# What Theologians and Biblical Scholars Wish the Others Knew

# John Goldingay

Hans Boersma, *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew*

Scot McKnight, *Five Things Biblical Scholars Wish Theologians Knew*

Each xx + 152 pages, InterVarsity Press, 2021, $20

What a brilliant idea on InterVarsity’s part to commission these two complementary works relating to such a prominent but controverted theme! As a biblical scholar, I am more directly addressed by Hans Boersma but more identified with Scot McKnight, though as an Old Testament theologian I come at both volumes from a different angle from that of the authors. I will first comment on each of the books and then reflect on what they make me as an Old Testament theologian want to say.

## What Theologians Wish

Dr. Boersma’s first chapter has the arresting title “No Christ, No Scripture.” As he puts it, we need to focus more on the fact that Scripture is about Christ and that he makes himself known to us from Scripture, than we do on “formal categories,” on the authority of Scripture over against tradition. As he sees it, biblical scholars are so concerned with affirming that it is Scripture alone that counts and not tradition, that they risk losing the living reality. And I recognize that we biblical scholars focus rather much on text rather than living reality, though I’m surprised at the suggestion that this is because we are concerned for text rather that tradition and at the suggestion that it is because we work with a *sola scriptura* hermeneutic. I don’t know of scholars who talk in those terms, but maybe that just means I move in different circles from Dr Boersma.

The also-arresting title of chapter two, “No Plato, No Scripture,” reminded me of my initial theological studies and my attempt to understand words like *ousia* and *hypostasis*. But Dr. Boersma makes a bolder point, that the New Testament is already expressing the gospel in a way that presupposes terms from Greek thinking. He insists on (Ur)-Platonism, a the belief that bodies are not the only things that exist, that the natural order cannot be fully explained by natural causes, that there are such things as universals, that humanity is not the measure of everything, and that knowledge is possible. In other words, Platonism is something bigger and more umbrella-like than one might have thought before Lloyd Gerson formulated Ur-Platonism in 2013. If you don’t work with Ur-Platonism, Dr. Boersma says, you won’t be able to understand the Scriptures. We need some commonality of assumptions with them.

Third, “No Providence, No Scripture.” That reminded me of a couple of possibly unpopular truths. One is that we don’t know as much as wished about how the books in the Old and New Testament came to be the books in the Old and New Testament. The other is that the text in a Greek New Testament is a scholarly construct, not a printed version of a manuscript that actually exists. Likewise we don’t know how close the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Scriptures is to what Ezekiel (for instance) generated. We have to trust God’s providence to have made sure that we have the right books and a good text of them. It would have been odd of God not to make sure of it! So being confident about providence matters. But Dr. Boersma has another point about providence. It is that there was a divine providence involved in the forming of the words in the Scriptures, and that this providence issued in there being something special about that wording. And I like the idea that (for instance) God’s providence might have been involved when Isaiah talked about a girl who was a virgin having a baby, so that this providence made these words available to be used to illuminate the moment when another girl got pregnant and was still a virgin when she had the baby.

Fourth, “No Church, No Scripture.” “The primary domain of reading Scripture is not the academy but the church,” and it needs to be interpreted by the church and not by individuals. If those are overstatements, they overstate important truths. Last night I dreamed I was reading the first Scripture lesson in a church service, from Exodus. Why Exodus? Because one of the lessons in church in Sunday did come from Exodus. So it had the precious Sunday and so it will next Sunday, because we follow a lectionary and we thus read systematically through a cross-section of the Scriptures. But I discovered on returning to the UK after twenty years in the USA that most churches had given up using the lectionary and confined themselves to reading their favorite bits (as a friend of mine put it). Admittedly in church on Sunday the minister spoiled things by commenting on how great it was that as Christians we don’t have to be fearful about being in God’s presence, like the Israelites in Exodus 19. She was taking no account of the New Testament reminder that we need to come before God with fear (Heb 12:28); of course both Exodus and Hebrews are talking about a godly awe rather than being afraid. In her assumptions about Old and New Testament faith she was following a regular Christian tradition. But that reveals the problem about interpreting the Scriptures in light of the church’s tradition. “We cannot properly understand the Scriptures without the guidance of the catholic or universal church,” Dr. Boersma declares. It’s usually said that both the Reformation and the development of biblical criticism depended on the conviction that the Scriptures need to be interpreted in light of themselves and not in light of what the church said they mean, and the authority of Scripture has been a key theological principle for many Christian groups. I’m not clear how to relate Dr. Boersma’s exposition to these ideas.

