# Don’t Be Christ-Centered, Don’t Be Trinitarian, Don’t Be Constrained By the Rule of Faith[[1]](#footnote-1)

# John Goldingay

Theological interpretation has become a growth industry over the past decade or two. It is rather an extraordinary fact. I am enthusiastic about it in principle but troubled by a number of the assumptions adopted by many of its advocates, especially regarding the Old Testament. So in this paper I want to lay out a position in relation to some of those assumptions.

By way of introduction, then, I am enthusiastic about interpretation of Scripture that is theological and not merely historical. Indeed, as well as being enthusiastic about it, I am angry about the need to advocate it. One of the main reasons why the documents in the Bible exist and why they are present in the Bible is that they talk about God and people. Their talking about God and people does emerge from historical contexts and often involves talking about historical events, and investigating these contexts and events contributes to an understanding of the documents. Further, a book such as Genesis or Isaiah came into existence by a complex process over a number of centuries, and discovering the nature of this process can contribute to our understanding the eventual form of the books. But the problem with the rigorous scholarly study of the past two centuries is that it has largely confined itself to an investigation of these questions concerning the historical events the documents refer to and the historical process whereby they came into being. It has not gone on to read the documents for themselves. My anger about that aspect of scholarly study has nothing essentially to do with my viewing these writings as Scripture. The scandal lies in the fact that the scholarly work in question has implicitly presented itself as objective study of the documents that as such would be seeking to get at their own agenda, but it has actually not taken account of their own nature. It has bracketed a key feature that lies at the center of that agenda, their religious and theological concern. The focus on historical events and processes was decided by the critical approach itself, not by the text. Which would be unobjectionable if critical study recognized the fact and acknowledged that it was using the text out of an interest different from the text’s own. But it does not do so. To put it another way, the problem with historical-critical exegesis is that it is not critical enough[[2]](#footnote-2) – it is not self-critical. It does not consider the way its own agenda skews its study.

When I try to explain to students the difference between exegesis and hermeneutics, I tell them that exegesis seeks to get at the text’s own meaning, while hermeneutics recognizes that what we see in texts is shaped by the questions, interests, and commitments with which we come to texts. I then point out that those questions, interests, and commitments can contribute to our exegetical understanding; for instance, we appreciate the intrinsic meaning of the book of Esther in new ways in light of the Holocaust and of feminism. I also point out that conversely attempts at accurate exegesis are affected by the questions, interests, and commitments with which we come to texts. The exegesis of historical criticism is deeply affected by that fact. It is not merely that historical-critical study is influenced by evolutionism, Hegelianism, rationalism, and romanticism, as R. J. Thompson long ago showed in a decisive way.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is that the very focus on historical questions distorts an understanding of the books, because it corresponds only partially to their interests. It is as if we studied Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra* by focusing on what it told us about the Roman Empire or about England in the seventeenth century, or studied Henry VIII in order to trace the process whereby John Fletcher may have collaborated in writing the play or may have revised it. As such questions do not deliver the goods in the interpretation of Shakespeare’s play, neither do they in the interpretation of the Old Testament.

In reading Shakespeare or Plato, we may think about what their works tell us about their times, but we do not focus primarily on that question; or at least, we do not reckon that such study counts as interpreting Shakespeare or Plato. We treat them as texts, as works. We ask about their structure, about the way their plot develops, and about the ideas they put forward. While we might refer to such a reading of Scripture as a ‘canonical’ one, ‘canonical’ interpretation has many different meanings, even for its foremost advocate, and further, it is inclined to suggest confessional and churchly; canonical interpretation is important for people who want to read Isaiah “as Scripture.” In reading Shakespeare for its structure and ideas, we do not see ourselves as involved in canonical or final-form or synchronic or theological interpretation. It is just – interpretation. To put it another way, even if one is reading the Hebrew Bible as an artifact as opposed to reading it as Scripture,[[4]](#footnote-4) one ought to give some priority to reading it for its own agenda.

