

Theological Interpretation: Don't Be Christ-Centered, Don't Be Trinitarian, Don't Be Constrained By the Rule of Faith

Over the past couple of decades, theological interpretation of Scripture, including the Old Testament, has become a significant theme. In principle I am enthusiastic about this development, but I think that the principles on which some of its advocates operate are quite wrong.

First, theological interpretation of the Old Testament will not be Christocentric.

On the first page of the main text in a recent book on theological interpretation of the Old Testament, Craig Bartholomew declares that “Any theological hermeneutic worth its salt must be Christocentric.” My response is that on the contrary, theological interpretation needs to be theocentric. Phillip Cary in his theological commentary on Jonah declares, “The book of Jonah is all about Christ.” I am not sure what this statement means, and the commentary does not really help me to know, but while it would be meaningful to suggest that all of Jonah helps us understand Christ, as far as what the book itself is “about,” it would be more appropriate to say that the book of Jonah is all about God.

I give a student lecture in which I point out the variety of lenses with which the New Testament looks at the Old Testament. I do so because they are aware of the Jesus lens but are inclined to assume that *the* point about the Old Testament is that it witnesses to Jesus, and I try to show them how the New Testament has a broader view. It has many other lenses – it uses the Old Testament for insight on the church, the ministry, mission, the world, and so on.

It is thus questionable whether the New Testament's theological interpretation is Christocentric. Even if it is, that fact would not mean that all interpretation should be so. I do not imply that the New Testament might be wrong in being Christocentric, only that there could be good reasons for its being Christocentric; its vocation is to offer an interpretation of Jesus. But the New Testament itself shows that an interpretation of Jesus is not the only focus of interpretation that the church needs. Further, interpretation of Jesus with the aid of the Old

Testament is a different exercise from understanding what God was doing in speaking to Israel through the Old Testament writers, and thus what God has to say to us through their work. Matthew's account of Jesus' birth does not help one understand the passage in Isaiah 7 about a girl having a baby. Theological interpretation of Isaiah 7 will need to look at what God was saying to Israel in that passage. It will not need to refer to Jesus.

The Old Testament restrains an interest in either Testament from being Christocentric. Indeed, it draws our attention to the fact that Christ is not Christocentric. Christ came to speak of the reign of God. At the End he will give up the reign to God, "so that God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15:24, 28). When every knee bows to Jesus, it will be "to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:11). Jürgen Moltmann has observed that "the name the church gives itself" is "the church of Jesus Christ." This name is not the one the New Testament gives it. The New Testament never describes the church as the church of Jesus Christ, only as the church of God. George S. Hendry declared that "the Holy Spirit is in an exclusive sense the Spirit of Christ." But the expressions "Spirit of Christ" or "spirit of Jesus" comes only four times in the New Testament, whereas "Spirit of God" comes twelve times, and of course many times in the Old Testament.

According to Francis Watson, "Christian faith is... necessarily christocentric: for in Jesus Christ the identity of God... is definitively disclosed." Robert Wall puts it another way: "the truth about God is now known more completely because of Jesus Christ in whom God's word and purposes became flesh and through whom God's grace and truth are mediated to us." Yet in what sense is the truth about God known more completely through Jesus? Robert Wall refers to John 1:14: Jesus was full of grace and truth. But John does not mean that before Jesus people did not realize that God was characterized by grace and truth. The very words are picked up from God's self-revelation at Sinai. John's point is not that no one knew God's nature before Jesus but that the known nature of God was embodied in Jesus. Robert Wall also refers to Hebrews 1:1-2, whose implication is similar. Jesus did not reveal something new about God. What he did was embody God. The point about Jesus was not something he revealed. It was something he was and did. In embodying God's instinct to sacrifice himself for people, which God had been showing through Israel's story, Jesus made it possible for people to be God's children. Before Jesus, Israel had a perfectly good revelation of God. The problem was that

people did not give a proper response to this revelation. Jesus came to make such a response possible. If this is the sense in which theological interpretation needs to be Christocentric, then one can affirm it. But it does not bring a new meaning to Old Testament texts.

