religions

# The Future of New Testament Theology

Edited by
Joel B. Green

Printed Edition of the Special Issue Published in *Religions*

www.mdpi.com/journal/religions

# The Future of New Testament Theology

# The Future of New Testament Theology

Editor

**Joel B. Green**

MDPI • Basel • Beijing • Wuhan • Barcelona • Belgrade • Manchester • Tokyo • Cluj • Tianjin

*Editor*
Joel B. Green
Fuller Theological Seminary
USA

*Editorial Office*
MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel, Switzerland

This is a reprint of articles from the Special Issue published online in the open access journal *Religions* (ISSN 2077-1444) (available at: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/new_testament_theology).

For citation purposes, cite each article independently as indicated on the article page online and as indicated below:

LastName, A.A.; LastName, B.B.; LastName, C.C. Article Title. *Journal Name* **Year**, *Volume Number*, Page Range.

**ISBN 978-3-0365-5011-4 (Hbk)**
**ISBN 978-3-0365-5012-1 (PDF)**

# Contents

# About the Editor

**Joel B. Green**

Joel B. Green (PhD, University of Aberdeen) is Senior Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Fuller Theological Seminary, USA. The author or editor of some sixty books and scores of essays, he has contributed especially to the study of Luke-Acts, the significance of Jesus's death, the contribution of the Bible to theological anthropology, and the theological interpretation of Scripture. He is the editor of both the New International Commentary on the New Testament and the Two Horizons New Testament Commentary, and the founding editor of the *Journal of Theological Interpretation*.

# Preface to "The Future of New Testament Theology"

This collection of essays appears at the confluence of two major streams—the flowering of the "biblical theology movement" in a range of New Testament theologies published in recent decades and the emergence of significant contributions to reflection on and the practice of theological interpretation of the Bible. To some, these two interests overlap enough to parade them under a single banner. To others, these are disparate approaches that draw on and display competing methodological commitments. In this collection, seasoned scholars and relative newcomers to the conversation orient readers to these concerns, not so much to resolve these differences but to engage them in reasoned discourse.

Roughly speaking, these essays can be grouped as follows: those essays that review the present state of affairs critically, while pointing the way to the future of New Testament theology (chs. 1–4); those that champion certain ways forward, generally by preferring one path over others (chs. 5–9); and those that practice New Testament theology with reference to particular texts or motifs (chs. 10–13).

Contributors to *The Future of New Testament Theology* include some household names—within the context of New Testament studies, at least. Numbered here, too, are several lesser-known names whose perspectives may well signal the future of theological work with the New Testament.

**Joel B. Green**
*Editor*

religions

MDPI

*Review*

# Is New Testament Theology Still Having an Identity Crisis? A Review of Five Recent Contributions

**Joshua Strahan**

Bible Department, Lipscomb University, Nashville, TN 37204, USA; josh.strahan@lipscomb.edu

**Abstract:** This article reviews five recent contributions to the field of New Testament theology. More accurately, three NT theologies will be examined alongside two biblical theologies, given that some regard NT theology as inherently deficient apart from OT theology. These five works are notable not only for their diversity of methodology but also their diversity of cultural perspective—one book by a Finn (Timo Eskola's *A Narrative Theology of the New Testament*), one by two Germans (Reinhard Feldmeier's and Hermann Spieckermann's *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology*), one by a Canadian (Thomas R. Hatina's *New Testament Theology and its Quest for Relevance: Ancient Texts and Modern Readers*), one by an American (Craig L. Blomberg's *A New Testament Theology*), and one by a native Briton (John Goldingay's *Biblical Theology*). Along the way, this review article will consider how these works navigate the tricky and contested terrain of NT (or biblical) theology, particularly vis-à-vis matters of history, canon, synthesis and diversity, and contemporary relevance.

**Keywords:** biblical theology; theological interpretation; historical criticism; narrative theology; history of religions; canon; dialectical

**Citation:** Strahan, Joshua. 2021. Is New Testament Theology Still Having an Identity Crisis? A Review of Five Recent Contributions. *Religions* 12: 636. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080636

Academic Editor: Joel B. Green

Received: 24 June 2021
Accepted: 29 July 2021
Published: 11 August 2021



## 1. Introduction

The aim of the present article is to review recent contributions to the field of New Testament theology (NTT). For an excellent introduction to the history of NTT from its beginnings with J.P. Gabler's inaugural address in 1787 to more recent contributions in the 1990's, one should start with Frank Matera's insightful review article (Matera 2005). Matera's review is nicely supplemented by Kavin Rowe's article from the following year, which considers several non-English NTTs (Rowe 2006). Finally, one should also consult Christoph Stenschke's essay that brings the reader up to 2008 (Stenschke 2010), wherein he reviews the NTTs of Howard Marshall (2004), Frank Thielman (2005), Frank J. Matera (2007), and Thomas R. Schreiner (2008).

The present article takes up the baton from these excellent review articles and surveys five works published in the previous decade: three NTT's and two biblical theologies. These five works are notable for at least two reasons. First, they are written by seasoned and accomplished scholars coming from diverse cultural locations—one book by a Finn (Timo Eskola), one by two Germans (Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann), one by a Canadian (Thomas R. Hatina), one by an American (Craig L. Blomberg), and one by a native Briton (John Goldingay). Second, they represent a spectrum of theoretical assumptions, theological convictions, and methodological approaches.

In Matera's aforementioned review essay, he opens by claiming, "NT theology suffers from something akin to an identity crisis about its task, method, and goal" (pp. 1–2). This identity crisis stems from several contested questions. Is NTT descriptive, prescriptive, or both? If it is descriptive, is it describing the NT in its final form, or the supposed religious history and theological developments behind the text? If it is prescriptive, how can this ancient text (or the history behind the text) speak two-thousand years later to a contemporary audience that occupies a different time, place, and culture? Should one approach the task of NTT with theological convictions about inspiration and canon, or

should one try to be more agnostic and skeptical about such matters? If theological convictions are put aside, is there any reason to limit one's research to the canon, or to look for some unity in the NT, or even for continuity with the OT. If one does look for unity, how does one retain the diversity in the NT? Is unity about finding a core theme (or themes) from which may sprout diverse expressions of a common core; or is the unity closer to discovering various points of overlap among the NT voices, like a complex Venn diagram? Should all the NT voices be heard, and if so, with equal voice; or can we, for example, largely sideline Jude and the Pastorals?

**2. Thomas Hatina**

With these questions swirling, it is perhaps appropriate that we start with Thomas Hatina's *New Testament Theology and its Quest for Relevance* (Hatina 2013). Like Matera, Hatina believes that "the discipline of New Testament theology has been suffering from a kind of identity crisis" (1). Thus, he aims to point out the symptoms, diagnose the root cause, explain the shortcomings of current treatments, and prescribe his own solution. In effect, Hatina's book is reminiscent of Heikki Räisänen's *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (Räisänen 2000), as both offer insightful criticism of the field of NTT then propose a controversial way forward.

Hatina highlights that an ongoing problem in NTT is how (and whether) one should move from description to prescription. That is, how does one bridge the gap between historical reconstruction and present-day application? Or, how does the theology of an author from a different time, place, and culture have relevance for whatever culture we found ourselves in today? For Hatina, some NTTs try to avoid this by sticking to the descriptive task; the result is contemporary irrelevance because there is no scriptural voice to be heard. In contrast, other NTTs seem oblivious that there is a gap to be bridged and simply conflate description with present-day prescription, or they bridge the gap in an ad hoc and inconsistent manner; once again, the result is irrelevance (or the wrong kind of relevance), because such theologies fail to speak in ways that are culturally perceptible or acceptable.

Hatina divides NTTs into two broad categories—foundationalist and dialectical. These are further divided into subcategories based on how such theologies are structured: foundationalist (chronological, author-by-author) and dialectical (salvation-history, dogmatic and thematic, existentialist). In my opinion, Hatina's categories and subcategories get a bit muddled. This is either due to Hatina's imprecise categorizing scheme or to the inconsistent (or incoherent) methodologies among some NTTs. For the sake of space and clarity, I will sometimes use different categorical descriptions than Hatina while still trying to be faithful to his project[1].

According to Hatina, the foundationalist approach "was initiated by a search for a 'pure' theology that has not been 'distorted' by traditions and doctrines . . . [which] alone becomes the standard for Christian belief and practice" (p. 21). Thus, we might think of the foundationalist approach as seeking a foundation either *behind the text* or *in the text* (these are my descriptions not Hatina's). Those who seek a foundation *behind the text* use historical-critical methodology to discover and describe "what really happened". Consequently, such NTTs can ironically seem to have little to do with either the NT or theology. Instead, they tend to be reconstructions of the historical Jesus and the early churches, in which case the NT canon represents an arbitrary limit and there is less emphasis (or expectation of) a unified theology. Moreover, for Hatina, such a project is doomed to fail because (a) it does not account for the historian's subjectivity that inhibits the discovery of pure results, (b) it does not have criteria that produce consistent or agreed-upon results, and (c) even if it did produce such results, it has no neutral strategy for moving from description to prescription or contemporary relevance.

Those foundationalists who seek a basis *in the text* use literary analysis to describe what each NT author or redactor originally meant, with the assumption that there is a singular meaning to be found. Such NTTs are often limited to the canonical books,

offer insightful descriptions of the various theologies of the NT writings, but struggle to synthesize these theologies into a singular theology. This foundationalist strategy is also problematic insofar as (a) the literary critic's subjectivity inhibits the discovery of pure results, (b) it is notoriously difficult (and arguably impossible) to determine a singular meaning for many texts, (c) there is no neutral or "pure" way to synthesize or unify the various theologies of the NT without appeal to some subjective thematic or dogmatic schema, and (d) once again, there is no neutral strategy for moving from description to prescription or contemporary relevance.

Hatina finds more promise in the dialectical approach, though not in every iteration. His description and examples of the dialectical approach lack precision. Nonetheless, we might think of the dialectical approach as a kind of dialogue between (a) that which is *in front of the text* and (b) that which is *behind the text* and/or *in the text*. For an example of how this might be carried out in a more traditionally Christian way, we might consider what Hatina calls the dogmatic or thematic approach. In this case, the NT theologian might bring themes from systematic theology (i.e., *in-front-of-the-text* inquiry) into dialogue with the various NT writers (*in the text*) and/or into conversation with a reconstructed historical Jesus (*behind the text*). For Hatina, this dialectical approach still lacks relevance in a globalized, pluralistic world because, among other things, it tends to assume a kind of theological superiority that will inherently limit its voice in the public square. It might be okay for "insiders" but probably not for anyone for whom these sacred texts are not authoritative. For an example of a less traditionally Christian dialectical approach, we might consider Bultmann's NTT, wherein he brings his existential framework (*in front of the text*) into dialogue with the historical Jesus (*behind the text*) along with the writings of John and Paul (*in the text*). Hatina finds Bultmann's existentialist demythologizing strategy more promising, but critiques it as having limited relevance insofar as Bultmann's focus tends to be too individualistic and fails to address contemporary societal issues.

This brings us to Hatina's proposal that the future of NTT, especially if it hopes to be relevant, requires a dialectical approach that is informed by "the science of religion". The discipline of religious studies, according to Hatina, is characterized by inclusivity, nonpartisanship, cross-disciplinary inquiry, and "non-(a)theism" (i.e., neutrality with regard to the existence of God). Then, from such a vantage point, "with one ear tuned to the hum of contemporary culture and the other trained on the voices from the historical context of Scripture, the New Testament theologian's task is to speak to the life of faith as it wrestles with contemporary complexities, such as human identity, human rights, poverty, global warming, terrorism, imperialism and racial inequality" (p. 214).

Although this sounds good on the surface, one wonders how Hatina could have such a sharp eye for discerning the problems in other approaches to NTT while being blind to the problems in his own proposal. First, and most problematic, he treats the discipline of religious studies as self-evidently superior, as obviously the right way to have a respected voice in a global world. It is startling that he can critique the exclusivity of a faith system like orthodox Christianity, then turn around and claim "what is needed is a theory of religion that can establish a common ground" (p. 219)—as though religious studies occupies some neutral space that all peoples should recognize as right. One wonders why it is neither disrespectful nor colonizing for religion scholars to place themselves as the authorities on how Christians should read the NT, and presumably how Muslims should read the Quran, and Jews the Torah. To be fair, Hatina works hard to claim that sacred texts are still sacred and can have some authoritative role; in practice, though, it becomes evident that Scripture can no longer function as divine revelation (unless the divine being in question is either fallible or deferent to the religion scholar). As Hatina describes the role of sacred texts, it becomes apparent that their authoritative voice can only speak when deemed right and relevant by some a priori criteria deemed appropriate by religions scholars; and the voices of sacred texts are muted, opposed, or made metaphorical when deemed wrong or irrelevant by that same elusive criteria.

Second, despite Hatina's repeated appeal to "relevance"—even within the book's title—this term is never clearly defined. By "relevant", Hatina apparently means being "respected" and capable of speaking to whatever social problems are deemed (by religion scholars or the dominant culture) as worthy of attention. (It is worth asking whether Hatina has considered whether his proposal is "relevant" to NT scholars or orthodox Christians). Further, one suspects Hatina is suffering from what Larry Hurtado called "cultural amnesia", being unaware of the tremendous impact that the Christian faith had and continues to have in the world (Hurtado 2017). That is, in the very areas that Hatina thinks matter (like human rights and poverty) Christianity (and not the discipline of religious studies) made a culture-altering impact. Even more, early Christianity's tremendous impact came via a message that seemed neither respectable nor relevant to the dominant Greco-Roman culture.

Despite these criticisms directed against Hatina's proposal, his diagnosis of NTT demands attention. In what follows, we will be considering how several recent NTTs have navigated the complex questions Hatina raises. What is the role of history, the limits of the canon, the unity of the NT witness, and their ongoing relevance for today?

### 3. Craig Blomberg

Craig Blomberg offers his own attempt at this tricky genre with his recent book, *A New Testament Theology* (Blomberg 2018). For those familiar with Blomberg's impressive resume of NT scholarship, there are many ways in which his NTT will not disappoint its readers: it is chock-full of scholarship, provides an evangelical voice on numerous theological and historical topics throughout the NT canon, and is written with enviably clear syntax. Blomberg identifies his project as closest to a "redemptive-historical approach", which tends to be "arranged chronologically, focusing on developments for one period of time to the next [and] may be tied to the concepts of progressive revelation or salvation history and is an overtly Christian endeavor" (pp. 6–7).

Thus, the book is arranged in a kind of loose chronological order, based on Blomberg's assumptions about dating, with a chapter devoted to each of the following: historical Jesus, early church, James and Jude, Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, the Pastorals (with Luke as a possible amanuensis of Paul), Hebrews, 1–2 Peter, and Johannine Literature. Most chapters have a similar structure: background material (author, date, audience, etc.), prominent themes of each author/collection, and theological themes that Blomberg traces through nearly every author/collection (esp. the themes of fulfillment and Christology). Each chapter reveals a depth of research and an intimate familiarity with the NT work(s) in question, making the book a valuable resource for those interested in (a) an author's major themes, (b) where those themes show up, and (c) relevant scholarship pertaining to these themes.

In many ways, the result is a NTT that reads like a NT Introduction of inverse proportions. Whereas NT Introductions tend to be heavy on background information and light on an author's recurring themes, Blomberg provides the reverse: a quick survey of background material followed by a detailed survey of major themes. Blomberg's concluding chapter—a mere fourteen pages—does disappointingly little in the way of synthesis, offering a mere paragraph that points out some shared emphases along with three paragraphs on distinctive contributions of each NT book. To be fair, the motif of "fulfillment" is Blomberg's scarlet thread that runs throughout, but this does less to build a synthesized NT theology and more to highlight a shared assumption of the NT authors. The reader may find it odd that a book titled *A New Testament Theology* claims it is "not our goal to evaluate the amount of unity and diversity in the NT in any detailed way" (p. 700). However, one wonders how that could not be a goal. It seems almost a self-evident necessity for something called NT "theology" and not NT "theologies". Instead, Blomberg offers a collection of NT theological themes loosely arranged according to a conservative chronology.

As we look closer, we might categorize Blomberg's approach as a blend of historical criticism and evangelical scholarship. After a cursory survey of various approaches to

NTT, Blomberg identifies his work, as mentioned above, as having "most in common with the redemptive-historical approach" (p. 7). Unfortunately, Blomberg gives no explanation for why he adopts this approach; instead, he immediately moves on to the structure of his work. The reader is left wondering if Blomberg has understood that a coherent and compelling NTT cannot bypass this conversation; that this is no mere matter of taste or personal preference, but establishes the foundation upon which one constructs their NTT. What is particularly frustrating is that Blomberg references the works of both Räisänen and Hatina, but has apparently not found it necessary to address the valid questions they raise. For example, Räisänen offers a compelling case for why a *consistent* application of the historical-critical method should lead one away from a synthesized theology of the NT canon and toward history-of-religions reconstructions. From what I can gather by reading between the lines, Blomberg apparently believes there's a simple solution to this problem—namely, any *good* application of the historical-critical method will produce results that are either consistent with the NT witness or simply neutral vis-à-vis the NT. Those historical critics who might dissent are presumably too skeptical or biased. The result is that Blomberg's NTT contains historical claims that are likely to be well received by many evangelicals but dismissed by the traditional historical critic.

Two examples might suffice to show how Blomberg's lack of theoretical clarity leads to confusing and unsatisfying results. First, Blomberg writes, "I must also be transparent about other presuppositions and principles I decided on in advance. I have limited my treatment to the twenty-seven books of the NT historically agreed upon by all major wings of the Christian church" (p. 13). One expects this statement to be followed by more details defending this particular presupposition, but Blomberg merely points to other publications defending "that the church's ratification in the fourth century . . . was a good decision and superior to other collections that might have been chosen" (p. 13). Did Blomberg limit his focus to the NT canon based on theological reasons ("what is agreed upon by all major wings of the Christian church") or historical-critical reasons (it is historically "superior to other collections")? If the former, then he might make this more transparent by appeal to the Spirit's guidance in the discernment process (which may then have implications for how to carry out the task of NTT). If it is the latter, then canonical limitations still seem arbitrary at best, or evangelical confirmation-bias at worst. After all, what historical critic, striving for neutrality, would contend that every NT document (including 2 Peter) is historically superior to every noncanonical document? This seems to be a place where Blomberg is making a theological move, but presenting it as a historical move to make it more respectable to the scholarly guild.

Second, and related, there is no explanation for why Blomberg includes a chapter on both the historical Jesus and the early church. Having just claimed to limit his survey to the "twenty-seven books of the NT", he seemingly backpedals by starting his NTT with two chapters of historical reconstruction (nearly one-hundred-twenty pages, occupying one-fifth of the book). This raises a multitude of unanswered (and unaddressed) questions about the relationship of such historical-critical constructions to NTT? If I were to surmise a guess, I would assume Blomberg sees these chapters serving an apologetic function—namely, showing that the theology of all twenty-seven books of the canon are not based on myth and hearsay, but are rooted in and consistent with real historical events. This is a laudable goal but requires a better strategy. I suspect Blomberg has made his NTT susceptible to two problems. First, Blomberg is unlikely to sway the traditional historical critic, because his historical constructions lack sufficient rigor and skepticism. As an example, his historical-Jesus research focuses almost exclusively on Q and parts of Mark. Second, by choosing to *play the game* of historical criticism, it would seem he has positioned himself to *play by the rules* of the historical-critical method. Further, if Räisänen is correct (and Blomberg has not demonstrated otherwise), this means, among other things, that methodological integrity demands that history of religions is the proper subject matter, rigorous skepticism is the chief virtue, the canon is an arbitrary limit, and Blomberg's periodic prescriptive statements are incongruous with the historian's descriptive task. Consequently, for some

readers, it will be disappointing that someone with such intellectual caliber, such clarity of writing, and such concern for the Church did not base his theology on a more coherent, consistent, or clearly defended foundation.

**4. Timo Eskola**

Next, we turn to Timo Eskola's *A Narrative Theology of the New Testament* (Eskola 2015), which Blomberg (2016) describes in a review as "by far the most erudite and helpful of the narrative theologies to date for NT study" (p. 869). In this stimulating work, Eskola charts a distinct path. Eskola aims "to construct a synthesis of the theological thinking present in different New Testament writings by focusing on the metanarrative of exile and restoration" (p. 14). In short, he hopes to show that the worldview of exile and restoration—made famous especially by N.T. Wright—enhances a reading of the NT. He is confident that this worldview lens will not only clarify many biblical passages but will also reveal shared assumptions that bring a certain unity to the many NT witnesses.

For Eskola, a worldview or metanarrative approach to NTT allows one to combine two important elements that belong together: (1) a close reading of the biblical narratives, and (2) a more current and informed understanding of the nature of historiography. "History, as it appears in ancient documents, has been presented to us in the form of narratives. A proper understanding of New Testament theology depends on a proper reading of narratives" (pp. 7–8). As Eskola points out, it is increasingly recognized that history-writing is never just a chronicling of bare facts but always involves selection, interpretation, and narrative arrangement; consequently, studying history requires good narrative analysis. Moreover, for Eskola, good narrative analysis requires understanding the metanarrative that shaped the interpretive, narratival process of history-writing: "[The] past is presented in the form of narratives, and *most descriptions are directed by metanarratives* that provide the rationale of the presentation. *Understanding theology, for the most part, depends on understanding these metanarratives* (p. 2, italics my own).

The structure of Eskola's NTT is a bit like a set of case studies of various NT texts and themes, testing the "fit" or explanatory power of the exile-and-restoration metanarrative. Besides an Introduction that lays out methodology and a Conclusion that summarizes things nicely, the book has four long chapters: Jesus' Message, The Teaching of Earliest Christianity[2], Paul the Theologian, and Jewish Christianity[3].

To help evaluate Eskola's work, I will adapt Alister McGrath's metaphor for thinking about worldview or metanarrative (McGrath 2010, pp. 51–52). McGrath describes world-view as a lens—something we can both look *at* and look *through*. In some places, Eskola invites the reader to look *at* the exile-and-restoration lens, showing where it can be found in the OT prophets, the intertestamental literature, and the NT writings. In much of the rest of the book, Eskola directs the reader to look *through* the exile-and-restoration lens, noting how it clarifies obscure NT texts while it also "helps the reader understand several other theological themes that previously may have looked like independent and separate elements" (p. 421). If I were to extend McGrath's worldview metaphor, I would note that some lenses are prescription lenses and others are colored lenses. At times, Eskola's metanarrative lens functions like a good set of prescription lenses, enabling the reader to see NT texts and themes with greater accuracy and clarity. At other times, Eskola's metanarrative lens seems more akin to colored lenses, tenting everything with the same hue, which can lead to both uniformity and self-fulfilling predictions (e.g., inviting people to look through blue lenses, then pointing out how much blue we "discover" in whatever object we're viewing). Regarding uniformity, one wonders if Eskola's colored lenses cannot but filter out the distinct "colors" of some NT witnesses, so that, for example, his NTT allots only seven pages for Hebrews, three for James, and two for Peter's letters. Regarding self-fulfilling predictions, for example, Eskola sees Israel's exile and restoration in the Prodigal Son parable. In this case, it appears that Eskola's metanarrative carries more interpretive weight than does the immediate Lukan narrative. (After all, in its literary context, Jesus tells this parable in response to the religious leaders grumbling that Jesus

eats with tax collectors and sinners). Superseding the literary context of the historical narrative in this way seems out of step with Eskola's earlier claims that we only have access to ancient history alongside such narratives.

We might also return to how Eskola navigates the relationship between history, narrative, and theology. I admit that I found Eskola hard to pin down. On the one hand, it would seem that Eskola is not interested in *behind-the-text* reconstructions based on his insistence that "theology is a matter of the content of texts and, therefore, depends on the semiotic nature and narrative structure of the texts in question" (1). On the other hand, he hopes to quell the fears of those who are nervous that narrative theologians "focus on the final version of the New Testament text and neglect the historical processes forming the material". This leads him to suggest that his metanarrative-informed historical construction can be something like data for the criterion of "coherence in order to evaluate which stories or traditions support the general picture" (p. 420). For example, in answer to the question, "Did [the historical] Jesus anticipate his death and resurrection?", Eskola thinks the exile-and-restoration metanarrative shows that "it is not logical to assume he didn't" (p. 187). I cannot understand why Eskola even considers such historical-Jesus questions. Is this not an instance of trying to peel back the layers of tradition and redaction to find the events behind the narrative, which Eskola had earlier problematized as guided by bad historiographical theory?

As for how Eskola's narrative theology of the NT speaks to a contemporary audience, that seems largely avoided; instead, Eskola sticks to the descriptive task. Perhaps Eskola recognizes that a shift to the prescriptive task may require a theological appeal, whereas he may desire to stay within the seemingly neutral and/or more respectable realms of socio-historical inquiry and literary analysis.

**5. Hermann Spieckermann and Reinhard Feldmeier**

Given that for some, NTT is inherently deficient apart from the OT, it seems wise to include two biblical theologies. We will start with *God of the Living*, which is the product of two German biblical scholars—Hermann Spieckermann (an OT scholar) and Reinhard Feldmeier (a NT scholar) (Spieckermann and Feldmeier 2011). Their biblical theology is worth considering for at least three reasons. First, its pages contain a vast amount of German scholarship that will likely be unfamiliar to many readers (although it is surprising that there is no bibliographical reference to towering English-speaking Pauline scholars such as John Barclay, N.T. Wright, E.P. Sanders, Michael Gorman, or Richard Hays). Second, it laudably combines the expertise of both an OT scholar and a NT scholar. This makes perfect sense for something as complex as writing a biblical theology. Third, Spieckermann and Feldmeier, whether they are aware of it or not, present a kind of via media between history of religions and theological interpretation. It is this third point that will be the focus of our review.

Their approach is to consider biblical theology by focusing on the doctrine of God. They describe their project as follows: "The doctrine of God seeks to examine the biblical understanding of God to the depths permitted by the biblical texts themselves and brought to light in all its complexity and controversy by the interpretive art of theological scholarship" (3). Precisely how they will be guided in this endeavor is somewhat mysterious. Despite closely reading the Introduction twice, I could pin down neither a clear methodological strategy nor the metaphysical assumptions that would guide their biblical theology. The following quotation is lengthy but necessary to capture the many strands the authors are trying to weave together:

> With regard to the presentation of a biblical theology in the form of a biblical doctrine of God, it is self-evident that it must be conceived simultaneously in historical-genetic and systemic fashion. Contexts in the history of religion and philosophy will be taken into account to the extent that they are necessary for an understanding of biblical notions of God. Equally indispensable are insights from literary and theological history … [These insights] serve the objective

> of appropriately understanding the knowledge of God in the Christian Bible in its final forms and tracing the internal logic of the understanding of God attained there. This purpose requires the systematization called for by the subject matter, without which the reflection of the theo-logic of the Christian Bible cannot succeed and relational knowledge of God cannot be facilitated (p. 12).

The brevity by which they lay out this approach may leave the reader unsatisfied. Whether the authors are trying to avoid the complex conversation about the nature and methods of biblical theology, or whether they assume that all sensible readers will share their presumptions, the result is that it will leave some readers, like myself, disoriented and frustrated. Nevertheless, their approach seems to be something like a history-of-religions account of the development(s) of the Judeo-Christian doctrine of God coupled with a literary exegesis of the final, canonical form of Scripture, all with the goals of (1) facilitating a "relational knowledge of God", and (2) presenting "biblical content . . . [that] can become fruitful and authoritative for contemporary reflection and insight" (p. 12). If all that sounds confusing, that's because it is.

In order to provide a lay of the land, let us briefly consider the arrangement of *God of the Living*. Part 1, "Foundation", considers "God's being" in six chapters: The Name and the Names, From Lord God to Father God, The One as the Unifier, The Loving One, The Almighty, and Spirit and Presence. Part 2, "Development", examines "God's doing" in twelve chapters: Word and Creation, Blessing and Praise, Justice and Justification, Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Hiddenness and Wrath, Suffering and Lament, Transience and Death, Eternity and Time, Commandment and Prayer, Covenant and Promise, Salvation and Judgment, and Hope and Comfort.

There is something of a consistent pattern for each chapter. The authors highlight an issue or doctrine, trace the supposed development of this doctrine from earlier OT texts to later OT texts, then to intertestamental literature, then typically to the Gospels (starting with Mark and ending with John), then to Paul's letters, and sometimes to the Catholic epistles and Revelation. Their survey is less a series of prooftexts, and more like a string of short interpretive essays on various texts—sometimes more of a historical-critical variety and sometimes more akin to a literary exegesis of the text's final form. Thus, their biblical theology at places reads like a history-of-religions survey, especially as the authors make numerous references to the history *behind the text*. At other times, the authors abandon history-of-religions commitments when they (1) try to locate some constant thread uniting this development, (2) act as though whatever they have teased out provides some kind of authoritative picture of God, and (3) hope that this invites the reader into a relational knowledge of God.

Take for example, Ch. 5, "The Almighty", which considers the doctrine of God's omnipotence. After raising some troubling issues associated with the implications of this doctrine, the authors hope to quell any fears by offering a biblical doctrine of God's omnipotence. To do so, they trace the development of this doctrine from a selection of Psalms to the Minor Prophets to Job to Ancient Judaism (*Letter of Aristeas*, Judith, 2 Macc) to excerpts of the undisputed Pauline letters to the Synoptics to John to Revelation. This survey leads to the authors' conclusion: "In the biblical context, almightiness is not unbounded omnipotence, but a power expressed in God's will for the salvation of his people. One may demonstrate the beginnings of a corresponding tendency in the Old Testament and in a clear form in the writings of Hellenistic Judaism. In the New Testament, this tendency develops into the assignment of omnipotence to the Father" (p. 197).

Generous readers might treat *God of the Living* as a vigorous quest to expose the biblical doctrine of God by discerning some scarlet thread(s) that runs throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Thus, the authors trace some theological idea from the earliest OT witness all the way through Jesus and the NT church, teasing out some shared doctrine and its historical development. For others, though, *God of the Living* will be more akin to an eccentric, connect-the-dots theological survey. Despite the vast amount of exegetical and historical insight on display, their biblical theology is particularly unsatisfying in that

it is never made clear why the authors chose to connect these particular historical and literary dots and why they connect them in this particular order. Moreover, once the dots are connected, the resultant picture never seems to be as self-evident as the authors assert. Instead, it resembles something closer to a Rorschach inkblot, which could plausibly resemble what the authors claim but could just as well resemble something altogether different. Rather than playing by the rules of either the historical-critical paradigm or theological interpretation, Spieckermann and Feldmeier seem to play by their own unspecified rules.

**6. John Goldingay**

Next, we will consider John Goldingay's *Biblical Theology* (Goldingay 2016). Along the way, we will come full circle by returning to some of the questions raised by Hatina at the beginning of our survey: namely, what does this biblical theology assume about the role of history, the limits of the canon, the unity of the biblical witness, and the ongoing relevance for today?

Let's begin with the structure of Goldingay's biblical theology. Perhaps only an author like Goldingay—one with his combination of scholarly credentials, courage, and provocative charm—can get away with admitting this research strategy: "I made a list of possible chapter headings on the basis of my hunches . . . and then began to read the New Testament and to make notes under those headings" (p. 9). Following a brief Preface and short Introduction—both of which touch on methodology without going into detail—the book has eight long chapters: God's Person, God's Insight, God's Creation, God's Reign, God's Anointed, God's Children, God's Expectations, and God's Triumph. Each of those chapters is further subdivided; for example, God's Creation, is broken down into the following themes: The Heavens and the Earth, The Human Community, The Nation, Human Beings, The Person, Waywardness and Its Consequences. For each theme, Goldingay references passages from both the Old and New Testaments, highlighting distinct contributions of various canonical witnesses. The result is an engaging book that I would characterized as *abstracts of major theological themes found in Scripture*. That is, one could ask, "What does the Bible say about human beings?", then consult Chapter 3.4 in Goldingay's *Biblical Theology*, and see a cleverly arranged essay containing brief descriptions of what the canon says about "human beings", which pulls from Colossians, Genesis, James, Hebrews, Proverbs, Psalms, Job, Leviticus, Ephesians, 1 Corinthians, Luke, Matthew and more.

Next, how does Goldingay address matters of unity, canon, history, and ongoing relevance? Regarding unity, he states, "My aim is not to identify a 'common core' or 'underlying unity' that that biblical writings share; the nature of such a common core is inclined to be thin. I am seeking to identify the 'building' that might be constructed from the materials that the writings offer, in a way that does justice to them . . . This volume is the impression I have as I come away from the Scriptures" (p. 16). There is "unity" in the sense that all these witnesses rightfully belong together as one "building", but this need not result in uniformity nor in muting dissident voices. Thus, "the canon does not imply a simple unity of doctrine . . . [although it] sets boundaries" (p. 127). Further, "[the] diversity of forms by which [a theological theme] finds expression, and then the diversity within those forms . . . reflects the complexity of reality . . . [which] implies a warning about biblical theology, about thinking that we can systematize it without losing the reality" (p. 84).

Why does Goldingay assume some measure of unity; why does he assume that these diverse forms and expressions are part of one "building"? Based on statements such as "The church regards these two collections as belonging together, and they are commonly printed as one volume" (p. 13), it appears that Goldingay is either sneaking in a theological basis (i.e., the Church's discernment of canon should be trusted[4]) or simply pointing to a practical literary fact (i.e., the Bible typically comes to us as a single two-testament volume, so we may as well reads it that way). All of this is further complicated by Goldingay's recent book, *Do We Need the New Testament* (Goldingay 2015), which acts as something of a

prelude to this biblical theology. In that book, Goldingay gives the strong impression that the NT is not revealing much that cannot already be found in the OT. If that's the case, why would Goldingay write a biblical theology after completing his OT theology; would not that just be redundant? Is it because, after all, the NT has something to add? That would fit the unity-in-diversity "building" model where distinct canonical voices need to be heard; at the same time, that would seem to undermine his position that the NT is not revealing much that cannot be found in the OT.

We might further consider how Goldingay "constructs" this one biblical-theological building. Notice above Goldingay's references to "my hunches" and "the impression I have". Interestingly, such appeals sit side-by-side with claims such as "I wanted to give priority to my reading of the Scriptures themselves and to let them set the agenda for the work" (p. 9). So, is this biblical theology fashioned from Scripture's voice(s) or Goldingay's hunches? A generous reader might make sense of this by appeal to something like a "model reader" or virtue theory. This would require four assumptions. First, all readings are to some degree dialectical as the situation-shaped voice of the text is interpreted by the situation-shaped mind of the reader. Second, some readers are better—i.e., more virtuous or model—than others. Third, the more virtuous or model readers are presumably those that are most in line with the voice(s) of Scripture itself. Fourth, Goldingay is presenting himself as such a virtuous or model reader whose immersion in Scripture has honed his instincts, so that his hunches and impressions are not haphazard but trained by the text itself to be on target[5]. Consequently, proper evaluation of his biblical theology may not be possible on the front end by examining methodology, but only by following Goldingay on the journey. In the same way as the Apostle Paul says, "Follow me as I follow Christ", perhaps Goldingay is saying, "Follow me as I follow the grain of Scripture". As far as I can tell, this framework would also explain how Goldingay hears the voice of Scripture speaking to contemporary issues (i.e., Goldingay is presumably the kind of virtuous or model reader who can hear how the text speaks to his own contemporary context). This would not be the foundationalism that Hatina critiques, but a kind of model-reader-dialectical approach. Nonetheless, Goldingay is evidently reserved about this task: "I want to know what significance these Scriptures have in our time . . . [but] I don't want such interests to stop me from seeing what they have to say in their own right" (p. 15).

If I am correct to apply a model-reader or virtue-theory framework to Goldingay's biblical theology, this raises some questions about other claims he has staked. For example, he writes, "I aim to write a critical biblical theology in the sense that I seek to avoid reading into the Scriptures the categories and convictions of postbiblical Christian theology", such as the doctrine of the Trinity and the Nicene Creed (p. 17). (In *Do We Need the New Testament*, Goldingay even has a chapter titled, "Theological Interpretation: Don't Be Christ-Centered, Don't Be Trinitarian, Don't Be Constrained by the Rule of Faith"). Are we to assume that Goldingay believes his hunches and impressions are superior to the collected witnesses of the ecumenical councils? Is he a more virtuous or model reader than they? Might the doctrine of the Trinity and the rule of faith be the time-tested, authorized, ecumenical, global "impressions" for how to read Scripture? Further, given that Goldingay apparently focuses on the canon for theological and/or literary reasons, would not either of those same reasons support a "ruled" reading of Scripture (i.e., theologically, the church catholic handed down both the canon and the Creed, which suggests that if Goldingay defers to one [the canon] he should defer to the other [Creed]; literarily, the same church who bound the two testaments together [so that Goldingay reads them as one volume] also provided an interpretive guide for reading them properly via the rule of faith)?

Lastly, we turn to the relationship between history and theology in Goldingay's work. He writes, "The choice between being historical, critical and academic or being ecclesial . . . is phony"; and, "my conviction [is] that [Scripture's] understanding of reality is true" (p. 17). His solution, which is spelled out in *Do We Need the New Testament*, is neither to claim that the Scriptural record is fabrication nor that it's some pure record of events exactly as they happened. Instead, he categorizes it as "memory", by which he means something

like an authorized interpretation and narration of events. For example, "Scriptures such as Exodus thus pass on the revelation, the account of the event, the proclamation and the interpretation" (p. 95). The history *behind the text* is, therefore, not Goldingay's focus, because he is more concerned with the memory transmitted *in the text*, which gives the authorized narration and interpretation of past events. Consequently, Goldingay's "critical biblical theology" will not satisfy the classic historical critic, but it may find an audience with the literary critic and the theological interpreter.

**7. Conclusions**

The title of this review posed the question, "Is New Testament theology still having an identity crisis?" Based on the five works surveyed, it appears the answer is "yes". Not only does our survey reveal there to be no standard approach to NTT (or biblical theology), it also shows that each work struggled to articulate and/or consistently implement a coherent strategy for carrying out its own approach. That is, it is not merely a matter of an identity crisis in the *field* but also an identity crisis in each surveyed work. To switch to a building metaphor, despite the tremendous amount of scholarship evident in these books, they all came up short of building something that was adequately sturdy and inhabitable and inviting, because they did not lay a sufficiently solid theoretical foundation and/or erect a structure that could weather the storms of the apt criticisms that their works elicit. By avoiding, minimizing, or mishandling one or more crucial issues—such as the role of history, the limits of the canon, the synthesis of the diverse biblical witness, and the ongoing relevance for today—these five books have left the door open for others to attempt a NTT (or biblical theology) that contains the kind of theoretical coherency and consistency required for bringing the genre out of its longstanding identity crisis.

My own modest contention is that NTT needs to stop attempting to be all things to all people. First, for the traditional historical-critics, sticking with their field's own theoretical presuppositions, they should abandon the project of NTT, focusing instead on the historical developments of Jesus and the early Christians. It is simply, and obviously, confusing or misleading to call such historical-reconstruction projects "NT theology", given that it makes little sense for the consistent historical critics to either (a) limit their focus to the NT, or (b) assume that these witnesses can be synthesized into a singular theology. Second, for the literary critics, who want to let all the "voices" of the NT be heard, but are reticent to synthesize these voices, they should cease referring to their works as "NT theology", but should instead call them "Theologies of the NT", which is more accurate. Third, my hunch is that the kind of NTT that Hatina proposes should be largely abandoned due to, of all things, a lack of relevance. Ironically, in attempting to make the NT relevant, Hatina has made it largely irrelevant by stripping it of its weight and status among the primary community that looks to the NT for direction. Consequently, I am not sure who the audience would be for the kind of NTT that Hatina proposes—a theology that speaks with no real authority to either the global or Christian community.

Fourth, I think the most promising way forward is to embrace a theoretical and metaphysical framework that befits something called "NT theology"—i.e., the kind of framework that naturally aligns with studying these twenty-seven NT books while also assuming they can be synthesized into *a* theology (*singular*). To my mind, this requires an unapologetically Christian framework that not only regards these twenty-seven books of the NT as special revelation, but also assumes these witnesses are capable of being synthesized into *a* theology, because they are inspired by *one* God. The audience for this work is not primarily the historical critic nor the literary scholar nor the pluralistic world; after all, some theoretical and metaphysical assumptions are different and/or incompatible. Sensibly, the primary audience for NTT would therefore be the community that regards the NT as this kind of special revelation. Then, when the writers of NTT come to matters such as history, contemporary relevance, or synthesis, they will not try to please all peoples of all assumptions but will instead inquire how Christian convictions and traditions might guide them. This is not to say that such a NTT would be fundamentalist or would ignore all the

tools of literary criticism or socio-historical inquiry. Of course, some tools might be seen as irrelevant to the specific project of NTT (such as historical-Jesus criteria, given that NTT would focus on the final, canonical form of the Gospels' witness to Jesus). However, other literary and historical tools would still play a role as they are wielded by those working within the larger framework of a Christian worldview. The Christian worldview that befits NTT (or biblical theology) would presumably operate on several guiding assumptions that make up basic Christian belief, such as the following: (1) God exists; (2) the one God has given special revelation in Scripture; (3) this special revelation is contained in both the Old and New Testaments; (4) this special revelation plays an authoritative role over believers of all times and cultures, because the Spirit makes it a living word capable of speaking beyond its original audience; (5) the special revelation of Scripture comes through God inspiring humans and working through their distinct languages, communication styles, and cultures (unlike the dictation model of the Quran), which means interpreting special revelation sometimes requires linguistic and cultural translation; (6) the same Spirit who inspired Scripture presumably guided the church to hand down the rule of faith (especially the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds), which functioned as a kind of core and authoritative synthesis of the canon, while still allowing room for diversity of emphases and guidance on secondary and tertiary matters; and, (7) Jesus was the God-incarnate Messiah who fulfilled Scripture, was crucified, died, resurrected and ascended, thereby ushering in the already/not-yet kingdom of God that will culminate in the redemption and reconciliation and right-making of all things. It appears time for a NTT that is boldly and coherently and consistently Christian.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

1 More specifically, I will use the following three categories: (1) "behind the text," (2) "in the text," and (3) "in front of the text." Joel B. Green (2007) concisely and clearly defines these categories:

> *Behind-the-text* approaches address the text as a window through which to access and examine the deposit of "meaning." These approaches, then, locate meaning in the history assumed by the text, the history that gave rise to the text, and/or the history to which a text gives witness. *In-the-text* methods recalibrate their gaze so as to bring into focus the qualities of the text itself, its architecture, consistency, and texture. Emphasis falls on the perspective contained within and transmitted by the text, apprehending the text as a kind of sealed "container" of meaning. *In-front-of-the-text* approaches orient themselves around the perspectives of various readers of the text, on readerly communities, and/or on the effects that texts (might) have on their readers. In this case, readers do not simply perceive but actually produce, or at least assist in the production of, meaning (p. 105 [italics original]).

2 In this chapter, Eskola examines "the earliest stratum of hymns, confessional statements and kerygmatic formulas still detectable in the New Testament writings" (p. 189).

3 This chapter offers a brief survey of the exile-and-restoration metanarrative in Hebrews, James, Peter, and the Johannine literature.

4 "Their canonical authority signifies that they are our key resource and norm for our thinking because they alone can tell us what God was doing in the story of Israel and the story of Jesus" (Goldingay 2016, p. 133).

5 These four assumptions might be inferred from the following: "While our grasp of truth is partial and is skewed by our perspective and context, so that our account of the narrative will be local, there is such a thing as objective truth . . . and the Scriptures convey truth . . . The scriptural story seeks to encourage people to look at their own story in the context of the story of creation; the exodus; David; the exile; Ezra and Nehemiah; the Maccabees; Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection; and the beginning of the Jesus movement" (Goldingay 2016, p. 83).

## References

Blomberg, Craig L. 2016. Review of Timo Eskola, A Narrative Theology of the New Testament: Exploring the Metanarrative of Exile and Restoration. *JETS* 59: 869–71.

Blomberg, Craig L. 2018. *A New Testament Theology*. Waco: Baylor.

Eskola, Timo. 2015. *A Narrative Theology of the New Testament: Exploring the Metanarrative of Exile and Restoration*. WUNT 350. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Goldingay, John. 2015. *Do We Need the New Testament?* Downers Grove: IVP.

Goldingay, John. 2016. *Biblical Theology*. Downers Grove: IVP.
Green, Joel B. 2007. *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture*. Nashville: Abingdon.
Hatina, Thomas. 2013. *New Testament Theology and its Quest for Relevance: Ancient Texts and Modern Readers*. London: Bloomsbury.
Hurtado, Larry W. 2017. *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*. Waco: Baylor.
Marshall, Howard. 2004. *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*. Downers Grove: IVP.
Matera, Frank J. 2005. New Testament Theology: History, Method, and Identity. *CBQ* 67: 1–21.
Matera, Frank J. 2007. *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
McGrath, Alister. 2010. *The Passionate Intellect: Christian Faith and the Discipleship of the Mind*. Downers Grove: IVP.
Räisänen, Heikki. 2000. *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme*, 2nd ed. London: SCM.
Rowe, C. Kavin. 2006. New Testament Theology: The Revival of a Discipline: A Review of Recent Contributions to the Field. *JBL* 125: 393–419. [CrossRef]
Schreiner, Thomas R. 2008. *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
Spieckermann, Hermann, and Reinhard Feldmeier. 2011. *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology*. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. Waco: Baylor.
Stenschke, Christoph. 2010. Strong Cases for the Unity of New Testament Theology: A Survey of Four Recent English New Testament Theologies. *R&T* 17: 133–61.
Thielman, Frank. 2005. *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetical Approach*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

religions

MDPI

*Review*

# New Testament Theology and the Production of Theological Commentaries: Trends and Trajectories

**W. Ryan Gutierrez**

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA 91182, USA; williamgutierrez@fuller.edu

**Abstract:** The past two decades have witnessed an explosion of new theological commentary series and theological commentaries. As we near the end of the second decade of theological commentary production, it is beneficial to take a step back to evaluate the contributions of each theological commentary series and how the commentary genre continues to be a helpful form for the development of NT theology. This paper reviews and evaluates four commentaries from each of the Belief, Brazos Theological, and Two Horizons New Testament commentary series according to (1) the aims and goals of the series, and (2) how each commentary attempts to actualize the stated ends of the series.

**Keywords:** theological commentary; theological hermeneutics; belief; Brazos Theological Commentary; Two Horizons New Testament Commentary

**Citation:** Gutierrez, W. Ryan. 2021. New Testament Theology and the Production of Theological Commentaries: Trends and Trajectories. *Religions* 12: 949. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110949

Academic Editor: Joel B. Green

Received: 7 September 2021
Accepted: 27 October 2021
Published: 1 November 2021



## 1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed an explosion of new theological commentary series and theological commentaries. Although the aims and goals of each theological commentary series are distinct, they all purportedly participate in the common project of (re)learning how to interpret Scripture theologically. Moreover, the editors and contributors to these series view the commentary genre as well-suited to accomplish the goals of both the broader and more specific projects related to theological interpretation and hermeneutics. As we near the end of the second decade of theological commentary production, it is beneficial to take a step back to evaluate the unique contributions of each theological commentary series. As some of the early commentary series end and new ones emerge, we should take stock of what we have learned from the production of these kinds of commentaries and, more specifically, how the commentary form can continue to contribute to the larger project of NT theology.

I will review and evaluate four commentaries from each of the Belief, Brazos Theological, and Two Horizons New Testament commentary series. I will begin with a brief definition of NT theology and the unique contributions that the commentary genre offers this project. I will then analyze each commentary series in turn. For each series, I will (1) articulate the aims and goals of the series, (2) provide summaries for how each commentary attempts to actualize the stated ends of the series, and (3) evaluate both the aims of the commentary series and the individual commentaries.

## 2. NT Theology and the Production of Theological Commentaries

It would seem pertinent to begin with a clear definition of the aims and purposes of NT theology. Like much of the biblical and theological disciplines, however, there is no shared consensus regarding such matters (e.g., Blomberg 2018; Hatina 2013; Rogan 2015). Even so, I offer a broad framework for NT theology that elucidates how the production of theological commentaries is a fruitful partner in charting a path forward. Though this claim might border on tautology, a NT theology is thoroughly a theological endeavor precisely because positing a collection of early Christian writings as "the NT" is itself a theological claim—an enactment of the church's faith in God's providential ordering of these texts to reveal and enfold God's people in God's economy of salvation. Moreover, the

*New* Testament assumes an *Old* Testament and, therefore, posits a second theological claim regarding the unity of the Christian two-testament canon. Theological reflection on these texts "works within the frame of the triune identity of the one God of the two Testaments alongside a commitment to the verbal character of the text in relation to its triune subject matter" (Gignilliat and Pennington 2016, p. 255). Central to doing NT theology is a focus on Scriptures' triune subject matter and a concern to situate the NT properly in relation to the OT. Theological reflection on these texts is theological reflection on the church's language about God derived from its disciplined reading and hearing of Scripture, and the performance of its mission in the works of piety and charity. Despite the contested nature of NT theology, for our purposes the perspective on NT theology that will follow in this essay will be "the science in which the Church, according to its knowledge at different times, takes account of the content of the NT critically under the guidance of its proclamation and confessions".[1]

While this critical account of the content of Scripture can take many forms, commentary seems well suited for the aims of a NT theology for at least four reasons. The first is the integral relationship between canon and interpretation. The theological claim that these texts and not others represent the NT canon necessarily calls forth the subsequent work of commenting on and interpreting these texts. As Marina Stojanović notes, "The authority of the canonical text bears itself the obligation of its interpretation, therefore a commentary is a natural and required interpretation" (Stojanović 2015, p. 72). Scripture is not self-interpreting and, therefore, requires the community of faith to discipline itself to hear God's Word through the verbal character of its literal sense across time. One of the forms such discipline has taken is the scriptural commentary.

Second is the form of commentary itself. The history of Jewish-Christian commentary witnesses to a wide array of possibilities for how scriptural texts are interpreted with different methods in various social contexts (Green 2005, p. 124). As a genre, commentary "can also function as a critical judgment on exegetical theories when the tension becomes unbearable between a new reading and the very integrity of the commentary form itself" (Childs 1997, p. 189). Commentary provides a particularly beneficial form for engaging in this critical and theological endeavor both in its ability to allow for a wide variety of methods and yet constrain or judge those methods that work against its foundational aim to elucidate the text under consideration.

Third, the production of theological commentaries provides a circumscribed area for scholars to explore and be further formed in the habits of thought necessary to produce a larger, more comprehensive NT theology. The problems facing theological hermeneutics of any kind have been rehearsed often: Johann Phillip Gabler's separation of biblical studies from dogmatics (Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge 1980), Troeltsch's all-consuming historical-critical method that brackets *a priori* Scripture's ability to witness to its divine subject matter (Troeltsch 1991), and Krister Stendahl's linear hermeneutical process of description—what a text meant—to theology—what a text means (Stendahl 1976). Such problems have only been compounded by the professionalization of the biblical and theological guilds that continues to subdivide their respective subject matter into smaller and more isolated components. Both NT theology and theological commentary, as species of theological interpretation, must simultaneously address these problems while offering theological readings of the NT texts. Among the numerous problems caused by such issues, the production of theological interpretations of Scripture must aim to unite biblical studies and theology, cultivate interdisciplinary habits that allow sharing between discrete disciplines, and reorient history toward its proper beginning and end in God's own eternal life. Such a task is monumental and can lead toward constant hermeneutical reflection on how to do theological interpretation without its actualization in theological readings. The commentary genre holds together such hermeneutical reflection and the interpretation of texts with a focus on one or a small selection of biblical books, and in this way, affords the exegete an opportunity to comprehensively explore theological readings of particular

passages in light of a book's larger message, while also offering preliminary considerations on the relationship between the NT books themselves.

A fourth and perhaps overlooked reason is how the commentary in its material reality is already situated between the church and the academy, and between biblical studies and theology. The commentary form has been and continues to be a staple literary production of the biblical studies guild, and although there is a persistent complaint that commentaries do not aid pastors in their homiletical reflection or ministries, commentaries continue to line the bookshelves of those who hold teaching offices in the church. Moreover, while the biblical studies guild has coopted the commentary form for the past two centuries, scriptural commentaries have traditionally been written by church doctors and theologians. With the new influx of theological commentaries that explicitly invite theologians to engage in this work, the production of commentaries already transgresses some of the boundaries that theological hermeneutics must overcome and begins to create a shared culture of material production and consumption between biblical scholars, theologians, and church leaders.

As I turn to the three commentary series under review, a brief word should be said about how I will evaluate them. I first assess the commentaries according to the standards set by the series themselves in order to determine how and the degree to which a particular commentary fulfilled the stated aims. I will then move to evaluate both the aims of the series and the individual commentaries as they relate to the production of a NT theology. A primary consideration must be the degree to which a given commentary helpfully elucidates the theological aim(s) of the text(s) under consideration. My broad framework and definition of NT theology above presupposes that theological commentators will read across and with all of Christian Scripture, doctrinal development, and ecclesial practice. We must evaluate whether such readings clarify or obscure a reader's ability to make sense of the given text's literal sense. A second and related consideration will be the extent to which a given commentary (re)orients the methods employed to the theological claims of Scripture. This reorientation of methods will involve a critical appropriation of both modern and premodern approaches to Scripture. Finally, I will evaluate how particular commentaries move the needle toward theological interpretations of Scripture. The theological culture that gave birth to the church's canons and ecumenical confessions developed across numerous generations; likewise, the malformation of this culture in the modern period was an intergenerational effort. It will take the effort of numerous generations to produce a requisite theological culture in which theological interpretation can flourish and will require a critical appropriation of the whole interpretive tradition. It is only fair to evaluate the present theological commentaries on their ability to move the needle toward such a theological culture and not on their ability to actualize every aspect of theological interpretation.

### 3. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible

The aims of this commentary series are twofold. First, it aims to produce commentaries that are useful for the church and its pastors, particularly in their ability to "convey the powerful sense of God's merciful presence that calls Christians to repentance and praise" and to "bring the church fully forward in the life of discipleship" (González 2010, p. ix). The second aim is to "encourage all theologians to pay more attention to Scripture and the life of the church in their writings" (x). These aims are meant to address the twofold problem that (1) many of the existing commentary series stop short of theological reflection and, for this reason, do not offer a full commentary on the biblical material, and (2) the increase in specializations across biblical and theological disciplines has resulted in a lack of scriptural engagement by theologians, especially in the traditional form of commentary. For these reasons, theologians are the preferred commentators in this this series. The commentaries should "seek to explain the theological importance of the texts for the church today" and dialogue primarily "with the church's creeds, practices, and hymns; with the history of faithful interpretation and use of the Scriptures; with the categories and

concepts of theology; and with contemporary culture" (x). How commentators engage these objects and what methods best elucidate the theological importance of a text is left to each commentator's discretion. The only prescribed structure is to introduce each biblical book in relation to its contemporary significance.

Catherine Gunslaus González's commentary *1 & 2 Peter and Jude* offers a concise reading of 1 Peter that, although exploring many topics, is relevant to contemporary Christians as it challenges assumptions regarding the necessity of the Hebrew Scriptures, the essential character of the church, the role of the congregation in Christian life, and the possibility of persecution. In regard to 1 Peter, Gunslaus González reflects on these challenges through a paragraph-by-paragraph interpretation with special attention to traditional Christian practices of typology, baptism, and the catechumenate. She argues that 1 Peter does not read the OT within a prophecy-fulfilment model that dispenses with the OT once its message has been fulfilled, but rather through typology where the OT "remains the absolutely necessary source for our interpretation of God's action in Christ as well as in our own times and in our own lives" (18). A prime example of a typological reading comes in 1 Pet 3:20–21 where baptism is the antitype (ἀντίτυπος) to the salvation of Noah and eight others through water in the ark. Just as God judged the violence of a fallen creation through the flood, so too does God drown our old life of sin and violence in the waters of baptism in order to raise us to live in the peace of God's new creation in the church (i.e., the ark). Within this typological reading and throughout the letter, the church is the indispensable community that births and socializes its babes and children (cf. 1:3, 14) in order to cultivate God's people toward holy living distinct from "being a good citizen." It is here that Gunslaus González reflects on the ancient practice of a catechumenate to aid the contemporary church in actualizing 1 Peter's exhortation toward a holiness that is distinct from western citizenship.

Thomas G. Long's commentary *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus* argues that the continued decline and instability faced by most North American churches makes these letters urgently important today. For Long, the aim of these letters is on "establishing—or reestablishing—order, discipline, and theological soundness in congregations that have gone—or are threatening to go—off the rails" (Long 2016, p. 1). He employs three reading strategies in his approach to these letters: reading the letters (1) within their historical context, (2) as Scripture that is enacted primarily through a posture of charity, and (3) as pseudonymous both in their authorship and in their addressees. The "Pastor" (Long's name for the author of these letters) is writing to the leaders at Ephesus (i.e., Timothy) and any newly formed church (i.e., Titus) in order to give pastoral guidance during the crisis of false teaching that has broken out among their congregations. These interpretive decisions lead Long to engage in constant historical typology, both between the literal sense of the text and the history behind the text, as well as between the historical situation and the contemporary church. In an example drawn from 2 Timothy, Long notes the "overarching theme of 2 Timothy" is Timothy's being entrusted with "faith in the gospel and the call to serve the church with strength and love" (185). Long is quick to remind the reader, however, that Paul is really the Pastor who is writing to a symbolic Timothy in order to encourage the elders at Ephesus whose leadership has been challenged. Throughout the commentary, Long draws comparisons to a contemporary ministry context from his behind the text reconstructions with comments such as this: "[Good ministry] looks like loving God's people so much that one stands with them in all of the broken places of life . . . standing there not in our own power but in the power of the Spirit, a gift given over and again. . . . It is a ministry that counts, really counts, because it is a ministry that is finally gathered up into the eternal mercy and reign of God" (207).

In his commentary on *Philippians and Philemon*, Daniel L. Migliore views Paul's letter to the Philippians as significant for four reasons: (1) this letter uniquely encapsulates Paul's joyful witness of knowing and following Jesus Christ, (2) the struggle to remain faithful amidst community disagreements is shared between the Philippians and contemporary readers, (3) the significance and implications of Christ's lordship within a diverse and

complex social environment must be urgently probed, and (4) the letter's integration of belief and practice challenges the ease with which contemporary Christians separate these realities (Migliore 2014, p. 2). His theological reading involves commitments to the literary integrity of the letter, a coherent Pauline theology that cannot be reduced to a single doctrine and is expressed in various ways across his letters, the use of narrative in ethical instruction, and attending explicitly to the theological content in such a way as to hear God's Word to contemporary readers (cf. 15–18). A recurring theme where the significance of Philippians and Migliore's theological sensibilities converge is in his repeated reflection on the practice of prayer. Through reflection on Paul's own prayers in the letter and the church's own life of prayer, Migliore probes theological issues like Paul's proto-Trinitarian language (43; cf. Phil 1:9–11) and the relationship between divine and human agency (104; cf. 2:12–13), as well as how prayer is a mode of fellowship in the gospel that produces rejoicing (31, 162; cf. 1:19) and a participation in and response to God's own life of self-giving love (180; cf. 4:15). Migliore's attention to prayer in its theological and practical registers helpfully ties his commentary to the Scriptures and the worshipping life of the church in mission.

Justo González locates the significance of his commentary on Luke within contemporary issues facing the church and Luke's own theological agenda. In addition to its concerns with the role of women, Christian responses to poverty, and eating practices that encode forms of exclusion and inclusion, Luke's theological-historical narrative presents an ongoing history of God's activity in the world and an unfinished church that invites contemporary readers to join in the "grand narrative" of "the fulfillment of the eternal plans and work of God" (González 2010, pp. 4, 278). In order to offer a theological commentary on this narrative, González rejects the temptation to reduce Luke to a set of abstract principles; rather, he aims to "relate it to the life and proclamation of the church and its members," especially as it pertains to issues of exclusion and inclusion (13). Throughout the commentary, González moves seamlessly between exposition of Luke's narrative and its connection with present-day Christian life through the characters Luke develops and employs. For example, in reflecting on the sign of Jonah and the queen of the South (Luke 11:29–32), he comments that Christians today look toward church growth and tithe income for a sign of God's presence. However, González exclaims, "It may be well that the sign of a church in which the Spirit of God is at work is precisely that the most unlikely folk are brought in, like the Ninevites at the time of Jonah" (149–50). A church that fails to discern this radical form of inclusion as a sign of God's presence and to conform its practices accordingly runs the risk of being thrown into the sea by the society at large.

Overall, these four commentaries provide concise, theological readings of the books under their purview with an eye toward their significance to contemporary Christian life and issues. Given the aims of the series, most commentaries focus on the literary and theological emphases in a given text and downplay or ignore historical-critical issues. These commentaries readily read the biblical books within the trinitarian and Christological developments of Nicaea and Chalcedon. While some commentators briefly justify this decision (cf. Migliore 2014, pp. 54–56), most simply assume its appropriateness. These theological and literary readings are also attentive to the formation of Christian discipleship both past and present. Perhaps the strongest contribution of these commentaries is their utilization of Christian practice as a way both to reflect on the text and to actualize its message within the life of contemporary Christians. Gunslaus González uses the practice of the catechumenate to bridge the theological claims of 1 Peter that require the socialization of new converts into an exilic Christian identity to the contemporary western church that has a difficult time distinguishing between faithful disciples and good citizens. For his part, Migliore's commentary provides an exposition of Philippians through the lens of the church's maxim *lex credendi est lex orandi* (my words, not his). Migliore and González explicitly, and Long and Gunslaus González implicitly, operate from the ecclesiological claim of the continuity of God's people and God's address that allows them to hear in these texts a word for the present. How these commentators discern a word for the present

fluctuates between drawing historical analogues between ancient and modern situations and allowing the theological thrust of a text shed to light on contemporary church practice.

The biggest areas of weakness in these commentaries stem from their lack of explicit reflection on the relationship between history and theology, coupled with the aim of the commentary series toward contemporary significance. Since no commentary in this series offers reflection on the relationship between history and theology, especially as it pertains to historical and theological interpretive methods, these commentaries end up either ignoring historical issues (e.g., Migliore) or accepting historical-critical judgments that distort and shortcircuit a commentator's ability to engage in theological reflection (e.g., Gunslaus González, Long). Long provides the worst example of accepting the historical-critical judgment that the Pastoral Epistles are pseudonymous in its authorship and addressees. These judgments relocate the primary meaning behind the text, and subsequently, situate its theological significance in the correlation of these behind-the-text reconstructions and contemporary analogues. Gunslaus González's acceptance of differing authorship for 1 and 2 Peter presents a less stark example of the same phenomenon. While she does not engage in historical reconstruction like Long, the historical-critical judgment regarding authorship leads her to focus on how the letters differ and forecloses her ability to reflect on the relationship between these two letters that the final canonical form invites (cf. 2 Pet 3:1!). González alone reflects on the relationship between history and theology in an excursus on issues of continuity and discontinuity in Luke's narrative, which discuss Luke's negotiation of *Weltgeshichte* and *Heilsgeshichte*; however, his decision to locate Luke as presenting a highly continuous synthesis of *Weltgeshichte* and *Heilsgeshichte* confuses more than it clarifies (cf. González 2010, pp. 29–32).

The lack of explicit attention to matters of history and theology are then compounded by the aim for contemporary significance. A search for contemporary relevance is vulnerable to circumscribing the interpretive task within categories of contemporary need or issues (Fletcher 2009). The result is an interpretation that must identify relevant, historical analogues that allow the message of Scripture to bridge a historical gap. The task for the commentator to elucidate the text theologically is subverted in a quest for a transhistorical significance. This is seen clearly in both Long and Gunslaus González's commentaries, which consistently search for analogous situations in order to work out the text's theological significance. To clarify, interpreting a text with an eye toward contemporary significance is not wholly bad, as it assumes the identity of one people of God across time and God's continued speaking through this text to God's people. However, in order for these theological claims to do their appropriate interpretive work, the categories for contemporary relevance must be determined by the theological aims of the scriptural texts themselves and not the other way around. We see the beginnings of such a move in Migliore and González's reflections on contemporary significance, which identify the theological motifs drawn from these texts—Paul's joyful witness or Luke's unfinished church—as of primary significance. In this way, the vulnerability of translating God's word into contemporary medium is subordinated to the more primary task of determining how the theological claims of these texts envision our personal and communal transformations.

**4. Brazos Theological Commentary**

R. R. Reno, the general editor for the Brazos Theological Commentary (BTC) series, frames the series not from a contemporary challenge like the state of critical commentaries, but rather with the nature of Scripture itself as described by Irenaeus and Origen. Irenaeus likens Scripture to a mosaic of a king whose tiles—that is, the individual books and passages of Scripture—must be put in their proper order to construct their intended result. Origen likens Scripture to a house with many locked doors and many keys, each representing the various books and passages of Scripture; it is the job of interpretation to learn which key goes with which door in order to properly unlock Scripture's true interpretive aims. Scripture is vast, heterogeneous, and obscure and, therefore, argues Reno, requires a traditioned reading that can order and clarify Scripture's many puzzles. In other words,

scriptural interpretation requires doctrine that is "the schematic drawing that will allow readers to organize . . . the Bible into a coherent whole" and "guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors" (Harink 2009, p. 10). The foundational claim of the series is that "dogma clarifies rather than obscures" (11). For this reason, the commentators for the series are primarily theologians, chosen "by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits" since "theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation" (12). Moreover, the series does not proscribe how dogma and the Nicene tradition should inform one's interpretation or relate to modern methods of interpretation but leaves such judgments to the individual commentators.

In lieu of standard introductory issues like authorship, date, or contemporary significance, Douglas Harink introduces his commentary *1 & 2 Peter* by identifying who his primary interlocutors are and with what framework he will bring to these texts. In relation to 1 Peter, Harink reads through the lens of the messianic/apocalyptic as developed by John Howard Yoder, Karl Barth, and Walter Benjamin, while also utilizing linguistic and socio-historical insights from Paul Achtemeier and John Elliott (Harink 2009, pp. 20–21). The commentary offers a sustained practice of utilizing the words of Peter as a launchpad for reading across the scriptural witness and into the quiet revolution that Jesus the Messiah has enacted. Harink locates the center of Peter's message and the revolutionary power of the Gospel in the repeated call to "be subordinate" (1 Pet 2:13–3:8). This call and the concrete forms of life it engenders within the institutions of slavery, marriage, and the church enacts the word of Christ that "comes as disruptive grace and plenitude in the midst of what exists, breaking into it and breaking it open for the sake of its own healing" (86). This revolution of breaking into and breaking open is quiet, hidden from those who have not been healed of their ignorance and are still trapped by their desires. Those who imitate Jesus Messiah by being subordinate to every human creature do not pit what exists against what exists so as to identically repeat the forms of violent control that undergirds worldly power, but rather, being filled with the divine plenitude of God's own life, reappropriate their lives within the world's social structures by enacting a cruciform life of self-giving for the good of what exists. While the immediacy of Harink's language and use of political philosophical readings of Pauline texts do provide fresh and expansive readings of 1 Peter, I wonder if perhaps Harink uses too many keys to unlock the door of 1 Peter and sometimes ignores the key that Peter has left behind. For example, Harink unpacks Peter's command to holiness (1:15–16) through an extensive reading of Romans and not Leviticus (19:2), which Peter cites.

Risto Saarinen's commentary *The Pastoral Epistles with Philemon and Jude* develops a hermeneutical paradigm from post-exegetical reflection on his section-by-section commentary on the Pastoral Epistles and Philemon that he then explicitly applies pre-exegetically to his commentary on Jude. His hermeneutical paradigm involves analysis of the subject–predicate relationship of theological propositions derived from the explicit statements in the biblical text or the obvious summary of the text. The interpretive task involves "realiz[ing] that the meaning of theological key subjects is elucidated by their intracanonical predicates" and that "the predicative terms . . . resonate with ordinary language as well as with other language types and the phenomenal world of human beings" (Saarinen 2008, p. 228). Thus, the meaning of theological subjects is not directly connected to the phenomenal world but must be mediated by "handshakes" with their intracanonical usage that take up and reconfigure the phenomenal signification. We can analyze Saarinen's theological hermeneutic by focusing on one of his theological propositions taken from the Pastoral Epistles: "Sound doctrine brings forth a sound mind, virtuous character, and good works" (227). Sound doctrine (ὑγιαινούσῃ διδασκαλίᾳ; 1 Tim 1:10; 2 Tim 4:3; Titus 2:1) as the theological subject is elucidated by its predicates. The primary way it "brings forth" these predicates is through the entrusting of "tradition" (παραθήκη; 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:12, 14). Tradition, argues Saarienen, should be read within the historical context of Seneca's articulation of gift-giving and gift-receiving, as well as a contemporary anthropological framework of "inalienable possession" that emphasizes how this form of giving and receiving is integral

to the identity formation of a community (251–56). These historical or phenomenological articulations of giving-and-receiving are taken up and reconfigured according to the intracanonical predicates of the Christian faith in which God's activity in Christ and the Holy Spirit makes faith possible and is also the object of faith, with the aim of producing a community of saints. Furthermore, while the predicates "a sound mind, virtuous character, and good works" draw heavily from the Greco-Roman medical tradition, the predicates are again reconfigured toward the intracanonical witness such that meekness becomes a central virtue and enactment of a sound mind (1 Tim 6:11; 2 Tim 2:25; Titus 3:2).

George Hunsinger's commentary *Philippians* is an exercise in "ecclesial hermeneutics" (Hunsinger 2020, p. 15), which he describes as "reading backwards . . . not only from the New Testament to the Old but also from the ecumenical councils to the canonical texts" (16). Hunsinger employs such backward reading primarily through disciplining his exegesis according to the patterns of thought developed in Nicaea and Chalcedon, patterns of thought that explicate the scriptural text within an ordered correlation of "asymmetry, unity, and distinction" (54). Hunsinger deploys this pattern of thought explicitly in his discussion of Christ Jesus's incarnational movement (Phil 2:6–11), free will and grace (2:12–13), righteousness through faith (3:9), and being in Christ while Christ also is in us (4:19). I will briefly look at his discussion of righteousness through faith as it is an extension of this pattern of thinking from Christ's two-natures and the relationship of the Trinity to Christ's salvific work. The key terms that Hunsinger correlates in his exegesis of Phil 3:9 are God's mercy, judgment, and righteousness, which he unpacks through a reading of Romans and the Corinthian correspondence. Christ, who is righteousness, becomes sin so that those who believe might become the righteousness of God through faith (2 Cor 5:21). Paul describes this double substitution through forensic, economic, priestly/cultic, and personal/communal metaphors (Rom 3:24–25). What is decisive for Hunsinger is the proper order of these metaphors so that the cultic/priestly metaphors are primary and lead to the others, especially the forensic ones. Hunsinger concludes: "Mercy and judgment in God are related without separation or division, without confusion or change, and with the priority and precedence belonging to divine mercy" (102). Again: "Mercy and righteousness are distinct but not separate on the cross, with priority and precedence belonging to mercy" (166). To speak adequately about God's right-making work in Christ as presented in Philippians requires a nuanced grammar that properly orders and relates a multitude of metaphors and ontological claims. It is precisely in the church's ecumenical creeds that one learns such a grammar.

David Jeffrey's commentary *Luke* draws heavily from the catena and *scholia* literary forms where comments from church tradition are gathered together to surround the biblical text (Jeffrey 2012). While offering a chapter-by-chapter commentary of the Gospel, Jeffrey draws deeply from the church's commentaries, homilies, hymns, liturgical formula, and art to illuminate the manifold interpretive possibilities inherent with this text. Such an approach impresses on the reader the deeply significant ways Luke's Gospel has informed the church's liturgical and aesthetic life. Jeffrey's work provides a good reminder that the habits of mind needed to faithfully unlock the doors of Scripture are not always formed within biblical commentaries, homilies, or theological treatises; equally, if not more significant, are the artistic representations of paintings and hymns. This work also serves as a good reminder of the consistent plurality of premodern interpretation that operate from shared presuppositions regarding the role of Scripture within the economy of salvation but offer distinct decisions for how best to read the individual parts within such an economy. Perhaps the most interesting parts of this commentary are where premodern exegesis subverts or pushes against the taken-for-granted consensuses in modern scholarship. These insights aside, Jeffrey's commentary does not necessarily offer a clear reading of the text. Numerous interpretive options are consulted but rarely does Jeffrey enter the conversation with his own voice in order to evaluate and arrange the various interpretive possibilities into a larger narrative framework. A poignant example comes in Mary's Song where Jeffrey focuses on her representation as a great poet in paintings and patristic

commentary but does not unpack the actual words of Mary's Song or their relevance as foundational themes in the rest of Luke's narrative (cf. 32–33).

Perhaps due to the wide latitude given to the commentors, the commentaries in the BTC series vary widely. The primary claims of the series are that "dogma clarifies rather than obscures" and a commentator's formation in the Nicene tradition is simultaneously the criterion by which commentators are chosen and the interpretive key to a proper ordering of Scripture. As such, one would assume the need for significant reflection on the relationship between doctrine and interpretation, or how the Nicene tradition will be used in one's interpretive judgments. While some commentators offer explicit hermeneutical reflections on their method (Saarinen and Hunsinger), others leave all such decisions implicit (Harink and Jeffrey). Jeffrey's work, which can only be considered a commentary in the broadest sense,[2] simply recapitulates premodern exegetical insights and does not attend to the manifold difficulties in appropriating these insights into a radically different theological culture. Saarinen does provide extensive hermeneutical reflection on his proposition-based theology, but strangely the method he produces seems to cut off his interpretive horizons from engagement with doctrinal development. Since theological subjects require the mediation of intracanonical handshakes to connect to the phenomenal world, all such connections are confined to the biblical text and the historical period of its production. At most, then, Saarinen's method allows him to point out various trajectories of doctrinal development on certain passages, but he cannot utilize these developments in his interpretive judgments (cf. Saarinen 2008, pp. 133–34; 2 Tim 1:15–18). For Jeffrey and Saarinen, it is unclear how dogma is used to clarify the Scriptures in any significant way or how their own formation in the Nicene tradition properly orders the heterogeneity of Scripture.

Both Harink and Hunsinger offer more fruitful ways forward than either Jeffrey and Saarinen, with Hunsinger offering explicit hermeneutical reflection and Harink doing so implicitly. Both scholars locate themselves within a received scholarly tradition that represents their formation in the Nicene tradition. Although the approaches and received tradition between them are distinct—Harink appropriates the apocalyptic/messianic of Yoder and Benjamin, and Hunsinger the *sensus communalis* of Frei—the end result reveals a fundamental aspect of the role of doctrine in interpretation: the practice of analyzing and ordering the literal sense of Scripture under the various aspects encoded in doctrinal formulations. For example, Harink's ability to read the household codes of 1 Peter as God "breaking into and breaking open" what exists for its own healing presupposes asymmetrically related orders of transcendence and immanence that are encoded in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. God's ability to create from nothing reveals that God acts from God's own plenitude and not from lack, and that the actions of God and humans do not operate on the same ontological planes and, thus, cannot be reduced to a zero-sum game. The theological reading of Harink is an analysis of the household codes under the aspect of this asymmetrical relationship between transcendent and immanent orders. Similarly, for Hunsinger, it is the logic of the incarnation as set forth in Chalcedon that patterns Christian language to speak of Christ's two-natures as united without distinction, and yet asymmetrically related as it is the eternal Son who assumes human nature. Hunsinger then reads the literal sense of Philippians, its claims regarding Christ's self-emptying obedience, the salvation won by this act of God, and the relationship between divine and human action, under the aspects of unity, distinction, and asymmetry.

The commentaries produced by Harink and Hunsinger reveal the "constraining and unleashing character" of doctrine to illuminate the literal sense of Scripture (Gignilliat and Pennington 2016, p. 255). Doctrine constrains as it pressures readings of Scripture under specific aspects that are asymmetrically related in specific ways and not others. Such constraint allows theological readings to unleash on the immanent horizon of our social institutions the transcendent reordering of God's plenitude; to probe the mysterious interconnection of God's mercy, righteousness, and judgment that is revealed in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ Jesus; and to cleanse our minds of idolatrous

patterns of thinking about God and creation that ultimately lead toward violence and death. What these commentaries do not do, and what needs to be done in order for their insights to be adequately appropriated for NT theology, is to determine whether their inherited traditions are in fact faithful extensions of the Nicene tradition. It is assumed rather than argued that employing doctrine's grammar in accordance with Barth, Benjamin, and Frei necessarily produces theologically faithful readings. Lewis Ayres and Michael Hanby have persuasively shown, however, that the modern period has sufficiently malformed the theological culture and metaphysical foundations of the Christian tradition that the deployment of its traditional terms becomes subtly reinterpreted toward improper ends (Ayres 2004; Hanby 2021). NT theology must become conversant with these malformations so that it can rightfully appropriate doctrine's ability to clarify. Moreover, no commentary in this series offers significant engagement with critical biblical scholarship and the need to utilize and tame these insights toward the theological claims of Scripture. Therefore, while the works of Harink and Hunsinger, in particular, helpfully reveal how to analyze Scripture under various doctrinal aspects, these contributions to the series fail to take seriously the verbal character of Scripture as a historical product and integrate the historical aspect into their analysis.

**5. Two Horizons New Testament Commentary**

Joel Green and Max Turner, the editors for the Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (THNTC) series, say that the series "seeks to reintegrate biblical exegesis with contemporary theology in the service of the church" with a focus toward "the nature of a biblical hermeneutics appropriate to doing theology" (Green and Turner 2000, p. 2). They further clarify that the purpose of the series is "to help the reader (1) understand individual books theologically in their ancient context and (2) be able to interpret them competently into the theological contexts of the turn of the twenty-first century" (3). Theology and not history is the chasm that separates contemporary readers from Scripture's initial audience and the church's history of interpretation, even as the historical articulations of the faith and theology of God's people must be heard within their socio-historical contexts both past and present. It is possible to describe this series, then, as a practice in "intercultural discourse and theological formation within the community of God's people" across time (42). While the individual commentators are given freedom to determine how to achieve this aim and purpose in light of their own theological tradition and their own reflection on the nature of both biblical theology and theological hermeneutics, the series does require adherence to a tripartite structure: (1) an opening section that covers matters of introduction and theological exegesis, (2) an exegetical section that "elucidates the key theological themes of the book, their relationship to each other, and their contribution to and place in a broader biblical theology," and (3) a final section that "attempts to articulate the significance of the book and its themes for theology and praxis today, and to do this *in conscious dialogue with serious contributions to modern systematic, constructive, and practical theology*" (3, italics original).

Joel Green's commentary *1 Peter* operates with the guiding assumption that 1 Peter does not contain the raw materials for theology, but rather is already theology's enactment "both in its critical task of reflection on the practices and affirmations of the people of God to determine their credibility and faithfulness, and in its constructive task of reiteration, restatement, and interpretation of the good news vis-a-vis its horizons and challenges" (Green 2007, p. 190). While Green traces the critical and constructive theology of Peter across a multitude of interrelated issues, I will look at his analysis of time as a prime example of his theological interpretation. Green utilizes narrative theology and contemporary insights in neurobiology to construct the following narrative emplotment of time from 1 Pet 1:13–21: (1) primordial time where the death of Jesus is inscribed into the timeless plan of God, (2) time of ignorance/emptiness shaped by the coercive powers of desire, (3) revelation of Jesus at the end of the age, (4) liberation through exodus imagery, (5) time of alien life characterized by holiness, (6) revelation of Jesus Christ that is oriented

toward divine vindication for those who imitate Jesus (cf. 36, 197–201). This temporal agenda, argues Green, serves to inscribe these Gentile churches into the history of Israel and cultivate "a strong sense of continuity with the past, a secure place within the arc of God's gracious purpose, and a firm basis for projecting oneself into a future made certain in Jesus' resurrection from the dead" (47). In this way, 1 Peter provides a narrative framework for solidifying communal identity amid social ostracism and discerning one's past, present, and future life as determined by God's actions in Jesus's suffering and glory and not the standard canons of honor and shame in the Greco-Roman world.

Robert Wall and Richard Steele's commentary *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* is an extended practice in a canonical approach to scriptural interpretation. The canonical approach assumes that the Scriptures are ambiguous, vulnerable to a variety of interpretations and uses, and, therefore, seeks to clarify its proper use and interpretation within the canonical process and final canonical form. In regard to matters of introduction, Wall argues that the Pastoral Epistles were canonized during the second-century debates with Marcion and Valentinus in order to solidify the correct reception and interpretation of the Pauline legacy as "the teacher of the nations" whose apostolic legacy, now codified in the thirteen-letter collection, is maximally effective for "making believers wise for salvation and bringing them to maturity to perform the good works of God" (Wall and Steele 2012, p. 25; cf. 2 Tim 3:15–17). Wall's commentary section offers a fairly straightforward reading of the Pastoral Epistles with an eye toward its intracanonical resonances with the other Pauline letters and Paul's characterization and speeches in the book of Acts. For example, Wall reads Paul's exhortation for Timothy to rekindle the gift of God (1:6; χάρισμα τοῦ θεοῦ) in light of the Pauline discussions of χᾰ́ρισμα in 1 Cor 12–14 and Rom 12:3, and the laying on of hands and receiving the Holy Spirit in Acts 8:17 and in various OT successions stories (cf. 221–25). In the final two sections of each book, Wall offers a "ruled reading" in which he rereads each book chapter-by-chapter in light of Tertullian's Rule of Faith, and Steele offers a historical example from the ecclesial tradition that enacts the theology and aims of these letters. Although suggestive in theory, these concluding sections in actuality do not deliver on substantive theological engagement with the Pastoral Epistles.

Stephen Fowl's commentary *Philippians* begins with explicit reflection on the nature of commentary and the distinction between historical and theological commentaries, offers a close reading of Philippians that keeps theological concerns central by allowing the text to address contemporary readers and utilizing historical inquiry only when it sheds light on the text's theological aims, and closes with a synthetic account of friendship that moves beyond the book of Philippians as one who has internally digested its message. Fowl argues that the central aim of the letter is to form in the Philippians "a Christ-focused *phronēsis* or practical reasoning" (Fowl 2005, p. 123). The central practices that constitute this Christ-focused practical reasoning are the ability to narrate one's life according to God's economy as revealed in Christ, and to identify faithful, analogous performances of Christ's self-emptying and obedience in the history of God's people—this in order to discern how to non-identically repeat these performances with those whom God has gathered in Christ. In addition to describing how Paul cultivates practical reasoning in the Philippians, Fowl enacts such practical reasoning through reflection on ecclesial life in America. After interpreting Paul's exhortation for the Philippians to stand firm in one Spirit and not be intimated by their opponents (Phil 1:27–28), Fowl reflects on the unity of the church in America. Fowl does not draw a direct connection between the Philippian church and the American church, but rather between the divided kingdoms of Israel in its historical narratives as a figure of the contemporary church's resistance to the Spirit, Paul's reflections on the Jewish people in Rom 9–11 as an analogous way to live in a divided church, and Paul's letter to the Ephesians that details how a divided church is unable to witness to the principalities and powers of our age (cf. 74–77).