It is because of the nature of these texts that anything that claims to be exegesis of the biblical documents should focus on what they have to say about God and Israel and life and on the way they are designed to shape people’s relationship with God and Israel and life. Their texts are religious literature not merely history or sociology. Exegetes need not then agree with what the texts have to say on these matters or even on whether these questions are important, but if they are claiming to do exegesis, they should deal with these questions. Theological interpretation reasserts this point that should really be self-evident on the basis of the nature of the literature.

Even advocates of theological interpretation do not make this point sharply enough; indeed, I can be tempted to get angry with them, too. Such advocates declare that theological interpretation involves going beyond historical exegesis in order to look at the text in light of a theological perspective that includes what we know about God as a whole.[[5]](#footnote-5) But theological exegesis is simply an aspect of what should be proper historical exegesis. Thus Brevard Childs in his commentary on Isaiah makes the point that the book of Isaiah is about divine realities not about human faith. Isaiah 1, for instance, focuses not on Isaiah the prophet nor primarily on Israel but on God—God’s anger, God’s efforts to win the people back, God’s punishment, God’s restoration. In Isaiah 40:12-31, he says, the text’s focus “does not revolve around the anthropocentric complaints of Israel, but rather the focus is unremittingly theocentric.”[[6]](#footnote-6) One could extend the point to Scripture as a whole.

So I am enthusiastic about theological interpretation, and want to urge that we see it as proper exegesis, but in light of that understanding I want to make three points in relation to current views about the matter. Theological interpretation does not need to be Christocentric, or Trinitarian, or to be constrained by the Rule of Faith. It needs to be – well, theological.

## Theological But Not Christocentric

First, theological interpretation does not need to 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.”[[7]](#footnote-7) 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.”[[8]](#footnote-8) I am not sure what this statement means, and the commentary does not really help me to know,[[9]](#footnote-9) 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. Richard Hays has commented that “Paul sees the fulfillment of prophecy not primarily in events in the life of Jesus (as Matthew does) but in God’s gathering of a church composed of Jews and Gentiles together,” so that “his hermeneutic is functionally ecclesiocentric rather than christocentric.”[[10]](#footnote-10) “Remarkably little of his interpretive practice bears a christocentric stamp.”[[11]](#footnote-11) His theme is that “the gospel is the fulfillment, not the negation, of God’s word to Israel.”[[12]](#footnote-12) So one could say that Paul’s interpretation, as well as being church-centered, is Israel-centered, like the Old Testament itself.

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.

This past quarter a student astutely reversed my question about lenses, asking what are the lenses the Old Testament provides for looking at the New. In a sense the question is anachronistic, but it is illuminating. The main answer is that the Old Testament’s lens is God. 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.”[[13]](#footnote-13) 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. An analogous point can be made about language concerning the Holy Spirit. George S. Hendry declared that “the Holy Spirit is in an exclusive sense the Spirit of Christ.”[[14]](#footnote-14) But the expression “Spirit of Christ” comes only twice in the New Testament (Rom 8:9; 1 Peter 1:11; the expression “Spirit of Jesus” comes twice more, in Acts 16:7; Phil 1:19), whereas “Spirit of God” comes twelve times, and of course many times in the Old Testament.[[15]](#footnote-15)

According to Francis Watson, “Christian faith is… necessarily christocentric: for in Jesus Christ the identity of God, the creator who is also the God of Israel, is definitively disclosed in the triune name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit for the salvation of humankind.”[[16]](#footnote-16) 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.”[[17]](#footnote-17) It might seem an obvious point. Yet in what sense is the truth about God known more completely through Jesus? As evidence for this statement Robert Wall refers to John 1:14, which declares that 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.”[[18]](#footnote-18) 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.”[[19]](#footnote-19) “The Christian church has not received an Old Testament that can be abstracted from Jesus. Such a collection would not be an ‘Old Testament’”. Letting it be autonomous excludes or minimizes the “hermeneutical significance of the event of the Word made flesh.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