Finally, “No Heaven, No Scripture.” Dr. Boersma is not referring to heaven as somewhere we will eventually go. Richard Middleton offered $100 to anyone who could show from the Scriptures that we will go to heaven when we die, because the New Testament says we are in heaven now, in spirit. Dr. Boersma’s point is that the Scriptures are designed to help us be heavenly-minded now. It doesn’t mean the Scriptures are not significant for our earthly lives. On the contrary, he sees them as designed to encourage the development of virtue ethics. Their relationship with virtue will be two way. Love is key to scriptural interpretation, and love is to be the criterion for scriptural interpretation, and the fruit of scriptural interpretation.

## What Biblical Scholars Wish

Biblical scholars are a varied bunch. In connection with the agenda of this book, we might divide them into three types. There are agnostics and atheists, who are often people who were once evangelical believers but who gave up for one reason or another. There are believers for whose faith and theology the Scriptures are not very important. And there are believers for whom the reality of their relationship with God and their academic study are in separate compartments. Dr. McKnight doesn’t belong to any of those groups. He starts his book with the conviction that “Theology Needs a Constant Return to Scripture” and he identifies two models for approaching interpretation. One is retrieval, which means trying to get back to the Scriptures’ own agenda. This model “contends that the fundamental form of theology is commentary on Scripture and the exposition of Scripture in preaching.” And I guess that this is the model I subconsciously work with. The other is the expansive model, whose impulse “is to explore new dimensions of thinking as it carries forward the Christian biblical and theological tradition.” The second is obviously closer to systematic theology, but it is broader, because it also works with the conviction that the Spirit brings new light to the people of God in each generation. Dr. McKnight himself suggests that we need to integrate these. For theological reasons we must, and in practice we can’t help it. And I guess that I subconsciously accept that, too. There follow two footnotes that nuance the exposition of the models. One is that *sola scriptura* may therefore be an impractical idea, but *prima scriptura* is important: Scripture is not the only thing (Dr. Boersma critiques that notion) but it is the first thing from which all else must develop. The other is a discussion of biblicism, which shows that this is a confusing idea but also one that is more or less impractical, like *sola scriptura* (of which it is a variant).

The title of chapter two is “Theology Needs to Know Its Impact on Biblical Studies.” The implication is, it has more affect than theologians may think. Dr. McKnight starts with the creed that an orthodox biblical scholar like himself (or me) says each Sunday, then turns to three New Testament scholars who seek to go back behind the creed to trace the history of the growth of beliefs about Christ—James Dunn, Larry Hurtado, and Richard Bauckham. They leave a gap between the New Testament and the creed. Then he looks at scholars who are more open to the idea that the patterns of thinking in the creeds are articulating something that is present in the New Testament—Wesley Hill, Matthew Bates, and Madison Pierce. Finally, he notes Robert Jensen as a systematic theologian who comes at the interrelationship of doctrine and Scripture from the other end but in a parallel positive way. The word *prosopological* plays a key role here; I have more work to do in order to understand it, but maybe that gets me out of juggling with *ousia* and *hypostasis*.