F. Scott Spencer's commentary *Luke* offers a narrative-theological reading of the Gospel that "remains staunchly *contextual* in arcing between ancient and contemporary literary and cultural 'horizons'" (Spencer 2019, 16 italics original). His narrative-theological

interpretation is theologically centered, philosophically expanded, canonically connected, salvifically aimed, ecclesially located, and emotionally invested. Reading the text as the narrative unfolds, Spencer attends closely to the spiritual and emotional development of its characters. Spencer draws on premodern anthropology and modern psychological insights to utilize emotions as embodied expressions of the characters' core values and perceptual frameworks. This allows Spencer to track how the characters' core beliefs and perceptual frameworks progress throughout the narrative and move from a dominating knowledge to a participatory knowledge, and finally to a transforming knowledge (cf. 390–91). He pays special attention to Jesus's growing knowledge of God's redemptive purposes as he "steadily get[s] to know the full dimensions of divine-human fellowship" (63). Jesus learns how to be obedient to his earthly parents in preparation for his public ministry (57; Luke 2:51–52), learns about the power of faith from the bleeding woman who touches his garment (137; 8:43–48), questions the disciples about his messianic identity in order to "gauge and solidify his own identity as God's Son the Messiah" (140; 9:18), struggles to submit to the Father's will (340–41; 22:42) and to forgive his enemies (357; 23:34), and is ultimately transformed in the resurrection (391; ch. 24). In his final section, Spencer unpacks how Luke's Gospel, various contemporary theologians, and his Baptist tradition conceive of this transformative knowledge across the theological foci of trinitarian theology, spiritual theology, creational theology, social theology, and passional theology.

In line with the aims of the series and in contrast to the commentaries in the previous two series, all of these commentaries offer explicit hermeneutical reflection on theological interpretation, especially in relation to historical-critical commentary writing and methods. Commentaries in the THNTC series do not reject historical inquiry wholesale but rather unilaterally reject those historical methods that seek to renarrate or rearrange the biblical texts in ways contrary to their canonical form and theological presuppositions. These commentaries, then, extensively use two forms of historical methods: (1) "[e]xcavation of traditional material in order to explain the process from historical events to their being textualized within the biblical materials," and (2) "[s]tudy of the historical situation within which the biblical materials were generated, including the sociocultural conventions they take for granted" (Green 2011, p. 161). Green, Fowl, and Spencer operate primarily in the second area and use this form to clarify how the taken-for-granted conventions of the Greco-Roman world are challenged and reconfigured in light of God's revealing work in Christ Jesus through the Spirit. Wall primarily operates in the first category, probing deeply the historical processes of event, textualization, and canonization in order to guide our theological judgments on the NT texts. One of the clearest strengths of this commentary series is its commitment to clarify which critical methods are able to be tamed by the theological aims of Scripture, and, in this way, reappropriate the gains of critical scholarship in their recovery of theological interpretation.

While each commentator has his own particular view of how to do theology, these four commentaries see as integral to theological interpretation Scripture's aim to reorder completely the lives of God's people according to its theocentric and trinitarian vision. That theological claims necessarily make claims on our lives lead these commentators to consistently highlight the integral role that practices play in the ordering and reordering of our lives. This is similar to the Belief series, though the THNTC focuses on a much wider set of practices whereas Belief tends to focus on liturgical ones. Moreover, whereas Belief's focus on contemporary significance is vulnerable to reduce theological reflection to historical analogues, the THNTC reads the contemporary context in light of the theological claims of Scripture that enables more robust and theologically sophisticated reflection. Fowl offers a great example. In order to reflect on the theological claim that salvation and faithful witness presuppose a united church, he does not look for a division within the Philippian congregation that maps neatly onto contemporary church life in America. Instead, doing theology with Philippians, Fowl reads the contemporary context in light of Scripture's larger witness—Israel's divided kingdoms, Paul's reflections on the Jewish people (Rom 9–11), and how church unity should witness to the principalities and powers of a given

age (Eph 3:9–10; 6:12)—in order to expose contemporary disunity as resistance to God's Spirit and offer tentative postures for faithfully living within such disunity. Such explicit reflection on the contemporary context is not consistently done. While Spencer does some analysis in his final section, Wall and Green keep their theological reflections attuned to the ancient context. In Green's case, even though his final section offers extensive examples of "doing theology with" 1 Peter and makes normative statements regarding the text's theological claims, he leaves it up to the reader to discern how such claims critique and refashion contemporary claims on the lives of God's people—for example, contemporary canons of honor and shame or secular emplotments of time.

Another aspect shared across the four commentaries is their deliberate use of trinitarian categories to elucidate the texts. It is interesting to compare the use of trinitarian categories in the THNTC and the BTC series. Trinitarian language in the THNTC is used principally in its economic registers with only rare explorations into the imminent life of the Trinity. Fowl comes the closest in his discussion on what aspects of Christ's kenotic self-emptying and God's vindicating work humans can and cannot analogously imitate (Fowl 2005, pp. 106–7) and further reflections on friendship with God as participating in God's own eternal life of perfect communion (212–13). Fowl's reflections are still quite different than those of Harink and Hunsinger, which seamlessly move between the eternal relations of God's inner life and their economic manifestations. This difference stems from the THNTC's use of creedal language as a prism through which one reads the text (cf. Green 2007, p. 258), and the BTC's adoption of a creedal grammar that takes as its point of reference the transcendent God's united, discrete, and asymmetrical life within God's self and with creation. I find both uses helpful yet inadequate on their own. The BTC's linguistic grammatical approach is a formative experience for both the writer and reader, training each one in the habits of mind necessary to engage in this kind of scriptural interpretation. This approach, however, is vulnerable to overwhelm the scriptural text, potentially obscuring rather than clarifying the larger narrative and literary aims of a given text, and in this way pushes against the limits of the commentary genre. The THNTC's more reserved approach, by contrast, maintains its ability to center the scriptural text even as its literal sense is interpreted according to trinitarian categories and claims. The downside is the seeming unwillingness for the commentators of this series to engage in metaphysical and ontological reflection both on the scriptural text and on the contemporary context.

## 6. Conclusions

The Belief, BTC, and THNTC series conceive of the theological task in distinct ways, even as each participates in the broader, shared work of recovering the practice of theological exegesis. Belief's use of the liturgical practices of the church as a lens for reflecting on the biblical texts and as actualizations of the theological claims of Scripture provide fruitful avenues for continued theological engagement. Its elevation of contemporary significance as its hermeneutical focus, however, is vulnerable to subordinating Scripture's theological claims to loosely drawn historical analogues between the ancient and contemporary contexts. The BTC's guiding claim that "dogma clarifies rather than obscures" is a powerful clarion call against the worst assumptions of modern critical scholarship. The use of doctrine as a grammatical norm for exegesis has also produced theologically dense and rhetorically powerful commentaries that induct both writer and reader into a pedagogical formation of the proper ordering of all reality. The lack of any formal guidelines for the series, however, has created a context for commentaries that differ widely from one another, pushing the limits of the commentary form or even failing to meet them altogether. The THNTC, as the only series that uses biblical scholars as commentators, offers the most reflection on theological hermeneutics and how certain historical-critical methods can be tamed toward Scripture's theological aims. Its consistent focus on elucidating how Scripture's theological claims in turn make claims on the reordering of the church's life grounds its theological reflection in the practices and thought patterns of the church, though there is

variety on how these claims are brought into a contemporary context. Furthermore, while there are benefits for its more reserved deployment of trinitarian language and exploration, commentators in this series might become more emboldened to probe the ontological and metaphysical commitments inherent to trinitarian language in order to expose and reformulate contemporary ontological and metaphysical claims that seek to distort the church's life and witness.

The road toward a robust theological culture that can sustain and produce faithful theological interpretation of Scripture for the church will be long and windy. I hope to have shown that the production of theological commentaries is a helpful avenue for charting and navigating such a road.

**Funding:** This project received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

[1] This definition is an adaption of Karl Barth's definition of dogamtics: "Dogmatics is the science in which the Church, according to the state of its knowledge at different times, takes account of the content of its proclamation critically, that is, by the standard of Holy Scripture and under the guidance of its Confessions" (Barth 1970, p. 9).

[2] Jeffrey's is not the only commentary in this series that struggles to produce a work that actualizes the commentary genre. Jaroslav Pelikan's decision to utilize the *loci communes* as an organizing principle for the commentary has the effect of relegating the text of Acts to a subordinate position, thus resisting the commentary genre (Pelikan 2005).

## References

Ayres, Lewis. 2004. *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Barth, Karl. 1970. *Dogmatics in Outline*. New York: Harper & Row.
Blomberg, Craig L. 2018. *A New Testament Theology*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
Childs, Brevard S. 1997. The Genre of the Biblical Commentary as Problem and Challenge. In *Tehillah Le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*. Edited by Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler and Jeffrey H. Tigay. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, pp. 185–92.
Fletcher, Paul. 2009. *Disciplining the Divine: Toward an (Im)Political Theology*. Farnham: Ashgate.
Fowl, Stephen E. 2005. *Philippians*. THNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Gignilliat, Mark, and Jonathan T. Pennington. 2016. Theological Commentary. In *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation*. Edited by Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, pp. 237–56.
González, Catherine Gunsalus. 2010. *1 & 2 Peter and Jude*. Belief. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
González, Justo L. 2010. *Luke*. Belief. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
Green, Joel B. 2005. Commentary. In *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. Edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier and Nicholas Thomas Wright. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, pp. 123–27.
Green, Joel B. 2007. *1 Peter*. THNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Green, Joel B. 2011. Rethinking 'History' for Theological Interpretation. *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5: 159–73.
Green, Joel B., and Max Turner, eds. 2000. *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Hanby, Michael. 2021. The Birth of Liberal Order and the Death of God: A Reply to Robert Reilly's America on Trial. *New Polity* 2: 54–85.
Harink, Douglas K. 2009. *1 & 2 Peter*. BTC. Grand Rapids: Brazos.
Hatina, Thomas R. 2013. *New Testament Theology and Its Quest for Relevance: Ancient Texts and Modern Readers*. London: T&T Clark.
Hunsinger, George. 2020. *Philippians*. BTC. Grand Rapids: Brazos.
Jeffrey, David L. 2012. *Luke*. BTC. Grand Rapids: Brazos.
Long, Thomas G. 2016. *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*. Belief. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
Migliore, Daniel L. 2014. *Philippians and Philemon*. Belief. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
Pelikan, Jaroslave. 2005. *Acts*. BTC. Grand Rapids: Brazos.
Rogan, Wil. 2015. Toward a Christian New Testament Theology: A Response to Thomas Hatina. *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 9: 117–26.
Saarinen, Risto. 2008. *The Pastoral Epistles with Philemon & Jude*. BTC. Grand Rapids: Brazos.
Sandys-Wunsch, John, and Laurence Eldredge. 1980. J P Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33: 133–58. [CrossRef]
Spencer, F. Scott. 2019. *Luke*. THNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Stendahl, Krister. 1976. Biblical Theology, Contemporary. In *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon, pp. 237–56.

Stojanović, Marina. 2015. On the Genre of Commentary in the Biblical Exegesis. *Philotheos* 15: 70–82. [CrossRef]
Troeltsch, Ernst. 1991. *Religion in History*. Fortress Texts in Modern Theology. Minneapolis: Fortress.
Wall, Robert W., and Richard B. Steele. 2012. *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*. THNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

religions

MDPI

*Article*

# Description or Truth? A Typology of New Testament Theology

**Seth Heringer**

Department of Bible and Theology, Toccoa Falls College, Toccoa Falls, GA 30598, USA; sheringer@tfc.edu

**Abstract:** This essay develops a typology to divide the overcrowded disciplinary space of New Testament theology into eight approaches based on subject matter. After describing and analyzing the approaches, it argues that descriptive New Testament theology becomes unworkable due to internal tensions. Next, it evaluates a recent proposal by Robert Morgan for "implicit" theological interpretation in New Testament theology. After finding Morgan's approach to insufficiently distinguish itself from a descriptive history-of-religions account, it argues that the future of New Testament theology must consist in a move away from description and toward a search for truth. It encourages Christians to read the New Testament in ways consistent with their own beliefs. The essay concludes by arguing that the future of New Testament theology is one of self-sacrifice in order that something better may appear.

**Keywords:** New Testament theology; biblical theology; theological interpretation; typology; historical criticism; history of religions; description

**Citation:** Heringer, Seth. 2022. Description or Truth? A Typology of New Testament Theology. *Religions* 13: 546. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060546

Academic Editor: Joel B. Green

Received: 12 April 2022
Accepted: 10 June 2022
Published: 14 June 2022



## 1. Introduction

Claims to the labels "New Testament theology" (NTT) and "Biblical theology" (BT) are widespread in contemporary biblical studies.[1] Publishers have encouraged this trend in titles ranging from *Ice Axes for Frozen Seas: A Biblical Theology of Provocation* to *Anthropology and New Testament Theology* to *Many Roads Lead Eastward: Overtures to Catholic Biblical Theology* (Brueggemann 2014; Maston and Reynolds 2018; Miller 2016). A comparison of similarly-titled books shows that they contain extensive methodological diversity, indicating that BT and NTT do not designate strict disciplinary boundaries. Rather, these phrases serve as aspirational and promotional signals that designate certain books as faithfully representing the content of the Bible. In other words, these phrases function as corporate slogans. Disney is where dreams come true; Gillette is the best a man can get; NTT is where accurate descriptions of the content of the New Testament can be found. Or differently, claims to be doing NTT or BT have become a battlefield where the winner collects the spoils of credibility. Those who occupy the center defend the border with disciplinary skirmishes, claiming that the invaders have no right to this ground and the respectability that comes with it. Those inside the borders reap academic prestige whereas those outside are left in ignominy. Professional advancement may be at stake if a scholar's work cannot claim the mantle of NTT or BT.

Given this context, what future does NTT have aside from being a contested naming scheme? Part of this answer comes from looking at its past.[2] But a discussion of its future must ask what the field should be and not just what it currently is. This essay will take up that prescriptive and aspirational task with the following plan.[3] First, I will lessen the importance of the term "New Testament theology" by developing a typology that divides an overcrowded disciplinary space into better defined approaches based on subject matter. Second, I will use this new methodological clarity to argue against descriptive approaches to NTT and for approaches that push beyond description by adjudicating the truth claims of the New Testament. Third, I propose that Christians use an intentionally confessional approach, what I call Scriptural theology, because it encourages Christians to read in alignment with the claims of the New Testament and consistent with their own beliefs.

## 2. A New Typology of NTT

Scholars could decrease the intensity of the debates over NTT by better delimiting the field according to *what* is being studied. All that is called NTT does not study the New Testament nor is it theological.[4] One possible approach to do this would be to create a typology that groups examples of NTT according to similarities.[5] I have chosen a different approach and created a typology formed from the answers to the following three cascading questions.

1. Does the NTT study the text of the New Testament or the history and context behind it (text or history)?
2. Does it stop with a description of the authors' claims or push further to adjudicate whether those claims are true (description or reality)?
3. Is the subject matter applicable to modern readers (neutral or prescriptive)?

The varying answers to these three questions create the eight heuristic approaches displayed in Figure 1.

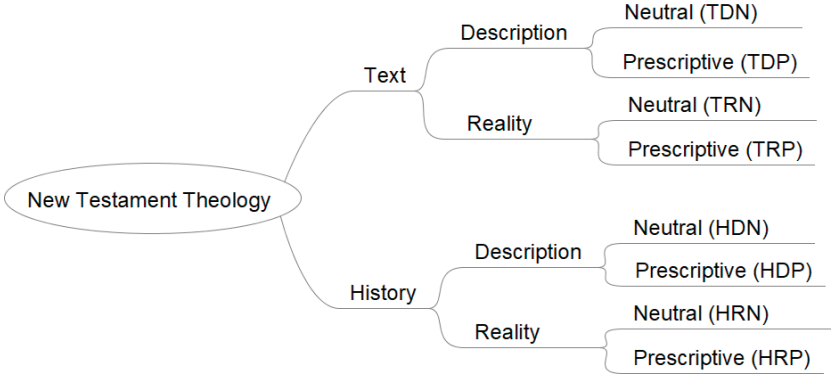


**Figure 1.** Typology of NTT subject matter.

The first question begins by distinguishing between textual and historical approaches to NTT. To clear up possible ambiguity, seeking the mind of the author or the beliefs of a community would be to pursue the history behind the text and not the text itself. Some may object and argue against a strong division between the study of a text and its context, stating that the meaning of a text can only be discerned by knowing the mind of the author and how his community used words. It is true that some level of historical knowledge is needed both to read Greek and know the semantic range of words. The distinction here, however, is about focus, effort, and goals. If the focus and primary effort is spent reconstructing the past as it really was, and if the New Testament is seen as a source to get at the minds of its authors, then the history behind the text is the goal of the work. If, alternatively, the focus and primary effort is to understand the grammatical sense of the text and use history as a secondary tool in order to understand its language use, then the text remains the primary endpoint.[6]

The second question assumes that both branches of the first step in the typology lead to texts, authors, or communities making claims about life and reality. Once these claims are identified, it asks if the biblical scholar is satisfied to let her work only describe ancient beliefs, or whether she wants to push further and investigate if those beliefs speak truth about reality.

The third question asks whether the claims of the texts, authors, or communities make prescriptive claims on the reader. Can these claims cross the historical ditch between the past and present? To clarify, this question does not ask if texts, authors, and communities make ethical claims, for surely, they do, but whether those claims have any pull on the present.

Although structuring the typology according to these questions allows for clearer logical distinctions among the approaches and a stronger analysis of the internal coherence of each, it makes giving clear examples difficult because the typology was not formed by the contours of existing New Testament theologies. Most examples of NTT cut across these eight approaches, mixing them to various extents. Therefore, when examples are given, they do not designate a strict identity but an orientation toward an approach.[7] Additionally, an important distinction must be made between subject matter and methodology. In this typology, a biblical scholar could use any method and still pursue the text (and not history) as the subject matter. Most likely, she will choose a literary method, but is not limited to that. She could use every historical and sociological tool available in order to understand the text as best as she can. Some methods, however, will fit better with certain subject matters, but that analysis is beyond the scope of this essay.

When asked in numerical order, these three questions form the eight approaches described below.[8] Some approaches are more hypothetical than actual, which means not all are represented by a clear example of an existing NTT. Some approaches are also internally more coherent than others, but that analysis will be made after describing each.

TDN: A description of the meaning of the New Testament that makes no prescriptive claims on the contemporary world. It resembles pure literary studies, something akin to Shakespeare studies that investigates only the literary meaning of the text. An example would be a NTT that examines Jesus's parables for their grammatical meaning and narrative purpose without considering their ethical import for today. An example is *A Narrative Theology of the New Testament: Exploring the Metanarrative of Exile and Restoration* (Eskola 2015).[9]

TDP: A description of the meaning of the New Testament that makes prescriptive claims on the contemporary world. It would resemble ethically-informed literary studies, which would see *1984* not just as a good work of literature but a warning against authoritarianism and its complete control of information. Similarly, it would look at the grammatical and narrative meaning of Jesus's parables and reflect on their relevance for modern life. Schreier's *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* serves as an example (Schreiner 2008).[10]

TRN: A work that adjudicates the truth of New Testament claims while making no ethical entailments for the contemporary world. In other words, it takes the claims of the New Testament seriously and investigates them with whatever methodology the scholar finds appropriate. The results of this investigation remain unconnected to the lives of modern readers.

TRP: A work that adjudicates the truth of New Testament claims and makes prescriptive entailments for the contemporary world based on the results. For biblical interpretation, it would investigate whether the Bible made true claims and how those claims affect various aspects of human life. An example would be the approach Hans Frei sets out in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (Frei 1974).[11]

HDN:A description of the New Testament authors' beliefs and the historical context surrounding them that makes no ethical claims for the contemporary world. An example from historical studies would be a book that described the theological beliefs of the ancient Greeks without making any claims as to their truth. Did Hera hate Hercules? This approach is silent on their reality and rancor. An example is the method John J. Collins argues for in *Encounters with Biblical Theology* (Collins 2005).[12]

HDP: A description of the New Testament authors' beliefs and the historical context surrounding them that makes ethical claims for the contemporary world. There is no parallel in historical studies since it would require investing ancient beliefs with a prescriptive authority even though the author made no attempt to validate those beliefs as true. The mere words on the page are authority enough. Thomas R. Hatina

proposes a similar method in his *New Testament Theology and Its Quest for Relevance* (Hatina 2013).[13]

HRN: A work that adjudicates the truth of the New Testament authors' beliefs and the historical context surrounding them using scholarly tools while making no ethical claims for the modern world.[14] To return to claims about the ancient Greek gods, here, the reality of those beliefs would be investigated while keeping the results disconnected from the modern world. NTT would do the same regarding claims about Jesus walking on water or healing the sick. An example is *A New Testament Theology* (Blomberg 2018).[15]

HRP: A work that adjudicates the truth of the New Testament authors' beliefs and the historical context surrounding them using scholarly tools while making normative claims for the modern world. Did Jesus really rise from the dead? The answer to that question, it says, should determine how you live your life. An example would be the approach described in *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (Räisänen 2000).[16]

## 3. Analysis of the Typology's Approaches

Some of the eight approaches are worse options for the future of NTT than others due to internal tensions and logical incoherence. Because these approaches have been created by the answers to a series of questions, the following arguments are not directed against any particular NTT but logical constructs. The first problematic approaches are TDP and HDP due to description (D) serving as an inadequate basis for prescription (P). Why would a modern person submit to the beliefs of an ancient text, community, or person without investigating whether they are true? On the one hand there is a possibility for weak prescription akin to what is offered by fables and parables. They inspire, warn, or give hope. They teach lessons about the world and describe human relationships. They do so, not because of an inherent authority, but because the reader recognizes that somehow, perhaps metaphorically or analogically, they shine light on reality. If this weak basis is used for prescription, then the New Testament is read like any other book of stories or fables that surfaces the internal wisdom of the reader, and a reason to study this book over all others slips away. On the other hand, religious authority can confer a stronger basis for prescription by guaranteeing truth. This alternative foundation for truth is limited only to confessional contexts. So TDP and HDP either treat the New Testament like any other book or limit themselves to strongly confessional readers.

The question of truth offers an even broader challenge to all four descriptive approaches to NTT. This challenge is best framed with a question: is it possible for descriptive accounts to remain descriptive no matter the content or who is speaking? To be sure, it is possible to offer a neutral description of topics that do not affect the reader such as a book about the history of European ferns. Moreover, a descriptive approach becomes attractive when an author does not want to make conclusions about a topic that may be offensive or lead to unwelcome results. As an example, it is much easier to take a descriptive approach to the claims of indigenous religions rather than question their truth.

There are two places, however, where cracks appear in the wall that descriptive accounts construct against the questions of truth and reality. The first crack appears when a text, author, or community makes claims that would, if true, directly affect the one describing those claims. For example, imagine a doctor looking at a patient and exclaiming, "You are having a heart attack! You will die if we do not get you into surgery immediately." The patient could offer a descriptive account of this encounter and say to his friend, "The doctor said that if I don't have immediate surgery I will die." This is the proper response for a descriptive approach for it describes the beliefs of the doctor without forcing the man to make a decision about his health. However, this is an absurd response. Surely, any right-thinking person is forced to make a decision and not remain in description. The nature of the claim pushes on him in such a way that forces an investigation of its truthfulness and spurs actions based on the result. This is not a book about ferns; instead, this is a

description that requires action. If an official approaches and says, "Your lottery ticket won the jackpot", the wise response would be to investigate this claim and act upon it. To remain descriptive here would be to preclude any action that could bring joy. Thus, statements of this sort pressure the hearer to move from description to reality.[17]

The second place cracks appear in the descriptive wall is when the description is of the claims or beliefs of a particular sort of person. For example, if a wife tells her husband, "I would like to spend some time together this weekend", the husband could take a descriptive approach and describe to his friend how his wife would like to spend time with him. However, a wiser plan would be for the husband to first decide if his wife is speaking truthfully and then act upon it. If he decides she is speaking earnestly, he would rightly hear in her words a prescription. Particular statements about the world by special people, such as loved ones, puts pressure on the hearer to move beyond description to prescription. Or consider an emperor who says to his entourage, "I am hungry." The hearers may stick with describing that state to each other, but that reaction may quickly lead to fatal consequences. There is no command in the emperor's language, but the wise person realizes who is speaking, and if he believes the emperor, will rush to satiate him.

When NTT tries to remain descriptive, both of these cracks expand. Many claims in the New Testament would affect the person describing them if true and are spoken by somebody special. An example of this comes when Jesus recounts the coming of the Human One to judge the nations and separate them into sheep and goats. Jesus identifies the sheep as those who fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited those who were sick or in prison; the goats being those who failed to do these things. He then speaks judgment on the goats when he says they "will go away into eternal punishment" whereas the righteous ones "will go into eternal life" (Matt 25:31–46).[18] A descriptive approach would either describe the grammatical meaning of this text or the minds of the authors or community that created it. Some would even try to find prescriptive meaning for the modern world in these words. But using a descriptive approach to this text is as unwise as a using a descriptive approach to a warning of an impending heart attack. Both may have fatal results. The very claim itself, that eternal punishment or eternal life is at stake, requires that the truth of the claim be investigated and acted upon. Not only are there consequences involved, but the claim is being made by a particular sort of person: a person the New Testament describes as the Son of God, creator, and redeemer of the world. Two questions must now be investigated: is Jesus who the New Testament says he is, and if so, is this coming judgment real?[19]

A defender of descriptive NTT might reply that although some claims require moving beyond description, that work is done by the readers of NTT, not the authors. The New Testament theologian merely describes the best understanding of the text, author, or community and the reader is left to make the appropriate investigations into their truth claims. This reply fails for three reasons. First, if the claims of the New Testament require a response, then the author of the NTT should have already completed the task of assessing the truthfulness of the claims. If she has assessed that Jesus is the Son of God and the coming judgment is real, or vice versa, then how could she keep this from her readers? Second, many texts such as the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20) speak about the need for proclaiming the message of the gospel and therefore push the author to do so in her work. Additionally, Jesus's warning that "Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Human One will be ashamed of that person when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (Luke 9:26) shows that the fear of losing scholarly status due to proclaiming her own beliefs cannot serve as a reason to retreat to description. Third, there are claims that are so morally problematic that they cannot be merely described neutrally. As an odious example, consider this pro-enslavement writer from the antebellum South describing why southern enslavers will not mistreat enslaved black men and women: "His [enslaver's] interest in the life and health of his slave obviates the necessity of any particular supervision of the subject by the public authorities. No better security has ever yet been devised by man, for the safety of man, and the proper observance of humane laws

by the citizen, than that which the Southern slaveholder offers, in the continual presence of his leading interests" (Simms 1853, p. 228). A purely descriptive retelling of this account would look at the grammatical range of meaning or do an investigation into the mind of the author and his community. But is it possible to just stop there? Must we not release the fire that wells up in our belly against the deceit of those words? Is not this topic so significant as to require moving beyond description? There are other such topics where a descriptive approach is morally problematic. Claims about God's existence and character determine the moral order of the universe. If these claims are true, then the author cannot remain silent about them because they are too weighty. Their nature presses on the author to seek and speak truth about them.

Descriptive approaches are not the only ones with problems, for TRN and HRN both make judgments about truth and reality (R) while jettisoning any discussion of its effects on the modern world (N). On the one hand, it is possible to remain neutral about the truth of unimportant things. To return to our example of a book on European ferns, the truth of this book makes no claims on a modern reader. However, it is much harder to remain neutral about truth claims central to life and existence. If I am about to walk through a field and read a red-lettered sign that says, "Warning: Landmines", what is the only reasonable thing to do once I believe that testimony? There is a reality outside of myself that I must take into account. My assessment of the truthfulness of the sign requires a modification to my life. If we expand this idea up to the level of theology, it becomes significantly more implausible to say that the reality of God's existence has no effect on the modern world, my existence, or life. If a NTT assesses that the resurrection is real, does that not change everything? If it assesses it is false, does that not do the same? To say that such claims have no relevance to modern readers is put up false barriers blocking the author from dealing with what is directly in front of her.

Before turning to TRP and HRP in the penultimate section of this essay, it is worth emphasizing that every descriptive approach exhibited problems with internal coherence. Does that finding signal larger problems with descriptive approaches to NTT? Perhaps these problems only appear in the abstract and are avoided in practice? If descriptive NTT is to be saved, it will have to be done by looking at concrete proposals.

## 4. Robert Morgan's Implicit Theological Interpretation

Robert Morgan has recently proposed an HDN approach that he believes is able to unite NTT's scholarly and theological character (Morgan 2016, 2018).[20] I have chosen to focus on this proposal because, unlike most examples of NTT, Morgan spends a significant amount of time defending his methodology.[21] Additionally, Morgan's desire to create an approach that can be used by both secular and confessional scholars alike makes it an especially attractive proposal to investigate to see if descriptive NTT is viable.

His proposal is historical (H) because he thinks that discovering the thoughts of the New Testament authors is the subject matter of NTT. "New Testament theologians", he says, "normally describe and try to explain the biblical authors' ancient understandings of their faith, and they do this in awareness of their own personal and ecclesial standpoints." He expands on this idea by saying that the goal of NTT is not primarily "historical description of the human realities behind these texts" but the "interpretations of the texts themselves, interpretations aiming to communicate what the original authors intended" (pp. 385, 390). Morgan is not dismissing historical events as unimportant but emphasizing the priority of getting to the minds of the authors.[22] Additionally, the above two quotations explicitly claim his approach is descriptive (D) in its goal to recover authorial intent without making judgment as to its veracity. The writer of a NTT should not make such judgments because "New Testament theology, as a largely historical discipline, has attempted to present original meanings and is typically silent about the interpreter's religious interests and theological standpoint" (Morgan 2018, p. 205). This standpoint silence reinforces the descriptive nature of NTT by precluding any interaction of the text and the New Testament theologian's understanding of reality and truth. Morgan's approach is neutral (N) because

it rejects normative language in NTT: "Biblical scholars across the spectrum from Wrede to George Ernest Wright and N. T. Wright describe the ancient writers' religion and their texts' talk of God without themselves regularly making normative theological statements" (Morgan 2016, p. 389). Thus, NTT should avoid making statements about the reality of New Testament claims that could intrude on the lives of contemporary readers. So far, Morgan's approach resembles a descriptive history-of-religions approach to NTT.[23]

Despite the similarity, Morgan criticizes examples of NTT that go too far in their secular orientation. For instance, he believes the history-of-religions approach forsook any theological character by reconstructing the history behind the text absent theological concern. William Wrede, according to Morgan, constructed just such a theology-less approach.[24] Morgan thinks Wrede made a "category mistake" by reflecting a "biblical scholarship whose critical historical achievements had outrun its hermeneutical reflection" (p. 388). Morgan's approach attempts to keep the critical achievements of Wrede's conclusions and methods while improving its hermeneutical reflection by promoting different aims and motivations. These revamped aims and motivations are how he adds theology to a descriptive history-of-religions approach. These theological aims and motivations cannot encroach on the "historical and exegetical tasks", Morgan warns, and "must surely be distinguished from modern theological judgments." In other words, Morgan has a vision of NTT as "theological interpretation of these texts within the constraints of modern scholarship." He wants this mixing of theological interpretation and scholarship to create a NTT that "sounds reasonable to outsiders and insiders alike" (pp. 387–89). It is here, at the intersection of the historical method and theology, that Morgan introduces his solution to the tension between them: implicit theological interpretation.

To review, Morgan is trying to create an approach to NTT that has a theological character while retaining the methodological strengths of a descriptive history-of-religions approach. This goal requires a novel understanding of the word "theological" due to the recurrent tension between speaking openly of God and the accepted rules of the historical method. Rather than "theological" referring to a characteristic in the text of a NTT, such as explicit talk of God, it instead refers to what happens in the mind of the scholar. Such a definition is useful because it allows for almost all biblical scholarship to be labeled "theological." The ubiquity of such a theological mindset, Morgan argues, is shown in that "Most Christian scholars more or less agree with the New Testament about who God is, and about the central significance of Jesus, and some of them have allowed their personal convictions to shine through their scholarly work."[25] Morgan identifies these "some" as doing "explicit theological interpretation" that speaks openly of God (pp. 384–85). Speaking of God explicitly, however, is not the only way for a work to be theological because scholars "may depend on systematic theology in shaping their own theological standpoint and in the application of their conclusions to contemporary Christianity" while doing "their scholarly work without alluding to their own standpoints. As they allow their historical, social-scientific, or rhetorical constructions to speak for them, the theological interpretation going on in their heads can remain implicit in their writing" (p. 392). The author of any NTT, Morgan argues, will have biases and beliefs. That is acceptable. In fact, such beliefs are desired. What is not desired is letting those beliefs become apparent in the work itself. They must remain implicit.

It still needs to be clarified what exactly makes implicit theological interpretation "theological." For Morgan, it is not something in the text, such as a method or even the subject matter; rather, "it has been the aims and assumptions of some interpreters that have made their work theological" (p. 386). Such a mindset shares the same standpoint as the New Testament authors: "Theological interpretation of these canonical texts is undertaken by the relevant rational methods on the assumption (whether hypothetical or genuine—some theological interpreters are more or less agnostic) that what the texts say about God refers to transcendent reality. That means that mutatis mutandis (on account of changing worldviews) theological interpreters share the biblical authors' standpoint in relation to the religious tradition whose meanings as contained in these texts they are

aiming to communicate" (p. 390).[26] Morgan holds that as long as an author believes the New Testament refers to a transcendent reality (and even if this belief is agnostic or hypothetical), then whatever that person writes about the New Testament should be considered "theological." With this approach, the model NTT would be written by a Christian who generally believes the New Testament's claims about transcendent reality, writes descriptively about the authorial intent of the authors, and makes no adjudication of the truth of these claims so as to not let her beliefs appear in the text.

Morgan anticipates the objection that his approach is too timid and self-limiting to the point of "apostasy" (Morgan 2018, p. 214). He says some will see him, similar to Nicodemus, as using the night to hide his conversation with Jesus, using implicit theological interpretation to hide scholars' true beliefs in order to gain "the repute of this world's methods and secular careers" (Morgan 2016, p. 387). Morgan rejects this criticism as misreading his intentions. His goal is not plaudits but persisting conversation between theology and the academic world: "NTT has provided a way of preserving in secular institutions the religious aims of most Bible study, and in religious institutions the secular methods used in other disciplines, making conversations possible across the spectrum of biblical scholarship" (Morgan 2018, p. 208). He believes the price paid in losing explicit God-talk is worth the continued conversations between Christian biblical scholars and the academy.

## 5. Analysis of Morgan's Implicit Theological Interpretation

Does Morgan's approach overcome the internal problems of descriptive NTT identified above? To begin, Morgan does not address the internal issues because descriptive NTT has not identified them as a problem. It has not yet wrestled with how to justify stopping at description and not progressing further into questions of truth and prescription. Beyond those concerns there are additional problems specific to Morgan's formulation. The first arises when considering Morgan's motivation to keep NTT "theological." The academic world does not care if NTT retains its theological character, so this move must be directed toward confessional audiences. But why would such audiences care about a term that is not allowed to have any clear influence on the work itself? Two possibilities arise. The first is that the term is retained for the sake of the confessional author, lending meaning or purpose to the work because it is "theological" even if that characteristic is not apparent in the text. The second is that the term signals to confessional audiences that this scholarship can be trusted because it is done by a person who shares their beliefs. Even if the methods and conclusions of the text contradict the beliefs of confessional audiences, they should have no fear because behind the text the author agrees with them on what truly matters. Trust this NTT, the term soothes, for it mixes theology and critical scholarship in a reliable way. In other words, "theological" is being used like "shibboleth"—a marker of trusted group identity.[27]

Second, using "theological" as an adjective in this manner creates a strange precedence. The adjective is not describing a characteristic of the text or a methodological approach, for such a possibility is ruled out by the nature of implicit theological interpretation. It describes the mindset of the author. This position requires an assessment of every author's mindset before she could be grouped in this "theological" project because an analysis of a text is unable to surface implicit theological beliefs. If this investigation discovered the author was an atheist, she would have her project labeled "atheistic interpretation" and removed from the "theological" group. However, this is the very situation Morgan is trying to avoid in his attempt to open lines of communication between NTT and academic methodologies.

Third, distinguishing between "theological" and non-theological texts confuses readers when there is no difference in the texts themselves. Imagine two New Testament theologies sitting on table in a book store. A woman sits behind the table, and when a patron approaches, she informs him that if he can guess which text is theological, he can have it for free. He reads them both and determines they share the same method and conclusions. He tells here there is nothing in either to distinguish it as theological and therefore the task

is impossible. She replies that he has the wrong understanding of the term "theological", for it refers to the mindset of the author, not something that is found in the work itself. He is thinking of explicit theology; her, implicit. The patron would most likely stomp away having wasted his time trying to discern the impossible.

Fourth, the property "theological" cannot be assumed to transfer from the author to the text. If the theological character of the text is weak enough to be unseen, is it still worth calling "theological?" If the rules of scholarship preclude speaking about God or thinking of God as active in the world, then in what sense does the theological mindset of the author transfer to the NTT? Imagine a scenario similar to the one above, but now with two cookbooks on this same table. One cookbook is written by a world-class chef; the other, by a skilled home cook. Both cookbooks were written according to a strict set of publishing rules that required all recipes to be simple enough for an unskilled reader to complete in 20 min using only six ingredients. The chef will have to set aside much of her skill and passion in order to comply with these rules. Both books will have similar recipes and techniques because the chef has been hindered from displaying her skill. The publishing rules will prevent the "world-class" character of the chef from transferring to the pages. Similarly, if "biblical scholar" replaces "chef" and "theological" replaces "world-class" in this scenario, it is clear that a method contrary to a theological mindset can greatly hinder the transfer any theological character.

Fifth, the cost of hiding an author's religious beliefs is not worth the value of broad conversations with the academic world. Under Morgan's approach, NTT authors are not able to write freely, openly, or passionately about what they believe to be true about the world. All are muzzled by the rules of historical method. Moreover, the approach forces authors into deception, pretending to be a neutral observers to claims that deal with the core of their identity, eternal hope, and ethical world. All of these must be pushed down and confined in order to converse with a discipline and method that reject much of what they hold dear. This price is steep indeed.

Morgan's approach to NTT has not vindicated descriptive accounts of NTT. In addition to issues of internal coherence, descriptive accounts struggle to justify the "theological" character of NTT in any meaningful sense. If descriptive approaches fail as both logical constructs and in practice, the future of NTT must lie elsewhere.

## 6. The Future of NTT: Seeking and Speaking Truth

Returning to TRP and HRP, both approaches seek truth and speak about it boldly. TRP seeks the textual meaning of the New Testament, tests the truth of its claims with a chosen method, and speaks about the results as having contemporary significance. HRP does the same, except it replaces investigating the text with investigating authorial intent or the history behind the text. Rather than focusing on the differences between these two approaches, I will instead examine two broad understandings of history and hermeneutics that could be used by either TRP or HRP.[28] The first understanding views the New Testament with a hermeneutic of suspicion and uses the historical method; the second, a hermeneutic of trust uses a specifically Christian epistemology.

The first understanding continues a history-of-religions approach to NTT by using the best academic methods available to reconstruct the historical reality behind the New Testament. This approach reads with a hermeneutic of suspicion, always doubting the claims of the New Testament until they can be verified. Stephen L. Young has recently expanded on this approach and given it an ideological and intersectional character. Young does not discuss NTT methodology specifically, but offers a broad criticism of New Testament studies by saying that it does not go far enough in its suspicion, gives too much credence to the text, and participates in protectionism. He defines protectionism as "the collapsing of inquiry into description such that the perspectives of those being studied are privileged in scholarly analysis. Insider perspectives are thus protected, if you will, from interrogation." Specifically, scholars "take these texts at face value" and let the texts "become normative for our scholarship rather than additional materials for us to historicize"

(Young 2020, pp. 329–30). This protectionism merely shields white, male scholars who already have privilege and excludes women and other disadvantaged groups. Instead of this retrograde approach, Young wants New Testament studies to move away from description to explanation and use all available methodologies to explain the experiences behind the text rather than believing the text.[29] Etic sociological investigation is a particular tool Young references, but he does not limit explanation to merely one methodology and is open to historical investigation as long as it is not done with a protectionist bent. This understanding treats the New Testament as any other book: it possesses no privileged status, requires no special method by which it must be read, and gives no special access to truth. Christian scholars who take a TRP or HRP approach and desire, similar to Morgan, to follow the accepted methods of the scholarly world in order to enter into broad conversations, will be forced into some version of this understanding.[30] However, for them, there is a more excellent way.

The second understanding is better suited to confessing Christians because it rejects the bonds imposed by the rules of critical scholarship. As we saw above with the analogy of the two cookbooks, those rules are not freeing but stifling; they do not open the horizons of thought but narrow them. This understanding privileges the perspective of the text and speaks explicitly of God. Douglas Campbell has argued for such an approach by saying that there is "only one way to do New Testament Theology" because "we must *begin* with God-talk, so with theology, and, moreover, with God-talk undertaken in a certain way" (Campbell 2021, p. 2). For Campbell, the basis of confident God-talk, and therefore NTT, is the revelation given in Jesus Christ. What is revealed "is indeed the truth—the truth above all other truths. It is to be relied upon where all others fail, and to be acknowledged and maintained under any circumstances" (p. 4). Because the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is true, all other foundations for God-talk are false and enter an infinite regress that searches ever lower for firmer footing. Moreover, Campbell argues that using any other foundation is disobedient because it rejects the foundation given in revelation. This understanding is far removed from a hermeneutic of suspicion because its trust in the revelation of Jesus Christ serves as an explicitly Christian epistemology. The influence of revelation does not stop with epistemology, however, but proceeds to affect the character of those who accept it. This character is shaped in a formative community grounded in experiencing the presence of Christ together. Christian formation produces the virtues of openness to dialogue and humility that will shape any NTT written by members of this community. In summary, Campbell proposes a vision of NTT rooted in the conviction that the revelation given in Jesus Christ is true and serves as the foundation for any speech about God and the church's communal life together.

Campbell has helpfully surfaced an idea that has only remained in the background to this point: the character, history, and worldview of the person writing a NTT should and will strongly shape it.[31] On the one hand, this is an ancient view. Gregory of Nazianzus taught that writing theology "is not for all people, but only for those who have been tested and have found a sound footing in study, and, more importantly, have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing purification of body and soul" (Gregory of Nazianzus 2002, p. 27). He warns that doing theology without this purification is as dangerous as handling holy objects unworthily, thereby running the risk of severe consequences. Writers of theology must be above reproach ethically and participate in a broad range of pious actions from hospitality to singing psalms to fasting. Moving to a physical analogy, Gregory describes the self-formative task of Christian theologians as being like that of sculptors who need "to look at ourselves and to smooth the theologian in us, like a statue, into beauty" (p. 30). This inner work is done so that the theologian is not temped by pride or passions to think wrongly of God and therefore misrepresent God to the world.

On the other hand, recognizing how the identity of the writer shapes a NTT is also a modern view. Joel Green uses cognitive studies to show that what a person sees in a text depends upon the type of person she is. Green argues that gaps exist in any text and the human mind fills those gaps according to past experiences: "We interpret the present and visualize

the future according to past patterns, generally applying old paradigms in new contexts." Thus, a NTT author will read the gaps in the text according to "conceptual schemes or imaginative structures" by which she understands the world (Green 2016, p. 447). If a person reads the New Testament with a scheme of naturalism, then she will fill in textual gaps with naturalistic explanations. A Christian, however, will fill those gaps with explanations based on a history and conceptual scheme that see God as active and working in the world.

Brevard Childs offers an example of this principle in practice by arguing that having more knowledge about the history behind a text does not necessarily make one a better reader of the Bible. Childs begins by challenging a common assumption of the historical-critical method that "If we could know more about Israel's customs and habits, the stories would automatically become clearer." The problem with this assumption, Childs argues, is that it draws the attention of the interpreter to the wrong place. The story quickly shifts out of focus as "elements which are in the background suddenly are moved to the foreground" (Childs 1980, p. 129). To demonstrate this claim, Childs explores two historical-critical interpretations of the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. The first reading uses the vast amount of historical knowledge scholarship has produced on Baal to interpret the story as being about the transfer of Baal's mythological power over fire and water to Yahweh. The second reading focuses on the sacrificial bulls as symbols of the Canaanite fertility cult. Childs argues that both of these interpretations let historical knowledge outweigh the text itself and cause them to miss the text's own pacing and emphasis. A better approach is to assume the text purposefully guides the reader's attention. The text gives little emphasis to Baal or bulls other than that Baal is to be mocked and bulls are to be sacrificed. Instead, the text lingers on Elijah's confidence, Yahweh's altar, the profligate wasting of water during a drought, and God's fire from Heaven. Child's investigation of different interpretations of 1 Kings 18 shows that Campbell, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Green are right: the person looking at the text and the methods and interests by which she reads will profoundly affect what is seen and therefore how she writes a NTT.

## 7. Conclusions

For Christians, the future of NTT cannot be one where they abandon their convictions, read the text according to a hostile methodology, and reach conclusions opposed to their core beliefs. Instead, a future approach to NTT must encourage Christians to speak about what they know to be true with passion and without obfuscation or deception. It must allow Christians to be Christian.

This essay started with the goal of lessening the importance of the term "New Testament theology" by clarifying its disciplinary boundaries. With that goal in mind, the eight approaches created by the typology above can be narrowed into three groups that will define the future of NTT. The first group comprises the descriptive approaches to NTT (TDN, TDP, HDN, HDP). Because this group resembles much of what has been called NTT, I propose it retains that label. If this essay's criticisms against descriptive approaches are persuasive, however, this group's influence will wane. The second and third groups are the two understandings of history and hermeneutics used by the TRP and HRP approaches discussed above.[32] The first understanding (Group 2) that uses a hermeneutic of suspicion and the historical method will retain the name it has taken in the past: "history-of-religions." Although Young has shown that this group is not beholden only to the historical-method, the name can still serve as an umbrella term. The second understanding (Group 3) is comprised of confessional Christians who use a hermeneutic of trust and a specifically Christian epistemology. I propose calling the work of this third group Scriptural theology because it is written with the assumption that the New Testament is the not just a collection of books but the church's Scripture. It is the Father's revelation of his Son given to his church through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This division of groups does not preclude conversations between them. In fact, clearer disciplinary boundaries will better allow both the history-of-religions approach and Scriptural theology to flourish as they seek truth together. Each will be done by people who

believe in the approach and endorse its methods. This sorting should not end dialogue across the groups but encourage it as each group presents its interpretations boldly and honestly. This dialogue should emphasize hermeneutics and methodology, places this essay could only lightly touch upon. The future of NTT belongs to approaches that seek truth; therefore, its future is one that first requires the self-sacrifice of descriptive approaches in order that something better may flourish.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

1 As to the relation of BT to NTT, Robert Morgan says that they are "closely related" (Morgan 1995, p. 104). Aligned with this, NTT can be thought of as a sub-discipline of BT that focuses on the New Testament. For example, see how Matera begins an article on NTT by looking at the origins of BT (Matera 2005, pp. 2–6).

2 Many books and articles have done this. The most helpful articles are (Matera 2005; Rowe 2006). An article that reviews many book-length contributions is (Schnabel 2019). Mead and Via have written books that give useful introductions to the field and its history (Mead 2007; Via 2002).

3 Heikki Räisänen and Thomas Hatina have written relatively recent books that give alternative views of what shape NTT should take (Hatina 2013; Räisänen 2000).

4 For example, Wrede says that NTT is to "lay out the history of early Chrisitan religion and theology" and that there is an "absolute necessity of going beyond the limits of the New Testament" when the "conception of the task" is clear (Wrede 1973, pp. 84, 101).

5 Hatina, for instance, classifies approaches according to a "foundationalist" or "dialectic" structuring (Hatina 2013, pp. 119–73). Mead classifies according to a work's issues, methods, and themes (Mead 2007).

6 Joel Green gives a helpful way of thinking about "history" when he describes three ways the term "historical criticism" is used in biblical studies. The first has as its goal the reconstruction of the past. The second excavates traditions in the text through traditional criticism, form criticism, source criticism, and redaction criticism. The third studies the historical context the biblical materials were written in (Green 2011, pp. 160–62). Here, the third use would be compatible with a textual focus whereas the first and second use with the history behind the text.

7 The purpose of giving specific examples is to make a fundamentally abstract and heuristic typology more concrete. The success of the typology does not require proper identification of examples and the reader should not get distracted by analyzing the placement of a particular NTT. No NTT will stick to one approach, for all mix history and textual interests, reality and description, neutrality and prescription, to various degrees. I explore the mixing of textual and historical interests in more detail elsewhere (Heringer 2014). A benefit of this typology is that it will encourage authors to think more clearly about the reasons behind such mixing.

8 This typology has structural parallels to the one Hans Frei created to explain biblical interpretation (Frei 1974, pp. 247–80). There, however, his typology examined where meaning resides in a text whereas this typology examines the subject matter of NTT. For more on Frie's typology see (Heringer 2018, pp. 43–53).

9 Timo Eskola uses historical background material and semiotics to investigate the metanarrative of the New Testament. For example, when discussing the resurrection, he remains descriptive in saying that the biblical accounts agree that a resurrection took place and leaves the ramifications of those claims to the words of the New Testament authors. As an example of mixing descriptive and reality approaches, however, he adds that his work supports the uncommon view that the historical Jesus anticipated his death and resurrection (Eskola, pp. 185–88).

10 Thomas R. Schreiner believes the Bible is the Word of God and thus makes true claims about reality and history (Schreiner 2008, pp. 886–88). This trust allows his focus to remain on describing the text without having to investigate its truth. Additionally, the assumption of truth shrinks the distance between the text and reader so that the mere description of the text feels prescriptive (see especially chp. 18). These assumptions mean the criticisms against descriptive approaches that arise later in this essay do not apply to Schreiner's work.

11 In this work, Frei distinguishes between "history" and "history-like" readings in order to argue that the meaning of the text lies in the narrative world it creates linguistically apart from its historical reference (Frei 1974, pp. 10–13, 280). Although Frei does not make a direct claim about the truth of this narrative world, his sympathetic description of premodern interpreters who believe that the world of the text is the real world points in this direction.

[12] Collins argues for "critical biblical theology" that clarifies "the meaning and truth claims" of ancient authors from a modern perspective. The neutral character of his approach is shown in that he believes the Bible cannot provide "objective, transcendent moral certainties", thereby stopping prescriptive readings of the text (Collins 2005, pp. 17–18, 78).

[13] Hatina serves as an example in the second and third stages of his approach where he locates NTT within religious studies. His approach is historical in its sociological study of the New Testament and descriptive in its "non-(a)theistic" methodology that does not "attempt to evaluate which claim is correct" among competing religions (Hatina 2013, p. 198). Prescription appears in the third stage where what is learned from a religious studies analysis of the New Testament is relevant to the modern world as it advocates for "universal human dignity, justice, and peace" (p. 215).

[14] The reality aspect of HRN and HRP needs further distinction from description. It is easy to see how historical claims can be either described or investigated, such as claims by a text, author, or community. The claims can be either left alone or investigated with an appropriate method. Yet, what is the truth value of a historical object that is part of the context surrounding the New Testament? For example, what is difference between a descriptive and reality approach to the temple? Since there is no claim being made aside from its mere existence, the distinction here is not obvious. My answer is that under the idea "temple" claims are being made, either by a variety of texts or archeology. A descriptive approach would describe these various claims; a reality approach would investigate those underlying claims to determine which were true.

[15] Craig L. Blomberg's work has a strong emphasis on the text but associates with the HR category because of traits such as a short defense of miracles in the gospels, an affirmation that Jesus felt abandoned on the cross, and an attestation of the historical reality of the resurrection (Blomberg 2018, pp. 71–72, 96–97). The main body of the text has a neutral feel because he moves most of his reflections on the modern relevance of the text to the concluding chapter (p. 15).

[16] Räisänen describes the two tasks of NTT as "the 'history of early Christian thought' (or theology, if you like), evolving in the context of early Judaism" and "critical philosophical, ethical and/or theological 'reflection on the New Testament', as well as on its influence on our history and its significance for contemporary life" (Räisänen 2000, p. 8). The first task sets out the HR characteristic; the second, P.

[17] Although it is often unrecognized, people evaluate every consequential claim they encounter. Any such claim is automatically run through plausibility considerations, such as the reliability of the speaker and comparison with what the person already knows to be true. In this manner, not every claim has to be relitigated anew. My argument is that we should not stop this process ad hoc but either admit the claims fails for some reason or continue this process to its end.

[18] All biblical quotations are from the CEB.

[19] Kavin Rowe has made a similar argument about the need to stop "deflecting" New Testament truth claims by examining a variety of texts that make claims that affect the reader (Rowe 2022, pp. 149–53).

[20] Morgan's work on NTT is respected enough to have merited a "festschrift" in his honor (Rowland and Tuckett 2006).

[21] All New Testament theologies have a section that discusses their methodology; however, most often these discussions remain short and deal with a whole range of topics from unity and diverity to hermeneutics. Broad discussions in a small space do not allow for the depth of engagement found in Morgan's two articles.

[22] Morgan, similar to many New Testament theologians, shows some ambivalence over whether he is interested in authorial intent or the grammatical meaning of the text. For example, he also says, "The exegete's contribution is to protect textual intention as the community attends to its Scriptures" (Morgan 2016, p. 386). This could be read as a grammatical and narrative interest in the text.

[23] A history-of-religions approach could take either an HDN or an HRP path. The difference between these two is whether the approach uses historical investigation to adjudicate the reality of the New Testament's claims.

[24] For example, Wrede says of NTT: "'We at least want to know what was believed, thought, taught, hoped, required, and striven for in the earliest period of Christianity; not what certain writings say about faith, doctrine, hope, etc." (Wrede 1973, p. 84).

[25] This statement is puzzling. A cursory study of biblical studies, or a special study of books on the historical Jesus, will show an intractable variety of opinions of who God and Jesus are. Is Jesus the Son of God or a man appointed by God to a special relationship with him? Was the cross the necessary step to Jesus's eventual triumph over death or the breaking of a man who threw himself against the wheel of history and was destroyed? The possible examples of incompatible visions of Jesus and God abound.

[26] Morgan's openness to "agnostic" theological interpreters is surprising as an agnostic interpreter would not share the mindset of the NT authors. I am unsure how he is able to maintain the distinction between his approach and Wrede's history-of-religions approach after making such an accommodation. I suspect his unwillingness to say that NTT must only be done by Christians is pushing him to make this pronouncement.

[27] This critique would be even stronger for an academically-acceptable HRP version of NTT. It would ask a confessional audience to accept a text that makes the stories and narrative of the Bible unrecognizable because its methodology would conclude that the stories were false. An HRP NTT author would say, this work is "theological" because I believe the same things you do (at some abstract or hypothetical level) even though the work tears down all the theological claims you hold dear.

[28] The differences between TRP and HRP are significant and worth exploring. A full discussion of these differences falls beyond the goals of this essay.

[29] Young levels this critique at historical criticism itself: "I also suggest that spaces of the field attending primarily to description (traditionally: 'exegesis' or 'Historical Criticism') will be the most hospitable environments for mainstream protectionism. Fixating on description of New Testament texts can reproduce the idea of their obvious importance or centrality" (Young 2020, p. 339).

[30] Elsewhere I argue that the current historical method forces such an approach because it is rooted in a misunderstanding of German historicism (Heringer 2018, pp. 1–41).

[31] It is worth noting that this is opposite to the viewpoint of the history-of-religions approach. There, the person—her beliefs, character, and history—should not affect what is written. The methodological replaces the personal.

[32] The TRN and HRN approaches are excluded from a group because I do not see a future for them in NTT.

## References


Blomberg, Craig L. 2018. *A New Testament Theology*. Waco: Baylor University Press.

Brueggemann, Walter. 2014. *Ice Axes for Frozen Seas: A Biblical Theology of Provocation*. Waco: Baylor University Press.

Campbell, Douglas A. 2021. The Future of New Testament Theology, or, What Should Devout Modern Bible Scholarship Look Like? *Religions* 12: 1072. [CrossRef]

Childs, Brevard S. 1980. On Reading the Elijah Narratives. *Interpretation* 34: 128–37. [CrossRef]

Collins, John J. 2005. *Encounters with Biblical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Eskola, Timo. 2015. *A Narrative Theology of the New Testament: Exploring the Metanarrative of Exile and Restoration*. WUNT 350. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Frei, Hans W. 1974. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Green, Joel B. 2011. Rethinking 'History' for Theological Interpretation. *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5: 159–73. [CrossRef]

Green, Joel B. 2016. What You See Depends on What You Are Looking for: Jesus's Ascension as a Test Case for Thinking about Biblical Theology and Theological Interpretation of Scripture. *Interpretation* 70: 445–57. [CrossRef]

Gregory of Nazianzus. 2002. *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*. Translated by Frederick Williams, and Lionel R. Wickham. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Hatina, Thomas R. 2013. *New Testament Theology and Its Quest for Relevance: Ancient Texts and Modern Readers*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.

Heringer, Seth. 2014. Forgetting the Power of Leaven: The Historical Method in Recent New Testament Theology. *SJT* 67: 85–104. [CrossRef]

Heringer, Seth. 2018. *Uniting History and Theology: A Theological Critique of the Historical Method*. Lanham: Lexington/Fortress Academic.

Maston, Jason, and Benjamin E. Reynolds, eds. 2018. *Anthropology and New Testament Theology*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.

Matera, Frank J. 2005. New Testament Theology: History, Method, and Identity. *CBQ* 67: 1–21. Available online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43725389 (accessed on 10 April 2022).

Mead, James K. 2007. *Biblical Theology: Issues, Methods, and Themes*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Miller, Robert D. 2016. *Many Roads Lead Eastward: Overtures to Catholic Biblical Theology*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

Morgan, Robert. 1995. New Testament Theology. In *Biblical Theology: Problems and Perspectives*. Edited by Steven J. Kraftchick, Charles D. Myers Jr. and Ben C. Ollenburger. Nashville: Abingdon.

Morgan, Robert. 2016. New Testament Theology as Implicit Theological Interpretation of Christian Scripture. *Interpretation* 70: 383–98. [CrossRef]

Morgan, Robert. 2018. Two Types of Critical Theological Interpretation. *JSNT* 41: 204–22. [CrossRef]

Räisänen, Heikki. 2000. *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme*, 2nd ed. London: SCM.

Rowe, C. Kavin. 2006. New Testament Theology: The Revival of a Discipline: A Review of Recent Contributions to the Field. *JBL* 125: 393–419. [CrossRef]

Rowe, C. Kavin. 2022. What If It Were True? Why Study the New Testament. *NTS* 68: 144–55. [CrossRef]

Rowland, Christopher, and Christopher Tuckett, eds. 2006. *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan*. Malden: Blackwell.

Schnabel, Eckhard J. 2019. Biblical Theology from a New Testament Perspective. *JETS* 62: 225–49. Available online: https://www.galaxie.com//article/jets62-2-01 (accessed on 10 April 2022).

Schreiner, Thomas R. 2008. *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ*. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Simms, W. Gilmore. 1853. The Morals of Slavery. In *The Pro-Slavery Argument as Maintained by the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States: Containing the Several Essays, on the Subject, of Chancellor Harper, Governor Hammond, Dr. Simms, and Professor Dew*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co.

Via, Dan Otto. 2002. *What Is New Testament Theology?* Minneapolis: Fortress.

Wrede, William. 1973. The Task and Method of 'New Testament Theology'. In *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter*. Edited by Robert Morgan. London: SCM, pp. 68–116.

Young, Stephen L. 2020. "Let's Take the Text Seriously": The Protectionist Doxa of Mainstream New Testament Studies. *MTSR* 32: 328–63. [CrossRef]

religions

MDPI

*Article*

# Is New Testament Theology Sufficiently Theological?

**Thomas Andrew Bennett**

School of Theology and Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA 91182, USA; tobennett0420@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** In this essay, I assess contemporary New Testament Theology against six values or aims of academic theology as espoused classically by St. Anselm and, recently, by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. I find New Testament Theology to excel in the first three, with contributions being coherent, historical, and engaged with contemporary contexts. It is with the second three theological trajectories—being confessional, constructive, and collaborative—that I find some standout hopeful examples that, should they become ubiquitous within the disciple, would lead to New Testament Theology becoming sufficiently theological and ultimately, would help to collapse the divide between biblical studies and theology altogether.

**Keywords:** theology; constructive theology; biblical studies; hermeneutics; Christian tradition; doxology; Old Testament; New Testament; interdisciplinarity

**Citation:** Bennett, Thomas Andrew. 2022. Is New Testament Theology Sufficiently Theological? *Religions* 13: 508. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060508

Academic Editor: Joel B. Green

Received: 1 April 2022
Accepted: 26 May 2022
Published: 2 June 2022



## 1. Introduction

"Is New Testament Theology Sufficiently Theological?" First, let us dispense with the obverse question: "Is theology sufficiently biblical?" No, it is most certainly not. Rather than cataloging a litany of abuses, it is more economical to just assert that academic—and even evangelical—theology studiously avoids sustained engagement with canonical texts.[1] The reasons for this disappointing pattern are legion, but for our purposes, the simple fact that theology does not usually deign to reach across the aisle gives us a reason to acknowledge and appreciate that New Testament Theology (NTT) is at least making an effort and with excellent results. As attested elsewhere in this issue of *Religions*, there are now "theological commentaries", series in which authors self-consciously attempt to make theological—and not just historical-critical or history of religions—contributions. Even if they do not always attain the lofty goals they set for themselves, they exist when just twenty years ago, they did not. Therefore, it is with appreciation and optimism that I argue here that, no, NTT is not sufficiently theological, but it is a "No, not yet" rather than a "No, abandon all hope ye who enter here". What follows are the humble and appreciative recommendations from a Bible-loving theologian to New Testament Theology: three theological trajectories wherein NTT is sufficiently theological and then three recommendations for continued development in otherwise promising directions. NTT is already theologically sufficient with respect to the theological values of coherence, history and historical considerations, and the ability to converse with contemporary thought and culture. For NTT to become sufficiently theological, it should be more confessional, more constructive, and more collaborative. I will do my best here to avoid getting entangled in biblical studies' internecine warfare over methodology, but some remarks will be inevitable. I promise to make them only when necessary to advance the goal: a more theological NTT.

## 2. What Does It Mean to Be Theological?

First, we should offer some justification for the six aforementioned trajectories. Why does NTT need to be more confessional, constructive, and collaborative and not a different set of alliterative objectives? Christian theology has long taken its shape from the prayer of St. Anselm in the first chapter of the *Proslogion* (Anselm 1965): "But I want to understand

a little of your truth, which my heart already believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand. For I believe even this: that if I do not believe, I will not understand". Anselm's *cri de coeur* is all the more remarkable today for its intransigence against modernism and critical lenses. Faith first, understanding second. This ordering is not due to fideism but due to the nature of human understanding, which is flawed and in need of aid. Indeed, earlier in the prayer, Anselm confesses that only God's mercy and grace make understanding possible. Anselm's prayer has led to the sort of catch-all definition of theology as "faith seeking understanding".

What is more fascinating is that Anselm's prayer ends with a bit of theological interpretation of Scripture. Obscured by modern translations, "if I do not believe, I will not understand" is, in the Old Vulgate, a translation of Isaiah 7:9 from the Greek Septuagint. Where Anselm has "I believe" and "I understand", the Septuagint reads in the second person plural as Isaiah is transmitting an oracle from Yahweh to King Ahaz and his people. In context, things look bad for the southern kingdom of Israel. The northern kingdom is now allied to the Assyrian empire, and that empire seeks Jerusalem's destruction. In verse four, God essentially tells Ahaz, "Do not panic! Relax!" Keep trust in God, Ahaz; that is the main thing. God will deal with your attackers; their schemes will fall apart. The Septuagint's reading of verse 9 shows the key to remaining calm when Ahaz lacks control and events are too much for him: "If you believe, you will understand". Ahaz will not understand much, but if he believes, he will understand enough. Enough to continue, enough to move forward, enough to make sense of what is happening now. Ahaz will get a better sense of his moment in history, his rule, and his God. He might draw further conclusions about his God and the nation's future, but that is decidedly not the horizon of God's promise. God does not promise that faith will lead to a full, unrestricted understanding of life, death, God, and the universe, but it will lead to enough. This is exactly the posture of Anselm's prayer. I do not wish to understand everything, just enough, just a little bit more. And I must believe if that is to come to pass.

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's recent definition of theology captures, I think, the spirit of the oracle to Ahaz and Anselm's prayer: "[Christian theology is] an integrative discipline that continuously searches for a coherent, balanced understanding of Christian truth and faith in light of Christian tradition (biblical and historical) and in the context of historical and contemporary thought, cultures, and living faiths" (Kärkkäinen 2019, p. 2). Humble but expansive, personal but traditioned and historic, conversing across the disciplines. If it stumbles, it is in the relative deprioritization of Scripture, but we should not quibble overmuch; the building blocks of an understanding brought about by faith are most certainly here. First, the discipline is "integrative", meaning that it incorporates many disciplines. I have renamed this aspect "collaborative" and treated it in Section 9. The definition also mentions "coherence", which I evaluated in Section 3. As for NNT's contributions to "Christian truth and faith in light of Christian tradition", I assessed these elements under "confessional" and "constructive" (Sections 7 and 8, respectively). I treated "the context of historical and contemporary thought" in Section 4. Kärkkäinen's "contemporary thought, cultures, and living faiths" I examined in Section 5. By applying these six elements of Kärkkäinen's definition as a rubric of sorts, we can make some determinations about how NTT fares qua theology.

### 3. Coherentism

By "coherence", theology tends to mean something like a web of belief that avoids internal contradictions.[2] This is not a full account of all things; it is rather a recognition that our account of the universe ought to make sense and not depend on cognitive dissonance to hold together. This has not, of course, always been the case in systematic theology, but it is important for offering a compelling vision while retaining some beliefs as essential and non-negotiable and others provisionally. Perhaps it is simply the nature of knowing and using critical biblical studies, but NTT has long been accustomed to, again borrowing

Kärkkäinen's language, "balancing" New Testament texts that appear in tension, attempting to create a cohesive account of the sort of world to which it attests.

Richard Hays, writing about the use of the Old Testament by the gospel writers, puts the same point this way: "The Gospels offer us four distinctive voices; they do not speak in unison as interpreters of the OT. Rather, we should hear their testimonies as four distinctive voices singing in *polyphony*. If that is correct, the art of reading the Gospels is like the art of listening to choral singing. . . . To be sure, in a complex choral work, there may be moments of dissonance between the different parts. Discerning hearers do not want to eliminate the dissonances; rather, the task of appreciation is to develop a nuanced ability to hear how the dissonances belong to a larger artistic design" (Hays 2014, KL 2167). Due to the tensions assessed between various New Testament authors (and perhaps even within one author's own undisputed canon), New Testament theologians are quite adept at developing balanced, critical, or post-critical coherences of disparate witnesses. The goal is not to make Matthew Paul but to show how Matthew and Paul testify in different ways and in different contexts to the same God. And, as with a complicated piece of music, different voices may exist in dissonance while still contributing to the whole of which we can perceive only a part. All of this is to say that NTT seeks to make sense of the universe through Scripture provisionally but does so in a way that is neither naïve nor disingenuous. Since the universe is complicated, it is no accident that the Bible and our interpretations of it are as well, and this is no mark against using Scripture to develop a faith that coinheres and thereby understands. In this respect, NTT and theology are already in, pardon the pun, harmony.

## 4. Historical Considerations

The words of God to Ahaz have credibility not simply because they are issued from the mouth of a prophet. Rather, they are credible because the God who declares them has a history with Israel, one on which Ahaz can look and reflect. Anselm's prayer remains optimistic despite every human defect that should render knowledge epistemically impossible because Anselm locates himself within a historical church tradition that has repeatedly seen God grant knowledge. Ahaz and Anselm have history, and that grounds their faith in the face of the future. If anything, NTT has had too much "history", that is, an understanding of vocation that has seemed at times inextricably enmeshed with "what actually happened" and, as Bultmann attempted to extract a century ago, the "kernel" of religious truth buried beneath the misleading and untrustworthy surface. I commend to the reader Joshua Strahan's excellent review of contemporary attempts at NTT to see how the discipline continues to wrestle with such a legacy. Recent theological appropriation of historiography suggests that such behind-the-texts attempts at reconstruction and the like are ineradicably wrongheaded because they deny the very subjectivity that history-writing—whether ancient or modern—necessarily includes.[3] But even if NTT has at times been overzealous in its historical inquiries, an historical orientation has, among many valuable contributions, recovered the Jewish milieu and worldview of figures like Jesus and Paul.

"The New Perspective" on Paul is itself a fascinating case study in the divide between NTT and academic theology. If ever there was a sea change in exegesis that could or should have had a bearing on the doctrinal commitments of churches in the Protestant tradition, this was it.[4] Much of classic Protestant soteriology hangs on being "justified by faith", that is, "being declared righteous through my believing in Jesus". If "justified by faith" actually means "made right by Jesus's faithfulness to God", it seems as though some constructive theology might be in order. Does this open the door to universalism? What, exactly, is my role in soteriology? Ironically, after much wailing and gnashing of teeth, New Perspective champion N.T. Wright's mature position seems to be that, soteriologically speaking, "The Spirit's work, by producing the faith (*pistis*) that God has raised Jesus and exalted him as Messiah and Lord, marks out all the people who share that faith as the Messiah's people" (Wright 2016), KL 64). If there has been a theological adjustment, it is probably in the

sidelining of "forensic" justification and the use of law court metaphors to describe the problem between God and humanity. This is undeniably an advance, but one wonders if much of the theological potential in reading Paul according to his historical context remains unfulfilled. The theologians appear to lack the technical expertise to adjudicate—perhaps even understand—what is happening at the historical and exegetical level, and the New Testament theologians appear to lack the doctrinal expertise to meaningfully engage in constructive thought.

But more on that later. For now, we should be content to recognize that the history component of theology is in good supply in NTT and not only with respect to the first-century ancient near Eastern contexts. Of late, there has even been a recovery of the interpretative methods and instincts practiced by Christian theologians of the past as well as post-critical hermeneutical approaches.[5] If critical biblical studies began in the post-reformation era with all its sloughing off the medieval church and the Fathers, NTT at least has been recognizing the mistake and rectifying it.

**5. Contemporary Thought, Cultures, and Living Faiths**

With the coming of the information age, theology can no longer be credibly done within a religious and cultural bubble. Where Western theology, since the medieval age, has been the province of European and then North American thinkers, new global contexts demand a mélange of voices. This is not diversity for diversity's sake; it is instead a brute fact—underground Chinese churches will be doing lay theology because they have no choice—and the result of better understanding of how social location and identity matter in terms of how we perceive God and Scripture.[6] The question biblical studies and theology needed to ask was "What are we missing?", and the answer turned out to be "quite a lot". The history of theology in the latter half of the 20th Century and now into the 21st has been the explosion of theologies done from the margins. Beginning with black liberation and feminist theology and now incorporating ecologically sensitive theologies, contextual reflections on the nature of God and the universe have proliferated wildly with astonishing results.[7] Happily, NTT shares this history and predilection.[8] I am not aware of a major New Testament Theology written explicitly from a historically marginalized perspective, but I have no doubt that such a contribution would be welcome.

**6. Summary Thoughts**

There is a great deal here to like, and it is a credit to NTT that the past twenty or thirty years have made such immense strides. But there is more to do. What about being "integrative" as Kärkkäinen recommends? What about "Christian truth" that has traditionally been formulated in terms of doctrines? If we reassemble these bits of Kärkkäinen's definition, I think we must acknowledge that theology should be (1) undertaken in praise of the God witnessed in Scripture; (2) limited to a time and a place and located in the life of the believer and the local church and its tradition; and (3) open to advances across the sciences. And I think these are the areas of NTT that need the most growth. As above, I have taken the liberty of terming and ordering them "Confessional, Constructive, and Collaborative". Let us turn to the first.

**7. Confessional**

In chapter thirty-six of the first book of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine writes, "So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them" (Augustine 1995, p. 49). Augustine thought and wrote in a world that had not separated theology and biblical study, so his words here apply to theological reflection as much as biblical interpretation. He has arrived at this conclusion (from our perspective) exegetically and theologically, thinking with the Psalms and John and Paul as he leads up to his pronouncement. For Augustine, when Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life", he leads us to himself and to the Father and "the Spirit [that]

binds us", that "cements us together" (Ibid., pp. 47–8). And the purpose of this leading and binding is "so that we can abide in the supreme and unchangeable good". By reason and Scripture, Augustine has become convinced that all Christian theology and bible study has its proper end in greater love of God and neighbor.[9]

Only in a context such as ours, where theology and biblical studies have been sundered from their native contexts and subjected to the canons of academic criticism, would Augustine seem radical—but he certainly does. Augustine not only thinks that theology should prompt doxology, but the assumption that he makes getting there is that theology and Bible are for Christians and churches. And the plural "Christians and churches" here is essential; in chapter thirty-five, we are to enjoy those who "together with us can enjoy [God.]" If he is to be believed, NTT ought to increase real Christians' love for God and each other and spark up communal worship.

This means that NTT must be confessional: written by Christians for churches, bent on generating the worship that springs from the greater love of God and neighbor. So is NTT doing that? My sense is that many New Testament theologians want to be generating love and praise, but they bump up against the reality of academic tradition, the notion that biblical study is meant to be rigorously descriptive and not pre- or proscriptive. An example might help to demonstrate where we are and where we might one day be.

In conclusion to his recent *New Testament Theology*, Craig Blomberg steps out of the descriptive mode and, as an evangelical should, shares the gospel found in his work. The result is a short treatise of sorts, a call for what he believes Christians ought to do and think in light of what he has found. This has theological promise; here, he could confess his love of God and neighbor. He recalls the results of his work, focusing largely on the themes of filling up or fulfilling the promises of the Old Testament and the high Christology of all the various New Testament texts. The fulfillment aspect, Blomberg thinks, should encourage us: "Once one recognizes how much the concept of fulfillment pervades the NT, both explicitly and implicitly, it is important to point out that not everything that God promised in pre-Christian times has come to pass. Still, the amount that has occurred should be sufficient to engender faith that the remaining unfulfilled promises will yet be kept" (Blomberg 2018, pp. 692–93). Blomberg then laments that this truth has been overlooked in church circles and worries that right/left politics in the West are damaging our unity and future hope. A better way, he thinks, would be for a holistic balance between personal and communal piety, internal love and loving outreach, and the continual recognition that even the best of us are broken and fallible.

These are lovely sentiments, and, in a cursory way, they do direct us to greater wonder at God's ability to fulfill promises in surprising and novel ways and caution Christians against division. But this massive, erudite work weighs in at seven hundred and sixty-nine pages. The concluding section—in which Blomberg makes an explicit charge to the church—lasts fourteen pages. By contrast, the Modern Author Index by itself is a full ten pages longer. I do not wish to besmirch Blomberg's achievement by any means; I only wish to point out that if doing NTT is ultimately judged by the way it impacts Christian life and love, the descriptive mode just does not suffice.

As he unpacks various themes in the Johannine literature, Blomberg notes the prevalence of "Son" language to describe Jesus and, in turn, his relationship to the Father. He notes that in John 5, "Son" language can "[sound] like a form of subordination" but, it turns out, has "Jesus mirroring God in particularly lofty ways—by giving life (v. 21), exercising judgment (v. 22), receiving the same kind of honor (v. 23), and even having 'life in himself' just as the Father does (v. 26) (Ibid., p. 592). In the very next paragraph, he explains that in Jesus' Farewell Discourse, "the perichoresis or interpenetration of Father and Son (and also the Spirit) appears, providing foundational material for the church's development of Trinitarian doctrine". If theology ought to lead to doxology, it seems like this might have been an excellent opportunity. First, there is a mystery here. Blomberg alludes to the notion that Jesus is both Son and not subordinate to the Father, but what does/can this mean? What does it mean for the messiah to be Son of God and in perichoretic interpenetration

with the Father? If that is what John is teaching us, what sort of God do we have? Second, should we not take a moment to marvel at this vision of the divine? Within this one gospel account, we have a Son and Father who are conceptually distinguishable and yet in full and complete alignment in all things. We have a wholly transcendent Father and a wholly immanent Son who share life and are "one". Surely this begs comment! Third, if Blomberg is right, what might this intimate union between Father and Son mean for Christian *koinonia*? Maybe nothing, maybe everything, but theology demands that we at least try for a provisional account.

Now, in Blomberg's defense, he is writing with at least some of an apologetical aim. He lives in an academic context that has traditionally treated those who locate bin- or trinitarian theology in the New Testament as credulous at best. But, and this is absolutely critical, such a posture might be making Blomberg—and many New Testament theologians—blind to what is and could be there in the text and how that might lift the eyes of readers to the living God to whom the text witnesses. What is more, this is just a single example from a truly monumental text, a text in which Blomberg's final consideration is "if even a few members of the church of Jesus Christ worldwide capture a glimpse of the vision of the NT for what God's people are called to initiate and for what they are given the power to become now in this age for the sake of a badly broken world, I will be convinced that I did what I set out to do" (Ibid., p. 704). The Spirit will not be quenched, so I have no doubt that God will affect transformation through Blomberg's work, but so much has been left on the table! The descriptive mode, the slavish devotion to a historical account of what Mark or Paul or Jesus's theological vision was, is an albatross, or, more appropriately, a laryngectomy, robbing him of the prayers and rhapsodies and encouragements and injunctions that come so quickly to Augustine's lips. Again, in his defense, I could easily prosecute an identical case against every NTT released in the 21st Century. The fault is not really with New Testament theologians so much as their training—and even this was not unwarranted. Critical tools do help biblical studies researchers remove the dross and elevate the quality of discourse and have proven immeasurably valuable in providing historical insight. But this only means that we should be careful not to cast aside all critical tools and thus abandon what gains they have made possible.

For NTT to become sufficiently theological, it will have to become more explicitly confessional—and not just in introductions and conclusions. New Testament theologians will have to move from the descriptive to the doxological in a thoroughgoing manner, bearing in mind that their readers are not (or at the very least not only) other academics and future academics but pastors and future pastors and parishioners. The work must reveal God's beauty and deepen love. And if this requirement does not pass muster with secular academia, that is (or should be) an acceptable loss. The goal is not to earn the praise of people but to inspire the praise of God.

**8. Constructive**

If theology is to provide a coherent account of things, it must strive to make provisional statements about God and the universe. Historically, this was the work of sacred doctrine, the various dogmas developed by theologians and ratified by the Catholic Church. Following the Protestant Reformation, dogmatics splintered widely and, over time, developed into Christian traditions. Alongside the Catholic and Orthodox, we now have Reformed, Lutheran, Methodist, Anabaptist, Baptist, holiness, evangelical, and Pentecostal/charismatic traditions, each of which have amassed doctrines that jostle one another both within and without the tradition.

So, for example, the Reformed tradition has been at odds with itself over the doctrines of election and omniscience at least since Barth radically reformulated them according to his Christology and reimagined the notion of God's Being-in-act. So Barthians and neo-Calvinists can square off and squabble over the particulars amongst themselves and then with Arminian Baptists or whomever else. The rubber meets the road, however, when pastors must answer questions from parishioners about whether they are among the elect

and how it is possible to have free will if God's sovereignty includes knowing the election of the saints from eternity.

I highlight election and omniscience because these happen to be two elements of theology where biblical studies have made welcome and timely contributions. For the former, Part Three of N.T. Wright's *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* features a substantive construal, even going so far as to mention some of the doctrine's history in Calvin and Luther and why careful attention to Paul's thought might set us up for thinking about the election, not in terms of "being chosen" but being chosen "*for a particular purpose*" (Wright 2013, p. 774, Italics in original). Wright offers a thoroughly reworked understanding of election based on accomplishing a mission rather than populating heaven or hell. This is good constructive work because it addresses real theological questions and points the way forward for how we ought to live. It is, of course, couched in a historical reconstruction of "What Paul really thought", but it directs a consequential and controversial doctrinal conversation in a particular direction.

If Wright's discussion of election is anemic, it is only in his reticence to directly address questions about predestination and salvation in classical Protestant doctrine. Wright is hard to pin down here. Maybe he agrees with Calvin about God electing individuals to salvation; maybe he does not. But at least he is able to say that no, Paul does not unequivocally tell us that God has decided on the citizens of heaven from eternity and that there is a better way to read those parts of his letters that have been so interpreted.

In his essay "Does God Have Surprises?", John Goldingay is very explicit about the philosophical options regarding God's omniscience provided by theology. He outlines classical theism (God knows all facts) and the challenge of open theism (God knows all facts, but the future is yet-to-be-determined) and then demonstrates how it is that Scripture offers a different view than either. According to the Old and New Testaments, Goldingay thinks, "God is not omniscient about the past or present any more than about the future, but that God can discover anything God wants to know about past, present, or future" (Goldingay 2010, p. 36). Goldingay does have an agenda: he has reservations about the limits and possibility of systematic theology.[10] It is no surprise that he lampoons what is on offer from theology, but it is quite surprising that he offers a constructive alternative. He is not interested in developing a metaphysics or divine epistemology to explain what it is in God's being that actualizes God's limited-but-unlimited knowledge or how that might work with and/or against other divine perfections. Still, this biblical theology gives us something to work with, a way to conceptualize what God does or does not know about us and how that might inspire praise and cause us to think about how we should live.[11] It has implications for perennial questions from parishioners ("Does God have a plan for my life?"), and it invites theology to join the discussion—if this is what God's knowledge is like, how can we square that with God's relationship to time? And what *is* time, exactly? Constructive thinking paves a provisional way forward in which theology and the Bible can work together to develop a coherent account.

Wright and Goldingay on election and omniscience provide two examples of how NTT can be constructively theological without turning into systematic theology themselves. Written from within a tradition, these two offer insights into difficult and contemporary theological questions without shouldering the burden of making final and comprehensive theological pronouncements. Their successors ought to follow the pattern: interpret New Testament texts with the questions of theology in mind. Read texts in ways that creatively and imaginatively address the questions that Christians have about life, death, God, heaven, hell, salvation, creation care, gender, sex, family, Trinity, Jesus, angelic tongues (and, for that matter, angels), the devil, predestination, free will, time, eternity, metaphysics, and everything else that challenge, affirm, or recontextualize classical doctrines in the tradition. And if these successors might desire to do a bit more work to develop a coherent set of beliefs within which such insights might fit, well, that would be even more welcome.

