two notes. On one hand, this woman opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy: in other words, she’s concerned for what is right and faithful and fair. And on the other hand, she’s someone who lives in awe of Yahweh, in submission to Yahweh, in obedience to Yahweh. To put it another way, she is also an embodiment of Psalm 1, which followed this Proverbs reading in our service.

Out of the James passage I focused on my favorite scary verse from the Scriptures, “You have not because you ask not.” I noted how that verse contradicts the popular Christian teaching that prayer is the way we conform our will to God’s will. On the contrary, prayer is the way we relate to God as our father, and we ask our father for what we want, though like smart children we may recognize that there are often good reasons why our father doesn’t give it. But we don’t let that fact stop us asking. In the sermon I spoke about some things I’m hesitant to ask God to do because they seem so big, like bring harmony to the Middle East or unify the church or enable a particular person I care about to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

In the Mark passage, I focused on the disciples’ desire to be the greatest, and I noted the pressure that has come to the disciples through their already being appointed to be the twelve people who will rule the twelve Israelite clans. It tempts them to want to be the number one among these twelve. I noted that the story suggested a focus for our prayers for a new Bishop of Los Angeles and for the incoming Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and for a new President of the United States. The question raised by the Gospel thus linked with the scary verse in James in that it points us to a vital and/or outrageous prayer for such leaders. And further, it linked with that feature of Proverbs that sees concern for the needy and awe for God as aspects of being a smart woman.

What happened to me through preparing to preach was that I heard God speak through the Scriptures in old and new ways through the collocation of the four passages with each other, with questions arising from our present context, with concerns of my own, and with the week’s events and news.

Now it’s possible to be critical of the lectionary, mostly because it’s not very balanced.[[9]](#footnote-9) But we might see the glass as half-full. The lectionary presented me with a collocation of passages that I didn’t choose and it thus opened up new possibilities of God’s speaking through the Scriptures. Further, the voice of God comes to us in the text of the Scriptures through our letting there be an interweaving between the way they speak in their context and the way our context relates to the questions they raise. A preacher is someone who lives in two worlds, the world of the Scriptures and our contemporary world.[[10]](#footnote-10) I express the point as a descriptive statement, but of course it’s really prescriptive, and it presupposes that it’s easy for a preacher to live in neither world.

## 5. Being Submissive

I began by noting two long-unquestioned ideas to which Hans Frei drew attention. The first was the identity between the scriptural story and the events to which the story refers. The second was the assumption that we interpret our story by setting it in the context of the scriptural story. The reversal that took place in the eighteenth century generated not only that interest in events rather than text, but also a new assumption about the relationship of the scriptural story and our story, that we evaluate the Scriptures in light of our convictions. In other words, biblical study became critical.

Admittedly, the word *critical* is used in confusing ways. Arguably, modern biblical study first became critical by insisting that interpretation of the Scriptures was critical of any received tradition of interpretation, and thus of what the church said the Scriptures meant. Critical biblical study means letting the Scriptures determine their meaning by the usual procedures for ascertaining the meaning of anything. One’s aim is “to read Scripture like any other book,”[[11]](#footnote-11) though the fact that they are not one book means a wide variety of approaches.[[12]](#footnote-12) I have noted that being critical means not letting the rule of faith determine the Scriptures’ meaning.

In general, however, critical interpretation of something means criticizing it as well as criticizing traditional interpretations of it, and this meaning is the one that more commonly attaches to the expression “biblical criticism.” Such criticism then takes its basis for criticism from somewhere other than the Scriptures themselves, though rare are the interpreters who make explicit where this basis lies.

Among interesting and illuminating current hermeneutics are postcolonial interpretation, disability interpretation, and ecological interpretation. They manifest an ambivalence in their relationship with the Scriptures, an ambivalence that they share with earlier hermeneutics such as feminist interpretation. On one hand, the perspective from which they start enables them to draw attention to features of the Scriptures that had often been missed. So postcolonial interpretation enables us to recognize that the Scriptures do not come from communities that are in power, the kind of communities from which scholarly interpreters usually come. They come from communities that are more like colonies than like superpowers. This awareness opens up the possibility of a sharper reading of (say) Isaiah in its own right, not to say Nahum in its own right, and also of such texts’ significance for people in our world who belong either to colonial communities or to superpower communities.[[13]](#footnote-13)

So a postcolonial hermeneutic opens up the possibility of hearing the text more clearly and more sharply as it functioned for its original hearers, and thus of discovering its significance in our world. But such a hermeneutic also becomes a basis for critique of the biblical text, on the grounds that the text itself is affected by quasi-colonial or imperial assumptions.