So far, Dr. McKnight has been rather conciliatory and ecumenical. With chapter 3 he starts getting more straight. “Theology Needs Historically Shaped Biblical Studies.” It’s easy for theology to work with understandings of biblical concepts that don’t really correspond to the concepts as they appear in the Scriptures. Most of this chapter goes to John Barclay’s study of grace in the New Testament. If Barclay is right, an implications is the paradoxical fact that theology’s understanding of grace is a biblical concept, but it’s not the biblical concept of grace, and therefore theology is missing out on what the Scriptures do have to say about grace. The problem then isn’t what theology says; it’s what it doesn’t say.

In chapter four Dr. McKnight gets even more straight, in what might be his most important wish: “Theology Needs More Narrative.” The way I would put it is to say that one ought to be able to tell from a systematic theology that Christian faith is a gospel. It’s a story about what God has done. Dr. McKnight begins from the creeds, which have a basically narrative shape, but interestingly he critiques them. “I myself ask this question when I’m done reading systematic studies: Where’s Israel?” (Israel just comes first in a list that follows). I was amused, because in another connection I was just looking for the article on Israel in a thousand-page dictionary of theology, and there wasn’t one. ‘The Bible’s central theology is a narrative about God’s ways with a people (Israel, church). The Bible’s theology is a story, and without that story framing theology, we lose the centrality of the Bible own frame.”

Dr. McKnight’s last wish is that theologians would recognize that “theology needs to be lived theology.” Arguably this is his most radical point. He notes that throughout the Scriptures, what we believe and what we do are interwoven. But from the beginning, Christian theology separated the two, so that the creeds, which are at least somewhat narrative, are not ethical at all. And it is entirely possible to be faultless in one’s theology but astray in one’s life. In fact, it may be quite a temptation. Getting everything right can easily push one into pride. But the great proof text about inspiration is also a text about the consequent capacity of the Scriptures to shape our lives. And Paul’s great theological exposition in Romans is also a great work of ethics.

## What This Theological Interpreter Wishes

The obvious response to the stimulus of these two thought-provoking volumes is to formulate my five wishes, so here are the five convictions of mine that I wish theological interpreters seemed to recognize, which I articulate in light of reading the two books and mostly in tension with either or both of them.

First: the gospel is about God and the Scriptures are about God. The good news is that whereas we gentiles were without hope and without God in the world, we have been brought near (Eph 2:12–13). We are now able to come to the Father (John 14:8). This happens through Christ; he is the one who takes us to the Father. But the Father is the one he brings us to. The gospel is about us being put right with God, the God who created the world, made promises to Abraham and Sarah, rescued the Israelites form Egypt, accompanied them through their story over the next millennium, and drew attention to the necessity that all the nations should acknowledge him. Through Christ we gentiles are able to join in that recognition, and we can read the Old Testament as the story of God’s relationship with Israel, into which relationship Christ has drawn us.

It fits, then, that the Old Testament is about God. It is not about Christ. You only have to read it to see that this is so. If you read it in a way that takes it as a story in which Christ is there under the surface, so that the challenge is to identify where it speaks about him, in a way that its original readers could understandably not discern, then you miss the thing it actually has to say about God and us. The Old Testament’s spiritual meaning is its surface meaning. Its surface meaning is its spiritual meaning.

So Christ is not the starting point for reading the Scriptures. God is the starting point. And not surprisingly, the New Testament does not imply that we will understand the Old Testament only if we start from Christ. The New Testament indeed sometimes enables us to see aspects of the inherent meaning of the Old Testament. For instance, Paul’s quotations in Romans 15 draw attention to the Psalms’ references to the gentiles acknowledging Yahweh, a theme that readers often miss in the Old Testament. The New Testament thus helps us see things that are there, on the surface not hidden underneath the surface. The same dynamic does not apply to Paul’s quotation in Romans 9 from Hosea in the same connection. Hosea is talking about God’s faithfulness to Israel; Paul applies his words to God’s welcome of gentiles. Paul does not reveal something about the surface or fuller or deeper or spiritual meaning of Hosea. He does not help exegesis of Hosea. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he is discerning a significance for his exposition that is not part of the text’s meaning. And if we take the New Testament as a guide to the exegesis of the Old Testament text or if we find references to Christ that would not be there for the author and the original readers, we miss the point. (When Dr. Boersma comments on Matthew’s quotation of Isaiah 7:14, he interprets this quotation in light of the idea of the Scriptures having a “fuller sense,” and my eyebrows raised when he attributed this understanding to me in something I wrote forty years ago, but I discovered that I was actually reporting the views of other interpreters there, not exactly affirming them, and I prefer his appeal to providence.)