**9. Collaborative**

Though its coinage has been misattributed to St. Thomas Aquinas, the angelic doctor would surely have agreed that theology is the "Queen of the Sciences".[12] Because theology has "eternal bliss" (*beatitudo aeterna*) as its end, it aims at something higher than any other science and thereby occupies the highest place (Aquinas 1952, I.1, 5). But this does not mean that the other sciences are to be ignored or pilloried. Aquinas goes on to defend the use of the lesser sciences such as poetry and what we would think of as the natural sciences in Scripture because "likenesses drawn from things farthest away from God form within us a truer estimate that God is above whatever we may say or think" (Ibid.), I.1, 9). He even interprets Proverbs 9:3 theologically, thinking Lady Wisdom to be theology and the "servant girls" the lower sciences, going into the town and issuing out her invitation to a feast.

His opinion seems to be that theology—"sacred doctrine"—is the greatest joy and deepest insight and the thing to which all other sciences point. And since Scripture ratifies their use, we can expect all realms of inquiry to lead us to it. So either Aquinas was terribly wrong, or something has gone terribly awry because few of the practitioners of the "lesser sciences" think of theology at all, much less a queen. Whether this inversion of the sciences can be rectified remains to be seen, but, as Kärkkäinen noted, if theology is to provide a coherent account of the things that are, it must be "integrative". As the academy has increasingly atomized, theology has been cut off from other disciplines to the point that physicists and occasionally philosophers—but certainly not theologians—are expected to answer questions about the nature of reality, free will, etc.

Rather than lament the breakdown, theology must go forward by engaging in vigorous conversations with the physical and social sciences—many of which will be one-sided, with theology doing more listening than instructing. And fortunately, or unfortunately, NTT will have to follow suit. Of course, not everyone is or can be a polymath, but the general facility with findings across the disciplines and attention to what is next will be necessary for NTT to fulfill its "integrative" or "collaborative" calling.

While researching his *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, Joel B. Green listened in on graduate-level neuroscience courses to gain competence in what was happening at the frontiers of brain science (Green 2008). Armed with these insights, Green was able to ask fresh questions about old or neglected theological topics. What are we to make of soul language in Scripture? What happens to our theological horizons if and when we take the embodied nature of the mind seriously? After reviewing a spate of findings of the neural correlates of human emotion and cognition, Green observes, "If the capacities traditionally allocated to the 'soul'–for example, consistency of memory, consciousness, spiritual experience, the capacity to make decisions on the basis of self-deliberation, planning and action on the basis of that decision, and taking responsibility for these decisions and actions–have a neural basis, then the concept of 'soul,' as traditionally understood in theology as a person's 'authentic self,' seems redundant (Ibid., p. 45)". In one fell swoop, classical dualism is put on notice as unnecessary, thanks to neuroscientific research. But rather than leaving a traditional idea deconstructed, Green goes on to exegete the biblical notion of the self and the language of the soul, ultimately concluding that the Hebrew concept is thoroughly unified and embodied—a view very much in keeping with what the neuroscience indicates. And this ultimately spurs theological reflection on the necessity of the sort of physical, bodily resurrection confessed by Paul and other early Christians. If humans have no immortal soul to carry them into the afterlife, only resurrection from the dead can confer life after death. Such reasoning is inherently theological and, perhaps more importantly, invites theology into a conversation about what resurrection life is and why it is essential to Christian confession.

The fruits of interdisciplinarity were extended in 2015's *Conversion in Luke-Acts*, where Green explains mind-change from the perspective of the narratives of Luke-Acts and neural plasticity. Genuine transformation of thought and behavior has a physical grounding, one that the "lesser sciences" help explain. Green notes that in Acts 2, we see "the centrality

to conversion of the process of incorporation into a new community, which entails a makeover of previous patterns of faith and life into patterns conforming to those of the new community" (Green 2015, p. 132). But this exegetical finding can be understood more deeply in the context of neuroscience. Earlier, he notes, "Borrowing a principle from the neuropsychologist Donald Hebb, known as Hebb's rule, we know that *neurons that fire together wire together*—with the result that, over time, our brains make connections on the basis of which we make sense of the present and predict the future in light of past experience" (Ibid., p. 41. Emphasis in original). If this is true, it means that the process of religious conversion may take place over a longer period of time than we might have thought and, moreover, that a community that reinforces certain habits, practices, modes of thought, and linguistic patterns will be essential to it. The community of faith instills a certain type of configuring of the world to which the converted adapt and, in time, adopt. As this configuration—sometimes philosophers of language call it a "horizon"[13]—succeeds in rendering the world comprehensible, the once foreign concepts and habits harden and become second nature.

The reader will note that Green is doing ecclesiology by collaborative exegesis, that is, biblical theology in the light of the physical sciences. My sense is that many would-be New Testament theologians would like to attempt this sort of collaborative interdisciplinarity but hesitate to do so for fear of straying out of their lane, as it were. Were it not for his graduate studies in the neurosciences, they might think, what right does Green or any other biblical studies scholar have to drift away from their historical-critical bread-and-butter? Well, to be blunt, *theology* grants that right. Because theology is the attempt to forge horizons within which all learning finds its proper end in the love of God and neighbor, it cannot be limited to critical exegesis. Once New Testament study crosses over into New Testament Theology, different rules apply. Integrative, speculative, boldly creative, and imaginative, these are the modes of theology at its best; unshackle biblical theology that it might embrace them. Doing so does not, as Green's work amply demonstrates, mean lacking in rigor or abandoning critical excellence. It means, rather, courageously striking out into the unknown, prayerfully expectant that God is pleased to grant a little more understanding, a slightly more coherent, bracing, and comprehensive Christian horizon.

## 10. Conclusions

"Is New Testament Theology Sufficiently Theological?" No, but it is a lot closer to the mark than theology is to being sufficiently biblical. In many places, NTT is as theological as theology or is at least close to it.

NTT already seeks a coherentist rendering of the voices of the New Testament and, by implication, knowledge of God in general. Close attention to texts and the theological conviction that they are the word of God forces NTT to bring the dissonant notes together to create a complicated symphony.

And NTT is certainly no stranger to historical research and uncovering the voices of the tradition. As theological interpretation shifts its methodology to become more inclusive, NTT is increasingly interpreting Scripture according to many canons but is not by any means abandoning the historical. Christianity is, after all, a historical religion that makes historical truth claims. NTT has done very well to ground those claims.

The discipline continues to become more inclusive. Historically marginalized voices now have the opportunity to speak, producing critical and constructive interpretations of biblical texts. There are surely more voices to hear, but I am confident that biblical studies publishers are ready and willing to promote them. Both theology and NTT have recognized the need for all Christians to participate in constructive work. In these areas, theology and NTT are walking hand in hand and appear to share the same destination.

There is more division, however, when it comes to the confessional, constructive, and collaborative values so prized by traditional and contemporary Christian theology. And in each of these, we have seen the desire and the attempt to do NTT more theologically. NT theologians do want to invite doxology and greater love for God and neighbor, but the

actual execution of that goal often falls short. The solution is to remember that theology begins, as Anselm shows us, as prayer—not an impressive academic feat.

At least within the broadly reformed tradition, we saw how N. T. Wright and John Goldingay are explicit about speaking to traditional theological categories such as election and omniscience. While neither is as coherent or doctrinally direct as theology can and should be, both point the way forward by boldly interjecting the Bible into classical theological controversies. Now we need to move to other subjects: trinitarianism, soteriology, glorification, etc. When NTT is not speaking to the real questions of Christians, it is not sufficiently theological.

Lastly, we saw that collaboration with the other domains of academic research is essential for theology to provide integration, showing how all human learning ought to end in the enjoyment of true divinity. Joel B. Green's extensive interaction with the neurosciences offers a template for how NTT might begin interdisciplinary conversations that lead to theological work. And though it may seem like a foreign endeavor, this shows that NTT can and must let the other disciplines speak if we are to present a fresh, contemporary understanding of how biblical texts witness the truth of human life.

Be more confessional, be more constructive, and be more collaborative. In Romans 11, Paul is convinced that the inclusion of the gentiles into the people of God through Jesus the Messiah will make Israel jealous. He hopes that his own ministry will inspire this envy, that unbelieving Israel will look at the spiritual riches God has poured out on pagans and recognize what God has done in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the giving of the Spirit. As a theologian enamored of biblical studies, I view NTT in much the same way. Contemporary theology has its bright points, but it remains relentlessly unbiblical. Perhaps by being more confessional, constructive, and collaborative, NTT will bring spiritual riches to the church in such a way that theology will reawaken to the power and possibility of Scripture. When the church hearkens not to theology but instead to the voice of biblical theology, perhaps theology will grow jealous and yearn to feast once again on the Scriptures that point to the Word of God. And someday—likely far off, but who knows? The Spirit blows where the Spirit wishes—there will no longer be any divide between theology and biblical studies at all.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

[1] Hopefully, just one example will suffice: (Sanders 2021), in his study, claims the need to hew close to Scripture when doing trinitarian theology but also suggests that "the overall trend of modern biblical scholarship has been toward a severe attenuation of the traditional exegetical arguments by which the doctrine of the Trinity was crafted and by which it has been supported since patristic times". Moreover, "[biblical studies] also tends toward fragmentation and a kind of textual atomism, which makes the trinitarian construal of Scripture impossible" (p. 75). Following this counsel of despair, the reader will not be surprised to learn that Sanders's otherwise impressive work features almost nothing in the way of textual engagement with Old or New Testament texts.

[2] The landmark text (Quine and Ullian 1978) proposes a coherentist epistemology. We apprehend knowledge about the world by first possessing a "web of beliefs", in which the most cherished and assured beliefs occupy the center. These are rarely questioned and form the core of our understanding of the world. More peripheral beliefs are held more tenuously and are more open to revision. When reality pushes back, as it were, these beliefs must be altered to withstand new empirical data. On occasion, our experiences in the world may undermine some deeply held, cherished beliefs. These encounters threaten the entire web and require a massive reimagining of the universe. Presumably, the right set of beliefs would be internally coherent and adequate to explain or navigate all experiences in the world.

[3] See (Heringer 2018, especially chs. 3 and 4)'s "The Construction of History" and "The Theological Interpretation of History". Heringer shows that historiography is at least as much a construction as it is a description, as authors are consciously evaluating and locating data to develop a coherent story. His work goes a long way towards showing that self-consciously Christian history is possible and need not subscribe to a thoroughgoing naturalism to gain legitimacy. Of course, such a proposal renders "What really happened?" accounts as interesting but unnecessary for NTT.

[4] It was not until Piper (2007)'s that mainstream North American reformed and evangelical theology really began to grapple with trends in biblical studies that had been fomenting for the thirty years since Sanders (1977)'s and it is questionable that Piper truly understood what the New Perspective (New Perspectives?) was saying. But Piper and others might be forgiven for the confusion. What, exactly, does the New Perspective mean for traditional Protestant soteriology and who is telling us?

[5] Nearly every issue of the *Journal of Theological Interpretation* (University Park, 2007) features exegetical articles featuring non-historical-critical methods. Narrative, in-the-text, patristic, and Pentecostal hermeneutics—to name just a few—demonstrate a wide range of post-critical interpretive possibilities.

[6] Powell (2004)'s essay shows the power of social location and context for biblical interpretation and theology. Powell relates a study in which three disparate groups of students from the United States, Russia, and Tanzania, respond to the parable of the prodigal son from Luke 15:11–32. The groups seize on different aspects of the story and come away with different lessons. Powell suggests that the reason for the different readings is different cultures and histories; Russian students had a collective memory of the power of hunger and famine; American students had a strong rooting in the concept of personal responsibility. For their part, the Tanzanian seminarians focused on hospitality and honor. Biblically and theologically, different social locations cause different people to hear and see different things.

[7] Baylor's *Studies in Religion, Theology, and Disability* (eds. Amos Yong and Sarah Melcher, 2007) series is one illustrative example of how seriously theology has taken up the task of thinking through doing biblical and theological reflection from the margins.

[8] For just a sampling of New Testament theology from traditionally marginalized peoples, see, e.g., (Blount 2007; Torre 2002; Howard 2021; Segovia and Sugirtharajah 2009; Soon 2021).

[9] For his part, Augustine thinks that even bad theology/interpretation is good if it ends in increased love. It should be corrected, of course, but it has still performed its purpose.

[10] (Goldingay 2016, p. 15), he writes of systematic theology, "I don't disapprove of that enterprise, but I'm trying to avoid undertaking it".

[11] He ends the essay with the thought that maybe God does not know the contents of our hearts, but when God wants to, God will find out. "You can run, but you can't hide".

[12] (Brink 2019) traces the actual term *Regina Scientiarum* to Erasmus in the 16th Century but notes that in the first question of the *Summa*, Aquinas affirms sacred doctrine as "nobler than other sciences".

[13] Coined by (Gadamer 2004), a "horizon" is a person's (or, in Gadamer's view, a piece of art's as well) totalizing conception of how the world is. Interpretation is the process in which different horizons intersect and, in the case of a human interpreter, ideally leaves our horizon expanded. One of Gadamer's pioneering insights is that this process is aesthetical rather than purely rational, a consequence of being attracted to beauty as much as through judgments.

## References


Anselm. 1965. *Proslogion*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Aquinas, Thomas. 1952. *Summa Theologica*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Brittanica.

Augustine. 1995. *De Doctrina Christiana*. Clarendon: Oxford.

Blomberg, Craig L. 2018. *A New Testament Theology*. Waco: Baylor.

Blount, Brian, ed. 2007. *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Brink, Gijsbert van den. 2019. How Theology Stopped Being *Regina Scientiarum*—And How its Story Continues. *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32: 442–54. [CrossRef]

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2004. *Truth and Method*, 2nd Revised ed. London: Continuum.

Goldingay, John. 2016. *Biblical Theology: The God of the Christian Scriptures*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.

Goldingay, John. 2010. *Key Questions about Christian Faith: Old Testament Answers*. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Green, Joel. B. 2015. *Conversion in Luke-Acts: Divine Actions, Human Cognition, and the People of God*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Green, Joel B. 2008. *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Hays, Richard. 2014. *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness*. Waco: Baylor.

Heringer, Seth. 2018. *Uniting History and Theology: A Theological Critique of the Historical Method*. New York: Fortress.

Howard, Melanie A. 2021. Recent Feminist Approaches to Interpreting the New Testament. *Currents in Biblical Research* 20: 65–96. [CrossRef]

Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. 2019. *Christian Theology in the Pluralistic World: A Global Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Piper, John. 2007. *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright*. Wheaton: Crossway.

Powell, Mark Allen. 2004. The Forgotten Famine: Personal Responsibility in Luke's Parable of the 'Prodigal Son' . In *Literary Encounters with the Reign of God*. Edited by Sharon H. Ringe and H. C. Paul Kim. New York: T & T Clark, pp. 265–87.

Quine, Willard Van Orman, and Joseph Silbert Ullian. 1978. *The Web of Belief*. New York: Random House.

Sanders, Ed Parish. 1977. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Sanders, Fred. 2021. *Fountain of Salvation: Trinity and Soteriology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Segovia, Fernando, and Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, eds. 2009. *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*. London: T & T Clark.

Soon, Isaac T. 2021. Disability and New Testament Studies: Reflections, Trajectories, and Possibilities. *Journal of Disability & Religion* 25: 374–87.
Torre, Miguel de la. 2002. *Reading the Bible from the Margins*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
Wright, N. Tom. 2016. *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision*, 2nd ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
Wright, N. Tom. 2013. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

religions

MDPI

*Article*

# The Future of New Testament Theology, or, What Should Devout Modern Bible Scholarship Look Like?

**Douglas A. Campbell**

The Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708, USA; dcampbell@div.duke.edu

**Abstract:** Consideration of the nature of New Testament Theology (NTT) necessitates an account of theology or "God-talk". Karl Barth grasped that all valid God-talk begins with God's self-disclosure through Jesus and the Spirit, which people acknowledge and reflect on. Abandoning this starting point by way of "Foundationalism"—that is, resorting to any alternative basis for God-talk—leads to multiple destructive epistemological and cultural consequences. The self-disclosure of the triune God informs the use of the Bible by the church. The Bible then functions in terms of ethics and witness. It grounds the church's ethical language game. Creative readings here are legitimate. The New Testament (NT) also mediates a witness to Jesus, which implies an historical dimension. However, it is legitimate to affirm that Jesus was resurrected (see 1 Cor 15:1–9), which liberates the devout modern Bible scholar in relation to history. The historical readings generated by such scholars have value because the self-disclosing God is deeply involved with particularity. These readings can be added to the archive of scriptural readings used by the church formationally. Ultimately, then, all reading of the NT is theological (or should be) and in multiple modes. NTT focuses our attention on the accuracy of the God-talk operative within any historical reconstruction, and on its possible subversion, which are critical matters.

**Keywords:** New Testament; theology; Barth; ethics; church; presuppositions; historical

**Citation:** Campbell, Douglas A. 2021. The Future of New Testament Theology, or, What Should Devout Modern Bible Scholarship Look Like? *Religions* 12: 1072. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121072

Academic Editor: Joel B. Green

Received: 30 August 2021
Accepted: 20 November 2021
Published: 3 December 2021

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



## 1. Introduction

In this article, we are considering the curated volume of *Religions* "the future of New Testament Theology," and its attempts to answer the question on what a New Testament Theology (NTT) should look like. This is a crucial question but also a complex and difficult matter. Immediately we can see the need to try to rigorously coordinate together three different sets of issues, taking into account their diverse constituencies and also locations. "Theology" is language that claims literally to speak accurately about God; hence, theologians sometimes refer to it usefully as "God-talk." But when it is tied to the New Testament (NT), it really references the divinity identified by the church, which is composed in the main of Christians,[1] who generally relate Jesus to a unified notion of God in some strong sense. "The New Testament" is the part of the church's Scriptures added to the existing Jewish corpus by those who confess Jesus as God, although it only comprises twenty percent of the total and is a somewhat artificial demarcation. Indeed, the church has vigorously resisted attempts to sever the NT too strongly from its antecedent Jewish texts and so any consideration of theology in relation to the NT must keep the Bible as a whole in view. But the issues and constituencies in play are more complicated than even this coordination of God and Jesus, the church, and the Bible, might suggest. This analysis is appearing in an academic journal, and has been written by a professional NT scholar who works in a modern university, at which moment we see that this constituency and its rather different location, along with all its assumptions and practices, is in play as well. The modern university, it might be worth briefly recalling, is heavily involved with, and hence influenced by, the modern European nation-state (and is especially strongly influenced by German antecedents in the USA), and hence is a rather different entity from the universities

that antedated this phenomenon—which were invented by the church—not to mention, from the church itself. Hence, we will need to finally endeavor to answer the question of what a New Testament Theology should look like for this person, in this location, namely, the modern scholar of the New Testament (In what sense can someone such as myself pursue New Testament Theology, and what should it look like as I do it?[2]).

Answering this question satisfactorily requires undertaking a journey through these different loci and their constituencies. But it needs to be appreciated from the start that this journey will begin in a certain way—from a particular place that might strike some of my academic colleagues as unusual. I suggest, nevertheless, that this is the only way ultimately to answer our question appropriately, while any other point of departure will risk generating false, misleading, and incoherent conclusions. There is, it turns out, only one way to do New Testament Theology.

The initial prompt for this rather bold opening claim on my part derives from the fact that the question we are ultimately considering asks about *theology*. Although it explicitly asks for this notion to be explained in relation to the New Testament (although implicitly in relation to the Bible as a whole), it necessarily raises the broader question of theology *per se*, which is to say, of the verification of language that claims to speak accurately about God. And I would suggest here, at the very beginning of our journey, that if we want to talk at any point within it about God—that is, to engage in God-talk that is *true*, which grasps the nature of God *accurately*—we need to understand, tutored ultimately by Karl Barth, that there is only one way for us to do this.[3] Moreover, we must appreciate, again with Barth, that this is a vitally important matter, and really is *the* matter. Nothing matters more than correct speech about God. That is why I myself read the Bible, having devoted my career to the interpretation of one of its key authors, Paul—*because he talks so programmatically about God.* But how do we proceed so that our interpretations mediate the Bible's God-talk accurately?

Barth recognized with great clarity—and not a little courage—that we must *begin* with God-talk, so with theology, and, moreover, with God-talk undertaken in a certain way. In light of this initial data set (so to speak), from this place, we then derive an understanding of everything else we are trying to understand, the Bible and of how best to interpret it, whether ultimately the Old Testament or the New, and whether we are reading it in the church or in the academy, and in historical terms, theological terms, or guided by other hermeneutics altogether. If we begin anywhere else, we will get lost. Moreover, and even more importantly, we will not be talking about God. As Barth put it, we will simply be talking about ourselves in a loud voice.

However, I cannot offer any reasons for this point of departure at this moment, which is why I am simply asserting the point rather baldly at the outset of my analysis. We will shortly realize that God-talk cannot and must not have an epistemological preamble. However, reasons for this will emerge as we follow in Barth's footsteps when it will become apparent, amongst other things, that this is the only way that reasons *can* emerge for this procedure—retrospectively. Indeed, some very powerful reasons for following this procedure and for starting from this place will become clear in due course.

In view of this, my analysis as a whole will begin positively if abruptly in Step I, with Barth's understanding of proper God-talk, including there a brief sketch of some important immediate implications. This will be followed straightaway in Step II by a raft of negative considerations that corroborate this starting point—the promised reasons emerging here to retrospectively justify the opening claims of Step I (Barth was very clear-sighted about these grim concomitants as well). After this grounding in accurate, God-talk we will be in a position to think about some of the key truths thereby revealed to the community that God has summoned into being, that is, the church. And this is the right time to consider the nature and role of the Bible, which is this community's Scripture. We will need to ask what the Bible is for within the church and how to read it there. After generating this set of insights in Step III, we will be in a position to shift the locus of the discussion to the university in Step IV, in our last analytic step. We will ask now what scholarly work is

appropriate for the modern Bible scholar in her particular institutional location with all its distinctive privileges and challenges, although assuming throughout that she remains "devout," which is to say, grounded within the truths articulated by Steps I–III (If she does not stay grounded in Steps I through III then she will not be doing proper God-talk when she begins to interpret the NT in the university, and no answer to our initial question will now be possible). After this final specialized inquiry, our journey will be over and a cogent, if slightly surprising answer to our opening question will be apparent.

With this road map for the journey ahead in mind then, we can begin our quest where we must, with God-talk, learn rapidly as we begin, because God has already begun with us.[4] And the person who has understood all this with the most clarity in the modern period is, I would suggest, Karl Barth.

## 2. Argument, in Four Steps (I–IV)

### *2.1. Step I: The Correct Starting Point and Basis for God-Talk*

In the early 1930s, Barth's understanding of the basis for God-talk underwent a paradigm shift that he then spent the rest of his life articulating, principally in his (Barth [1932–1955] 1956–1975), the 12 main volumes of which were published from 1932 to 1955.[5] Barth's pioneering insights, arguably mediated first by a deep engagement with Anselm's *Proslogion* in 1931 (see Schwöbel 2000, pp. 28–30), were the twin realizations that, first, the truth about God derives from an act of self-disclosure to humanity *by* God, so it rests on a revelation, and, second, that this self-disclosure or revelation is definitively located in Jesus. God, in short, reveals the truth about God, and what God reveals is that the key insight into God is Jesus. The recognition of this situation—of this disclosure—is then the correct starting point for all God-talk, and all accurate God-talk reflects on this initial starting point, which is itself a given. Good theology is consequently always a *Nach-denken*.[6]

This sounds simple enough, but in fact, grasping this starting point clearly, developing it consistently, and maintaining it in the face of the swarm of challenges that immediately engages it, not the least from within the modern university, is anything but. A great deal is set in motion by these basal realizations to the point that Barth's enormous 12-volume articulation remained overtly incomplete. Noted quickly here are seven important, immediate implications that will ground the analysis that follows:

*Initial features*. This disclosure is a gift to humanity by God, revealing that God is a fundamentally giving God; moreover, it is an unconditional gift. It proceeds from God and God's own motives and concerns. It is also therefore, as such, an event, and necessarily an ongoing event. And it is now apparent that the information about God that God self-discloses is embedded within a relationship—within an ongoing, sustained event of divine self-disclosure to humanity by way of Jesus.

*Pneumatology.* Pressing further into this ongoing relationship that ceaselessly discloses who God is, we can detect a triune dynamic.

Barth was quick to note in his mature reflections that in order to be fully effective (which it is) this divine self-disclosure extends "all the way down," into the very hearts and minds of its recipients (see Rom 8:27; 1 Cor 2:10–11). Hence the role of the divine Spirit—usually called the Holy Spirit by Paul—must be recognized alongside the definitive focal point of Jesus. The divine Spirit reaches into and discloses the nature of God as Jesus within the depths of her listeners, thereby creating (if necessary) the very perceptions and capabilities necessary for registering and acknowledging these truths, but also indirectly bearing witness to herself.

In short, those sensitive to the revelatory dynamics involved within this act of self-disclosure, as Barth was, can detect the activity of a triune God. A revealer definitively reveals in relation to Jesus but also in a way that encloses people within that revelation; hence, in more traditional parlance, the Father is revealed through the Son by the Spirit (using the language of "Father" and "Son" here advisedly[7]). Barth thereby endorses the basic claims of Nicea, Constantinople and Chalcedon, and shows himself to be a

fundamentally orthodox thinker who is simply, in the modern period, taking the original ecumenical claims of the church rather more seriously than many of his contemporaries did.

It follows, further, that Barth is, strictly speaking, not discovering anything new about God. He is simply recovering the correct response to a divine self-disclosure that the ancient church was deeply familiar with—and indeed centered on—but that had been confused, overlaid, and even displaced by modern agendas. Having said this, Barth's preferred textual mediation of these insights was not the Church Fathers or Mothers but the Bible. He constantly suggests, in an essentially historical interpretative mode, that the Bible attests repeatedly, in numerous ways, to this revelatory dynamic on God's part.[8]

*Acknowledgement.* It follows that the appropriate correlate to this complete and effective triune self-disclosure is a people who recognizes it—who receives it, affirms it as true, and goes on to confess it. At bottom, a people *obeys* this revelation, acknowledging that God is in it. And this people is also thereby invited to witness it to others when called on, and to maintain it, handing it on from generation to generation. An important set of dynamics is thereby set up in relation to witness and tradition that we will shortly need to explore more. For now, it merely needs to be noted that the correct location for accurate God-talk is in a particular communal location that gratefully acknowledges the self-disclosure of this truth, and that extends that gratitude and acknowledgement through space and time—and of course we tend to refer to this communal location as the church.[9]

*Facticity.* It is worth appreciating at this moment that this revealed set of truths is a "fact," which is to say, it is absolutely and utterly true.[10] It is indeed *the* truth—the truth above all other truths. It is to be relied upon where all others fail, and to be acknowledged and maintained under any circumstances (Various apostles of modernity will challenge this claim, but I will suggest momentarily that clear-sighted witnesses to this truth will be able to detect critical moments of question-begging and contradiction within these challenges and so wisely reject them).

*Sovereignty.* In close relation to the foregoing, this truth is the truth by which all other truth-claims are now to be measured. The self-disclosure of God in Jesus through the Spirit is, as A. J. Torrance (1996, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2008) often says, *of decisive epistemic significance*, or, as Paul puts it, "every thought is [now] to be taken captive, in submission to the Messiah" (2 Cor 10:4–5).[11] Hence, in the light of this definitive self-disclosure, even our previous understandings of the divine—of "God"—are now to be—if necessary—revised and given a more accurate form in terms of Jesus and the work of the Spirit. From this moment onward—and, we now see, *only* from this moment—we can speak with confidence about what God is really like.

And implicit in this simple ancillary recognition is, in fact, the bulk of the subsequent theological task, while its difficulty, at least at times, should not be underestimated. Those acknowledging the decisive epistemic significance of the God who has self-disclosed through Jesus, and hence those located within the church, are summoned to think through the implications of this self-disclosure for all other God-talk, and this will include both what we might denote as directly referential God-talk, where claims are being made about what the divine is like, and any indirectly referential God-talk, when the concerns and supposed engagements and instructions of the divine dimension so identified are being expressed (although we would expect these two dimensions within God-talk to be closely related). Hence, in biblical parlance, the triune God, focused on Jesus, will *judge* all other God-talk, along with any complementary activity dedicated or supposedly in obedience to this God.

It follows then that the self-disclosure of the triune God through Jesus demands the development of a particular mode of reasoning. Those who acknowledge this God are summoned to learn to think, and to think in a certain way (in terms of the Christological *Nach-denken* noted earlier). Moreover, this will undoubtedly involve the unlearning of a great deal that we probably hold dear, which is invariably a difficult, and even a painful process.[12]

*Reformulations*. Some immediate examples of this potentially painful reformulation of our thinking are worth noting.

It is now apparent that the nature of God is dynamic or, as certain philosophers like to put it, actual (although the very definition of "actual" will need to be subject to the activity of the self-revealing God and not vice versa). What God is has been revealed through a set of events, irrupting into our location, and by God's ongoing activity of dynamic relating. Hence God, who is fully disclosed here, must be what God *does*, which is to realize, as Eberhard Jüngel (1976) put it, that "God's being is in [God's] becoming." This is often going to be a revolutionary set of insights into the fundamental nature of the divine reality and of reality in general. Thus, theological epistemology and ontology must be tightly intertwined, with a strong resulting emphasis on ontological actuality. We must now reject any strong being-act dichotomy, and certainly any account of the divine that deploys such distinctions too aggressively.

Closely related to this, we now realize that God is inextricably involved with that which is not God and so in a key sense is a fundamentally extrinsic being. God reaches outside of God, and this external actualization is a further key insight into the nature *of* God. God's being is missional. Moreover, this insight parlays directly into the account of personhood that the self-disclosing God supplies.

The triune God is fundamentally and comprehensively interpersonal, comprising Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and so discloses a critical insight concerning what a person is. A person is revealed by the personal God to be, as we might have just begun to suspect, *extrinsic* and *relational*. As John Zizioulas (1995) puts this: "the *hypostasis* [or being] of the person consists of *ekstasis* [or "extrinsicity"]". Which is to say, people are inherently relational, and are constituted *by* their relationships with other people. They reach out from one another to others, existing *qua* people within interpersonal networks.[13]

*Relationality and ethics.* Unsurprisingly in view of what we have just learned, a profoundly personal and hence relational God has strong expectations in terms of the nature *of* those relationships, and we begin to grasp here the way that theology, ecclesiology and ethics are also inextricably intertwined. The relational God is inherently ethical, and summons those who acknowledge God to a certain sort of relationality—to a communion characterized, it turns out, by relational dynamics of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22–23). The self-identification of God reveals the true nature of humanity and the true orientation and calling of humanity in terms of the correct accounts of goodness and right behavior—in a word, "love"—which are important matters, to put it mildly.

We need now to pause for a moment from the positive task of clearly identifying the correct starting point for God-talk, acknowledged by the church, and from which all accurate God-talk proceeds, along with some of its immediate key implications, and to briefly articulate a complementary set of realizations that will encourage us to maintain this starting-point.

### *2.2. Step II: Foundationalism*

Many good additional reasons are now—and I emphasize "now"—apparent for resisting any alternative basis for our God-talk. That is to say, in light of what we know, we can now view the consequences of straying from the path that has just been illuminated for us, and they are dire. Multiple considerations warn us not to accept any alternative epistemological starting point that would, in fact, then operate in a more fundamental way than the theological claims just noted in Step I above.

We will call all such alternative starting points (instances of) "foundationalism," because they are attempts to construct an alternative foundation for God-talk from the basis supplied *by* God, a foundation that is then necessarily of our own making.[14] We need to learn to recognize the operation of any foundationalism within the God-talk either of ourselves or others and to repudiate it because if we do not the ultimate results are serious. Barth traced the European church's complicity in two horrific world wars ultimately, and

convincingly, to the failure to do just this. So, the stakes for maintaining the starting point for God-talk are very high. We will briefly note here nine problems that result from abandoning the self-disclosing God's triune starting point in favor of one of our own constructions, and they ascend in severity:

*Collapse into the epistemological dilemma.* As Kevin Diller (2014) has recently pointed out with particular clarity, to abandon the self-disclosure of the triune God as *the* truth and to go on to attempt to justify or to measure this truth by some other truth criterion results in a treacherous outcome: our most basic rules for truth should never attempt to justify themselves, because if an attempt to do this is made, then they are necessarily displaced from a central or basic position in favor of the truth criterion just used to try to justify them. So, in traditional parlance, Jesus is Lord, and he is also the truth; he is, in fact, the Lord of the truth and in this he shows himself to be the Lord. Hence if we try to justify Jesus's lordship by introducing some prior set of truth criteria by which to prove his ultimate claims, we necessarily strip his lordship of ultimate truth. He is now no longer the Lord of the truth, or *the* truth, and, as such, no longer really the Lord![15] This outcome should clearly be avoided, and can be if—and only if—the temptation to introduce a foundationalist justification for Jesus's Lordship, including for his Lordship over the truth, is resisted. We should see this consequence playing out, like a chess gambit, and so refuse to accept its beguiling opening offer in the first place.

*Activation of an infinite regress.* In similar manner, to fail to resist the temptation to erect a prior, more fundamental set of truth claims by which (to attempt) to justify an initial set of truth claims, is to activate an infinite regress. If the claim that "Jesus is Lord" is truth claim A, but we—foolishly—accept the need for some prior, more basic authentication of this claim, then we must introduce another set of truth claims by which to justify set A, namely, set B. But we now do not know whether the truth claims in set B are true, because they are unjustified, so we must introduce set C by which to justify set B, and so on. This process can never end. Now this problem must be phrased precisely. Technically, the argument is Socratic. If someone charges us with holding unjustified truth claims at the base of our position—the criticism that they are claims that do not possess warrant in terms of some other prior, justified set of truth claims—then we reject this charge on the basis that our accusers cannot satisfy this criterion themselves. Insofar as they charge us, they condemn themselves, we might say (Rom 2:1–2), and so we are entitled to ignore their criticism—and we will save ourselves a great deal of unnecessary and futile effort by doing so.

*The adoption of an artificial starting point.* If we accept the invitation to step outside the circle of trinitarian revelation for the sake of argument—and in fact for whatever reason ultimately, whether in epistemological terms or not—we necessarily abandon the truth and engage in role-play that is not authentic, and it is difficult to see how this will benefit anyone (see Gal 2:11–14). Those who wish to engage with those located within the church will no longer be able to do so, because their representatives have stepped outside that space, while those representing the truths of the church will no longer be accurately expressing them. One would not expect a satisfying debate with a Marxist if she began the conversation by saying, "For the purposes of this engagement I am going to temporarily set to one side all the key Marxist truths and begin the discussion as if I had no Marxist loyalties or content whatsoever." There is just no point having this conversation. Hence it is better for all concerned if those in the church know its epistemological basis and attest to its implications clearly (although, admittedly, its representatives do not always seem to appreciate the further implications that this entails a respectful and even a gentle advocacy; the means is the end (see Campbell 2020, pp. 193–94; 216; 516–18)).[16]

*The adoption of a false starting point.* Building directly on the foregoing, we can now see that the adoption of an artificial, extra-ecclesial starting point from which basis to discuss the question whether or not Jesus is Lord would deny the fact that Jesus is Lord. It would deny that he is the truth, and hence that he is the Lord of the truth and that he is in fact Lord. Hence this starting point would be *untrue*, and the truth that Jesus is Lord would

be subtly but directly undermined as we endorsed some other set of claims that is, in fact, false.[17]

*Sheer disobedience.* Moreover, we would not then be serving the triune starting point but undermining it. Indeed, we would be *disobeying* it. We would be *rejecting* the starting point that God has gifted us, and turning to our own resources—an activity the Bible generally calls either sin or stupidity (lit. "foolishness"). Since God has chosen to gift us with the truth about God in Jesus by way of the Spirit, we should simply accept this gift and not go in search of supplements or alternatives. This is the obedient and sensible, and not merely the appropriately grateful, course of action.

*The presence of surprise.*[18] One of the results of being gripped by the triune self-disclosure acknowledged by the church is a sense of surprise. That God is revealed definitively as Jesus is crucified is almost certainly something of a shock (1 Cor 1:18–31), and this reveals in turn that our prior perceptual capacities were inadequate for the recognition of the divine. We did not see this was coming, and yet this point of degraded identification is where God is revealed at God's deepest and most decisive level. It follows that our expectations were incorrect, and probably profoundly so. (Paul's certainly were, see 1 Cor 15:9–10.) Hence, we learn here (amongst other things) that we simply cannot rely on our own intuitions about the nature of God independently of their correction by God's self-disclosure. They have been shown to be, at least in certain respects, deeply unreliable, and so we should further repudiate any foundationalism which relies directly on those intuitions rather than on what God has shown us concretely to be the case.[19]

*The presence of sinful distortion and resistance.* In continuity with the foregoing, our innate capacities to grasp God are shown by God's own self-disclosure in a realization that may come as rather a jolt to be not merely inaccurate and misguided *but directly resistant and hostile* (Rom 8:5–7; Col 1:21; John 1:11; 3:19–20; 8:14–15, 43–44, 47; 9:39). Our minds are not merely inadequate but sinful; they *oppose* God, *distorting* what information we do have and actively subverting and resisting the promptings of the Spirit (Rom 5:10). It follows that our own intuitions, which lie at the basis of any foundationalist theological project, will be not merely unreliable; they will be sinister, actively twisting and subverting truthful God-talk—and three of these destructive consequences are worth identifying in more detail. I have dubbed these elsewhere "the horsemen of the foundationalist apocalypse," meaning by this that whenever a foundationalist project is activated, they are set loose (Campbell 2020, pp. 40–47).

*Horseman 1: atheism.* The first "horseman" derives from the fact that alternative foundations as positive accounts of God invariably collapse. But the important point to grasp here is not the collapse of the church's foundationalist truth claims as much as its cultural result, namely, atheism. As Michael Buckley (1987) has shown, a theological program that proudly advocates the self-evident nature of divine truth—in universally-demonstrable, propositional terms—creates a particular dynamic when it fails, as it invariably does. A culture that has been told that the truth about God can be proved, concludes, when it cannot, that God does not exist. And this judgment hardens into a general resistance even to the mode in which God *does* wish to be known—through the declaration of the cross. So here confidence in the foundationalist theological project only succeeds in generating its opposite: widespread cultural resistance to the existence of God, which is to say, atheism.

*Horseman 2: deliberate obfuscation and obstruction.* Those committed to a foundationalist theological project nevertheless tend to believe in it and to continue to advocate it—probably because its gatekeepers can generate a great deal of social capital by doing so. However, this tends to generate in turn—and deeply paradoxically—a resistance to God's mode of divine self-disclosure. If the truth about God is supposed to rest on a particular foundationalist structure, its advocates will defend it tooth and nail, and, if necessary, *against* other suggestions about how to pursue God-talk *including God's own deepest act of self-definition and preferred mode of undertaking God-talk*. It is truly astonishing to observe—once one knows to look for it—the constant resistance offered by many leaders in the church to the revelation of the divine nature disclosed through Jesus.

Perhaps in my modern context, in the South of the USA, the most common such resistance is by way of appeals to texts in the Bible. Even when a recommended construal cannot be ratified by Jesus biblical explications are nevertheless held to freight decisive insights into the divine nature that tend in practice to override the insights that come from Jesus himself. Of course, these insights derive from the viewpoint of the modern biblical interpreter, who has selected certain texts and read them in a certain way—often anachronistically—thereby supplying the key theological truth criteria here—a particularly subtle form of foundationalism. So, for example, Wayne Grudem (2010) argues that the Bible discloses clear information about political organization, but ends up endorsing in detail a system that is uncannily similar to the conservative political agenda within the modern U.S.A. The book's cultural projections and anachronisms are especially apparent in chapters entitled "The Courts and the Question of Ultimate Power in a Nation" (which assumes the modern separation of powers that did not exist in biblical times but that is only possible in an industrial state and that is especially central to Jeffersonian democracy), and "Freedom of Speech," and "Freedom of Religion" (which are again overtly modern Liberal political notions that would be entirely unfamiliar to the authors of the Bible). But as this confident "biblical" projection happens the operation of the second horseman is everywhere apparent, namely, the occlusion of God's concerns as those are revealed by Jesus.[20]

*Horseman 3: cultural compromise, ultimately with evil.* Foundationalist projects always involve cultural capture, followed by, most sinister of all, activity that is overtly oppressive and evil. As was most perceptively noted originally by Feuerbach ([1843] 1966), foundationalist projects in modernity literally project the idealized images of their founders into the heavens, constructing the definition of the divine in their own image. So self-ratification lies at the heart of such projects—something usually quite apparent in retrospect, although not so easy to detect at the time of their creation and endorsement. Two dangerous consequences follow from this (which Feuerbach's sunny optimism was not so sensitive to[21]). Since this projection is held to precede and to ground the proclamation of the gospel it is removed from any triune control. Jesus is not Lord over these truth claims and necessarily so. Nevertheless, this projected self-image will enjoy divine ratification, and in certain respects, rather more than this. It is the basis for all further God-talk. So, it should not and cannot be criticized but must instead simply be defended. It follows from these corrupt theological dynamics that any flaws within the original projection—for example, any unwitting racial or gender marginalizations or special geographical claims—will enjoy divine ratification *and* immunity from any Christological correction. A more dangerous theological project is hard to conceive of.

Accordingly, for example, Dutch migrants originally settled in the south of Africa in the early 1800s believed that God had gifted them an exodus from the oppressive rule of the British empire there as they traveled away from British control in the Cape into uncolonized territory to the north and east. God then covenanted to be with them always, after he delivered the local, godless pagan nations into their hand for slaughter at the battle of Blood River on 16 December 1838, when 3,000 spear-carrying Zulu warriors resisting this incursion were massacred by the settlers' musket fire (this day is still celebrated annually on site by the descendants of the settlers as a sacred covenant). It followed that, roughly 100 years later, God continued to endorse the cultural and racial distinctions created between peoples, and hence the creation of the Apartheid regime that recognized those distinctions, segregating people into black, white and intermediate categories. This arrangement also vested ongoing power and prosperity in the hands of the covenant people and in them alone, namely, the descendants of the original white settlers who had been overtly chosen and blessed. This notoriously oppressive arrangement could appeal to a frighteningly-high level of direct biblical and theological support since all of its key claims in terms of notions such as "creation mandates" were made foundationally, in advance of correction by the triune self-disclosure of God through the crucified Jesus.[22]

I labor this point a little because of its importance. A road—twisting but nevertheless direct—runs from epistemology to politics. Thus, any human-centered foundationalism will eventually ask its advocates to pay a brutal cultural price. Moreover, the expression of this particular project within Pauline interpretation tends to take place in relation to Jews.[23] A direct line can be traced from foundationalist God-talk in the church, mediated centrally by certain readings of Paul, to horrifically anti-Jewish, and ultimately anti-Semitic, activities.[24] To repeat the key point here then: the stakes for resisting foundationalism are high. The cultural and political integrity of much that we do rests on acknowledging God's self-disclosure through Jesus and then resisting the many siren calls to abandon that starting point for something that might seem in the first instance to be more learned, but that proves ultimately to be of our own making. That alternative will inevitably betray us even as it oppresses those who do not look like us.

These realizations bring us to the brink of an important subordinate question, namely, a consideration of the role of the Bible and the right way to read it. Needless to say, we will need to reflect on this locus in the light of the God-talk that was summarized in Step I and not the compromises of Step II.

### *2.3. Step III: The Bible as Scripture*

What does the self-revealing God want us to do with the Bible? Quite a lot, as it turns out—so much so, that only a compressed summary can be provided here.

*The Bible and ethics.* Emerging from our brief consideration of the implications of the self-disclosing God is a sense of the arc of the cosmos. The triune God, almost incomprehensibly, desires a permanent gift of relationality with us. We have been created for eternal communion (Rom 8:29; Eph 1:3–14). However, that communion is a thoroughgoing interpersonal relationality and it follows that one of the principal influences on the church from the self-disclosing God will be a constant gentle pressure toward the appropriate modes of relating. We are both invited and summoned to a personhood that relates properly. We will set aside here for the moment the immediately apparent and deeply-awful truth that we are currently operating some distance from this good relating. The key point to grasp here is positive, namely, that the giving God is drawing humanity inexorably into a perfect communion, and it is here that the Bible will find its first important function.

Communion is relational, and our human relating, into which God self-discloses, is freighted almost entirely by *language*. In the light of this, we can see that the Scriptures anchor the language game of the community, to use Wittgenstein's phrase for the moment. Nonetheless, that language game is also primarily an ethical language game.[25] Hence, the Scriptures are not only the means by which we speak to one another; they are the medium through which we learn to speak *rightly* to one another. They are the written reservoir for the language of the community who acknowledges the self-disclosing God and journeys toward that God's relational goodness. And straightaway it is possible to detect two important subordinate dimensions within the basic ethical function of the Scriptures.

First—and departing here a little from Barth on the advice of one his most insightful followers, Stanley Hauerwas (2001, pp. 141–204)—Scripture will function at the heart of the *formational* process that this community effects. Repeated use of the right language will play a critical part in the journey towards right relating, hence the enduring insight of ritual language or liturgy. It is clear then that community formation is not a rule-governed process; it is not analogous to a legal system.[26] It works more like a close friendship or a good marriage. People talk through any issues that arise, with a language that is mutually intelligible because it is anchored in the same textual treasury.

Second—utilizing Barth's insights here more directly[27]—Scriptural language can convey divine *commands* that speak, in an unanticipated way, into the particular, unrepeatable circumstances of our personal journeys. God will tell members of the community what to do, and possibly quite frequently. "Go and proclaim my Son to the pagan nations" is an especially important example of such a command (although in fact Paul intertwined

this with further scripturally-mediated intelligibility; he "was set apart from his mother's womb" for this task, echoing the call of Jeremiah to the nations; see Gal 1:15–16; Jer 1:5).

Those attuned to hermeneutical considerations will probably have detected by this point that the use of the necessarily delimited text by the community, which is to say, of the canon, can nevertheless be quite creative within the different, individuated lives of particular Jesus followers.[28] Those taking up the scriptural text within the ethical journey toward goodness can generate meaning productively, not merely reproductively, in Gadamer's (1989) terminology, utilizing whatever reading is helpful ethically, whether analogical, anagogical, typological, referential, or something else[29]—although readings are not uncontrolled, because they are always subject to the theological judgment of the God who self-discloses through Jesus (see § 2.6 above, and more just below).[30] And this observation leads us quickly to the next major dimension within the use of the Bible by the church alongside its ethical use.

*The Bible and witness.* We have noted repeatedly up to this point that God has self-disclosed focally in relation to Jesus. But the recognition of the divine Spirit's involvement locates this self-disclosure within the present moment, where it needs to be, because this is where we live relationally. God's self-disclosure to us takes place in relation to the *living* Jesus, which is to say, the *ascended* Jesus, who is "up there" as the old-fashioned language would have it, enthroned next to his Father as Messiah and Lord (we will leave the question concerning the coordinates of this location to one side for the moment[31]). This is the Jesus who is disclosed by the Spirit, and who discloses his heavenly Father in turn, to whom we, "in him," cry "Abba" (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). Still, it will be best to envisage this disclosure—without claiming that this controls it—in terms of worship,[32] although it will probably also be helpful to invest it with emphatic Pentecostal or charismatic dimensions, which are clearly presupposed by Paul.[33]

As Paul notes in texts like 1 Cor 14—articulating a scenario much-repeated through church history[34]—people may fall down or "quake" and "shake" in the divine presence mediated by the Holy Spirit; they may experience liberation from illness or some sort of evil influence; they may expostulate in what seems like an unintelligible language, or, alternatively, identify issues and situations in the lives of others that they have no way of knowing directly; and so on. Within all this drama—which is not supposed to descend into absolute mayhem—the worshipping community presently acknowledges and reveres—and thanks and praises and adores—a heavenly Father and Son by way of a palpably-present divine Spirit who has adopted them and destined them for eternal glory. This is what the gathering sings about and what its prayers presuppose. This God in their presence is *alive* and *real*, and *this* God accessed through the risen Jesus and his Spirit is alive, a God who reaches out to commune with them.[35]

Notwithstanding, we come now to an important dimension within the situation. In this moment, the present, enthroned Jesus, who is being worshipped, is doubtless also being identified by a story that reaches back into the past and answers some important questions (and a broader story is immediately implied about the still more prior God of Israel). Here, it is clear that the Scriptures will again be critical.[36]

The final part of the Scriptures that we usually refer to as the New Testament tell a story about a human being bearing the name Jesus of Nazareth who was executed shamefully on a Roman gibbet, buried, but then, in the Jewish terminology of the day, resurrected, appearing to many of his followers, before "ascending" to his current location where he is now being worshipped. We learn from this story, that is, about Jesus's prior life, which, rather unusually, traversed through and beyond death and hence brought him to the place where is he now—"on high," enthroned at the right hand of the Father. The critical importance of these prior events is even inserted into the community's present worship by way of a ritual meal. The breaking of bread and drinking of wine together recall this antecedent narrative about Jesus's endurance, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection (1 Cor 11:23–25). It also celebrates Jesus's concrete connection with his community in the present, along with his anticipated return, so it speaks to all three temporal dimensions as we

experience them (so vv. 26–32; also 10:16–17), but one of these dimensions is past. Hence, implicit in this narrative is a tradition, which has been maintained by the community in the past, and thereby transmitted into the present, a transmission anchored by the New Testament. And the presence of this tradition now raises some interesting questions three of which need to be briefly but carefully explored:

*What is it for?* The story relates that the risen Jesus, who is currently being worshipped by way of the Spirit, was at one point a human being, just as we are. But as Paul tells it, and the ritual meal reminds us, the key events in this story focus on a sequence of days that the church now calls "Easter." On a Thursday night Jesus anticipated his impending death, creating the ritual meal that would recall it; on Friday he obediently endured a shameful execution at the hands of the Romans; by Saturday he was buried; then on Sunday he began appearing to his followers, in some dramatic sense, alive; at a later point he ascended to "heaven," where he has been enthroned as Messiah and is now also acclaimed with one of the divine names as "Lord." It is there where he is now worshipped, although the complete story anticipates his return. And we need to ask now why the worshipping community tells this story, although the answer is possibly very simple.

The identity of the risen Lord is coterminous with the earthly Jesus; they are the same person, as the story states. Hence the story about the earthly Jesus, even just by way of its account of Easter, provides critical information about the character of the risen Lord, and so about the nature of the triune God as well (recalling both that to know a character necessitates telling a story; and to know one person within the one God is to know all three). And we certainly need to know just what sort of person the triune God is made up of; we need to know what relationality characterizes the divine characters, summoning us to conform to it. This is, after all, the arc of the cosmos. Hence, we receive critical answers from this story about Jesus's earthly life and thereby about God and our current ethical situation. As Luther observed insightfully in 1518 CE,[37] reproducing the insights of Paul written in 52 CE (1 Cor 1:17–2:16), the divine nature is definitively revealed by a theology of the cross. Unfortunately, the scope of the paper is too limited to develop this set of insights, but a great deal will flow from them.[38] We must instead press on to our remaining interpretative questions in this direct relation.

*What is the resulting epistemological structure of the situation?* It is important to grasp now that even the telling of the story about the past, preserved in parts of Scripture, can be seen to preserve the basic epistemological pattern that we began with here (when, admittedly, read in a historical mode; see more on this momentarily). A self-defining, self-disclosing and hence self-revealing divinity, here in person of the risen Jesus, appears to a community summoning them to acknowledgement and obedience. Even the story that is told by the community then, received as a tradition, is couched in the form of revelation and corresponding witness. The story is of a group of witnesses recalling the story. And this invites the present community to *join* its witness to the witness that has preceded it, reproducing and affirming it. That is to say, the truth of that prior witness is not the basis for the present community's posture as much as its confirmation. The present community is grounded in the present, and in the God disclosing in the present, but can thereby *recognize* a corresponding activity in the witnesses of the past, at which moment it is able both to affirm it and to join them.

It seems then that we are supposed to learn from this that the self-disclosing God clearly does not want its community "standing gazing up into heaven" (Acts 1:10) *or* back into the past; the crucial location is here and now. The present is primary and the past is secondary (2 Cor 5:16-17). The past serves the present; the present does not serve the past. And this has tended to mean, in turn, that the recall of the past has been shaped by the present location of those recalling it. That is, the past is recalled in such a way that the present purposes of the self-revealing God are also served (What would be the point of doing anything else?). This implicit arrangement and set of priorities is implicit in the very form of the texts that are transmitted, and so presumably we ought to take note of it.

We cannot get past the structure of "witness," and we are not supposed to. This structure maintains the appropriate emphasis on present self-disclosure.

*However*, the recall of the past within this witness has to be, nevertheless, *true*, and this raises what we can call—very carefully at this moment—the "historical question."[39]

*Is the historical dimension plausible?* There can be no doubt that a divinity who has, at least in part, lived for a time as a human being among us, has been a part of the past and has thereby, at least in theory, left an imprint on the past. Jesus left footprints in the dust of the Galilean roads and hillsides. He wore clothes, ate food, said words, and he interacted with others just as we do (or at least similarly to how we do). Hence, a modern person will usually ask at this moment if we can find evidence of this imprint and assess it—and this is fair, at least in basic terms. The story that the community tells about Jesus is committed to a historical dimension and to historical claims. It is not the most important question for the community—far from it. The community is located in the present, not the past, and looks toward the future. It is only certain modern academic specialists who tend to spend their time almost entirely focused on the past. But the reconstruction of the past is unavoidably involved as soon as any story about Jesus is told. So how should we assess the past, which is to say, the historical dimension, implicit within this story?

We need to assess it very carefully indeed because of the potential intrusion at this moment, subtle but deadly, of various foundationalist agendas. If we are to resist these subversions certain features of the situation need to be constantly born in mind.

First, and as we saw earlier, we need to recall that the self-defining God supplies important information in that self-disclosure about the nature of reality. This is one of the great benefits of being gifted with the truth. Other things tend to make sense in its light. And at the very heart of this truth is a God who is alive, and who resurrects from the dead. God is the God of life, which is to say, an entity who, very unlike us, can triumph over disorder, chaos, and death (Rom 4:17; see also Ezek 37:3–14). These truths are one of the main reasons why the community is so joyful, grateful, and excited, and the overt activity of the divine Spirit within the community makes particular sense at this moment.

Moreover, one of the things that has been exposed by the light is the darkness of many of our other ways of thinking. Our thinking is distorted, and often deeply so. It follows that when we turn to assess the past strictly in terms of what actually happened, we should do so in fear and trembling—or, at the least, well aware of our own limitations.

I emphasize these points here because we should detect at this moment, if we are honest with ourselves, just how much of our assessment of the past is generated by our own unreliable grip on the present. As the modern investigation of memory is beginning to discover in ever-greater detail, our own recollected past is in many respects the extrapolation of our present, with all its attendant blind spots.[40] Meanwhile, the reconstruction of the distant past—of the lives of others—presupposes entire discourses of explanation that we must supply again from our present locations. Answering the question "what really happened?" is dictated by what we think *could* have happened, and that is shaped by *our construction of our present location*—by our judgments about what is or is not possible, and what is or is not likely here and now. It is also shaped by what we think will be useful *for* our present, which implies various judgments about what is presently expedient politically, culturally, and socially; the preservation of memories is a cultural process.[41] And it follows that we make the past, to a significant degree, in our own image at which moment it is useful to recall that the self-disclosing God has revealed to us that our expectations about what can or cannot happen, and what is or is not good or right, are often well wide of the mark.

It follows from this that the assessment of the truth claims about the past implicit in the Jesus story that the church tells is a valid exercise, although secondary. But this assessment must proceed in terms of the account of reality—the metaphysics, so to speak—that the community stands within, complemented by an awareness of the limitations of our own powers of explanation.[42] And once this location is grasped, and its metaphysics recognized,

I would suggest that the basic historical assessment can be completed both quickly and positively (strictly speaking, it *has* been completed).

Therefore, for example, in 52 CE, an early Jesus follower, who did not know him personally during his earthly lifetime but claimed on multiple occasions to have met him after his ascension, nevertheless recorded a comprehensive attestation by multiple figures to Jesus's suffering, death, burial, resurrection and ascension (I am speaking about Paul's words in 1 Cor 15:1–9). And there are simply no good reasons for doubting this. (There are a lot of *bad* reasons for doubting this, but these should be rejected, usually for presupposing an alternative, and ultimately dubious metaphysics.[43]) In short, when we turn to a historical assessment of the truth claims implicit in the Jesus story, bearing in mind just what an appropriate reconstruction of the past in historical terms might or might not involve, it is simply case closed—but it is worth noting immediately just how limited this essential historical assessment is.

We have made a quick inquiry into the truth of the Jesus story: Is the person we currently worship as alive and reigning "on high" in fact plausibly said to be the same person as the Jesus who ate on Thursday evening, was crucified on Friday, buried on Saturday, and then rose from the dead on Sunday in the early first century CE? Are the traces on the record that we might reasonably expect there? Since, given the appropriate account of reasonableness, the answer is "yes," it follows that the identity of the Lord as the crucified Jesus remains true after its historical assessment, and if this remains true, then not much else will matter in terms of subsequent historical assessments, at least in terms of ultimate truth questions. Indeed, this realization—about the economy of the historical kernel that is implicit in the heart of the church's witness—will shortly generate important, and ultimately deeply liberating implications for the Bible scholar who continues as a specialist to be interested in reconstructions of the past in relation to the Scriptures. However, we must now discuss some final implications within this particular line of reflection before turning to consider what biblical scholarship should look like.

*Embodiment and particularity.* The Jesus story, which identifies the self-disclosing God so significantly, contains not just the implication of traces on the past, and hence of a certain sort of historical inquiry, but also implicit commitments to the vital importance of *embodiment* and of *particularity*.

Embodiment denotes that Jesus was present as a person in a fully embodied form, and hence that the divine can be present in a fully embodied form, also thereby affirming a fundamental validity for embodiment. Paul's account of the resurrected body also points toward a certain sort of (vital!) transcendence, but it too remains an *embodied* transcendence. Much more remains to be said, but this realization will suffice to place significant limits on future theological claims that denigrate or lack embodiment, that is, any type of what later became known as Gnosticism. God delights to be present with us, this story states, through bodies, and hence, in terms of our present, through *our* bodies. The centrality of the community or church is consequently once again affirmed.

Furthermore, the story about Jesus implies that the divine was present among us in the life of a certain, individuated and specific person—someone who lived, breathed, and walked in a certain way and a certain place. He was, like all of us, unrepeatable and unique. But the divine was necessarily present within every aspect of Jesus's life, indwelling every detail, so to speak, which entails that the God self-disclosing through Jesus is deeply committed to *particularity*.[44] God loves particularity and is in particularity, which is to say that God is present within the unique, and loves the unique. Moreover, this entails, to slip for a moment into Lucan idiom, that God is interested in every hair on our heads (12:7). Our locations are highly detailed and "granular," and the God self-disclosing through Jesus affirms every facet, feature, and mark.

With these realizations in place, we are in a good position to reflect on the work of the Bible scholar in the context of the modern university.

### *2.4. Step IV: What Are (Devout) Modern Bible Scholars for?*

We need now to generate an account of biblical scholarship in the specific context of the modern university. But I am going to presuppose in the following what we can call "devout" biblical scholars. Whatever else Jesus followers are called to do, it never overrides the importance of being Jesus followers; that remains primary. So, devout biblical scholars do not relinquish their primary ecclesial location when they travel into the far country that is the modern university, along with all its bewitching concomitants. And this preexisting loyalty must create a certain clear-sighted posture vis-à-vis various intellectual pressures.

As we just noted, devout biblical scholars—and I include myself among them—must clearly remain grounded in the ecclesial location of accurate God-talk. This is (obviously) non-negotiable. But in the context of the modern university maintaining this posture might require a higher degree of intellectual self-awareness than the average Jesus follower needs to muster. Perhaps ironically then it follows that the devout biblical scholar is, first of all, a good theologian, who is aware that her knowledge of God is a mere acknowledgement of the gracious self-disclosure of the triune God through Jesus and the Spirit, while part of this self-awareness is the realization that there is a gifted and undeserving dimension to this knowledge. It has not been gained, but simply received. We must eschew finding the bases of our learning for ourselves. I mention the importance of this self-awareness because it will probably be assaulted so quickly by various countervailing discourses that flow through the modern university.

Universities are factories for foundationalism. Consequently, corresponding to the self-awareness of the correct starting point for theological knowledge, the devout biblical scholar must maintain a crystal-clear awareness of the nature and ultimate destructiveness of foundationalism to her location and work. This methodological idolatry must be identified, in whatever guise in which it is travelling, and resisted—although, and again, rather ironically, the university will provide plenty of resources for this resistance.

Universities are highly contested spaces, and alongside the strong claims that some of their occupants claim to have discovered absolute truth within this or that project or agenda, are the representatives of countervailing discourses that unmask those claims as incomplete and occasionally pretentious (The term "post-modern" is misleading, but it does identify many of the most powerful discourses that engage in this subversion other than there is very little that is *post*-modern about them. Arguably, they are directly implicit within what we call "modernity."[45]). If the devout biblical scholar is not a reasonably good theologian then, in both positive and negative terms, she may well get overwhelmed (although this is not a fate limited to muddled biblical scholars).

It is worth noting too that in order to survive, certain virtues might be needed in addition to theological clarity and Socratic dexterity. It might simply take courage to endure the speeches of Christianity's cultured despisers, so many of whom can be found in the university, while the ongoing acknowledgement of the gifted nature of absolute truth may also have a dash of humility about it. Assuming that theologically-learned biblical scholars exist who do in fact possess both courage and humility, what should they actually do? What will their devout scholarship look like?

We return here to the question of history because most biblical scholars are trained to spend much of their time carefully reconstructing the past, retrieving the meanings that the biblical texts generated in those locations. But perhaps we need to pause to ask at this moment whether devout biblical scholars should engage in this practice? Let us bring this practice in submission to Christ. What is the point of it?

In fact, we have good reasons for doing this type of scholarship, although it will mean both more and less than it is often held to, and this might ultimately be a very good thing.[46]

We realized earlier on that God was present in the past, and, moreover, that this presence affirmed both embodiment and particularity, which is to say, God *loves* particularity and is present within it. Consequently, the investigation of past particularities has value, and could potentially be quite instructive. God was there, present within—although not to be identified with—every detail.[47] It is important to recall that God is also *here*, and that

the self-disclosure taking place here both grounds and controls the reconstruction of God's presence there. But under this impetus, and utilizing this control, the retrieval of the past may deeply enrich our language about God and our understanding of God. A word about this control is in order though.

The retrieval of the past is not under historical as much as it is under theological control. The definitive self-disclosure of God takes place through Jesus, and only through Jesus, as Chalcedon attempts to say; only there, in this person, is divinity fully present, although even there in a mediated form that is distinguishable from Jesus's humanity although never separate from it.[48] It follows that the divine can be present elsewhere but never in such an immediate way. God's involvement in the past will therefore be imperfect, and possibly in multiple respects. It must consequently be sifted, judged, and evaluated, in triune terms, if it is to prove useful to the community—and it will, as it has already on many occasions.[49]

Moreover, partly because of the centrality of *theological* control, devout scholars are actually free to discover what really happened. They do not need to find anything, whether for or against God or for or against anything else in terms of what took place (insofar as we can reconstruct that). Recall that the key historical question has already been settled, and this liberates the rest of historical reconstruction from having to settle anything. There is nothing to fear from history, or to impose on it. Hence the devout scholar is free simply to explore the past and to tease out what really happened (guided here by a suitably open and nuanced account of what *can* happen). They might even be able simply to enjoy this process. Of all people, then, the devout biblical scholar can be the best—and perhaps also the happiest—historical scholar. But some useful virtues might be imparted by this careful historical attention as well.

Such reading trains its practitioners in deep attentiveness to particularity, which is a virtue in and of itself. In so doing it also teaches close attentiveness to the details of the text, which is the foundation of all good scriptural engagement. This type of reading is then simultaneously a training in the painstaking craft of listening to other voices—here in that most delicate of all positions, namely, silenced by death; historical reading is always cross-cultural reading—and here it cannot even be directly corrected. So, this education takes place in a delicate space. Nevertheless, it does afford the constant opportunity for interpreters to develop the complementary skills of listening deeply to one another, thereby recognizing their own presuppositional locations as well.[50]

In close proximity to this developing attentiveness; however, we will also in all likelihood see a growing awareness of textual indeterminacy. Historical reading, done well, should be an education into the fragility of textual interpretation, and hence a further prompt in terms of humility. What the text "says" exactly is often very difficult to say, a phenomenon that the reconstruction of ancient semantic events can disclose quite clearly, while those who insist on making a text say something explicitly are often overstating the likelihood of their construction. It is a useful skill to be able to detect when this is happening. And this is an opposite moment to recognize some of the key limitations attending historical readings of Scripture.

I have been articulating the positive contributions that can be made by devout biblical scholars reading the text in an historical mode. But while this modality can be useful, enjoyable, and even important, it is clearly by no means everything. No justification is apparent for imposing a historical monopoly on scriptural interpretation; and in fact, the reverse is closer to the case. Scriptural reading (as we have already seen) mainly takes place within the church in an ethical mode, to mediate the appropriate relationality, so its actual hermeneutical rules are undetermined and potentially highly creative. Readings are subject only to theological control. Moreover, from this moment forward we need to recognize that multiple scriptural readings undertaken in all these creative modes accumulate over time into an *archive*. This is the basic reality of scriptural reading that the church curates, and historical readings occupy a distinctive place within it.

Historical readings press rather distinctively into the fascinating but fragile meaning-events surrounding the origins of an interpretative archive, and this can be an especially rich semantic location to mine.[51] This is when the archive of a particular text's interpretation begins. Though interesting, such a reading remains no more—or less—important than subsequent readings. Reading arises upon reading, spiraling into diversifying and layered histories of interpretation. And these realizations open up some interesting further activities for the devout biblical scholar.

Such a scholar can now become a curator of the archive of scriptural interpretation. This is no small task, and not every devout biblical scholar will feel called to it, or called away from historical readings (although every scholar is called to *some* archiving). Nonetheless, it is important to recall at this moment that, as was the case for historical readings, every devout scholar is still called to evaluate theologically the archive that she is curating. Every reading is, needless to say, embedded in God-talk and its implications, and hence in ethics. And the devout biblical scholar is trained to detect when God-talk is correctly grounded and speaks accurately, and when it needs to be modified, corrected or even abandoned—something that can become evident as the communal impact of a reading is studied. Hence, the curating of the archive still involves the usual evaluative tasks and should thereby generate a clear-sighted *ethics* and *politics* of interpretation. And it is here that a useful conversation with historical readings *might* be resumed.

The archive contains quite an array of interpretative options, and it is the proverbial curate's egg. Some readings have proved to be healthy and constructive, some are constructive in their own particularity but now not so useful, and some prove to be completely odious—read in certain ways functioning as "texts of terror" in Phyllis Trible's (1984) famous phrase. The retrieval of historical readings can help to mitigate this last phenomenon (although they can also cause it). Such readings can introduce an alternative into the archive of existing readings that the church is using, which might displace the use of a reading that is destructive. The historical interpretation always has a right to be heard and might prove superior theologically and ethically to later options, though this might not always be the case.[52]

In sum, to draw the strands of this last discussion together, we can perhaps see at this moment that the devout NT scholar, located the modern university, but theologically astute and alert enough to cope with that challenging context, is potentially called to a very happy life. She can generate historical readings by way of her scholarship that is historically astute and subtle and so often quite fascinating in its own particular terms, and yet that is profoundly aware in ethical respects, including in terms of self-awareness, and that might serve to displace and/or to correct unhelpful and even vicious readings generated by other readers. Having said this, if she is to maintain this scholarship, there will probably be times when she will need to call on the virtues of humility and courage in addition to her possession of a clear-sighted theological frame. Nonetheless, she is then grounded in the right location, and in the right God, to do so.

We can now return to consider our opening question.

## 3. Conclusions: What Is New Testament Theology?

It should be clear by now that everything depends on just how this question is posed specifically, and then answered. However, if we follow the progression I have recommended here, treading in the footsteps of Barth, theology is prior to the reading of the NT and then enfolds it and drives it.[53] Only in this way will any NT analysis speak truly of God, and this is what ultimately matters. It follows from this that all reading of the NT that is undertaken in the right way is theological, and deeply so and in many respects. It is an articulation, in various different directions, of a theological location, and this *includes* historical readings, i.e., reconstructions of the text's origins and original reception, for which biblical scholars located in the modern university are especially trained to undertake. These make sense theologically, as an exploration of particularity, which can be a very rich context to investigate; they are informed by an overarching metaphysics that

is ultimately grounded theologically; as with all readings, they are subject to theological and ethical judgment. This is not to suggest that they are not historical, however—far from it. Theologically-informed readings should be, of all readings, the *most* historical. The devout biblical scholar has the best grip on how history as an overarching category of reality operates, and is, moreover, free to find whatever details historical investigation might disclose.

In a sense then there is nothing but NT theology, when the devout Bible scholar reads the NT, even in historical mode (that is, assuming it is being done from the right place and in the right way). Given that all reading of the NT is theological then, we might ask if the question "What is New Testament Theology?" still has distinctive content or relevance. We now know how to do the important and relevant things that we should be doing (that is, as devout Bible scholars within the modern university).

Nevertheless, it seems to me, at the end, that this specific question can still direct our attention to the importance of God-talk *within* the readings we are generating. True God-talk as we well know by now is grounded in God's self-disclosure, which is acknowledged in the present ecclesial moment, often in the context of worship, and it is, as we just noted, informing everything else we are doing. But insofar as we are modern Bible scholars generating historical readings, which is to say, approximations to what (in my case, for example) Paul's texts were held to mean in their original settings, we can—and indeed must—subject those readings to theological evaluation; we must ask to what extent those readings mediate accurate God-talk, during which process we will almost inevitably run into closer and more distant articulations and hence be prompted to describe just where articulations have gone slightly—or significantly—astray. Moreover, such readings will go necessarily astray as they either begin foundationally, or allow the intrusion of foundationalism. It follows from this that if we perform our historical task accurately and faithfully, attentive to the precise God-talk in play, we will thereby constantly reiterate the interplay between Steps I and II that my analysis here has described; we will *reinforce* God-talk, insofar as it is found within our reconstructions to be accurate, and *teach* it, both in its own terms *and* when it is subverted. The question of New Testament Theology consequently focuses us on those aspects of our exegetical work that convey some of its most important contributions, and hence seems to be identifying an exegetical dimension well worth clearly defining and pursuing. It asks us to constantly evaluate the extent to which our reconstructions of ancient meaning-events are mediating statements about the living God that are actually true.

The journey to this point of clarity has not been easy. But we seem finally to have ended up in a constructive place—focused on accurate God-talk, and on a clear-sighted resistance to its subversion. There is very little, I would suggest, that is more important than this.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

1 This way of stating the situation deliberately leaves open a place within the church for Messianic Jews, whom I would not equate with "Christians." "Christians," as Acts 11:26 suggests, are converts to Jesus from paganism, or descended from the same. In Paul's churches they are not summoned to full Torah-observance, although they are asked to be sensitive to Jewish practices in mixed settings. Messianic Jews are part of the Jewish people and can appropriately be fully Torah-observant.

2 To place the question as one of my key mentors, Stanley Hauerwas, would.

3 Alan J. Torrance explores this issue, in ultimate reliance on Barth, in his 2008 essay. Jenson is making similar observations in his 2008 essay. Andrew J. Torrance offers an insightful parallel discussion, assessing analytic theology vis-à-vis the philosophy of

religion, in (A. Torrance 2019). The use of Barth can raise reservations for some in view of his problematic personal life. This situation and its implications are carefully addressed by Tietz (2021).

4 Paul makes a similar point quickly in Gal 4:9.

5 Many NT scholars think that the agenda in Barth's famous *Römerbrief* is his key contribution both to theology and to NT studies. But this is an error. Although that commentary contains numerous refreshing insights, along with some key continuities with his later thinking, it was published in 1919, at the end (not insignificantly) of WW1, but well before Barth's paradigm shift in 1931. Two subsequent attempts to articulate a dogmatics while Barth was teaching at Münster ended in failure. Further details can be found in (Busch 1976).

6 A. J. Torrance makes this quite clear, especially in "Theological Description and the Content of Theology in Volume One of *Church Dogmatics*," chapter 1 of his magisterial 1996 (pp. 7–57).

7 There is an important intertextual reference here that is worth maintaining by way of these gendered pronouns, but that draws the sting of any implications specifically for gender. Paul uses the language of "father" and "son" to supply intertextual information about those two divine figures by way of Genesis 22 and Abraham and Isaac, and by way of several enthronement texts and the elevation of the King of Israel by Yahweh (see i.a. Pss 2, 89); see my 2005, pp. 69–94; more recently Novenson (2012, 2017); and Jipp (2015, 2020, pp. 148–256).

8 See, i.a., (Baxter 1987).

9 Few understand this better than Hauerwas (2001); see esp. his 2001, pp. 205–41.

10 Strictly speaking, it defines what a "fact" is. Kuhn ([1962] 1996) is a useful conversation partner at this point as he describes how—despite how it is commonly viewed—what a "fact" is, is heavily constructed by a tradition, various presuppositions and methods, certain questions, and so on. Facts remain important, as truth claims, but those claims are located within very different frames. Those thinking out of the community responding to the self-defining deity will need to define their "facts"—and to resist unhelpful alternative definitions—accordingly.

11 All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

12 Kuhn ([1962] 1996) speaks to the way people think in terms of "paradigms," and shift between them rarely and with great difficulty. Kahneman (2011) outlines some of the reasons why the brain and its explanatory structures resist shifts in fundamental explanatory categories. (His account of "fast" thinking is helpful here and in other respects; his account of "slow" thinking should be ignored.)

13 The consequences of this insight are far-reaching, including, most probably, for many occupants of the modern Academy. The massively-influential Cartesian view held by so many located there that the basic nature of the person is an individual, rational, self-consciousness can now be seen to be deeply misguided, along with any epistemology, ethics, or politics advocated on this basis. (This world-view and its debiliations are elucidated elegantly by Gunton [1985] 2006). It is not all bad news for the modern university though; some views generated there are, conversely, rather vindicated, for example, the insights of certain sociologists in terms of network theory, and the insights of philosophers of mind and neuroscientists into the relational generation of the person as an infant offered by those developing the intellectual movement known as the Second Personal. And so on. (My 2020 provides further details.) Having said this, it is important to remain aware, at the same moment, of the individuated dimension within persons. A reaction against Cartesianism and similar accounts must not lead to an equally unhelpful obliteration of the individuated, embodied, particularity of each person, within his or her relational matrices (Volf provides an excellent account of this interplay in 1996.).

14 Paul is making a similar point in 1 Cor 3:9b–17.

15 The author of the Fourth Gospel is profoundly aware of this dynamic. Hence the prologue simply declares the presuppositions that the rest of the Gospel rests on (1:1–18), and that the various characters in the subsequent narrative struggle to respond to appropriately. So, for example, Nicodemus's understanding is entirely dependent on the revelation of the Spirit, which is itself at the behest of the Spirit, and not a result of his own status or learning (3:5–8, 11–13). Similarly, right understanding of the Scriptures requires the revealed hermeneutical lens of Jesus, the person from heaven, and not vice versa (5:39–40; see also 2:22). And so on.

16 This rejection of the challenge that we are too committed initially to our own location and its truth should be carefully distinguished from the situation within which what we might call "an honest doubter" simply does not experience or sense a divine revelation or presence and voices concerns accordingly. This posture of questioning necessitates a very different response—inclusive, welcoming, and constructive. Kierkegaard is an excellent conversation partner in this relation. Briefer responses to different kinds of doubt can be found in my 2020, pp. 464–67, 546, 723–24 (n. 5).

17 Clearly, a certain notion of faith is implicit here, and is very important. It is, as Paul well knows, a gift (see Rom 12:3, 6; Gal 5:22; and perhaps also Eph 1:17–20; 2:8). For further discussion of the nature of faith necessary here—and especially its relation to the presuppositional faith of Jesus—see my 2020, pp. 13–27, 62–65, 297–325.

18 Most of these claims are articulated in my 2020 (see esp. "Vigilance," ch. 2, pp. 32–48); but this and the following consideration are not deployed there in this relation.

19 Foundationalism necessarily involves prioritizing our own intuitions concerning the divine nature over what the divine has self-disclosed.

[20] So, in an especially clear example, Grudem (2016) (after some vacillation) supported Donald Trump's candidacy for President in 2016 with a widely-read and -quoted justification. Its content is worth consulting purely as an example of how an extensive "biblical" case can be generated for an important question that nevertheless makes no appeal to the nature or character of Jesus. The closest Grudem's argument comes to a comparison with Jesus or an evaluation of God's purposes as revealed by the events of Easter is when the importance of character in a leader is marginalized, which functions as an act of Christological occlusion. See https://townhall.com/columnists/waynegrudem/2016/07/28/why-voting-for-donald-trump-is-a-morally-good-choice-n2199564 (accessed on 30 August 2021).

[21] Wryly noted by Barth ([1947] 1959).

[22] This particular instance is discussed in Campbell (2020, pp. 693–700). See also (De Gruchy 1979).

[23] The outworking in relation to slavery is now—thankfully—uncommon; sadly, the outworking in relation to minorities in terms of gender construction is increasingly overt. A masterful analysis of many of the racialized othering dynamics at work here is ( Jennings 2010).

[24] I supply more details Campbell (2020, pp. 652–700).

[25] Few appreciate this more than Stanley Hauerwas; see (Hauerwas 2011), esp. "Speaking Christian: A Commencement Address," ch. 6 (pp. 84–93); and "Why 'The Way Words Run' Matters: Reflections on Becoming a 'Major Biblical Scholar'," ch. 7 (pp. 94–112); see also (Hauerwas 1993).

[26] This is not to exclude rule-governed situations altogether, but they are secondary and, strictly speaking, denote an ethical failure (presupposing that a conditional, contractual regulation of human relationships is appropriate), hence if they become too prominent it is a very bad sign.

[27] See Barth ([1957] 2009), esp. § 52, "Ethics as a Task of the Doctrine of Creation" (pp. 1–42).

[28] It follows from these functions that the canon does not have to be exactly co-terminous across different traditions, although the various lists of texts assigned for repeated sacred use within those traditions do need to overlap significantly—and they do.

[29] The scholar who has done the most to bring this hermeneutical cornucopia to the attention of the church is Henri De Lubac; see especially his groundbreaking study of Origen (De Lubac [1950] 2007).

[30] And members of the community indwelling its scripturally-mediated language also need to know their lines! There is now a crisis of basic scriptural literacy. See (Campbell 2020, pp. 552–56).

[31] T. F. Torrance is a good starting point for the consideration of this question; see esp. the analysis he offers of "space" and hence "place" in dialogue with Luther, Calvin, and modern physics, in (T. F. Torrance [1969] 2005).

[32] This is an important corrective to Barth's account offered by (A. J. Torrance (1996)), utilizing an insight derived originally from his father, (J. B. Torrance (1996)).

[33] Here Fee's (1994) magisterial should be consulted.

[34] Insightful entry-points into the movements limited just to the modern USA are Wacker (2003) and Sánchez-Walsh (2018). (My thanks to Aaron Griffiths for assistance with these references.).

[35] An insightful and deeply compelling account of these intimate, "present," relational dyanamics within Paul's letters and his communities is Tilling (2015, pp. 75–187); he leans at times on an important earlier account by Fatehi (2000). An important modification of Barth's program in this respect, orienting the location of self-disclosure towards the eschatologically-inflected message of the NT, is (Jenson 1997).

[36] Jenson is especially attuned to these dynamics; see (Jenson 1997, 2008).

[37] In *The Heidelberg Disputation*, esp. theses 20 and 21 (see Lull 2005, pp. 47–61).

[38] My 2020 articulates things in a preliminary way in terms of love, gift, fidelity, peacemaking, enjoyment and celebration, contextualization, and vulnerability. See also esp. (Moltmann 1974).

[39] Hauerwas makes some typically insightful observations about history and its relationship with the other key notions introduced here in his 2018 (leaning in turn here on Henri de Lubac and Rowan Williams).

[40] Gilbert (2005) introduces this phenomenon accessibly.

[41] So NT scholarship has relatively recently discovered the value of Jan Assmann's (2011) work, who draws on the insights into the cultural production of "memory" originally developed (independently) by the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and the art historian Aby Warburg.

[42] Sam Adams (2015) provides an insightful account of the way historiography should be informed by theological considerations, and how to fail to provide this is simply to fall victim to an alternative, unwarranted metaphysics.

[43] Rae is exceptionally insightful and lucid on the negative and positive dimensions of the "historical" assessment, not to mention, on the question of the definition of "history" itself (Rae 2005). The problems lurking within many claims to be undertaking objectively-true—but functionally reductionist—"history" are elucidated brilliantly by Gregory (2006, 2008). See also Hauerwas (2018).

[44] A key theological emphasis in Barth that is articulated especially well by Gunton (1993).

[45] MacIntyre's justly famous Gifford lectures articulate this well (MacIntyre 1990). If Nietzsche, as he says, is the modern fountainhead of modernity's own critics, other masters of suspicion will doubtless prove useful as well—Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, and so on.

[46] Green's (2011) account of the type of historical criticism that can be practised in a way that both makes sense for devout scholars and constructively informs their contributions is both insightful and helpful.

[47] Except in the person of Jesus, when God was identified with every detail.

[48] I would lean now especially on Beeley's (2012) account of Chalcedon, and the neo-Orthodox network he identifies there.

[49] An interesting posture toward "history" is also detectable here. Devout biblical scholars already know that the reconstruction of the past presupposes a metaphysics, and they are in an excellent position to detect and to repudiate false conceptions. Hence devout scholars do not need to be reductionist. They celebrate particularity and complexity. History, like life, is inordinately complicated. (History is of course the retrieval of past life.) It can be explored but the devout scholar does not need to control it, and so is in a good position to detect when overarching conceptualities are doing too much work. Every reconstruction of the past presupposes an account of what reality is and so can be, and a foundationalist account is likely to be oversimplified.

[50] There is insufficient space here to develop an account of the development of presuppositional self-awareness that is related to this point. This is an important question, but it raises so many further issues that another long analysis would be required. Suffice it say that a full-fledged presuppositional self-awareness is possible within this paradigm, and that this paradigm enhances that self-awareness—of presuppositions that are sound, grasping the object of their inquiry accurately, and of those that are unsound, distorting the object, which is probably here a reasoned historical reconstruction of a text's original received meanings. A presuppositional architecture mapping the distorted reconstruction of Paul's "justification" texts can be found in my "The Recognition of a Discourse"; ch. 7 in (Campbell 2009, pp. 221–46) (endnotes on pp. 989–96 n. 3 being esp. important). This map recognizes seven interpretative levels or dimensions, and five possible framing considerations (drawing in these on Derrida's notion).

[51] Historical readings can lend color, memorability, and impact to the exposition of the text, because they generally embed their interpretations in detailed reconstructions of the circumstances that surrounded its original production. A Pauline text was often originally deployed in a highly polemical context, before confused and even irritated congregants who were engaged by sophisticated rivals who can be dimly glimpsed just off stage, and all the while in the context of thriving Hellenistic cities under the aegis of the Roman empire. Friends, co-workers, apostles, and enemies, shuttle back and forth out of view. As these circumstances are reconstructed, historicizing interpretations can be highly memorable, even entertaining expositions!