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.[[21]](#footnote-21) 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 C. 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.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Allegorical interpretation, he goes on,

made it possible for the church to pray directly and without qualification even a troubling Psalm like 137. After all, Jerusalem was not merely a city in the Middle East; it was, according to the allegorical sense, the church; according to the tropological sense, the faithful soul; and according to the anagogical sense, the center of God's new creation. The Psalm became a lament of those who long for the establishment of God's future kingdom and who are trapped in this disordered and troubled world, which with all its delights is still not their home. They seek an abiding city elsewhere. The imprecations against the Edomites and the Babylonians are transmuted into condemnations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. If you grant the fourfold sense of Scripture, David sings like a Christian.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Now Psalm 137 is an odd starting point for thinking about the interpretation of the Old Testament. “It is… not the difficult passages that provide the critical norm for biblical interpretation.”[[24]](#footnote-24) 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 (Rev 6:9-12) and it several times quotes Psalm 69 (e.g., John 2:17; Acts 1:20), 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.[[25]](#footnote-25) 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. That dynamic is characteristic of interpretation that focuses on the importance of peacemaking and non-violence, concerns that take their agenda from modernity. This fact does not make them wrong, but we need to be rescued from reading our modern concerns into the agenda of earlier interpreters. The point applies also to the inclination to read a modern concern with non-violence and peacemaking into Jesus’ agenda.[[26]](#footnote-26)

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,[[27]](#footnote-27) any more than mainstream Jewish interpretation does.[[28]](#footnote-28) 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.[[29]](#footnote-29)

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.

## Theological But Not Trinitarian

“Precisely because a theological hermeneutic is Christocentric it will be trinitarian.”[[30]](#footnote-30) 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.[[31]](#footnote-31) “All Christian use of the Old Testament seems to depend on the belief that the One God who is the God of Israel is also the God and Father of Jesus Christ. All our use of the Old Testament goes back to this belief. What is said there that relates to ‘God’ relates to our God. Consequently that which can be known of our God is known only when we consider the Old Testament as a place in which he is known.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

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.

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.[[33]](#footnote-33)

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.[[34]](#footnote-34) 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*, thenext-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).[[35]](#footnote-35) 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.

## Theological But Not Necessarily 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 original formulation of Trinitarian doctrine took place in the context of the broader formulating of the framework of Christian faith that is embodied in the creeds. There we declare our faith in God as the creator, in Christ as the redeemer, and in the Holy Spirit as the giver of life. The shape of the creeds corresponds to the outline understanding of the Christian faith expressed in the ancient Rule of Faith, which follows a narrative line: creation, fall, Jesus, Pentecost, the Second Coming.

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.[[36]](#footnote-36)

That summary misstates Irenaeus’s point in *Against the Heresies* 1.8-10.[[37]](#footnote-37) Indeed, he 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.”[[38]](#footnote-38) 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 (2 Peter 2:4), 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.[[39]](#footnote-39)

“Can and should the Bible be read as a unified story of the triune God’s creative and redemptive work?”[[40]](#footnote-40) 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,”[[41]](#footnote-41) which implies that we cannot read the Bible as such 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 rather to deny Collins’s premise, or at least to look at the question from the inside of Scripture.[[42]](#footnote-42) Scripture can and should be read as a unified story. 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.’”[[43]](#footnote-43)

Yet 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.”[[44]](#footnote-44) The New Testament contains few direct hints in this direction (Hebrews with its adaptation of the idea of rest is the clearest), though neither does it contain direct hints in another 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.”[[45]](#footnote-45) The significance of the motif of land lies elsewhere than in its becoming a metaphor for the body of Christ. Rather, “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.’”[[46]](#footnote-46)