Francis Watson, again, declares, "The Old Testament comes to us with Jesus and from Jesus, and can never be understood in abstraction from him." There can be "no interpretative programmes that assume an autonomous Old Testament." It is "a body of texts whose centre and goal lie not in themselves but in that towards which they are retrospectively seen to be oriented." "The Christian church has not received an Old Testament that can be abstracted from Jesus. Such a collection would not be an 'Old Testament'".

One flaw in this argument is that the Scriptures that come to us with Jesus and from Jesus are not the Old Testament. They are simply the Scriptures. They did not become the Old Testament until a century or two after Jesus' day. I am not sure what would be the unfortunate result of interpretive programs that assume an autonomous Old Testament. I am sure that our actual problem is that of subsuming the Old Testament under our understanding of what is Christian, so that this strategy enables us to sidestep parts of the Old Testament that we modern people want to avoid. By sleight of hand, aspects of what the Old Testament says about God are filtered out in the name of Christocentric interpretation when the real problem is that we moderns don't like them. Christocentric interpretation makes it harder for the Scriptures to confront us when we need to be confronted. It is not the case that what was hidden in the Old is revealed in the New. Rather, there are many things revealed in the Old which the church has hidden by its interpretive strategy, obscuring the nature of scriptural faith.

Here are some examples. First, the Old Testament has a huge amount to say about superpowers. If the church had read what it says, it might have been able to argue against some of the oppressiveness of what we British did in creating our empire and what the United States has done as a superpower. Second, the Old Testament has a huge amount to say about work. In order to perceive it, one needs to see that the Old Testament does not talk about slavery. As the King James Version recognizes, it talks about being a bondservant, which is very different, and is more like work in our terms. The New Testament does talk about slavery, and raises no questions about the validity of the institution. It would have been harder for people on both

sides of the Atlantic to argue for the maintenance of slavery if they had read the New Testament in light of the Old. Third, Christians have often held an oppressive understanding of the relationship of husbands to their wives. A Christocentric or Christological interpretation of the Song of Songs prevents the application of that book to a vision for relationships between a man and a woman. An autonomous Old Testament affirms the sexual relationship between a man and a woman in a way the New Testament does not.

In a classic text for theological interpretation, David Steinmetz speaks of the difficulty raised for Christians by Psalm 137 with its talk of baby-bashing, given that we are “expressly forbidden” to avenge ourselves on our enemies. “Unless Psalm 137 has more than one meaning,” he says, “it cannot be used as a prayer by the Church and must be rejected as a lament belonging exclusively to the piety of ancient Israel.” Allegorical interpretation, he goes on, “made it possible for the church to pray directly and without qualification even a troubling Psalm like 137”.

Now Psalm 137 is an odd starting point for thinking about the interpretation of the Old Testament. One would not start from the passage about the millennium in Revelation 20 in seeking to understand New Testament interpretation. (That, of course, is a joke, because it is what some people in the United States do.) Yet the fact that Psalm 137 strikes us a difficult text may itself help us to see some of the issues involved in theological interpretation of the Old Testament. First, the early church had no difficulty with psalms such as Psalm 137, understood in their literal sense. The New Testament has the martyrs praying in a Psalm 137 way in Revelation 6 and it several times quotes Psalm 69, a psalm with a similar tone to Psalm 137. Second, the psalm makes no reference to avenging oneself on one’s enemies. Indeed, its implication is the opposite. It is an expression of the regular Old Testament inclination to leave vengeance to God. Third, one significance of the psalm is that it is a prayer by an oppressed people for God to judge an oppressor. Most modern biblical interpreters belong to oppressor nations rather than oppressed peoples; being able to rule out its literal meaning makes it possible for the psalm to have no purchase on us. An oppressed people’s attitude to the psalm may be different. And fourth, related to that fact is the way what presents itself as

interpretation that takes up the insight of the pre-critical period can easily become a way of propagating what are actually modern concerns.