[52] We have arrived then in an interesting place. The devout biblical scholar treasures the scriptural text but does not worship it; but clearly it is not being despised or abandoned either. There is good historical work to do. Such readings are not everything but neither are they nothing. They are frequently fascinating and enriching, and sometimes even quite important. Meanwhile, there is a constant awareness of the text's fallibility, and of the damage its interpretation can do. In all readings there is nevertheless important theological and ethical evaluation taking place. And I hope it is not too much to suggest that this is a supremely constructive place for devout biblical scholar to occupy—positioned between two deeply polarized, incoherent, and destructive poles, namely, between Fundamentalism and any wholesale rejection of the value of the Scriptures, which is usually associated with theological Liberalism, although that association is often imprecise.

[53] If we do not follow the progression outlined here I suspect that we will be in the grip of a foundationalist agenda and that this will compromise everything else, including the accuracy of any God-talk. But this suspicion would need to be corroborated by a careful demonstration in relation to particular alternative proposals that this in fact the case and there is no space to do this here.

## References


Adams, Samuel V. 2015. *The Reality of God and Historical Method*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.

Assmann, Jan. 2011. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Barth, Karl. 1956–1975. *Church Dogmatics*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark. First published 1932–1955.

Barth, Karl. 1959. *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History*. Translated by Brian Cozens, and John Bowden. London: SCM. First published 1947.

Barth, Karl. 2009. *Church Dogmatics: III.4 The Doctrine of Creation, Study Edition*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Thomas F. Torrance. London: T & T Clark (Continuum). First published 1957.

Baxter, Christina A. 1987. Barth–A Truly Biblical Theologian? *Tyndale Bulletin* 38: 3–27.

Beeley, Christopher A. 2012. *The Unity of Christ: Continuity and Conflict in Patristic Tradition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Buckley, Michael J. 1987. *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Busch, Eberhard. 1976. *Karl Barth. His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*. London: SCM.

Campbell, Douglas A. 2009. *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Campbell, Douglas A. 2020. *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God's Love*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

De Gruchy, John. 1979. *The Church Struggle in South Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

De Lubac, Henri. 2007. *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen*. Translated by Anne Englund Nash, and Juvenal Merriell. San Francisco: Ignatius Press. First published 1950.

Diller, Kevin. 2014. *Theology's Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response*. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press.
Fatehi, Mehrdad. 2000. *The Spirit's Relation to the Risen Lord in Paul: An Examination of Its Christological Implications*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Fee, Gordon. 1994. *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*. Peabody: Hendrickson.
Feuerbach, Ludwig. 1966. *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*. Translated by Manfred Vogel. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill. First published 1843.
Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1989. *Truth and Method*, Second rev. ed. Translated and revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London: Sheed & Ward.
Gilbert, Daniel. 2005. *Stumbling on Happiness*. New York: Vintage (Random House).
Green, Joel B. 2011. Rethinking 'History' for Theological Interpretation. *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5: 159–74.
Gregory, Brad S. 2006. The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion. *History and Theory: Theme Issue* 45: 132–49. [CrossRef]
Gregory, Brad S. 2008. No Room For God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion. *History and Theory* 47: 495–519. [CrossRef]
Grudem, Wayne. 2010. *Politics—According to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
Grudem, Wayne. 2016. Why Voting for Donald Trump Is a Morally Good Choice. *Townhall*. July 28. Available online: https://townhall.com/columnists/waynegrudem/2016/07/28/why-voting-for-donald-trump-is-a-morally-good-choice-n2199564 (accessed on 26 August 2021).
Gunton, Colin. 2006. *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay Toward a Trinitarian Theology*. Eugene: Cascade. First published 1985.
Gunton, Colin. 1993. *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Hauerwas, Stanley. 1993. *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America*. Nashville: Abingdon.
Hauerwas, Stanley. 2001. *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology. Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered at St Andrews in 2001*. London: SCM.
Hauerwas, Stanley. 2011. *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian*. Eugene: Cascade.
Hauerwas, Stanley. 2018. The Past Matters Theologically: Thinking Tradition. In *Minding the Web: Making Theological Connections*. Eugene: Cascade, pp. 32–46.
Jennings, Willie. 2010. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Jenson, Robert W. 1997. *Systematic Theology. Volume I: The Triune God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Jenson, Robert W. 2008. Identity, Jesus, and Exegesis. In *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*. Edited by Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 43–59.
Jipp, Joshua W. 2015. *Christ the King: Paul's Royal Ideology*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
Jipp, Joshua W. 2020. *The Messianic Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Jüngel, Eberhard. 1976. *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming*. Translated by Horton Harris. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.
Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
Kuhn, Thomas S. 1996. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. First published 1962.
Lull, Timothy F., ed. 2005. *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
MacIntyre, Alasdair C. 1990. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame.
Moltmann, Jürgen. 1974. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Translated by Robert Anton Wilson, and John Bowden. London: SCM.
Novenson, Matthew V. 2012. *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Novenson, Matthew. 2017. *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Political Idiom and Its Users*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Rae, Murray A. 2005. *History and Hermeneutics*. London: T & T Clark (Continuum).
Sánchez-Walsh, Arlene M. 2018. *Pentecostals in America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Schwöbel, Christoph. 2000. Theology. In *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*. Edited by John Webster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 17–36.
Tietz, Christine. 2021. *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict*. Translated by Victoria J. Barnett. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Tilling, Chris. 2015. *Paul's Divine Christology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Torrance, Alan J. 1996. *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation with special reference to Volume One of Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.
Torrance, Alan J. 2000. The Trinity. In *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*. Edited by John Webster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 72–91.
Torrance, Alan J. 2001. Jesus in Christian Doctrine. In *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*. Edited by Markus Bockmuehl. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 200–219.

Torrance, Alan J. 2005. Auditus Fidei: Where and How Does God Speak? Faith, Reason, and the Question of Criteria. In *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*. Edited by Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhardt Hütter. New York: T & T Clark, pp. 27–52.
Torrance, Alan J. 2008. Can the Truth Be Learned? Redressing the 'Theologistic Fallacy' in Modern Biblical Scholarship. In *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics*. Edited by Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance. Grand Rapids: Baker, pp. 143–63.
Torrance, James B. 1996. *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
Torrance, Thomas F. 2005. *Space, Time and Incarnation*. London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark. First published 1969.
Torrance, Andrew. 2019. The Possibility of a Scientific Approach to Analytic Theology. *Journal of Analytic Theology* 7: 178–98. [CrossRef]
Trible, Phyllis. 1984. *Texts of Terror*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
Wacker, Grant. 2003. *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Zizioulas, John D. 1995. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.

religions

MDPI

*Article*

# Religion, Politics, and New Testament Theology: Contesting Relevance and a Constructed Category

**Timothy W. Reardon**

Bible, Religion and Theology, Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, VA 22802, USA; timothy.reardon@emu.edu

**Abstract:** It has been suggested by some, since the time of William Wrede, that biblical theology should align itself with the scientific study of religion. More recently, these appeals have been linked to a concern for the relevance of the discipline within modern universities and amid a secular, Western world. However, the category "religion" is itself complicated, and the implications of its use are not innocent. This article investigates the socially constructed nature of religion and the political discourse that shapes it in order to assess how the appropriation of this constructed category pertains to the relevance of New Testament theology as a discipline in particular, as well as how this category has already shaped New Testament studies more generally. I suggest that, rather than aiding biblical theology's relevance, this category obscures a larger discourse that has sought to order social and political space in the modern Western world and beyond and that relevance should be sought elsewhere, including in the dialogue on alternative conceptual constructs that center those stories and persons that have been traditionally marginalized.

**Keywords:** biblical theology; New Testament theology; religion; politics; relevance; Clifford Geertz; Talal Asad

**Citation:** Reardon, Timothy W. 2022. Religion, Politics, and New Testament Theology: Contesting Relevance and a Constructed Category. *Religions* 13: 579. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070579

Academic Editor: Joel B. Green

Received: 12 May 2022
Accepted: 17 June 2022
Published: 22 June 2022



## 1. Introduction

Practitioners of New Testament theology (NTT), as with most disciplines, rely on categorical distinctions to define the boundaries, terms, and aims of their field. For NTT, a particularly recurrent category is "religion", a concept generally taken to be self-evident. Historically, the discipline has wrestled with Johann Philipp Gabler's fundamental distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology; nevertheless, his subsequent distinction between the "true" historically contingent *theologies* of the texts and the "pure" *religion* to which Scripture attests seemingly casts an equivalent shadow over the discipline (Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge 1980). Though historical retrospectives generally conclude that Gabler's search for a religious kernel went unfulfilled, concern for religion never faded from focus, appearing in various forms in Baur (2016) and Wrede (1973) through the turn of this century with the work of scholars such as Räisänen (2000), Theissen (1999), and Hatina (2013).

These latter scholars, among others, following the lead of William Wrede, emphasized the scientific study of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) with particular concern for "relevance" amid a secularizing and/or pluralistic Western world. For such scholars, centering *Religionswissenschaft* enables NTT to move past its perceived narrow Christian parochialism, making the subject matter publicly accessible, subject to common reason, and thus relevant to modern, post-Enlightenment people. As Hatina writes, "If a New Testament theology is to have a meaningful voice in mainstream North Atlantic Western culture, then it must be formulated in such a way that it can respectfully and intelligently interact with both secularism and religious pluralism" (Hatina 2013, p. 4). The way in which this respectful interaction must occur is within the parameters of the science of religion; thusly, the discipline might be saved from social and academic irrelevance.

Simultaneously, however, the academic study of religion itself has undergone what Richard King calls a "Copernican turn" (King 2017), a turn not significantly represented, accepted, or acknowledged by these advocates of NTT as *Religionswissenschaft* (cf. Räisänen 2005, p. 407). This turn has called into question the category of "religion" itself as a universal, sui generis phenomenon and has sought to lay bare the discursive and political foundations of the discipline. Over the last few decades, scholars such as Talal Asad, Jonathan Z. Smith, Russell T. McCutcheon, Timothy Fitzgerald, Tomoko Masuzawa, and others have variously contended that the modern concept religion is a socially constructed phenomenon of Enlightenment origin, codependently birthed alongside "the secular" as a way to discursively order the political and social world under the sovereign authority of the liberal nation-state. This category is not simply the grouping of like with like, but the discursive disciplinary ordering of social–political space. Masuzawa writes, "'World religions' as a category and as a conceptual framework initially developed in the European academy . . . [and] quickly became an effective means of differentiating, variegating, consolidating, and totalizing a large portion of the social, cultural, and political practices observable among the inhabitants of regions elsewhere in the world" (Masuzawa 2005, p. 20). Indeed, Nelson Maldonado-Torres argues that "The concept of religion most used in the West by scholars and laypeople alike is a specifically modern concept forged in the context of imperialism and colonial expansion" (Maldonado-Torres 2017, p. 547).

In what follows, through attention to the discourse by which "religion" has been constructed and to what the category itself does, I aim to show that not only articulating NTT through the lens of the science of religion is a poor strategy for securing meaningful relevance for the discipline, but that it is politically fraught. We begin by discussing the socially constructed nature of religion, which leads to a consideration of the political implications and interests involved in such categorizations. We then consider a few particular examples of how such categories have political and material implications, particularly for those with less societal power. Then, our attention turns to the specific emergence of the discipline of religious studies; finally, we look at Clifford Geertz's definition of religion and Talal Asad's influential critique of that definition. This last point is particularly important, as Theissen's work relies heavily on Geertz; Asad's critiques also pertain, to some degree, to other articulations of religion, such as Peter Berger's, on whom Räisänen relies; furthermore, amid this discussion, I touch on key assumptions about religion, including the place of religious belief. By way of conclusion, I offer a few quite preliminary reflections on what might instead lead to meaningful relevance for NTT.

## 2. Religion as a Constructed Category

Perhaps the most fundamental task is to de-naturalize our conceptions of religion, understanding their categorical and constructed character. Typically, religion is assumed to be an autonomously identifiable, coherent category, whose articulation has distinct analytical value. Though the question "*What* is religion?" is fundamental, there often appears among those emphasizing NTT as *Religionswissenschaft* little question *that* religion—a sui generis category of which Christianity is a subtype—*is*. Nevertheless, not only is it important to query *what* religion is or *whether* it can or should be profitably applied to NTT, but more foundationally, we should ask whether religion has an autonomous essence at all to which we can justify the substantive, phenomenological, functionalist, or comparative investigation of religion. Furthermore, we must ask about the discourses that produce such a conception. What are the effects of these discourses and whom do they benefit? Thus, we should ask "*whence* (the category of) religion?" and "what does (the category of) religion *do*?"

A cursory perusal of most religion(s) textbooks gives the impression that, though the definition of religion is complicated and contains some fuzzy edges, there really is something "out there" (sui generis) called religion that can be defined (cf. Smith 1998), a "transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon" that has an "autonomous essence" that is easily distinguishable from other aspects of life, such as economics, politics, and "the secular" (Asad 1993, p. 28). This phenomenon is so transparently natural for some (recognized

in beliefs about supernatural beings; an experience of the holy; a cosmic, meaning-giving function; or sets of practices, myths, or rituals) that Max Weber famously began his study of religion by refusing to define it but rather simply taking for granted that what is commonly understood as religion a priori occupies a transparent set that suffices as the basis of his investigation (Weber 1963, p. 1). That is, though we may not be able to define religion from the outset, we seem simply to know what religion is.

Nevertheless, this superficial assertion is misleading. As Craig Martin notes, "there are no features that are uniquely common to all the traditions we typically call religions" (Martin 2017, p. 14). Substantive definitions fail to encompass the totality of the category under a single essence, inevitably excluding some form of colloquially understood religious reality. For instance, one might define religion as pertaining to supernatural matters, which could include most "religious" phenomena, though certain forms of Buddhism and Christianity would be excluded, and other things such as Ouija boards could be included. Such ambiguity also pertains to other organizing principles, such as belief systems, concern with the meaning of life, or matters of faith. Similarly, functional definitions can be helpful, though they also prove to be less than (or too) comprehensive (see Martin 2017, chp. 1).

Why the difficulty? Simply put, "because the colloquial use groups together dissimilar things" (Martin 2017, p. 16). Nevertheless, this should not cause a significant issue. My concern is not that religion is difficult to define. Wittgenstein demonstrates that general concepts do not require a distinct set of common essential properties, sharing some features and differing in others, having family resemblances (See Schatzki 2002, pp. 11–14; cf. Stowers 2008). Our question is not whether we can define a reality that approximates this concept more or less sufficiently, but what is the discursive move that associates these realities? Why are they seen as similar, and what work does the construction of the category perform that binds them, if they do not simply share a common essence? Furthermore, how does this categorization obscure the elements and subcategories ordered to that category or concept? Theodore Schatzki observes, "In, for example, the human sciences, however, generalizations too often veil the wide variety of factors that shape the activities, processes, or formations they are about" (Schatzki 2002, p. 12). The problem with a universal definition of religion is not so much the particularity of the historical elements, but that the definition itself is "the historical product of discursive processes" (Asad 1993, p. 29).

More to the point, critical religion scholars have argued for decades that religion is not simply "out there" as an apparent and distinguishable phenomenon; it is a constructed category that serves to organize social, economic, and political spaces to specific ends and is particularly instrumental to the modern, sovereign nation-state. That is, religion does not have an autonomous essence—it does not exist apart from human beings; rather, it is a constructed category to which we assign what we identify as "religions" and "the religious."

Humans create categories to help articulate the world around them. Such categories are necessary and fundamental elements of language and conceptualization (see Bruner et al. 1956, pp. 1–22). Yet, categorization is not simply a neutral, objective process of assigning like with like. It is not simply collecting and sorting. What is identified as a category is influenced by extrinsic factors, including political power, and these categories shape and are shaped by the elements and subcategories assigned to them. Categories are used *interestedly* to organize reality with material political, social, and economic consequences. Religion is no different.

Religion is a discursive creation, as is race, Spain, or driving on the right side of the road. Such constructed categories lack independent essence and are, in principle, never settled; they have movable boundaries and are discursively and conceptually negotiated. This is not to say that the "things" populating these categories do not exist or are completely human creations. A category is not itself the objects, subcategories, and concepts assigned to it. Thus, religion is not God or the gods, beliefs, noumenal experience, rituals, a sense of cosmic order or *nomos*, etc. Though it may "contain" or be characterized by those things in its breadth of reference, the category itself orders those realities and the (social and political) spaces they occupy (and are excluded from). Nor is it to say that the category does

not really "exist" or have tangible material impacts. Social constructs, as they form and structure systems and naturalized conceptions, have real material effects and existence apart from individual intentions (cf. Fong 2014; Cavanaugh 2016, pp. 187–88; Schilbrack 2020). Though race, for instance, is socially constructed and does not have independent essence, race as a social construction has material impact, systemically and beyond the will of individual actors alone, structuring societies. Religion is also a naturalized category with material impact through the disciplinary organization of the social–political space.

### 3. The Modern, Political Emergence of Religion

Religion is also not a transhistorical concept. Reflecting the work of Peter Berger, Thomas Hatina advocates pursuing NTT under the guidance of academic religious studies precisely because, he asserts, it is a universal human phenomenon centered on an inward "raw faith experience," and it gains import because it participates in "a conversation that is very old and very broad. It is a conversation that wrestles with identity, meaning and legitimization. It is, in short, the conversation of religion" (Hatina 2013, p. 210). This is the repeated *mythos* of religion; nevertheless, this conversation is not that old, and such formulations veil their political impact. Indeed, McCutcheon and Arnal assert that "the phenomenology of religion is in fact a phenomenology of the modern state" (McCutcheon and Arnal 2013, p. 30).

Most religion scholars recognize there is, in fact, no concept equivalent to religion that predates the Protestant Reformation (Martin 2017, p. 4). It is well documented that other terms thought to refer to religion, such as *religio*, *dharma*, *dīn*, *thrēskeia*, etc., do not map onto the supposedly persistent concept religion without significant difficulty or distortion (Smith 1962; Smith 1982; Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 60–69; Nongbri 2013, pp. 26–34; Barton and Boyarin 2016, pp. 4–5, 15–38; Fitzgerald 2017, pp. 446–51).

The English word "religion", which shares conceptual overlap with similar European-language terms, most apparently developed from the Latin *religio*, which first emerged in Latin literature in the first century BCE and was used in antiquity to refer to the general observation of moral and dutiful obligations. This included a soldier serving Rome or a senator's obligation in the Senate (Fitzgerald 2017, p. 447). Transitioning in European locution, it could refer to that which is set apart for God in distinction from that which is for ordinary use. Thus, one could find discussion of religious and secular priests. The latter were not ungodly but dedicated to common service rather than distinct monastic life. Religion was only later associated with the body of "Christian truth"; finally, during the Enlightenment, Christianity became a subtype, a religion, of a general sui generis category, religion. In fact, "religion" really developed as a form of non-contingent and non-particular universal Christianity, by which other religions were judged and through which Christianity was initially seen to be the most advanced and developed type. Nevertheless, the construction of Christianity as a model "religion" brought with it the expectations of disciplinary compliance to the newly ordered Enlightenment world.

This conceptual history, however, is not simply the history of an inability to comprehend or disembed the essential reality of religion (which is a modern creation) from an unnatural mixture with politics, society, or economics. As Fitzgerald notes, there is an implicit sense in our scholarship of religion, antiquity, and theology that there really are distinct domains that have been confused throughout history, but having emerged from the primordial uncivility and of the pre-scientific world, we are able to see with clear objectivity what those inhabiting that time could not, i.e., that religion was always there, a universal concept distinguishable from others spheres of life and pertaining to faith, the divine, and concern for ultimate meaning: "We now 'do' history; or we now study 'religion'. They were unable to do so then because they hadn't yet understood that what they confused is really distinct" (Fitzgerald 2007, p. 11). Yet, this is projection.

The seminal and oft-cited work of Talal Asad brought to the fore the codependent emergence of the pair "religion" and "the secular", which he links to the interests of the emerging liberal nation-state:

> The insistence that religion has an autonomous essence—not to be confused with the essence of science, or of politics, or of common sense—invites us to define religion (such as any essence) as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon. It may be a happy accident that this effort of defining religion converges with the liberal demand in our time that it be kept quite separate from politics, law, and science—spaces in which varieties of power and reason articulate our distinctively modern life . . . Yet this separation of religion from power is a modern Western norm, the product of a unique post-Reformation history. (Asad 1993, p. 28)

Religion was constructed as an isolated sphere for alternate authorities deemed in tension with the interests of the sovereign nation-state. The twin emergence of "religion" and "the secular" as oppositional and mutually defining spaces during the Enlightenment enabled this discursive disciplining of distinct spheres of authority.

Importantly, the claim is not that the secular emerged and removed religion from the center of society, but that religion itself (as well as "the secular"), as an autonomous, separable category, was constructed by the liberal discursive disciplining of political space (cf. McCutcheon 2018, p. 12; McCutcheon and Arnal 2013, p. 140; Smith 1962). In this reconfiguration of social imagination and categorization, the Church became an authority over the religious sphere, a realm defined primarily as inner, moral, voluntary, spiritual, and increasingly by *belief*, or as Locke asserted, "soul maintenance" (Locke 1950, p. 18). The state, in turn, assumed (or increasingly developed) sovereign secular authority, manifesting a simplified political space in a rather seismic shift in the European metaphysic. The liberal Enlightenment metaphysic imagined a simplified space, characterized by the flattening of hierarchies and individuals as distinct rights bearers connected (atomistically) to a single sovereign head, whose function was not so much the pursuit of the virtuous but to protect each individual and their rights from their neighbor (Milbank 1997, p. 275; Cavanaugh 2011, pp. 18–21). Furthermore, this division of the social–political space was also imprinted on the individual person, with the body belonging to the state and the soul belonging to God. This dualism inscribed on both the social body and individual bodies participated with other such hierarchical disciplinary oppositions, such reason/emotion, public/private, culture/nature, male/female, white/black, etc. J. Kameron Carter, for one, demonstrates the deep racial logic to such oppositions, creating a racial, patriarchal, and Eurocentric socio-political order (Carter 2008, pp. 79–121).

Central to this metaphysic was the investing of the state with increased sovereignty, so as to serve as the guarantor of individual rights. "In the state . . . borders mark out a unitary space in which the individual is subject directly to the center, which has the right to enforce its will through a monopoly on the means of legitimate violence within those borders" (Cavanaugh 2011, p. 18). Theoretically, religion as the primary *other* to the emerging secular is materially excluded from this space, and a narrative of the liberal state's function in protecting society from irrational religious violence emerges as a central element of the modern *mythos*. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a popular recounting of the story of post-Reformation Europe without some account of society freeing itself from religion, religious violence, and ecclesial authority. William Cavanaugh's *Myth of Religious Violence* (Cavanaugh 2009) aptly critiques this narrative. Cavanaugh does not deny the existence of "religious violence", as applied to those entities structured as religious; rather, he demonstrates the utility of the myth for the modern liberal nation-state and that so-called religious violence is not categorically worse than the violence committed by other realities, especially the liberal nation-state.

The rhetorical strategy, however, is not new, and it allows for the distinction of "legitimate" violence from that deemed "illegitimate." In the United States, such rhetoric of legitimate and illegitimate violence, to which the power to define "violence" itself is crucial, is often used against popular protest movements and is akin to the free designation of "terrorism" against those groups deemed to act against the interests of states. The modern liberal nation-state assumes authority over legitimate violence and defining violence, often masking its own violence in the process (See Butler 2020). As the guarantor of rights, the

nation-state reserves its own right to monopolize violence and invoke exception to accepted norms around violence. Asad also adds a rhetorical violence: "liberal violence . . . (as opposed to the violence of illiberal regimes) is translucent. It is the violence of universalizing reason itself. For to make an enlightened space, the liberal must continually attack the darkness of the outside world that threatens to overwhelm that space" (Asad 2003, p. 59). In the modern construction of "the secular", religion serves as that outer darkness. The development of the category "religion", in this sense, has never been purely descriptive—not the grouping of objectively identified like elements—but has been rather prescriptive, disciplinary, and transformational. The search for a definable, theoretical essence of religion "invites us to separate it conceptually from the domain of power" (Asad 1993, p. 29). Such a concept, "religion", seems hardly suited for imposition on the biblical text or NTT and certainly brings with it a problematic "relevance."

The modern policing of religion and proper boundaries can be somewhat convoluted, as is noted by Fitzgerald, whose tongue-in-cheek description of modern liberal notions of authentic religion lays this bare:

> It is well known that religion is essentially peace-loving, nonviolent, nonpolitical, concerned with the inner spiritual life and the other world. Religion is kind, tolerant, gentle, nonpolitical and nonprofit-making. Religion is a matter of personal faith and piety, essentially separated from the nonreligious secular state, from politics, and from economics. Religion is concerned with personal and family morality, but not with laws, which are the affair of the state. Religion is essentially that domain of private experience in which the individual soul concerns itself with the rewards and punishments of an afterlife in another world.
>
> On the other hand it is equally well known that religion is essentially barbarous, violent, and irrational, causing conflicts through religious terrorism and religious nationalism. This view of religion as essentially violent and irrational is popular today, especially since 9/11. It is said—frequently said—that if religion is confused with politics it becomes dangerously unstable, such as a Molotov cocktail. It ceases to be true (pure) religion, and becomes a compound of incompatible elements that will blow up in our face. (Fitzgerald 2017, p. 435)

Though one might be tempted to see this simply as fickleness and a lack of clarity, what Fitzgerald identifies is the disciplining of "religion", expressing the criteria by and realm within which true, authentic religion is expected to operate.

Attempts to find modern relevance through the submission of NTT to the academic study of religion should not naively ignore the political discourse by which "religion" was created and via which it operates. Rather than a value-neutral categorization of a natural universal, the articulation of the discreet categories "religion" and "the secular" has proven to be a tool of powerful interests. Kwok Pui-Lan argues that secularism functions as a colonializing reality by which Western states consolidate power throughout the world, adding that "secularism deserves to be a serious topic of scrutiny in postcolonial critique" (Kwok 2021, p. 33). Furthermore, Fitzgerald argues that the metaphysical remodeling that attended the emergence of these categories resulted in part from "powerful interests in banking, trading, and manufacturing, with the transformation of land-use rights into private property, and with the commodification of human beings in the forms of slavery or wage labor" (Fitzgerald 2017, p. 452). Indeed, the emergence of the category religion and the naturalization of the liberal metaphysic have served to mask the *un*-naturalness of global capitalism. Simply operating within this realm without a critical stance perpetuates these political and social interests.

## 4. Religions and the Imposition of Religion

In the intervening years between its emergence and the present, the category religion has not become innocently descriptive. Rather, religion remains an interested socially constructed category and continues to be used to manufacture imagined space with dis-

tinct material consequences, and the boundaries of this category remain malleable to suit powerful interests.

Amid modern examples of the political imposition of religion, several scholars note the creation of "Hinduism" as a religious category, which, they argue, did not exist in pre-colonial India (e.g., Balagangadhara 1994, p. 150; Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 87–92; Fitzgerald 2000, pp. 134–55). While the British negotiated their colonial authority over India, the circumscription of certain social obligations referred to in Hindi as *dharma*—including public law, temple rituals, and caste obligation—as "religion" enabled colonial power to differentiate "Hinduism" (a general set of non-British social practices and authorities) from governance, economics, and other aspects of life, disciplining alternate authorities by imposing a familiar and manageable order.[1] Categorizing religion served Britain's colonial endeavors.

In the United States, constructed categories such as race, nationality, and religion have played particularly important political roles in organizing society, with particularly dramatic impact on indigenous nations and peoples. Currently, categorical constructions are at the heart of Brackeen v. Haaland, a case due to be heard soon before the Supreme Court, in which a white couple from Texas is seeking to overturn the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978; commonly known as ICWA), a nearly half-century-old piece of civil rights legislation designed to keep Native American children who are in the adoption system within native households. The matter of the case is a simple custody dispute, yet it has risen to the Supreme Court because of powerful interests in extraction industries and the future interpretation of what is referred to as "federal Indian law."

The Indian Child Welfare Act is regarded as a cornerstone piece of indigenous civil rights legislation (and a particularly effective piece of child welfare legislation), which came after centuries of cultural and physical genocide perpetuated by the U.S. government and nongovernmental organizations, including the forced removal of indigenous children from their homes and placement in boarding schools designed to rid the children of their native identities.[2] The basis of the ICWA is federal Indian law, which categorizes membership in indigenous nations and people groups as a *political* designation. In Brackeen v. Haaland, however, the litigants argue that the ICWA is unconstitutional because it privileges one *race* above another, an audacious move by the white couple from Texas.

The ruling hinges on the assignment of socially constructed categories articulated by power. If the ICWA were overturned and Native American identity were legally defined by race, this would threaten the basis of all federal Indian law, resulting in a cascade of consequences that would impact the basic afforded rights of indigenous people across the U.S., potentially opening native territory for, among other things, extractive industry and oil pipeline projects that many indigenous nations have been fighting against for years. This is not simply a custody dispute; the contestation of this constructed category is the site of the negotiation of powerful capital interests. Thus, it is no surprise that the Texas Attorney General has put his weight behind the case in support of the Brackeens and overturning the ICWA and that the Brackeens are represented *pro bono* by Gibson Dunn, a law firm that has among its biggest clients multiple oil companies seeking access to tribal land in order to, among other things, complete oil pipeline projects.

Brackeen v. Haaland highlights categorization as a politically powerful reality regarding *race*; however, the U.S. also has a rather checkered history concerning *religion* and indigenous peoples (see Irwin 2000, pp. 295–316; McNally 2015). A current example is that of the Apache people who seek to prevent the construction of a copper mine at *Chi'chil Biłdagoteel*, also known as Oak Flat, in Arizona, by appealing to constitutional protections for religion. The difficulty, however, is gaining federal recognition for specific practices or sacred sites as appropriately "religious." A distinct barrier is that "religion", as recognized by U.S. law, is conceived in the image of modern Christianity—privatized, individual, and centered on belief and experience. Thus, it becomes difficult for indigenous practices—which are often embodied, material, and communal in ways that are not recognizable to those assuming Christianized notions of religion—to receive religious protections, being

defined most often in terms of "spirituality" (see McNally 2015). Thus, claims to sacred land or the right to use peyote in tribal rites, for instance, though at times legislated, prove difficult to be attained through courts. Given these conceptual deficits, U.S. courts (as well as the U.S. Forest Service) frequently deny federal religious protections for land right claims, being unable to see these as related to an "undue burden" on the practice of religion, which is imagined as an "inner" reality and centered primarily around beliefs.

The shape and recognition of categories such as religion serve a political purpose. In the case of tribal religious protections, one might be justified to infer that religion is categorically restricted *in order to* consolidate sovereign authority over material, public, and political matters within society, so as to profit from things such as the lucrative copper mining rights of Oak Flat at the expense of the local indigenous community. The fuzzy boundaries of religion in U.S. law often seem to shift for the benefit of state power and powerful economic interests.[3] These concrete examples further point to the malleable and constructed nature of religion as well as its political use and import. NTT might most profitably engage the concept of religion in a *relevant* way not by submitting to this conceptual veiling of power but by providing alternate conceptions and stories governed by a theological vision fostered in dialogue with the text, tradition, reason, experience, and the complexity of the reading body that centers those who have been excluded from such power, offering an alternate political vision through a responsible reading of the text. NTT is not responsible for manufacturing a workable notion of religion for or working within an understanding of religion to be imposed by powerful interests. Rather, NTT should situate itself within and contribute to the pluriform dialogue of powerful, world-structuring alternative stories that call into question the impositions of those powerful interests, articulating a distinct textual and traditioned witness, and indeed witnesses.

## 5. Biblical Theology and the Scientific Study of Religion

Returning to the historical narrative, biblical theology (including NTT) and the scientific study of religion have developed amid these socio-cultural pressures. With the prevailing demand that all knowledge be subject to universal rational principles, neither Scripture nor tradition could be taken as its own foundation; rather, universal rational principles and methods were expected to ground that which stood behind Scripture, now understood as "a text" (cf. Legaspi 2010). The philological study of the Bible emphasized the recovery of history and authorial intention. In response, Gabler envisioned a historical discipline to serve as a new foundation for dogmatic theology, with particular attention to the articulation of "pure religion" (as Christian truth) understood through the historical investigation of the biblical text (Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge 1980). Gabler's program was, in many ways, an attempt to preserve Scripture's relevance amid the philosophical pressures of his day.

In short order, however, Kant seemingly pulled the rug out from Gabler's historical method. For Kant, Scripture was only ecclesially useful, and individuals only benefitted to the degree that their reading of Scripture corresponded to the universal (non-particular and inward-focused) religion of pure reason (Kant 1960, pp. 11, 144–45). Pure religion was a universal truth accessed by reason apart from the contingent facts of history. At best, Scripture and tradition were secondary tools through which one might articulate pure religion, which was restricted to moral knowledge. *Religions* were contingent variations on this universal theme, or as Kant put it, "vehicles" for religion (Kant 1991, p. 141). Kant's religion was a transcultural and transhistorical universal, relegated to the inner, subjective sphere, a formulation that also served Kant's political interest to free individuals from "heteronomy", subjection to authority other than human reason, including the authority of the church and its canon (DiCenso 2011, p. 2).

*Religionswissenschaft* was built upon such a universal concept of religion, though by its emergence as a distinct discipline, there were significant Hegelian undercurrents. F. Max Müller, who is often credited as a seminal figure in the study of religion, for instance, offered a Hegelian progressive history, where Christianity emerged as the fullest development of

pure religion (Müller 1873). Conversely, Judaism (as also in Kant) represents its antitype, trapped in materialistic, parochial, and physical religion (Carter 2008, pp. 111–21). Indeed, it is not surprising that this both played into and would help foster anti-Semitism, given the conception that deviant, undisciplined religion served as the mythological other in the modern liberal narrative and Judaism represented a particularly deviant form in this scheme. Judaism was the foil to the pure religion of interiority and belief, and despite the general rejection of anti-Judaism in current scholarship, the conceptual realities that defined religion, belief, and interiority (e.g., Hatina's emphasis on "raw faith experience") remain central defining features for many. Religion as a discipline, according to Tomoko Masuzawa, still formulates its subject as a progressivist and developmental movement toward the enlightened position of neutral objectivity, possessing what Masuzawa calls a "scientistic" bent (Masuzawa 2005, p. 69). Much of modern scholarship understands the problematic origins of the field while leaving unquestioned the universal categories or conceptual divisions upon which the discipline is founded.

Although Theissen, Räisänen, and Hatina offer their own distinct approaches, for each, religion is unquestionably a universal sui generis phenomenon. For Hatina, "religion is a social universal" (Hatina 2013, p. 184), and his main concern is anthropology through a "phenomenology of religious experience" (Hatina 2013, p. 199). Indeed, for Hatina, religion enables one to answer the fundamental question, "What does it mean to be human?" (Hatina 2013, p. 7, see also p. 171). Hatina's formulation falls directly within the logic of the modern liberal social construction of religion, without offering or broaching a critical appraisal of this discourse. Religion is an inner experiential reality that does not structure social or political ways of being within the world but rather offers an experience and sense of meaning: "at the heart of every religion lies a mysticism: a profound experience of, or connection with, a transcendent reality" (Hatina 2013, p. 190). Though this may go a long way in soothing the existential *anomie* of the modern person, it also masks the political reality at work in this disciplined definition.

A trend in religious studies is to emphasize that the function of religion is to provide coherence and meaning and that this functional reality is religion's transcultural and transhistorical essence. However, Catherine Bell argues the contrary: "It is a relatively recent thing for scholars to emphasize meaningful and systemic coherence in relation to what religion is all about. Only in the second half of the twentieth century, for the most part, has the provision of coherence been seen as the defining role of religion, that is, what we theorists think it should do when religion clearly can no longer explain the nature of the universe or act as the authoritative source of morality" (Bell 2002, p. 107). However, assuming that this is the age-old question of religion, as seems to be apparent with Hatina, fails to ask, more fundamentally, "how discourses of religion construct the very object that they seek to explain" (King 2017, p. 8). Indeed, Hatina not only explicitly affirms the transhistorical and transcultural autonomy of religion as a human universal, he also imagines a sort of soteriology, a progressive movement through time where the phenomenological study of religion helps erode myths and difference, enabling a world of tolerance and peace through the further uncovering of a form of universal, rational religion (Hatina 2013, p. 202–3). This soteriology, however, is not new but reflects an ideology that is embedded within the discipline of religious studies at its foundation. It is the modern liberal myth of progress in religious form. Though Hatina is aware that a departicularized Christianity has been used to undergird such universal concepts of religion, he asserts that his project has legitimacy because it begins not with Christianity but with universal religious phenomena (Hatina 2013, p. 222). However, that is precisely the problem. The category religion and the universals therein contained remain built on the foundation of the liberal Western emergence of "religion" as a disciplining of Christian tradition.

Furthermore, in the field of NTT and New Testament studies more generally, such assumed conceptions of religion often retroject foreign disciplining categories onto the past, which conveniently helps to legitimate the naturalness of those ordering categories in the present. In the study of antiquity, Simon Price, for example, laments the distorting

imposition of "Christianizing" tendencies onto the past: "The influence of prejudice and the imposition of arbitrary culture-bound categories, especially ones derived from Christianity, are a perennial problem in the study of the imperial cult . . . . The most pervasive [Christianization] is our assumption that politics and religion are separate areas" (Price 1984, p. 12). These conceptions assume, for instance, that primary elements of religion are experiential faith, existential meaning, and the primacy of belief. Without critical awareness, it is perhaps difficult to conceive of "religion" not defined by voluntary ascent, through initiatory belief, grounded in feelings of existential meaning. Thus, for example, A. J. Festugière begins his *Personal Religion among the Greeks* with this assertion: "There is no true religion except that which is personal. True religion is, first of all, closeness to God. Every religious ceremony is but empty make-believe if the faithful who participate in it do not feel that thirst for the absolute, that anxious desire to enter into personal contact with the mysterious Being who is hidden behind appearances" (Festugière 1954, p. 1). Here, the prioritization of personal belief is elevated as religion's sine qua non.

Similarly, it was common in the past to associate the rise of mystery cults with a desire to overcome a sense of existential *anomie* and to accommodate increased demand for personal salvation, religious experience, and assurances of immortality amid a growing lack of confidence in traditional deities (Brückner 1908; Heitmüller 1911). More recent scholarship, however, has called this picture into question (Beard et al. 1998; Price 1984, pp. 15–16; Rive 2010). It is increasingly clear that Greco-Roman cultic practices were vibrant and public, tied very much to civic and political life (Beard et al. 1998; Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a; Sourvinou-Inwood 2000b), and even the mystery cults, Walter Burkert argues, rather than being an Eastern invasion into traditional Greco-Roman piety, "were a special form of worship offered in the larger context of [civic Greco-Roman] religious practice" (Burkert 1987, p. 10). Modern religious assumptions and historical endeavors designed to find the genetic link between Christianity and mystery cults have over-emphasized personal elements, which these cults do not categorically stress (Burkert 1987, p. 28; cf. MacMullen 1981, p. 55).

New Testament theology often instinctually emphasizes "religious" themes, putting primary emphasis on salvation (understood in terms of accounting for personal sin), morality, and belief. Regarding salvation, it is not uncommon for some to assert a progressive development from the Old Testament to the New Testament where a more spiritual salvation emerges from antiquated notions of national, material, political, and social salvation (e.g., Marshall 1998, p. 94). What should be clear by now is that my contention is that the academic study of "religion" as a socially constructed concept should not be pursued as a primary structure for NTT, but that NT studies should also develop a critical awareness concerning how the modern politically derived category of religion has influenced and become embedded in our interpretations and that this course of action would ultimately be more "relevant."[4]

## 6. Geertz, Asad, and Belief

It is now worth turning specifically (though not comprehensively) to the influential critique of Clifford Geertz's definition of religion by Asad (1993, pp. 27–54). Gerd Theissen's *The Religion of the Earliest Churches* is particularly reliant on Geertz's work. What is central to Geertz and Theissen's conception of religion and is summarily critiqued by Asad is the centrality of belief/faith and a cognitive conception of religion as an overlay to a base "common sense" reality (cf. Geertz 1973, pp. 87–125).

Amid an academic landscape that privileged Durkheim and conceptions of religion that posited "direct correspondence between religion and social structure", Geertz offers a definition that investigates religion as an autonomous area of human experience (Mitchell 2017, p. 327). He does this in part by separating out distinct areas (and "perspectives") of life, which saw "common sense" (distinct from religious, scientific, and the aesthetic perspectives) as properly basic. His definition articulates a universal human category that spans culture and time. Geertz defines religion as:

> "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [*sic*] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic". (Geertz 1973, p. 90)

For Geertz, religion is a cultural, "semiotic" reality, where "[Culture] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [*sic*] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." (p. 89). What is true of Geertz's notion of culture is also true of his conception of religion. Both culture and religion exist as cognitive–linguistic systems that impose meaning from without, being extrinsic to the person, and serving as models *of* and *for* reality (Geertz 1973, p. 92).

For Asad, this is a primary point of contention. Asad argues that Geertz's cultural systemic overlay lacks any coherent mechanism of authorization. It is not simply that systems have an irresistible sway or that they are external realities functioning at the cognitive level. Asad writes, "Geertz moves away from a notion of symbols that are intrinsic to signifying and organizing practices, and back to a notion of symbols as meaning-carrying objects external to social conditions and states of the self" (Asad 1993, p. 32). For Asad, this is a fundamental error. Discourses are only authorized and meaningful in relation to other discourses, specifically those in which persons and communities are formed; they do not have an external authority but are to an extent *internal*. This should not be confused with the reductively "inner" relegation of religion; rather, Asad argues that religious belief, practice, knowledge, activity, etc., cannot be divorced from the material, social, embodied, and lived realities of those who practice these realities. Geertz, on the other hand, sets forth a notion of religion that becomes an epiphenomenal reality, abstractable from a normative base (Geertz 1973, p. 91). In this sense, Geertz inscribes the modern liberal metaphysic and the twin realities, "religion" and "the secular", onto this universal cultural definition.

By the end of Geertz's treatment, the role of religion is quite reduced. As an abstraction, its primary role is to intervene in moments of incoherence. Problems of (1) suffering, (2) lack of understanding, and (3) evil and injustice are remedied by religion's "aura of facticity", which "posits a world where these [three problems] are not characteristic of the world as a whole" (1973, p. 108). Asad rightly critiques how Geertz reduces the function of religion to a "god of the gaps" and a positive attitude amid suffering (Asad 1993, p. 45). Indeed, Geertz goes on to identify religion as fostering a primarily *passive* disposition, not characterized by the pragmatic concern to change things but by the simple acceptance of incoherence "by faith" (Geertz 1973, p. 111). According to Asad, "This modest view of religion (which would have horrified the early Christian Fathers or medieval churchmen [*sic*]) is a product of the only legitimate space allowed to Christianity by Post-Enlightenment society, the right to individual *belief*."

Indeed, religion for Geertz is primarily defined by belief. "The basic axiom" for all religions is that "[the one] who would know must first believe" (Geertz 1973, p. 110); yet, such an assertion is transparently dependent on Western conceptions of religion. Thus, Asad aptly replies, "I think it is not too unreasonable to maintain that 'the basic axiom' underlying what Geertz calls 'the religious perspective' is *not* everywhere the same. It is preeminently the Christian church that has occupied itself with identifying, cultivating, and testing belief as a verbalizable inner condition of true religion" (Asad 1993, p. 48; cf. Lopez 1998). More than that, such definitions demonstrate the modern tendency to separate pure "religion" from power. Asad writes:

> [W]ith the triumphant rise of modern science, modern production, and the modern state, the churches would also be clear about the need to distinguish the religious from the secular, shifting, as they did so, the weight of religion more and more onto the *moods and motivations* of the individual believers. Discipline (intellectual and social) would, in this period, gradually abandon religious space,

> letting "belief", "conscience", and "sensibility" take its place." (Asad 1993, p. 39, italics mine)

Here, Asad firmly grounds Geertz's definition as a distinctively modern liberal formulation, complicit in the consolidation of power. Such a definition is necessarily articulated by power, and subjection to it would hardly be a step towards relevance. Furthermore, one wonders what it would mean to emphasize NTT as a *discipline* not simply an articulation of beliefs. Admittedly, this would take NTT far afield of its Gablerian roots, but not only is the subjection of NTT to the constructed category of religion problematic, but so are the uncriticized elements entailed with that decision, including the prioritization of beliefs, cognitive content, and a discretely descriptive focus. What if "belief" should be understood within, as, and as the outworking of practice, and what if NT *theologizing* functioned as such a practice?

Many NTTs give distinct attention to belief. Similarly, the science of religion has historically centered "belief" as perhaps *the* quintessential element of religion, often seen as the first step to the appropriation of a religious system. What could be more universal than beliefs and religious "faith"? Yet, Müller himself noted in his time the difficulty of finding conceptions of belief in many "uncivilized races": "that the idea of believing, as different from seeing, knowing, denying, or doubting, was not so easily elaborated, is best shown by the fact that we look for it in vain in the dictionaries of many uncivilized races" (Müller 1897, p. 448). Interestingly, Müller associates the lack of conceptions of "belief" with an intellectual deficit on the part of the "uncivilized races" and not with the uniquely Western application of the concept in the guise of a universal given. My desire is not to deny that anyone *believes* in what they worship; however, belief itself is not simply a content but a way of reflecting on and practicing one's "religious" reality. In the vein of Asad's response to Geertz above, many do not in fact prioritize or reflect on what they "believe", holding its acceptance naturally and without critical attention.

Catherine Bell contends that "belief" is how we characterize "the specific illusions of others" (Bell 2002, p. 106). It is what others believe is not naturalized and abnormal for us. In this sense, belief is an object with content that has risen above the naturalized plane to receive particular scrutiny. This tends to be how the science of religion presents belief, as mental content that overlays reality with an alien coherence. Bell, however, questions that this is how belief and religion actually function (Bell 2002, p. 107). Rather, Bell maintains that belief is a type of social practice "rather than a (true or false) linguistic statement or mental conviction" (Bell 2002, p. 108). Or, as Michel de Certeau asserts, "I define 'belief' not as the object of believing (a dogma, a program, etc.) but as the subject's investment in a proposition, the *act* of saying it and considering it as true—in other words, a 'modality' of the assertion and not its content" (De Certeau 1984, p. 178). What both of these conceptions have in common is a refusal to reduce belief to a cognitive object and mental content. These definitions offer something more embodied and enacted. Stanley Stowers, citing Thomas Schatzki and Ludwig Wittgenstein, notes that Wittgenstein rejected the Cartesian notion of the mind as an *inner* container or machine and that believing, as a mental state, does not refer to mental objects but a holistic embodied expression of bodily states of affairs. The mind is a bodily activity instituted by practices, and such practices and believing are socially dependent: "Activity is intelligible to the actor and others in virtue of its place in socially constituted and historically inherited, even if evolving, practices" (Stowers 2008, p. 440).

For a discipline such as NTT that is so focused on the history of ideas, one wonders if this provides a useful point of departure. Perhaps viewing NTT not in terms of a historical descriptive enterprise but rather as a type of social practice defined by dialogical interaction amid difference, a sort of radical democracy, that does not seek closure and "unity" as a historical or rational kernel to extract from the text but sees the text—in its diversity, the diversity of tradition, and the diversity of the body of readers who meet from complex situations and experiences by the power of God's Spirit—as a site of practice and formational encounter through interpretation and theologizing—to view the *theology* of

the New Testament as a practice without closure and without kernel (and, similarly, not as a mental object or content simply to be won or grasped) but as a site of negotiation and encounter consistently in flux. Though this is rather abstract, it does suggest an alternate approach that no longer seeks to emphasize unity over diversity, but seeks unifications amid diversity, grounded by the distinctly contingent reality of the tradition of the church, including the grounding and centering position of Scripture. After all, the modern scandal of Christian tradition is its irreducible particularity. Thus, belief functions as a mode, as an act, as a bodily activity, not as the object-content of a Cartesian mental container.

Asad's critique of Geertz's assertion that rituals are primarily symbolic similarly emphasizes the particularly embodied nature of these rituals, not simply their cognitive content. Asad contends that the identification of activities and rituals as symbolic is an imposition of the anthropologist. Those who practice these rituals do not see them as symbolic. They are first "identified as symbolic by the outside researcher, and then seen as appropriate for interpretation" (Asad 1993, p. 61). The distorting gaze of the anthropologist, Asad maintains, manufactures this primarily symbolic reality, enabling treatments of religion as coping practices, such as with Geertz. Asad, instead, emphasizes the importance of performance, whereby "apt performance involves not symbols to be interpreted but abilities to be acquired according to rules that are sanctioned by those in authority: it presupposes no obscure meanings, but rather the formation of physical and linguistic skills" (Asad 1993, p. 62).

What is essential is not a cognitive-symbolic reality, but an embodied practice of virtue development. One is formed into the nature and body of rituals much similar to playing the piano, so that through practice one creates a competency whereby one needs not think about the activity, but the virtue, formation, and activity flow naturally from them. Pointing to the Benedictine rule, Asad notes that these liturgical practices are not rituals designed to help cope with existential meaninglessness or give a sense of order but are about the practiced acquisition of Christian virtues: "As in the case of medieval monastic programs, discourse and gesture are viewed as part of the social process of learning to develop aptitudes, not as orderly symbols that stand in an objective world in contrast to contingent feelings and experiences that inhabit a separate subjective one" (Asad 1993, p. 62). Again, perhaps NTT, a discipline often concerned with the recovery of a theological kernel, might imagine itself as clearing ground for enabling and participating in a theological practice of developing "aptitudes" amid the diverse dialogue of the canon, tradition, and the church universal without the necessity to isolate a unity beyond Scripture, tradition, the triune God, and the diverse intersectional and complex constructed embodied subjectivities of Christ's body. Such an approach would necessarily include the interpreter and her readers in the equation.

Geertz seems to naturalize a division of space created in the mold of Western modernity, where religion is an adjunct to the "common sense" picture of the world. Yet, this notion of "common sense" is actually quite odd unless one assumes precisely what Asad accuses Geertz of, asserting that religion is functionally an adjunct framework imposed upon "normative" existence. This formulation hardly seems to suffice as an apt description of anyone's understanding of the practices that infuse one's own life that have been categorized (for them) as religion, and given that Geertz's notion of "common sense" assumes one's "sense" of normative reality that is also somehow shaped and molded by religion, it is difficult to imagine that "religion" is only that which functions outside "common sense" reality. This seems to necessitate somewhat distinct boundaries between Geertz's articulated domains (common sense, science, religion, and the aesthetic), which can only be an imposition, especially on non-Western, non-modern cultures.

Yet, if the social conceptions and practices isolated as religion are instead the prevailing quotidian reality for a society, one might certainly imagine a situation in which the question of belief is not primary or even conceptualized. That is, it is clearly possible to imagine a society for which the question "Do you believe in God?" makes as little sense as asking if one believes in the sky. Though obviously different in kind, one might imagine that the question "Do you believe in private property" is not actively considered by most

U.S. citizens for whom private property functions essentially as a fact of nature, as does Capitalism. Functioning within Capitalism for Americans does not require, in Heideggerian terms, a *vorhanden* (present-at-hand) reflection and belief. Similarly, the rites of those societies designated as "religious"—as well as the rites of U.S. Capitalism—compose with general day-to-day life a simple *zuhandenheit* (ready-to-handed-ness). In such a society, the knowledge of gods, rites, and social practices is not discreet and esoteric but basic and practical, and faith is not something to be held onto *in spite of* knowledge but the product of practical ready-to-hand knowledge (cf. Asad 1993, p. 47). Such was the situation, Asad insists, of premodern Christian belief, where "Familiarity with all such (religious) knowledge was a precondition for normal social life, and belief (embodied in practice and discourse) an orientation for effective activity in it." Belief is a practice and activity. It seems to me that a particular requirement for "relevance" is asking how NT *theologizing* might be articulated as a practice and activity of the body and not primarily a discipline of dislocated description. Uncovering what the concept religion *does*, we might then ask ourselves what might NTT *do*? Moreover, in this way, we might understand the relevance of the discipline quite differently.

**7. Concluding Thoughts on Relevance**

All of this, of course, depends on how we understand relevance. Relevance to whom and to what end? Many New Testament scholars are understandably concerned about the relevance of the discipline in particular. Amid an academic landscape where confessional scholarship finds no coherent place and within a modern landscape where traditional religious language is increasingly foreign, how might NTT be relevant at all? Certainly, speaking the language of others is a step in overcoming these issues, and adopting a more universal field of inquiry as a basis theoretically addresses this problem to a significant degree. However, is this "relevance" if these categories are inherently constructed to veil power and to structure the world? Furthermore, does this relevance assume a unified world under the modern liberal metaphysic? This is not to dismiss these concerns at all. It is certainly true that the discipline of NTT must also not linger in closed confessional walls unable to address the real concerns and questions of a pluralistic world. Nevertheless, the assumption that this is accomplished by submission to the science of religion does not provide a simple solution. The assuming of the mantle of religious studies and "religion" more generally is not an innocent proposition. Rather, it masks a distinct discourse of power.

Religion is not a universal and sui generis reality, but a construct. It is not value neutral, but participates in a political, economic, and social ordering of space, conformity to which hardly makes NTT more relevant. Indeed, David Chidester's comments are apt here: "The disciplinary history of the study of religion is also a history of discipline, a dramatic narrative of the discourses and practices of comparison that shaped subjectivities on the colonized peripheries and at European centers" (Chidester 1996, p. xiii). The modern conception of religion is, in fact, designed to make those things that it designates as "religious" categorically *irrelevant* to economic and social–political power.

Relevance, however, may be conceived as addressing these discourses of power that seek a forced rational unity, by participating in unmasking these discourses through the diverse dialogue of powerful alternate stories, offering NTT as a practice of this storytelling that takes readers, tradition, complex experiences, and the text seriously for a world often uncritically subjected to modern liberal and colonial narratives. As Fitzgerald adds, "From the point of view of State power, whether US, Chinese, or other, some leaders—mullahs, imams, the Dalai Lama, Buddhist monks in Vietnam and Burma, Jesuit priests in Latin America, or *whoever cleaves to a powerful alternative view of the world* that challenges the values and institutionalized practices of capitalism—pretend to be religious but are really political" (Fitzgerald 2017, pp. 435–36). NTT cannot help but be political when telling such an alternate story, and NTT only benefits from responsible approaches to the text that emphasize our embodied locations and non-dominant perspectives. Indeed, Schüssler-Fiorenza writes, "Biblical scholars are called to contribute as critical transformative intellectuals to a radical

democratic biblical vision for the overcoming of domination in the global *cosmopolis* that is our spiritual home" (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1999, p. 14). NTT must give up its pretensions to a value-neutral description and embrace the normative task so often obscured by its history, and this is not to be performed simply by appropriating a discourse designed to veil discourses of power.

Much more can be said of course, but NTT, from this angle, benefits by embracing a dialogue of diversity, locating itself within tradition(s), orienting itself to specific readerly communities, emphasizing ethical responsibility, and highlighting openness to underdetermined interpretations (Fowl 1998, pp. 10–11). In this way, the text becomes a site of contestation, not of ultimate meaning, but of meaning together in process, and it is the textual practice itself, at the site of the text and within tradition(s), that is a *theological* practice by which the community is formed and relevant meaning can be ascertained, though always provisionally. In short, despite a slow but consistent flow of work suggesting that NTT finds relevance through "religion", rather than contributing to the relevance of NTT, such a move would contribute negatively to the real relevant need of political, critical, and formational theological activity that is centered in the textual rite of Christ's body.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

1 Admittedly, however, this account speaks of the people of India as passive recipients, who do have their own agency in the process. Such agency is the focus of Jason Ānanda Josephson's investigation of the Japanese political effort to incorporate Western categories of religion, the secular, and superstition (Josephson 2012; see also Isomae 2017). Helpfully, Josephson's account speaks to the agency of those in Japan in the process and distinguishes a threefold distinction between the categorical imposition of religion, superstition, and the secular.

2 In a particularly notorious quote from 1892, Captain Richard Pratt articulates the intention of these schools as to "kill the Indian, and save the man" (Pratt 1973).

3 This is undoubtedly the legacy of the "Doctrine of Discovery", which still lies at the base of the imagination of settler colonialists worldwide and their conception of a right to "the land" (See Augustine 2021). The colonization of native peoples continues to this day, though most non-indigenous U.S. citizens, for instance, believe that settler-colonialism is a legacy of the past. However, these two cases are current examples of the Doctrine of Discovery's persistence.

4 What I hope is also clear, however, is that this does not bring us to a more historical or "objective" reality that has simply been obscured by the modern category, but to a recognition of the way that our reconstructions are necessarily articulated by context and power. Thus, for instance, Barton and Boyarin's important work, *Imagine No Religion* (Barton and Boyarin 2016), while advancing the field considerably, still posits that properly extricating impositions of the category religion would help us to see the past *as it was* (See McCutcheon's (2018, chp. 2) critique). However, the point is not that utilizing the category "religion" simply obscures our comprehension of what actually *was*, but that our reconstructions are always articulated by power, interest, and the context of the modern investigator. I do not mean that we should neglect historical investigation but that we should approach such investigation, within NTT at least, understanding the political moves that necessarily attend our reconstructions and narration as integral elements of theologizing, not as imperfections to flee from. This is perhaps more imaginable when we let go of our notions of history as a modern science. Thusly, we would make an *ethics* of interpretation, as Schüssler-Fiorenza has advocated, primary (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1999, pp. 28–29). Still, even this ethics would not be grounded in an a priori rationality but negotiated in the developing and shifting traditions within which we are formed.

## References

Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Augustine, Sarah. 2021. *The Land Is Not Empty: Following Jesus in Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery*. Harrisonburg: Herald Press.

Balagangadhara, S. N. 1994. *'The Heathen in His Blindness . . . ': Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. Studies in the History of Religion 64. Leiden: Brill.

Barton, Carlin A., and Daniel Boyarin. 2016. *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Baur, Ferdinand Christian. 2016. *Lectures on New Testament Theology*. Edited by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert F. Brown. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Beard, Mary, John North, and Simon Price. 1998. *Religions of Rome*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Bell, Catherine. 2002. "The Chinese Believe in Spirits": Belief and Believing in the Study of Religion. In *Radical Interpretation in Religion*. Edited by Nancy Frankenberry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Brückner, Martin. 1908. *Der sterbende und auferstehende Gottheiland in den orientalischen Religionen und ihr Verhältnis zum Christentum*. Religionsgeschichtliche Volksbücher für die deutsche christliche Gegenwart, 1/16. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr.
Bruner, Jerome S., Jaqueline J. Goodnow, and George A. Austin. 1956. *A Study of Thinking*. New York: Science Editions, Inc.
Burkert, Walter. 1987. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Butler, Judith. 2020. *The Force of Nonviolence: The Ethico-Political Bind*. London: Verso.
Carter, J. Kameron. 2008. *Race: A Theological Account*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Cavanaugh, William T. 2009. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Cavanaugh, William T. 2011. *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*. Minneapolis: Eerdmans.
Cavanaugh, William T. 2016. *Field Hospital: The Church's Engagement with a Wounded World*. Minneapolis: Eerdmans.
Chidester, David. 1996. *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
DiCenso, James. 2011. *Kant, Religion and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Festugière, André Jean. 1954. *Personal Religion among the Greeks*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Fitzgerald, Timothy. 2000. *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Fitzgerald, Timothy. 2007. *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Fitzgerald, Timothy. 2017. Critical Religion: "Religion" Is Not a Stand-Alone Category. In *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*. Edited by Richard King. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 435–54.
Fong, Benjamin Y. 2014. On Critics and What's Real: Russell McCutcheon on Religious Experience. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 18: 1127–48. [CrossRef]
Fowl, Stephen E. 1998. *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation*. Malden: Blackwell.
Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
Hatina, Thomas R. 2013. *New Testament Theology and Its Quest for Relevance: Ancient Texts and Modern Readers*. London: Bloomsbury.
Heitmüller, Wilhelm. 1911. *Taufe und Abendmahl im Urchristentum*. Religionsgeschichtliche Volksbücher für die deutsche christliche Gegenwart 1/22–23. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr.
Irwin, Lee. 2000. Freedom, Law, and Prophecy: A Brief History of Native American Religious Resistance. In *Native American Spirituality: A Critical Reader*. Edited by Lee Irwin. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
Isomae, Jun'ichi. 2017. Religion, Religious Studies, and Shinto in Modern Japan. In *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*. Edited by Richard King. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 87–93.
Josephson, Jason Ānanda. 2012. *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Kant, Immanuel. 1960. *Religion with the Limits of Reason Alone*. New York: Harper & Row.
Kant, Immanuel. 1991. *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd ed. Edited by Hans Siegbert Reiss. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
King, Richard. 2017. The Copernican Turn in the Study of Religion. In *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*. Edited by Richard King. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1–20.
Kwok, Pui-Lan. 2021. *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
Legaspi, Michael C. 2010. *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*. Oxford Studies in Historical Theology. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Locke, John. 1950. *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. New York: Liberal Arts.
Lopez, Donald S., Jr. 1998. Belief. In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Edited by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 21–35.
MacMullen, Ramsay. 1981. *Paganism in the Roman Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. 2017. Religion, Modernity, and Coloniality. In *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*. Edited by Richard King. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 547–54.
Marshall, I. Howard. 1998. *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, 3rd ed. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.
Martin, Craig. 2017. *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
Masuzawa, Tomoko. 2005. *The Invention of World Religions; Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
McCutcheon, Russell T. 2018. *Fabricating Religion: Fanfare for the Common E.G*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
McCutcheon, Russell T., and William Arnal. 2013. *The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political Nature of "Religion"*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
McNally, Michael D. 2015. From Substantial Burden on Religion to Diminished Spiritual Fulfillment: The San Francisco Peaks Case and the Misunderstanding of Native American Religion. *Journal of Law and Religion* 30: 36–64. [CrossRef]
Milbank, John. 1997. *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Mitchell, John P. 2017. Defining Religion: Geertz and Asad. In *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*. Edited by Richard King. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 327–34.

Müller, F. Max. 1873. *Introduction to the Science of Religion*. London: Longmans, Green, & Co.
Müller, F. Max. 1897. *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*. 2 vols. London: Longmans Green.
Nongbri, Brent. 2013. *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Pratt, Richard H. 1973. Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction (1892). In *"The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites", Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian" 1880–1900*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 260–71.
Price, Simon R. F. 1984. *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Räisänen, Heikki. 2000. *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme*, 2nd ed. London: SCM.
Räisänen, Heikki. 2005. What I Meant and What I Might Mean . . . an Attempt at Responding. In *Moving Beyond New Testament Theology? Essays in Conversation with Heikki Räisänen*. Edited by Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele. Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 88. Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, pp. 400–43.
Rive, James B. 2010. Graeco-Roman Religion in the Roman Empire: Old Assumptions and New Approaches. *Currents in Biblical Research* 8: 240–99. [CrossRef]
Sandys-Wunsch, John, and Laurence Eldredge. 1980. J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33: 133–58. [CrossRef]
Schatzki, Theodore R. 2002. *The Site of the Social: A Philosophical Account of the Constitution of Social Life and Change*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
Schilbrack, Kevin. 2020. A Metaphysics for the Study of Religion: A Critical Reading of Russell McCutcheon. *Critical Research on Religion* 8: 87–100. [CrossRef]
Schüssler-Fiorenza, Elisabeth. 1999. *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
Smith, Jonathan Z. 1982. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Smith, Jonathan Z. 1998. Religion, Religions, Religious. In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Edited by Mark C. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 269–84.
Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. 1962. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*. New York: Macmillan.
Sourvinou-Inwood, Christiane. 2000a. What is Polis Religion? In *Oxford Readings in Religion*. Edited by Richard Buxton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 13–37.
Sourvinou-Inwood, Christiane. 2000b. Further Aspects of Polis Religion. In *Oxford Readings in Religion*. Edited by Richard Buxton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 38–55.
Stowers, Stanley. 2008. The Ontology of Religion. In *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith*. Edited by Willie Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon. New York: Routledge, pp. 434–49.
Theissen, Gerd. 1999. *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
Weber, Max. 1963. *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston: Beacon.
Wrede, William. 1973. The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology'. In *The Nature of New Testament Theology*. Edited by Robert Morgan. Studies in Biblical Theology 2.25. London: SCM, pp. 68–116.

religions

MDPI

*Article*

# Grounding the Theory of Discursive Resistance: Language, Semiotics and New Testament Theology

**Timo Juhani Eskola**

Department of Biblical Studies, Theological Institute of Finland, 00100 Helsinki, Finland; timo.eskola@sti.fi

**Abstract:** Focusing on semantics and semiotics, this article will suggest new and renewed approaches to studying the construction of New Testament theology. First, the relation between Saussure and Peirce will be analyzed because the interpretation of their relationship is crucial for understanding the process of signification. A critical stance will be taken towards Derrida and Eco's interpretation of signification and towards deconstruction. Applying Benveniste's development of Saussure's semantics will introduce a discursive theory. Linguistic signs are not simply linguistic units as such. A sign is about conditions and functions. A sign as a role is a manifestation of participation. For anything to serve as a sign entails participation in a web of relations, participation in a network of meanings, and adoption of a set of rules. In the act of encoding there are elements that resist the free selection of components in encoding, such as narratives and metaphors. Therefore, they also become a means of appropriation: the construction of the sentence is not spontaneous but constrained. When, for instance, the metanarrative of enthronement directs the construction of a Christological statement, the basic theme dominates the process and becomes compelling for the ancient author.

**Keywords:** New Testament theology; semiotics; semantics; metanarrative; signification; discursive resistance

**Citation:** Eskola, Timo Juhani. 2021. Grounding the Theory of Discursive Resistance: Language, Semiotics and New Testament Theology. *Religions* 12: 776. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090776

Academic Editors: Joel B. Green and John Jillions

Received: 6 July 2021
Accepted: 14 September 2021
Published: 16 September 2021



## 1. Introduction

Semiotics, while gaining only periodic popularity and only among rather specialized scholars is, nevertheless, the main explanative factor behind most of the recent trends in New Testament interpretation. In the U.S., Jacques Derrida's influence has been immense, as evidenced by the numerous different projects proposing deconstruction. On the continent, the legacy of Ferdinand de Saussure has been remarkable despite the fact that later interpretations have never reached unanimous conclusions about his work. And, last but not least, C.S. Peirce has had an exceptional impact on the theory of meaning all over the globe. As we take an interest in semiotics, we must and need commit ourselves to serious work on many fundamental issues concerning the nature of language.

Furthermore, there are several myths circulating in scholarly circles that need thorough reconsideration. It is a commonplace to read in a textbook, for instance, that Saussure's conception of the sign is dyadic, while Peirce's conception is triadic. Everyone knows Derrida's claim that his theory of language is based on Saussure's conception of langue. Umberto Eco, in turn, claims in his main treatment *A Theory of Semiotics* that the classic semantic triangle by Ogden and Richards can be paralleled with Peirce's famous triad. It is essential to question each and every one of these statements.

Why is this necessary? All these misunderstandings have produced high profile interpretative theories which have spread widely, for instance in deconstruction and a/theology, postmodern theologies, negative theology, death-of-God, as well as progressive theology. The basic problem here is that if the first premises turn out to be defective, their applications need to be reconsidered. The main aim of this essay is to analyze the use of the concept of sign and to apply a coherent Saussurean interpretation of signification to the study of New Testament theology. I will first investigate the complex history of the theory of signification because it is impossible to understand the nature of present theories

without knowing their premises. Then, in Section 6, I will argue for a new theoretical approach, that of discursive resistance, based on the theories of Saussure and Benveniste in particular. The validity of this interpretation will be put to the test by concentrating on some particular biblical passages focused especially on the themes of jubilee and liberation.

## 2. Saussure vs. Peirce: Dyadic or Triadic Conception of the Sign?

One must start with the definition of the linguistic sign. This, simple as it seems, is a complex task. Contemporary philosophy, ever since Immanuel Kant, has mainly been philosophy of language. Frege the linguist and logician sent Wittgenstein to Cambridge, and Heidegger searched for authentic language most of his career. Therefore, it is rather surprising that the linguistic turn that Saussure engendered had so little impact on philosophy and theories of signification. Should we conclude that philosophy of language was not actually interested in language?

Starting with Saussure today is not commonplace. He has been exploited in so many ways that it is in fact hard to explore the basic tenets of his linguistic thinking. Most scholars of course recognize his concepts *signifiant* (signifier) and *signifié* (signified) but after that, debates arise. Is Saussure's conception of the linguistic sign dyadic as so many writers assume? It certainly appears to be, but does this mean that his theory of signification was dyadic? In semiotical literature, Saussure's theory is often contrasted with Peirce's theory of *semiosis*, which is triadic. Or is it? Is Peirce really discussing the linguistic sign here? Admittedly, the task is huge and in what follows it is possible only to present certain crucial arguments on which a consistent hermeneutical theory can be constructed. A more thorough investigation of the theory needs to be conducted elsewhere (Eskola 2021).

Saussure's concept of the sign is not precisely dyadic. It is bipartite (de Saussure 1983, p. 66). This is an important distinction. The bipartite understanding of the sign as such is the basis for the revolution. For Saussure, the signifier or "sound pattern," as he calls it, is just a mental image of a sound pattern. The original French expression is "image acoustique," an acoustic image. It is a mental entity that lives in our minds. It is something that remains only in our memory. In a sense it is an engram (Sebeok 2001, 5f.; Tobin 1990, p. 39).

Together these elements construct a linguistic sign and these signs, in turn, compose a formal language system (*langue*). One can see one practical example of such a system in a dictionary. Meanings in a dictionary are not (solely) dependent on etymology but, instead, on the synchronic language system that is spoken for instance in any given country today. This is why Finnish–English dictionaries, for instance, grow old so quickly. The main issue in Saussure's theory is that words, in this sense, are concepts. They are general concepts denoting species and classes. They form a code, not a nomenclature where each "word" provides a "name" (*nominatio*) for some particular in the real world.

Meaning, therefore, is not simply dictated by the system. *Langue* provides merely the system of signs that can be used in encoding. Saussure spoke of *parole* but, unfortunately, never got to explain that aspect of language in his lectures. He assumed that it was not a topic for linguists to handle. At least so we are told. Émile Benveniste developed the idea later and introduced the term *utterance meaning*. Saussure focused on the proper nature of *langue*, the linguistic system, to prove that nominalism with its theory of primitive reference had been completely wrong.

It is important to emphasize that Saussure's conception of the linguistic sign is bipartite. This distinction is crucial. His understanding of practical meaning is a matter of *parole*, and the process of signification presupposes encoding. This makes his theory of signification triadic. This means that which interests us the most is not simply a matter of a dictionary's definitions. Particular, contextual meaning proper is not a matter of the code as such. It is a matter of using language. It is a matter of encoding, a matter of utterance.

In Peirce's thinking, signs are always involved in triadic relations. This is the basic point of departure in his epistemology. All signs as representamens have a relation to their objects and to an interpretative element, the interpretant. Meaning, therefore, is practical and is constructed by creating new interpretants in a thinking process. This, however, is

not simply a picture of the linguistic meaning—and this is where the most problematic mistakes are made.

Linguistic signs are not defined in terms of triadic relations. As Peirce investigates the categories of different signs, he presents the linguistic sign in his second trichotomy.

> "[S]econdly, according as the relation of the sign to its object consists
>
> in the sign's having some character in itself, or
>
> in some existential relation to that object, or
>
> in its relation to an interpretant." (*CP* 2.243)

Peirce's second trichotomy is referential, and introduces his most famous distinction between icon, index, and symbol. He explicates here the relation of signs to their objects in the real world. The first mode concerns quality. The class of performance speaks of existential relation. And third, that of thought, brings in the role of the interpretant. Each of these can later be used in the triadic relations. Our interest lies in the third group. Words in Peirce's semiotics belong to the category of *Symbol*. In fact, this can also address an entire linguistic system.

Word, for Peirce, is a sign because a law of language—a convention—makes the interpreter connect a symbol with the object it denotes (Greenlee 1973, p. 94; Pharies 1985, p. 41). Since words are conventional, their meaning is based on a law. But what kind of signs are words, since they belong only to one class of aspects on the second level of Peirce's triadic categories? Why can these signs not be defined by all three levels? The reason is simple: words are elements of semiosis. They are not the results of semiosis.

Peirce is a realist in the sense that he still speaks of real objects. There is, however, an important distinction that affects his theory, that between an immediate object and a dynamical object. The object in his theory means two quite different things. He still believes in the referential object as his examples of e.g., icon and index prove. In addition to this, Peirce also calls representation an object.

> "We have to distinguish the Immediate Object, which is the Object as the Sign itself represents it, and whose being is thus dependent upon the Representation of it in the Sign, from the Dynamical Object, which is the Reality which by some means contrives to determine the Sign to its Representation." (CP 4.563)

As regards the linguistic sign, the immediate object corresponds to the conventional sign, which is a general concept. Pharies notes that the immediate object "corresponds perfectly to Saussure's 'signifié' in being an idea or concept whose very being depends, as Saussure agrees, on the clarifying power of the sign which designates it." (Pharies 1985, p. 15) One should, however, remember that not all of Peirce's immediate objects are general concepts of the conventional language system. Peirce could also address all representations, representamens, belonging to the processes of semiosis. So the question is more complicated. An immediate object can be any idea produced during a thinking process. Here the meanings in question greatly surpass the lexical meanings of individual words. This notion is useful since in his semiotics Peirce distinguishes between lexical meanings and more complex concepts quite like Saussure did (Hervey 1982, p. 36).

When Peirce explains how signs are related to information, he simultaneously addresses the issue of lexical meanings and denotations. He calls denotation and connotation (meaning respectively reference and sense), somewhat unorthodoxly, breadth and depth: "the dyadic relations of logical breadth and depth, often called denotation and connotation, have played a great part in logical discussion". These, however, have often been discussed in a flawed context because, "these take their origin in the triadic relation between sign, its object and its interpretant sign". The dyadic explanation "forgets that concepts grow" (CP 3.608). Liszka explains the difference as follows (Liszka 1996, p. 28):

> "The *essential depth* of a sign is all the qualities or characteristics that are predicated of it simply by means of its definition, or general, conventional understanding (CP 2.410). The *essential breadth*, on the other hand, is all those things to which,

> according to its very meaning, the sign refers. The term 'human being' has a dictionary meaning, and refers to whatever satisfies that definition in a vague and general way. Peirce claims that the essential depth and breadth of a sign do not really give us information in the strict sense of the term, but instead a sort of 'verbal knowledge' (MS 664:20)."

When defining the lexical meaning of a word, Peirce goes even beyond Saussure when he states that *depth* (connotation) as a general concept is determined by all qualities and characteristics that have been or can be predicated of it. Definitions have many dimensions, and symbols/linguistic signs have a vast range. Accordingly, the *breadth* of a linguistic sign (denotation; reference) covers all possible objects that can be referred to only if the qualities or characteristics allow the application.

Furthermore, Peirce's "Saussurean" distinction between *langue* and *parole* is confirmed here. He clearly speaks of a linguistic system as a collection of lexical meanings, "dictionary meanings" as he says (sense). Standard linguistic systems before Peirce had been dyadic, as he notes. The use of linguistic signs, however, belongs to the field where "triadic relations" work. Signification proper, denotation in the scheme mentioned above, which falls in the category of breadth, are in the world of semiosis. This explains how concepts grow and, in accordance with what Peirce says about interpretants, through semiosis a "translation" takes place and "the meaning of a sign is the sign it has to be translated into" (CP 4.132). Liszka notes that Peirce "defines information as the quantity of the interpretant," and as such, information "is a dimension of meaning achieved in the systematic intersection (or the area) of the sign's breadth and depth (CP 2.419)" (Liszka 1996, p. 29).

Considering similarities between Saussure and Peirce, the result is surprising. Even in their different contexts they both speak of a bipartite linguistic sign. For Saussure this was a linguistic innovation and for Peirce a philosophical necessity. They both believed that meaning proper is a matter of using language. It is a matter of creating ideas and constructing utterances. Furthermore, they were convinced that a nominalistic alternative was impossible. No *nominatio* could explain the proper meaning of propositions. This conclusion will be of utmost importance as we turn to Derrida and the post-structuralist reading of both Saussure and Peirce.

### 3. Derrida, *Différance* and Deconstruction

Derrida's importance stems from his claim to have learned both from Saussure and Peirce. He does not recognize the distinction between *langue* and *parole* but maintains that language is merely a self-referential system of signs where words refer only to other words. There is a logical reason for such a conclusion. Derrida was a radical phenomenologist. He developed many of his ideas in his dissertation on Husserl. His philosophy can be understood only when remembering that he deals with phenomena and the cognitive handling of these phenomena. Derrida is known for his two major concepts: *différance* and deconstruction. The former is an epistemological concept. Derrida created a neologism, derived from the French verb différer, meaning deferring and moving forward. The French suffix "–ance" makes the word a noun. Therefore, for Derrida, this neologism expresses constant deferring (Derrida 1982, 3f.). But what does this mean?

For Derrida any intuition in one's mind is merely a trace of Being (real reality). He states that the Being of beings "can never be presented." Neither can there be an actual manifestation of the trace, because it will appear only through *différance*, always escaping other manifestations and deferring meaning in the linguistic system. A quotation explains this best (Derrida 1982, p. 23).

> "As rigorously as possible we must permit to appear/disappear the trace of what exceeds the truth of Being. The trace (of that) which can never be presented, the trace which itself can never be presented: that is, appear and manifest itself, as such, in its phenomenon. The trace beyond that which profoundly links fundamental ontology and phenomenology. Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting

> itself, muffles itself in resonating, like the *a* writing itself, inscribing its pyramid in *différance*."

An appearance produces a trace in our minds, and this trace keeps escaping the reality of the occurrence. For Derrida, interpretation is a process where reality cannot be present and cannot become manifest as such. What is left are interpretations which are treated by the mind. These interpretations are further organized with the help of a system of signs. The trace will be represented by a sign which in itself is already part of another system. Derrida never discusses the genesis of words in the linguistic system.

The crucial point in this discussion is that none of Derrida's terms can be understood properly without his third concept: noema. Intentional acts of consciousness have a structure of meaning, a noematic structure, or simply a noema, as Derrida calls it. When a mental act is directed at an object, for instance at a book or at a computer, the mode of directedness is always constructed by a noema. Or, to keep it simple, a noema is being constructed every time a mental act is directed at an object. As a result, each different noema has a "meaning" by which it is linked to the object. So it is not the object itself which directs meaning, but the way the object manifests itself as a phenomenon. Therefore, the structure of meaning is constantly changing, since it depends on the changing manifestation (Derrida 1973, p. 19). Contrasting Saussure, he states: "there is neither symbol nor sign but a becoming-sign of the symbol." (Derrida 1997, p. 47).

For Derrida, therefore, there are two complementary movements, *différance* and noema. These movements prove that language and words have nothing to do with reality. For Derrida, observation is nothing but a play between phenomena and intuition. The mind works on impressions and uses the only system that it has available—the linguistic system. This is why Derrida adopted Saussure's theory of *langue*, that of a linguistic system. As a system of general concepts it is self-referential and must be considered a closed system as such. No representation selected from this repository of codes can represent anything else but impressions, according to Derrida. People do not speak about reality but about language.

**4. Derrida and Eco: Reinstating the Primitive Reference Theory**

Derrida's view is rather extreme. Under certain conditions such a view might grow into a garden of death where all meaning perishes. And so it has. Scholars speak of a real deconstruction industry where all semantic values are considered dead, and deconstruction is a tool for dissemination and destruction. In philosophy moral values were scrutinized according to deconstruction, and, in theology, all this grew into the theory of the death-of-God. G–o–d has been treated as a sign that needs to be erased. Epistemology of darkness results in a theology of *no–thingness* (Raschke 1979, p. 8). Assuming that Derrida was right, that is.

There are severe problems in Derrida's theory, though. His greatest mistake is that, despite speaking so highly of Saussure, Derrida adopts an old view of primitive reference and thus places himself among Saussure's opponents. Like so many philosophers before him, Derrida is not really interested in language. The pertinent two questions, repeated throughout his essay are, what is a linguistic sign? How is meaning constructed? When Derrida and later his follower Eco attempt to explain the theory of meaning, they wish to unite the Peircean triadic approach and the nominalist theory of referential meaning. Hence they run into problems when trying to apply Saussure's ideas to their own theory.

In his *Of Grammatology*, Derrida compares the patterns of Saussure and Peirce. He adopts some of Saussure's terminology, speaking for instance about signifiers and signifieds, but eventually he supports Peirce's approach. The reason for this is that, according to Derrida, it is Peirce who in his theory of semiotics dissolved the close relation between signifier and signified. Hence, for Derrida, Peirce became a forerunner for the idea of *différánce*. By proposing a semantic interpretation of Peirce's semiotics, Derrida claims that the relation between signifier and signified is unstable. A crucial conclusion follows: in this discussion the interpretant must be understood as the conceptual content of sign.

Derrida assumes that, according to Peirce, the referent of the sign is indefinite. "Now Peirce considers the indefiniteness of reference as the criterion that allows us to recognize that we are indeed dealing with a system of signs." (Derrida 1997, p. 48).

To assess this solution we will concentrate on Eco who, in his *A Theory of Semiotics* (Eco 1976), presents an interpretation where the theory of semiosis appears built on a similar tension. Eco presents his Derridean interpretation in diagrams where he compares and parallels Peirce's views with several well-known semantic patterns. This is where triads enter the stage. Firstly, Eco refers to Ogden and Richards, who presented a pattern of signification in a triadic form (Eco 1976, 59f.; Ogden and Richards 1966, p. 11).

REFERENCE
△
SYMBOL REFERENT

Ogden and Richards' triad changes the Fregean pattern (see below) only slightly and focuses on the meaning of individual words. Furthermore, it can be applied to any symbol, explaining the production of meaning. A symbol is now linked with a concept, actually called the reference here. In addition to this it also has an object, a referent, to which it refers. Naturally such a referent may be either a factual, existing thing or merely a concept.

This semantic triad is then considered identical with Peirce's triadic pattern of semiosis. In order to emphasize this, Eco presents Peirce's pattern in a similar diagram.

INTERPRETANT
△
REPRESENTAMEN OBJECT

Echoes of Derrida are obvious, but this comparison reveals many inconsistencies in Eco's interpretation. In Peirce's theory the representamen is the bipartite sign itself. The object is then the referent that is being described. Eco distorts Peirce's original idea with this new identification where the interpretant becomes the conceptual content of the sign, i.e., "the signified" in Saussurean terminology. Thus he gives the pattern of semiosis a (nominalist) semantic interpretation. This line of thought is further emphasized by a comparison with Frege's classical (German) pattern of signification. The interpretation is underscored by using a triangular pattern and drawing an actual triangle.