In his introduction to the *Journal of Theological Interpretation,* Joel B. Green observed that “Theological interpretation emphasizes the potentially mutual influence of Scripture and doctrine in theological discourse.”[[47]](#footnote-47) 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.[[48]](#footnote-48)

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. The question it had to deal with was not whether the Scriptures fitted with Christian faith but whether Christian faith fitted with the Scriptures. Paul knew that if he could not establish this fact, he was in trouble. “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.”[[49]](#footnote-49) 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.”[[50]](#footnote-50) (We do not have information on when the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings reached the form in which we have them as the Jewish Scriptures. We have no indications of there being a moment when a body made a decision to “close the canon,” and I think it more likely that there was no such decision-making; the process of adding things simply ceased. I also think it likely that the addition of Daniel soon after the deliverance from Antiochus Epiphanes was the last time such an addition happened. But fuzziness over this question does not affect the fact that the New Testament presupposes the established position of a collection of Scriptures roughly approximate to what later came to be known as “the Old Testament.”)

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.[[51]](#footnote-51) But its role is to enable us to see things that are there; it does not determine what is allowed to be there.[[52]](#footnote-52) The Scriptures do not need to be rendered coherent and relevant; they are coherent and relevant. The Rule of Faith can help us see how that is so. 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.[[53]](#footnote-53) The Rule of Faith has no room and no hermeneutic for any episodes in the scriptural story between Genesis 3 and Matthew 1.[[54]](#footnote-54) As Robert W. 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.”[[55]](#footnote-55) One recalls the alleged statement about a Vietnamese city by a major in the United States army, that “It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

It deserves reflection that the people who want to control biblical exegesis by the church’s doctrinal tradition are mostly systematic theologians who want to be biblical, and the people who want to resist this control are mostly biblical scholars who want to be theological. I don’t know where to go next with this observation about power, but it deserves noting.

In critiquing N. T. Wright’s work, Richard Hays takes up Wright’s claim that he operates purely as a historian and invites him to recognize that he is denying the influence of the fact that he is “a believing Christian, formed intellectually and imaginatively by years of participation in the rich liturgical life of the Church of England; even as a Christian trying to think historically, he is engaged in the project of faith seeking understanding.” He goes on to address Wright: “if your reading seems totally unprecedented in the church’s whole tradition of reading… should that give you pause about whether your interpretation can persuasively claim historical validity?”[[57]](#footnote-57) Wright himself then responds that “to appeal to tradition and dogma as the framework for understanding Jesus is to say that not only the entire enterprise of biblical scholarship but also the entire Protestant Reformation has been based on a mistake.” The history of the church does not support the view that tradition has got it mostly right.[[58]](#footnote-58) 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.

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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.

Kevin Vanhoozer suggests that “theological interpretation is biblical interpretation oriented to the knowledge of God.”[[59]](#footnote-59) I am not sure whether I agree with that statement. In principle I want people to reflect on the theological significance of texts even if they are not people who are interested in the knowledge of God. I learn from such people; I know that they can help to check what I think I see in texts and that they sometimes see things that I miss. When I am engaged in interpretation my work is an exercise in seeking to understand a text. I assume the reality of the God of whom it speaks and my study is indeed oriented to knowledge about God and knowledge of God. In this sense my reading of Scripture has its ultimate focus not on the biblical text but on the divine Teacher, whom we are seeking to come to know.[[60]](#footnote-60) I am committed to accepting whatever I find in biblical texts, and there are disadvantages as well as advantages from occupying this position. I often think that students take the view that one of my jobs as a professor is to reassure them that the Bible does not say anything that they do not already think, to show how when it says something outrageous it does not mean it. If theological interpretation is an aspect of academic study for which faith is not a requirement, then people who read texts without being personally interested in knowing God may enable me to see things I do not want to see.

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.