Second, God was really relating to his people before Christ came and it’s worth seeking to discover what he was saying to them. It’s worthwhile seeking to discover what (say) Jeremiah was bringing as God’s message to people in his day. Thus Hebrews begins by noting that God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets. It’s surely worthwhile therefore to discover what he was actually saying to them, and not just reading what he said to them in light of what tradition has made of it or what the New Testament made of it. That’s why biblical interpretation actually is a historical discipline and why a focus on authorial intention is theologically and devotionally worthwhile. It’s why we don’t have to choose between explaining the historical meaning of the text and using the Scriptures as a means of grace, drawing the reader to God. We don’t have to choose between the one true meaning of the text and the wisdom of knowing God and being known by Him. Ascertaining the one true historical meaning of the text is a way of knowing God and being known by him.

It does mean we have to reconsider what we mean by interpretation being a historical discipline and by authorial intention, in several connections. The nineteenth century saw the development of historical-critical interpretation and historical-grammatical interpretation. Historical-critical interpretation signified being critical of what tradition or the church said the Scriptures meant, and it was right to open up that investigation, though in declining to treat Jerome or Calvin as potential sources of insight on the text, it gave away as much as it gained. Further, historical-critical interpretation became preoccupied with the history behind the text instead of the text—both the historical events to which the text referred, and the historical process whereby the text came into being. Its focus continues to lie there, and this focus is of little usefulness in helping the Scriptures to speak to us. Historical-critical interpretation thus focused on what the human author was doing and on the faith of Israel and not on God.

In reaction, historical-grammatical interpretation focused on an elucidation of the text itself and on a conservative understanding of the process whereby it came into existence and of its historical value, but it still didn’t focus on the way God was speaking to the ancestors in these texts. Thus historical-grammatical or conservative commentaries are no more useful to the believer or the preacher than historical-critical or liberal ones.

The problem was not that scholars were focusing on authorial intention. It was actually that they were not focusing on authorial intention. Because by the providence and/or the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the authors in their historical contexts were bringing God’s message to their people. But neither liberal nor conservative commentators were looking at it that way. And that’s why “theological interpretation” became necessary. As if there could ever have been non-theological interpretation! The challenge of exegesis includes discerning the intrinsic theological meaning of the text itself. It does not mean bringing a theological framework from outside in light of which to read the text. We do not take the creeds as having the role of deciding what the Scriptures mean. The church’s tradition is not the authoritative context for reading the Scriptures. The Scriptures decide what they mean.

Third, the New Testament and the Old Testament are both revelatory and the New Testament does not provide criteria for deciding how far the Old Testament is revelatory or how far it remains authoritative. While there is progress between the Old and the New, there is also regress (for instance, the Old Testament has a more enlightened view on slavery).[[1]](#footnote-1) In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit makes allowance for human hardness of heart, and he does the same in the New Testament.[[2]](#footnote-2) The New Testament does not think that it itself brings a fuller revelation of God or a revelation that corrects what people might think on the basis of the Old Testament. To talk in terms of “holy war” in the Old Testament is confusing, because neither the expression nor the practice appear in the Old Testament, and therefore Jesus does not annul holy war texts. The Old Testament does speak of Yahweh being involved in war, and the New Testament does not question that he was so involved: the about-to-be martyred Stephen rejoices in it (Acts 7:45), as does Hebrews in its list of people who achieved things by faith (Heb 11:32–34). This is not to imply that the New Testament writers thought that God might now get people who believe in Jesus to be involved in war, but the reason is not that Jesus has come and ruled out the war idea. Other Jews would mostly think the same. Israel had hardly gone to war for six centuries, since Josiah’s day (perhaps not surprisingly, given how that one turned out). Jesus did not come to bring a new revelation about peace or love or non-violence. He came as the embodiment of the revelation that God had already given. Hebrews indicates as much when it goes on from “God spoke to our ancestors in many various ways” to “in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.” It is affirming that there is a difference between the variegated nature of the revelation in the Old Testament and the unified nature of the revelation when Christ embodies it. It is not suggesting that Christ brings a superior revelation.