There is then a paradoxical aspect to this critique. The nature of a superpower’s relationship with its colonies is that it exercises power not only in economics or politics but in ways of thought and values. Postcolonial thinking seeks to subvert and destabilize the power relationship between the superpower and its colonies and to enable subaltern writers to speak with their own voice and within the parameters of their own ways of thinking. And postcolonial biblical study seeks to destabilize that power relationship. The paradox is that postcolonial biblical study commonly takes an imperial stance in relation to the Scriptures. That is, the Scriptures are mostly permitted to relate to postcolonial thinking in one of two ways. Either the postcolonial perspective allows one to see ways in which the Scriptures themselves validate postcolonial attitudes rather than the imperial attitudes that they had been assumed to support. Or the postcolonial perspective allows one to see that the Scriptures themselves embody imperial attitudes.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The Scriptures are thus the victims of postcolonial study in the same way that colonies are the victims of the imperial power. The imperial power claims to be bringing positive benefits to the colonies, and indeed it does so, but the presupposition of its approach is that the superpower knows best and that its framework of thinking needs to govern the colonies’ thinking. Postcolonial study treats the Scriptures in the way a superpower treats its colonies. They become resources that the superpower can appropriate where it approves of them or where it deems them useful, but that it can dismiss where it does not approve of them or does not deem them useful. And there is no way in which “the empire can write back.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Like the colonies of an empire, the Scriptures are the victims of postcolonial study’s imperialism. The empire continues to maintain control but by different means. It continues to impose it value system.

Admittedly I oversimplify, because l fail to allow for hybridity. An imperial culture such as Britain’s set itself over against a colonial culture such as India’s and presupposed its superiority, yet its doing so was both unrealistic and unwise. Where would Britain be without Indian tea, Indian curry, and pajamas? In practice, cultures influence one another; they are regularly hybrid. This fact deconstructs the claim that the imperial culture is inherently superior.

Postcolonial biblical study is likewise hybrid, as is all critical biblical study. It lives in the world of the West, of the Enlightenment, of modernity and postmodernity. It also lives in the world of the Scriptures. Its practitioners are commonly people who began their academic lives with a traditional adherence to the Scriptures, though they likely “grew out of it.” So postcolonialism, like most biblical criticism, has an uneasy relationship with the Scriptures. Indeed, postcolonial cultures commonly have an uneasy relationship with their former overlords, like that of teenagers to their parents. The point is illustrated by the ambiguous attitude that the United States takes to Europe.

The result of the stance that postcolonialism takes to the Scriptures is that such study can never have God’s voice come to it except to confirm what it thinks already. Unless by some miracle the study already assumes a scriptural viewpoint without recognizing that it is so, it will follow that by being partly scriptural, it is bound to be unscriptural.

Ironically, then, postcolonial study deconstructs because it operates on an imperialist basis. Something similar without irony and perhaps without self-contradiction is true of other hermeneutics such as feminist interpretation or disability interpretation or ecological interpretation.

Yet there is a further irony in the fact that people who abjure a critical or liberal stance towards the Scriptures are affected by the same aftermath of that Fall which is analyzed by Hans Frei. That is, more conservative Christians are also inclined to be concerned with how relevant are the Scriptures to us, rather than how relevant are we to the Scriptures. Christian faith is about me and my personal relationship with God, they may assume, or about me and my making my life work out. More recently, I have noted, it is about justice. We evaluate the Scriptures on the basis of how far they speak to our agenda, or we covertly pass judgment on them by deciding to pay attention to some parts and not to others. To be fair, I guess it has always been so.

It has been argued that biblical study is necessarily critical in the sense that it will accept some perspectives from the Scriptures, and ignore others, because the Scriptures themselves express a variety of viewpoints on the issues they cover. When James E. Brenneman so argues in *Canons in Conflict*,[[16]](#footnote-16) his subtitle is *Negotiating Texts in True and False Prophecy.* Brenneman is especially interested in the texts that speak on one hand of beating swords into plowshares and on the other of beating plowshares into swords, and his basis for deciding which text has authority is the stance of the interpretive community.[[17]](#footnote-17) But the implication is that the voice we hear is the voice of the current community rather than the voice of the Scriptures.

I have recently been involved in a project to facilitate the study of the Scriptures across the Anglican Communion. You could say that we were asking the question, how do we as Anglicans hear the voice of God in the Scriptures? Part of the background is that for us as for other denominations, reading the Scriptures has become contested because of the fracas over same-sex relationships, and the Scriptures are read differently in this connection according to whether you come from Africa or from North America, with England maybe somewhere in between.