Could an autonomous Old Testament encourage the kind of genocide that Deuteronomy and Joshua speak of? Yet the Old Testament itself does not treat such genocide as a pattern for regular Israelite life, any more than mainstream Jewish interpretation does. Further, ironically, the positive way the New Testament speaks in Acts 7:45 about Joshua's taking of the land and in Hebrews 11 about Israel's conquering kingdoms, becoming faithful in battle, and routing foreign armies, suggests that it did not feel any of the unease about such Old Testament narratives that is characteristic of modern Christians, as it does not feel any unease about the kind of praying that occurs in Psalm 137.

So I do not see much danger in an autonomous Old Testament, but I see much danger in the narrowing down of the Old Testament's agenda to that of a Christian tradition which is itself narrower even than that of the New Testament. Christocentric interpretation makes it harder for the Scriptures to confront us when we need to be confronted.

Second, theological interpretation of the Old Testament will be theological but not trinitarian.

"Precisely because a theological hermeneutic is Christocentric it will be trinitarian," Craig Bartholomew says. This assertion is open to similar questioning as applies to the idea that it should be Christocentric, and to some further questioning of its own.

Admittedly, the notion that theological interpretation should be Trinitarian seems to be more a theoretical principle than one with significance purchase in connection with particular texts. Perhaps it is mainly a declaration that we interpret Scripture knowing that the real God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the one to whom the Old Testament refers. It is of course right that God has been Trinity from the Beginning and thus that all God's activity in the Old Testament is the activity of the Trinitarian God.

An instance of Trinitarian theological interpretation of particular texts is the suggestion that God's being Trinity enables one to see extra significance in the way the prophets speak of the Father, the Messiah, and the spirit of God. It's been said that

The Major Prophets... are strikingly trinitarian. First of all, their message is christocentric, repeatedly looking beyond the ongoing series of political and military crises and the spiritual malaise that marked the Israelite monarchy, as well as the devastating humiliation of exile, to the coming of a Davidic heir and just ruler who would succeed where his predecessors had failed and would therefore enable Israel to experience the covenantal blessings that they frequently forfeited through disobedience....

Second, the Major Prophets refer more frequently to God as “Father” than other sections of the Old Testament (e.g., Isa. 9:6; 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 3:4, 19; cf. Mal. 1:6; 2:10). Finally, the Spirit is instrumentally involved in the ministries of the prophets and the future Davidic king (e.g., Isa. 11:2; 32:15; 34:16; 42:1; 44:3; 48:16; 59:21; 61:1; 63:10, 11, 14; Ezek. 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 8:3; 11:1, 5, 24; 36:27; 37:1, 14; 39:29; 43:5). The Major Prophets should be heard as a message regarding the triune God’s will and plan for humanity — with a special focus on Israel.

There are two sorts of problem about that quotation. It is insufficiently theological, and it skews insight into the theological meaning of the Prophets. With regard to the references to the coming David ruler: first, the Prophets do not repeatedly look to such a person. There are relatively few such references; among them are Isaiah 11:1-10; Jeremiah 23:5-6; and Ezekiel 34:23-24. There are other texts that the New Testament uses to help it understand Jesus, such as the passage about a young girl in Isaiah 7, and other texts that the Christian tradition came to us in that way, such as the “to us a child is born” passage in Isaiah 9, but if we take those later allusions as key to understanding the Prophets, we commit to two evils (as Jeremiah 2:13 puts it). We lose the inherent theological significance of what God was saying through the Prophets to their people, and we gain nothing in its place, because whatever we are reading into the Prophets’ words we already know from the New Testament and the Christian tradition.