 This is not to deny that we learn new things through Christ’s coming. Hebrews itself happens to point to the two main ones. As a collect puts it, Jesus “revealed the resurrection.” And by emphasizing Jesus’s divine status, Hebrews made possible and necessary the subsequent formulation of the doctrine of the two natures of Christ and of the doctrine of the Trinity. But the New Testament does not indicate (for instance) that people were now to love their enemies whereas previously they thought they had been free to hate them. On one hand, the New Testament allows for hating enemies. And on the other, when the Old Testament tells people to love their neighbors, the context indicates that the neighbors they are to love are their enemies. And the Old Testament provides a most magnificent embodiment of that expectation in the story of Joseph and his brothers.

Fourth, precritical interpretation is not necessarily either better or worse than critical interpretation. The two complement each other. Both read the Scriptures in light of agenda they bring to the text that enables them to see things and causes them to miss things. Each of our authors refers to David Steinmetz’s classic article on “The Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis,” which unwittingly helps to make the point. Like C. S. Lewis, Steinmetz argues for an allegorical interpretation of Psalm 137; otherwise we must reject the psalm as “a lament belonging exclusively to the piety of ancient Israel.” Yet this claim ignores the fact that such a lament appears in the New Testament: the martyrs pray for vengeance on their killers, and they are promised that their prayer will be granted (Rev 6:9–11). While unease about Psalm 137 is not entirely a modern phenomenon, its modern prevalence issues from a context where Americans like Steinmetz and Brits like Lewis are the equivalents of the Edomites and Babylonians against whom the psalm prays. The Israelites come to God as people oppressed by the empire of their day, as people oppressed by us pray against us. The appeal to pre-critical interpretation enables us to evade the challenge that Scriptures such as Psalm 137 put to us.[[3]](#footnote-3) The appeal to pre-critical interpretation serves our agenda as modern people. Allegory enables us to escape from learning from the Scriptures and makes them say what we think already and what we are comfortable with.

Fifth, to qualify all the above points: there can be various approaches to theological interpretation and people who do it one way shouldn’t want to claim that theirs is the only way. There is canonical interpretation in the sense of a study that especially emphasizes looking at any one book in light of the Scriptures as a whole. There is Christ-centered interpretation. There is creedal interpretation or ecclesial interpretation. I might call what I do textual interpretation. As Augustine said, the question is, indeed, does our interpretation serve love of God and love of neighbor.

1. See Margaret Davies, “Work and Slavery in the New Testament: Impoverishment of Traditions,” in John W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies, and M. Daniel Carroll, eds., *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium*, JSOTSup 207 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 315–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See John Goldingay, *Do We Need the New Testament?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2015), 139–56. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See further Kathleen Scott Goldingay and John Goldingay, “The Sting in the Psalms,” *Theology* 117 (2014): 403–10; 118 (2015): 3–9; systematically and insightfully, Kit Barker, *Imprecation As Divine Discourse: Speech Act Theory, Dual Authorship, and Theological Interpretation*, JTISup 16 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016); also Arie Versluis, “‘Knock the Little Bastards’ Brains Out’: Reception History and Theological Interpretation of Psalm 137:9,” in Jacques van Ruiten and Koert van Bekkum, eds., *Violence in the Hebrew Bible: Between Text and Reception*, Oudtestamentishe Studiën 79 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 373–96. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)