1. An address at the conference of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools in Brisbane, July 2, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Karl Barth’s prefaces in *The Epistle to the Romans* (reprinted Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Moses and the Law in a Century of Criticism since Graf* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), pp, 35-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Benjamin D. Sommer, “Dialogical Biblical Theology,” in Leo G. Perdue, Robert Morgan, and Benjamin D. Sommer, *Biblical Theology: Introducing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), pp. 1-53 (p. 14). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See e.g., Matthew Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), p. 22; also *Participatory Biblical Exegesis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2008), p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: WJK, 2001), pp. 17, 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Craig G. Bartholomew, “Listening for God’s Address,” in Craig G. Bartholomew and David J. H. Beldman (eds.), *Hearing the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 3-19 (p. 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Phillip Cary, *Jonah* (The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cary’s comments about Jesus include that Jesus contrasts with Jonah in his obedience to God’s call (p. 40), identifies with Jonah (p. 45), and sleeps in a boat like Jonah (p. 50). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1989), p. xiii. Cf. Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford/Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), p. 152. Hays later (pp. 98-99) notes that Hebrews’ hermeneutic is “relentlessly christocentric”; my gloss would be that undue attention to Hebrews has thus skewed Christian understanding of the Old Testament, as it has in connection with an understanding of sacrifice as primarily concerned with atoning for sin. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, p. 34; see further pp. 84-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology* (revised ed., London: SCM/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), p. 26 (cf. Michael E. Lodahl, *Shekhinah Spirit* [Mahwah: Paulist, 1992], p. 26). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hendry leaves these Old Testament occurrences out of account on the grounds that the New Testament ignores them; he does not think that the New Testament as a whole accepts the inspiration of the Old Testament as a whole (*The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology*, pp. 27-29). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Francis Watson, *Text and Truth* (Edinburgh: Clark/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Robert W. Wall, “Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions,” in Joel B. Green and Max Turner (eds.), *Between Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 88-107 (p. 91). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Watson, *Text and Truth*, p. 182; the first quotation is italicized. On p. 185 he is explicit that he calls for “christocentric” interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Watson, *Text and Truth*, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Watson, *Text and Truth*, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. I have not been able to establish who first used the expression “the Old Testament” to refer to them; a number of occurrences of that expression in the Fathers seem to refer to the old covenant rather than to the writings about it. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” in *Theology Today* 37 (1980), pp. 27-38 (pp. 29-30); cf. Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” pp. 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, “Tuning Hebrew Psalms to Reggae Rhythms: Rastas’ Revolutionary Lamentations for Social Change,” *Cross Currents* 50(2000-1), pp. 525-540. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This is a problem with Stephen N. Williams’s otherwise illuminating comments about violence in Joshua in J. Gordon McConville and Stephen N. Williams, *Joshua* (The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 120-24, where he lumps together the violence over which God grieves in Genesis and the violence that God elsewhere commissions or undertakes. The former is *hamas*, illegitimate violence; the latter is not. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Which raises the possibility that for the Old Testament Joshua is already “noninstrumentalisable” if not quite “heretical, subversive and disowned” – that is, it is respected and recognized but not exactly “used” (Douglas S. Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010], pp. 4-6, quoting from Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory* [Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006], p. 27). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See e.g., Elliot N. Dorff, *To Do the Right and the Good* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), pp. 161-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Indeed, Earl begins his study *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture* by noting that unease about Joshua became prevalent only in the late twentieth century (pp. 2-3), though he also notes that it was felt by people such as Marcion, Valentinus, and Basilides, and thus by Origen, though not by Augustine (p. 