Further, by focusing on the passages referring to a coming Davidic ruler, we obscure the theological significance of the fact that this expectation is only one aspect of the way the

Prophets' portray God's fulfilling his purpose. When they refer to this future consummation, they more often do so without referring to a Davidic ruler (so, for instance, throughout Isaiah 40 – 66). Now, all God's promises find their Yes in Christ (2 Cor 1:20). Focusing on the promises that explicitly relate to a Davidic ruler obscures the way Jesus is the fulfillment or confirmation of all God's promises.

With regard to the references to God as Father, there are two parallel points to be made. One is that the Prophets' references relate to God's being the Father of Israel, whereas in connection with Trinitarian interpretation, the point about God's being Father is that he is the Father of the Son. Further, the God who is called Father in the Old Testament is not simply the first person of the Trinity. Yahweh is God - period; therefore Yahweh is Father, Son, and Spirit. Applying prophetic passages about the Father to the first person of the Trinity obscures their theological significance.

Further, again, the Christian idea of God's fatherhood in relation to his people is more often conveyed in the Old Testament by images other than fatherhood. It is a common feature of the relationship between the Testaments that they express the same ideas but use different images for them. For instance, both Testaments speak of a quasi-personal embodiment of power that is resistant to God. The New Testament often calls this entity Satan. The Old Testament uses the Hebrew word *satan* but does not use it in that connection; it refers to this entity by terms such as Leviathan. The two Testaments' use of the same word is not always an indication that they are referring to the same reality. Their use of different words is not always an indication that they are referring to different realities. Now when the Old Testament wants to refer to the relationship between God and his people that is conveyed by the image of fatherhood, it more often uses other images. A spectacular example is the image of the *go'el*, the next-of-kin or guardian or redeemer or restorer. Your *go'el* is someone who is more powerful than you and has resources that you do not have, which he is willing to use on your behalf because you are a member of his family. The image overlaps considerably with the New Testament idea of God's fatherhood in relation to his people, but the link is substantial not linguistic.

A focus on explicit Old Testament references to God's spirit also obscures an understanding of the activity of the Trinitarian God in Israel. In the New Testament, talk of God's spirit comes to be the dominant way of referring to God's presence and activity within his people. In the Old Testament there are many such ways of speaking about God's presence and activity, such as God's hand, God's arm, and God's face. Spirit is the New Testament and doctrinal equivalent of all these. That fact is hinted by the way Luke's reference to Jesus casting out demons by God's finger becomes in Matthew Jesus casting out demons by God's spirit. Another example is Paul's comment that the promise of blessing to Abraham is fulfilled in the giving of the Spirit (Gal 3:14). The implication is that we can see the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit wherever we see the real and powerful presence of God in the Old Testament. If we see the presence and activity of the Spirit only when we find occurrences of the word *ruach*, we miss much.

We may see the activity of the Holy Spirit, then, whenever we find Old Testament references to the activity of God's hand, God's arm, or God's face, but adopting that understanding involves a theological judgment not an exegetical one, and it is misleading to describe that understanding as theological exegesis or theological interpretation; it might be better to call it theological translation. This term preserves the priority of the Scriptures' own way of speaking, rather than seeming to decode it into something else.

Christian theological interpretation will be Trinitarian in the sense that it knows that Yahweh the God of Israel is the God who is Trinity. It will not be Trinitarian the sense that it looks for reference to the Trinity in Isaiah or Genesis.

Third, theological interpretation will not necessarily be constrained by the rule of faith

I have a more general unease about Trinitarian interpretation. The doctrine of the Trinity is a piece of church tradition; it is not part of Scripture. It is a legitimate spelling out of material in the New Testament, and I accept it and say the Creed on Sundays without any mental reservations. But it is a human formulation explicating the scriptural material about God in the

context of a particular European philosophical framework in the Mediterranean world in Late Antiquity. It is not part of the New Testament, and there is something odd about treating it as a basis for deciding the meaning of Scripture itself.