SINN
△
ZEICHEN BEDEUTUNG

Frege's so-called triad has clearly influenced Ogden and Richards' diagram above. There is no doubt that Frege did make a distinction between intension and extension. The conceptual meaning of a sign (word), *Sinn*, is here the lexical meaning (intension) which is designated in the linguistic system as having merely general meanings. The referential meaning, *Bedeutung*, brings the object into the picture. This is why Frege remains in the nominalist tradition. Now Eco drew parallels between these three patterns, emphasizing that in all these diagrams the left side, i.e., the relation between sign and concept, can be seen as identical with Saussure's dyadic view of a sign. He even stated that the relation was similar to "the Saussurean dichotomy 'signifiant—signifié'". This, however, is not what Saussure meant. In fact, he claimed the opposite.

Based on such comparisons, Eco further stated that Peirce's and Saussure's diagrams are actually similar. He assumed that neither of them paid much attention to the actual object of reference (Eco 1976, p. 60).

> "The semiotics of Saussure and Peirce is a theory of the conventional (or at any rate strictly semiosical) relation between symbol and reference (or meaning) and between a sign and the series of its interpretants [...] Objects are not considered within Saussure's linguistics and are considered within Peirce's theoretical framework only when discussing particular types of signs such as icons and indices [...]."

This comparison reveals the mistake. By following Derrida, Eco falls into the standard nominalist referential theory of meaning with both a reinterpreted Saussurean "triad" and Peirce's concept of semiosis. Considering his solution in the light of philosophy, however, there is no triad here. Eco merely presents a "fork." Like in Abelard's theory, words have now a direct reference. This is why Eco actually reinstates the primitive reference theory where *nominatio* and *significatio* are considered separate.

SIGNIFICATIO (impression)
WORD <
NOMINATIO (object)

The Abelardian distinction between *nominatio* and *significatio* makes all the difference, because here the meaning of a word is its object. The roles of representation and signification are switched. With this premise, general concepts take the place of universals, and semantics and meaning concern "words" (which Saussure would call mere signifiers that carry no meaning).

In Derrida's thinking, a similar development of ideas can be detected. When he substitutes the interpretant for the signified, he turns back towards phenomenological nominalism. The Peircean triad is lost in this procedure. For Derrida, there was no longer a real object, but merely the immediate object present in the mind. It was identified with the phenomenon. So, in the triad of semiosis, the Peircean "object" was transferred into the category of the representamen. The signified no longer existed either. Derrida's first interpretation had transformed the sign into a signifier, and the interpretant into the signified. His final conclusion, however, transferred the interpretant finally into the (original) area of the sign/representamen, the self-referential system of signs, because it was now considered the noematic meaning of the sign, not a lexical meaning common to all speakers using the linguistic system.

The main conclusion of this section is that Eco has visualized the graphic form of Frege's and Ogden and Richards's semantic theory erroneously. There was no triad, only a dualist "fork" emphasizing *nominatio*. The only benefit in Eco's explanation is that it enables scholars to detect a similar error in Derrida's critique toward the alleged logocentricism. Therefore, it is evident that both Derrida and Eco suggested a nominalistic, semantic interpretation for Peircean semiosis. For them, the interpretant became the conceptual content of the sign. Using Saussure's terminology, they stated that the interpretant was identical with the signified. Derrida and Eco use this new construction in their battle against the transcendental signified. This is why Derrida and Eco's semantic interpretation of Peircean semiotics is strained. Distorting Peirce's original ideas shifts the study of semiotics onto a postmodern path.

## 5. Benveniste on Enunciation

As we consider constructive alternatives, the work of Émile Benveniste (1902–1976) needs to be rehabilitated in contemporary scholarship. Being the great hero of young Ricoeur, Benveniste can be held up as the main writer to develop Saussure's semantics and should be placed beside Greimas, Jakobson and Lotman in the canon of semiotics scholars. Benveniste follows Saussure's main theoretical premises on the definition of the sign. This must be noted because he is sometimes known for his early article "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign" (1939) where he appears to oppose Saussure at certain points. What makes him special is that he shifts the focus from investigating the sign itself to the investigation of meaning and semantics in propositions. Here he brings up new terms such as discourse and enunciation. The first volume of his writings has been published in an English collection called *Problems in General Linguistics*.

Benveniste claims that when defining the sign—a unity of an acoustic image and concept—Saussure does not treat the relation of language to the real world, he does not question the latter's premises. Benveniste simply focuses on *parole*. This differs little from what Saussure himself had written. Therefore, Benveniste continues the project by presenting a theory of how language is able to signify in everyday life (Benveniste 1971, p. 46).

In his "Form and Meaning in Language" ("La forme et le sens dans le langage") Benveniste seeks a general comprehension of the "very being of language". He says that the essence of language is to signify. By using language people give meaning to the world. "Language is the signifying activity par excellence." (Benveniste 1974, p. 217). Therefore, language is a bearer of signification. In the article "The Levels of Linguistic Analysis" Benveniste writes about meaning: "a certain property which this element possesses qua signifier: that of forming a unit which is distinctive, contrastive, delimited by other units, and identifiable for native speakers for whom this language is language" (Benveniste 1971, p. 108). Benveniste's first point of departure is similar to that of Saussure. He speaks of inherent meanings. In addition to this, however, human speech refers to the world of objects.

> "But at the same time, all human speech has reference to the world of objects, both as a whole, in its complete utterances in the form of sentences, which refer to concrete and specific situations, and in the form of inferior units that relate to general and particular 'objects' recognized from experience or created by linguistic convention. Each utterance, and each term of the utterance, thus has a referend, a knowledge of which is implied by the native use of the language." (ibid.)

The special contribution that Benveniste brings to the Saussurean tradition is his emphasis on utterance. In Benveniste's writings we encounter two important concepts that explain his ideas, enunciation and discourse. Enunciation ("énonciation") is the act of producing an utterance ("énoncé"). He states that this means the "conversion of language into discourse" (Benveniste 1966, p. 254). In Saussurean terms, this means a change from *langue* to *parole*, the shift that Benveniste also calls the change from semiotics to semantics.

"What in general characterizes enunciation" he writes, "is the accentuation of the discursive relation to the partner". He calls it "the figurative framework of enunciation". There is a "structure of dialogue", as he says. "As discourse's form, enunciation posits two 'figures' that are equally necessary: one the source, the other the goal of the enunciation". For Benveniste, such a framework "is necessarily given with the definition of enunciation" (Benveniste 1974, p. 85).

Benveniste states that speaking, i.e., using language, involves addressing someone. This is why there is a significant difference between *langue* and *parole*: énoncé is a statement independent of context, but énonciation is bound and directed by the context. It is an act of stating. This makes language a "discursive instance". There is a difference between semiotics and semantics. Linguistic signs must be used. Discourse is the actual utilization of language. Utterance is a bearer of signification. It represents the medium through which man gives meaning to the world. This leads to Benveniste's great thesis: the essence of language is to signify. It is signification itself (Mosès 2001, p. 517).

When poststructuralism approaches questions of meaning from the point of view of *langue* alone, the language system, it misses the point. In this sphere, meaning in the traditional sense of the word disappears and a play between the autonomic binary elements of the linguistic system is introduced in its stead. According to Benveniste, however, meaning is a matter of discourse (*parole*). It is a matter of "semantics". The use of words takes place in enunciation, the act of producing an utterance. This is precisely where the speaker produces a conversion of *langue* into discourse—and this is where meaning is created.

**6. Web of Relations**

Such developments in the theory of signification produce useful results. In enunciation people speak about real objects (and events and all kinds of imaginable things). This is what a discourse is all about. It means that signification takes place in utterances. Benveniste speaks about evanescent signification and referential reality. One could also call this contextual meaning. In an utterance, *words* (in a strict sense precisely "words" now, not just linguistic signs) refer, indicate and represent. They are taken into a network of meaning.

Their use depends on application and association, and concepts are put in a certain context. This is the reason why particular meaning in a sentence is evanescent. It focuses on one independent situation. Furthermore, this kind of "use" of words serves intentional speech. It is about communication. Benveniste speaks of dialogue. It concerns interaction and transmission of messages (Delorme 1998, p. 36). It is easy to see that much of what we today consider as the contemporary understanding of contextual meaning and rhetorical communication have their roots in Benveniste's writings.

Should we want to apply a triadic interpretation of Benveniste's theory—in order to explain the faults of Eco's application once more—this would result in a developed version of Saussure's semantics. In Benveniste's theory, in fact, we find a new triad that comes close to what Peirce has written about meaning, consisting of the bipartite sign that has a relation both to the object and an evanescent signification. Benveniste starts with the bipartite sign. The linguistic sign is only the first element in the dynamic process of signification. One must consider enunciation and discourse. In utterances meaning grows—but this does not alter the content of the code itself, the content of the linguistic signs of *langue*.

As noted, the original construction of theology—the soteriological statements now found in the New Testament—has been a matter of encoding. One of semiotics's main premises is that a sign is not simply a linguistic unit as such. A sign is about conditions and functions. A sign as a role is a manifestation of participation. For anything to serve as a sign entails participation in a web of relations, participation in a network of meanings, and adoption of a set of rules. This web of relations is where meaning is constructed.

Consider, for instance, how the meaning of Jesus's death is governed by a cultic discourse in the classical passage of 1 Cor 15:3–5. This early homology which is filled with expressions betraying an Aramaic original starts with a short *passio Christi* opening, contrasting a normal Greek work order, "Christ died". This description is not left hanging, though. The homology goes on saying: "Christ died for our sins (*hyper tōn hamartiōn hēmōn*) in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3–5; cf. the similar pattern behind Paul's baptismal theology in Rom 6:3–4; for the analysis of 1 Cor. 15, see Hurtado (2005, pp. 168–70)). There are several factors here that form the web of relations investing the opening statement with meaning. First, the implied narrative restores the intention of Old Testament sacrificial laws. Second, the focus is on a substitutional sacrifice (*hyper*). And third, according to the first apostles, Jesus's death should be interpreted as a vicarious act for the transgressions of Israel.

In such passages there are apparently elements that resist the free selection of code—and simultaneously reduce the possibilities and alternatives to interpret this homology. The key question in biblical hermeneutics will now be: what are these elements of resistance?

## 7. The Theory of Discursive Resistance

New solutions require new premises. Saussure spoke of syntagmatic and associative relations. It is necessary to adapt these concepts into a wider hermeneutical discussion. Associative relations concern the networks into which words are taken in utterances. As Peirce has noted, such links create new impressions that depend on different kinds of contexts. For meaning, many formal factors are important, such as lexical meaning (language system), grammar (intrasystemic relations), syntagmatic relations close to the expression (similarities and opposites), semantic fields, and style (legal, hortatory, etc.). In addition to these we encounter factors that directly deal with other syntagmatic and associative relations.

Idiomatic speech also belongs to these factors. It is important to pay attention to linguistic conventions of the speech community. Idioms are only one example of conventional factors that direct semiosis. We must also be alert to intertextual relations and metanarratives. Of these two, intertextual relations are the easier ones to handle, especially in cases where one can detect quotations or clear allusions. Metanarratives, however, open up a field of their own.

How should one understand the crucial theoretical concept "discursive resistance"? The term concerns semantics. The linguistic phenomenon of idioms, therefore, provides an analogue for what I would like to call the hermeneutics of "discursive resistance". We can refer here again to Saussure's notion: "These idiomatic twists cannot be improvised; they are furnished by tradition". Since meaning proper is constructed in sentences, scholars from Saussure and Jakobson onward have stated that, in the process of encoding, there are linguistic "rules" that govern the process. In the production of an utterance there are linguistic elements that resist the free selection of components. As noted, idioms no doubt serve as such factors, and so do cultural conventions. The main thesis of the present article is that when we adapt the same principle to the interpretation of metanarratives the result is quite similar. We cannot speak of linguistic resistance in the strict sense because this is not a matter of *langue* but of *parole*—using Saussure's terminology. Therefore, it is better to speak of discursive resistance. The conclusion, to state it as precisely as possible, is that a metanarrative can control the construction of a crucial theological statement, and traits of this can be found in the New Testament. This is why it is not hermeneutically legitimate to interpret theological statements without exploring the nature of the metanarratives involved.

As we consider metanarratives, their influence in the process of constructing meaning is important. They direct the semiotic process in utterances as implied narratives, among other things. It is noteworthy that they appear to function, theoretically, in the same way as idioms. Their use resists the free selection of components in encoding. Therefore, they are extreme examples of conventional meaning. They also become a means of appropriation: the construction of the sentence is not spontaneous but constrained. One faces a movement from optional to compulsory. When for instance the metanarrative of enthronement directs the construction of a Christological statement, the basic theme dominates the process and becomes compelling for the ancient author. In many cases, an Old Testament passage—an intertextual element—completes the process.

Metaphors, in turn, appear to have a special role in the construction of New Testament theology because they serve as signs in semiosis. Most soteriological and Christological presentations are completely dressed in metaphorical language. Metaphors provide authors with a means for speaking about metaphysical issues, about God's reality. This is, for example, how Koester has applied the theory to gospel studies (Koester 2003, 4f.). Metaphors, therefore, become part of the hermeneutics of discursive resistance. By using metaphors, semiosis in a way locks up the signification process. Metaphors can be freely selected but, once in a text, it cannot be changed into some other image. Instead, it all needs to be understood in terms of hermeneutics of utterance.

What happens when a disciple, apostle, or Jesus' follower gives a theological interpretation of something the Lord does? The construction of an original theological statement—in the early Christian community—is parallel to the construction of a historical description. Some particular event is provided with meaning, it is put into a context, and it is considered significant. In history writing, or creating a short gospel story, the process can be called metahistory. It means a narrative approach to history. Historical narratives are not lists of details but presentations of alleged causalities and meanings. Even these narratives are not devoid of theological meaning.

In theology proper, for instance in Christology, such a process can be called metatheology. The meaning of an event—expressed in utterances—is usually a product of a multidimensional network of ideas, coming from Old Testament texts, prophetic proclamation, Jewish tradition, temple ideology and Jesus' own teaching. This is semiosis. New signs are born in the process where particular theological topoi and motifs are applied to interpret the meaning of historical events, often the "stations" of Jesus' via *crucis* and the empty tomb (like above in 1 Cor. 15). Does one impose a theological structure on the events he or she interprets? The setting is different from that of constructing metahistory.

In metatheology, the multidimensional network definitely invests natural events with meaning. In a sense this is a procedure that implies imposition. But what could serve

as a "structure" that would be clear enough to justify the hermeneutical inference made by the author? There must be a tradition history or religious cultic point of reference on which semiosis can build. But like in the application of a metaphor, the *tenor* must not be overshadowed or displaced by the *vehicle*. Metanarratives no doubt have a primary role here. They are implied in a statement, as was the case in one of our examples where the enthronement act was applied to Jesus' resurrection. Metanarrative guides the new interpretation, for example the belief that after Easter, Jesus the Son of David is a heavenly king who has been invested with eschatological power and dominion.

One of the main postulations in this paper will be that a proper definition both of the linguistic sign and the process of signification leads to a useful hermeneutics on which a New Testament theology can be built.

**8. Jubilee and Liberation from Egyptian Slavery in Theological Semiosis**

How can a metanarrative control and guide the construction of theological statements in the New Testament? What kind of discursive resistance can we decipher in the essential theological descriptions that can be considered basic for the entirety of New Testament theology? The basic claim of this essay is that since narrative is an epistemological factor, several soteriological and Christological presentations revolve around certain topoi (such as metaphors), motifs (recurring topoi) and themes which together provide materials for both simple narratives and large metanarratives. This means that when the reader wishes to explicate the theological content of a particular passage, it will be most useful to focus on the dynamics between descriptions and the narratives they rely on.

A perfect example of such a dynamical relationship between different descriptions and overarching metanarratives is theology concerning an eschatological jubilee, the day of the final restoration of Israel. Liberation and abolition are recurring themes both in Old Testament and in New Testament theology. Furthermore, the narrative of exile and restoration has always been connected with the arrival of an eschatological jubilee (C. J. H. Wright 1992, p. 1025). This issue opens up a hermeneutical horizon where an even more extensive metanarrative can be constructed: the deliverance from slavery. This is a metanarrative that unites exodus theology and the end of the exile. One of the uniting factors is the fact of slavery. Egypt itself, in the writings of the Old Testament, is the "house of slavery," (Ex. 13:3). In several passages, however, Egypt and Babylon are no longer separated from each other. In the latter case, however, the slavery starts to mean more a slavery under sin.

Therefore, the first prominent Old Testament narrative creating the identity of the people of Israel is the one rejoicing over an extraordinary historical event: release from Egypt. It is closely linked with the theme of jubilee—but this element needs some background. Even though the narrative concerning the arrival of the year of freedom, or jubilee, is directed to the future, its foundation lies in the past. Exodus itself is a story of deliverance, and *pesach* is the festival of liberation. Therefore, in Leviticus 25-27, a jubilee becomes the feast symbolizing abolition and the freedom from slavery. It also has many social consequences. Slaves must be set free after seven sabbatical years (49 years; Lev. 25; in this context concerning Jewish slaves) and so the land too will be given a rest (Bergsma 2007, 81f.).

> "And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family." (Lev. 25:10)

These chapters in Leviticus have become statutes of social justice. Furthermore, the ideas of release and even reconciliation have a theological foundation. Our possessions are merely on loan from God himself. They will be returned when the time comes. According to Leviticus, land "shall not be sold in perpetuity" (25:23). This results in the great commission that land shall be released in the jubilee (25:28, 31). The Torah teaches that Israelites are but the temporary guardians of God's property. The Israelites must not be enslaved to money and property more than to the Lord. Mammon, already in Jewish texts, is an idol, a false god (C. J. H. Wright 1992, p. 1026).

In the writings of the prophets, then, the word for jubilee is changed into "the year of liberty" (*drwr*). There may be several reasons for this, but in Leviticus 25 it is already the year when liberty is proclaimed. Meaning grows, and the jubilee becomes an interpretant in a new interpretation. It is easy to see why such a symbol of liberty became crucial in exile as a symbol for returning from captivity. This allows for a fresh treatment of the feast of jubilee and the liberation theme both in Old and New Testament texts. Descriptions build on the confession "God who brought us back from Egypt". It is one of the main symbols for the Mosaic covenant.

In the narrative itself there are several unitive features. They can be found directly in Lev. 25–27, in the passages that describe the year of jubilee. Jubilee and deliverance from slavery belong together. The significant theological conclusion in the Israelite exodus-idealism concerns the ending of slavery. The event of exodus itself reflects being freed from the power of oppressive pharaohs and forced labor in Egypt. The ending of slavery further results in a new morality: no one should be enslaved (Lev. 25:39–42). This theology gives the jubilee its hermeneutical power. Jubilee is a feast of abolition, and the paradigmatic example for this is Egypt. The same argument is repeated in chapter 26. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect." (Lev. 26:13).

It is quite easy to detect a process of signification, semiosis, in these texts. There are also good grounds for understanding the growth of meaning and a new interpretation because, in Old Testament theology, Egypt and Babylon play a similar role. The days of slavery return as Israel is taken into Babylonian exile. The unity of these two is established already in Leviticus 26. First the prophetic proclamation states that in case of apostasy, God will set his "face against you" (26:17). Should this continue more severe consequences will follow: "If you continue hostile to me, and will not obey me, I will continue to plague you sevenfold for your sins." (26:21). A new slavery will take place. "I will bring the sword against you, executing vengeance for the covenant; and if you withdraw within your cities, I will send pestilence among you, and you shall be delivered into enemy hands." (26:25).

> "And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste. Then the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbath years." (Lev. 26:33–34)

Finally, the theme grows into an eschatological proclamation about the restoration of Israel. In the second part of the book of Isaiah, the hope of restoration is based on the arrival of an eschatological jubilee, the year of freedom. Restoration is described in terms of redemption already in Isa. 52:7, in the passage that speaks of the restoration of God's kingship. A little later, in the paradigmatic passage in 61, liberty is promised: "he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners". This day of restoration can be identified as the final jubilee: "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn." (Isa. 61:1–2).

Exodus' rhetoric on slavery forms the basis for the new interpretation. The task of Lord's servant is to "proclaim release to the prisoners." This is a theology of abolition. Liberty to the "prisoners" concerns all those who have lived under God's punishment in the exile. And almost like underscoring the exodus motif in restoration eschatology, the day of salvation is identified as the year of the Lord's favor, the jubilee. A similar interpretation can be found later in Jubilees 50, as well as in 11QMelch. II.4–5 (Bergsma, *Jubilee*, 238).

The narrative tradition both of the Old Testament and Second Temple Jewish theology is quite clear on the issue. This serves as the intertextual background for New Testament descriptions where restoration and abolition are recurrent themes. Considering the particular topoi and themes accompanying the metanarratives, it is obvious that Jesus's teaching against mammon, his proclamation concerning Israel's punishment, the constant focus on slavery, and the great gospel of abolition belong together. These features are inevitably

linked with Jesus's teaching about the new brotherhood and probably even Paul's idea of the congregation as the body of Christ.

There are two particular passages in the New Testament where restoration is depicted precisely as the arrival of the jubilee. At Nazareth Jesus gives a sermon on Isa. 61, the passage proclaiming the mission of the Anointed One: "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Isa. 61:1–2). The short comment on the content emphasizes the actuality of restoration: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Symbols grow. According to this actualizing interpretation Jesus brings the eschatological jubilee into being.

The slavery mentioned by Jesus is often slavery under sin: "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." (John 8:34). Jesus is not speaking merely of the exile itself but of the exilic condition and the reason for the punishment. As the great prophets proclaimed, the reason for the deportation is Israel's sin. Therefore, the way back, the "highway" John speaks about, starts with repentance. A similar rhetorical device is also adopted in the Pauline tradition (Gal. 4:7–9; Titus 3:3).

Furthermore, in Matthew 11:5, in Jesus's answer to John's disciples, we find an eschatological catena, a combination of quotations from Isa. 26, 29, 35, and 61. The time of restoration is not only the time of abolition but also a *kairos* for the entire renewal of creation: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." In the renewal of Israel the cultic uncleanness will be sanctified by God's own initiative. The eschatological nature of the passage became clear after the publication of 4Q521 where restoration theology like "freeing prisoners" is linked with making "the dead alive." Slavery is understood in the broadest possible sense. Paul clearly understands this when he writes that, in Christ, the tyranny of death is conquered (Rom. 5:14–17; 1 Cor. 15:21–22; Gal. 2:19–20).

In New Testament Christology, Christ inaugurates the new exodus–restoration: the new Moses (Acts 3:22), the Savior/*sōtēr* (John 4:42; Acts 13:23) and the Creator himself (John 1:3; Col. 1:16). The importance of these features is highlighted as we recall that, in general, restoration theology in the New Testament is depicted as the entrance and enthronement of the Son of David. The re-enactment of the divine enthronement expresses the fulfillment of the Isaianic *besorah*, "Your God reigns." There is connection between resurrection and eschatological enthronement (Eskola 2001, 217f.).

As regards Paul's theology, its essence can be seen in the "summary of summaries"—as it has been called—of the Letter to the Romans. As a conclusion of his entire train of thought, and right before the last doxology, Paul writes: "God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all" (Rom. 11:32). Both here and in Galatians, salvation is depicted in terms of imprisonment and release. "But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe." (Gal. 3:22). Jubilee and abolition have significant value in the metanarratives that Paul relies on when constructing his soteriology.

Furthermore, abolition is the main theme in Galatians 4. As Wright has noted, Paul speaks here of "slavery" under the elements of the world. Compared with the "complex webs of allusion and echo" in Second Temple Jewish literature, as Wright says, Paul's description is a true exodus-story. He employs several features of the exodus-narrative and makes them serve restoration eschatology, promising liberation (Wright 2013, p. 656; cf. N. T. Wright 1992, p. 268).

There are also some interesting interpretants in New Testament texts that bring some of the themes of Old Testament theology to a new level. In the beginning of Jesus's work, John the Baptist became an interpretant for the end of the exile. Toward the end of Jesus' earthly work, we find another example. Outside Jerusalem, the colt that becomes his royal charger is an interpretant for liberation and the arrival of the new David to Zion (Zech. 9:9). In this eschatological performance no words are needed: the interpretant itself is enough in mediating the message to the hearers (Mark 11:1–11).

As we investigate the growth of meaning and ask how the interpretation of the narratives of liberation from Egyptian slavery and eschatological jubilee have developed, it becomes clear that these themes are significant both in Old Testament theology and New Testament teaching. In the Old Testament, liberation from Egyptian slavery was an essential confessional and theological theme, and it formulated the identity of the Israelite community. This was later expanded into exilic theology, and the jubilee, the year of release, became a leading motif that could be used when expressing the eschatological hope of the people. On this foundation the narrative of abolition was constructed.

In the New Testament, restoration eschatology has a primary role in Jesus's proclamation. Israel still lives in spiritual exile: deported and scattered among nations. Jesus as the Son of Man brings restoration into view and summons the eschatological jubilee that aims at a final abolition of enslaved humanity (Eskola 2015, p. 118). Exodus and the promised land have become metaphors first for the "release of prisoners" of the Babylonian (and Assyrian) exile, and second for the great release of all the prisoners of sin and death.

**9. Conclusions: Signification Theory and the Future of New Testament Theology**

According to the main thesis of the present essay, semiotics of the linguistic sign enables one to tackle some essential questions of biblical hermeneutics. Great theoretical problems are simpler than first thought, and they can be reduced to different views concerning the nature of the sign, the nature of words. Signification, as Benveniste has proved, is a matter of enunciation. Saussure—when understood correctly—ended the era of nominalism despite the fact that phenomenological tradition attempted to prolong its final dethronement.

There are several discursive factors that influence the construction of meaning in sentences. When New Testament scholars wish to explicate the content of the texts, they need to deal with narratives and metanarratives, often supplemented by influential metaphors presenting Christ, for instance, as a king, priest, or slave. It is quite common to refer to such elements as "titles" but, from the perspective of constructing theology, they are details that betray the presence of discursive resistance. The process of encoding has not been free but directed by particular narrative factors.

What are the prospects, then, for the future of New Testament theology? How does a semiotic approach improve this field of study? Firstly, it is easier to assess earlier approaches to the study of the texts. There is no hidden meaning behind the utterances that we deal with, no universal truths (Strauss), no ethical agenda (Harnack), no existential experience (Bultmann), and no deconstructed inversion on which a scholar should build. Instead, there are compelling factors in the text that direct the act of decoding.

Secondly, it is easier for scholars to make a distinction between textual and linguistic approaches on the one hand, and ideological criticism and reader-response on the other hand. The latter deals with issues of reception and assessing meaningfulness. In the academic world today there is no doubt room for an alternative to deconstruction, to subjective reading, to ideological criticism. The theoretical conclusion merely states that these are not examples of New Testament theology. Instead, they are examples, for instance, of philosophy of religion or results of an ideological history-of-religion reading that has gained popularity in recent years.

Thirdly, a better understanding of processes of signification will help scholars to focus on relevant issues. In the context of communication theory, the tenets and intention of the original author will return because encoding is a means for enunciation. Hermeneutics proper depends on a strict definition of the linguistic sign. As meaning is actually constructed in utterances and can be seen as a result of encoding, it has a special character. Meaning when created is evanescent and contextual, directed by many elements that resist the free selection of the code. Therefore, constructing a New Testament theology is a hermeneutical task of decoding.

The theory of discursive resistance is one alternative for a fresh approach since Saussure's linguistic turn. A proper reading of Saussure and Benveniste enables us to make

essential corrections to the understanding both of semiotics and New Testament theology and, simultaneously, to the theory of meaning.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** Neither the manuscript nor any parts of its content are currently under consideration or published in another journal. The author declares no conflict of interest. The author also follows the ethical policies of the journal.

## References

Benveniste, Émile. 1966. *Problèmes de linguistique générale I*. Paris: Gallimard.
Benveniste, Émile. 1971. *Problems in General Linguistics*. Miami: University of Miami Press.
Benveniste, Émile. 1974. *Problèmes de linguistique générale II*. Paris: Gallimard.
Bergsma, John S. 2007. *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation*. VT.S. 115. Leiden: Brill.
de Saussure, Ferdinand. 1983. *Course in General Linguistics*. London: Duckworth.
Delorme, Jean. 1998. Orientations of a Literary Semiotics Questioned by the Bible. *Semeia* 81: 27–61.
Derrida, Jacques. 1973. *Speech and Phenomena. And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
Derrida, Jacques. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*. Brighton: Harvester.
Derrida, Jacques. 1997. *Of Grammatology*, Corrected ed. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Eco, Umberto. 1976. *A Theory of Semiotics. Critical Social Studies*. Thetford: Indiana University Press.
Eskola, Timo. 2001. *Messiah and the Throne: Jewish Merkabah Mysticism and Early Christian Exaltation Discourse*. WUNT 2. Reihe 142. Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck.
Eskola, Timo. 2015. *A Narrative Theology of the New Testament: Exploring the Metanarrative of Exile and Restoration*. WUNT 350. Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck.
Eskola, Timo. 2021. *New Testament Semiotics: Linguistic Signs, the Process of Signification, and the Hermeneutics of Discursive Resistance*. BINS 193. Leiden: Brill.
Greenlee, Douglas. 1973. *Peirce's Concept of Sign. Approaches to Semiotics 5*. The Hague and Paris: Mouton.
Hervey, Sandor. 1982. *Semiotic Perspectives*. London: Allen & Unwin.
Hurtado, Larry. 2005. *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Koester, Craig. 2003. *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
Liszka, James J. 1996. *A General Introduction to the Semeiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
Mosès, Stéphane. 2001. Émile Benveniste and the Linguistics of Dialogue. *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 32: 509–25. [CrossRef]
Ogden, Charles Kay, and Ivor Armstrong Richards. 1966. *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, 10th ed. London: Routledge.
Pharies, David A. 1985. *Charles S. Peirce and the Linguistic Sign. Foundations of Semiotics 9*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
Raschke, Carl A. 1979. *The Alchemy of the Word. Language and the End of Theology*. AARSR 20. Missoula: Scholars.
Sebeok, Thomas A. 2001. *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd ed. Toronto Studies in Semiotics and Communication. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Tobin, Yishai. 1990. *Semiotics and Linguistics*. London: Longman.
Wright, Christopher J. H. 1992. Jubilee, Year of. *ABD* III: 1025–30.
Wright, N. Thomas. 1992. *Jesus and the Victory of God. Christian Origins and the Question of God 2*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
Wright, N. Thomas. 2013. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God I-IV. Christian Origins and the Question of God 4*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

religions

MDPI

*Article*

# New Testament Theology: Too Theological, Too Difficult, and Too Repetitive?

**Michael F. Bird**

Ridley College, Parkville, VIC 3052, Australia; m.bird@ridley.edu.au

**Abstract:** This essay argues that New Testament Theology (NTT) is an indispensable mediating discipline between historical exegesis and systematic theology. It defends NTT against claims that: (1) NTT should be replaced by the study of early Christian religion; (2) The NT is too diverse and disparate to sustain any unifying theology; and (3) NTT has been over-done so that there is nothing new to be said. The essay proceeds to the defense of NTT by contending that theology is part of the substance and significance of the NT. In addition, the NT contains several varieties and unities that can simultaneously challenge and aid theological reflection. Finally, the essay proposes a fresh approach to explicate the theological texture and religious impetus of the NT with a view to renewing living faith communities.

**Keywords:** biblical theology; New Testament Theology; religion; canon; early Christianity

**Citation:** Bird, Michael F. 2022. New Testament Theology: Too Theological, Too Difficult, and Too Repetitive? *Religions* 13: 518. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060518

Academic Editors: Joel B. Green and Joseph Rivera

Received: 13 February 2022
Accepted: 25 May 2022
Published: 6 June 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



## 1. Introduction

According to Rosner (2000, p. 10), biblical theology may be defined as the "theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyse and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus." New Testament Theology (henceforth NTT) is a subspecies of biblical theology as applied to the literary corpus identified as the New Testament. NTT is on such a perspective a mediating disciple. On the one hand, NTT is not NT historical background, not comparative analysis of the NT with other texts from antiquity, and more than exegesis of the NT, because NTT engages in tacit synthesizing of the NT texts in search of coherences and normativities. On the other hand, NTT is not systematic or dogmatic theology, because it seeks to map the issues raised by the texts themselves, it refuses to answer alien questions, and it resists the imposition of rigid systems to organize the text. I am aware that NTT can be defined and practiced in several ways (see Klink and Lockett 2012; Hatina 2013). Yet, on my reckoning, NTT is a mutually historical and theological enterprise that stands between the descriptive and the dogmatic, between what the text "meant" and what it "means", between analysis and synthesis, between ancient context and living communities of faith (see Morgan 1973, pp. 24–26, 32, 34, 59–62; Schlatter 1973, pp. 126, 151–52; Carson 2000; Bird 2009). NTT is part of the many discourses pertaining to the Christian religion. J. P. Gabler's famous distinction between Biblical Theology and dogmatic theology in his 1787 essay was not intended to silo them permanently away from each other, rather, it was intended to "find tools for a meaningful dialogue between them" (Eskola 2013, p. 244). I'd aver that Biblical Theology prepares for and leans in towards Systematic and Practical Theology even as Systematic Theology is a partner in the exegetical process itself by explicating the judgments of biblical texts for their moral, ontological, and theodramatic implications (Vanhoozer 2014, p. 38).

However, there are several serious challenges to the validity of NTT. If NTT is neither pure history, nor pure theology, is there a sense in which it is a half-hearted effort at both and satisfies the aims of neither? Is a "theology" derived from a so-called NTT nothing more

than a deposit of dogmatic assertions read into the text to give contemporary justification to the continuing prejudices and superstitions of religious communities? Given the radical diversities of belief, practice, and provenance in the NT, is finding a coherent theological message to the NT even remotely possible? Finally, given the sundry NTTs available, why on earth would anyone write another one since it is unlikely that anyone has anything original to say in or through a NTT?

A comprehensive defense of NTT is impossible, however, in this essay I do intend to address some of its challenges and try to assuage some of its critics. I believe that NTT is necessary as a mediating discipline between historical exegesis and systematic theology. Therefore, in light of those challenges, I will tackle the issues of whether NTT is too theological, whether a NTT is even feasible given the diversity of early Christianity, and whether it is possible to say anything fresh or pioneering by writing a NTT.

**2. Is NTT Too Theological?**

One upshot of J.P. Gabler's distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology is that NT scholars periodically suggest that one must choose between them. Consequently, for some, NTT should be revised and replaced with a theology of early Christianity, or NTT should be deliberately displaced by a secular, critical, and deconstructive approach to Christian texts. There are several reasons given for such a turn from NTT to NT religion, history, and deconstruction.

First, the NT canon is allegedly a totalizing collection that was codified in the fourth century. Accordingly, to limit one's study of early Christian religion to the NT is to accept the version of Christian proffered by catholic bishops and secured by imperial sponsorship in the fourth century (Wrede 1973, pp. 70–71). In addition, the canon was also the result of a deliberate effort to exclude the voices of "other" Christian groups such as Christian Jews, Gnostics, Valentinians, Marcionites, Montanists, and, in particular, women (Koester 1991, p. 472). To accept the canon as a collection is to place oneself under the authority of those who canonized the text and excluded so many others. Study of Christian religion must deliberately go beyond the confines of the canon and its defenders and explore the varieties and diversities of early Christianity (Wrede 1973; Räisänen 2000, 2006).

Second, NTT is purportedly premised on the notion that religion is cognitivist rather than phenomenal and NTT is apparently exercised in such a way as to provide historical warrant for authoritative truth claims that prop up dogmas in contemporary religious groups (Meeks 2005, pp. 167–68). The function of NTT is to establish a hierarchy of truths which may then be wielded in an authoritative manner in religious institutions in the present day. Instead of NTT, one should pursue an account of early Christian religion, by exploring the texts and voices of popular devotion with equal concern for mainstream actors as marginalized figures. As such, scholars of religion must see their task as questioning rather than defending of theological dogmas subtlety derived from the NT texts.

In response, I have no problem with rooting NTT in the traditional *Einleitung*, considering texts and traditions beyond the canon, and incorporating a comprehensive understanding of ancient religion into a NTT. I find these illuminating rather than interdicting the NTT project. However, I remain concerned and confused as to the rejection of the canon as a theological entity and I am likewise disinclined to abandon theology for comparative religious history.

To begin with, concerning the canon, it was not an arbitrary collection, but was formed as a consensual corpus. The basic architecture for the New Testament was in place by the end of the second century with the four Gospels, Paul's epistles plus Hebrews, as well as 1 John and 1 Peter, were widely recognized, commonly cited, and read in public gatherings (see Trobish 2000). The periphery of the canon was contested, 2 Peter and Revelation the most earnestly debated, while the *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, *1 Clement*, and *Apocalypse of Peter* came close to inclusion. The texts that became canon need not be regarded as carrying some ontological feature that separated them from other Christian literature. Yet, what became the NT was a literary corpus that was thought to contain the

essential and unifying elements of the church's testimony to Jesus Christ and believed to carry authentic apostolic memory of Jesus. The canon was not everything the church had to say about Jesus Christ, but it was the beginning of what many believed must be said. The canon was considered the literary testimony of the apostles that met with catholic consensus.

As for displacing NTT with the study of early Christian religion, this poses a false dichotomy. For example, Esler (2005, pp. 2, 6–7) is aware of the problems that occur in reducing NTT to excavating theological ideas that are to be merely made available to systematic theology. Yet Esler (2005, p. 1) detects no dissonance with "an avowedly theological" aim to speak of "God's ongoing relations with human beings and with the cosmos" especially when married with an approach that attempts to join the dialogical connection between canon and community. In Esler's mind, one can avoid the reductionism of cognitivist or moralizing approaches to NTT by a pursuit of the social-historical dynamics which itself may speak towards contemporary Christian experience and identity (Esler 2005, pp. 35–36, 39). One may valorize the descriptive task precisely because it is concerned with texts which furnish identities, carry cultures, and bear testimony to enduring theological truths. There is, then, no reason why "primordial Christ-oriented experience, understood in its own terms, cannot enrich contemporary Christian experience and identity within the model of social-theological communion" (Esler 2005, p. 36).

It also must be asked if "theology" and "religion" can really be neatly compartmentalized. For a start, theology is merely the ideation of religion, the beliefs which sustain the praxes, rituals, devotional habits, symbols, and community of the early church. Even Wrede (1973, pp. 76, 106) could not really isolate Paul's "theology" from Paul's "religion" in the end. Similarly, the genius of Bultmann, arguably Wrede's greatest successor, was his synthesis of *Religionsgehschicte* with the existential quest to discover theological meaning for human existence. Bultmann was committed to describing the historical processes behind early Christianity, but only in the context of the meaning of history itself as unveiled in the kerygma. Bultmann's *theologie* was geared towards mending what others had rented asunder, namely, the act of thinking and the act of living (Bultmann 1952–1955, 2.244-51). Also, I must point out that preferencing "religion" over "theology" is itself a theological judgment. Pietist theologians such as Philipp Jakob Spener eschewed dogmatic theology in favour of biblical theology precisely because biblical theology was a type of theology that connected Christian belief to habits of a Christ-shaped heart (Scobie 2000, p. 13). Even John Calvin, the most dogmatic of Protestant dogmatists, named his magnum opus not *Institutes of Christian Theology* but *Institutes of Christian Religion*. Calvin was focused on "religion" because, for Calvin, theology was pointless and perilous without the discipline and devotion of true religious piety. In which case, the purported dichotomy between theology and religion is wordsmithery since preferencing religion over theology emerges precisely out of a commitment to a lived-out theology. Theissen (1999, pp. 274–82) has pursued an explicitly descriptive approach to early Christian religion and yet still believed that such an approach permitted one to plot the normative power of religion in the Christian life. He identified Christian thought as a "semiotic cathedral" combining axiomatic beliefs, myth, rites, and ethics. Thus, to ascertain ideational patterns, diversities, and coherences within the NT, in both its constituent parts and as a whole, whilst showing how they come to empirical expression and attain normative status, is necessary and unavoidable for the study of early Christian religion.

Furthermore, to end NTT or a theology of early Christianity at the point of description is mundane and misses an opportunity. The NT does not contain a "theology" as a treatise let alone bequeath to us a specific system. Rather, the NT is the literary deposit of authors who engaged in "theologizing," that is, trying to work out the significance of Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and exaltation for their faith and the fellowships united around it (Hooker 2006, p. 77; Dunn 2009, p. 38). NTT is a contemporary continuation of that theologizing, it is conversing with and contextualizing from the NT, working out afresh who is "the prophet Jesus from Nazareth" (Mt 21:11) and looking to imbibe "what is true, noble,

righteous, pure, lovable or admirable" (Phil 4:8). To avoid curatorial antiquarianism in the study of the NT surely one must ask the question, "So what?" What is the significance and relevance of the NT for anyone today? For those of us who are a part of living communities of faith, the NT theologian must provide some notes as to how his or her results can assist those operating in the realm of systematic theology, ethics, missions, human flourishing, inter-faith relations, and contemporary religious life (see e.g., Schlatter 1973, pp. 117–66; Bockmuehl 2006, pp. 44–47; Ashton 2006, p. 10; Thielman 2005, p. xxvii; Stuhlmacher 2018, p. 772).

The pursuit of contemporary significance should not be considered alien to the study of NTT or NT religion. I gained a whole new appreciation for Bultmann's project upon discovering that Bultmann had little interest in identifying a theology *of* Paul or a theology *of* John as much as he was in engaging in a creative theological reading *from* Paul and *from* John that spoke into the human situation in his own day (Bultmann 1952–1955, 2.251). Even Räisänen, for all his advocacy for a secular and global approach to NTT, still acknowledged that NTT "may be a legitimate part of a self-consciously ecclesial theology" (Räisänen 2000, p. 8). Laffey (2005, p. 54) takes her cue from Räisänen and affirms that "increasing numbers of people who identify with both church *and* society, or who understand themselves as church *in* society, are studying the church's Scriptures with an overtly contemporary agenda." Morgan (1973, p. 26) would seem justified in saying: "[I]t is one thing to say that theological interest in the New Testament must not contravene the canons of modern historical method, and quite another to imply that these prohibit any theological interest in it or interpretation of it by a historian while he is wearing his historian's hat." In which case, the task of NTT is, says Udo Schnelle, "to envision the past in view of the present, to explicate it in such a way that its future relevance can be seen" (Schnelle 2009, p. 25).

The first movements of a NTT, as an exegetical and excavational exploration of the texts are indeed important, as they provide the crucial minerals for assembling a Christian worldview and its corollaries. There is no manufacturing of doctrine and no melding of praxis without first extracting minerals for refinement through detailed exegetical analysis. Yet the descriptive and exegetical task cannot, should not, and never really is pursued without reference to its theological, sociological, and existential entailments. For example, it is useful to scan Pauline ethics for traces of Stoic philosophy, thereafter, one cannot help but wonder how a Christian and Stoic interface can resource people with the facilities of resilience and contentment in their quest for human flourishing today. Furthermore, while it may not be fashionable to want some kind of payoff for historical study beyond antiquarian interest, there is a case to be made for the kind of "academically unorthodox experiment" proposed by Brian Blount so that study of the biblical texts is informed by contemporary experiences of Blacks in America while the text also speaks to contemporary Black experiences (Blount 2001, p. 16). An observation that Esau McCaulley believes invites Black readers to fuse together a sense of Scripture's power and authority with Black experiences of oppression and subjugation. He writes: "If our experiences pose particular and unique questions to the Scriptures, then the Scriptures also pose unique questions to us" (McCaulley 2020, p. 20). In effect, descriptive and reader-oriented interrogations of texts can still be liberative and normative for contemporary human experience. Thus, without an interest in the abiding meaning and significance of the NT, the most one is doing is updating the bibliography and re-arranging the footnotes for an over-done domain of discourse. Instead, the NT Theologian should be alert to how the NT is a force for renewal in living communities of faith and also has a meaningful voice in mainstream secular and religiously pluralistic cultures (Hatina 2013, pp. 3–4).

### 3. Is NTT Even Feasible?

On a more critical perspective, NTT might be begrudgingly permitted if pursued in a piecemeal fashion whereby one focuses on the theologies of each part or perhaps each sub-corpus. Yet that would be the limit of any NTT because the diversity of the NT precludes any unifying enterprise. In some minds, early Christian literature, such as the writings

that became the New Testament, are "a collection of conflicting and competing religious views, symbols that represent institutionalized experience" (Eskola 2013, p. 309). It must be conceded that NT diversity is indeed a challenge to creating a synthetic and unifying NTT (see Bird 2009, pp. 274–76). Is there really a theological unity between Philemon and Jude? How does one derive a normative theology from religious reasonings that were contingent upon pre-modern assumptions, local circumstances, were improvised, and contested by other Christian groups? What of development within an author's thinking such as Paul's thoughts on the Torah from Galatians to Romans? Then there are genuine differences between authors such as Paul and James on faith vis-à-vis works (Rom 4:1–25; Jas 2:14–26) and Paul and John the Seer on whether believers can eat food sacrificed idols (1 Cor 8:1–13; Rev 2:14, 20). Some argue, not without reason, that if there is to be a unity to the NT, it cannot be found within it, but is artificially constructed and imposed upon it. To this end, Helmer and Landmesser (2004, p. 7) preface their volume on the canon by saying: "The argument unifying all contributions in this book is that the unity of the canon is hermeneutically constituted. Unity is a function of interpretation. The unity is 'outside' not 'inside' the text. It is imposed onto the text by its hearer or reader, by a community of interpretation or by academic scholars, whether from an intra-biblical or an extra-biblical location."

These objections cannot be glossed over, and I would add to them the inherent subjectivity and dangers that accrue in pursuing a "canon within the canon". However, I'm persuaded that there are types of coherences or unities across the NT and these are significant for the history of early Christianity just as they are for application to contemporary Christian theology.

The NT, for all its diversity, is not a chaotic collection, as if it comprises of a Twilight novel, a shopping list, a weather report, and excerpt of a Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus. There are similarities ranging from literary genre, language, symbols, narratives, and patterns of devotion. As such, I think there are several clusters of convergence across the NT.

First, *theologically* there are several shared convictions across the NT. Theissen (1999, p. 282) detects several "religious axioms" that were widely held by various Christians. He asserts: "[T]he consensus of primitive Christianity is governed by two basic axioms, monotheism and belief in the redeemer. In addition, there are eleven basic motifs: the motifs of creation, wisdom and miracle, of renewal, representation and indwelling; of faith, agapē and a change of position; and finally the motif of judgment." I would add that Paul evidences a basic agreement with the Jerusalem leaders about the gospel (1 Cor 15:11; Gal 1:6–9, 2:1–15) and he also assumed that churches he did not establish shared in the same "tradition" as he did (Rom 6:17; Col 1:6–7). The four Gospels, for all their variety, share a pool of Jesus traditions and comprise of kerygmatic biographies with Jesus at the centre, that all climax in his death and resurrection, and intend to motivate readers towards following in the way of Jesus (see Johnson 2006). There was already developing in the mid-first century a notion of faith as "the faith," a distinct body of belief even if it lacked the specificity and formality of later creeds (Balla 1997, pp. 200–7).

Second, *scripturally*, unity was expressed in a shared literary culture among NT authors. There was a common reverence for and usage of the Jewish Scriptures. Plus, several shared interpretive strategies based on common rhetorical and midrashic techniques. The basic story of Jesus and what was required of his followers was universally considered to be "according to Scripture." There was a collective concern, evident from Matthew to Revelation, to root the new messianic movement in Israel's religious heritage and its sacred literature.

Third, *phenomenally*, unities are exhibited in certain theological intangibles. These include shared religious experience of the risen Lord and the Spirit's effervescent life, rituals such as baptism and the eucharist, demonstrations of hospitality to believers from other regions, co-belligerence against sectarian rivals, the adoption of mutually recognized modes of worship, and a shared commitment to embody God's love in Jesus's name.

Fourth, *sociologically*, the Christian movement as a whole was an identifiable and homogenous sect according to several Christian and non-Christian authors (Acts 11:19–21; 24:5, 14; 28:22; Suetonius, *Nero*, 16; Justin, *Dial*. *Tryph*. 108; Tertullian, *Apol*. 5). Indeed, we can speak of an acute consciousness within the early churches of being a worldwide movement that saw itself connected to various groups, Jewish and Gentile, with a shared ethos and identity, who were interested in each other's affairs, quite evident from the Pauline, Johannine, Clementine, Ignatian, and Quartodeciman letters. Ehrman (2003, pp. 179–80) comments: "The proto-orthodox were in constant communication with one another, determined to establish theirs as a worldwide communion . . . The proto-orthodox were interested not only in what happened locally in their own communities but also in what was happening in other like-minded communities." To which I would also add that Trebilco's (2004, p. 716) study of Christianity in Ephesus shows how different Christians groups in close proximity could certainly rub up against each other with some friction, but degrees of "commonality" still existed and the Ephesian Christian assemblies in particular were quite willing "to acknowledge the validity of each other's claim to be part of the wider movement that we call early Christianity".

Consequently, the early church was not fraught with endlessly endemic disunities. There were several clusters of convergence in belief and practice shared by churches from east to west. Matera (2005, p. xvi) identifies a "diverse unity" in the New Testament. Hurtado (2013) prefers the term "interactive diversity" to account for the unities and diversities in early Christianity. Otherwise Markschies (2015, pp. 343–44) proposes a "plural identity" with an identity-forming center labelled as the "Holy Spirit" and pluralistic expressions in different institutions in the church. So, it may be fashionable to say that there is no single theology of early Christianity available in the NT, but there were in fact unitive fixtures manifested in shared beliefs and sacred texts, common practices, shared experiences, and collective identity. These unities are expressed precisely in the NT! In the words of Bockmuehl (2006, p. 103): "At the end of the day, when everything is said and done about the genetic vagaries of the New Testament canon's formation, it remains an equally *historical* phenomenon that the church catholic came to recognize in these twenty-seven books the normative attestation of its apostolic rule of faith."

In which case, it is a justifiable and perhaps even necessary task of NTT to identify the types of unity across the entire NT in order to have an overarching sense of what the New Testament is about (Carson 1995, pp. 30–31). In terms of a unity to the NT, one could opt for a fairly minimalist version like Dunn (2006, p. 403) who posits a "unity between the historical Jesus and the exalted Christ, that is to say, the conviction that the wandering charismatic preacher from Nazareth had ministered, died and been raised from the dead to bring God and man finally together, the recognition that the divine power through which they now worshipped and were encountered and accepted by God was one and the same person, Jesus, the man, the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord, the life-giving Spirit." Schröter (2013, p. 327) acknowledges that position but extends it further through a "unifying bond" or an "interpretation of reality with a centre" that includes "faith in the God of Israel as the creator of the world and human beings, in the fact that Jesus Christ represents this God with full vitality, and in the fact that he is active by the Spirit." Or else one could opt for a cluster of convergences as Frey (2007, pp. 50–51) does: "[The] collective interpretation of the New Testament witness to the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is arguably the most significant reason why it is fitting to ask about the unity of New Testament theology. The common assumption of the Old Testament belief in God and, even more precisely, the testimony of the divine love of God in Christ, the eschatological tension between the 'already-now' and the 'not-yet' first present in the proclamation of Jesus and then constituted by the conscious awareness of eschatological fulfilment, or even the agreements between the Jesuanic basileianic-proclamation and the later Pauline construal of justification doctrine are further points of convergence and lines of concurrence" (trans. M. Bird). After one identifies a cluster of unities one is then free to

pursue "the normative exposition of a religion through an interpretative summary of its canonical texts" (Theissen 2006, p. 207).

**4. Are NTTs Too Repetitive?**

Although biblical theology more broadly has a wide and diverse set of practitioners, the people who write NTTs tend to be white, male, and Protestant. They are, almost exclusively, German or Anglo-American men. In addition, NT theologians appear to pursue their NTT in three basic ways: (1) Corpus by corpus; (2) Thematically; and (3) Analyzing diversity and unity. Given the proliferation of NTTs since World War 2, given the ethno-religious homogeneity of NT theologians and the predictable methods and findings that they proliferate, and given that no NTT since Bultmann (1952–1955) and Ladd (1993) have really had any impact upon the academic or ecclesial scene, do we really need another NTT?

This is a question I have much pondered precisely because I am contracted to write a NTT which is 10 years over-due, so I have been mulling over these very questions. My procrastination has been partly because I have become acutely aware that adding another NTT volume to the existing collection is like adding a glass of water to Lake Michigan or adding a buzzing sound to a cacophony of noises on a busy freeway. And yet, I remain hypnotically captured by the project, attracted to the task like metal to a magnet, and drawn to the challenge like a moth to a flame. That is because writing a NTT presents the chance to pursue a theology of the NT and to engage in theologizing from the NT. A NTT is a once in a life time chance for a scholar to state what matters most in the NT and translate that into a face-finding report for theologians and practitioners. Further, a revitalized NTT may even open up new vistas for wrestling with the faith of the first Christians and exploring ways in which such a faith can be renewed today. But how? Well, I do have a preliminary proposal!

First, in terms of structure, I intend to adopt the following approach. I think NTT needs a prolegomenon with an overview of the historical Jesus and the historical church prior to Paul. In other words, we need to explain why and how the NT began to be written. Here I partly agree with Bultmann (1952–1955, 1.3) that the historical Jesus is not part of a NTT but is the presupposition of a NTT. But that presupposition needs an exposition before writing a NTT. The same holds true for the Jerusalem church, one must start, "beginning from Jerusalem" (Lk 24:47) and end with how believers "went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus" (Acts 11:20).

Second, as to how to materially organize a NTT proper, I hope to proceed with a survey of (1) Paul, (2) the four Gospels and Acts, (1) Apostolos [Catholic letters] and Apocalypse [Revelation], (5) the edges around the New Testament with a glance at the Didache, *1 Clement*, Ignatian letters, and Papias of Hierapolis; and (6) conclude with comments on what is the center of gravity in the NT in terms of beliefs, ethics, and praxes with accompanying commentary on how this matters for living communities of faith today. The purpose of such a structure is to engage in an analytic exposition of the NT in the context of early Christianity before shifting to the synthetic task of mapping out the meaning of NTT for contemporary faith.

The closest analogue to my proposed structure of first examining Jesus and the early church, followed up with Paul, the Gospels, and early Christian letters, is Craig Blomberg's *A New Testament Theology* (Blomberg 2018). However, my proposed project differs when it comes down to the brick and mortar construction of each chapter, hence the next point!

Third, as for what to include in a chapter on each NT sub-corpus, we need more than a listing of key theological ideas since that has already been done to death. Instead, I propose the following approach: (1) Situation and setting, a brief outline of the circumstance of each corpus in order orientate the reader to the text(s); (2) Old Testament substructure, analysis of how each sub-corpus is built upon the Jewish scriptures because the OT provided the architecture that the NT is established upon and establishes the arc that NT faith largely follows; (3) Rhetoric, examination of what attitudes and actions the author is trying to

persuade the audience to accept, showing that believing certain things entails behaving certain way; (4) Canonical conversations, mapping the distinctive contributions of each sub-corpus and how they relate to or grate against other NT writings; (5) Global perspectives, illustrating the influence of the texts upon different Christian traditions and showcasing the wisdom from different wings of the global church; and (6) Challenges, this has two sides, noting the ways that the NT exhorts us to better discipleship (e.g., attitude to wealth), but also how the NT presents us with problems that we must address (e.g., acceptance of the normalcy of slavery).

## 5. Conclusions

There are many reasons why another NTT does not need to be written and I have tried to address some of these concerns. *Yes*, NTT needs to be anchored in the study of early Christian religion. *But* the NT itself is irredeemably theological in contents and concerns and explicating its significance for living communities of faith is a task that needs no apology. *Yes*, the diversities within the NT are real as they are radical, and they present a strenuous challenge to anyone trying to find a central or unifying message in the NT. *But* clusters of convergence can still be found even amidst the range of diversities. *Yes*, NTT seems to be done, re-done, and over-done by the same group of white Protestants males through a limited range of approaches. *But* NTT can be retooled, renewed, and refocused by deploying some fresh approaches at the macro (book structure) and micro (chapter structure) levels. As one who hopes to soon write a NTT, my objective is that such a volume would move beyond the descriptive exegetical task and begin the first movements toward an informed normative theology that assists Christian disciples on how "to learn to think accurately, behave morally, preach passionately, sing joyfully, pray honestly, obey faithfully" (Peterson 2005, p. 182).

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

Ashton, John. 2006. History and Theology in New Testament Studies. In *The Nature of New Testament Theology*. Edited by Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 1–17.
Balla, Peter. 1997. *Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise*. Peabody: Hendrickson.
Bird, Michael F. 2009. New Testament Theology Re-Loaded: Integrating Biblical Theology and Christian Origins. *Tyndale Bulletin* 60: 265–91. [CrossRef]
Blomberg, Craig L. 2018. *A New Testament Theology*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
Blount, Brian K. 2001. *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh: New Testament Ethics in an African American Context*. Nashville: Abingdon.
Bockmuehl, Markus. 2006. *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
Bultmann, Rudolf. 1952–1955. *Theology of the New Testament*. Translated by Kendrick Grobel. 2 vols. London: SCM.
Carson, Donald A. 1995. Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective. *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5: 17–41. [CrossRef]
Carson, Donald A. 2000. Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology. In *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, pp. 89–104.
Dunn, James D. G. 2006. *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 3rd ed. London: SCM.
Dunn, James D. G. 2009. *New Testament Theology: An Introduction*. Nashville: Abingdon.
Ehrman, Bart E. 2003. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and Faiths We Never Knew*. Oxford: OUP.
Eskola, Timo. 2013. *Beyond Biblical Theology: Sacred Culturalism in Heikki Räisänen's Hermeneutics*. BIS 123. Leiden: Brill.
Esler, Philip F. 2005. *New Testament Theology: Communion and Community*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Frey, Jörg. 2007. Zum Problem der Aufgabe und Durchführung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments. In *Aufgabe und Durchführung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. Edited by Cilliers Breytenbach and Jörg Frey. WUNT 205. Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, pp. 3–53.
Hatina, Thomas R. 2013. *New Testament Theology and its Quest for Relevance: Ancient Texts and Modern Readers*. London: T&T Clark.
Helmer, Christine, and Christof Landmesser. 2004. Introduction: A New Biblical-Theological Approach to the Unity of the Canon. In *One Scripture or Many? Canon from Biblical, Theological and Philosophical Perspectives*. Edited by Christine Helmer and Christof Landmesser. Oxford: OUP, pp. 1–12.

Hooker, Morna. 2006. *The Nature of New Testament Theology*. Edited by Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett. London: Blackwell, pp. 75–92.
Hurtado, Larry. 2013. Interactive Diversity: A Proposed Model of Christian Origins. *Journal of Theological Studies* 64: 445–62. [CrossRef]
Johnson, Luke Timothy. 2006. Does a Theology of the Canonical Gospels Make Sense? In *The Nature of New Testament Theology*. Edited by Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett. London: Blackwell, pp. 93–108.
Klink, Edward W., and Darian R. Lockett. 2012. *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
Koester, Helmut. 1991. Epilogue: Current Issues in New Testament Scholarship. In *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*. Edited by Birger A. Pearson. Minneapolis: Fortress, pp. 467–76.
Ladd, George Eldon. 1993. *A Theology of the New Testament*. Edited by Donald A. Hagner. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Laffey, Alice L. 2005. Reflections down the Road. In *Moving Beyond New Testament Theology? Essays in Conversation with Heikki Räisänen*. Edited by Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, pp. 45–60.
Markschies, Christoph. 2015. *Christian Theology and Its Institutions in the Early Roman Empire: Prolegomena to a History of Early Christian Theology*. Translated by Wayne Coppins. Waco: Baylor University Press.
Matera, Frank. 2005. New Testament Theology: History, Method, and Identity. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67: 1–21.
McCaulley, Esau. 2020. *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
Meeks, Wayne A. 2005. Why Study the New Testament? *New Testament Studies* 51: 155–70. [CrossRef]
Morgan, Robert. 1973. *The Nature of New Testament theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter*. SBT 25. London: SCM Press.
Peterson, Eugene H. 2005. *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Räisänen, Heikki. 2000. *Beyond New Testament Theology*, 2nd ed. London: SCM.
Räisänen, Heikki. 2006. Towards an Alternative to New Testament Theology: 'Individual Eschatology' as an Example. In *The Nature of New Testament Theology*. Edited by Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 167–85.
Rosner, Brian S. 2000. Biblical Theology. In *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, pp. 3–11.
Schlatter, Adolf. 1973. The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics. In *The Nature of New Testament Theology*. Edited by Robert Morgan. London: SCM, pp. 117–66.
Schnelle, Udo. 2009. *Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
Schröter, Jens. 2013. *From Jesus to the New Testament: Early Christian Theology and the Origin of the New Testament Canon*. Translated by Wayne Coppins. Waco: Baylor University Press.
Scobie, Charles H. H. 2000. History of Biblical Theology. In *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, pp. 11–20.
Stuhlmacher, Peter. 2018. *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*. Translated by Daniel P. Bailey. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Theissen, Gerd. 1999. *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*. Translated by John Bowden. London: SCM.
Theissen, Gerd. 2006. Theory of Primitive Christian Religion: And New Testament Theology: An Evolutionary Essay. In *The Nature of New Testament Theology*. Edited by Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett. London: Blackwell, pp. 207–30.
Thielman, Frank. 2005. *New Testament Theology: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
Trebilco, Paul. 2004. *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*. WUNT 166. Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck.
Trobish, David. 2000. *The First Edition of the New Testament*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Vanhoozer, Kevin J. 2014. Is the Theology of the New Testament One or Many? Between (the Rock of) Systematic Theology and (the Hard Place) of Historical Occasionalism. In *Reconsidering the Relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology in the New Testament*. Edited by Benjamin E. Reynolds, Brian Lugioyo and Kevin Vanhoozer. WUNT 269. Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, pp. 17–38.
Wrede, William. 1973. The Task and Methods of New Testament Theology. In *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter*. Edited by Robert Morgan. SBT 25. London: SCM, pp. 68–116.

religions

MDPI

*Article*

# Hope for the Future of New Testament Theology

**Rodney K. Duke**

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608, USA; dukerk@appstate.edu

**Abstract:** This paper presents the author's hope for changes in New Testament (NT) theology particularly as currently experienced in American Christian culture. Those changes are based on exegetical work that seeks to place the NT texts into their Jewish first-century thought world. The first part of the paper presents examples of theological concepts that have crept into NT exegesis, translations, and Christian thinking, concepts that appear to be foreign to or contrary to that original-audience thought world. The second part of the article seeks to present a reading of Rom 3:21–26 that better represents Paul's thinking than what is found in some English translations that read the text through the lenses of some of the foreign concepts mentioned in Part 1. The resulting vision for the future of NT theology is twofold: for NT theologies to self-critically rid themselves of the infiltration of foreign concepts, and for the field to better ground its work in exegesis and translations that better respect the Jewish thought world of the texts.

**Keywords:** New Testament theology; biblical theology; theological exegesis; theological hermeneutics; New Testament translations; righteousness of God; faith of Christ; work of Christ; Romans 3:21–26

**Citation:** Duke, Rodney K. 2021. Hope for the Future of New Testament Theology. *Religions* 12: 975. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110975

Academic Editors: Joel B. Green and Stephen Dawson

Received: 28 August 2021
Accepted: 9 October 2021
Published: 8 November 2021



## 1. Introduction

My hope for the future of New Testament (NT) theology is that it will become more grounded in placing the NT in the context of the Israelite Scriptures and the thought world of the NT writings. I am writing from the perspective of one in the American Christian culture and as a generalist in biblical studies who has taught the Hebrew Bible (HB)/Old Testament (OT) and NT literature for thirty years. More importantly, I write as one whose main fields are OT/HB and literary criticism, and whose focus is always on trying to reconstruct what the biblical texts might have meant to their original audiences. In my exegetical work, in the classroom, and in church setting, I frequently run up against concepts of NT theology disseminated to the public that stand in opposition to a close reading of NT texts, particularly from an OT/HB perspective. That is, some of these popular concepts reflect foreign theological systems of thinking more than they do the world of the NT. Moreover, some of these concepts stand as significant obstacles to the formation of a healthy Body of Christ. The solution to this issue is to better locate the NT texts in relation to the HB and the thought world of the NT.

### *1.1. Working Parameters*

Although this paper is a product of research, I am writing it in a personal style as a position paper that refers to the identification, perception, and assessment of issues from my circle of experience. That subjective side is, after all, the nature of the human pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

Although NT theology proper may be considered a subset of NT studies, I am avoiding that distinction. I am recognizing that one's NT theology will to some degree precede interpreting, translating, and applying the NT, since one is forever caught in a hermeneutical circle. What one believes theologically influences one's understanding of the texts. One cannot escape this circle, but one can seek to be metacognitive about it.

In the same way, although my goal as a biblical exegete is to understand the NT as a work of communication to a first-century audience and to seek to uncover what it meant to that audience, I recognize this goal as impossible to achieve. I am caught up in the hermeneutical circle of my own horizon of experience and limited knowledge as I interact with the texts. Nevertheless, it is worth striving for this goal.

My intended audience is not just NT theologians—I am not presenting a critical survey of their works—but is both scholars who work in interpreting and translating the NT and lay people who study, teach, and preach its texts. My main concern is not to critique NT theologians per se, but the NT theologies behind many standard exegetical works and translations that misinform a popular audience.

### *1.2. Approach*

Below, I will first provide a few examples illustrating the kind of theologically influenced exegetical problems that I encounter (Part 1). Having suggested how serious the problem is through those examples, I will then focus on the problem at the level of translation by translating and discussing a key Pauline text (Rom 3:21–26) that relates to some of these issues (Part 2). I recognize that it is too much to lay the blame for all of these examples at the foot of NT theologians, particularly since translations tend to follow traditional patterns and not the latest theological work. Indeed, in some cases, NT theologians would agree with me.[1] Still, I see a significant need for NT theologians to advance more vocal and active correctives as part their future role. Since this article is a programmatic proposal based on my synthesis of accumulative study, I cannot defend every claim here—that would call for a much longer work. Moreover, as an exegete and an HB scholar, I do not pretend to have mastered the current literature of NT theology proper.

## 2. Part 1: Exegetical Encounters with Poor NT Theology

### *2.1. Jewish Jesus, Savior of a People*

My experience with Christian teaching at the popular level is that for the most part it does not recognize Jesus as a Jew, as the savior to Israel, who unlike the Israelites was successfully tested in the wilderness, whose gospel (good news) was the proclamation of the presence of the Kingdom of God and the nowness of eternal life, a movement extended to Gentiles as a fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, etc.[2] This experience leads me, first, to advocate for NT theologies that guard against "Gentilized", or perhaps better "de-Judaized", Christianity that lacks grounding in the essential worldview and theology of the HB/OT and has little understanding of Jesus as the Jewish messiah. Such Gentilized Christianity, for example, tends to miss the key concept behind the first words out of Jesus' mouth in the Gospel of Mark (1:15) about the presence of the Kingdom of God and the mission on which Jesus sent his disciples. Second, in concord, NT theologies should guard against the modern Western model of defining the work of Christ mainly in terms of effecting individual salvation, something that feeds into the American individual "rights" movement that ignores serving the common good. The person with an HB/OT perspective will develop how the Christ relates to the salvation of Israel and fulfilling the promise to Abraham about Israel being a blessing to the nations/Gentiles.[3] This perspective recognizes that Jesus calls people into a corporate identity, which is set apart to be holy, and to extend the reign of God. As a Christian, one cannot embrace one's salvation and role within the will of God without understanding that one is embedded in a greater corporate identity and mission that goes back to God's call to Abraham.

### *2.2. Work(s) of Christ and Atonement models*

Some popular NT theologies limit the work(s) of Christ almost exclusively to a focus on Jesus' death and in particular a Reformed penal substitutionary model of atonement influenced by Luther and Calvin, a model that is foreign to the Israelite atonement symbol system.[4] Such a narrow, and rather non-Jewish, focus misses the richness and depth of the work(s) of Jesus. In the NT, the whole Christ event contributes to the salvific outcome,

such as: Jesus' involvement in creation, his incarnation, his life ministry by words and deeds, his death, and his resurrection. All of Jesus' titles and roles are significant, such as: "God with us" (Mt 1:23), the Logos (Jn 1:1), son of David and son of Abraham (Mt 1:1), the last Adam (1Cor 15:45), the Light of the world (Jn 8:12), King of the Jews (Mt 27:11), the Holy and Righteous One (Acts 3:14, our High Priest who intercedes for us (Heb 4:14–16; 723–25), and so forth. Moreover, a penal substitutionary model of the atonement, which is foreign to the HB/OT atonement system, loses two biblical emphases. First, it loses the connection between the God of grace and mercy of the HB/OT who "bears/lifts" the sin of people as expressed symbolically in the atonement process and Jesus who in like manner bears the sins of people (Heb 9:28; 1Pet 2:24).[5] Second, it sometimes loses the emphasis on what is new in Christ; that is, in part, what it means to participate in the death and life of Christ in the new age of the Spirit and of life and of reigning over sin and death.

### *2.3. Eschatological Sequence*

At both the popular and scholarly level, I find an often-presupposed eschatological sequence: a person dies, "goes to heaven," and then gets eternal life. However, the Gospels portray Jesus teaching one of the Jewish eschatological models of the time period: a person dies, "sleeps" in some holding place/state, and awaits the resurrection of the dead at which time will be judgment.[6] I marvel weekly at how people at a worship service will recite from one of the classic church creeds that they are awaiting the "resurrection of the dead," but apparently do not know what they are saying. Even the often taught, so-called "rapture" passage of NT Dispensational theology, 1 Thess 4:13–18, states quite clearly that at the Lord's coming, it will be the dead in Christ (those fallen asleep) who will be the first to rise and greet Christ in a triumphal processional entry. The popular-level notion of "getting saved" in order to "go to heaven" completely loses sight of the "nowness" of salvation and of the role of the Body of Christ in this world.

### *2.4. Body–Soul Dualism, Christian Anthropology*

In concord with the scholarship of this issue's editor, Joel Green, I run up against the body–soul dualism that entered Christian theology at an early stage historically (Green 2008). To the contrary, the Israelite/Jewish understanding of a person as found in the HB/OT is wholistic and not one of a soul = person that enters and leaves a bodily shell.[7] The word translated to "soul" in the OT, *nephesh* (נֶפֶשׁ), refers to breathing animals. It is not something that enters a body at birth and leaves at death. The body–soul dualism is a Greek concept that arose with the postulation that the universe was eternal and could never gain or lose anything. A first-century Jew open to the concept of resurrection would not have accepted something less than a bodily raised, albeit transcendent, Jesus as proof of the resurrection of the dead and the irruption of the Kingdom of God into the present era. Moreover, in conjunction with rejecting a body–soul dualism, NT theologies need to provide the Church with a proper biblical anthropology of embodied, embedded, and extended humans in order to ground our self-perception, our actions, our morality, and our ethical decisions. As embodied beings, we need to avoid the pitfalls of monistic materialism and spiritualism as well as separation dualism that pervade our culture. We need to pursue what it means to be embedded not just in our various relationships with our environments but also what it means to be "in Christ." We need to live according to our identity as extended humans who have been given spiritual gifts and functions within the Body of Christ.

### *2.5. Immortality, the "Fall", Total Depravity, and Original Sin*

NT theologies have also brought into pop-level Christianity foreign concepts of human immorality, the "Fall," total depravity, and "original sin" (Duke 2016–2017, pp. 242–50). In the HB/OT, humans are never said to have been created as immortal. To the contrary, they are portrayed as dependent on access to the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden in order to maintain life. The consequence of Adam and Eve seeking to overturn the cre-

ational order and "be like God" (Gen 3:5), the root of sin, was for them to be barred from the Tree of Life and face their mortality (3:22). One should note that according to Revelation, in the New Jerusalem after judgment, after those whose names that are not recorded in the Book of Life receive the "second death" (Rev 20:11–15), those who are granted life will once again have access to the Tree of Life (Rev 21–22, partic. 22:2, 14). So, too, the HB/OT does not have a "Fall" theology in which Adam's sin leads to total depravity and is passed down seminally to all humans as in Augustine's teaching of "original sin." Rather, the story of the sin of Adam and Eve demonstrated how failure to give glory to God as God in the face of self-seeking brought a reversal of chaos back into the order that God created, such that humans since then have to face their own mortality.[8] This is Paul's point in Rom 5, when he speaks of how death entered the world and came to all people, because of the "one man" (vv. 12–14). Without this understanding of humanity being under the realm of death and accountable for their own sin(s), Christians will miss the significance of participating now in the reign of life inaugurated by Jesus (Rom 5:17). Again, the Church needs to be equipped with a proper biblical anthropology.

### *2.6. Hell and Gnashing of Teeth*

Connected with the above non-biblical concepts, popular NT theologies have constructed a concept of "hell" that is far from what a first-century understanding of final judgment would have been.[9] Once the Greek notion of immortal humans was uncritically accepted into some NT theologies, one is left with the logical, but false, conclusion that people who do not receive eternal life are somehow consciously punished eternally, rather than receiving the "second death" as set forth in Revelation. Along with the mistaken notion of human immortality, was the early English translations of both Hades and Gehenna by the same term "Hell," a tradition that apparently followed early German translations. However, to a first-century person Hades was an image of a holding place of the dead until the resurrection of the dead. One should note in Revelation that Hades itself, after it gives up the dead, is thrown into the lake of fire (20:14) that is present in the heavenly tableau. The Gehenna tradition, coming from Jeremiah, was a place where dead bodies were dumped without proper burial. Then, too, based on this foreign construct of Hell, the formulaic clause, "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" is misunderstood. It receives the atypical treatment in some modern English translations of being treated as a dependent clause instead of as an independent clause, and it is usually understood as an action attributed to those who receive punishment.[10] However, the punishments mentioned would have communicated a judgment of death to a first-century audience, with the result that the recipients could not be weeping and gnashing teeth. Instead, this formula probably reinforced the notion of death having occurred and presents an image of those mourning at a funeral. Without a NT theology grounded on understanding basic NT terms, Christians will misunderstand the nature and consequences of final judgment.

### *2.7. The Sovereignty of God*

Quite popular in American Christian culture is the tendency to fall into the Greek heritage of platonic, abstract definitions of God in distinction from humanity. Whereas humans are limited and frail, God is defined as omnipotent, omnipresent, omnibenevolent, even apathetic, etc. I have heard my philosophy colleagues naively argue the false conundrum that one cannot explain the presence of evil if God is both omnibenevolent and omnipotent. In reality that problem is constructed by creating a "god" based on abstract definitions and not on the revelations of a God who interacts with humans relationally. Perhaps most troubling is defining God abstractly as sovereign in such a way that makes God responsible for all that takes place. One must remember that the HB/OT terms that speak of God as sovereign use that language metaphorically. In the ancient Israelite culture, a king was never understood as personally accountable FOR everything that happened within his realm; the king did not cause everything. Rather, a good king was to act rightly in response TO what happened within his domain; that is, mainly to bring about

righteousness, justice, and peace. When NT theologies lose this distinction, the Church tends not only to trivialize others' pain and suffering as "the will of God," but also lose sight of how our relational God enters into our crises and suffering and calls us to address their causes.

*2.8. Being Reckoned as Righteous vs. Legalistic Perfectionism and Imputed Righteousness*

Most troubling to me about the popular-level NT theologies I encounter, due largely to a culmination of reading into the NT some of the wrong conceptions mentioned above, is how the grace of God in the HB/OT is downplayed, overlooked, or distorted. The result is a negative influence on one's understanding of the work of Christ as wrongly foregrounded on a supposed Jewish teaching of failed legalist perfectionism that calls for the righteousness of Jesus to be imputed to a person. Sound HB/OT and Jewish theology never taught that righteousness was self-achieved by people obeying God's stipulations.[11] Rather, when such "doctrines" as the Fall, original sin, and total depravity have been imported into Christianity and then supplemented from a mentality of criminal law[12] with the "doctrines" of penal atonement and the necessity for Jesus' righteousness to be imputed to people, then it is those NT theologies that are imposing a kind of "legalism" on the Bible that is foreign to the HB/OT and its understanding of covenant relationship with God.

In the second part of this essay, I will provide a translation with notes on a Pauline sentence in Romans that shows the continuity between how God operates in both the HB/OT and NT. In my comments, I will focus on how a key concept of Paul, and of Israelite religion and mainstream first-century Judaism in general, is that God's declared assessment of someone being right (righteousness) is, and always has been, based on the "heart" of the person, that is whether or not the person is in a relational commitment of entrusting oneself to God Yinger (2019, chpts. 8–9). The Church cannot lose sight of this basic teaching and retain a vital proclamation of the mercy and goodness of God.

## 3. Part 2: An Illustration from Translating Paul (Romans 3:21–26)

*3.1. Introduction*

In the second part of this essay, I would like to offer an exegetical overview of Romans 3:21–26 by way of translation with comments to illustrate the circular nature of how NT theology influences translations and conveys that theology to the readers. My motivation for translating this text was to grapple with the inadequate and even misleading nature of some modern English translations that seem to reflect the imposition of theological systems on the text rather than reading it in its original contexts. I encourage readers to compare my translation (and the following paraphrase) with other English translations such as NIV, NRSV, and the NET Bible for some of the differences. Moreover, I recognize that an abundance of exegetical works exists on this text and its related concepts, works which I cannot pretend to control or enter into point-by-point debates, although I will note areas of controversy.[13] My general purpose is programmatic: to try to read Paul in light of the HB/OT and first-century Pharisaical Judaism as a suggested move in a more positive direction. I offer it to NT scholars for their assessment.

Romans 3:21–26, which is one sentence in Greek, focuses on the Christ event as an expression of the righteousness of God. Paul's main theme and various issues begin well before these verses. However, I am mainly focused on Paul's terminology here and how the Christ event, the Gospel that inaugurates a new era, still expresses a historical continuity of the faithfulness of God to Israel in the past as it reveals God's righteousness both in terms of God's faithful behavior and God's act of reckoning a person as righteous by faith.

In the first few chapters of Romans, Paul makes an argument for how it is that the Gentiles are included in the covenant community. He does so by showing how the model of covenant faithfulness/relationship of God's current work in the Christ event predates Torah[14] and goes back to the Abraham event (God's offer and promises followed Abraham's response). Paul's model is from the HB/OT, mainly Genesis 15:6 and reinforced by Hab 2:4.[15] In Genesis 15:6, God graciously offered a covenant relationship of himself to

Abraham without first having to "cleanse" or "atone" him; Abraham accepted that offer, entrusting himself to God (וְהֶאֱמִן בַּיהוָה 15:6);[16] and God regarded that response as "righteousness" (*ṣdqh* צְדָקָה 15:6); that is, what is "right" in terms of God's offer of relationship. This basic connection between entrusting oneself to God and God counting such a person a righteous is all but lost in some NT theologies of the Christ event.

Paul leads up to explaining the Christ event in continuity with Abraham's expression of faith by arguing that God had already found such a right response from Gentiles who do good and seek God's glory even without the Torah[17] (2:6–11, 14–15), that is, from Gentiles who are circumcised inwardly (2:26–29). In fact, Paul says that no one is properly a "Jew" if not inwardly circumcised of heart (2:28–29). In Chapter 4, Paul develops how Abraham is the father of all who share in his faith response (vv 16–17) and how righteousness is reckoned by God to all who entrust themselves to the God who raised Jesus from the dead (vv 22–24), thereby including Gentiles in the promises to Abraham. This Abrahamic prototype of a response of faith resulting in what God considers "righteous," prior to Torah even existing, is found again in Gal 3:6–14. For Paul, as in Israelite/Jewish religion proper, Torah obedience is a response of the one of faith (the "righteous") and not the prerequisite "work" to be deemed righteous.[18]

Most importantly, to show the continuity of God's righteousness, Paul uses parallel language between the Abraham event and the Christ event as he briefly formulates it in 3:21–26. Paul's parallel language draws on concepts of participation of one life in another.[19] Paul's theology of salvation is one of participation (e.g., those who 'believe into' Christ— *pisteuō eis*/πιστεύω εἰς—are in Christ, and, Christ in turn is in them through the Holy Spirit (Chapter 6–8). This vocabulary of participation also comes into play within Chapters 3 and 4, in which Paul makes a rabbinic style argument that connects the Christ event to the Abraham event. Paul draws the connections between how the Gospel reveals the righteousness of God (theme introduced in 1:16) through the faith/faithfulness of Jesus (3:22) on behalf of "the one of the faith of Jesus" (3:26) in parallel to the faith/faithfulness of Abraham (4:9) on behalf of "the one of the faith of Abraham" (4:16). That is to say, as those of the "faith of Abraham," participate in his act of entrustment and are reckoned righteous, so, too those who are of the "faith/faithfulness of Jesus are reckoned righteous, or as Paul states it a little differently: those who (like Abraham) entrust themselves to the God who raised Jesus from the dead are considered righteous (4:23–24). To this end, Romans 3:21–26 focuses on how the righteousness of God is revealed and expressed in the Christ event. Due to the complexity of this long Greek sentence, English translations can easily lose the key theme of God's righteousness. Therefore, below the Greek text, I first offer a visual schematic translation of the flow of thought.

*3.2. Text (Rom 3:21–26)*

1. Νυνὶ δὲ χωρὶς νόμου δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ πεφανέρωται
2. μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν (See Note 19)
3. δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ
4. διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
5. εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας.
6. οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολή
7. πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον καὶ ὑστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ
8. δικαιούμενοι δωρεὰν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι
9. διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ
10. ὃν προέθετο ὁ θεὸς ἱλαστήριον
11. διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι
12. εἰς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ
13. διὰ τὴν πάρεσιν τῶν προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων ἐν τῇ ἀνοχῇ τοῦ θεοῦ,
14. πρὸς τὴν ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ
15. ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον καὶ δικαιοῦντα
16. τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ [20].

*3.3. Translation (Spacing Indicates Flow of Thought, Not Syntax; Bracketed Numbers Refer to Comments Below in the Next Section)*

1. But now, apart from Torah[1] **righteousness of God**[2] has become made known
2. being attested[3] by the Torah and the prophets[4]
3. **even** (*de*) **the righteousness of God**
4. through (*dia*) the faith(fullness) of Jesus Messiah[5]
5. on behalf of (*eis*[6]) all of the ones believing (pres ptc) [7]
6. (*gar*) because there is no distinction [btw Jew and Gentile]
7. (*gar*) because all have sinned and become destitute[8] of the glory of God
8. [on behalf of] (the ones) being *declared righteous*[9] gratuitously[10] by his grace
9. through (*dia*) the in-Christ-Jesus deliverance[11]
10. whom God dedicated[12] [as the] Mercy Seat[13]
11. through (*dia*) trust in his blood[14]
12. for (*eis*) a **verification**[15] **of his [God's] righteousness**
13. through (*dia*) the remission[16] of former sins by the forbearance of God
14. for (*pros*) **the verification of his righteousness** in the present time
15. for (*eis*) **him to be righteous AND the one who** *declares righteous*
16. the one of the faith of Jesus.[17]

*3.4. Commentary Notes*

1. "But now", focuses on the current situation, and "apart from Torah" emphasizes Paul's point that as in the time of Abraham, the act of God declaring a person "righteous" is not based on Torah obedience.