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Bartholomew, “Listening for God’s Address,” p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. I take this to be part of Levering’s point in his advocacy of “participatory exegesis.” He argues that “the texts and their authors are already historically caught up in a participatory relationship… with the trans-temporal realities of faith.” Thus “the Church’s theological and metaphysical ‘reading into’ biblical texts may largely be expected to *illumine* the realities described in Scripture (*Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, p. 5; his emphasis). My gloss would be that it indeed illumines the realities; it does not illumine the texts, and it may obscure them and thus ultimately obscure the realities, too. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM/New York: Harper, 1966), p. 149; cf. Bartholomew, “Listening for God’s Address,” p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Richard Schultz, “Hearing the Major Prophets,” in Bartholomew and Beldman (eds.), *Hearing the OT*, pp. 332-55 (pp. 335-36). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Williams declares that “in the New Testament the Lord God of Israel is identified as the Father of Jesus Christ” (in McConville and Williams, *Joshua*, p. 217). This seems an oversimplification in light of the way the New Testament applies passages about Yahweh to Jesus as Lord. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Cf. Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 811. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Russell Reno, in his preface to the Brazos Theological Commentary: e.g., in Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, pp. 9-14 (p. 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Tertullian’s argument in *Prescription against Heretics* is similar. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Against the Heresies* 1.8.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Reno also refers to Origen’s comments about obscurities in Scripture, in his commentary on the Psalms (see Reno’s “Preface,” p. 9). Origen does put more emphasis on Scripture’s obscurity but his solution to the problem does not involve interpreting Scripture in light of the Rule of Faith but interpreting obscure passages by clear passages: his Jewish teacher had taught him that “the only way to begin to understand them was… by means of other passages containing the explanation dispersed throughout them” (p. 32 in the edition of Origen’s comments that I have used, *The Philocalia of Origen* [Edinburgh: Clark, 1911], pp. 30-34). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 160-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Cf. Levering, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, p. 100. In a footnote Hays acknowledges the influence of insights from Northrop Frye and Paul Ricoeur on this sentence. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Against Levering, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Old and New in Interpretation*, p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. McConville in McConville and Williams, *Joshua*, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. “The (Re-)Turn to Theology,” *JTI* 1 (2007), pp. 1-3) (p. 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. “Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions,” pp. 88, 97, 98. Wall refers directly to Tertullian and quotes his summary of the Rule of Faith, but notes (p. 90) that it is essentially the same as Irenaeus’s account. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. James A. Sanders, “Adaptable for Life," in Magnalia *Dei* (G. E. Wright Memorial Volume; ed. F. M. Cross and others; Garden City: New York: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 531-60 (p. 552). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. David Noel Freedman, in his review of *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* (ed. Bernhard W. Anderson; New York, Harper, 1963/London: SCM, 1964), in *Theology Today* 21 (1964-65), pp. 225-28 (p. 227). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. It thus fulfills a function analogous to that of a concern for the gospel’s significance for the whole world, which makes it possible to look back at the Old Testament and see that this concern is also there, so that theological interpretation is missional: cf. Christopher J. H. Wright’s comment on the missional implications of theological interpretation, in “Mission and Old Testament Interpretation,” in Bartholomew and Beldman (eds.), *Hearing the OT*, pp. 180-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Contrast also Francis Watson’s observations about the creeds in *Text, Church and World* (Edinburgh: Clark/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Contrast the arguments (e.g.) of Robert Wall, “Jesus in the Old Testament,” and Kathryn Greene-McCreight, “Sinews Even in Thy Milk,” *JTI* 2 (2008), pp. 16-19 and 19-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Irenaeus does refer to other Old Testament material, but not as part of a narrative understanding of Scripture as a whole: see Nathan MacDonald, “Israel and the Old Testament Story in Irenaeus’s Presentation of the Rule of Faith,” *JTI* 3 (2009), pp. 281-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *Canon and Creed* (Louisville: WJK, 2010), p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *New York Times* March 15, 1968 (<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F60716F73A5D147493C7A81788D85F4C8685F9>, accessed May 31, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Richard B. Hays, “Knowing Jesus,” in Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays (eds.), *Jesus, Paul and the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), pp. 41-61 (pp. 56, 57). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. “Whence and Whither Historical Jesus Studies in the Life of the Church?” in the same volume, pp. 115-58 (p. 122). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer and others; Grand Rapids: Baker/London: SPCK, 2005), pp*.* 19–25 (p. 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, e.g. p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)