Trinitarian thinking has become a focus of theology in the West in recent decades, and the stress on the Trinity in theological interpretation is one aspect of that development. Someone needs to write a book about why Trinitarian thinking has become a focus of theology. What strikes me is the emphasis on the relational nature of the Trinity in this Western context. The Trinity appeals to us Westerners because we are desperate to become more relational. In other words, as contextual factors were involved in the formulating of the doctrine of the Trinity, so contextual factors are involved in recent Western interest in the Trinity and thus in the stress on the Trinity in theological interpretation.

The importance of the Rule of Faith is a significant aspect of recent stress on theological interpretation. According to the editor of the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, a theologian such as Irenaeus thinks that the “the Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand.” It is as if the Scriptures are a collection of tiles designed to be assembled as a mosaic, but without any instructions for their assembly. It is the Rule of Faith that makes it possible to puzzle out the mosaic.

That summary misstates Irenaeus’s point. Indeed, Irenaeus implies the opposite to the idea that the Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. He starts from the way the Valentinians get the contents of their faith from outside the Scriptures, then take individual verses and phrases from the Scriptures and string these together so that they seem to support their views, when the compilation actually represents an artificial construct that does not reflect the faith of Scripture. Irenaeus says that they thus “disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures.” He goes on nicely to note how one could similarly prove anything to be the teaching of Homer by forming a collection of sayings without regard to their context. In other words, he does not think the Bible is confusing and obscure, but orderly and interconnected. It is not a collection of fragments from which we have to form the big picture. The Bible *is* a big picture, it *is* an assembled mosaic. It is the Valentinians who have treated it as a collection of disconnected bits when it is no such thing,

and have reassembled it in a different order from its own, utilizing what we would call allegorical method in order to make it say what they believe.

Irenaeus then argues against them not by appealing to the Rule of Faith but by discussing the exegesis of John 1 and showing that the Valentinians' exegesis ignores the contextual meaning of the expressions they pick up. Only after making his exegetical argument, in his next section, does he refer to the Rule of Faith. There he grants that Scripture contains some obscurities, for instance in the parables and in the passage about angels that transgressed, which the Valentinians use to their advantage. He comments that it is when people build doctrines on things that are unclear that they ought rather to rely on the Rule of Faith. He does not set forward the Rule of Faith as a general-purposes guide to the interpretation of Scripture.

At the end of his study of "historical criticism in a postmodern age," John J. Collins comments that "the internal pluralism of the Bible, both theological and ethical, has been established beyond dispute," which implies that we cannot read the Bible as a unified text or a unified story. Either we must choose from its different perspectives, or we must impose some unity from outside. My comment is that the appropriate response is to deny Collins's premise, or at least to look at the question from the inside of Scripture. Scripture can and should be read as a unified story. As Richard Hays puts it, the "astonishing event" of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, "completely unpredictable on the basis of the story's plot development, is nonetheless now seen as the supremely fitting narrative culmination, providing unforeseen closure to dangling narrative themes and demanding a reconfiguration of... the reader's grasp of 'what the story is all about.'"

This understanding does not carry with it the implication that (for instance) "the holy land points forward to fulfillment in the body of Christ," either as "the incarnate Son" or "as his body the church." The New Testament contains direct hints in this direction. I agree with James Barr that the general idea of the Old Testament "pointing forward to" or "looking towards" Christ and the New Testament "does not seem to have real meaning." The significance of the motif of land lies elsewhere than in its becoming a metaphor for the body of Christ. Rather, says Gordon McConville, "the contemporary theological relevance of Joshua is unmistakable"

because “its central topic of land resonates not only with the modern contention over the territory of Israel-Palestine, but with the perennial relationship between human beings and land, not only as essential to life and sustenance, but also as identity and ‘place.’”