Excursus on holiness, covenant, and Torah. Knowing that I am dealing with three debated topics in biblical theology, I will simply give my HB/OT theological synthesis. Within the relational contract of covenant, God calls his people to be holy (e.g., Exod 22:31). The root notion of "holy" (קָדֵשׁ *qōdeš*) is not perfection but being dedicated or set apart. Therefore, when the Israelites entered into relationship/covenant with Yahweh they were to be set apart to Yahweh and set apart from other people; they were to have a distinctive identity. Obeying the covenantal commands and stipulations of Torah was to set them apart and to have two primary results. First, it would be for their own good to align themselves to the Creator (e.g., Exod 15:25–26; Deut 4:39–40; Psa 1); that result is part of the directional or guidance nature of "torah," (תּוֹרָה *tŏrāh*) a word which is also used of wisdom (Prov 13:14). Second, obedience to the covenantal stipulations would form a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:3–6). Their priestly role is a high calling; that is, as priests they stand in as intermediaries between Yahweh and the nations, a role that appears to relate back to Abraham's calling for his people to be a blessing to all other peoples (Gen 12:1–3). Other nations would be attracted to their wisdom (Deut 4:6). Still, although the covenantal stipulations are "righteous" (Deut 4:8, see too Paul in Rom 8:4 for example), never are we told that simply obeying them makes one righteous before God. Paul, who once saw himself as blameless in terms of righteousness in/by the Torah (Phil 3:6), recognizes that being reckoned by God as righteous cannot come by merely following Torah (Gal 2:21; 3:21), because one can pursue Torah righteousness out of works rather than out of faith (Rom 9:31–32)[21].

2. God's righteousness is the key focus of this sentence, but that focus is sometimes lost in translating this lengthy sentence. Paul starts this theme and his thesis in the Thanksgiving section (1:16–17). He states there that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe (Jew and Gentile). He explains further that in the gospel God's righteousness is revealed out of (*ek*) faith into (*eis*) faith and draws on Hab 2:4 for support: "The righteous one out of (*ek*) faith will live." Paul comes back to develop this thesis more in our text.

One should note that at 1:17, theologians debate whether the genitive "righteousness of God" is: (1) a status given to believers "from God," (2) a declaration "of God" that makes

righteous, or (3) an attribute of God (see NET notes). Such sophisticated distinctions are based on theological presuppositions read into the text and not stated in the text. In the previous verse, one could also wrongly try to parse the genitive construct "the power of God," when God comprehensively: is powerful, exerts that power, and empowers. In the same way, God's righteousness" (*ṣdqh* צְדָקָה) has both the nuances of God being faithful to God's character as just/right in relationship to others (e.g., covenant faithfulness as well as judgements), and how in accord with God's character, God considers a person as "righteous." I would suggest that the key notion here of the righteousness of God being revealed "out of faith into faith" (ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, 1:17) involves this connected or circular notion that God's faithfulness, which comes **out of** God's righteous character and behavior, leads **into** a response of faith (entrusting in God), which God counts as righteousness, as we see demonstrated in the Abraham event of Gen 15:6. This notion is also captured in Paul's quotation here (1:17) of Hab 2:4, "the righteous out of faith (ἐκ πίστεως) will live." The ambiguity of that statement (who's faith/faithfulness?) is fine and maybe deliberate, since Paul is neither exactly rendering the MT nor the LXX. One can rightly take it to mean either "out of God's initial faithfulness" or "out of one's response of faith" or both.

Here (3:21–26), following Paul's argument about how righteousness is by faith and not Torah, the idea would be that God's righteousness is demonstrated by how he counts people as righteous (see more at Comment 9).

3. Note the connection of thought about God's righteousness being attested here and verified below at lines 12 and 14, as Paul emphasizes how God's righteousness is revealed in the Gospel (1:16–17). This is a focal point that gets lost in translations of our text/sentence.

4. How is God's righteousness being attested/witnessed? The present passive suggests that Paul's point is that the Scriptures present an ongoing testimony of the righteousness of God. Paul explains in Romans 4 how the Scriptures that tell of the Abraham event reveal the promises to Abraham as including Gentiles. Paul makes a similar case in Gal 3:6–9; however, in that context (14–20) Paul argues that Christ is the seed of Abraham, so that the blessings of Abraham come through (*dia*) faith in (*en*) Christ. See Comment 5 below on *dia* (through), *ek* (from), *en* (in), and *eis* (into).

5. Controversial: The idiom of "faith of Christ/Jesus" (*pisteōs Christou/Iēsou* / πίστεως Χριστοῦ/Ιησοῦ) has been much debated[22]. However, a study of the genitive construction of *dia* (through), and *ek* (from), with *pisteōs Christou* ("faith of Christ"), shows that Paul consistently uses this idiom in a "subjective," or perhaps better, "general" sense of what comes from the Christ/Christ event, not from the believer. That means that *pistis* would refer to Christ's faithfulness (recognizing that the noun *pistis*/faith refers to a volitional act). The same meaning is there in Paul's use of the "faith of God" (3:3) and the "faith of Abraham" (4:9). The use of *dia* and *ek* expresses a result coming through or from an agent. This reading of the genitive leads into the debate about whether *pisteōs Christou* ("faith of Christ") can ever be an objective genitive; that is, meaning "faith in Christ." I think not, because when Paul does want to communicate that concept, he uses the directional prepositions of *en* (in) or *eis* (into) (e.g., in or into Christ) to convey his participation theology, not the vague genitive. Following Zerwick (1963, pp. 12–13), I have come to doubt that there is a pure "objective" genitive, at least not in Paul's Semitic Greek. The categories of "subjective" and "objective" genitive may be an unhelpful carryover from a Latinized approach to biblical Greek.

6. Here *eis* has the sense "for, on behalf of" (*BDAG* #5).

7. This phrase could equally modify "righteousness of God" or "faith of Jesus." Since it appears that Paul sometimes follows the Hebrew tendency to move from general to greater specificity, I think it qualifies the latter phrase. However, in either case the two options are closely linked, since the "faith of Jesus" expresses the "righteousness of God".

8. It is difficult to translate ὑστεροῦνται, which expresses the concept of coming into a passive state of "lacking, destitute of" (w/gen.). It is often translated "fall short, which might strike one as communicating human striving, a concept that would appeal to

translators who read into the text that Paul is mainly arguing against a concept of "works-based righteousness." However, Paul's main point is the equality of Gentile and Jew in terms of righteousness by faith. Additionally, "fall short" loses the passive voice, which might be a theological passive often used to express an activity in which God is involved. Moreover, we need to take into account what Paul thinks about the glory of God. Seeking/acknowledging the glory/honor of God is what people have exchanged for something lesser (1:23); although glory is something they can seek (2:7) and receive (2:10). As a result of exchanging God's glory, people's hearts are darkened (1:21, probably a theological passive) and God gives them over to their desires (1:24, 26, 28) to depravity. Given this train of thought, ὑστεροῦνται likely indicates a "descent" away from the divine order associated with the glory of God rather than "falling short" of it. So, I render it "become destitute".

9. Controversial: Declared/counted righteous" is better than "justified," since the latter term, popular among NT theologies, may lead the English reader to think of the criminal justice system. However, a criminal justice system is not about establishing or restoring relationships. (Although a criminal may receive a "just" penalty and be restored to society, such penalties do not result in a restored relationship with the victim. That restoration of relationship occurs only when the victim offers mercy and forgiveness as God does through the atonement system in the HB/OT and through the work of Christ.) Note the connection between "the ones believing" (line 5), this line (8), and line 16 in which the one declared righteous is "the one of the faith of Jesus." "Declared/counted righteous" fits Paul's repeated emphasis on God's response to Abraham, reckoning him righteous because he believed (entrusted in) God, Gen 15:6. (See Rom 4:3–6, 9–11, 20–25; Gal 3:6–14; so too James 2:23).

Excursus on "righteous". To understand Paul's use "righteous" (δικαιοσύνην), I go back to Hebrew *ṣdqh* צְדָקָה ("righteousness") in Gen 15:6). *Ṣdqh* expresses the notion of meeting the highest standard or measure (e.g., gods', God's, king's, people's) of correct relational behavior and/or legitimate status. Both of these nuances belong together in social contracts such as in the context of a covenantal (legal) relationship or in a matter like a court case (addressing a type of social contract) in which the "Justice/Judge" can declare a person cleared/legitimated or not. In the case of being legally cleared, this is not a state only achieved after someone is punished. God, as the standard, can both be righteous in his faithful, loyal behavior and be the one who declares/counts as righteous (legitimates the relational standing of) the person of faith. This dual divine demonstration of righteousness is what Paul sees so clearly and ultimately demonstrated in the Christ event as God makes him the Mercy Seat (*hilastērion* ἱλαστήριον) (line 10) but is lost by NT theologies that miss the HB/OT connection between one's faith and being considered righteous.

10. The adverb here, δωρεὰ, can have the sense of "without cost" or "without reason/result." Although "freely" works well, it can have the sense of "loosely." As such, even though "gratuitously" is not a word in frequent use, it captures the sense of a status that is given without cost to the recipient. Again, contrary to some NT theologies, the declaration of "righteous" is based on God's mercy, not on a penalty paid or a status earned.

11. There is possibly a parallel track of thought among the four "through" (*dia*) phrases (lines 4, 9, 11, 13), such that what was done through the faith/faithfulness of Jesus (line 4) is developed further as ἀπολύτρωσις (line 9), a term which is best rendered here as "release" or "deliverance" or even "transference" rather than "redeem" or "ransom." Paul, again in accord with the HB/OT, does not use the term narrowly as if some literal price was paid to a third party as a ransom, but uses it more generally as deliverance from one state of being into a new state (e.g., the deliverance of our old body into a new state, Rom 8:23; or in association with sanctification, 1Cor 1:30; or in association with spiritual inheritance, Eph 1:14; or, most importantly, being rescued from the dominion of darkness and into the kingdom of God, Col 1:13–14). In Romans, Paul argues for a work of Christ that delivers people from the reign of sin and death into the reign of the Spirit and life (5:12–6:14) just as God redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (e.g., Exod 6:6).

12. The term προτίθημι is sometimes translated as "to display," but it means more than that. In the Greek HB/OT, it is used to describe how cultic objects are set forth or offered before God (e.g., Exod 29:23; Lev 24:8) with the nuance of "dedicated to." When God is the object of the verb (e.g., people do not set forth God before them, Psa 54:3), again the notion of "dedicated to" is there. Here God is setting forth Jesus as the Mercy Seat; that is, presenting or dedicating Jesus to that place/function.

13. Controversial: Although sometimes translated at "propitiation" (KJV) or "sacrifice of atonement" (NIV, NRSV), the word ἱλαστήριον (*hilastērion*) in the Greek HB/OT refers to the Mercy Seat, the top of the ark of the covenant that resided in the Holiest Place in the Temple. It was the place where the blood of the sin offering on the Day of Atonement was applied to symbolize the removal of the effects of sin and the restoration of a right relationship with Yahweh. The Mercy Seat in terms of cultic symbolism was the closest space/place of "contact" between God and the people. It was the place of reconciliation. Some translators, apparently for theological reasons, have given preference to the non-biblical, external Gentile usage of the term as relating to a propitiatory offering to a god as if Jesus was killed to appease God. However, this preference for non-Jewish usage ignores Paul's understanding as a trained rabbi of Jewish Temple practice and cultic language. For instance, elsewhere Paul calls Jesus "the sin offering" itself (*hamartia* ἁμαρτία) which provided the pollution cleansing blood (Rom 8:3) that was applied to the Mercy Seat. Thus, Paul, too, uses *hamartia* again in 2 Cor 5:21 where it is sometimes translated too generally as "sin", when *hamartia* was also the technical term that Paul would for the sin offering.

14. Strangely, NET does not render "in his blood" as modifying "through faith (*pistis*)" which it follows, but adverbially modifying "dedicated" ("displayed" NET). For example, NET has "God publicly displayed him at his death as the mercy seat accessible through faith," translating "in his blood" as "at his death" because the translator wanted to have Paul avoid making "a violent mixed metaphor' (translator note, 32). As mentioned above (Comment 13), Paul also refer to Jesus as "the sin offering" who provides the cleansing lifeblood in Rom 8:3. We should recognize that Paul had no problem using both metaphorical images here: Jesus is not only the Mercy Seat (place of reconciliation) where the blood was applied, but also the sin offering that provided the blood that symbolically eliminated the pollution of sin and restored an unimpeded relationship with God. Paul does not avoid mixed metaphors elsewhere. For example, C.K. Barret, in his commentary on 2 Corinthians mentions Paul's "hopelessly mixed" metaphors (Barrett 2001, p. 152).

15. The term ἔνδειξις does not merely mean an act of demonstration, but has the stronger sense of verification, proof. Again, the continuity of God's righteousness in the past is proven in the Christ event.

16. Paul is stating that God's act now of dedicating Jesus as the Mercy Seat verifies God's past merciful righteousness. The term πάρεσιν (*paresin*) is about remitting a debt, not overlooking or "passing over" sin in a negligent, forgetful way as popularly understood theologically. Rather, Paul is making a positive statement about God's righteousness. However, some translators (e.g., NIV) and even lexicons see πάρεσιν of "done-before sins" (τῶν προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων) as negative, as if God had not properly, or yet, punished people for sins of the past. They seem to see God's reputation as being "just"—apparently in a Calvinistic legal sense—as being at stake and creating the need for Jesus to receive the punishment of "justice" in order for his work to be redemptive. Such readings presuppose a theology in which punishment is necessary to achieve God reckoning a person as "righteous." However, as seen in Paul's example of Abraham (Gen 15:6), that is precisely not the case. God reckons a person as righteous on the basis of that person's entrustment/faith. "Passing over sin" in the sense of remitting debt is precisely what the mercy of God is about in the HB/OT! God's appointment of Christ as Mercy Seat serves as a continuation of the proof of God's former merciful righteousness, albeit the ultimate one. For Paul, the Gospel of Christ introduces the new era of the Spirit, an era that supersedes that of the Torah, an era in which the righteousness of God is ultimately revealed in God

being both the one who is righteous and also the one who makes righteous by his grace through the faithful act of Christ being the *hilasterion* (Mercy Seat) for the redemption of the who believes (trusts oneself to) Christ Jesus ("the one of the faith of Jesus," line 16).

Further support of this point is the repetition of ἔνδειξις ("verification;" see lines 12 and 14 as well as 2) of God's righteousness; that is, the verification of God's righteousness occurs in reference to the former sins and in reference to those in the present time/age (τῷ νῦν καιρῷ). As I have tried to capture the flow of thought in the spacing of my translation, this whole sentence is focused on developing Paul's theme of the revelation of God's righteousness and how, in continuity with the behavior of God in the past, it is ultimately displayed in the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

17. As mentioned in my introduction to the translation, this phrase "the one of the faith of Jesus" is going to be paralleled by "the one of the faith of Abraham" in Rom 4:16 as Paul shows that God's inclusion of Gentiles goes back to the promises to Abraham and the response of entrustment/faith that that God counts as "righteousness".

### *3.5. Summary of Key Points*

Since it is easy to become lost in the details of Paul's long, complicated, but important sentence and his flow of thought within the immediate context, I will summarize some key points. First, it is imperative to track Paul's theme of how the gospel reveals the righteousness of God (starting at 1:16) and its continuity of expression from Abraham through the Christ event (specifically 3:21–26). This is not to say that there are no unique aspects of the Christ event, but rather to say that some NT theologies, which read a perspective of forensic "justification" into the NT, miss the basic nature of faith and righteousness. The righteousness of God is how God "keeps faith" to his offer of relationship and how he declares those "righteous" who trust in him. This theme is wrapped around the Abraham event of Gen 15:6 and supported by Hab 2:4, because Paul explains the inclusion of the Gentiles in terms of the Abraham event, using it as a model with some parallel language: "faith of God", "faith of Jesus", "faith of Abraham", "one of the faith of Christ", "one of the faith of Abraham". Sometimes overlooked is how before the Christ event, "being righteous in God's sight" could apply to Gentiles, who not having the Torah, but obeying it, are considered inwardly circumcised of heart (e.g., 2:13–15, 28–29). Therefore, my graphic translation tries to show how this text is about the revelation and verification of God's righteousness in continuity with God's earlier expressions of righteousness.

Second, I have sought to understand the Christ-event language of 3:21–26 through an HB/OT perspective that assumes Paul knew the Temple symbol system well (e.g., Mercy Seat and atonement language). This perspective counters some popular NT theological positions, particularly that of penal substitution. God offers the relationship gratuitously, not after "cleansing" someone (e.g., Abraham, the people of Israel, Gentiles). The Temple atonement symbolism is about how God mercifully forgives those who have broken covenant, not that God achieves "justice" by demanding a price of punishment. So, my translation varies most on: "faith of Christ" not meaning "faith in Christ", *hilasterion* as Mercy Seat and not "propitiation" or "expiation," "in his blood" referring to the cleansing blood of the sin offering and not "death" (the punishment idea), and *paresin* meaning remission of a debt (forgiveness) and not a temporary "passing over" until God could finally take care of sin by punishing Jesus.

### *3.6. Translation Paraphrase*

However, now, God's righteousness has been made known apart from Torah, though the Torah and the prophetic writings show how it works. We are talking about how God puts people in right relationship with God by means of Jesus Christ's own faithfulness. This deliverance is offered to those who entrust themselves to God (whether they are Jews or Gentiles) because all humans, on their own, lack a relationship with God. God delivers people gratuitously—as a free gift—with no deserving or earning involved. This is possible because Jesus functions for us like the Mercy Seat (in the Old Testament atonement rit-

ual) when we trust in Jesus's function as a sin offering and enter into intimate relationship with him. This plan of God's verifies God's righteousness, both in the way God forgave sins in the Old Testament and in the way God forgives sins now. God is righteous, so God is the one who can declare humans righteous now, and God does this for the person who benefits from the faithfulness of Jesus[23].

## 4. Resulting Vision for Future NT Theology

As illustrated in Part 1 and Part 2 above, NT theologies have been read into exegeses and translations of the NT and embraced in popular American Christianity, leading me as an HB/OT scholar to a twofold vision for the future of NT theology. The first aspect, and ongoing step is for disciplinary introspection to rid NT theologies from the infiltration of foreign concepts such as Greek body–soul dualism, platonic definitions of God, the conflation of Gehenna and Hades, atonement models far from the conceptual realm of the Israelite atonement system, etc. A task of the NT theologian is to restate and reapply the messages of the first-century texts to a contemporary audience. However, the theologian must guard against the encroachment of foreign concepts and paradigms for the messages of those texts to be faithfully represented in Christian teaching and NT translations. Just as historians in the 20th century became self-critical of essentialist approaches to history and moved to more contextualized historiography, so NT theologies need to be introspective, self-critical, and self-purging.

The second part is concomitant: NT theologies need to become more Israelite/Jewish. For example, they need to recognize: Hebraisms in the Greek texts, an Israelite (biblical) anthropology, Abrahamic participatory theology in Paul, the Israelite symbol system of atonement, Jewish eschatologies, Davidic-Messianic theology in the hymnic allusions in the Passion Narratives, etc. Just as the New Perspective on Paul movement has been a necessary corrective to the kind of Protestant scholarship that portrayed both HB/OT prophets and Paul as faithful Protestants, so, too NT theology must continue to embrace the same corrective approach across the NT literature. NT theologies must always start with exegesis that seeks to understand how the first-century audiences would have heard the NT literature. These correctives will deepen and enrich Christians' understanding of the nature of faith, of the grace of God, of the work(s) of Christ, of their participatory role in the Kingdom of God, and of their participation in the new era of the reign of the Spirit and life.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

1 Although my training is as an HB/OT exegete and not as a NT theologian, I am aware that my thoughts line up well with those of the New Perspective on Paul movement in general and with those of N.T. Wright in particular. Wright (2011, pp. 115–58) defends the basic approach of his massive body of work, an approach I advocate, as seeking to understand Jesus and early Christianity in its historical setting. He recognizes, too, that appealing to tradition to interpret Scripture ignores the fact that the church too many times has misread the Scriptures (p. 122). For an introduction to the New Perspective on Paul movement, which will be mentioned below, see (Yinger 2011).

2 As Wright notes, "Jesus as kingdom-bringer has been screened out of the church's dogmatic proclamation. The church has managed to talk about Jesus while ignoring what the Gospels say about him" (Wright 2011, p. 133).

3 Indeed, as John Goldingay states, while defending the need for Christians to properly understand the OT, and with significant qualifications, "In a sense God did nothing new in Jesus. God was simply taking to its logical and ultimate extreme the activity in which he had been involved throughout the First Testament story" (Goldingay 2015, p. 12).

4 For a detailed rebuttal of penal substitutionary atonement and an appeal for a more comprehensive understanding of the work(s) of Christ in general, see my article (Duke 2018).

5 The Hebrew verb *nāśā'* (נָשָׂא, "to lift/bear") one of the frequently used terms used figuratively for "to forgive" in the HB/OT is expressed by *anapherō* (ἀναφέρω, "to take up") in the two NT texts.

6 For a detailed discussion, see section IV "Recovering the general resurrection of the dead" (Duke 2016–2017, pp. 240–42).

7 For a detailed discussion, see section V. "Recovering biblical anthropology: humans as mortals" (Duke 2016–2017, pp. 242–50).

8 NT theologians need to deal with the fact that modern evolutionary science has replaced the "Out of Africa" model of tracing Homo sapiens back to some original couple to a more complex model of various interactions among hominins giving rise to our species. For example, *Theology and Science*, dedicated an issue to the new perspectives on human origins and how they impact theology by directly challenging notions of original sin and death. See essays by (Cole-Turner 2020; Molhoek 2020).

9 For a detailed discussion on "hell", see section VI "Wrongly conflating terms and symbols of different states of judgment" (Duke 2016–2017, pp. 250–55).

10 For a full discussion of the clause rendered, "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" see (Duke 2020).

11 This point is made repeatedly by those of the "school" of NPP. For a full discussion of this point covering biblical and early Jewish literature, see (Yinger 2019, chpts. 3–4).

12 See n. 14 below and Comment 9 of the translation of Rom 3:21–26.

13 An excellent recent work on Rom 3:21–26 by Murray Smith (2019) identifies most of the controversial issues and provides much of the important bibliography such that it provides a great resource as well as an exemplar and a foil for my position paper. Interestingly, Smith not only argues correctly for "righteousness of God" and "faith of Christ" to refer respectively to "God's righteousness" (pp. 189–207) and "Christ's faith/faithfulness" (pp. 207–27), but also argues that these readings support Reformed theology of justification by faith as outlined in the Westminster Confession (p. 182). His position on some issues with which I agree and will touch on below, are: Paul's main point is how the gospel demonstrates God's righteousness as disclosed through Christ's faithfulness for the free justification of those who believe (pp. 183–89); the essence of sin is the rejection of God's glory (pp. 188–89); God has revealed his righteousness in part through his salvific actions for his people (pp. 194–95); the HB/OT and NT vocabulary of "faith" expresses a relationship of trust which includes fidelity (pp. 210–12); *hilasterion* (ἱλαστήριον, 3:25) refers to the Mercy Seat (pp. 231–32); and, there is a deliberate connection made by Paul between "one of the faith of Christ" and "one of the faith of Abraham" (pp. 223–24). Where we disagree is that he reads the texts through the confessional lens of penal substitution of Christ by which his faithfulness is imputed to believers (pp. 228–33, 236–40), which is not an HB/OT concept of atonement. As a result, he misses the continuity of how God responds to faith and sin in both the HB/OT and NT. Smith's presuppositions lead to other areas of disagreement: he takes Paul's reference to Jesus as *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία) in Rom 8:3; 2Cor 5:21 to mean that Jesus became sin itself (p. 197), a mimetic magic concept, whereas Paul, who knew atonement language, would have meant "sin offering"; he assumes that 3:25 refers to God not dealing with sin before Christ (pp. 206, 233), and, he takes "by his blood" (3:25) to be a metonymy for Christ's punishment of death rather than to Christ's blood of the sin offering (pp. 221–22). Moreover, his focus seems to overlook what is new to the gospel, such as the believer's participation in the life and death of Christ with victory over sin as one lives under the reign of the Spirit and life (e.g., Rom 6).

14 In this essay, I will use the terms "Torah" or "torah" rather than "Law" or "law" to translate *nomos* (νόμος) for a couple of reasons. First, for the modern readier, "law" may tend to evoke thoughts of criminal law when the Torah arises in the context of covenant law, which is different. Criminal law defines criminal offenses and penalties to protect social order; however, Israel's legal contact/covenant with God is based on divine sanctions that sets them off as a community belonging to God. Second, the basic notion of "torah" ( תּוֹרָה*tôrāh*) is directional and instructional in a positive sense, rather than restrictive and negative. To be sure, there are specific commands Israel was to obey or experience the resulting "curses" of the covenantal contract; it is legally binding. However, the main function of Torah/torah was to bring people into an identity in conformity with God. See below, Section 3.4 Commentary Notes, Comment 1, Excursus on holiness, covenant, and Torah.

15 For example, see not just Paul's direct references and allusions Gen 15:6 (Rom 4:3, 9, 22–23; Gal 3:6) and Hab 2:4 (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11) but how the arguments of the surrounding contexts are built on these proclamations of God's pronouncement of righteousness as a response to one's faith/entrustment.

16 In Gen 15:6, the Hiphil verb of אָמַן (*ʾāman*) with the preposition בְּ (*b*) attached to the object Yahweh, expresses not that Abraham simply believes God, an act of cognition, but an act of volition, that he entrusts himself to God. This expression is rendered in Paul's salvation language of the response of believers by *pisteuō eis* (πιστεύω εἰς) "believe into Jesus".

17 Controversial: The Greek word *nomos* (e.g., custom, rule, law) is used by Paul in a variety of ways, which leads to individual instances debated among scholars. When it appears that Paul is using *nomos* (νόμος) to refer to the Torah proper (Pentateuch), I will capitalize it. Sometimes, however, when it appears he uses it loosely for a range of divine stipulations, I will use "torah".

18 See the now rather classic work of E. P. Sanders (Sanders 1977) in which he demonstrates that obedience was a response to God's gracious offer of covenant, that is covenantal nomism.

19 A background cultural example of participation of one life in another is found in the understanding of procreation that lies behind genealogies and many cultural beliefs and practices of the ancient Near East. Much like an oak tree produces an acorn that grows into an oak tree, one understood the first father to be "contained in" or participating in the descendant of the latest living generation as well as the that latest grandchild being "contained" in the progenitor.

20 Nestle-Aland, 28th edition (2012), exported from BibleWorks 10 (2015).

21 Controversial: Scholars who advocate the NPP have provided a needed corrective to some forms of Protestant theology that portrayed Judaism as "legalistic;" that is, believing that keeping Torah could make oneself righteous. However, the NPP "school" also generally rejects that Paul dealt with people who were legalistic. See, for example (Yinger 2009). Although the discussion

is highly nuanced, my counter argument is simple: (1) in basic biblical theology people either trust in self-rule or to God's rule; (2) when people rely on self-rule and see themselves as righteous based on obeying some set of regulations, whether Israelite or other, that is a form of "legalism" or better "works righteousness." Paul clearly confronts people for whom entrusting oneself to the Christ somehow was being challenged as insufficient and in need of supplementation by circumcision or by eating kosher or by worshipping at certain times in certain ways, etc. For example, Paul calls out those of Israel who pursue righteousness out of "works" rather than faith (Rom 9:31–32), because—a theme bracketing our text—works of laws do not make a person righteous (Rom 3:20 and 27).

[22] See reference to work of (Smith 2019) at n. 13 who cites the key bibliography.

[23] This paraphrase was provided by NT scholar Sharyn Dowd in personal correspondence. I am indebted to her.

## References


Barrett, C. K. 2001. *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. ProQuest Ebook Central. Available online: https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy006.nclive.org/lib/appstate/detail.action?docID=742504 (accessed on 28 August 2021).

Cole-Turner, Ron. 2020. New Perspectives on Human Origins: Three Challenges for Christian Theology. *Theology and Science* 18: 524–36. [CrossRef]

Duke, Rodney K. 2016–2017. Eternal Torment or Destruction? Interpreting Final Judgment Texts. *EQ* 88: 237–58.

Duke, Rodney K. 2018. Simon Gathercole's *Defending Substitution*: Why I am Unconvinced and Concerned. *The Expository Times* 129: 458–65. [CrossRef]

Duke, Rodney K. 2020. The Idiom of 'Weeping and Gnashing Teeth' in the Gospels: A Funerary Formula. *PRSt* 47: 283–98.

Goldingay, John. 2015. *Do We Need the New Testament? Letting the Old Testament Speak for Itself*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.

Green, Joel. 2008. *Body, Soul and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible*. Studies in Theological Interpretation. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Molhoek, Braden. 2020. Reflections on the Implications of the Human Linage. *Theology and Science* 18: 560–63. [CrossRef]

Sanders, E. P. 1977. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Smith, Murray. 2019. God's Righteousness, Christ's Faith/fulness, and 'Justification by Faith Alone' (Romans 3:21–26). In *Romans and the Legacy of St. Paul: Historical, Theological, and Social Perspectives*. Edited by Peter G. Bolt and James R. Harrison. Occasional Series 1; Macquarie Park: SCD Press, pp. 181–254.

Wright, N. T. 2011. Whence and Whither Historical Jesus Studies in the Life of the Church? In *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright*. Edited by Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, pp. 115–58.

Yinger, Kent L. 2009. The Continuing Quest for Jewish Legalism. *BBR* 19: 375–91.

Yinger, Kent L. 2011. *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction*. Eugene: Cascade Books.

Yinger, Kent L. 2019. *God and Human Wholeness: Perfection in Biblical and Theological Tradition*. Eugen: Cascade Books.

Zerwick, Maximilian. 1963. *Biblical Greek: Illustrated by Examples*. Translated from Fourth Latin Edition by Joseph Smith. Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 114. Rome: Biblical Institute.

religions

MDPI

*Article*

# Metaphors and New Testament Theology: The Temple as a Test Case for a Theology of New Testament Metaphors

**Jonathon Lookadoo**

Liberal Arts Department, Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary, Seoul 04965, Korea; jonathon.lookadoo@puts.ac.kr

**Abstract:** Researchers within New Testament Studies have attempted in recent years to articulate the multifaceted identity of a broad discipline. The place of New Testament Theology (NTT) remains disputed within the guild. Some would like to remove NTT from fields of research undertaken within Arts and Humanities departments, while others argue that the New Testament cannot be properly understood without an eye to its theological claims. This article employs the ongoing tension as a starting point from which to argue that metaphors provide a fruitful field of study within NTT. The study of metaphors allows readers of the New Testament to draw upon broader research within the Humanities, while wrestling with the theological claims of New Testament texts. The article outlines recent studies of metaphors in a range of fields before exploring metaphorical uses of temple imagery within the Gospel of John, the Pauline letters, and Revelation. Temple metaphors employ the same image with multiple referents so that the study of metaphors may also illustrate unity and diversity within the New Testament. The study of metaphors deserves further consideration within NTT, since multiple avenues for exploration open when undertaking such research.

**Keywords:** Gospel of John; metaphor; New Testament Theology; Pauline letters; revelation; temple

**Citation:** Lookadoo, Jonathon. 2022. Metaphors and New Testament Theology: The Temple as a Test Case for a Theology of New Testament Metaphors. *Religions* 13: 436. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050436

Academic Editor: Joel B. Green

Received: 29 March 2022
Accepted: 6 May 2022
Published: 12 May 2022



## 1. Introduction

The discipline of New Testament Studies has struggled with issues of self-definition in recent decades. At first glance, the name suggests that the discipline centres around twenty-seven early Christian writings that have been collected into the corpus known today as the New Testament. Although such a statement is true, it has rarely been understood as an all-encompassing definition. Since the New Testament is a relatively small corpus of books, the borders of New Testament Studies regularly extend beyond these twenty-seven documents to include explorations of Israel's scriptures, other Second Temple Jewish writings, texts from Graeco–Roman philosophy, manuscripts of New Testament documents, and the reception of the New Testament in the second and third centuries. New Testament researchers are also asked to know something about the history and current state of their academic field. Reinhartz (2021) has challenged biblical scholars to be particularly attentive to the voices of marginalised scholars within the guild, while *Neutestamentler* like Bird (2009), Hengel (1994, 1996), Hurtado (1999, 2009), Meeks (2005), Schröter (2000), and Tuckett (2014) have set out the wide-ranging material that should be part of the discipline's identity, along with attempts to focus the discipline on particular types of studies.[1]

In addition to enquiries into how far the borders of New Testament Studies should extend into studies of ancient history, religion, and archaeology, specialists in the New Testament have also disagreed about the scholarly orientation that should be brought to bear on these texts. Questions of orientation become particularly pointed when exploring New Testament Theology (NTT), that is, how the New Testament characterises God, how the individual documents therein may be interpreted as part of a collection, and what these ways of speaking reveal about early Christian belief structures. On the one hand, there are some who would declare that NTT is a subject of study and a genre of writing that is not

suitable within Arts and Humanities departments in modern universities. Such theological studies have value only within the confines of communities of believers. For example, Räisänen (2000, p. 166) warns against the dangers of allowing theological presuppositions to determine the study of historical texts. Such presuppositions may unduly affect historical study before it has begun. Rather, a sociologically oriented history of early Christianity should be put in its place.[2] More recently, Young (2020) has argued against what he sees as 'protectionism' within academic studies of the New Testament. He argues that the discipline of New Testament Studies tends to privilege the claims of the sources—in this case, the New Testament documents—rather than to interrogate them in a suitably critical manner. Such a claim has clear implications for the study of NTT, in which the theological claims and coherence of the New Testament are examined. In place of protectionism, Young calls instead for a reconsideration of the politics of New Testament scholarship with a particular view to issues of gender (see also Dye 2020). It may be difficult for those persuaded by the types of arguments made by Räisänen and Young to allow NTT a space within the public discourse of a pluralist society.

Others, however, have called for a renewed theological study of the New Testament.[3] One of the most prominent ways in which such studies may be seen has come in the recent movement toward 'theological interpretation of scripture'. Green (2007, p. 2) critiques modern biblical scholarship because it 'has not oriented itself toward approaches or development of means that would enable us to tune our ears to the voice of God'. Such a programme of study would not entail abandoning historical readings of the New Testament, but would recognise that theological interpretation grows from a concern for both the historical situation out of which scripture was generated and the sociocultural conventions that are assumed within the texts (Green 2011b).[4] To be sure, the movement that has come to be known as 'theological interpretation of scripture' does not allow for an infinite number of meanings within the biblical texts (Rae 2007). Rather, theological interpretation requires asking vital questions about how texts written for believers in Jesus Christ may reveal the identity of God (see similarly Campbell 2021). Interpreting scripture theologically has also been brought to bear on ecclesial practices that reflect on God's actions in particular situations (Rae 2021). Thus, Peeler (2021) has explored the use of androcentric language in Hebrews with a view to how women take a place on God's holy mountain within the masculine language of the letter. In a related vein, Rowe (2022) has urged *Neutestamentler* to consider the way in which truth claims in New Testament documents should inform the practice of New Testament Studies.

These two orientations toward theological study of the New Testament, namely, one in which theological readings are thought to be either impossible or inappropriate to the academy, and another in which theology is thought to be inseparably bound up within the texts now collected in the New Testament, have obvious implications for how one might approach NTT. For the first, such a study lies in the purview of ecclesial practitioners alone. Although there may be some in the second camp who also think that theological interpretations of scripture are exclusively bound up with inner-ecclesial matters, others would see such interpretations as part of an open enterprise in which theologically oriented readings of the New Testament are part of public discourse.

This article sets out from these tensions to consider how the study of metaphors might inform theological studies of the New Testament, remain part of a shared discourse available to all, and offer fresh material to consider when writing NTT. Although metaphors have received some attention by *Neutestamentler*, more remains to be done to situate examinations of metaphors within theological studies of the New Testament. Accordingly, the article briefly notes some of the ways in which metaphors appear in the New Testament, while also observing how these metaphors have been studied within New Testament Studies. The essay next turns its attention to the definition and effects of metaphor in order to situate itself within larger studies in the Humanities, and to suggest the importance of metaphorical language for epistemological and social formation. After modelling a theologically oriented study of temple metaphors in the Gospel of John, the Pauline letters, and Revelation, the

study concludes by reflecting on ways in which research on metaphors may inform NTT. Theological study of New Testament metaphors offers a promising way in which to explore how New Testament authors bring together ways of speaking that have social implications for readers of the text, while simultaneously articulating a robust theological understanding of God's relationship to the community.

Alongside the questions of self-definition and orientation that have already been noted, two additional observations from within the discipline of New Testament Studies also inform this article. First, recognition of both unity and diversity within the New Testament have become commonplace in recent decades. Within New Testament Studies, this language may be most closely associated with Dunn (1977), but studies of unity and diversity have proliferated (e.g., Pitts 2008; Skinner and Iverson 2012). Importantly for our purposes, the language of unity and diversity extends even to theological studies of the New Testament (e.g., Matera 2007; Hahn 2011). Considerations of the theological dimensions of metaphors will thus need to take into account both ways in which metaphors might cohere as a source of unity among New Testament documents, and ways in which metaphors are utilised to distinct ends by various authors. Second, *Neutestamentler* in recent years have become increasingly attentive to the ways in which New Testament texts and motifs were incorporated and interpreted by later authors. Bockmuehl (1995, 2006, pp. 169–228; 2010, 2012) has consistently brought the study of second and third century Christianity to bear on studies of the New Testament and figures therein. Other major edited collections have examined the Gospels and Paul (e.g., Schröter et al. 2018; Edsall 2019; Schröter et al. 2019). This list of studies could quickly be expanded. Yet the reason for mentioning it now is to note that theological studies of the New Testament may likewise be considered across a range of texts outside of the canon, thereby situating doctrinal elements within the history of early Christianity (Menoud 1946, p. 152; Butticaz 2019, p. 530). Insofar as early Christians utilised similar metaphors in their respective writings, theological explorations of metaphor may highlight similarities, contributions, and unique elements from the New Testament while also tracing the use of related metaphors outside the canonical New Testament.

## 2. Imagery and Metaphors in the New Testament

After locating this study in relation to several of the swirling eddies about how to study the New Testament, in general, and NTT in particular, it will be useful to say something about the various ways in which metaphors are encountered within the canonical collection. The documents gathered in the New Testament are filled with images. Jesus's parables are a particularly vibrant source of imagery that draw on the full range of first-century Galilean life and which 'open imagistic worlds that compel thought' (Snodgrass 2018, p. 602). One meets a man spreading seed on a piece of land with varying qualities of soil. Jesus interprets this scene with a view to how people will receive the message about the kingdom of God (Matthew 13:1–23; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 8:4–15).[5] Jesus also imbues the ordinary *realia* around him with greater meaning than is evident at first sight. When talking with a woman at a well, Jesus identifies himself as living water that will forever take away any thirst (John 4:1–42). Similes are also a part of Jesus's teaching in the Gospels. The kingdom of God—or the kingdom of heaven in Matthew—is compared to a seed that grows on its own (Mark 4:26–29), a grain of mustard (Matthew 13:31–32; Mark 4:30–32; Luke 13:18–19), a bit of yeast baked into some bread (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20–21), and a net cast into the sea (Matthew 13:47–50). Various types of rhetorical images pervade the New Testament Gospels.

Other images are utilised to reveal something about God. This happens in the parables as God is depicted as a king ruling mercifully over subjects (Matthew 18:23–35) or a master intervening following the misbehaviour of slaves or tenants (Matthew 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 7:40–43; 20:9–19). Yet imagery related to God extends beyond the parables. God is depicted as a king on the throne (1 Timothy 6:15; Hebrews 4:16; Revelation 4:2–5; 15:3). One of the most enduring images of God in Christian theology draws upon New Testament portrayals of God as Father (Luke 10:21–22; John 5:17–18; Romans 1:7; 8:15;

James 1:17). Paternal language expands to include Jesus as God's Son (Matthew 16:16; Acts 9:20; Galatians 4:4–6; 1 John 4:15). Although allusions to the Father and Son would likely have had other cultural overtones among first-century readers, including interactions with references to divine fathers and sons in Jewish scripture and among Roman emperors, the New Testament utilises these metaphors in their own way in order to reveal God's identity in a coherent and persuasive manner. Jesus is likewise portrayed as a lamb (John 1:29, 36; Revelation 5:6; 7:17; 19:9), a lion (Revelation 5:5), and a star (Revelation 22:16). Among other images, his death is described in terms of a sacrifice (1 Corinthians 5:7–8; Hebrews 9:26–28; 1 John 2:2) and an exodus (Luke 9:31; Mittmann 2021). Symbolic representations of the divine are found throughout the New Testament and are thus vital to NTT.

Such imagery can speak to the close connections between God and God's people, particularly when considered across the New Testament canon. If God is king, then God's people are ruled over by God (Mark 1:14–15; Acts 8:12; Ephesians 2:4–7; Revelation 1:4–6). The kingdom of God is thus a benevolent realm in which wrongs are set right and the last are made first (Matthew 19:30; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30; 16:9–31). If God is Father and Jesus is Son, then the people are adopted graciously as heirs of God (Romans 8:15–23; Galatians 4:4–6; Zimmermann 2007, pp. 127–40; Heim 2017a). If Jesus's death is sacrificial, then his actions on behalf of God's people take away their sins (John 1:29, 36; Hebrews 10:10; 1 John 2:2). When one reads the entire New Testament, it is not only the number of images that come to the fore but also the potential for interaction in the imagery. An intriguing example of this can be found in the use of temple language throughout the New Testament. Although the temple in Jerusalem and the practices associated with it have an ambivalent place within many of the documents contained in the New Testament, cultic imagery is put to a variety of uses by New Testament authors. Temple metaphors will thus provide a useful place from which to illustrate the utility of metaphorical studies for theological readings of the New Testament.

The collection of documents in the New Testament is thus filled with images that appear for a variety of purposes. This section has merely pointed to the existence of such images and has risked collapsing various imagery and figures of speech in doing so. In order to gain greater clarity about the promise of metaphors for NTT, it will be helpful to reflect at greater length on precisely what a metaphor is.

### 3. Recent Scholarship on Metaphors

Metaphors are not only littered across the pages of the New Testament but are also prevalent—almost omnipresent—throughout language, rhetoric, and literature. When someone mentions a muscle, they draw upon a metaphorical usage of the Latin word *musculus*, a little mouse. The fleshy matter described as a muscle is implicitly compared to a small rodent. Likewise, when someone declares that they are 'feeling down', they utilise an orientation metaphor that relates downward movement with negative states (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, pp. 15–16; Kövecses 2010, p. 40). As metaphors pervade language, so also studies of metaphor continue to proliferate. Given that the focus of the study is on the ways in which metaphors may be useful to the discipline of NTT, it will thus be useful to situate this study within the context of recent studies of metaphor.[6]

Identifying precisely what a metaphor is and articulating how human beings form metaphors have proven to be tricky tasks. This essay will focus on linguistic and rhetorical understandings of metaphor rather than attempts to locate the origins of a metaphor externally or within embodied cognition (Heim 2017a, pp. 52–56). Soskice's (1985) influential definition of metaphor can be usefully adopted for the purposes of this paper. For Soskice, 'metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another' (Soskice 1985, p. 15).[7] A metaphor is thus found when two matters animate one another. The author or speaker of a metaphor utilises certain elements of one item to shed light on a topic which, at first glance, may have no particular relation to the former. Thus, both Paul and the author of 1 Clement use the body to speak about a collective of people (1 Cor 12:12–31; 1 Clem. 37.5–38.1). The audiences that each author

addresses are described in terms of a body. Both authors highlight unity and diversity within the body, but the metaphors may be designed to accomplish different tasks in their respective texts. Metaphors are rhetorically useful because they enable authors to enhance an audience's understanding of the topic that they desire to address by bringing another, perhaps better-known, object into the conversation. In this example, the people of God can be understood in terms of a body. Just as a body is a singular unit that can be conceptually divided into distinct parts that must cooperate, so also the Corinthian communities addressed in 1 Corinthians and 1 Clement are to be united communities comprised of cooperating individuals.

The interaction that results from a metaphor can bring about new knowledge, introduce a fresh concept, enable one to formulate an innovative way of thinking, and encourage the audience to participate in the meaning-making process.[8] Metaphors encourage such conceptual newness because they are catachrestic (Soskice 1985, pp. 58–64). To speak metaphorically requires a speaker to utilise at least one term in a way that differs from its normal usage (Kennedy 2008, p. 449). In a good metaphor, however, this catachresis bears fruitful results. Far from being dissonant, the potential misuse brings about new possibilities of meaning. Metaphors are thus not simply pedagogically useful but are irreducible (Soskice 1985, pp. 93–96; Johnson 2008, p. 39).[9] Although similar phrases may be found, it is unlikely that a completely synonymous word exists in English that equates with the phrase 'falling in love'. 'Falling in love' is an irreducible, albeit somewhat common, metaphorical phrase in English (Kennedy 2008, p. 449). Although metaphors may sometimes be approximated by further exploration or additional figures of speech, something is lost in the process of translation. More specifically, the potential of metaphors to be extended dissipates when metaphors are explained in alternative ways.

Metaphors regularly create lexical gaps that need to be filled with additional terminology. To speak of a brain in terms of a computer allows one to extend the computer metaphor to speak of a brain's storage capacities, of the size of a brain's databank, of the possibility of being programmed in alternative ways, and of the myriad means by which a brain gives feedback. There is little inherent in the brain that necessitates its comparison to a databank, but this comparison becomes natural when a brain is conceived of in terms of a computer. Similarly, when electrical energy is discussed in terms of currents, the speaker depicts electrical energy in similar ways to the currents that run through water (Soskice 1985, p. 94). By extension, it is possible to speak of a direction in which electricity flows, to stop the direction of this flow, and to reroute the electricity in another direction. Metaphors are thus central to conceptualisation and the epistemological process (Kim 2021). They can thus be formed by the author to accomplish a myriad of tasks because they create such lexical gaps. Moreover, metaphors act on their audience in ways that may be difficult for an author to anticipate. The transmission of metaphors and their significance can thus be a fluid process.

The linguistic and rhetorical aspects of metaphor are central to this study, but they are hardly the only ways in which the studies of metaphor have been undertaken and contributed to recent scholarly discussions. Metaphors have played a vital role in philosophy and theology, particularly in the philosophy of science and Thomistic theology (Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Johnson 2008; Ryliškyté 2017). By speaking metaphorically, one can reframe, alter, or introduce new concepts to an audience. In so doing, one has the power to modify the cognitive processes at work in an audience. Put differently, 'metaphors have the power to create a new reality' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, p. 145). Metaphors are also capable of influencing group identity (Heim 2017a, pp. 104–10). When constructing a metaphor, an author can frame the metaphor in such a way as to create an in-group and an out-group so that the boundaries of a group are maintained. In addition, some metaphors can be privileged in such a way as to become constitutive of a group's identity (Zhang 2011). The metaphor becomes the primary way by which the group understands who it is, what has happened to it, and what they are doing. Finally, since metaphors depend in large part on being embodied, they can be useful in defining embodied entities that are located in space.

Even a metaphor that may at first glance have nothing to do with anything external to a person, such as 'feeling down', often depends upon an understanding of embodied reality. For example, if someone says they are 'feeling down', the direction word *down* makes sense only if one is in space within a body.[10] A disembodied being would be unlikely to experience up and down in the same way.

If metaphors are irreducible linguistic constructions with the power to frame how individuals conceptualise and how groups outline their identity, then the study of metaphors in historical and/or theological texts is not merely the exploration of rhetorical adornments. Rather, investigating what metaphors mean and how they are utilised in a text may open new vistas from which to gaze upon the people, beliefs, and literature of a group (Zimmermann 2003b, pp. 6–18). By exploring the theological uses to which metaphors were put in the New Testament, researchers may endeavour not only to come to a better understanding of the texts in which the metaphors are located, but also to recognise the way in which metaphors, doctrines, and beliefs interact with one another.

## 4. New Testament Temple Metaphors

Metaphorical discussions of the temple provide an exemplary test case to study within the pages of this article. The temple played a central role in forming Jewish identity during the Second Temple period, and its destruction in 70 CE left traumatic scars that are evident in extant Jewish literature. The temple continued to be central in the writings of Jesus followers after the death and resurrection of Jesus. There are hints of continued temple practice among those who followed Jesus (e.g., Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:42), but the temple's largest impact on early Christians is to be found in its continued presence in the discourse of believers. Although the discussion of temple metaphors could be expanded to include texts like Hebrews (Church 2017), 1 Peter (Botner 2020), or Luke–Acts (Smith 2017; Moore 2022), this section will focus its attention on the Gospel of John, the Pauline letters, and Revelation in order to use these texts as a foundation for methodological reflection in the next section.

### *4.1. The Gospel of John*

For anyone coming to the Gospel of John after reading the accounts of Jesus's actions in the temple in the Synoptic Gospels, the elevated portrayal of the Johannine Jesus coincides with a startling account of Jesus's actions in the temple. Although Matthew, Mark, and Luke locate Jesus's actions in the temple near the end of their stories (Matthew 21:12–16; Mark 12:15–18; Luke 19:45–48), John's account is placed prominently near the beginning of Jesus's ministry (John 2:13–22; Anderson 2008, p. 99). The differing levels of violence between the accounts is also a noteworthy point (Croy 2009; Glancy 2009). A less obvious but no less significant difference between John and the Synoptics is the scriptural rationale attributed to Jesus's action. Jesus quotes Isaiah 56:7 and alludes to Jeremiah 7:11 to justify his actions in the Synoptics (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46). The Johannine Jesus says something similar to the Synoptic accounts when he tells the temple merchants to leave and 'not make my Father's house a market house' (John 2:16). Yet Jesus does not appeal directly to scripture in the Johannine story. Rather, the disciples remembered the scriptural text through which the story is to be interpreted. They recall the Psalmist's claim that 'zeal for your house will consume me' (Ps 68:10 [LXX]; John 2:17).

Although questions about the historical Jesus's actions in the temple (Fredriksen 2007; 2018, pp. 43–51; Hengel and Schwemer 2007, pp. 557–61; 2019, pp. 589–93) and the literary function of the temple incident in each Gospel (Vistar 2018) are centrally important subjects to consider, the interest of this study lies on the relationship between the scriptural basis remembered by the disciples, and the metaphorical rationale given by Jesus in the immediate aftermath of the temple incident. Jesus's interpretation of the event is distinct from the disciples' scriptural recollection in John 2:17. Jesus's words are drawn from him by a question from 'the Jews', who enquire about the sign that he can produce to justify the profaning disturbance which he has caused (John 2:18). Jesus's response is stunning. If the temple is destroyed, he will rebuild it in three days (John 2:19). His Jewish interlocutors

scoff at such a claim because the Herodian temple had been under construction for forty-six years (John 2:20; see also Josephus, *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 15.11.1–7 [380–425]). Jesus's claim seems incredible. However, the narrator clarifies in an interpretive aside, that Jesus was talking about 'the temple of his body' (John 2:21). Although Jesus's actions in the temple in John 2:14–16 have implications for how Jesus and his followers see the temple, Jesus's Jewish dialogue partners fail to understand his explanation because they do not recognise that Jesus has defined the temple in terms of himself. Indeed, the disciples apparently fail to understand Jesus's words and only recognise their significance after the resurrection.

This failure on the part of the disciples to understand suggests that there are statements in John's Gospel that are only properly appreciated from a post-resurrection perspective (Hengel 1990, p. 29; Ashton 2014, pp. 33–36; Frey 2020, pp. 212–13).[11] Although the disciples may only have understood after the resurrection, placing Jesus's identification of his body as the temple early in the narrative enables readers to recognise the significance of the passion events from the beginning. For Johannine readers, God does not dwell uniquely in the Jerusalem temple. Rather, God has revealed Godself in the temple of Jesus's body. Jesus's body is thus the revelation of God's glory on earth. 'Jesus' promise of a new temple suggests that God's glory would be manifested, not in a building, but in a person' (Koester 2003, p. 88).[12] Jesus's identification as the temple is then located more precisely in John 2:22. The references to a three-day time frame in John 2:19–20 might hint at the forthcoming—from a narrative perspective—event of Jesus's resurrection for John's readers. The disciples' remembrance of Jesus's words 'when he was raised from the dead' (John 2:22) brings these hints clearly into the light. When Jesus speaks about the reconstruction of the temple, he describes the resurrection of his body as the reestablishment of God's temple.

When the disciples recognise the significance of Jesus's saying, they believe both scripture and the word that Jesus spoke (John 2:22). Both scripture and a word of Jesus have already been discussed in John 2:13–22. The narrator's statement in John 2:22 does not mean that the disciples believe in scripture generally, but that the disciples understood the connection between Ps 68:10 and Jesus's temple actions. Similarly, their belief in Jesus's word refers to his self-identification as the temple (Beasley-Murray 1987, p. 41). The citation of Ps 68:10 may be interpreted with a view to the zeal that Jesus exhibits in clearing the temple. Such an interpretation may be aided by noting that Ps 68:9 refers to estrangement between brothers. Jesus's actions in John 2:14–16 not only illustrate his zeal but also create separation between the Jewish authorities and him (Brown 1966, pp. 123–24). Yet the consumption of Jesus prefigures the death on the cross that is so prominent throughout the Johannine narrative (Klaiber 2017, pp. 78–79). Both meanings of the verse may be in view within John's story (Zumstein 2017, p. 127), but the latter interpretation is given greater prominence both in the temple pericope (John 2:18–22) and in the remainder of the story with regard to the disciples' memory (John 11:13; 12:16; 13:7). By citing Ps 68:10 and the future consumption of Jesus's body, the narrator prepares readers for the crucifixion of Jesus's body. The crucifixion comes about as a result of Jesus's zeal and makes it possible for the temple to be rebuilt, that is, resurrected, after three days.[13]

The messianic links between Jesus and the temple have implications for how readers consider Jesus's identity elsewhere in the Gospel of John. Temple connotations may already be found in the prologue as the narrator declares that the Word 'dwelt among us' (ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν). Accordingly, the author is positioned among those who have seen the Word's glory, which is further characterised as the glory of the only begotten of the Father (John 1:14). The language of dwelling and glory recalls the tabernacle in which God's glory was made visible to Moses and the Hebrew people journeying in the wilderness. Other Second Temple authors link the tabernacle and temple, and it is likely that Jesus's association with both tabernacle and temple are meant to work together in John's story (Behr 2019, pp. 139–40). A similar phenomenon may be found in Jesus's promise that Nathanael would see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man (John 1:51). Jesus's language is redolent of Jacob's experience at Bethel, so that Jesus is again depicted as a location in which God's presence is revealed to human beings. When talking to the

Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42), Jesus's discussion of worship works in concert with his earlier temple metaphor. The Samaritan woman enquires about the proper location of worship, whether it is on Mount Gerizim or in Jerusalem (John 4:20). Jesus explains that an hour is coming when God's people will worship in neither place (John 4:21) but rather in spirit and truth (John 4:23–24). Just as Jesus is associated with the temple, so he has the right to declare the way in which people are called to worship the Father. The temple metaphor likewise interacts with other images that Jesus employs in his self-identifications. When Jesus refers to himself as the source of living water (John 7:37–39), the Johannine image resonates with depictions of the heavenly temple in Israel's scriptures from which living waters flow (e.g., Ezek. 47:1–12; Joel 4:18 [LXX]). Yet Jesus's description of raising the temple in three days (John 2:19) is most closely associated with his death and resurrection. The passion is the event in which Jesus is decisively glorified (John 12:16), and temple, glorification, and exaltation themes converge in Jesus's death and resurrection (Hoskins 2006, pp. 147–59).

The Johannine Jesus thus speaks of himself metaphorically in terms of a temple. Such a statement identifies Jesus in particular ways. Jesus's body is understood as the temple that is destroyed and rebuilt in three days, so that the events of the passion are already alluded to in John 2:13–22. This knowledge only becomes available to the disciples after Jesus's death and resurrection (Zimmermann 2003a, p. 110). Even so, the influence of christologically interpreted temple themes can be found elsewhere in John's story. Instead of a temple in Jerusalem, God's self-revelation is thus to be found in the temple that is Jesus himself.

### *4.2. The Pauline Letters*

Turning from John to Paul is a canonical move forward but a chronological move backward. Although both authors are similar in their high view of who Jesus is, and in their willingness to employ temple language metaphorically, the use to which Paul puts his temple metaphors in the middle of the first century differs substantially from John's metaphorical portrayals of Jesus as temple. Paul, on the other hand, speaks of the community of believers in terms of a temple. The temple metaphors are one form of cultic imagery that informs how Paul desires his addressees to live, worship, and interact with others in the world (Gupta 2010). Although Paul's depictions of communities in terms of a temple have vital implications for how the faithful should relate to one another, the presence of Jesus and the consequences for how one associates with outsiders remain important to consider when reading Paul.

Paul's temple metaphors occur most often within the Corinthian correspondence. Paul refers to the Corinthians with reference to a temple three times within the letters to Corinth, and he emphasises both unity and holiness in doing so. The first occurrence of the metaphor is found in the lengthy opening section of 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 1:10–4:21). Paul is alarmed at the presence of internal factionalism among Corinthian believers (Mitchell 1991), and he writes to correct their emphasis on what he considers a mistaken kind of wisdom. Paul and at least some of the Corinthians appear to be at odds regarding the nature of wisdom and the way in which God's mysteries have been revealed. These misunderstandings regarding the nature of revelation may involve disagreements about teaching authorities (Mihăilă 2019). In any case, they seem to lie at the heart of the divisions that Paul has discovered through Chloe's associates (1 Cor 1:10–17). Near the centre of this discourse, Paul employs three images to identify the Corinthians: a field, a building, and a temple. Human teachers are ultimately of little account in the Corinthian field because God must give the water by which they grow (1 Cor 3:5–8). In a society in which funding construction was an important activity of magistrates and other civic leaders, Paul and other teachers are thus called to work carefully to build on the foundation of the Corinthian building (Morgan 2020, pp. 174–81). Jesus alone is the foundation, and the work that other architects construct on the foundation will eventually be tested to determine its substance and quality (1 Cor 3:9–15).

Paul's reference to the temple in 1 Cor 3:16–17 is thus part of a larger discourse calling for unity among Corinthian believers. The Corinthians are collectively portrayed as a single temple so that the temple metaphor is a way of expressing the identity of the Corinthian community (Thiselton 2000, pp. 315–16). Divisions are inappropriate within a community that has been chosen by God like a temple. Moreover, if the Corinthian believers collectively form a temple, then holiness is required within the community. Paul's erotesis asks readers to consider their identity more carefully. They are God's temple, and God's Spirit thus indwells them (1 Cor 3:16). An implication follows from the identification of the Corinthians as a temple, namely, that if someone ruins the temple, God will ruin that person. The rationale behind Paul's claim is that God's temple is holy (ἅγιος), so the Corinthians are likewise sacred (1 Cor 3:17; Fitzmyer 2008, p. 203). If they are holy and are corrupted by someone, Paul reasons that there will be consequences for the source of the corruption. The temple metaphor is thus a call to communal holiness. Yet the Pauline image is not simply part of a call to action. It is also a reminder of the Corinthian identity. They are not called to become God's temple; rather, they are God's temple. This recognition of how the imagery of 1 Cor 3:16–17 works together recalls Paul's initial address to Corinthian believers, who are referred to as 'sanctified' (ἡγιασμένοις) in Christ Jesus and 'called saints' (κλητοῖς ἁγίοις; 1 Cor 1:2). Despite the shortcomings that Paul finds in the Corinthian community, his temple imagery beckons them to recall who they already are in Jesus.

Paul employs temple imagery to describe the Corinthians later in the letter when he takes up the matter of prostitution. Corinthian believers are not only restricted from having sexual relations with others' partners but also from visiting prostitutes. Paul's instructions are at odds with the general tenor of Roman legal attitudes, which largely tolerated prostitution as a form of licit sexual activity (McGinn 1998, pp. 343–45; 2004, pp. 261–62). In so doing, Paul holds male believers to the same sexual standards that were idealised for women (Hurtado 2016, pp. 160–65). The application of the temple metaphor to individuals provides the rationale for Paul's ethical statement. Illicit sexual relations are incompatible with the identification of Corinthian believers as temples in which the Holy Spirit dwells. Moreover, Paul identifies the Corinthian body as the temple. Although it is tempting to understand the reference to a singular body and temple as collective nouns in keeping with 1 Cor 3:16–17, the context of 1 Cor 6:12–20 strongly suggests that the identities and corresponding sexual ethics of individuals are in view (Campbell 2008, p. 185). Corinthian bodies are thus holy sites in which the Holy Spirit is present (Marshall 2015, pp. 843–44). Therefore, the bodies must be kept from defilement (Blidstein 2017, p. 152). A similar call to a particular kind of lifestyle underlies Paul's temple metaphor in another Corinthian letter. He urges the Corinthians 'not to be unequally yoked' (μὴ γίνεσθε ἑτεροζυγοῦντες) with unbelievers (2 Cor 6:14). The rationale that follows depends on oppositions between righteousness and lawlessness, light and darkness, and the true God and idols. Paul again poses a question with an ostensibly obvious answer regarding the possibility of agreement between God's temple and idols (2 Cor 6:16). For Paul, there is no chance for God and idols to call a truce. Paul then insists that he and the Corinthians are collectively the temple of the living God. As in 1 Cor 3:16–17, a collective reference comes into view with the temple metaphor of 2 Corinthians. Yet the emphasis falls heavily on a holy lifestyle. Believers should not be inequitably yoked with unbelievers because God dwells, walks, and is in a covenant relationship with them (Morgan 2020, p. 106). In short, the Corinthians are identified as God's people (2 Cor 6:16). Accordingly, Paul employs scriptural language to call the Corinthians to come out and to be set apart in their lifestyle (2 Cor 6:17–18). By following Paul's instructions, the Corinthians will purify themselves and complete their sanctification (2 Cor 7:1). The Pauline temple metaphor is employed to call the Corinthians to live holy lifestyles because they are already like the temple, insofar as God is present in their community and in their bodies.

The final temple metaphor to discuss within the Pauline corpus comes from Ephesians and highlights the importance of unity within the people of God.[14] Unity is a central theme in the letter as Paul highlights by enumerating several singular entities around which the

audience should unify (Eph 4:3–6). Paul emphasises the social and ethnic implications of the unity that results from the Christ event in Eph 2:11–22 and appeals to temple language in the process. Although Paul's audience was once far from God and estranged from Israel as gentiles, they have been brought near to God's people through Christ's blood (Eph 2:11–13).[15] Jesus is thus an icon of peace in the passage (Eph 2:14, 17). He tore down the wall that was erected to divide the community and thus created a new human being (Eph 2:14–16; Thielman 2010, pp. 163–73). Paul and the Ephesians thus have access to the Father in the Spirit (Eph 2:18). Paul's reference to the Spirit and the resulting access to the Father open the Ephesian temple metaphor, while simultaneously resonating with 1 Cor 3:16–17. The Ephesians are being built up on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20). The construction of the Ephesians on a foundation again recalls Paul's Corinthian metaphors, particularly the building metaphor in which Jesus serves as the foundation (1 Cor 3:11; see further Van Nes 2015). Jesus's position has moved in the Ephesian temple metaphor. He is no longer the entire foundation but more specifically the cornerstone (ἀκρογωνιαῖος; Eph 2:20). The entire building is joined together in Jesus and grows into a holy temple (Eph 2:21). The indwelling of the Spirit in the Ephesians thereby becomes a sign of the unity that results from Jesus's redemptive work on behalf of the audience. Life in Jesus should thus be characterised by concord rather than separation.

Paul employs the temple metaphors for varying purposes within his letters. At times, he emphasises the unity that should typify the communal life of his addressees. Elsewhere, the weight of Paul's metaphor falls on the holiness that believers should portray in their relationships with one another and with others. In all cases, however, Paul's temple imagery is applied to the community. The formation of God's people into a temple is a result of what Jesus has done, but Jesus is not himself the temple. Rather, believers are portrayed as a temple in ways that enable Paul to enshrine the unity and holiness that he desires from his audiences into the identity of the communities.

### *4.3. The Revelation of John*

The final text to examine in this article is the Revelation of John. Temple imagery pervades the Apocalypse in a stunning variety of ways.[16] Sacred objects from within the temple are mentioned throughout the text. For example, John's first vision of Jesus occurs among seven golden lampstands (Rev 1:12–13). In addition to the inclusion of lampstands within the Jewish temple (1 Kings 7:49; 2 Chronicles 4:7, 20; see also Exodus 25:31–40), the lampstands are interpreted within the Apocalypse as the seven churches of Asia to which the text is addressed (Rev 1:20). The two witnesses who prophesy for 1260 days are likewise described as the two lampstands who are placed before the Lord (Rev 11:4). The altar and incense are associated with the prayers of God's people (Rev 6:9–11; 8:3–4). Yet the altar also appears to be capable of declaring its praise of God with its own agency (Rev 16:7). The ark of the covenant likewise makes an appearance in John's apocalyptic vision (Rev 11:19). Temple furnishings are flexible images that can be multivalent within the text. The plasticity of images in Revelation enables the author to incorporate them in such manifold ways (Huber 2020).

The variety of ways in which temple artefacts and related cultic imagery are used makes it difficult to classify the temple strictly as a metaphor in Revelation. The Jerusalem temple may be in view when the two witnesses are discussed in Rev 11:1–14, even if the event described therein is not understood as a direct prophecy of some future event. In an allusion to the end of Ezekiel's prophecy, John receives a measuring rod with which to measure the temple (Rev 11:1; see Ezekiel 40:3, 5). He hears about the defilement of the temple's outer courts (Rev 11:2), finds that the temple is located in Jerusalem (Rev 11:8), and sees people on earth celebrating the deaths of the prophets (Rev 11:9–10). Like the rest of the New Testament Apocalypse, this passage is also redolent with symbolism. Yet the temple is not strictly speaking a metaphor in Rev 11:1–14. Although both the temple and the items associated with it are highly symbolic, rhetoric about the temple is not always an exclusively figurative mode of communication in Revelation. Nevertheless, the symbolic

significance of the language makes it a useful point of comparison with the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul. Since the temple is only occasionally a physical temple located on earth, it is worth exploring the temple's symbolic significance in further detail.

When Jesus initially appears to John in exile, the setting in which John sees him resounds with temple imagery. The temple is thus a key theme from the start of the Apocalypse. John sees seven lampstands that mark out his experience as an occurrence happening within a sort of visualised sanctuary on Patmos (Rev 1:12; Briggs 1999, pp. 53–54). The description of the person in the centre of the temple is astonishing. Employing language from the apocalyptic portion of Daniel, John sees one like a son of man standing among the lampstands (Rev 1:13; see Dan 7:13–14; Berger 2018, pp. 175–79). In addition to the seven lampstands in which the son of man appears, John also sees seven stars in the man's right hand (Rev 1:16). The significance of the lampstands and stars are then interpreted symbolically by the son of man himself. The seven stars signify the seven churches to which John has been told to write, while the seven lampstands identify seven angels who watch over the seven communities of believers (Rev 1:20). The interplay between temple and astral imagery creates a paradoxical tension between heaven and earth that remains in play throughout the Apocalypse, while the identification of both the lampstands and the stars in terms of the addressees keeps the focus in Rev 1:9–20 on the way in which seven particular earthly communities are to understand their lives within God's apocalyptic activities.

The most common ways in which the temple is found in Revelation concern references to God's heavenly abode in terms of a temple. The heavenly temple is a common feature of Second Temple apocalyptic literature (e.g., 1 Enoch 14.16–20; Testament of Levi 5.1; 18.6). Revelation employs the temple to illustrate God's majesty and holiness. Because God resides in the heavenly temple, God is worthy of worship and set apart from everything else that happens in creation. The beast that comes from the sea thus blasphemes God's tent (σκηνήν), that is, God's tabernacle (Rev 13:6). The beast is part of the creation that opposes God and God's people, and the slander of God's dwelling place is one of the characteristics that clarifies the beast's anti-God position. The close connection between the tabernacle and testimony is so strong that John can refer to the opening of the tabernacle (Rev 15:5) and then refer in the same breath to God's power filling the temple (Rev 15:5, 8; Koester 2018, pp. 144–45). To understand the heavenly tabernacle and the temple in nearly identical terms is thus justified by John's use of the terms within Revelation. Both entities signify God's presence. It is thus appropriate to worship God in the temple, and the heavenly temple is a realm in which God's praises are sung. After witnesses are gathered from the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev 7:1–8), John sees an innumerable crowd singing of God's salvation, wisdom, power, and honour (Rev 7:9–12). One of the elders then explains to John that those who wear white robes while bearing witness to God's strength came from the affliction of believers, and currently serve before the throne in God's heavenly temple (Rev 7:13–17; see also Rev 6:9–11). The Lamb in the midst of the throne will serve as their shepherd so that their service will occur without any further suffering. The temple is thus both a place of worship and a place of refuge for those who have suffered on earth.

The link between throne and temple is also found in the stunning vision of Rev 4–5. Central to the purpose of John's vision is the revelation of the Lamb's identity as Jesus the crucified messiah (Rev 5:6). Yet the location in which the Lamb is revealed is important to observe. John enters the temple through an open door in heaven (Rev 4:1). A throne stands at the centre of the temple. Although the throne is occupied by someone who is beyond detailed description (Rowland 1999, p. 793), the splendour of the throne and its surroundings denote the majesty of its occupant (Rev 4:2–6). In addition to the visual grandeur of the heavenly temple, praises ring out endlessly concerning God's holiness, glory, and power in creation (Rev 4:8, 11). Whatever disturbances occur on earth, the heavenly temple is thus a place in which to worship God. The presence and role of the Lamb are more surprising when Revelation is read alongside other apocalyptic literature (Karrer 2003, p. 123). The Lamb not only opens the scroll and thus plays a role in the apocalyptic drama (Rev 5:7; 6:1) but is also acclaimed by the same creatures that praise

God. The Lamb is worthy to open the scroll because he was slain, should receive power, wealth, and praise, and joins the one who sits on the throne as one whose glory should be given eternally (Rev 5:9–13). Both the one on the throne and the Lamb are worshipped in the heavenly temple. Since the worship given to the Lamb is of the same kind that is given to the one who sits on the throne, the Lamb must be regarded as divine and identified with the God who created all things (Bauckham 1993; Hurtado 2003, pp. 591–93).

Since the heavenly temple is the centralised location of God's presence within Revelation, it must be kept pure for the worship of God. The story throughout much of the Apocalypse continues from this central premise. Although the heavenly temple is a cultically pure space in which to worship, the earth that God created is notably not in such a clean state. God's judgement is intended, among other things, to purify creation of all that opposes God. When the seventh trumpet is sounded (Rev 11:15), God's temple is opened amidst a rash of praises from heavenly voices (Rev 11:19). The opening of the temple is followed by lightning, thunder, and a great hailstorm. The temple is most prominent in the judgements of Rev 14–16. Before 'one like the son of man' swings his sickle to harvest the earth, an angel comes out of the temple to inform him that it is time to begin (Rev 14:15). Immediately afterward, another angel emerges from the temple with a sickle, while a third angel instructs the angel with the sickle to harvest grapes in the winepress of God's wrath (Rev 14:17–20). The temple is thus the location from which commands are given about judgement. The bowl judgements begin with a temple procession of seven angels, while one of the living creatures bestows each of them with a bowl (Rev 15:5–8; Ladd 1972, pp. 206–8). A voice then comes from the temple with the instruction to begin pouring the bowls out on the earth (Rev 16:1). Although such actions cause difficulty for all the inhabitants of the earth, the judgements are ultimately designed to wipe away the forces that oppose God. Their origin within the heavenly temple signifies the justice and truth that God exercises as judge.

The last vision of the temple is one of the most delightful surprises in the narrative arc of Revelation. The end of the story portrays the descent of a new Jerusalem in which God will dwell with the people of God (Rev 21:1–22:6; Beale 2004, pp. 328–31). There is a renewal and reimagining of both heaven and earth throughout this passage. The new Jerusalem becomes a place in which tears, death, and mourning no longer have a place (Rev 21:4). The city is depicted in a variety of ways, and there is a particularly close connection between the city and feminine imagery (Rev 21:1–2, 9; Fekkes 1990; Huber 2013, pp. 82–83). Jerusalem is imagined coming down from heaven in ways that recall the heavenly temple of Rev 4–5 (Rev 21:10–14). The city shines brilliantly due to the presence of God's glory, while the gates of the city are numbered and placed in symbolic locations. The cubed shape of the city is striking (Rev 21:16), but one of the most notable claims about this new city is that there is no temple within its walls (Rev 21:22). The rationale that underlies this claim is that God and the Lamb indwell the entirety of the city (Rev 21:23; Koester 2018, p. 194). There is no need for a temple in which God and the Lamb might dwell because the entire city functions like a temple. The stunning city in which God lives intimately among its residents is a light to the nations in which nothing impure or shameful will ever be allowed to enter (Rev 21:22–27).

The final hope in Revelation is thus that the tension between the majesty of the heavenly temple and the instability of the harsh life on earth will one day be resolved, as God descends to earth in the heavenly city to live directly with the people of God. The calls to faithful witness that are found throughout the Apocalypse thus follow from the certain anticipation that God is worthy of praise in the heavenly temple, that God will act on behalf of God's people, and that God will one day live directly among the faithful in a display of glory that will set all things right.

## 5. Metaphors and New Testament Theology

The examination of the temple metaphor in John, Paul's letters, and Revelation suggests that the study of metaphors provides one with a rich means by which to take up

NTT. The temple is a common referent among these texts, but the metaphor can be used for distinctive purposes depending on what the authors want to say and who they want to say it about. The temple image is thus multivalent. Although Jesus's body is the temple that is torn down and rebuilt in his death and resurrection, Paul locates the temple in the communities of believers that he addresses within his letters. As such, Paul's readers should demonstrate the unity and holiness that are characteristic of God's unique temple. Of the texts examined in this article, Revelation employs temple imagery in the most internally diverse ways. Allusions may be made to the Jerusalem temple, but John's visionary experience on Patmos takes him into a setting that is reminiscent of God's temple, while he is privy through his visions to God's actions in the heavenly temple. The ultimate hope that John offers to his readers is one in which God's people will dwell in a city that has no need of a temple because God indwells the entire city.

In light of the irreducible nature of metaphorical expression and the significant cognitive and identity constructing potential that recent scholarship has demonstrated in metaphor studies (e.g., Soskice 1985, pp. 93–96; Heim 2017a, pp. 104–10), the implications of these metaphors are worthy of additional research. When one looks at the preceding survey of temple metaphors collectively, the temple plays both a theological and a social role within the texts. Since the Johannine temple refers to the person of Jesus Christ, the revelation of God's presence is to be found in Jesus's body. The Word of God walks on the earth. Jesus's body is thus set apart and cannot be touched by Mary Magdalene after the resurrection (John 20:17). God also resides in the temple within the Pauline temple metaphors, but the referent of the temple has shifted. No longer does the temple refer to Jesus's body but to the community of believers who worship Jesus. There are vital social consequences for Paul's metaphor. If the Corinthians and Ephesians are God's temple, they must live a holy lifestyle in unity with one another since they have been set apart as distinct places in which God is revealed. The theological and social implications of the temple metaphor come together in Rev 21–22. God dwells among the people in the new Jerusalem so that no symbolic location for God's presence is required. The theological and social are intertwined as the divine lives among believers. It would be disingenuous to reduce either the theological or social implications of the temple metaphor. Rather, close study of the metaphors enables a new appreciation for the connections between beliefs about God and beliefs about God's people in New Testament documents.

The cognitive and social effects of the temple metaphor for early Christian readers of these texts provide another avenue of study within NTT (Marshall 2015). Since temples were a location in which cultic duties were undertaken within the Roman world, the temple metaphor may be expected to have effects on the worship practices of early Christians. For example, if the Johannine Jesus can be portrayed in terms of a temple, worship is no longer tied to a specific location but rather to a person. Such an observation fits well with Jesus's words to the Samaritan woman in which he disconnects worship from specific mountains and describes worship in terms of spirit and truth (John 4:19–26). If Pauline communities are depicted as temples, then worship happens when members of the community are gathered together. Moreover, Pauline communities may extend their worship into times and spaces that might otherwise be regarded as common instead of cultically pure, thereby necessitating a holy lifestyle that makes ethical claims on believers' lives at all times.[17] A similar effect may be found in the temple metaphor of Revelation, even though God's indwelling of the new Jerusalem is a hope that is distinguished from the present reality of the text's first readers in Asia Minor. Since God will one day live among God's people, readers are encouraged to testify truly and to continue in their faithful practice despite suffering. In this way, the temple metaphor in these New Testament texts may affect the location and mode of worship, while simultaneously impacting the way in which social identity was formed within the community. The faithful are tied together in or as God's temple so that they must persevere and remain holy in their relationship with Jesus.

A theological exploration of metaphors in the New Testament may also provide an alternative to other ways of writing NTT. The genre of NTT writings is regularly organised

either thematically or canonically.[18] Thematic organisation often utilises dogmatic classifications or categories drawn from the New Testament as a frame to support the book (e.g., Vouga 2001). Others employ a canonical arrangement that follows canonical collections, approaches NTT book by book, or combines these two ways of writing to some degree (e.g., Thielman 2005). Both approaches are valuable and allow New Testament theologians to outline their work in meaningful ways. Approaching NTT with a view to the metaphors contained within the texts may allow for another method of outlining research within NTT to come into view. Since the metaphors to be examined would be limited by the metaphors that are found within the pages of the New Testament, theological studies of New Testament metaphors may arise organically from within the texts themselves. The role of the New Testament theologian would not thereby be eliminated. The influence of a particular New Testament scholar would remain evident in the process of selecting which metaphors to discuss, determining when a metaphor is utilised, and interpreting what the metaphors mean within the documents.[19] Yet a theologically oriented examination of metaphors provides both a starting place for such a study and a control that allows for a theology of the New Testament to arise organically.

These reflections on the implications and effects of the temple metaphor also offer hope that continued study of the temple and other metaphors may yield fresh insights into the links between New Testament understandings of both God and the community, as well as a new scaffolding around which to build an NTT. Studies of metaphors found in multiple New Testament books may also enable theological readers of the New Testament to wrestle afresh with both the unity and diversity of this collection.[20] Utilising the terms unity and diversity, that are most strongly associated in New Testament studies with Dunn (1977), theological explorations of metaphors occurring in multiple books are primed to be attentive to both facets. On the one hand, the same metaphor may be employed across multiple books in the New Testament. The temple is one such example. Research conducted on a metaphor that is found in multiple texts allows for a strong point of connection to be made from the start, since similar metaphorical modes of expression may be found across a variety of New Testament texts. Additional commonalities may be found in how metaphors are employed by different authors, but these points of potential unity cannot be determined from the outset. Thus, on the other hand, a theological study of New Testament metaphors allows researchers to examine a high degree of diversity in the New Testament. Although New Testament texts may utilise the same images, they are under no compulsion to speak of the metaphors in the same way. This diversity is evident in how New Testament authors exploit the symbolic capital of the temple to speak of Jesus, the people of God, God's presence in heaven, or God's future dwelling among believers. Study of unity and diversity thus arises naturally by giving attention to the theological significance of New Testament metaphors.

Finally, a theological study of metaphors in the New Testament may also engage ongoing calls to examine the documents of the New Testament with a view to their reception history in early Christianity (e.g., Bockmuehl 2006, pp. 169–228; Butticaz 2019, p. 530). The New Testament is a relatively small corpus of writings, and interpreters may gain greater insight into how specific metaphors functioned within early Christianity by giving attention to extracanonical texts from the late first and second centuries. In the case of the temple, additional studies would doubtless want to take up temple imagery employed in Heb 9:1–10, 1 Pet 2:4–10, and elsewhere in the New Testament. Yet one might note that there are similarities between Paul's depiction of believers in terms of a temple and the metaphorical temple language in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (Legarth 1992, pp. 139–231; Kieffer 2000; see Ignatius, Ephesians 9.1; 15.3; Magnesians 7.2; Philadelphians 7.2). Second-century texts share a metaphorical understanding of the temple with Paul that extends the temple's significance to the everyday lives of believers, while they simultaneously specify the importance of the temple ethic with regard to sexual relationships (1 Cor 6:19–20; Acts of Paul 3.5; 2 Clement 9.3). If one considers the portrayal of the tower constructed in the Shepherd of Hermas (*Vision* 3; *Similitude* 9) as a kind of temple, further similarities between

New Testament temple metaphors and second-century symbolism appear (Lookadoo 2021, pp. 187–203). Jesus is included as part of the temple that Hermas sees (*Vision* 9.2.1–2 [79.1–2]; 9.12.1–2 [89.1–2]), while believers are united as stones in the tower so that differences between the stones cease to be apparent (*Vision* 3.2.6 [10.6]; *Similitude* 9.9.7 [86.7]). Examples could be multiplied across early Christian texts, but these may be enough to illustrate that holiness, unity, and the presence of Jesus are significant in other temple metaphors. The study of metaphors thus opens new avenues along which the reception history of the canonical New Testament can be discussed alongside NTT.

## 6. Conclusions

This article found its starting point by observing how several *Neutestamentler* have attempted to resolve challenges within the discipline. More specifically, the provocation for this essay concerns ongoing discussions about the role of theology in the study of the New Testament. Although New Testament Studies engage in a variety of studies that extend beyond NTT, this article has outlined the value of a particular type of theological study of the New Testament, namely, the study of metaphors within the New Testament. After noting the prevalence of images and metaphors in the New Testament, consideration was given to how metaphors have been studied in recent Humanities scholarship. Although metaphors are a linguistic phenomenon in which one entity is discussed in terms of another, they are not merely rhetorical ornaments. Rather, metaphors frame the concepts that a person has available to them and thus have vital cognitive and social capacities.

Following these observations, the study turned to consider three metaphorical usages of the temple in the New Testament. The Gospel of John employs temple language to identify Jesus so that Jesus's crucified and resurrected body is to be understood in terms of a temple. The temple shifts referents within the Pauline corpus. Paul depicts communities of believers as the temple in which the Lord resides with the result that believers are called to be unified with one another and to live in holy ways befitting their status as temples. The temple remains the location in which God's presence dwells in the New Testament Apocalypse, but the referent of the temple is particularly flexible. John sees the temple in his vision of the risen Lord on Patmos, may refer to the Jerusalem temple, refers to the heavenly temple several times, and closes with a stunning vision of the new Jerusalem without a temple because God indwells the entire city.