As part of our work we looked at Jonah, and we then thought that we should consider the different stance to Nineveh taken in Nahum compared with that taken in Jonah. It is a similar difference to the one Brenneman considers. But a principle we tacitly accepted is that seeking to hear the voice of God in the Scriptures means listening to Nahum as well as Jonah. Enlightened Western people prefer Isaiah and Jonah to Joel and Nahum, but living by that preference again means that we have decided what we will hear simply on the basis of our presuppositions. To put it in late twentieth-century terms, our preunderstanding has ceased to be a preliminary understanding that opens up a conversation. Our preunderstanding has hardened into a final understanding. But the function of the Scriptures is more than merely to fill out what we know already. As is the case with prophecy, the point about the Scriptures is to confront what we think already, not merely to confirm it.

Interpreting the Scriptures like any other book does not mean giving them the same status as any other book.[[18]](#footnote-18) It does mean that the process of understanding is similar to that for any other book. But their status is different. The Scriptures being the Scriptures means we yield to what they say when we don’t like it. And discerning the voice of God in the Scriptures likely depends in part on our advance willingness to do so. If someone’s will is to do God’s will, Jesus says, he will know whether or not Jesus’ teaching comes from God (John 7:17). You don’t first discover what the teaching is, then decide whether to do what it says. You write God a blank check, and then you discover how God will cash it.

I ponder the mystery of how communities and individuals come to change their minds, especially about things that matter. It’s my way of articulating the election-freewill question. I love the way Psalm 119 walks round this question at great length. It keeps promising God commitment but it also keeps asking God to teach us his expectations of us. It doesn’t mean we don’t know what the expectations are, that we don’t know what the Torah says. It means we recognize that our knowledge of the content of the Torah has not reached and changed our inner being. To use Jeremiah’s expression, it’s not written on our hearts. How do we hear God’s voice through the Scriptures? By being people who are already committed to obeying God’s voice there.

1. See Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. J. Reumann, “*Oikonomia*-terms in Paul in comparison with Lucan *Heilsgeschichte*,” *New Testament Studies* 13 (1966-67), 147-67 (147). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *The Epistle to the Romans* (reprinted Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1963); cf.

   Richard Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See e.g., his comments on 1:2-31 and on 40:12-31 (*Isaiah* [Louisville: WJK, 2001], 17, 307). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I have argued these points further in “Theological Interpretation: Don’t Be Christ-centered, Don’t Be Trinitarian, Don’t Be Constrained by the Rule of Faith,” in *Do We Need the New Testament?*  (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 157-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See e.g., Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore: St. Mary’s University, 1955); Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1967); *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. J. Gordon McConville notes that my interpreting Matthew’s use of Isaiah 7:14 in this way “simply cuts the connection between the literal meaning of Isa. 7:14 and its (‘inspired’) re-application in Matthew” (“Figures in Isaiah 7:14,” in McConville and Lloyd K. Pietersen [eds.], *Conception, Reception, and the Spirit* [A. T. Lincoln Festchrift; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015], 3-18 [16]): which I accept, with the comment that this seems to be what God does. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See John Goldingay, “Canon and Lection,” In *To Glorify God: Essays on Modern Reformed Liturgy* (ed. B. D. Spinks and I. R. Torrance), 85-97. Edinburgh: Clark, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. James D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress/London: SCM, 1970), 163; cf. Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1995), 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in Frederick Temple and others, *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 330-433 (338)*;* cf. James Barr, “Jowett and the ‘Original Meaning’ of Scripture,” Religious Studies 18 (1982): 433-437; “Jowett and the Reading of the Bible ‘Like Any Other Book,’” Horizons in Biblical Theology 4.2/5.1 (1982-83): 1-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cf. R. W. L. Moberly, “‘Interpret the Bible like Any Other Book’?” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4 (2010): 91–110 (101-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See e.g., Andrew T. Abernethy and others (eds.), *Isaiah and Imperial Context* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013); W. J. Wessels, “Nahum,” *Old Testament Essays* 11 (1998): 615-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Mark G. Brett’s *Decolonizing God* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008) helped me articulate this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Bill Ashcroft and others, *The Empire Writes Back* (2nd ed., London/New York: Routledge, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. New York: OUP, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Canons in Conflict*, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See the discussion in R. W. L. Moberly, “‘Interpret the Bible like Any Other Book’?” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4 (2010): 91–110. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)