In his introduction to the *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, Joel Green observed that “Theological interpretation emphasizes the potentially mutual influence of Scripture and doctrine in theological discourse.” What is the nature of that mutual influence? Robert Wall declares that the proper use of Scripture “depends upon interpretation that constrains the theological teaching of a biblical text by the church’s ‘Rule of Faith.’... Scripture is not self-interpreting, then, but is rather rendered coherent and relevant by faithful interpreters whose interpretations are constrained by this Rule.” This corresponds with the fact that “Scripture was received as God’s word by the faith community because its content cohered to the core beliefs of its Christological confession.” The Old Testament writings so cohered because they had come to be interpreted in such a way that they did so; the New Testament Scriptures so cohered because this coherence was the basis for their choice.

This seems to me quite wrong. As far as the Old Testament is concerned, it is by no means the case that the Old Testament Scriptures were received as God’s word because their content corresponded to the core beliefs of the church’s Christological confession. If anything, the process was the opposite. The faith community started off as a Jewish entity that accepted the Jewish Scriptures as God’s word and used these Scriptures to help it understand Jesus. As James Sanders and David Noel Freedman have put it, “the problem of whether the Old Testament was Christian did not arise in the church until the second century A.D. The problem of the first century, and hence of the NT, was whether the NT was biblical.” Thus seeing “the New Testament, or more particularly Jesus Christ, as the norm by which the Old is to be measured and interpreted... is curious, chiefly because the viewpoint of the earliest Church was exactly the reverse: the Old Testament was the canonical Scripture, the unquestioned authority by which New Testament persons and events were to be assessed.”

The Rule of Faith provides a horizon from within which we come to understand the Scriptures, and it may open our eyes to see things within the horizon of the Scriptures themselves. But its role is to enable us to see things that are there; it does not determine what

is allowed to be there. The Scriptures do not need to be rendered coherent and relevant; they are coherent and relevant. Where they have a broader horizon than that of the Rule of Faith, we do not narrow down their horizon to ours; we allow them to broaden our horizon. In practice the church has followed the Rule of Faith in a way that did constrain what the Scriptures are allowed to say, and the Rule of Faith has thus been a disaster for the hearing of the Old Testament. The Rule of Faith has no room and no hermeneutic for any episodes in the scriptural story between Genesis 3 and Matthew 1. As Robert Jenson put it, "The rule of faith saved the Old Testament as canon for the church – or rather, the church for the Old Testament canon – but in the process it did not open itself to the theological shape of the Old Testament's own narrative, and so it could not support the Old Testament's specific role in the church's practice." One recalls the alleged statement about a Vietnamese city by a major in the army, that "It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it." Theological interpretation needs to pay attention to the Christian tradition in order to broaden the horizon from which it works, but not to subordinate Scripture to the tradition.

So my argument is that theological interpretation needs to be wary of being Christocentric and wary of being Trinitarian and wary of following the formulations of Christian theology and of the Rule of Faith. Theological interpretation is an aspect of exegesis. It involves discerning the theological questions that are at issue in texts. When it seeks to set in a wider context the theological insights expressed in a text it will operate in a way that recognizes how Jesus is the decisive moment in God's fulfilling his purpose in the world, but it will expect to find that the texts also nuance our understanding of Jesus' significance. It will take into account the way the Christian tradition has understood the theological implications of Scripture and it will reconsider its work if it finds itself coming to a conclusion that stands in tension with that tradition, but it will not assume that the same authority attaches to this doctrinal tradition as attaches to the Scriptures themselves. And it will make the assumption that the God who speaks and acts in the Scriptures is the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but it will not let a reading in of that formulation skew what we might learn theologically from particular texts.

The aim of interpretation is to enable the Scriptures to confront us, widen our thinking, reframe our thinking, rescue us from our narrowness, deliver us from the way our thinking and

lives are decisively shaped by our being modern or postmodern, Western people. The vocation of theological interpretation is to encourage that process and not let it be constrained by Christocentrism, Trinitarianism, or an unqualified submission to the Christian tradition.