Temple metaphors do not neatly separate the theological from the social. The temple entails beliefs about God's presence among and availability to believers in a robustly theological manner. At the same time, New Testament temple metaphors make certain demands on the lives of believers that are inescapable. By examining temple metaphors, *Neutestamentler* are able to wrestle with both the theological beliefs and the social practices of early Christians as they are attested in the New Testament. In addition, the metaphors lend themselves to studies of unity and diversity in the New Testament, since the same metaphor may appear in multiple texts as part of a common linguistic reservoir but may also be used for different purposes as required by the author's situation. Finally, New Testament metaphors may be examined alongside their reception history in order to come to a fuller understanding of how other early Christians utilised similar metaphors and to gauge the effects of a metaphor on some later believers.

In light of the disputed place of NTT within New Testament Studies, constructing a means by which theological explorations of the New Testament can be undertaken through a more or less agreed upon method may appear to be a hopeless enterprise. This article hopes nevertheless to have made a modest contribution to the place of NTT as part of public discourse, by setting out crumbs along the way for a theological study of New Testament metaphors and its inclusion within NTT. A thorough study of New Testament metaphors could draw from other interdisciplinary scholarship to examine the wide-ranging metaphorical language sprinkled across the pages of the New Testament, in ways that acknowledge both the theological and social implications of the metaphors, while

simultaneously recognising the unity, diversity, and ongoing influence of the metaphors within the New Testament and elsewhere in early Christianity.

**Funding:** This research is supported by the Research Fund of the Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary, Seoul, 2022.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

1 For the language of identity as a means by which to describe the discipline, I am indebted to Hatina (2013, pp. 12–18).

2 For a full engagement with Räisänen's hermeneutics, see Eskola (2013), and, on NTT more specifically, Eskola (2013, pp. 235–317).

3 It may also be worth noting that some who study religion from a more explicitly 'Religious Studies' paradigm have been reticent to give up the value of a religious insider's perspective completely. See Smart (1986); Wilken (1989).

4 Green writes more fully about theological interpretation in his 2011 book, *Practicing Theological Interpretation* (Green 2011a). On history and theological interpretation, see also Rae (2016); Heim (2017b).

5 Similar stories can also be found in 4 Ezra 8.41–44; Gospel of Thomas 9; Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 38.2.

6 This attempt follows the call of Vouga (2007, pp. 164–66) to understand NTT as an interdisciplinary dialogue.

7 There have, of course, been other attempts to define metaphor. One could start with ancient definitions, such as those found in Aristotle, *De arte poetica* 1457b; Quintilian, *Institutionis oratoriae liber* 8.6.8. For more recent attempts to define metaphor, see (Richards 1936, pp. 89–114; Black 1962, pp. 25–47; Ricoeur 1975; Booth 1979; Cameron and Low 1999; Steen 2008; Kövecses 2010, pp. 3–15).

8 The role of metaphor in education and in engaging the emotions are thereby significant fields of study within the field of metaphor studies. For concise overviews, see (Kövecses 2008; Low 2008; Littlemore 2017).

9 For a different but related distinction, see Lewis [1939] (Lewis [1939] 1979), who distinguishes a 'Master's Metaphor' from a 'Pupil's Metaphor'.

10 Yu (2008) helpfully surveys various ways in which the body can also be a source for metaphors in both Chinese and English.

11 On the fusion of temporal horizons in the Gospel of John, see (Frey 2013; 2018, pp. 73–99).

12 See Rahner (1998) for more on the place of Jesus as God's revelation in the Gospel of John.

13 For a slightly different intertextual reading, that takes into account both Ps 68:10 and the identification of Jesus's body as temple, see Klem (2021).

14 References to 'Paul' and 'Pauline' letters or theology are to be understood with reference to the corpus of thirteen letters that are written in his name and collected in the New Testament. Authorship of some of the letters is disputed. For the purposes of this article, the date and authorship of Ephesians is most heavily disputed, on which see Best (1998, pp. 6–36); Hoehner (2002, pp. 2–61); Sellin (2009); Thielman (2010, pp. 1–5). Nevertheless, arguments for and against authorship of a particular letter by the historical Paul will be left to one side for this article, since the ultimate aim of the article is to contribute to ongoing discussions about NTT. For the sake of a theological reading of the New Testament, the placement of the letters within the Pauline corpus may be more important than determining the letters' dates and authorship precisely.

15 On the use of ethnic terminology in Ephesians, see Harrill (2014).

16 This article will utilise 'Revelation', 'the Apocalypse', and 'the New Testament Apocalypse' as synonyms referring to the same text. On the other hand, lowercase references to an 'apocalypse' or to 'apocalyptic' designate a genre of Second Temple Jewish literature.

17 The temple imagery in 1 Corinthians works alongside terms separating insiders and outsiders to create high boundaries. On outsider designations in 1 Corinthians, see Trebilco (2017, pp. 213–19).

18 On the interplay between the activities of New Testament theologians and the genre of NTT books, see Morgan (2007).

19 Of course, this statement applies *mutatis mutandis* to the study of New Testament temple metaphors in this article.

20 For a recent discussion of unity and diversity with regard to NTT, see Frey (2007, pp. 34–38).

## References


Anderson, Paul N. 2008. 'From One Dialogue to Another: Johannine Polyvalence from Origins to Receptions'. In *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature'*. Edited by Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, pp. 93–119.

Ashton, John. 2014. *The Gospel of John and Christian Origins*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Bauckham, Richard. 1993. The Worship of Jesus. In *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, pp. 118–49.

Beale, Gregory K. 2004. *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*. New Studies in Biblical Theology. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.

Beasley-Murray, George R. 1987. *John*. Word Biblical Commentary 36. Waco: Word.

Behr, John. 2019. *John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Berger, Klaus. 2018. *Leih Mir Deine Flügel, Engel: Die Apokalypse des Johannes im Leben der Kirche*. Freiburg: Herder.

Best, Ernest. 1998. *Ephesians*. International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Bird, Michael F. 2009. New Testament Theology Re-Loaded: Integrating Biblical Theology and Christian Origins. *Tyndale Bulletin* 60: 265–91. [CrossRef]

Black, Max. 1962. *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Blidstein, Moshe. 2017. *Purity, Community, and Ritual in Early Christian Literature*. Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bockmuehl, Marcus. 1995. A Commentator's Approach to the 'Effective History' of Philippians. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 60: 57–88. [CrossRef]

Bockmuehl, Marcus. 2006. *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*. Studies in Theological Interpretation. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Bockmuehl, Marcus. 2010. *The Remembered Peter: In Ancient Reception and Modern Debate*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 262. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Bockmuehl, Marcus. 2012. *Simon Peter in Scripture and Memory: The New Testament Apostle in the Early Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Booth, Wayne C. 1979. Metaphor as Rhetoric: The Problem of Evaluation. In *On Metaphor*. Edited by Sheldon Sacks. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 47–70.

Botner, Max. 2020. The Essence of a Spiritual House. Misunderstanding Metaphor and the Question of Supersessionism in 1 Peter. *JBL* 139: 409–25.

Briggs, Robert A. 1999. *Jewish Temple Imagery in the Book of Revelation*. Studies in Biblical Literature 10. New York: Peter Lang.

Brown, Raymond E. 1966. *The Gospel according to John (i–xii)*. Anchor Bible. Garden City: Doubleday.

Butticaz, Simon. 2019. Theologies of the New Testament in Twentieth-Century Francophone Scholarship: An Assessment of an (Absent) Tradition. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41: 519–36. [CrossRef]

Cameron, Lynne, and Graham Low. 1999. Metaphor. *Language Teaching* 32: 77–96. [CrossRef]

Campbell, Constantine. 2008. From Earthly Symbol to Heavenly Reality: The Tabernacle in the New Testament. In *Exploring Exodus: Literary Theological and Contemporary Approaches*. Edited by Brian S. Rosner and Paul R. Williamson. Nottingham: Apollos, pp. 177–95.

Campbell, Douglas A. 2021. The Future of New Testament Theology, or, What Should Devout Modern Bible Scholarship Look Like? *Religions* 12: 1072. [CrossRef]

Church, Philip. 2017. *Hebrews and the Temple: Attitudes to the Temple in Second Temple Judaism and in Hebrews*. Supplements to Novum Testamentum 171. Leiden: Brill.

Croy, N. Clayton. 2009. The Messianic Whippersnapper: Did Jesus Use a Whip on People in the Temple (John 2:15)? *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128: 555–68. [CrossRef]

Dunn, James D. G. 1977. *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*. London: SCM.

Dye, Guillaume. 2020. A Response to Stephen L. Young, 'Let's Take the Text Seriously': The Protectionist *Doxa* in Mainstream New Testament Studies. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 32: 380–85. [CrossRef]

Edsall, Benjamin A. 2019. *The Reception of Paul and Early Christian Imitation: History and Hermeneutics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eskola, Timo. 2013. *Beyond Biblical Theology: Sacralized Cultralism in Heikki Räisänen's Hermeneutics*. Biblical Interpretation Series 123. Leiden: Brill.

Fekkes, Jan. 1990. The Bride Has Prepared Herself: Revelation 19–21 and Isaian Nuptial Imagery. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109: 269–87.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. 2008. *First Corinthians*. Anchor Yale Bible 32. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Fredriksen, Paula. 2007. The Historical Jesus, the Scene in the Temple, and the Gospel of John. In *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views*. Edited by Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just and Tom Thatcher. Symposium 44. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, pp. 249–76.

Fredriksen, Paula. 2018. *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Frey, Jörg. 2007. Zur Problem der Aufgabe und Durchführung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments. In *Aufgabe und Durchführung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. Edited by Cilliers Breytenbach and Jörg Frey. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 205. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 3–53.
Frey, Jörg. 2013. Die Gegenwart von Vergangenheit und Zukunft Christ: Zur 'Verschmelzung' der Zeithorizonte im Johannesevangelium. *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 28: 129–57.
Frey, Jörg. 2018. *The Glory of the Crucified One: Christology and Theology in the Gospel of John*. Translated by Wayne Coppins, and Christoph Heilig. Waco: Baylor University Press.
Frey, Jörg. 2020. Between Jewish Monotheism and Proto-Trinitarian Relations: The Making and Character of Johannine Christology. In *Monotheism and Christology in Greco-Roman Antiquity*. Edited by Matthew V. Novenson. Supplements to Novum Testamentum 180. Leiden: Brill, pp. 189–221.
Glancy, Jennifer A. 2009. Violence as Sign in the Fourth Gospel. *Biblical Interpretation* 17: 100–17. [CrossRef]
Green, Joel B. 2007. The (Re-)Turn to Theology. *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1: 1–3. [CrossRef]
Green, Joel B. 2011a. *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
Green, Joel B. 2011b. Rethinking 'History' for Theological Interpretation. *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5: 159–74. [CrossRef]
Gupta, Nijay K. 2010. *Worship That Makes Sense to Paul: A New Approach to the Theology and Ethics of Paul's Cultic Metaphors*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 175. Berlin: De Gruyter.
Hahn, Ferdinand. 2011. *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 3rd ed. 2 vols, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Harrill, J. Albert. 2014. Ethnic Fluidity in Ephesians. *New Testament Studies* 60: 379–402. [CrossRef]
Hatina, Thomas R. 2013. *New Testament Theology and Its Quest for Relevance: Ancient Texts and Modern Readers*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
Heim, Erin M. 2017a. *Adoption in Galatians and Romans: Contemporary Metaphor Theories and the Pauline Huiothesia Metaphors*. Biblical Interpretation Series 153; Leiden: Brill.
Heim, Erin M. 2017b. Theological Historiography in Practice. *Criswell Theological Review* 15: 17–33.
Hengel, Martin. 1990. The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel. *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 12: 19–41. [CrossRef]
Hengel, Martin. 1994. Aufgaben der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft. *New Testament Studies* 40: 321–57. [CrossRef]
Hengel, Martin. 1996. Tasks of New Testament Scholarship. *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 6: 67–86. [CrossRef]
Hengel, Martin, and Anna Maria Schwemer. 2007. *Jesus und das Judentum*. Geschichte des frühen Christentums 1. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Hengel, Martin, and Anna Maria Schwemer. 2019. *Jesus and Judaism*. Translated by Wayne Coppins. Waco: Baylor University Press.
Hoehner, Harold W. 2002. *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
Hoskins, Paul M. 2006. *Jesus as the Fulfillment of the Temple in the Gospel of John*. Paternoster Biblical Monographs. Milton Keynes: Paternoster.
Huber, Konrad. 2020. 'Imagery in the Book of Revelation'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Revelation*. Edited by Craig R. Koester. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 53–67.
Huber, Lynn R. 2013. *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation*. Library of New Testament Studies 475; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
Hurtado, Larry W. 1999. New Testament Studies at the Turn of the Millennium: Questions for the Discipline. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52: 158–78. [CrossRef]
Hurtado, Larry W. 2003. *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Hurtado, Larry W. 2009. New Testament Studies in the 20th Century. *Religion* 29: 43–57. [CrossRef]
Hurtado, Larry W. 2016. *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
Johnson, Mark. 2008. 'Philosophy's Debt to Metaphor'. In *Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Edited by Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 39–52.
Karrer, Martin. 2003. 'Sprechende Bilder: Zur Christologie der Johannesapokalypse'. In *Metaphorik und Christologie*. Edited by Jörg Frey, Jan Rohls and Ruben Zimmermann. Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 120. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 111–29.
Kennedy, John M. 2008. Metaphor and Art. In *Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Edited by Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 447–61.
Kieffer, René. 2000. La demeure divine dans le temple et sur l'autel chez Ignace d'Antioche. In *La cité de Dieu: Die Stadt Gottes*. Edited by Martin Hengel, Siegfried Mittmann and Anna Maria Schwemer. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 129. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 287–301.
Kim, Eun-Joo. 2021. Christian Education through 'Metaphorical Epistemology': Focusing on Maria Harris' Forms and Gerd Theißen's Motif. *Korea Presbyterian Journal of Theology* 53: 217–39. [CrossRef]
Klaiber, Walter. 2017. *Das Johannesevangelium, Teilband 1: Joh 1,1–10,42*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
Klem, Matthew J. 2021. Flipping Tables and Building Temples: An Intertextual Reading of Psalm 68:10 LXX in John 2:17. *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 43: 70–98. [CrossRef]
Koester, Craig R. 2003. *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress.
Koester, Craig R. 2018. *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Kövecses, Zoltán. 2008. Metaphor and Emotion. In *Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Edited by Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 380–96.

Kövecses, Zoltán. 2010. *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Ladd, George Eldon. 1972. *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic.
Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 2003. *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Legarth, Peter V. 1992. *Guds Tempel: Tempelsymbolisme og Kristologi hos Ignatius af Antiokia*. Menighedsfakultetets Videnskabelige Serie 3; Århus: Kolon.
Lewis, Clive Staples. 1979. Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare. In *Selected Literary Essays*. Edited by Walter Hooper. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 251–65. First published 1939.
Littlemore, Jeannette. 2017. Metaphor Use in Educational Contexts: Functions and Variations. In *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*. Edited by Elena Semino and Zsófia Demjén. London: Routledge, pp. 283–95.
Lookadoo, Jonathon. 2021. *The Shepherd of Hermas: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Handbook*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
Low, Graham. 2008. Metaphor and Education. In *Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Edited by Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 212–31.
Marshall, Jill E. 2015. Community is a Body: Sex, Marriage, and Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 6:12–7:7 and Ephesians 5:21–33. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134: 833–47. [CrossRef]
Matera, Frank J. 2007. *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
McGinn, Thomas A. J. 1998. *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
McGinn, Thomas A. J. 2004. *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: A Study of Social History and the Brothel*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
Meeks, Wayne A. 2005. Why Study the New Testament. *New Testament Studies* 51: 155–70. [CrossRef]
Menoud, Philippe H. 1946. Théologie du Nouveau Testament et histoire du salut. *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 34: 145–52.
Mihăilă, Corin. 2019. The Number and Nature of Parties in 1 Corinthians 1–4. *Perichoresis* 17: 41–50. [CrossRef]
Mitchell, Margaret M. 1991. *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians*. Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie 28. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Mittmann, Ulrike. 2021. 'Sie sprachen von seinem Exodus, den er in Jerusalem erfüllen sollte' (Lk 9, 31). In *Die Weisheit und der Gottessohn: Studien zur hermeneutischen Grundlegung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 462. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 139–84.
Moore, Nicholas J. 2022. 'He Saw Heaven Opened': Heavenly Temple and Universal Mission in Luke-Acts. *New Testament Studies* 68: 38–51. [CrossRef]
Morgan, Robert. 2007. Made in Germany: Towards an Anglican Appropriation of an Originally Lutheran Genre. In *Aufgabe und Durchführung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. Edited by Cilliers Breytenbach and Jörg Frey. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 205. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 85–112.
Morgan, Teresa. 2020. *Being 'in Christ' in the Letters of Paul: Saved through Christ and in His Hands*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 449. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Peeler, Amy Lauren. 2021. 'Leading Many Sons to Glory': Historical Implications of Exclusive Language in the Epistle to the Hebrews. *Religions* 12: 844. [CrossRef]
Pitts, Andrew W. 2008. *Paul: Jew, Greek, and Roman*. Edited by Stanley E. Porter. Pauline Studies 5. Leiden: Brill.
Rae, Murray. 2007. Texts in Context: Scripture and the Divine Economy. *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1: 23–45. [CrossRef]
Rae, Murray. 2016. Theological Interpretation and Historical Criticism. In *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation*. Edited by Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, pp. 94–109.
Rae, Murray. 2021. Who are Abraham's Children? *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 15: 219–32. [CrossRef]
Rahner, Johanna. 1998. *'Er aber sprach vom Tempel seines Leibes': Jesus von Nazaret als Ort der Offenbarung Gottes im vierten Evangelium*. Bonner biblische Beiträge 117. Bodenheim: Philo.
Räisänen, Heikki. 2000. *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme*, 2nd ed. London: SCM.
Reinhartz, Adele. 2021. The Hermeneutics of Chutzpah: A Disquisition on the Value/s of 'Critical Investigation of the Bible'. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140: 8–30.
Richards, Ivor Armstrong. 1936. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Ricoeur, Paul. 1975. *La métaphore vive*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
Rowe, Kavin C. 2022. What If It Were True? Why Study the New Testament. *New Testament Studies* 68: 144–55.
Rowland, Christopher. 1999. Apocalyptic: The Disclosure of Heavenly Knowledge. In *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume 3, The Early Roman Period*. Edited by William Horbury, William David Davies and John Sturdy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 776–97.
Ryliškyté, Ligita. 2017. Metaphor and Analogy in Theology: A Choice between Lions, Witches, and Wardrobes? *Theological Studies* 78: 696–717. [CrossRef]
Schröter, Jens. 2000. Zum gegenwärtigen Stand der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft: Methodologische Aspekte und theologische Perspektiven. *New Testament Studies* 46: 262–83. [CrossRef]

Schröter, Jens, Simon Butticaz, and Andreas Dettwiler. 2018. Receptions of Paul in Early Christianity: The Person of Paul and His Writings through the Eyes of His Early Interpreters. In *Collaboration with Clarissa Paul*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 234. Berlin: De Gruyter.
Schröter, Jens, Tobias Nicklas, and Joseph Verheyden. 2019. Gospels and Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Experiments in Reception. In *Collaboration with Katharina Simunovic*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 235. Berlin: De Gruyter.
Sellin, Gerhard. 2009. Adresse und Intention des Epheserbriefes. In *Studien zu Paulus und zum Epheserbrief*. Edited by Dieter Sänger. Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 229. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
Skinner, Christopher W., and Kelly R. Iverson, eds. 2012. *Unity and Diversity in the Gospels and Paul: Essays in Honor of Frank J. Matera*. Early Christianity and Its Literature 7. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
Smart, Ninian. 1986. The Principles and Meaning of the Study of Religion. In *Concept and Empathy: Essays in the Study of Religion*. Edited by Donald Wiebe. London: Macmillan, pp. 195–206.
Smith, Steve. 2017. *The Fate of the Jerusalem Temple in Luke-Acts: An Intertextual Approach to Jesus' Laments over Jerusalem and Stephen's Speech*. Library of New Testament Studies 553. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
Snodgrass, Klyne R. 2018. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Soskice, Janet Martin. 1985. *Metaphor and Religious Language*. Oxford: Clarendon.
Steen, Gerard. 2008. *Finding Metaphor in Grammar and Usage: A Methodological Analysis of Theory and Research*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Thielman, Frank. 2005. *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
Thielman, Frank. 2010. *Ephesians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
Thiselton, Anthony C. 2000. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Trebilco, Paul R. 2017. *Outsider Designations and Boundary Construction in the New Testament: Early Christian Communities and the Formation of Group Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Tuckett, Christopher M. 2014. What is 'New Testament Study'? The New Testament and Early Christianity. *New Testament Studies* 60: 157–84. [CrossRef]
Van Nes, Jermo. 2015. Under Construction: The Building of God's Temple according to Ephesians 2, 19–22. In *Paul's Graeco-Roman Context*. Edited by Cilliers Breytenbach. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 277. Leuven: Peeters, pp. 631–44.
Vistar, Deolito V. 2018. *The Significance of the Temple Incident in the Narratives of the Four Gospels*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
Vouga, François. 2001. *Une Théologie du Nouveau Testament*. Le monde de la Bible 43. Geneva: Labor et Fides.
Vouga, François. 2007. Die Aufgaben der Theologie des Neuen Testaments: Verstehen als interdisziplinäre Kunst der Interpretation. In *Aufgabe und Durchführung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. Edited by Cilliers Breytenbach and Jörg Frey. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 205. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 159–73.
Wilken, Robert L. 1989. Who Will Speak for the Religious Traditions? *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57: 699–717. [CrossRef]
Young, Stephen L. 2020. 'Let's Take the Text Seriously': The Protectionist *Doxa* of Mainstream New Testament Studies. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 32: 328–63. [CrossRef]
Yu, Ning. 2008. Metaphor from Body and Culture. In *Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Edited by Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 247–61.
Zhang, Peter. 2011. Corporate Identity Metaphor as Constitutive Discourse in Miniature: The Case of New China Life. *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 68: 375–94.
Zimmermann, Christiane. 2007. *Die Namen des Vaters: Studien zu Ausgewählten Neutestamentlichen Gottesbezeichnungen vor Ihrem Frühjüdischen und Pagenen Sprachhorizont*. Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums 69. Leiden: Brill.
Zimmermann, Ruben. 2003a. 'Du wirst noch Größeres sehen...' (Joh 1, 50): Zur Ästhetik und Hermeneutik der Christusbilder im Johannesevangelium—Eine Skizze. In *Metaphorik und Christologie*. Edited by Jörg Frey, Jan Rohls and Ruben Zimmermann. Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 120. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 93–110.
Zimmermann, Ruben. 2003b. Paradigmen einer metaphorischen Christologie: Eine Leseanleitung. In *Metaphorik und Christologie*. Edited by Jörg Frey, Jan Rohls and Ruben Zimmermann. Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 120. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 1–34.
Zumstein, Jean. 2017. *Das Johannesevangelium*. Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

religions

MDPI

*Article*

# Johannine Ethics: An Exegetical-Theological Summary and a 'Desiderative' Extension of Mimesis

**Paul Anthony Hartog**

Department of Theology, Faith Baptist Theological Seminary, Ankeny, IA 50023, USA; hartogp@faith.edu

**Abstract:** If we consider the Johannine literature to have primarily espoused an exemplary (rather than an imperatival) ethical paradigm, our understanding of its moral teaching becomes much richer. The Gospel of John does not provide a moral grammar primarily by conveying a set of commands or prohibitions, but through conformity to a moral example (Jesus Christ himself). More specifically, this paper initially approaches the issue by surveying the uses of the imperative in the Gospel of John, the appearances of ὀφείλειν and καθώς, related moral themes, the descriptions of the two Johannine commandments, and the statements of John 13:14–15. The essay then focuses particularly upon the recent work of Cornelis Bennema on the imitative or "mimetic" ethics of John. Bennema has emphasized the "cognitive mimesis" and "performative mimesis" of Johannine ethics, engendered and enabled by the Paraclete. Finally, through an exposition of John 8 and other relevant texts, this essay contributes to the conversation by adding "desiderative mimesis" to Bennema's proposed framework. As one's identity (who I am) is transformed, one's desiderative inclinations (what I desire) are renewed, resulting in changed behavior (how I act).

**Keywords:** Gospel of John; First Epistle of John; New Testament Ethics; imitation; mimesis; virtue ethics; Paraclete; desires

**Citation:** Hartog, Paul Anthony. 2022. Johannine Ethics: An Exegetical-Theological Summary and a 'Desiderative' Extension of Mimesis. *Religions* 13: 503. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060503

Academic Editor: Joel B. Green

Received: 31 March 2022
Accepted: 25 May 2022
Published: 1 June 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



## 1. Introduction

An integral field within biblical theology is biblical "moral theology", or biblical ethics. Within the New Testament canon, some authors and corpora have received far more attention than others. Johannine ethics have often been "shunned" or relegated to the "periphery" (Estes 2019, p. 43; Koester 2013, p. 85). In the past, scholars commonly "overlooked or downplayed the potential contributions" of Johannine ethics, being "quick to dismiss" their value (Skinner 2017a, p. xvii), and treated the presence of ethical material in the Gospel of John with skepticism (van der Watt 2018, p. 363). The "elusive" nature of Johannine ethics stubbornly proved to be "a problematic and challenging area of research" (Trozzo 2020, p. 276; van der Watt 2006d, p. 107; 2011, pp. 431–32).

Through much of the twentieth century, many commentators had often assumed that the Johannine community suffered from a nearly complete lack of structured ethical teaching.[1] Brown (1982, pp. 80–81) referred to the Fourth Gospel's "strange silence on ethical matters" and theorized that "the lack of specific moral directives" led to a "lack of interest in moral behavior among the majority of the Johannine community". Jack T. Sanders (1975, p. 100) even referred to the "weakness and moral bankruptcy of the Johannine ethics". As late as a decade ago, Ruben Zimmermann (2012, p. 44) could claim "New Testament scholarship appears to find consensus on one subject—there is general agreement that the Fourth Gospel contains no ethics".

Over sixty years ago, Noël Lazure (1965, p. 9) observed "L'aspect moral de la théologie johannique a été très peu étudié". Apart from the famous love command, almost nothing of Johannine ethics had been considered, by some, to be retrievable (Houlden 1973, p. 36; Meier 2001, pp. 47–48). Frank Matera (1996, p. 92) highlighted the "major challenge" faced in reconstructing the ethics of the Gospel of John, with its "remarkably few references to

moral conduct". János Bolyki (2003, p. 198) underscored the common charge that the ethical teaching of the Fourth Gospel "is limited, scanty and far from being part of an overall ethical system". To complicate matters, although the Gospel lacks maxims, moral sermons, paraenetic sections, *Haustafeln*, virtue, and vice lists, etc. (Trozzo 2020, pp. 262, 278; van der Watt 2011, p. 445), it is flush with metaphors, pervasive ironies, *double entendres*, imagery, and symbolism (Culpepper 1991, p. 133).

Douglas Estes (2019, p. 44) maintains that modern biases have limited the study and understanding of Johannine ethics (cf. Wannenwetsch 2012, pp. 93–94).[2] Explorations of Johannine ethics have suffered from the pincer movement of "a restricted definition and a limited imagination" (Skinner 2020, p. 283). Wayne Meeks (1996, p. 320) commented that "the Fourth Gospel meets none of our expectations about the way ethics should be constructed". If one is searching for propositional ethics in the form of "specific injunctions or detailed parenetic passages", one will remain disappointed (Schrage 1982, p. 297). One finds few rules of exact conduct, and nothing comparable to the Sermon on the Mount (Kanagaraj 2001, p. 34; Zimmermann 2012, p. 47). Willi Marxsen (1989, p. 286) rightly notes the complete absence of "specific instructions and admonitions" in the Gospel of John.

Only within the last generation has scholarly interest in the ethics of the Fourth Gospel blossomed, causing Jan van der Watt (2018, p. 378) to underscore "the renewed interest in the ethics of John in the twenty-first century" (cf. Williams 2021, pp. 35–38). A "much richer, textured perspective" has flourished as scholars have moved beyond narrow understandings of "ethics" and an unwarranted obsession with paraenetic material (moral exhortation) alone (Skinner 2017a, p. xxxii). As Richard Hays (1996, p. 140) rightly insisted, "the ethical significance of the New Testament narratives cannot be restricted to their didactic content".[3] In a broader sense, an "ethical text" is one that "offers reflective orientation toward one's way of life, defining how to behave according to a specific value system" in relation to others (Trozzo 2020, pp. 282–83).

Over the last decade, numerous volumes covering Johannine ethics have appeared in a burgeoning flurry, including *Rethinking the Ethics of John* (2012), edited by Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann;[4] *Die Ethik des Johannesevangeliums im sprachlichen Feld des Handelns* (2014), by Karl Weyer-Menkhoff; *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John* (2017), edited by Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner; *Exploring Johannine Ethics: A Rhetorical Approach to Moral Efficacy in the Fourth Gospel Narrative* (2017), by Lindsey M. Trozzo; *Ethics in the Gospel of John* (2018), by Sookgoo Shin; *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature: A Study in Johannine Ethics* (2019), by Cornelis Bennema; *A Grammar of the Ethics of John: Reading John from an Ethical Perspective* (2019), by Jan G. van der Watt; *Zeit und Ethik im Johannesevangelium: Theoretische, methodische und exegetische Annäherungen an die Gunst der Stunde* (2019), by Olivia Rahmsdorf; and *Christology, Soteriology, and Ethics in John and Hebrews* (2022), by William R. G. Loader (2022).

In a review article, Craig Koester (2013) summarized the Johannine answers to the fundamental ethical question, "What should I do?" He listed the responses as "Do the loving thing"; "Do what gives life"; "Do what is true"; and "Follow Jesus". In sum, "Do what is congruent with what God has done in Jesus" (Koester 2013, p. 88). In a recent study, Christopher Skinner (2020) has argued for an "emerging consensus" regarding Johannine ethics. Skinner's "consensus" holds that "(1) the Gospel of John has ethical material, and (2) that material must be taken seriously by those reflecting on ancient ethical systems in general and New Testament ethics in particular" (Skinner 2020, p. 280).

This essay will follow Skinner's move to simplify (by relating an exegetical summary and some resulting theological corollaries), but it will then nudge the conversation in a new direction by suggesting an overlooked facet of Johannine ethics, that of "desiderative mimesis". In addition to norms (values, identity, rules, and principles) and behavior (*ethos*, actions, and lifestyle), the field of ethics also entails linking mechanisms such as dispositional desires and inclinational motivations. Nevertheless, scholars have neglected the desiderative facets (desires and motivations) of Johannine mimetic ethics. Therefore, after examining the exegetical foundations of Johannine ethics and some resulting theo-

logical corollaries, this article will add "desiderative mimesis" to Cornelis Bennema's dual framework of "cognitive mimesis" and "performative mimesis".

## 2. Materials (Exegetical Foundations of Johannine Ethics)

### *2.1. The Use of the Imperative in the Fourth Gospel*

The lack of propositional directives within the Johannine literature is manifested by the employment of the imperative in the Gospel of John. Numerous instances of the imperative appear on the mouth of Jesus, yet most are specifically bound to the persons in the contexts in which they are uttered: John 1:39; 2:7; 2:8; 2:16 (2×); 2:19; 4:7; 4:10; 4:16 (2×); 4:21; 4:50; 5:8 (3×), 5:11 (2×); 5:12 (2×); 5:14; 5:45; 6:10; 6:12; 6:20; 7:8; [8:7]; [8:11 (2×)]; 9:7; 9:11 (2×); 11:39; 11:44 (2×); 12:7; 13:27; 13:29; 14:31; 18:8; 18:11; 18:21; 18:23; 20:17 (3×); 20:22; 20:27 (4×); 21:6; 21:10; 21:12 (2×); 21:15; 21:16; 21:17. Other imperatives which Jesus pronounces are simply idiomatic, such as "Behold" (1:47; 4:35; 5:14; 16:32; 18:21; 19:26; 19:27; 20:27), "Do not marvel" (5:28), or "Do not think" (5:45). In other cases, Jesus uses the imperative with his Father; for example, "Father, save me from this hour" (12:27) and "Father, glorify your name" (12:28). Jesus' imperatives addressed to the Father are more common in his "high priestly prayer": "Glorify your Son" (17:1), "Glorify me in your own presence" (17:5), "Holy Father, keep them in your name" (17:11), and "Sanctify them in the truth" (17:17).[5]

Yet some imperatives uttered by Jesus, though relative to a specific situation, could lend themselves to universal implications in the Johannine community and/or among wider readers of the Johannine literature: 1:43; 4:35; 5:28; 6:27; 6:43; 7:24; 7:37; 10:37; 10:38; 12:26; 12:35; 12:36; 14:1 (2 or 3×);[6] 14:11 (2×); 14:27 (2×); 15:4; 15:7; 15:9; 15:20; 16:24; 16:33; 21:19; 21:22. For example, Jesus commands the disciples to lift up their eyes and look on the fields, ready for harvest (John 4:35). Such an imperative could continue to carry weight within the missional endeavors of the community. Another example is found in the precept of 7:24 where Jesus commands the Jews, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment". In addition, Jesus commands his listeners to walk in the light (12:35) and to believe in the light (12:36), both imperatives that could be generally applied. The command to believe recurs (14:1, 11; cf. Brown 2017), as does the command to abide in Christ and his love (15:4, 9; cf. Caragounis 2012). Another general principle attached to an imperative is found in 16:24: "Ask, and you will receive" (cf. 15:7: "ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you").

Upon examination, the imperatives in the Gospel of John do not provide much information about Johannine ethics. Although over 150 imperatives occur, most uses are so bound to their specific contexts as to be invalidated as universal ethical directives. There are some imperatives spoken by Jesus in the Fourth Gospel which could perhaps imply general ethical propositions, but these are relatively unsubstantial when compared with the Synoptics. For example, the Gospel of John does not contain anything resembling the moral teachings of the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5–7 or the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:20–49 (cf. Matera 1996, pp. 42–50, 73–79). The Sermon on the Mount by itself contains over fifty imperatives in three chapters alone.

This examination of the imperatives in the Gospel of John confirms the supposition that John does not focus upon propositionally prescriptive ethics. Marxsen (1989, p. 294) even mused that "the dominant characteristic of the Johannine ethic" is that "there are no imperatives with specific content". If one wishes to describe Johannine ethics, one must turn from an imperatival, propositional system to another form of ethics. The uses of ὀφείλειν, καθώς, ἐντολή, and ὑπόδειγμα in the Johannine literature provide us with clues.[7]

### *2.2. The Use of ὀφείλειν*

An interesting paradigm of ethics in the Johannine literature is signaled by the use of the verb ὀφείλειν ("to owe, ought, be obliged"). One notes that the verb ὀφείλειν occurs six times in the Johannine writings. In order to incorporate all these instances, we cast our net to include the Johannine epistles as well as the Fourth Gospel, even while acknowledging the

distinctive purposes of the separate works within their historical contexts.[8] The appearance of ὀφείλειν in the Gospel of John 19:7 is inconsequential for Johannine ethics, but the other five occurrences warrant examination.

First, Jesus told the disciples that they "ought" to wash one another's feet, even as he had washed theirs (John 13:14). Second, the believer "ought" to walk in the same manner as Jesus walked (1 John 2:6; cf. Leung 2018, p. 125). Third, the believer "ought" to lay down his life for his fellow community members, even as Christ laid down his life for us (1 John 3:16).[9] Fourth, the believer "ought" to love other believers, even as God loved us (1 John 4:11). Fifth, believers "ought" to entertain traveling missionaries (3 John 8).

An examination of the use of ὀφείλειν reveals that four of these five occurrences portray an *example* which "ought" to be followed (John 13:14; 1 John 2:6; 3:16; 4:11). Furthermore, three of these four particular constructions describe Jesus as the example to be imitated (John 13:14; 1 John 2:6; 3:16). This use of ὀφείλειν signals an *exemplary* system of ethics, wherein the Johannine literature underscores a foundational moral example.[10] Moreover, the Johannine sense of imitation involves not only replication (acting like), but mission (acting as representative of) (van der Merwe 2017b, p. 4; Trozzo 2020, p. 306).

### *2.3. The Use of καθώς*

The word καθώς ("as; just as") is found thirty-one times in the Gospel of John and thirteen times in the Johannine epistles (de Dinechin 1970; van der Merwe 2017b, p. 5). The use of καθώς in the Johannine literature further reveals an ethics of example (often correlated with the conjunction καί) (van der Watt 2001, pp. 139–40; Bennema 2018, p. 191). One finds a "mimetic chain" or "chain of imitation" (or a "laddering" of mimesis) in Johannine ethics.[11] Schrage (1982, p. 306) notes, "The frequent repetition of 'as' is characteristic: on the one hand, it reflects the relationship of the Father to Jesus and of Jesus to the disciples; on the other, it confronts Jesus' followers with Jesus' own conduct as an exemplary realization of Christian life".

First, "just as" (καθώς) the Father has related himself to Jesus, so Jesus has related himself to his disciples. References to Jesus following the example of the Father are found in such verses as John 5:30; 8:28; 14:31; and 17:1–2. Jesus only judges as (καθώς) he hears from the Father (5:30). Jesus speaks as (καθώς) the Father taught him (8:28). Jesus acts as (καθώς) the Father commanded him (14:31). Jesus glorifies the Father as (καθώς) the Father has given him authority (17:1–2). Directly parallel constructions are found in 15:9, 17:18, and 17:23: Jesus sent his disciples as (καθώς) the Father sent him (17:18; 17:23). Ultimately, Jesus loved the disciples as (καθώς) the Father loved him (15:9).

Second, "just as" (καθώς) Jesus has related himself to his disciples, so they are to relate to one another. The second notion, that the disciples are to follow the *example* of Jesus, is found eleven times (in John 10:14–15; 13:15; 13:34; 15:10; 17:11; 17:16; 17:21; 1 John 2:6; 3:3; 3:7; and 4:17). Believers know Jesus as (καθώς) Jesus knows the Father and as (καθώς) the Father knows Jesus (10:14–15). Jesus states, "For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as (καθώς) I have done to you" (13:15). The disciples are to be one as (καθώς) the Father and Jesus are one (17:11; 17:21). The disciples are not of the world, just as (καθώς) Jesus is not of the world (17:16). Above all, the disciples are to love one another as (καθώς) Jesus has loved them (13:34). If the disciples keep the commandments of Jesus, they will abide in his love, just as (καθώς) Jesus has kept the Father's commandments and abides in his love (15:10).[12] In this manner, "divine love is the foundation and calling of the Christian community" (Nissen 1999, p. 211). The unity of the Father–Son relationship forms a "template" for unity in the Christian community (van der Merwe 2017a, p. 6), and the *familia Dei* serves as the communal context of the "lived experience" of the love of God (van der Merwe 2020, pp. 4–5). Moreover, "The measure of our love toward each other is Jesus' love towards us" (Bolyki 2003, p. 204).

This ethical use of καθώς is more fully developed in 1 John (Schrage 1982, pp. 306–8; van der Watt 2014, pp. 210–19). Believers should walk as (καθώς) Jesus walked (2:6). The believer purifies himself or herself as (καθώς) Jesus is pure (3:3). The believer practices

righteousness as (καθώς) Jesus is righteous (3:7). As (καθώς) Jesus is in the world, so the believer is in the world (4:17). Ultimately, the readers were to be willing to lay down their own lives for one another, based upon the example of Jesus' own sacrifice, because "he laid down his life for us" (1 Jn 3:16). Such sacrificial love is demonstrated through care for those in need (1 Jn 3:17–18). Conversely, hatred of a brother or sister is tantamount to murder (1 Jn 3:15; van der Merwe 2006, p. 553)

### *2.4. Related Moral Themes*

In general, trends deeply rooted in the Gospel continue in the first epistle, demonstrating continuity and adaptation within the community.[13] Rhetorical accents upon such moral attributes or qualities as love, truth, light, life, goodness, and holiness persist (van der Watt 2013; Bennema 2017a, pp. 148–52, 157–59), often in the form of contrasts, such as love and hate, truth and falsehood, light and darkness, and life and death (Schrage 1982, p. 308; Reese 2013, p. 87). One also notices new emphases upon the virtues of purity and righteousness in the epistle. More specifically, 1 John exhorts its readers not to love the world (1 Jn 2:15–17; cf. Loader 2014), and its abrupt ending commands them to abstain from idols (1 Jn 5:21). The Johannine epistles also directly address such moral topics as proper speech and hospitality (Reese 2013, pp. 86–88).

In the moral theology of the Johannine literature, "believing, loving, following, abiding, obedience, serving, and testifying, authenticate and shape the family bond between the believer, God, and fellow-believers (identity)" (Bennema 2018, p. 190; cf. Bennema 2017a, pp. 83–142). Other related terms in the Johannine literature include hearing, knowing, continuing, coming, and receiving (Schrage 1982, p. 303). Throughout the Gospel, love leads to obedience, which is portrayed as "love in action" or "returned love" (Smith 2005, p. 49; van der Watt 2006d, p. 117). As Dirk van der Merwe (2017b, p. 9) comments, "love for Christ finds expression in the obedient action of his followers". At the same time, in moving from the Gospel to 1 John, one notices a subtle shift from "direct relation to a tradition-oriented ethics" (van der Watt 2018, p. 374). Nevertheless, Jesus remains at the center of the ethical model, because "Christology determines ethics" (Kenney 2000, p. vii).

These examples of the use of καθώς (and related common themes) in the Johannine literature reveal that the system of exemplary ethics was two-tiered. Jesus imitates the example of the Father, and believers are to imitate the example of Jesus.

### *2.5. The Johannine Commandments*

The Gospel of John uses several phrases referring to obedience, including "following", "doing the will of God", "doing the works of God", and "obeying/keeping commands" (van der Watt 2001, pp. 140–43; 2011, pp. 433–36). Many scholars have maintained that the Johannine literature only refers to one ἐντολή (commandment),[14] the "new" commandment to love one another (cf. Marxsen 1989, p. 286; Maston 1997, p. 221; Nissen 1999, p. 194).[15] Manifesting such love is "the most overtly ethical imperative in the Johannine literature" and "an abiding theme across the entire corpus" (Skinner 2017a, p. xxxi; 2017b, p. 25). As Nissen (1999, p. 203) quips, "Love is seen as the badge of discipleship". He reiterates, "The Johannine community is a community of love" (Nissen 1999, p. 212). While some have depicted the Johannine love command as narrowly sectarian or parochially exclusive, Skinner (2017b, p. 37) contends that the self-giving, missional, and open nature of love within the Fourth Gospel (rooted in God's own sacrificial love for the entire world) reflects an "inherent and underlying universality".

Urban von Wahlde, however, argued that there are actually two Johannine commandments (von Wahlde 1990, p. 110; cf. Brown 2017, p. 7). Specifically, these two commandments are to keep the word of Jesus and to love another.[16] "The first commandment stressed fidelity to the word of Jesus as he had spoken it and as the community had heard it from the beginning" (von Wahlde 1990, p. 3). "The second commandment stressed the necessity of actively demonstrating love for one another within the community in imitation of the love of Jesus for them" (von Wahlde 1990, p. 3; cf. Stovell 2018). Furthermore, the juxtaposition

of the two commands links believing (faith) and love (Matera 1996, p. 111; Nissen 1999, p. 204; van der Watt 2006c, p. 158). Thus the "two primary commandments" of the Fourth Gospel could be construed as "to believe and to love" (Brown 2017, p. 7). The verb "believe" appears ninety-eight times in the Gospel, and its foundational role is already established in the prologue (1:12) and is reiterated in the book's final purpose statement (20:30–31) preceding the epilogue (Brown 2017).

The use of "imitation" in von Wahlde's definition of "the second commandment" is instructive, for it reveals that the two Johannine commandments also add to our understanding of Johannine exemplary ethics. Jesus was given two commandments by the Father: what to say and what to do (his words and works). Specifically, states von Wahlde, "it is clear that there are two commandments given to Jesus: to speak the word given him by the Father and to lay down his life on behalf of his own out of love for them" (von Wahlde 1990, p. 16). Similarly, Jesus gives two commandments to his disciples: to keep his words and to love one another (von Wahlde 1990, p. 31).[17] The disciples are to keep/guard (τήρειν) the message of Jesus and to love each other sacrificially. The verb τήρειν indicates "an obedient orientation" (van der Merwe 2006, p. 544).

All this coalesces well with a system of mimetic ethics: just as Jesus received two commandments from the Father and faithfully kept them, so the disciples were to keep the commandments they had received. Hans Boersma declares, "Jesus does the Father's works that he has commissioned him to do. The believers in turn do Jesus' works that they have been commissioned to do" (Boersma 2003, pp. 115–16). Thus, a laddering chain links "the Father", "the Son", and "believers" (Boersma 2003, p. 116). One may add another Johannine commandment, "to follow" Jesus—in the ethical sense of walking the path of discipleship (Collins 2017; Skinner 2020, p. 292). In addition, Glen Lund (2012, pp. 276–77) asserts that von Wahlde overlooked the "order" of being sent in mission (cf. Kok 2010).

### *2.6. The Statements in John 13:14–15*

Even after having surveyed the two Johannine commandments, one is left with a sense of ambiguity. How did the two Johannine commandments play out in real-life, concrete situations? A clue may be found in John 13:14–15 (van der Watt 2006d, pp. 122–27). After washing the disciples' feet, Jesus remarks, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought (ὀφείλειν) to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example (ὑπόδειγμα), that you also should do just as (καθώς) I have done to you". This passage combines the exemplary uses of ὀφείλειν and καθώς, and it adds the explicit statement that Jesus is the "example" or "pattern" or "model" (ὑπόδειγμα) of the community (Skinner 2017b, pp. 28–33).

The sense of ὑπόδειγμα surpasses "an example to be imitated", therefore, Robert Brawley (2013, p. 50) prefers the translation "revelatory pattern". Jesus *is* the example in his person, he *sets* the basis for mimesis in his deeds, and he calls upon his disciples to grasp the full purpose of his actions (van der Merwe 2022, p. 6; van der Watt 2001, pp. 134–35; Bennema 2014, pp. 265, 268). Thus his action is not simply "an object lesson or template", and the required mimesis cannot be "mindless copying" (Bennema 2014, p. 269; 2017a, p. 174). Alan Culpepper (1991, p. 139) has demonstrated that the foot-washing "functions metaphorically and proleptically in relation to Jesus' death". "It clarifies in advance the meaning of Jesus' death" (Culpepper 1991, p. 139; cf. Skinner 2017b, pp. 31–33). In "responsive" interaction, one is not merely informed by his example, one is radically transformed by him and is called to act creatively and faithfully in response (Koester 2013, p. 88; Bennema 2014, pp. 273–74; van der Watt 2019, pp. 250, 257–58).

As Marxsen notes, Jesus' statement that he is providing a ὑπόδειγμα was naturally to be taken more broadly than the specific action of washing feet (Prunet 1957, pp. 137–38). In all of life, Jesus was the ὑπόδειγμα of the community (Matera 1996, p. 105; Köstenberger 2004, p. 408). In this manner, the "exemplary character of Jesus" serves as "a prototype for his disciples" (Schrage 1982, p. 306). Therefore, the Gospel of John posits "a close connection between ethics and Christology, for it is in Christ that the character of God is

revealed and that people can clearly see what the right things are and how to do them" (Kanagaraj 2001, p. 60).

Thus far, we have noted a lack of Johannine propositional ethics, through the meager presence of imperatives in the Gospel of John. Then, through the occurrences of ὀφείλειν, the uses of καθώς, related moral themes, the two Johannine commandments, and the statements in John 13:14–15, we have established that the Johannine literature sustained a system of "exemplary" or mimetic ethics. As Olivier Prunet has written, "La norme de la vie morale revêt habituellement le visage de la loi. Mais dans la pratique, l'incarnation d'un ideal dans un individu exceptionnel joue un role non moins determinant. Une forte personnalité morale imprime sa marque à ses disciples, son histoire deviant source d'inspiration, ses actes servent d'exemple" (Prunet 1957, p. 135). We now turn to focus upon the specific, theological topic of mimesis, which will lay a foundation for our own unique contribution of "desiderative mimesis" within Johannine ethics.

## 3. Results (Theological Corollaries and Desiderative Mimesis)

### *3.1. Mimesis and Moral Transformation*

Scholars have frequently referenced the "implied" or "implicit" ethics of the Gospel of John (Kanagaraj 2001; Zimmermann 2009; van der Watt and Zimmermann 2012). Skinner (2020, p. 282) elucidates, "By 'implied ethics', scholars mean to explore those areas that are woven into the fabric of the narrative and may not be as obvious as imperative commands or prohibitions" (cf. van der Merwe 2022, p. 6). The Fourth Gospel is "laden with ethical implications" (Nissen 1999, p. 199). To quote Ruben Zimmermann (2012, p. 80): "The underlying structure of this implicit ethics seems to be simple: The acts of man are connected to Jesus' deeds and finally to God's work. The actions of people are thus given a responsive character. . . . It is more than imitation. It is responsive, reactive ethics". Among the last generation of scholars, addressing the "implied" and responsive nature of Johannine ethics has led to a cascade of publications.

Since the turn of the century, scholars have examined Johannine ethics through various lenses, including a reinterpretation of the Decalogue, Law, or Torah (Kanagaraj 2001; Schroeder 2002; Lioy 2007; Loader 2012, 2016);[18] the ethical roles of story, narrative, and "narratological" characterization (Boersma 2003; Wagener 2015);[19] the nature of having "fellowship" (van der Merwe 2006); rhetorical and dynamic uses of "imagery" (van der Watt 2006b);[20] the nature of "radical love" (van der Watt 2006d); virtue ethics (Brickel 2012; Bennema 2013, 2017a); the foundational roles of "abiding" in Jesus and "following" him (Caragounis 2012; Collins 2017); sapiential themes (Glicksman 2012); "doing God's will" and "doing God's works" (Zimmermann 2012); linguistic fields of action (Weyer-Menkhoff 2014); eschatology or "living the in-between-time" (Balz 1986; Mabotja 2014; Moloney 2017); the rhetorical features of moral efficacy (Trozzo 2017a, 2017b); conceptual frameworks of time (Rahmsdorf 2019b); "discipleship as moral progress" (Shin 2019); and the "grammar" of ethics (van der Watt 2019); Others have investigated specific terms within Johannine ethics, such as "sin" (van der Merwe 2005); "holiness" (van der Merwe 2017a, 2017b); "work" (Löhr 2012); "life" (Stare 2012); the "good" and "true" (van der Watt 2011, 2013); and "obedience" (van der Merwe 2022).

Of course, the above listing is not exhaustive. A further (and fruitful) avenue of recent exploration has been the role of *imitation* or *mimesis* in Johannine ethics (Capes 2003; Burridge 2007, 2009; van der Watt 2016). In particular, Cornelis Bennema has developed this mimetic theme (Bennema 2014, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2020). In his early work, Bennema (2016, p. 206) claimed that "mimetic ethics" in John had remained largely "uncharted territory". He posited the following "working definition" of *mimesis*: "Person B represents or emulates person A in activity or state X in order to become like person A" (Bennema 2017a, pp. 25, 34, 193).

Bennema focuses upon both "state" and "activity" because the goal of mimesis is "moral transformation" as the imitator becomes like the exemplar in both identity and behavior (Bennema 2018, pp. 191–92). Bennema (2017a, p. 193) maintains that "Johannine

literature presents two types of mimesis—performative mimesis and existential mimesis". In *performative mimesis* "believers imitate Jesus in their actions", while in *existential mimesis* "the believer imitates Jesus in a particular state of being" (Bennema 2016, p. 215). Under this "mimesis of being", Bennema (2016, pp. 215–17) lists "to be one", "not to be of the world", "to be sent", "to be in", and "to be where Jesus is".

Bennema acknowledges that the exact term *mimesis* does not appear in the Gospel of John or Johannine epistles, except for 3 John 11 (μὴ μιμοῦ). Nevertheless, he focuses upon related linguistic expressions that indicate mimesis, including the employment (and interconnected use) of καθώς, καὶ, οὕτως, ὥσπερ, ὁμοίως, and ὅμοίος (Bennema 2017a, pp. 207–9). He contends that the conceptualization of mimesis is so central and integral to Johannine moral theology that "Johannine ethics *is* mimetic ethics" (Bennema 2018, p. 193; italics mine).

As Bennema himself recognizes, however, some avenues of further development remain to be explored (Bennema 2017a, pp. 204–6). For example, the notions of "disposition" and "desire" are key concepts within the virtue ethics tradition, yet desiderative facets do not play a role in Bennema's dual construction of cognitive and behavioral virtues. As argued later in this essay, one could add "desires" to the mimesis of "identity" and "behavior", and thus add "desiderative mimesis" to "existential mimesis" and "performative mimesis". This desiderative mimesis bridges one's being (identity) with one's behavior (actions), as who one is changes what one desires and thus affects how one behaves.

### *3.2. Virtue Ethics and Pneumatological Transformation*

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains, "A virtue is an excellent trait of character. It is a *disposition*, well entrenched in its possessor . . . to notice, expect, value, *feel*, *desire*, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways" (Hursthouse 2016; italics added). Eric Silverman (2019, p. 8) synopsizes, "Virtuous *dispositions* are excellent habitual patterns of thought, *emotion*, *desire*, and external behavior" (italics added). The essential linking of virtue ethics with dispositions and desires runs deep within the tradition. As Howard Curzer (2018, p. 106) elucidates, "Aristotle says that virtues and vices are *dispositions* to *feel certain passions* as well as act in certain ways in certain situations (Curzer 2018, p. 106)". "Aristotle makes it clear that virtuous people also reliably *desire and enjoy the right objects* (i.e., act with *certain motivations*), and have knowledge (particularly about values). Elsewhere, Aristotle adds that they perceive in the right ways. To be virtuous, one must get *all of these components* of virtue right" (Curzer 2018, p. 106; italics added).

Following Thomas Aquinas, the virtue of love can be portrayed "as a *disposition* towards relationally appropriate acts of the will—consisting of *desires* for the ongoing good of persons and *desires* for ongoing proper bonds with persons—held as final ends" (Silverman 2019, pp. 3, 20; italics mine). Virtuous dispositions are, thus, properly ordered orientations of loves or desires. Virtues entail more than cognitive or rational aspects, even as they consist of more than behavioral activities. Virtues also encompass motivational facets like dispositional emotions and inclinational desires. In particular, "agent-based" forms of virtue ethics emphasize the motivational and dispositional qualities of agents (Hursthouse 2016).

The Paraclete plays a "central role" in Johannine ethics (van der Watt 2006a, p. 618). Although community members were expected to follow Jesus' example, they were not expected to do so in their own power of resolve. The Fourth Gospel teaches that "People cannot set themselves in motion, activate themselves, and bring forth fruit on their own initiative" (Schrage 1982, p. 301). This is the lesson of the branches abiding in the vine (Skinner 2017b, pp. 34–36; Caragounis 2012). Jesus states, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:4–5).[21]

Therefore, the example of Jesus is more than simply something "out there" to which the believer must strive. Rather, the example of Jesus is someone to whom the believer is

intimately related by faith (Kanagaraj 2001, pp. 58–59). Jesus abides in the believer, and the believer in Jesus. One might label Johannine ethics not merely as *imitatio Christi* (Barnette 1961, p. 80; van der Watt 2001) but as *unio Christi* (cf. Smith 2005, pp. 45, 48; Zimmermann 2012, p. 73). Especially in the case of love, as Eduard Lohse (1991, p. 170) explains, "Only the one who looks to Christ, believes his word, and abides in it can experience what love means". Therefore, the imitation of Jesus becomes not only a form of ethics, but also a motive and power for the ethical life.[22]

Jesus' Spirit empowers the believer in the process of conformity. The Gospel of John maintains that the believer enjoys the motivating and enabling presence and ministry of the Spirit (van der Watt 2001, pp. 143–47; Bennema 2017a, pp. 176–77). Jesus pledged that he would send the Paraclete to enable believers after his departure (John 14:17; 14:26). He also promised that the Paraclete would lead believers into all truth (John 16:13).

Put differently, Johannine mimesis is more than emulation (in which the externality of the exemplar remains sufficient) but entails an identity-formation through an internalized Spirit-transformation (van der Watt 2019, pp. 224–25). The Paraclete shapes the believer's identity and behavior (as well as dispositional desires) and is a mnemonic agent in bringing Jesus' teachings to remembrance. The Spirit thus ministers as an empowerment for ethical good within the believer. "La morale johannique, envisage comme une marche en Jésus, la verité, ne se comprend pas sans l'assistance ou l'animation de l'Esprit à qui il revient de nous guider sur cette voie de la verité" (Lazure 1965, p. 117).

The Spirit, however, empowers not only the individual but also the community (Hays 1996, p. 210).[23] As Smith (2002, p. 117) has declared, "Johannine ethics and Christology are integrally related and closely tied to an understanding of Christian community" (cf. Nissen 1999). Within the Johannine literature, this believing community is contrasted with the "world" as a countercultural form of life and love (Meeks 1996, p. 324; cf. Rensberger 1989). In short, the Johannine community could be described as a "community of character" (see Nissen 1999, p. 200). As Nissen (1999, p. 212) comments, "The Johannine community is a community of love. In and through this love for one another the disciples are called to give public witness to the life-giving power of God's love revealed in Jesus". This Spirit-induced love relates to desiderative mimesis, an imitative notion interrelated with cognitive mimesis and behavioral mimesis, yet neglected within Johannine scholarship.

### *3.3. Cognitive, Behavioral, and Desiderative Mimesis*

In 2017, Bennema published an essay in *Verbum et Ecclesia* entitled, "Virtue Ethics and the Johannine Writings". Bennema's investigation explores "two components of Johannine virtue ethics—virtuous behavior and virtuous thinking", because Johannine ethics has "two components: (1) moral virtues that inform virtuous behavior; and (2) intellectual virtues that inform virtuous thinking" (Bennema 2017c, pp. 262, 266). Bennema (2017c, p. 275) thus structures his essay around "virtuous thinking" and "virtuous behavior", which are "closely related". "Virtuous thinking" involves the practice of "intellectual virtues" (like perception, knowledge/understanding, remembrance, and belief/faith) and aims at "the cognitive penetration of Jesus's teaching in order to extract truth" (Bennema 2017c, pp. 272–75). The "intellectual virtues inform and direct virtuous behavior", and in turn "virtuous behavior supports virtuous thinking" (Bennema 2017c, p. 275). "The practice of the intellectual meta-virtue of belief admits one into *zoē*, and the practice of the moral virtues affirms one's participation in the divine life" (Bennema 2017c, p. 272). Bennema maintains that "the Spirit's cognitive function has effectively enabled the community's virtuous thinking", and the Spirit also shapes the community's moral vision and directs its actions (Bennema 2017c, p. 280).

Also in 2017, Bennema published an article in *In die Skriflig* entitled, "Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings". This article describes how "moral transformation" (which Bennema defines as "the shaping of, or change in, a person's character and conduct") involves how one must both "think and live" (Bennema 2017b, p. 1). Moral transformation thus embraces both character/identity and behavior (Bennema 2017b, p. 2).

According to Bennema, a virtue ethics approach "promotes moral thinking and behaviour" (Bennema 2017b, p. 6). Moral transformation entails both "a renewal of the mind and a corresponding change in behaviour" (Bennema 2017b, p. 30). "Moral reasoning" (or "thinking 'from above'") is a "renewed mindset" that "informs and shapes both thought and behaviour according to the beliefs, values and norms of the world above" (Bennema 2017b, pp. 2, 4; cf. Bennema 2018, pp. 187–88, 203). One's "thinking" informs one's behavior, and (in turn), moral behavior "strengthens and affirms moral thinking and character" (Bennema 2017b, p. 30).

Alongside the interrelationship of cognitive mimesis and behavioral mimesis, Bennema dialectically relates identity and behavior (Bennema 2017a, p. 164). The values of God's character and world shape "the identity and behaviour of believers" (Bennema 2017b, p. 3). Therefore, "mimesis is intrinsically related to behaviour and identity" (Bennema 2017a, p. 169), and the Johannine writings "stress the correlation between identity and behaviour" (Bennema 2017b, p. 5). "Thus identity informs and demands corresponding behaviour, and conversely, behaviour reveals and validates identity" (Bennema 2017b, p. 5). "Thus there is a reciprocal, transformative dynamic between identity and behaviour; each has the potential to shape the other" (Bennema 2017b, p. 5). "We noted", Bennema reiterates, "a transformative correlation between identity and behaviour where identity informs, shapes and drives behaviour, and in turn, behaviour reveals, affirms and strengthens identity" (Bennema 2017a, p. 161; cf. 163). "In short, there is a reciprocal, transformative dynamic between identity and behaviour; each has the potential to shape the other" (Bennema 2018, p. 190). "In conclusion, the believers' moral transformation relates to the extent that they *think and behave* 'from above'" (Bennema 2017b, p. 6; italics added).

It seems possible, however, to add "desiring" to "thinking" and "behaving". This addition of "desires" emerges explicitly within the narrative of John 8, as well as appearing implicitly elsewhere in some other key texts.

### *3.4. Desires in John 8, 1 John 2, and John 3*

It is certainly true that the Gospel of John is *primarily* structured by thinking (cognitive) and doing (behavioral) facets. "If you *know* these things, blessed are you if you *do* them" (John 13:17; italics added). Nevertheless, beyond norms (values, rules, and principles) and behavior (actions, habits, and lifestyles), the field of ethics also entails desiderative facets (inclinations, desires, and motivations). Cognitive linguists have explored the connections between emotions and ethics. Ethics cannot be divorced from emotions, and reason and emotions cannot be separated by an impermeable wall. The Johannine notion of love is not antithetical to the "emotional" orientation of the one loving, nor can these dispositional operations be fully understood on an individualistic, internalized basis completely divorced from the socio-communal context (Frey 2013).

Beth Stovell (2018, p. 436) has investigated the ethical role of emotions in moral transformation, including how the conceptualization of emotions relates to social identity. "While there has been some work in New Testament study on the relationship between social identity and emotions and an even smaller amount of focused work on social identity in relation to love in the Johannine corpus specifically, much of this analysis has not had the advantage of recent developments in identifying intergroup emotions and on studying the sociology of emotions" (Stovell 2018, p. 437).[24] To complicate matters further, ancient contexts often reflected communal, intergroup perceptions of emotion and not merely individualized experiences of emotion (Stovell 2018, p. 437).

Within the Johannine literature, the believer is placed within the believing community (the family of God). When Jesus' hearers inquire, "What must we do, to be doing the works [τὰ ἔργα] of God?", he responds "This is the work [τὸ ἔργον] of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:28–29). Jesus changes the plural of the inquiry (τὰ ἔργα) into a singular within his response (τὸ ἔργον) (van der Watt 2011, p. 435). In this manner, he singularly focuses upon believing as "the necessary first action", "the primary moral imperative", "the basic ethical requirement", and "the first and most crucial action required

to do the works of God" (Trozzo 2020, p. 296; Bennema 2017a, p. 153; van der Watt 2011, pp. 433, 435). "Since belief is the means by which Jesus's followers are brought into unity with God, belief is the fundamental ethical action" (Trozzo 2020, p. 295; cf. Brown 2017).

Bennema (2017a, pp. 146–47) highlights the role of "believing" as a "moral act", through which people attain ζωή or "life", which is "the highest moral good". This ζωή serves within Johannine ethics much like εὐδαιμονία acts as "the ultimate good" in Aristotelian ethics. The Word became incarnate so that believers "may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10; Bennema 2017c, p. 265). Moreover, Johannine belief is not only accompanied by ζωή, but also by entry into the believing community as a locus of moral transformation. The enjoyment of ζωή begins with rebirth into God's family, followed by a life journey of participation in the divine life (Bennema 2017c, p. 265).

As Lindsey Trozzo insists, abiding trust in Jesus (by its very nature) bears behavioral fruit (Trozzo 2020, p. 296; cf. Skinner 2017b, pp. 34–36). One could add that such abiding trust also manifests itself in dispositions, including a self-giving love that desires the well-being of others (Skinner 2017b, p. 36). Therefore, Johannine ethics addresses identity (who am I?) and behavior (how should I act?), but also dispositional inclinations (what should I desire?). Participation and fellowship in the proper family (the *familia Dei*) form and transform one's desiderative orientation and inclinations.

The presence of "dispositional mimesis" can be demonstrated through the exegesis of John 8, where the concept of "imitation" entails not only doing the "works" of one's father but also possessing the same "desires" as one's father (John 8:39–44). While "the Jews" (the adversarial leaders standing in opposition to Jesus) claimed Abraham as their father, their works demonstrated that the devil was their real father. If they had possessed God as their Father, they would have loved Jesus (John 8:42). In the only use of the word ἐπιθυμία in the Gospel, John 8:44 declares, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do [θέλετε ποιεῖν] your father's desires [τὰς ἐπιθυμίας τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν]"(cf. van der Watt 2019, pp. 122, 158).[25] Bennema (2017a, p. 89) argues that the Jews' "behaviour suggests that they are children of the devil and choose (θέλειν) to emulate their father". However, in verse 44, the verb θέλετε is tied not only to "doing" or behavior (ποιεῖν), but also to desires (ἐπιθυμίας). Desiderative connotations also appear two verses earlier, when Jesus declares, "If God were your Father, you would love [ἠγαπᾶτε] me, for I came from God and I am here" (John 8:42).

Bennema (2017a, pp. 88, 91) argues that John 8 speaks of a "filial mimesis", a "family mimesis" that "lies beneath the surface" (cf. van der Watt 2019, p. 157). While the "Jews" claim Abraham as their father, Jesus retorted that "if this were the case their conduct would show it" (Bennema 2017a, p. 89). Bennema focuses upon this demonstrative conduct through highlighting that "their behaviour does not show they belong to God's family", because "their behaviour suggests they are children of the devil" (Bennema 2017a, p. 89). Regarding "familial mimesis", Bennema (2017a, p. 165) further declares that "mimesis is a form of family ethics that shapes *both* character *and* conduct" (italics original). "This means mimesis shapes both the believer's behaviour and identity within the context of the divine family" (Bennema 2017a, p. 165).

In this manner, Bennema underscores the notions of behavior and identity within John 8 but overlooks desires. Bennema is not alone in neglecting the desiderative facets of Johannine mimesis within the passage. Lindsey Trozzo (2020, p. 283) affirms that "we are particularly interested in the story's ability to influence an audience-member to *think* or to *act* in a certain way" (italics added). In his focused exposition of John 8, Jan van der Watt (2010) highlights the ethical facets of "sin", "following", "walking", "doing", "abiding", "keeping", "love", "truth", "works", "honor", and "glory". van der Watt (2010, p. 164) maintains, "The structure of the argument is based on the assumption of the *interrelatedness of identity and behavior*" (italics original). van der Watt (2010, p. 164) insists, "identity determines deeds and deeds show identity". He particularly emphasizes the "proverbial-like remark" that "a child does what his father does", which "forms the basis for the rest of the argumentation that takes behaviour as indication of identity" (van der Watt

2010, p. 155).[26] One observes van der Watt's reiterated emphases upon identity (existential mimesis) and behavior (performative mimesis), but one also notices the lack of attention to desires (desiderative mimesis) in his exposition of John 8.

Bennema himself finds a correlation of identity and behavior in John 8:39–47, which twice employs an "if you *were* . . . you would *do*" construction (Bennema 2017b, p. 5). The passage contrasts "two mutually exclusive families", having the devil as one's father or having God as one's Father, and "identity and behaviour are inseparable in either family" (Bennema 2017b, p. 5; 2018, p. 189). "Becoming part of God's family does not only result in a new *identity* but also a new mode of *conduct*" (Bennema 2018, p. 189; italics added). "The believer's participation in the divine relationship is dynamic, and sharing in this divine identity is profoundly transformative, affecting one's *being, thinking and doing*" (Bennema 2017b, p. 6; italics added). Bennema follows these themes of familial identity and behavior into 1 John (1:6–7; 2:3–6; 2:9–11; 3:7–10; 3:17–19; 4:7–8, 12, 15; 5:2–3; cf. Frey 2013).

It would seem, however, that materials within 1 John 2:15–17 are equally relevant. "Do not love [ἀγαπᾶτε] the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves [ἀγαπᾷ] the world, the love [ἀγάπη] of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desire [ἐπιθυμία] of the flesh and the desire [ἐπιθυμία] of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desire [ἐπιθυμία], but whoever does the will of God abides forever".[27] In this passage, one observes the interplay of "love [ἀγάπη]" and "desire [ἐπιθυμία]". Yes, love is a mindset (cognitive) and an action (behavioral), but it also interrelates with desiderative facets, such as affections, attractions, and attachments.

Returning to the Gospel of John, the roles of attraction and aversion related to love and hatred are more fully developed in John 3:19–21.[28] "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved [ἠγάπησαν] the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates [μισεῖ] the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God". While God's children are attracted to the light, those having the devil as father love darkness and hate the light, and, therefore, display an aversion to the light (and have no desire to come to it).

Love serves as an inclination and motivation. The theme of contrasting loves (and love contrasted with hate) resurfaces on several occasions within the Gospel. "Whoever loves [φιλῶν] his life loses it, and whoever hates [μισῶν] his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25). John 12:42–43 narrates, "Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but on account of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved [ἠγάπησαν] the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God".[29] A similarly dissuading and deterring "fear of the Jews [τὸν φόβον τῶν Ἰουδαίων]" reappears in John 7:13; 19:38; and 20:19; cf 9:22.

On a positive note, 1 John 4:18 affirms the power of love over fear: "There is no fear [φόβος] in love [ἀγάπῃ], but perfect love [ἡ τελεία ἀγάπη] casts out fear [φόβον]. For fear [φόβος] has to do with punishment, and whoever fears [φοβούμενος] has not been perfected in love [οὐ τετελείωται ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ]". Ultimately, as a manifestation of desiderative mimesis, the believer's love is responsive to (and mimetic of) God's love. The following verse succinctly declares, "We love [ἀγαπῶμεν] because he first loved [ἠγάπησεν] us" (1 John 4:19). Then the passage immediately broadens the scope of love: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:20–21).

## 4. Conclusions

New Testament ethics remains a vibrant sub-field of biblical theology. However, as Allen Verhey (1984, p. 152) has pronounced, "To fashion the great variety of New Testament ethics into one, massive, undifferentiated whole is impossible and impoverishing". Within the New Testament, "no single ethical structure or code or set of guidelines exists" but rather a "tapestry" (van der Watt 2006a, pp. 611, 632). Unlike the Synoptics, Johannine literature contains very few ethical propositions (such as imperatives, rules, or maxims). Instead, the Johannine literature stresses an exemplary ethics of mimesis. This emphasis is demonstrated by the uses of ὀφείλειν and καθώς, by the inclusion of relevant moral themes, by the description of the two Johannine commandments, and by the statements of John 13:14–15. Moreover, the indwelling Paraclete and abiding unity in the Son empowered believers in the Johannine community "to follow [ἀκολουθέιν]" the example of Jesus (van der Watt 2019, p. 260).

Bennema acknowledges that "Johannine ethics have flourished in recent times", but argues that "scholars have yet to reach the heart of the matter", which he maintains is the role of mimesis or imitation in moral transformation. He insists, "*mimesis is at the heart of Johannine ethics*" (Bennema 2017a, pp. 23, 26; italics original). I have argued that Bennema's own explanation of mimesis has fallen short of a full reflection of the "*heart* of the matter" in one regard, by focusing upon thinking (intellectual virtues) and behavior (moral virtues) to the neglect of dispositional desires (John 8:44; 1 John 2:15–17). In Johannine ethics, "love" (a key moral category) transforms one's identity and shapes one's behavior, but as a dispositional inclination love also impels and empowers.

All agree that "love" is a core component of Johannine ethics (Zimmermann 2012, p. 47). Is love a facet of "identity" or "behavior" (to use Bennema's two facets of "moral transformation"), or both? Moreover, are there desiderative facets of love that can expand our understanding of the cognitive and behavioral facets of Johannine ethics? Indeed, love is manifested in affection, attraction, and attachment, as well as in mindset and action (cf. Jackson 2017, p. 593). In Johannine ethics, the Spirit brings Jesus' teachings to cognitive remembrance (John 14:26; cf. Bennema 2017a, pp. 178–80, 189–91), but he also motivates and empowers through renewed and transformed desiderative dispositions and inclinations (cf. Pregeant 2007, p. 209).[30]

The command to love as Jesus loved (John 15:12) can be construed as imitating the compassionate disposition of Jesus, and not only the resulting behavior. Love is a virtue that "should be tangible" in one's behavior (Bennema 2017b, p. 30). Love is "a moral property" that compels one to act morally (Bennema 2017c, p. 269). Love is "a virtue to be practiced" as well (Bennema 2017c, p. 269). However, love is also a desiderative orientation of one's affections, attractions, and attachments. A "desiderative mimesis" of orientation and inclination, although it may not stand out as prominently as "existential mimesis" and "performative mimesis" within Johannine ethics, nevertheless plays a secondary role in the immediate background. As one's identity is transformed (who I am), one's inclinations are renewed (what I desire), leading to one's behavior being changed (how I act).[31]

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

1 There have been exceptions. In 1901, John Haas referred to the "deep and wonderful ethic" of the Gospel of John (Haas 1901, p. 207).

2 The patristic authors often preferred the moral theology of the Fourth Gospel (Wannenwetsch 2012, pp. 93–94; Brown and Skinner 2017, p. 285).

3 Meeks (1996) went on to discuss the hurdles posed by the gospel's narrative form, high Christology, dualistic sectarianism, and predestinarian theology.

[4] Bennema (2017b, p. 1; 2017c, p. 261; 2018, p. 102) describes this volume as "the crucial breakthrough", both "a landmark study" and "a turning point" within Johannine scholarship.

[5] Scripture quotations are from the ESV, unless otherwise noted. In van der Merwe's view, sanctification, imitating Jesus, discipleship, and doing the will of God can all refer to following Jesus as a way of life (van der Merwe 2017b, p. 2).

[6] There is some question as to whether the first πιστεύετε in John 14:1 is an imperative or an indicative, since the second person plural of each has the same morphological form (see Morris 1971, pp. 636–38). John 5:39 and 15:18 entail similar indicative/imperative decisions of interpretation.

[7] Other clues include the verb ἀκολουθέιν and the motivational function of ἐάν … μή ("if … not" or "unless"). See (van der Watt 2001, pp. 132–34; van der Merwe 2017b, pp. 3, 6–7). Van der Merwe includes a helpful list of Johannine ἐάν … μή constructions on p. 7. A concept related to ἀκολουθέιν is the verb περιπατέιν (van der Watt 2010, p. 149; Leung 2018, pp. 125–26). One can also add the discussions of "reward" to the fabric of Johannine ethics (van der Merwe 2020, p. 8).

[8] See (Bennema 2017c, p. 261) for a similar design: "The topic of this study is virtue ethics in the Gospel of John with occasional references to the Johannine Epistles". Richard Hays (1996, p. 140) likewise explains, "Since our concern is to trace the major moral visions represented within the New Testament canon, we need not discriminate too finely between the Epistles and the Gospel ..." (cf. Schrage 1982, p. 297). In contrast, Labahn strongly counsels that the Gospel of John and each Johannine Epistle should be treated individually, "with each dealing with a distinct situation and developing its own concept of meaning and, correspondingly, its own concept of ethical demands within that situation—all, of course, engaging and drawing upon the larger Johannine agenda in various ways" (Labahn 2012, p. 9). It is true, of course, that the Gospel and 1 John arose out of "two different crises" (Nissen 1999, p. 198; see also Culpepper 2014). But this essay focuses upon the level of the "general approach" or "basic model" of Johannine ethics, and thus "the larger Johannine agenda".

[9] "Jesus gives his followers the new commandment of love as it is based on the example of his self-sacrificial death" (Boersma 2003, p. 119). The grain of wheat must first die before bearing fruit (John 12:24). See (van der Watt 2006b, pp. 436–40).

[10] According to Johannes Nissen (1999), the ethics of the Gospel of John include, but are not limited to, exemplary ethics.

[11] The phrase "mimetic chain" appears in Bennema (2017a, pp. 194, 200); "chain of imitation" comes from Bennema (2020, p. 106); in previous presentations, I have referred to the "laddering" of Johannine ethics.

[12] On the "new commandment", see (Bolyki 2003, p. 204; Nissen 1999, pp. 202–3).

[13] Scholars have debated the chronological priority of the Gospel and Epistle (for an overview, see Trozzo 2017a, pp. 182–85).

[14] On the Johannine use of ἐντολή, see also Kanagaraj (2001, pp. 35–36).

[15] "New" has been interpreted in relationship to source, motive, nature, and dimensions (Maston 1997, p. 222). "The new commandment rests on a new reality; the new imperative is based on a new indicative, the love of God in Christ and the love of Christ in his own" (Verhey 1984, p. 143; cf. Nissen 1999, pp. 202–3).

[16] von Wahlde (1990, p. 99) finds two commands in 1 John: to believe in Jesus and to love one another (cf. 1 John 3:23; Rensberger 1992, p. 299).

[17] Skinner (2020, p. 292) distinguishes three Johannine imperatives: to believe, to love one another, and to follow; (cf. Collins 2017).

[18] According to van der Watt (2018, p. 376), "Within the narrative of John every aspect of the Decalogue is found implicitly confirmed within the ideology of the narrative". For example, moral norms of worshiping God, keeping the Sabbath and honoring parents foundationally lie beneath the surface of the Gospel, and the Gospel's castigation of murder, bearing false witness, and adultery all assume the nature of ethics embodied in the Decalogue (see also van der Watt 2006d, pp. 110–14). Cf. 1 John 5:21.

[19] "How to take one's place within the biblical story" (Boersma 2003, p. 105). Moral transformation through characterization can include the role of vilification. "Vilification encourages positive choice by showing the negative aspects of what should not be chosen" (van der Watt 2010, p. 157).

[20] Imageries are "social phenomena" that draw "a whole world of latent and implicit social knowledge into the narrative", and thus they function as "pregnant vehicles for ethical arguments" (van der Watt 2006b, pp. 446–47).

[21] On "abiding" and Johannine ethics, see (Matera 1996, pp. 107–8; van der Merwe 2017b, pp. 8–9). While the Synoptics emphasize discipleship as surrender, the Gospel of John focuses upon discipleship as abiding (Matera 1996, p. 116).

[22] "Above all this motive unfolds in a new way that is only possible within Christianity, that is, by the imitation of Jesus" (Schnackenburg 1965, p. 165).

[23] Perhaps the Johannine literature reflects the "sectarianism" of a community affected by conflict (see Perkins 1992; van der Watt 2006d, pp. 128–29). But see Skinner (2017b). Culpepper (2017) widens the Johannine moral horizon to include "creation ethics".

[24] Similarly, Olivia Rahmsdorf (2019a, p. 474) affirms, "Johannine ethics, therefore, are not restricted to single, imitable deeds, but can embrace entire ways of living and life orientations. They are not restricted to rational discourse, but can also be discovered in their emotional, sensual, and spiritual dimensions".

[25] Admittedly, "desire" appears only once in the Gospel of John (John 8:44). Even so, by analogy, *imitate/imitation* occurs explicitly only once within the Johannine literature—in 3 John 11 (as recognized in Bennema 2020, p. 104); yet the conceptualization of *imitation* is similarly more prevalent than this single instance.

[26] van der Watt (2010, p. 160) does comment that "the major task of the child of God is obedience to the will and desires of God as they are revealed through Jesus".

[27] Although the ESV has "desires" (plural) throughout the passage, I have changed the wording to "desire" to reflect the consistent use of the singular in the Greek. One may contrast the uses of "world [κόσμος]" in 1 John 2:15 and John 3:16 (see Skinner 2016).

[28] At one point, Bennema (2017b, p. 20) briefly mentions that those involved in "morally dubious behaviour [πράσσειν φαῦλα]" possess "immoral inclinations" and exhibit "a strong aversion to the light (μισεῖν τὸ φῶς) and prefer the darkness (ἠγάπησαν τὸ σκότος) for fear that their evil deeds (πονηρὰ τὰ ἔργα) may be exposed". John 5:29 similarly contrasts those who do right things (οἱ τὰ ἀγαθὰ ποιήσαντες) and those who practice evil things (οἱ τὰ φαῦλα πράξαντες).

[29] The ESV has "but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it" (John 12:42). The word "fear [φόβος]", however, does not appear in the original Greek, which simply has ἀλλὰ διὰ τοὺς Φαρισαίους.

[30] The title of Pregeant's work is *Knowing Truth, Doing Good: Engaging New Testament Ethics*. Our study has shown that a fuller framework could perhaps be *Knowing Truth, Desiring Virtue, Doing Good: Engaging New Testament Ethics*.

[31] Acknowledgements: I express my gratitude to *Religions* for the invitation to submit this article and to the peer reviewers for their contructive feedback. My approach to the imitative/mimetic nature of Johannine ethics has resulted from a long process of reflection and writing. The exegetical foundations, nature of mimesis, and role of the Paraclete were initially forged during the so-called "dark era" of Johannine ethics (see Bennema 2017a, pp. 8–9). The genesis of the study began as a PhD research paper submitted to Urban von Wahlde for a graduate course on the Gospel of John in the fall of 1994 and later revised as "'I Have Given You an Example': Johannine Literature and the Future of Biblical Ethics", presented at the University of Chicago in 1997. Subsequent iterations have included "The Exemplary and Pneumatological Nature of Johannine Ethics", presented at a colloquium at Loyola University Chicago in 2001; "The 'Exemplary' Nature of Johannine Ethics", presented at the Central States SBL meeting in 2013; "A Re-Evaluation of Johannine Ethics", presented at Lincoln Christian University in 2013; and "Reconfiguring Johannine Ethical Formation", presented at Creighton University in 2015. For the last two decades (since 2002), I have annually presented a lecture on the "exemplary (imitative or mimetic) ethics of John" in a theological ethics course. This present essay is an expansion of that "exemplary" approach and is dedicated to my students.

## References

Balz, Horst Robert. 1986. Johanneische Theologie und Ethik im Licht der "letzten Stunde". In *Studien zum Text und zur Ethik des Neuen Testaments*. Edited by Wolfgang Schrage. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Barnette, Henlee H. 1961. *Introducing Christian Ethics*. Nashville: Broadman.

Bennema, Cornelis. 2013. Virtue Ethics in the Gospel of John. The Johannine Characters as Moral Agents. In *Rediscovering John: Essays on the Fourth Gospel in Honor of Fréderic Manns*. Edited by Leslaw Daniel Chrupcala. Milan: Edizioni Terra Santa.

Bennema, Cornelis. 2014. Mimesis in John 13: Cloning or Creative Articulation? *Novum Testamentum* 56: 261–74. [CrossRef]

Bennema, Cornelis. 2016. Mimetic Ethics in the Gospel of John. In *Metaphor–Narratio–Mimesis–Doxologie: Begründungsformen frühchristlicher und antiker Ethik*. Edited by Ulrich Volp, Friedrich W. Horn and Ruben Zimmermann. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Bennema, Cornelis. 2017a. *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature*. London: T & T Clark.

Bennema, Cornelis. 2017b. Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings. *In die Skriflig* 51: 1–7. [CrossRef]

Bennema, Cornelis. 2017c. Virtue Ethics and the Johannine Writings. In *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John*. Edited by Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Bennema, Cornelis. 2018. Moral Transformation through Mimesis in the Johannine Tradition. *Tyndale Bulletin* 69: 183–203. [CrossRef]

Bennema, Cornelis. 2020. Imitation in Johannine Christianity. *Expository Times* 132: 101–10. [CrossRef]

Boersma, Hans. 2003. A New Age Love Story: Worldview and Ethics in the Gospel of John. *Calvin Theological Journal* 38: 103–19.

Bolyki, János. 2003. Ethics in the Gospel of John. *Communio Viatorum* 45: 198–208.

Brawley, Robert L. 2013. John. In *The New Testament and Ethics: A Book-by-Book Survey*. Edited by Joel B. Green. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Brickel, Jeffrey E. 2012. Transacting Virtue within a Disrupted Community: The Negotiation of Ethics in the First Epistle of John. In *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Brown, Raymond. 1982. *The Epistle of John*. New York: Doubleday.

Brown, Sherri. 2017. Believing in the Gospel of John: The Ethical Imperative to Becoming Children of God. In *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John*. Edited by Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Brown, Sherri, and Christopher W. Skinner, eds. 2017. *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Burridge, Richard A. 2007. *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Burridge, Richard A. 2009. Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to the Ethics of the Historical Jesus and John's Gospel. In *John, Jesus, and History*. Edited by Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just and Tom Thatcher. Atlanta: SBL.

Capes, David B. 2003. Imitatio Christi and the Gospel Genre. *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 13: 1–19. [CrossRef]

Caragounis, Chrys C. 2012. "Abide in Me": The New Mode of Relationship between Jesus and His Followers as a Basis for Christian Ethics (John 15). In *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Collins, Raymond F. 2017. "Follow Me": A Life-Giving Ethical Imperative. In *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John*. Edited by Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Culpepper, R. Alan. 1991. The Johannine *Hypodeigma*: A Reading of John 13. *Semeia* 53: 133–52.
Culpepper, R. Alan. 2014. The Relationship between the Gospel and 1 John. In *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*. Edited by R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson. Atlanta: SBL Press.
Culpepper, R. Alan. 2017. The Creation Ethics of the Gospel of John. In *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John*. Edited by Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Curzer, Howard J. 2018. Aristotle and Moral Virtue. In *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue*. Edited by Nancy E. Snow. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
de Dinechin, Olivier. 1970. ΚΑΘΩΣ: La similitude dans l'évangile selon Saint Jean. *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 58: 195–236.
Estes, Douglas. 2019. Ethics in the Gospel of John? The Character of Virtue. *Didaktikos: Journal of Theological Education* 3: 43–45.
Frey, Jörg. 2013. Ethical Traditions, Family Ethos, and Love in the Johannine Literature. In *Early Christian Ethics in Interaction with Jewish and Graeco-Roman Contexts*. Edited by Jan Willem van Henten and Joseph Verheyden. Leiden: Brill.
Glicksman, Andrew T. 2012. Beyond Sophia: The Sapiential Portrayal of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel and Its Ethical Implications for the Johannine Community. In *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Haas, John A. W. 1901. The Ethic of the Gospel of John. *Lutheran Church Review* 2: 207–17.
Hays, Richard B. 1996. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. San Francisco: Harper.
Houlden, James Leslie. 1973. *Ethics and the New Testament*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Hursthouse, Rosalind. 2016. Virtue Ethics. In *the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford: The Metaphysics Research Lab. Available online: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue (accessed on 20 May 2022).
Jackson, Valencia. 2017. What's Love Got to Do with It? *Review & Expositor* 14: 593–95.
Kanagaraj, Jey J. 2001. The Implied Ethics of the Fourth Gospel: A Reinterpretation of the Decalogue. *Tyndale Bulletin* 52: 33–60. [CrossRef]
Kenney, Garrett C. 2000. *The Relationship of Christology to Ethics in the First Epistle of John*. Lanham: University of America Press.
Koester, Craig R. 2013. Rethinking the Ethics of John: A Review Article. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 36: 85–98. [CrossRef]
Kok, Kobus. 2010. As the Father Has Sent Me, I Send You: Towards a Missional-Incarnational Ethos in John 4. In *Moral Language in the New Testament: The Interrelatedness of Language and Ethics in Early Christian Writings*. Edited by Ruben Zimmermann, Jan G. van der Watt and Susanne Luther. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Köstenberger, Andreas J. 2004. *John*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
Labahn, Michael. 2012. "It's Only Love"—Is that All?: Limits and Potentials of Johannine "Ethic"—A Critical Evaluation of Research. In *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Lazure, Noël. 1965. *Les valeurs morales de la théologie johannique*. Paris: Librairie Lecoffre.
Leung, Mavis M. 2018. Ethics and *imitatio Christi* in 1 John: A Jewish Perspective. *Tyndale Bulletin* 69: 111–31. [CrossRef]
Lioy, Dan. 2007. *Jesus as Torah in John 1–12*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
Loader, William R. G. 2012. The Law and Ethics in John's Gospel. In *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Loader, William R. G. 2014. The Significance of 2:15–17 for Understanding the Ethics of 1 John. In *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*. Edited by R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson. Atlanta: SBL Press.
Loader, William R. G. 2016. The Significance of John 1:14–18 for Understanding John's Approach to Law and Ethics. *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 19: 194–201. [CrossRef]
Loader, William R. G. 2022. *Christology, Soteriology, and Ethics in John and Hebrews*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Löhr, Hermut. 2012. Ἔργον as an Element of Moral Language in John. In *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Lohse, Eduard. 1991. *Theological Ethics of the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Lund, Glen. 2012. The Joys and Dangers of Ethics in John's Gospel. In *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Mabotja, James Jan. 2014. The Johannine Ethics within a Realized Eschatological Framework. Master's thesis, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa. Available online: https://ujcontent.uj.ac.za/vital/access/services/Download/uj:11709/CONTENT1?view=true (accessed on 20 May 2022).
Marxsen, Willi. 1989. *New Testament Foundations for Christian Ethics*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Maston, Thomas Buford. 1997. *Biblical Ethics: A Guide to the Ethical Message of the Scriptures from Genesis through Revelation*. Macon: Mercer University Press.
Matera, Frank. 1996. *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox.

Meeks, Wayne A. 1996. The Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist. In *Exploring the Gospel of John*. Edited by R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
Meier, John P. 2001. Love in Q and John: Love of Enemies, Love of One Another. *Mid-Stream* 40: 42–50.
Moloney, Francis J. 2017. God, Eschatology, and "This-World": Ethics in the Gospel of John. In *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John*. Edited by Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Morris, Leon. 1971. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Nissen, Johannes. 1999. Community and Ethics in the Gospel of John. In *New Readings in John: Literary and Theological Perspectives*. Edited by Johannes Nissen and Sigfred Pedersen. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
Perkins, Pheme. 1992. Apocalyptic Sectarianism and Love Commands: The Johannine Epistles and Revelation. In *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*. Edited by Willard M. Swartley. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press.
Pregeant, Russell. 2007. *Knowing Truth, Doing Good: Engaging New Testament Ethics*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
Prunet, Olivier. 1957. *La morale chrétienne d'après écrits johanniques*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
Rahmsdorf, Olivia L. 2019a. "You shall not wash my feet εις τὸν αἰῶνα" (John 13.8): Time and Ethics in Peter's Interactions with Jesus in the Johannine Narrative. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41: 458–77. [CrossRef]
Rahmsdorf, Olivia L. 2019b. *Zeit und Ethik im Johannesevangelium: Theoretische, Methodische und Exegetische Annäherungen an die Gunst der Stunde*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Reese, Ruth Anne. 2013. 1–3 John. In *The New Testament and Ethics: A Book-by-Book Survey*. Edited by Joel B. Green. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
Rensberger, David. 1989. *Overcoming the World: Politics and Community in the Gospel of John*. London: SPCK.
Rensberger, David. 1992. Love for One Another and Love for Enemies in the Gospel of John. In *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*. Edited by Willard M. Swartley. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press.
Sanders, Jack T. 1975. *Ethics in the New Testament: Change and Development*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
Schnackenburg, Rudolf. 1965. *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*. New York: Herder and Herder.
Schrage, Wolfgang. 1982. *The Ethics of the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
Schroeder, Edward H. 2002. Mosaic and Christian Ethos in the Gospel of John. *Currents in Theology and Mission* 29: 189–96.
Shin, Sookgoo. 2019. *Ethics in the Gospel of John: Discipleship as Moral Progress*. Leiden: Brill.
Silverman, Eric J. 2019. *The Supremacy of Love: An Agape-Centered Vision of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
Skinner, Christopher W. 2016. The World: Promise and Unfulfilled Hope. In *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*. Edited by Steven A. Hunt, Francois Tolmie and Ruben Zimmermann. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Skinner, Christopher W. 2017a. Introduction: (How) Can We Talk about Johannine Ethics? Looking Back and Moving Forward. In *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John*. Edited by Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Skinner, Christopher W. 2017b. Love One Another: The Johannine Love Command in the Farewell Discourse. In *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John*. Edited by Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Skinner, Christopher W. 2020. Ethics and the Gospel of John: Toward an Emerging New Consensus? *Currents in Biblical Research* 18: 280–304. [CrossRef]
Smith, D. Moody. 2002. Ethics and the Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. In *Word, Theology, and Community in John*. Edited by John Painter, R. Alan Culpepper and Fernando F. Segovia. St. Louis: Chalice Press.
Smith, Winston T. 2005. Authentic Morality: The Living Values in First John. *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 23: 44–53.
Stare, Mira. 2012. Ethics of Life in the Gospel of John. In *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Stovell, Beth M. 2018. Love One Another and Love the World: The Love Command and Jewish Ethics in the Johannine Community. In *Christian Origins and the Establishment of the Early Jesus Movement*. Edited by Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts. Leiden: Brill.
Trozzo, Lindsey M. 2017a. *Exploring Johannine Ethics: A Rhetorical Approach to Moral Efficacy in the Fourth Gospel Narrative*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Trozzo, Lindsey M. 2017b. Genre, Rhetoric, and Moral Efficacy: Approaching Johannine Ethics in Light of Plutarch's Lives and the Progymnasmata. In *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John*. Edited by Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Trozzo, Lindsey M. 2020. Elevated Christology and Elusive Ethics: Unity and Identity in the Gospel according to John. In *Johannine Christology*. Edited by Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts. Leiden: Brill.
van der Merwe, Dirk G. 2005. Understanding "Sin" in the Johannine Epistles. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 26: 543–70. [CrossRef]
van der Merwe, Dirk G. 2006. "A Matter of Having Fellowship": Ethics in the Johannine Epistles. In *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
van der Merwe, Dirk G. 2017a. Conceptualizing Holiness in the Gospel of John: The Mode and Objectives of Holiness (Part 1). *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 73: 1–9.
van der Merwe, Dirk G. 2017b. Conceptualizing Holiness in the Gospel of John: The *En Route* to and Character of Holiness (Part 2). *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 73: 1–11.
van der Merwe, Dirk G. 2020. The Christian Spirituality of the Love of God: Conceptual and Experiential Perspectives Emanating from the Gospel of John. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 41: 1–10. [CrossRef]

van der Merwe, Dirk G. 2022. The Concept and Activity of "Obedience" in the Gospel of John. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43: 1–9. [CrossRef]
van der Watt, Jan G. 2001. *Imitatio Christi* in the Fourth Gospel. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 22: 131–48. [CrossRef]
van der Watt, Jan G. 2006a. Again: Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament. A Few Tentative Remarks. In *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
van der Watt, Jan G. 2006b. Ethics Alive in Imagery. In *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language*. Edited by Jörg Frey, Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann. In collaboration with Gabi Kern. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
van der Watt, Jan G. 2006c. Ethics and Ethos in the Gospel according to John. *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 97: 147–76. [CrossRef]
van der Watt, Jan G. 2006d. Radical Social Redefinition and Radical Love: Ethics and Ethos in the Gospel according to John. In *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the Ethos in the New Testament*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
van der Watt, Jan G. 2010. Ethics through the Power of Language: Some Explorations in the Gospel according to John. In *Moral Language in the New Testament: The Interrelatedness of Language and Ethics in Early Christian Writings*. Edited by Ruben Zimmermann, Jan G. van der Watt and Susanne Luther. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
van der Watt, Jan G. 2011. The Gospel of John's Perception of Ethical Behavior. *In die Skriflig* 45: 431–47. [CrossRef]
van der Watt, Jan G. 2013. Reflections on Doing What Is Good and True in the Gospel of John. In *Ethische Normen des frühen Christentums: Gut–Leben–Leib–Tugend*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
van der Watt, Jan G. 2014. On Ethics in 1 John. In *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*. Edited by R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson. Atlanta: SBL Press.
van der Watt, Jan. G. 2016. Reciprocity, Mimesis and Ethics in 1 John. In *Erzählung und Briefe im johanneischen Kreis*. Edited by Uta Poplutz and Jörg Frey. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
van der Watt, Jan G. 2018. Ethics in Community in the Gospel and Letters of John. In *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*. Edited by Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
van der Watt, Jan G. 2019. *A Grammar of the Ethics of John: Reading John from an Ethical Perspective*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
van der Watt, Jan, and Ruben Zimmermann, eds. 2012. *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Verhey, Allen. 1984. *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
von Wahlde, Urban C. 1990. *The Johannine Commandments: 1 John and the Struggle for the Johannine Tradition*. New York: Paulist Press.
Wagener, Fredrik. 2015. *Figuren als Handlungsmodelle: Simon Petrus, die samaritische Frau, Judas und Thomas als Zugänge zu einer narrative Ethik des Johannesevangeliums*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Wannenwetsch, Bernd. 2012. Political Love: Why John's Gospel Is Not as Barren for Contemporary Ethics as It Might Appear. In *"You Have the Words of Eternal Life": Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran Perspective*. Edited by Kenneth Mtata. Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press.
Weyer-Menkhoff, Karl. 2014. *Die Ethik des Johannesevangeliums im Sprachlichen Feld des Handelns*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Williams, Matthew Nantlais. 2021. "Good News to the Poor"? Socio-Economic Ethics in the Gospel of John. Ph.D. thesis, Durham University, Durham, UK. Available online: http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/14207 (accessed on 20 May 2022).
Zimmermann, Ruben. 2009. The "Implied Ethics" of New Testament Writings: A Draft on a New Methodology for Analysing New Testament Ethics. *Acta Theologica* 43: 398–422.
Zimmermann, Ruben. 2012. Is There Ethics in the Gospel of John? Challenging an Outdated Consensus. In *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings*. Edited by Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

religions

MDPI

*Article*

# An Incarnational Pneumatology Based on Romans 8.18-30: The Spirit as God's Solidarity with a Suffering Creation

**Matthias Wenk** [1,2]

[1] Institut für Gemeindeorientierte Weiterbildung, 8005 Zurich, Switzerland; m.wenk@bewegungplus.ch
[2] BewegungPlus, 3400 Burgdorf, Switzerland

**Abstract:** In this article, I argue that scholars of the field of New Testament theology need to be familiar with and listen to the various voices in the discourse of contemporary Christian spirituality in order to give voice to the ancient texts, as well as hear them in new ways. Based on Romans 8.18-30, I want to illustrate how the field of New Testament theology can contribute its voice to the contemporary (western) discussion on ecology, social justice, and power and at the same time enrich a spirituality of solidarity. For this purpose, I will contrast those voices within "pneumatological discourse" in Christian spirituality, which associates the work of the Spirit mainly with the improvement of one's personal life, to Romans 8.18-30, a text central for Pauline pneumatology. I will argue that it represents a cosmic and eschatological outlook and fosters a Christian ethos of walking *with* the Spirit; taking side with a creation longing and groaning for redemption. This aspect has not received much attention, but is vital for a robust Christian spirituality, especially in regard to an ecological theology and a more nuanced understanding of power.

**Keywords:** Romans 8.18-30; Pauline pneumatology; *missio spiritu*; Spirit as solidarity; Pauline Ethics; cosmic redemption

**Citation:** Wenk, Matthias. 2022. An Incarnational Pneumatology Based on Romans 8.18-30: The Spirit as God's Solidarity with a Suffering Creation. *Religions* 13: 191. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030191

Academic Editor: Joel B. Green

Received: 26 January 2022
Accepted: 21 February 2022
Published: 23 February 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



## 1. Introduction

### *1.1. New Testament Theology and Contemporary Christian Faith and Spirituality: A Needed Dialogue*

In an article that stirred up a vivid discussion on the very culture of discussion in Switzerland, Bruno Ziauddin laments that today the formation process of a political opinion is mainly taking place among peers and in dialogue with people already known to share one's own view; there is no real dialogue taking place anymore. The result is, according to Ziauddin, that many people are no longer willing (or even able) to listen to voices that do not confirm their own viewpoint (Ziauddin 2021). However, living in a complex world demands that we listen to the many tongues and voices in it in order to be able to live together in this world. One such strange and old voice is the Bible, and this voice may help us receive different and new perspectives on pressing issues of our time. However, if and in what way the biblical voice can contribute to contemporary discussions still is a matter of debate. Two of the more recent publications that address the questions *if* and *how* the biblical canon can help us particularly in contemporary ethical discussions are *Bibelhemeneutik und Sozialethik* (Heimbach-Steins and Steins 2012) and *Key Approches to Biblical Ethics. An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (Rabens et al. 2021). The field of biblical and/or New Testament theology can also help the Christian churches in a twofold way, cultivating the ability to listen to different voices and thereby gaining new insights for our lives together in this world. First, it helps us to listen carefully to a voice that is definitely not reflecting our own viewpoint and time, nor is it simply confirming our own presuppositions or addressing just the concerns of our own agenda. Second, the canon reflects in itself a role model of giving room to different voices. New Testament (biblical) theology precisely wants to carefully listen to each particular voice represented in the

canon: New Testament theology seeks "both to describe each document's theology, and to engage theologically with it, noting also its canonical context and any specific influence it may have had on the history of Christian faith and life" (Bauckham 2003). In order to be heard and to contribute to the contemporary discourse on Christian faith and life, scholars working in the field of New Testament theology should carefully listen to the voices of the global Christian community and be acquainted with the major trends and developments of contemporary spirituality (the Christian faith and life). An excellent example of such a dialogue of academics listening to non-academic voices and their understanding of biblical texts is Pascal Bazzell's study of urban ecclesiology (Bazzell 2015).

In listening to such voices, New Testament scholars can, in turn, give voice to the New Testament authors and at the same time hear these authors in a new way. In addition, these non-academic voices are often very influential in the faith and life of many Christians and churches around the globe, and not dialoguing with them deprives both sides of vital benefits.

### *1.2. The Aim of the Article*

In this article, I want to illustrate how the field of New Testament Theology can contribute to the contemporary discussion in the churches of the Western hemisphere on ecology, social justice, and ethics in general and, at the same time, enrich a spirituality of solidarity and how the theology of one particular text may have an influence on Christian faith and life in our time. For this purpose, I will focus on the role of the Spirit in Romans 8.18-30. I have chosen this passage for several reasons: Especially in German-speaking Europe, the notion of "spirit" mainly is associated with the non-material world, pure reason or pure beauty, *Geist* being that which takes us beyond and above nature. Hence, the semantic field of "spirit", at least in German, refers mainly to the non-material and/or the invisible world. This understanding of "spirit" in turn impacts, often unconsciously, many contemporary books and approaches to a pneumatic spirituality: The Spirit of God is to take the believer out of and above this world; the Spirit of God being mainly associated with optimizing the personal life, morally (Bernhardt 2015), financially (Benson 2018), and in terms of health (Medic and Blain 2013) and power (Roberts 2002; Hagin 2012). This, in turn, fosters a spirituality in which the Spirit of God is predominantly associated with "success-stories", the well-being and improvement of life as well as with the realm of the super-natural: the Holy Spirit offers a happy, healthy, and successful life, as presented daily in commercials. All of this leaves people confronted in their lives with even more pain, loss, and failure, with a feeling of being Spirit-abandoned. Further, Romans 8.18-30 represents a text with an apparent cosmic and eschatological outlook, and it is a text that is vital in Paul's theology far beyond its pneumatological or eschatological implications. N.T. Wright remarks that these verses have too often been downplayed in much exegesis, but they are precisely the climax of Paul's argument in Romans 8; indeed, Romans 8 is the central section of Paul's most important letter, it represents "the final great act of covenant renewal and vindication" (Wright 2003, p. 258). Already earlier, Ernst Käsemann has noted: "If Marcion was forced by the inner logic of his theology to cut out vv. 18-22, he is followed today by an existentialism which individualizes salvation and thereby truncates Paul's message by describing freedom formally as openness to the future" (Käsemann 1971, p. 236).

In this article, I will also try to display one perception of the work of the Holy Spirit presented in the New Testament that often is neglected, both in New Testament pneumatology (i.e., Haacker 2003, p. 75) and in contemporary spirituality: The Holy Spirit as God's solidarity with life that is suffering and groaning for liberation. In order to do so, the leading question will be: How does Romans 8.18-30 describe the Spirit working on behalf of this world; what embodies the *Missio Spiritu* in this world? The question, therefore, is not *how* or *what* typifies, according to Romans 8.18-30, the work of the Spirit in a person's or in the church's life, as, e.g., in Galatians 5.16-26. The question is more fundamentally asking for the ethos of the Spirit or his mission: What is the Spirit doing, where is he working, and how is he working?[1] Thereby, I will be asking for the mission of the Spirit exemplified in

this passage, and how the community of God's people can participate in it. Ultimately, I will argue that Romans 8.18-30 is crucial for an "incarnational theology", not only in terms of Christology but also of pneumatology:[2] By pressing into this material world (cf. Gen. 1:1) and taking side with creation and all forms of life that are threatened by caducity, the Spirit participates in the liberation of this creation. At the end, I will delineate some possible contributions Romans 8.18-30 can make in the contemporary discussion of the mission and ministry of church, particularly the church in the Western hemisphere. However, it needs to be noted that Paul presents neither a detailed nor a systematic presentation of a pneumatological social ethics or an eco-theology in this passage. He rather delineates the larger, cosmic, frame within which he addresses particular ethical issues later in his letter (Rm 12-15); Romans being a letter and not a systematic treatise. In order to develop a thorough pneumatological eco-theology (or social ethics), scholars from the field of New Testament Theology need to listen to other voices, both from the past and contemporary. Voices of the past may include the German nun Hildegard of Bingen with her pneumatological vision of creation or Saint Francis of Assisi and his spirituality of solidarity with all of creation. For a thorough eco-theology, contemporary voices from around the globe must be included in this dialogue, both academic and non-academic as well as both theological and non-theological.

## 2. Paul's Pneumatological-Based Soteriology and Social Ethics in Romans 8.18-30

### *2.1. Soteriological Considerations Based on Romans 8.18-30*

#### 2.1.1. The Redemption of Creation

For any consideration of the Spirit's role in redemption, Romans 8.1-30 proves itself to be of crucial importance. Already in the first 17 verses of chapter 8, Paul unfolds his understanding of justification and of the new identity of the believers from a pneumatological perspective. In sum, Paul argues that, independent from the law, God is creating for himself a new people by the Spirit, comprising both Jews and gentiles. The reconciling power manifested in this redemptive creation is of eschatological importance for all of creation, for the final redemption of this reconciled people of God will become the very liberation of all of creation.[3] The ultimate culmination of his soteriological vision is found in the apostle's statement regarding the redemption of the entire creation: " . . . creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rm. 8.21; NIV), or, as Yates notes: "In these verses [8.18-30] Paul's thought gradually shifts from the resurrection of those individuals who are in Christ, to a vision of the renewal of all of creation at the eschaton" (Yates 2008, pp. 151–51; similarly Rabens 2010, p. 209). This shift of focus from a discussion of the Spirit's role in an individual believer to its cosmic dimension is crucial and is also reflected in passages such as Ezekiel 36.26-35, where the renewal of Israel is said to lead to a renewal of creation so that it becomes a new garden of Eden (Yates 2008, p. 153). Passages like Isaiah 32.15-18 also speak of the renewing and life-giving power of the Spirit and its effects on all of creation and are in the backdrop of Romans 8.18-30. Hence, it may not suffice to reduce the Spirit's role in Romans 8.1-30 merely to reveal to "each Christian the supreme significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in God's redemptive plan" (Menzies 1991, p. 282), but rather at the centre of Paul's interest in Romans 8 is not an individualized soteriology (cf. Rm. 8.17) but the renewal of all that God has created. Haacker emphatically notes that "the glory (literally 'radiance') to be revealed is described as sharing the status of Jesus as brothers and sisters of God's firstborn Son (vv. 29-30)" (Haacker 2003, p. 75). The passage clearly represents a cosmic perception of liberation.

Paul further argues in this passage that the salvation already experienced now by the children of God (including the reconciled relationship between Jews and gentiles) testifies to the eschatological breaking in of God's salvation for all of creation: through the community of faith's present experience of salvation and through the work of the Spirit, it becomes evident here and now what the future reality of all of creation will be like. What exactly comprises the work of the Spirit according to Romans 8.18-30 will be elucidated below.

2.1.2. The Spirit and the Redemption of Creation

Not only does Paul unfold in this passage a soteriology that goes far beyond an individual person's salvation to include all of creation, but he also develops his argument from a pneumatological rather than a purely Christological argument. Instead of relating the eschatological salvation of creation to the Parousia of Christ, he links it to the work of the Spirit[4]: The Spirit that indwells the risen Christ (Rom. 8.11)[5] is the guarantee for the eschatological and universal fulfilment of salvation, which will be the final reality for all of creation. And because this final salvation has yet to come, Paul defines the triumph of the children of God (Rom. 8.1-17) as a salvation "in hope". Regarding this hope, Rudolf Bultmann has aptly noted: "If hope is fixed on God, it embraces at once the three elements of expectation of the future, trust, and the patience of waiting" (Bultmann 1964, p. 531). All three aspects of this hope are present in Romans 8.18-30: (a) expectation of the future liberation (Rm. 8.21); (b) trust, based on the work of the Spirit in raising Jesus from the dead (Rm. 8.24-25, 28); and (c) the patient (eagerly) waiting for the final liberation of both the believers as well as of all of creation (Rm. 8.19, 23).

In addition Paul makes it clear that there is no final salvation through the Spirit for those who cry "Abba Father" and who are glorified with Christ (Rom. 8.17), without the liberation of all of creation yet to come:[6] "Spirit possession in no way causes any distance between Christians and creation but rather leads them into solidarity with it, because their final redemption is to serve all of creation to be liberated from the enslavement by demise" (Wilckens 1993, p. 158, own transl.).

Based on the Spirit indwelling the resurrected Christ from, Romans 8.18-30 presents the role of the Spirit until the final liberation of creation in a threefold manner:

- He intercedes before God on behalf of the believers in their present pain and sufferings and thereby helping them to bridge the time between now and their final redemption.[7]
- By the indwelling of the Spirit of God, the believers participate in the resurrection of Christ (Rm. 8.11). This participation becomes the guarantee for their own resurrection and the liberation of all of creation.
- Until the eschatological liberation, the Spirit is God's solidarity with a creation groaning and suffering.

This threefold role of the Spirit becomes even more evident if looking at the formulation "first-fruit of the Spirit" (ἀπαρχὴν τοῦ πνεύματος). The most obvious reading of this Genitive (τοῦ πνεύματος) is to understand it as a Genitive of apposition that defines the nature of the fruit. In this case, the Spirit itself *is* the first fruit. However, understanding the formulation as a Genitive of qualification (Genitivus Qualitatis), it is the Spirit that brings forth the first fruit in the life of the believers (similarly: Yates 2008, p. 154). Hence, the Spirit given to the believers is not only the first fruit (God's down payment of salvation); rather, the Spirit already here and now effects the first fruits of the eschatological salvation in the life of the believers: (a) the Spirit stirs up hope in the lives of Christians, (b) the Spirit intercedes for them in times of weakness, and (c) the Spirit groans in solidarity with all of creation. Such are the first fruits of his mission here and now. In his solidarity with all of creation, the same Spirit that indwells the risen Christ is the guarantee that all of creation, which is subject to decay, will have a future that cannot be destroyed anymore.

The Spirit's soteriological work in Romans 8 can best be described with the terms of new life, hope, solidarity, and intercession for a creation that is suffering, including the people of God threatened in this present time. In his solidarity, the Spirit endures the pain of a groaning creation and is longing for its liberation along with it. At the same time, he is interceding on behalf of creation in a way that it cannot do for itself. In addition, he assures that his solidarity with creation becomes visible in and through the church in the midst of the present reality that still is characterized by lack of salvation. On a side note, it may be important to note that Paul in Romans 8.18-30 is not talking about the sufferings "on behalf of Christ" as he does in 1 Cor 4.10-13, 2 Cor 1.5, or even just before in Romans 8.17.[8] Although Paul speaks in Romans 8.35-36 of the sufferings on behalf of Christ, it seems that

the sufferings in Romans 8.18-30 represent life's struggles and pains in general; creation and life in general are still threatened and subject to demise: "For I made the world for their sake, and when Adam transgressed my statures, what has been made was judged. And so entrances of this world were made narrow and sorrowful and toilsome; they are few and evil, full of dangers and involved in great hardships" (4 Ez. 7.11-12, Metzger 1983). This is similar to Paul's "pain of childbirth" in Romans 8.22. Creation endures these sufferings precisely because it has not yet been raised *with* Christ to the newness of life and because all of creation is not *with* Christ yet, the Spirit is in the meantime *with* all of creation (Rm. 8.26). While addressing the hope evidenced in Romans 8, J.L. Story in his article on Christian affections and Romans 8 surprisingly addresses the solidarity, the groaning *with* of the Spirit (Story 2021, pp. 204–8), nowhere, an aspect that would have enriched his overall argument.

2.1.3. The Spirit as God's Solidarity with Creation Waiting for Its Redemption

In Romans 8.18-30, Paul not only develops his soteriology from a pneumatological rather than a Christological perspective, but he also associates other topics with the Spirit that both in theology as well as in Christian spirituality are normally associated with Christology. This is especially the case with the subject of solidarity: As it is common in Christology to speak of the crucified Jesus as God's solidarity with the suffering creation,[9] in Romans 8.18-30, Paul links God's solidarity with a suffering and threatened creation to the Spirit. Romans 8.18-30 also reflects a voice for which it is self-evident that there is no personal liberation without the liberation of the soil upon which we stand. Already in the Old Testament, the anticipated eschatological renewal through the outpouring of the Spirit often is described in terms of a renewal of creation (Is. 32.15-18; Ez. 36,25-35), and Paul seems to drink from this fountain in Romans 8.18-30. Further, Paul's emphasis on the Spirit's solidarity with a suffering and groaning creation is only surprising if one limits the Spirit's role in Pauline theology to the transforming power (dynamis) of God. It seems, however, that at least in Romans 8.18-30, the Spirit's presence and activity in this world is also associated with his emphatic-enduring power: The Spirit is the life-giving Spirit, and wherever life is impeded, the Spirit is grieving. Paul's reference to the groaning and grieving of the Spirit in Romans 8.18-30 is not unlike Ephesians 4.30 and the call "do not cause the Spirit to be sad (μὴ λυπεῖτε το πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον)"; whatever hinders the work of the Spirit in this world is grieving the Spirit and thereby hindering life to flourish. The contrast between impeding the Spirit, and thereby making communal life impossible, and the work (fruit) of the Spirit that enables communal life is also reflected in Paul's discussion on the work of the "flesh" and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5.13-26); all aspects of the fruit of the Spirit represent relational categories, including joy (rejoicing with).

Romans 8.18-30 represents a voice that adds an aspect often neglected in the discussion of the transforming power of the Spirit: the empowerment to live in and to endure solidarity with a suffering and groaning creation. The text also reflects a voice in which the Spirit of God not only guarantees the salvation accomplished in Christ until its eschatological fulfilment but the Spirit himself is the subject working towards the salvation of all of creation. Ultimately, it is the Spirit of Christ who will give new life to all of creation. Thereby, he will liberate all of life so that it cannot be extinguished anymore.

If in Romans 8, the Spirit is presented as an active subject towards salvation of his own right, it is important to rediscover the role of the Spirit in God's overall story of salvation as Frank Macchia has begun to do (Macchia 2010), so that the discussion on soteriology will truly be Trinitarian. Not only would a "soteriology of the Spirit" broaden the oftentimes judicial outlook of western soteriology, but it would also include such themes as the resurrection and newness of life (the ecological dimension of salvation) as well as the reconciliation among people as vital aspects of soteriology (i.e., Eph 1.10 and 2 Cor 13.13). With the inclusion of the social and cosmic dimension of God's work for all of life, the "soteriological vision" of the church would be broadened and reflect more accurately God's passion for this world.

2.1.4. Summary of the Spirit's Role in Salvation

In Romans 8.18-30, the Spirit has his own role to play in the story of salvation. His role in the redemption of this world can best be summarized in a twofold way: (a) the creation/liberation of life and (b) his solidarity with a world that is suffering and groaning for its final liberation. Both of these reasons are enough for hope in the midst of despair, because the Spirit is "the bridge over troubled water" that carries the believers until they participate in the unlimited joy of their final salvation, or, to express it in terms of the *missio spiritu* (the ethos of the Spirit) exemplified in Romans 8.18-30, until the final re-creation and liberation of life, the mission of the Spirit leads him into the present-day pains and conflicts of creation in order to join in solidarity into its cry for salvation and then to offer this very cry to God. Since God's salvific intervention in this world has always become paradigmatic for the church's way of living in this world (the ethos of God as a source for the church's ethics), it is now that we have to consider some social–ethical (as well as missional) implications based on such an "incarnational pneumatology".

## 3. Sharing the Ethos of the Spirit: Social–Ethical Considerations

I will now delineate some implications for the ethical discussion of the church, especially the Western church that I am part of. Thereby, I hope to provide evidence that New Testament Theology does indeed contribute a vital voice in our contemporary discussions on ecology and social justice, and at the same time needs to listen carefully to other voices outside its own field of research.

### *3.1. Christian Social Ethics as Participation in the Mission of the Spirit*

It is a common notion in Pauline research that the Spirit is of ethical importance in the apostle's theology: to be Christian is "to walk *in* the Spirit". In addition, current research has shown that the community of saints plays a vital role in the process of "sanctification" and is of essential importance for it (Samara 2006; Rabens 2010, pp. 171–202). Thereby, the process of developing a life in the Spirit is not an interaction only between the Spirit and the believer, but rather this process is enhanced by the community of believers: "to walk *in* the Spirit" always comprises a social dimension.

However, in Romans 8.18-30, the issue at stake is not a person's (or community's) walk *in* the Spirit (as it is e.g., in Gal. 5.16-25); rather, the issue at stake is the mission of the Spirit leading him into solidarity with this creation. It seems that Paul, as well as other biblical authors, tends to associate the cosmic and social aspect of salvation repeatedly with the work of the Spirit (e.g., Is. 32.15-20). Therefore, it perhaps would be adequate to state that Romans 8.18-30 represents a passage that is more likely asking its readers to walk *with* the Spirit, because in this passage, Paul primarily speaks of the work of the Spirit and not of the believers' responsibility to life according to the Spirit. Hence, a "pneumatological ethics" based on Romans 8.18-30 orients itself along the Spirit's solidarity and intercession for a creation that is suffering and groaning for liberation and thereby is concerned not only with the transformation of a person's character but also with the eschatological liberation of creation to the newness of life in fellowship with the children of God (Rom. 8.21). Even if the text does not provide any clear instructions concerning ethical behaviour to its readers, it is evident from the larger Pauline context that it encourages them to participate in the Spirit's mission in this world: the church is to be where the Spirit is, and the Spirit is in solidarity with this suffering world (cf. Rm. 8:14). Further, throughout the biblical canon, God's redeeming and liberating intervention in this world becomes paradigmatic for the community of faith's ethics (Wenk 2000, pp. 203–7).

It is at this stage that scholars from the field of New Testament Theology need to listen to voices other than their own: as mentioned above, in Romans 8.18-30, Paul develops a systematic approach neither to a Christian social ethics nor to an eco-theology, he merely defines the cosmic frame within which he develops both his soteriology and his particular ethical advice later on in his letter (Rm. 12-15). However, with his emphasis on the groaning and the solidarity of the Spirit with a suffering creation, as well as with the participatory

language throughout the entire text, the starting point for any Christian social ethics and eco-theology based on Romans 8.18-30 is precisely in listening carefully and emphatically to the voices of those suffering. Since the "soteriological frame" of Romans 8.18-30 is of cosmic dimension, the many tongues to listen to comprise people suffering, i.e., by oppression, hunger, war, and injustice but also animal life, plants, water, and other elements of nature suffering due to human exploitation. Some of these voices are "non-verbal" or in need of being given a voice in order to be heard in our time. There may well be people outside from the academic guild that are more competent in hearing these voices, and they may more adequately speak on their behalf than do scholars from the field of New Testament Theology. There are also voices from the theological guild that advance a pneumatological based eco-theology, i.e., Wallace, who develops a nature-based pneumatology that will bring healing and peace for a planet suffering violence and separation (Wallace 1996), or Bergmann, who argues that the Spirit is the principle agent of salvation as well as the perfector and liberator of nature. In order to sustain his thesis, he develops a methodology by listening to voices from the past (Gregory of Nazianzus), then bringing it in dialogue with contemporary voices in order to address the ecological crisis of our days. (Bergmann 2005), or Swoboda, who develops a Pentecostal theology of a Spirit-baptized creation (Swoboda 2013), however, with basically no reference to Romans 8.18-30.

Further, the participatory language of the text especially helps people living in the West to look at life through fresh lenses and enhances our awareness that we do not exist without the soil upon which we stand and without the air we breathe; we co-inhabit this world. Through the indwelling of the Spirit in all of creation, we participate in creation, as we participate in the resurrection life of Christ. Again, we can learn from both voices of the past (i.e., Saint Francis of Assisi or John Muir) and present (Midgley 1978; Wallace 1996) how we can best live in a creation in which we participate.

However, the Spirit's mission in this world is characterized not only by his solidarity with life threatened but also by stirring up hope and interceding on behalf of those suffering.

### *3.2. Hope in the Spirit and Interceding for Those Suffering*

The hope that a church, participating in the mission of the Spirit (sharing in his ethos), is stirring up the lives of those suffering is not simply a comfort for a better life *then and there*. Rather, a church embracing the ethos of the Spirit lives hope in the midst of a world that is hopeless, for it knows of the life-giving power of the Spirit as well as of his emphatic solidarity and intercession on behalf of this world (Johnson 2011, pp. 96–129): the ultimate reality for all creation is made manifest in and through the church here and now. Again, such hope is rooted both in the actual experience of the Spirit's presence in the church as well as in the resurrection of Jesus, anticipating thereby the resurrection of all of creation towards its final liberation and glory in the presence of God. However, such hope will lead the church at times to live in contradiction to its surrounding culture, for any community proclaiming a hope beyond the present reality automatically finds itself criticizing this present reality; it identifies this current reality as passing and therefore ultimately not as indispensable or absolutely necessary. This is what makes the church a prophetic voice; it will speak on behalf of those that cannot speak for themselves. It will stir up a hope in those that have no hope—and solidarity is the way to do so.

## 4. Conclusions

This reading of Romans 8.18-30 represents a different approach to a theology of the Spirit than is often reflected by both contemporary academic and non-academic voices. Romans 8.18-30 unveils Paul's understanding of the mission of the Spirit (ethos) in a threefold way:

- (Re)creation and liberation of all of creation
- Solidarity by groaning with creation
- Intercession on behalf of creation.

The passage reflects a cosmic understanding of salvation; thereby, the text addresses issues such as the justice for and redemption of the victims of sin, including all of creation. Such a soteriology adds to the Christian understanding of "the incarnation of the word of God" the "incarnation of the Spirit of God". A more pneumatological formulated soteriology, based on Romans 8.18-30, will also have implications for the mission and ethics of the church, for it comprises the overcoming of sin so that the victims of injustice, abuse, and violence (including nature) will be liberated to their final freedom together with the children of God. A community of faith that is to embrace the ethos of the Spirit, or to walk *with* the Spirit, is to take side with all forms of life that are threatened.

As noticed earlier, in Romans 8.18-30, Paul does not elucidate a detailed pneumatological social ethics nor a systematic pneumatological eco-theology. Paul rather sets the wider cosmic stage for his soteriology and his particular ethical advice later on in the letter. However, Romans 8.18-30 can nevertheless contribute to the contemporary discussion on social ethics and the ecological crisis, because Paul's cosmic and universal frame "becomes incarnated" in our particular contexts by the Spirit's solidarity with and participation in the suffering creation, as well as with the hope being stirred up based on the resurrection of Jesus. What this solidarity looks like in our particular contexts remains for us to find out together, and we do so by listening to all voices of creation that are groaning and in pain, eagerly expecting their liberation. In order to hear these voices, it may be necessary for many of us to learn new languages and to speak new tongues: any social ethics or pneumatological oriented eco-theology based on Romans 8.18-30 begins not with writing a new approach to the topic but with listening to those suffering.

Lastly, Romans 8.18-30 has much to contribute to any discussion of empowerment through the Spirit, for it provides a definition of power that honours any Spirit-prompted solidarity with all forms of suffering and pain in the same way as those experiences in which the destructive forces of sin are proleptically overcome already here and now. Perhaps the churches in the West have much need for such a kind of power that is expressed in solidarity with those groaning for their final liberation, and they have much need to seek the guiding of the Spirit for new ways yet to walk *with* the Spirit.

Scholars working in the field of New Testament theology should not hesitate to "add their voice" to the contemporary discourse on the Christian faith, because it is only in listening to the voices from past and present that the Christian community will be able to face the challenges of our time. However, biblical scholars (as well as all theologians) should be well-acquainted with the many other voices impacting contemporary spirituality and the discourse on the Christian faith, both academic and non-academic. Sometimes scholars working in the field of New Testament theology will represent the prophetic voice in this dialogue, and sometimes other voices will help them hearing the voice of the New Testament authors in a clearer way.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares not conflict of interest.

## Notes

[1] The German ethicist Hans G. Ulrich has performed ground-breaking work in this regard. He differentiates between a Christian social-ethic, evidenced in a certain program, and the lived ethos of a Christian community. The ethos is more foundational and reflected in rituals and acts that are not necessarily part of an explicit ethical discourse (Ulrich 2007, pp. 48–49; Ulrich 2009, pp. 435–48).

[2] An "incarnational pneumatology" becomes even more apparent in developing it from the Old Testament where the Spirit constantly works towards the materialization of God's desire to give life to that which is without life—or threatened by the forces of chaos.

[3] While Gordon Fee emphasises the collective and ethical dimension of the work of the Spirit in this passage, he neglects to highlight the eschatological one (Fee 1994, p. 517).

[4] Dunn understands the motive of the intercession by the Spirit as reflecting early Jewish parallels speaking of the intercession of angels, something that is found also in Hebrews (Dunn 1998, p. 308).

[5] For a discussion of the fact that the resurrection of Jesus is never explicitly attributed to the Spirit other than in Romans 8.11and, therefore, the belief in resurrection by the Spirit is, so to speak, the result of their belief in the resurrection of Jesus, since Jesus had been raised the early Christians had to believe that the Spirit had been given to them, cf. Yates, *Spirit and Creation*, pp. 148–51.

[6] Macchia speaks in this context of the cosmic dimension of Spirit Baptism (Macchia 2006, pp. 102–7).

[7] For the argument that this "groaning of the Spirit" refers to glossolalia, cf. Macchia (1992).

[8] The three verbs συγκληρομόμοι, συμπάσχομεν, and συνδοξασθῶμεν clearly point in direction of participating in Christ.

[9] Very well-developed by Moltmann: "Er offenbarte seine Identität bei denen, die ihre Identität verloren hatten . . . und erkennt sich als den Menschensohn bei denen, die ihrer Menschlichkeit beraubt sind. (. . . ) Das Geselligkeitsprinzip des Gekreuzigten aber ist die Gesellung zu den anderen und die Solidarität mit denen, die zu Fremden wurden und zu anderen gemacht worden sind". (Moltmann 1972), S. 32–33]. Cf. (Wiesel 1982, pp. 93–94). However, Wiesel's argumentation is not Christological but theological in the broadest sense: God is hanging at the gallows; God *is* that boy that was executed—and therefore God has been killed.

## References


Bauckham, Richard. 2003. *New Testamen Theology: The Theology of the Book of Revbelation*, 10th ed. Edited by James Dunn. Cambridge: CUP.

Bazzell, Pascal. 2015. *Urban Ecclesiology, Famila Deim and a Fillipino Community Facing Homelessness*. New York: Bloomsburry.

Benson, Ezekiel. 2018. *How to Fellowship with the Holy Spirit to Activate & Live in Divine Prosperity, Divine Success & Divine Favour*, Independently Published.

Bergmann, Sigurd. 2005. *The Spirit as Liberator of Nature*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans.

Bernhardt, Andrew. 2015. *How to Gain Victory over Sin. Knowing the Sanctification of the Holy Spirit*. Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Bultmann, Rudolf. 1964. ἐλπίς κτλ. In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrichs. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Vol. II, Seitenzahl.

Dunn, James. 1998. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Fee, Gordon. 1994. *God's Empowering Presence. The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*. Peabody: Hendrickson.

Haacker, Klaus. 2003. *The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Romans*. Cambridge: CUP.

Hagin, Kenneth. 2012. *The Believer's Authority*, 2nd ed. Tulsa: Rhema, First Publish 1985.

Heimbach-Steins, Marianne, and Georg Steins. 2012. *Bibelhermeneutik und Christliche Sozialethik*. Stuttart: Kohlhammer.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. 2011. *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Chruc h. The Challenge of Luke-Acgts to Contemporary Christians*. Grand Rapdis: Eerdmans.

Käsemann, Ernst. 1971. *Perspectives on Paul*. London: SCM Press.

Macchia, Frank. 1992. Sighs to Deep for Words. Towards a Theology of Glossalalia. *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1: 47–73. [CrossRef]

Macchia, Frank. 2006. *Baptized in the Spirit. A Global Pentecostal Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Macchia, Frank. 2010. *Justified in the Spirit. Creation, Redemption and the Triune God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Medic, Praying, and Silvia Blain. 2013. *Divine Healing Made Simple: Simplifying the Supernatural to Make Healing and Miracles as Part of Your Everyday Life*. Gilbert: Inkity Press.

Menzies, Robert P. 1991. *The Devlopment of Early Christiabn Pneumatology. With Special Reference to Luke-Acts*. Sheffield: SAP.

Metzger, Bruce M. 1983. The Fourth Book of Ezra. In *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. Edited by James H. Charlesworth. New York: Doubleday, vol. 1, pp. 517–59.

Midgley, Mary. 1978. *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Moltmann, Jürgen. 1972. *Der gekreuzigte Gott: Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik ch Ristlicher Theologie*. München: Kaiser Verlag.

Rabens, Volker. 2010. *The Holy Spirit and Ethics in Paul*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Rabens, Volker, Jacquelin N. Grey, and Mariam Mamell, eds. 2021. *Key Approaches to Biblical Ethics. An Interdiciplinary Dialogue*. Leiden: Brill.

Roberts, Oral. 2002. *When You See the Invisible, you Can Do the Impossible*. Shippensburg: Desteinity Image.

Samara, James G. 2006. *Being Conformed to Christ in Community. A Study of Maturity, Maturation and the Local Chruch in the Undisputed Pauline Epistles*. London: T & T Clark.

Story, J. Lyle. 2021. Christian Affections in Romans 8. *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 30: 201–20. [CrossRef]

Swoboda, Aaron Jason. 2013. *Tongues and Trees. Toward a Pentecostal Ecological Theology*. Dorset: Deo Publising.

Ulrich, Hans G. 2007. *Wie Geschöpfe leben. Konturen Evangelischer Ethik*. Berlin: LIT.

Ulrich, Hans G. 2009. Ethik lernen im Vaterunser. Das Gebet als paradigmatische Praxis einer Lebensform. In *Denkraum Katechismus. FS für Oswald Bayer*. Edited by Johannes Von Lupke and Edgar Thaidigsmann. Tübingen: Mohr.

Wallace, Mark I. 1996. *Fragments of the Spirit. Nature, Violence, and the Renewal of Creation*. New York: Continuum.

Wenk, Matthias. 2000. *Community Forming Power: The Socio-Ethical Role of the Spirit in Luke-Acts*. London: T & T Cklark.
Wiesel, Eli. 1982. *Die Nacht zu Begraben*. München: Bechtle Verlag.
Wilckens, Ulrich. 1993. *Der Brief an Die Römer (EKK)*. Zürich: Enzinger.
Wright, Nicholas Thomas. 2003. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
Yates, John W. 2008. *The Spirit and Creation in Paul*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
Ziauddin, Bruno. 2021. Wo stehe ich? Eine politische Abrechnung mit mir selbst. *Das Magazin* 4: 10–20.

religions

MDPI

*Article*

# "Leading Many Sons to Glory": Historical Implications of Exclusive Language in the Epistle to the Hebrews

**Amy Lauren Peeler**

School of Biblical and Theological Studies, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL 60187, USA; amy.peeler@wheaton.edu

**Abstract:** This study examined Hebrews' use of gender-exclusive language for the purpose of understanding the author of the Epistle's perspective on women and their role the religious community. The study used both broader historical research and exegetical analysis to support theological conclusions about Hebrews' treatment of women. Despite the use of gender-exclusive language, the epistle does not suggest a bias against women. On the contrary, in the author of Hebrews' hand, gendered language becomes a vehicle for understanding the implications of the gospel message for the Christian community.

**Keywords:** Hebrews; exclusive language; women; community; pedagogy; inheritance; priesthood

**Citation:** Peeler, Amy Lauren. 2021. "Leading Many Sons to Glory": Historical Implications of Exclusive Language in the Epistle to the Hebrews. *Religions* 12: 844. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100844

Academic Editor: Joel B. Green

Received: 13 August 2021
Accepted: 24 September 2021
Published: 8 October 2021



## 1. Introduction

The Epistle "to the Hebrews" is not a comfortable text. Familiar ideas interspersed with encouraging platitudes are not its domain. One does not cuddle up with it so much as be disciplined by it. A significant part of its discipline is the necessity of learning its cultural setting, a setting built upon the foundation of the vast and detailed narrative of Israel expressed by those living in the challenging realities of the Roman Empire.

The particular discomfort upon which this essay focuses is the discussion of women in the Epistle, or rather, the lack thereof. In comparison with some of the stark statements in the Pauline or Petrine literature (e.g., 1 Cor 11:3; 14:34–35; 1 Tim 2:11–15; 1 Pet 3:1–7), this oversight might be a welcome relief, but many interpreters have not found it so. In the first edition of the *Women's Bible Commentary*, for example, Mary Rose DeAngelo (1992) states: "This imagery requires women to read ourselves into the male relationship of father and son." To be ignored might be a greater slight than to be contested. A letter in which the author depicted salvation as "leading many sons to glory" (2:10), discipleship as the education of sons (12:5–11), and revelation as God speaking to sons (12:5), sounds not just archaic but exclusive to many readers in the 21st century.

That this is so, that the text is not just odd but troublesome, reveals a key feature of the New Testament *as a theological text*. If a scholar approaches a text simply as a historical document, as a repository of what someone thought at a particular time, the almost complete absence of women in the text would not only *not* disturb, but would, in fact, be expected. This author would be one among the many educated throughout time who ignored the presence and experience of women. Although some scholars approach Hebrews in this historically distant way, the majority of ecclesial readers who encounter it do not. For these readers, the author of Hebrews' words have a life beyond their original utterance. In fact, these living and active words have been shaping the communal and individual lives of readers for millennia.

One might argue that the words of Aristotle have had similar effect. I am rather confident that no matter what I might achieve in my life, Aristotle would continue to view me as a "deformed male" (*Gen. An.* 737 a 18), far less than perfect, an aberration, never capable of either ideal strength or virtue. More importantly, the ideas expressed through his writings have had profound impact on science, philosophy, theology, and culture

(Aspegren 1990). His words have too shaped the way the world works, as have the words of the author of Hebrews.

There remain, however, at least two vital differences between their writings. First, I care not at all what Aristotle would have thought of me personally. Other than the broad generalities of being humans in the stream of "Western" culture, we share nothing in common and his personal opinion has zero effect on my life. Were it the case that the author of Hebrews viewed me in the same way as Aristotle, however, the impact would be much greater and more painful *because we—the author of Hebrews and I—are part of the same community*. United across vast distances of time, geography, and culture, we stand together under the confession that Jesus is Lord. To put a point on it, I interpret Hebrews 12:1 to mean that I worship with him weekly because he is a member of the cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints whom my church acknowledges as singing the same song that proclaims God's holiness. If a fellow member of that choir, from the triumphant rather than the militant section, thinks I can be ignored because I am deformed as a female, that impact is something very different than the non-existent weight of what Aristotle thinks. The wounds of a stranger pale in comparison to the wounds of a brother. Indeed, for those of us who turn to Hebrews as Christian Scripture, the author of Hebrews spoke not just for himself, but for God. This is the second reason Hebrews' impact is greater than that of Aristotle. If the author of Hebrews truly ignored women and did so because of disdain, this dismissal reflects not only a particular time and culture, but also the heart of the One who created me. The stakes are high.

It is no accident that volumes of ink have been spilt in service of explicating the gendered nature of the biblical text, a cottage industry that stands as testament to the unparalleled influence of this text across history, and, for those inside the confessing community of the church, a testament that no other text matters as much.

In what follows I argue that, in fact, the author of Hebrews did *not* hold the same opinion of women as did Aristotle, and I will provide evidence of this assertion from the text of Hebrews. I should, however, name at the outset the conviction that stimulated my searching of the text in the first place, namely, the conviction that if this author and I claim the same Lordship of Jesus, the Son of God born of a woman (Gal 4:4; Heb 7:14), he might articulate my value as constrained by his own culture, but he should not deny my value altogether (see discussion of the failures of this standard in (Clark 1983, pp. 204–5)). Women are not as invisible in the Epistle to the Hebrews as it might first appear, because they too are included alongside sons in *the Son*. Before the argument, however, it is necessary to say a word about the historical method I employ.

## 2. Method

The following essay may seem ill-fitting in a volume on New Testament theology, for it spends the bulk of its words investigating the historical realities faced by women in the ancient world. The work of Joel Green influences the method employed here (Green 2011). I am not simply describing what the author of Hebrews thought in a distant and disinterested way. As I argued above, what this author says matters a great deal to women today, particularly to Christian women. Neither am I attempting to reconstruct a history behind the text so that systematic theologians and pastors can then build a theology upon it. Hebrews offers so very little regarding its historical setting; all interpreters can do is to posit plausible situations, and I do so here with particular attention to the gendered makeup of the community. My argument for the author's inclusion of women, however, stands by virtue of the words of the text no matter what the particular situation of the community might be. That being said, this community did exist in the 1st-century world, and so I conduct the historical work in the service of better understanding the text. It is my conviction that when I better understand the situation of the text, I better understand God's intent in communicating through the text, hence, I better understand its theology. Learning history births better theology.

I argue here for two (seemingly dissonate) aspects of Hebrews in its historical setting, namely, that it elevates women, but that it does so through its use of exclusive language. The historical work both explains why Hebrews sounds so foreign and even infuriating to many contemporary readers—it was a document of its own time—but also shows the bedrock continuity between that author and contemporary Christian theology in the valuing of women, because, as stated above, the author was also a disciple of Jesus the Messiah. Theologically aimed historical work prevents both excoriating this author for a historical situatedness he did not choose as well as twisting him to be in all ways a 21st-century feminist. My success in employing the method will be up to the reader to decide.

The historical setting of Hebrews allows interpreters to formulate plausible implications of this filial language as the author of Hebrews utilizes it. I first address the presence of women in this particular assembly. Then, I sketch some of the trends regarding education, inheritance, and religion and women's degree of participation therein. Addressing this community of Christians as υἱέ, the Greek term for son (Heb 12:5), the author exhorts his readers to participate in realms typically dominated by sons in the 1st-century world. I contend that such filial language and themes, rather than excluding women, invites them into responsibilities and benefits. Cynthis Briggs Kittredge sees a similar move, stating that Hebrews' language "emphasizes Jesus' close kinship with all human beings, not only male ones" (Kittredge 1997, p. 429). Thus, women can step into realities predominantly reserved for sons because these women are now equal members in the Son, Jesus the Messiah (Heb 3:14).

The temptation looms large to argue that Christianity was beneficial for women while Greco-Roman and Jewish religion was detrimental. This kind of simple bifurcation is as historically inaccurate as it is dangerous (Osiek 1994). Instead of claiming an exceptionally positive status for Hebrews (Hylen 2019), I illuminate a positive dimension of Hebrews' argument for women—largely underappreciated—in light of the letter's historical situatedness. Other authors and other leaders invited women, in many and various ways, into spaces dominated by males. Hebrews gives evidence of one of the communities who did so as well.

### 3. The Community of the Epistle

Some scholars of Hebrews have argued that the author of this letter addressed his exhortation to former Jewish priests, which would indicate that women were not included (Allen 2010). Most interpreters, however, have rejected this option. The author addressed the community members as the household of God (3:6) and as an assembly (10:25). Such language makes the recipients of Hebrews sound similar to other early Christian groups. The presence of women in such a setting seems quite likely, as demonstrated by the women mentioned and addressed in the New Testament (Lk 8:2–3; Acts 1:14; Rom 16; 1 Cor 16:19; Phil 4:2; 2 Tim 2:19; Phil 2) and Celsus' famous comment that Christianity was for "women and children" (Origen 1994, *Cels.* 3.44). After recognition of the complexity of the sources, Ross Shepard Kraemer (1994, p. 131) carefully concludes, "[W]omen constituted a significant presence in the Jesus Movement". In fact, Mary Ann Beavis and HyeRan Kim-Cragg draw from research on contemporary New Religious Movements to argue, "Women may have made up the majority of converts, a fact obscured in the NT by the Greek preference for the masculine grammatical form" (Beavis and Kim-Cragg 2015, p. LXVI). Based on knowledge of those groups as indicated by the New Testament documents, it would be more likely that this congregation—like the others—would have included women (Lane 1991). A mixed-gender audience seems most likely, although it cannot, without the discovery of more evidence, be proven.

Moreover, with its boundary-breaking vision of time and space, the author of Hebrews envisioned this congregation as a part of a much larger group, the covenant people of the God of Israel. The text makes clear that he did place women among this larger community of faith.

The author included the stories of at least three women in the encomium to faith (Chapter 11). In v. 11, Sarah appears as the barren one—close to death in fact (νενεκρωμένου)—through whom the promised descendants come. The grammar here has been a *crux interpretum* in Hebrews. It is not clear whether Sarah is the subject, hence, the one who received the power to cast seed because she regarded God as faithful, or whether she was mentioned as a parenthetical support for the hopelessness of the situation and Abraham retains the place as subject. Even if the latter was the case and Sarah was not in the foreground, she was certainly included as part of the summative all (πάντες) in v. 13. She died (ἀποθνήσκω in Gen 23:2; Heb 11:13), and although she did receive the promise of her son (Gen 18:9–15; 21:1–8), she did not live to see the many descendants who came from him. Moreover, it was her death that caused Abraham to mourn his standing as a sojourner (παρεπίδεμος in Gen 23:4; Heb 11:13), which showed the unfulfilled promise of possessing the land. Hence, both Abraham *and Sarah* died without receiving their divine promise in full. In that state of necessary hope, she was among those whom the author considered as part of the community. As faithful in trust, she was among those whom God was not ashamed to be called their God (Heb 11:16).

The author also included—and even ended his list of the faithful with—Rahab. By faith, she received the spies with peace, and therefore escaped the destruction of the unfaithful (Heb 13:31). She acted in a way the author urged for the whole audience, namely, by embracing the way of peace (12:14) and bearing peaceful fruit (12:11) because it is a characteristic of God, the God of peace (13:20). She herself—with no connection to a patriarch—because of *her* actions, resided with the witnesses (11:39; 12:1). She was included with those who did not receive their promise in full but was in some way dependent upon God's divine perfection that would happen to her along with the readers (11:40).

Finally, so too were the women who received their dead from resurrection included in this group (11:35). Commentators will see referents to the women in the prophetic literature, the mother of the Maccabean martyrs, or even the women in the gospel narratives. All of these are possible, and without more detail, it seems impossible to nail down which one group—if it is only one—the author had in mind. To my point, the author did say explicitly that there were *women* who received their dead, and so they too joined the cloud of witnesses.

The inclusion of these women indicates that when the author referred to their ancestors, technically their fathers, he was using this term inclusively. In 11:23, he explicitly used this word to refer to Moses' parents who hid him, which clearly included his mother and father. Every other reference to ancestors (1:1; 3:9; 8:9) was also utilized in a gender inclusive way, for it includes the women he has mentioned in the list of faithful in Chapter 11.

In addition to the community who lived before this audience, the communities of faith who followed them and read this letter ensured that women received its message. In this instance, beyond any claim to the author's intention to address this letter to women, I engage with the subsequent life of the text. Those early generations of readers remain important for this argument because they would have retained many of the same cultural mores of the first recipients. As this letter was copied and discussed in both the Christian East and West, if women of the early Christian movement were hearing it, by the example of Sarah, Rahab, and the resurrection women, these female auditors would have seen an invitation for their participation in these responsibilities and benefits of the sons of God.

The original audience of Hebrews, if it was like other Christian groups, likely included women. Even if not, the author affirmed that women from the history of Israel were included in the group and therefore participated in the experiences with God, articulated in filial terms. Finally, as this document spread to other Christian groups, women in those communities heard it read. With the assured inclusion of women in this broad community of Hebrews, before and after its original audience if not also among them, I may now proceed to sketch the setting in which it would have been heard, focusing upon the gendered trends of education, inheritance, and religion in the ancient world.

## 4. Gendered Dynamics in the Ancient World

### *4.1. Education*

The ancient world valued education because, as Plutarch is thought to have stated, it can lead to "sound character" (*Lib. Ed.* 1.1). This belief is on display in Hebrews where the education of the audience twice featured prominently in the sermon. The first instance occurred after the author introduces the name Melchizedek, with his citation of Ps 109:4 LXX (Heb 5:6–10). The story of this priest-king is a thorny one, and the author knew the entire subject of Christ's priesthood would be difficult for him to interpret because the audience had difficulty hearing. They were, the author stated bluntly, a bit dull (5:11). While all of them should have been teachers by the time the letter came to them, they were, at that time, at the learning level of infants. They needed to go back to the basics because, unable to discern good from evil, they were not prepared to choose what is right (5:13). They needed to be trained (γεγυμνασμένα, 5:14); they needed an education.

The author of Hebrews also drew a connection between training (γυμνάζω) and education (παιδεία) in Chapter 12 where the grief of παιδεία results in righteousness for those who have been trained (Heb 12:11). This connection is found in other authors of the ancient world. The essay attributed to Demosthenes (1949) contrasts the education of philosophy to the education of practical training, but, though the content is different, both γυμνάζω and παιδεία are seen as educative (*Erot.* 43). In this second instance, the author quoted a proverb that was spoken to them as sons (12:5). Focus remained upon the proverb's call for endurance of the training (παιδεία) they were experiencing (12:7). Other than the assertion that they were struggling against sin (12:4), the author gave no specific example in this section of exactly *what* they were experiencing. It is possible that the author was speaking of the persecution they faced in the past (10:32–34) and in the present (13:3), but whatever the precise nature of the struggle, his point was to remind them that the difficulty they faced was not due to God's absence; rather, it provided evidence of God's presence. These challenges proved that God was training them so that they might partake of divine holiness (12:10) and righteousness (12:11). Whereas in Chapter 5, the author seemed to urge the audience to pursue more training—they, unlike the mature, had not had their senses trained (γεγυμνάζω)—this passage in Chapter 12 may indicate that they simply needed to interpret correctly the training they were already experiencing.

As is evident in both of these passages, the author of Hebrews affirmed the importance of education, namely, that it is necessary, that it is difficult, and that it produces results. These ideas correlate well with educational affirmations of his time. Plato (1924), for example, spoke at length concerning the care with which parents and the state seek to educate the young toward virtue (*Prot.* 325–26). Likewise, Plutarch described Cato's careful and intimate education of his son, holding it up as an example (*Cat. Maj.* 20). Other ancients, including Aeschylus, Sophocles, Herodotus, Aesop, and Philo may also be cited as proponents of the necessity of struggle in education (Johnson 2006). The training of people into increasing maturity through the process of struggle was widely viewed as a good thing.

In the context of the 1st-century Greco-Roman world, education was a gendered affair. It is well-known that some authors decried the education of women. In addition to Juvenal's famous satire of the inappropriately educated woman at a dinner party, whose wide-ranging conversation he describes as, "Such vigorous verbiage pours from her, you'd say it was the sound of people bashing all their bowls and bells at once," (*Sat.* 6.434–39, 445–47) others too believed that education decreased women's status as virtuous wives. Lucian (1905) recounted how ridiculous and ill-effective it is for women to be educated in philosophy and literature. It is only, "one among their other embellishments if it is said that they are cultured and have an interest in philosophy" (*Merc. Cond.* 36). To educate a woman was an unnecessary and even negative endeavor, these authors might say.

Clearly, young men featured more prominently in educational endeavors than young women. Interpreters of the ancient world share this consensus. Commenting on the treatise attributed to Plutarch, *On the Education of Children*, W. Martin Bloomer concluded that a

"gendered, class sensitive typology of bodies" underlies the preference for male education (Bloomer 2011, p. 71). Typically, boys were able to progress past the basics of grammar into the realms of rhetoric (Cribiore 2001; Pomeroy 1975), and if girls were educated, theirs was often less focused and less demanding than their male peers (Hallet 1984). Scholars of the Greek culture (Cribiore 2001) and Roman culture (Hemelrijk 2015) concur with the conclusion of Susan E. Hylen: "Women were less likely than men to be educated in this period" (Hylen 2019, p. 128).

These generalities, however, do not indicate that educated women did not exist—quite the contrary. Others authors such as Plutarch and Musonius Rufus himself argued for the education of women (Plutarch 1928; Musonius Rufus 1947b). They, like many, viewed this education as a benefit to the women and to their husbands (Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 4.19.4; Quintilian, *Inst.* 1.1.6; Seneca, *Cons. Helv.* 17.3–4). The iconic frescos from Pompeii ("Sappho" as well as "Paquius Proculus and His Wife") show women with books and quills and thus serve as pertinent material examples (Winsbury 2009). In the ancient world, levels of women's education differed according to time period, geographic location, and class. Indeed, Pomeroy's (1975) conclusion captured the nuances of the period: "Roman women were liberated, but compared to Roman men they were not" (p. 189). By the 1st century, more than just elite girls could receive an education, and it could progress past elementary subjects (Hemelrijk 1999). Moreover, some women participated in physical education, musical education, or philosophy, evidenced by the dedication of philosophical works to women (Hemelrijk 2015).

Exceptions to the rule of male education certainly existed, but nowhere did education reach to levels of gender *equality*. The education of women and men differed because the aims of education differed. The life of an elite Greco-Roman woman was aimed at marriage: "For Roman women, marriage formed the major turning point in their lives" (Hemelrijk 2015, p. 296). Even Musonius Rufus advocated for women to be educated *so that* they could be good at running their households (Musonius Rufus 1947a). Due to that fact, time and purpose distinguished, therefore diminished, women's education in comparison with that of men. "The absence of a well-defined aim for female education, and the early age of marriage of most Roman girls —in their mid or late teens—caused their education to be . . . deeply inconsistent: taken as a whole, it lagged behind that of men" (Musonius Rufus 1947a, p. 293; Hemelrijk 2015). These differences were often justified in the context because young men were typically being trained for different vocations than young women. Everyone should be educated, but although public and private realms overlapped in the ancient world, generally the belief was that men received training for the state and women for the home.

Less testimony exists for non-elite women, but based on material evidence of working-class women, many may have had some facility with literacy and numeracy, enough to keep business records, at most, or carve graffiti, at least. It does not seem that women were prohibited from learning such basic skills, but neither is there evidence that they did so at the same rate as men. Hemelrijk (2015, p. 295) concluded: "literate women were far outnumbered by literate men, as well as outdone by them in terms of the level of their proficiency".

Due to its heavy dependence upon Jewish culture, Hebrews demands more than a general understanding of the educational system of the time. Jewish approaches to education are quite pertinent, particularly because the letter discussed and deepened the theme of education/training.

The situation for Jewish women was much the same. Some scholars read the writings of the rabbis to conclude that Jewish women were totally excluded from learning (Archer 1983). Other evidence indicates the situation may not have been so dismal. Although Philo made derogatory statements against women in other places (*Hyp.* 11.14; Sly 2020), his description of the Therapeutides provides one example affirming educated women. These Jewish women lived a life devoted to prayer and study and likely received a Greek education (*Contempl.*, pp. 87–89) (Kraemer 1994; Taylor 2006). Docu-

ments concerning a woman named Babatha indicate that she was savvy and educated, if illiterate (Magness 2012). Furthermore, likely educated were the women denoted as ἀρχισυνάγωγος throughout the Mediterranean world, who could have read and interpreted the Scriptures (Brooten 1982). Josephus stated that women and slaves knew the Torah (*C. Ap.* 2.181). Even the writings of the Rabbis themselves seem more divided on the subject. One Mishnaic ruling (*m. Ned.* 4.3) supported fathers educating their daughters (Kraemer 1994), and others said that women could become scribes (*m. Qidd.* 4:13; *m. Giṭ.* 2.5; Kraemer 1994). Evidence from Rabbinic writings and those certainly composed during the Second Temple period indicate that while some Jewish women did have the opportunity to become educated, that did not seem to be the widespread norm. In other words, some women were able to be educated, but not most (Leiber 2012).

In light of that reality, the author of Hebrews' lack of differentiation among his audience is worth noting. In both discussions of παιδεία, the author issued the same call to all members of his community. The author added no caveats in Chapter 5 to who should and could be teachers. Instead, the exhortation towards maturity and even leadership in instruction went to the whole audience. William Lane (1991, p. 135) concluded, "The writer is persuaded that 'solid food' is not the privilege of a few initiates who have been exposed to deeper truths or have attained a higher level of existence, but is intended for all Christians". Hebrews 12 states that all of them have participated in a kind of training, and if they endure, they can all look forward to the same results. In fact, not to have participated in this education possibly puts one outside the Christian community (12:8). The author exhorted the whole audience to endure the same kind of challenging training that many writers of the time primarily imagined fathers employing for sons alone.

Hebrews' author posited several types of education for this community. First, he desired for them to have an intellectual education. His expectation, arising from the length of time, was that they all should be teachers (5:12). As he began by stating that his important word to them was difficult (5:11) and because he contrasted what they should know with the elementary words of God (5:12b), it seems that he wanted them to understand and be able to convey the more difficult concepts associated with belief in the Son of the God of Israel—specifically, his priesthood. This kind of learning demands endurance. Abraham displayed it (6:13–18), and Jesus lived it in the vocation of his priesthood (5:7–10), but the author worried that his auditors may not have had it yet (6:4–8). If they were going to teach others, they would need to endure in their learning to understand the complexities of God's fulfilled promises (6:13–18; 7:21; 8:6). Everyone needed a knowledge of Israel's Scriptures and traditions and a scripturally (especially cultically) informed interpretation of the Jesus event (Thompson 2008).

The education he recommended was not simply intellectual knowledge, however. They also needed to live these realities, so, second, their education took on an experiential dimension. In Chapter 5, the author stated that knowledge about the word of righteousness leads to ethical decisions (5:14). Lived learning, then, becomes the focus in Chapter 12. Those to whom he wrote were struggling against sin (12:4), and this education was full of grief (12:11). He was urging them to learn from their experience that God had not abandoned them. Similar to Seneca (*Marc.* 16.1) and Musonius Rufus (39–41 Lutz) who expected both men and women to be virtuous, the author of Hebrews demanded a high degree of fortitude in the listeners. He imported no sense that women, weak in body or in mind, would not be able to rise to the same level of training.

In both theological content and lived struggle, this author wanted everyone in the congregation to be educated. By hearing "son" and being asked to participate in the παιδεία about and from God, women join with their male congregants in preparing neither for the state nor the home but for residence on Mount Zion (12:22–24).

Moreover, the author urged those listening to "imitate those who through faith and patience inherited the promises" (6:15). Sarah had faith in God (11:11), and was included in those who died in faith (11:13). Rahab was faithful as were the women who received

their dead (11:31, 35). The ultimate path of education is the path of faith, and this author believed that women are just as capable as men to travel that path.

*4.2. Inheritance*

Inheritance played a key role for the author of Hebrews as evidenced by its appearance as the initial attribute of the Son ("the one who inherited all things" 1:2) and a very early description of humanity ("those who are about to inherit salvation" 1:14). From that point on, inheritance took the focus of the sermon several more times. This was a particularly salient point for the author's perspective toward women for, as Beavis and Kim-Cragg posited, "From a feminist standpoint the male 'heir of all things,' is problematic in that it functions within a patrilineal legal system in which sons inherit the paternal estate" (Beavis and Kim-Cragg 2015, p. 3).

In Chapter 6, the author urged the audience to imitate those who inherit the promises. Right away, the author recounted God's promise to Abraham that he would be blessed and multiplied (from Gen 22:17) and emphasized the fact that God upheld this promise with an oath (Gen 22:16). After Abraham showed patience, the author said, he obtained the promise. God's promise of an heir to Abraham (Gen 15:4; 16:15–17) he obtained both in miraculous birth and in rescue from death through faith (Heb 6:12) and patience (Heb 6:12 and 15). The author focused upon Abraham's patience and God's faithfulness; the point being proven is that God was faithful to keep the promise and honor the oath to Abraham. For the author of Hebrews, God's interactions with Abraham had a dual purpose. They gave assurance to him, and they also give confidence to future generations, here described as the heirs of the promise (Heb 6:17). If God's oath to Abraham resulted in the attainment of a promise, God's other oath—which arguably is the oath that Jesus would be a priest in the order of Melchizedek (Ps 109:4 LXX/Heb 7:21; Johnson 2006; Cockerill 2012)—is the hope that takes the heirs inside the veil to the presence of God (6:19).

Inheritance and promise appear together again in the Chapter 9. People who had been called needed redemption for the transgressions committed under the first covenant. Jesus' death made this possible. Then, those who were called could receive the promise of an eternal inheritance (9:15). Since Jesus' blood allowed him to go into the holy place and obtain eternal redemption (9:12), this is likely the inheritance in mind here (Koester 2001). These called ones inherit the ability to be redeemed, which recalls the transition from slavery to sonship in Heb 2:14–15, entrance into the new covenant (Heb 8:8–12), and the ability to serve God with a pure conscience (9:14).

Finally, in Chapter 12, Esau provided the negative example of someone who gave up his benefits as the firstborn son, and when he did want to inherit his blessing, he was unable to do so. His tale contrasted with the readers, who had a better future as those who were about to join the firstborn ones (πρωτοτόκων, a plural noun, 12:23). It is an intriguing paradox that multiple saints could have the singular designation of being the "firstborn." With such a status of honor, these children would certainly inherit the blessing. These people did not follow Esau's path but inhabited the blessings of dwelling in the city of God. The author depicted all these from Israel's past as heirs of the inheritance.

In every instance, the promised inheritance involved being with God: inside the veil (6:19), in the new covenant (8:10), and on Mount Zion (12:22–24). The audience of Hebrews was exhorted to join these forebearers and take possession of their inheritance from God, which was to be in relationship with God now and dwell with God forever.

The author had cast a spiritual reality as an inheritance, a metaphor that demands contextualization. Daughters certainly could and did inherit goods and property from their fathers. Roman intestate law stipulated that if a person did not leave a will or left one that was deemed inadmissible, then children—sons and daughters no matter the age—inherited equally (Evans 1991; Walters 2003). Most Romans shuddered at the prospect of being intestate. The extant wills also show that daughters inherited. Intellectuals from Cato to Augustine regarded this as appropriate for they are some of those who made negative comment about the *Lex Voconia*, a law passed in 169 BC which prohibited the

upper classes from naming daughters (even only daughters) as sole heirs (MacLachlan 2013; Evans 1991). Even under the aegis of *Lex Voconia*, however, daughters could still inherit, just not independently. Romans found other ways, however, to give their daughters property through the bestowal of trusts (*fidecommissia*) or dowries (Champlin 1991). It would not have been an unusual thing for women to assume that they would be included as heirs along with their brothers.

The legal records for Jewish women's ability to inherit are quite complicated. The biblical principle is that firstborn sons inherit a double portion, and daughters inherit only if there are no sons (Deut 21:16–17; Num 27:1–11; 36:6–12). On the other hand, it is also possible to find records of Jews who made statements or actions denoting inheritance for sons and daughters, including Philo (*Spec.* 2.125), and the records of Babatha. The archives of Babatha and Salome Komaise, Jewish women who lived in the late 1st and early 2nd century (Oudshoorn 2007), corroborated by documents from other ancient Eastern peoples, suggest that daughters could inherit. If, however, daughters married outside their family, they lost this right (Oudshoorn 2007). Jonathan S. Milgram argued that the Tannaim develop the inclusion of daughters even more, so that daughters, even married ones, can inherit directly from their fathers. Similarly, Milgrom (2016) argued for this reality from Mishna *Baba Batra* 8:4. It is not clear, however, that this expansion of inheritance rights would have been in play in the 1st century.

The difference between law and lived reality, then, seems to work against the benefit of women on this point. While it is true that daughters could have inherited equally with their brothers, examples remain where daughters were given less inheritance than their brothers. It seems that fathers wanted to leave their daughters something, as the Babatha records attest, and unmarried daughters certainly took preference over anyone outside the family, but equality between sons and daughters was not the norm. Edward Champlin (1991, p. 115), in his monograph on Roman testation, closed with this summary of the evidence: "in short, all things being truly equal, one expected a daughter to receive less than a son when both were heirs".

The author of Hebrews stands among other Jewish authors of the 1st century who moralized the concept of inheritance and thereby opened it to the participation of everyone. Anyone, regardless of gender, could "inherit" the moral goods of virtue and wisdom. The Gospels' presentation of redefined family also supports an expansive and inclusive inheritance. Jesus configured family around response to God rather than biology (Mark 3:31–35; Matt 12:46–50; Luke 8:19–21). Jesus set a pattern by which anyone has invitation to come into his family, and joined with his claim of God as family, by extension his followers have God as Father as well. Jesus' words exhibit an inclusive inheritance as well. The meek will inherit the earth (Matt 5:5), those who follow him and give up family for him will inherit eternal life (Matt 19:29), and those who have done the will of God will inherit the kingdom (Matt 25:34). In the exchange with the man who inquired about how to inherit eternal life, Jesus offered the commandments and complete charity as the path (Mark 10:17–22; Luke 18:18–23).

Mark Forman highlighted the socially radical nature of Paul's use of inheritance language. First, he argued that " ... Paul is still referring to physical land, albeit extended to include the whole world, when he uses the word inheritance" (Forman 2011, p. 5), then suggested that such language "has profound socio-political significance" (Forman 2011, p. 243). Similarly, Nigel Watson (2001) argued that Paul also intended a more equal idea of inheritance between men and women in Rom 8:17. Paul explicitly extended God's relationship with sons to include daughters as well (2 Cor 6:18).

Philo knew of, and seemed to affirm, the normal practice that sons inherit property over daughters (*Spec.* 2.124), yet he also spoke of a blessed inheritance that comes to those who practice virtue (*Her.* 69, 98, 313; *Fug.* 17, 19; *Sacr.* 120, *Somn.* 1.175; *Spec.* 4.75; *Virt.* 79). *Psalms of Solomon* equates a current inheritance of a happy life with those who are devout (Pss. Sol. 14:10). Finally, *The Testament of Job* offers a fascinating spiritualization of inheritance for women when he granted his daughters divinely healing cords instead of

property (T. Job 46–47). This spiritualization of inheritance occurred also in the Psalms. In Ps 15:5 (LXX) where the One who trusts in God finds the Lord as his inheritance, and in Psalm 118:111, the Psalmist inherited God's testimonies. "Inherit" becomes a term for obtaining in Wisdom literature as well, where virtue results in the inheritance of blessing and folly in the inheritance of cursing (Prov 3:35; 11:29; Sir 4:13; 6:1; 20:25; 37:26).

Hebrews makes similar moves. Since this author did envision an inheritance of a kingdom from God, and many have seen this kingdom to be material—the renewed creation—then his gender-silent assertions about inheritance stand in distinction with the legal and lived practices of inheritance in their historical setting. The author left no indication that women will participate differently or less in this inherited relationship and dwelling. All members of this congregation were fully equal co-inheritors, firstborn ones, with all those who confess Christ who have an inheritance with God in this future reality.

*4.3. Priesthood*

Hebrews uniquely proclaims Jesus as High Priest, but it also attributes priestly functions to the listeners. Most explicitly, in Chapter 10 the author exhorted the audience to go into the inner part of the holy place through the veil by means of the blood of Jesus (10:19). Chapter 6 previews this exhortation when the author assured them that God wants them to keep pursuing the hope before them, a hope that goes inside the veil (6:29). The author exhorted all the listeners to go into a section of the tabernacle that, if he was drawing his picture from the one described as accompanying the Israelites in the wilderness, only priests could approach and only the high priest could enter (Lev 16:2–34).

When they approach God's presence, they can perform the ministry of priests. Λατρεύω appears as a description of ministry of the auditors and can indicate worship in the cultic service. Having been cleansed by the blood of Christ and having pure consciences, they can turn from dead works to minister to the living God (9:14). He called them to the worship of thanksgiving for the kingdom they were receiving (12:28). Reverence and awe should characterize this worship because the God whom they serve is a consuming fire, imagery which evokes God's judgment (Deut 4:24; 9:3) and divine consumption of the whole burnt offering sacrifice (Lev 6:10; 1 Chron 21:26). In his closing instructions, the author exhorted his readers to continually offer a *sacrifice* of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name (Heb 13:15). He continued his instruction: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such *sacrifices* are pleasing to God" (13:16). It is clear that he followed in a tradition in which sacrificial language applied to moral acts (Ps 50:14; 51:17; 141:2; Prov 21:3). He called his audience into ways of relating to God described as entrance into priestly realms and performance of priestly practices.

In the Greco-Roman world, women performed sacred rites and entered into the proximity of the gods. The history inherited from the Greeks is one in which women often served alongside or even exclusive of men. Female deities, at times, demanded female servants (Connelly 2007). In Roman religion, the priest was "responsible for leading the procession to the altar, offering prayers, consecrating the victim, and burning the entrails (*exta*) after the animal had been slaughtered [which was the focus act]," (Schultz 2006, p. 135), and in some of those situations, women could be priestesses and perform priestly actions, including being near the god. For example, Ovid recorded that women bathed the goddess *Fortuna Virilis* during her April festival (*Fast*. 4.133–40). They could also handle sacrifice (Schultz 2006). They might have assisted other male priests as in the sacrifice to the goddess Tellus during the Fordicidia festival (*Fast.* 4.629–40) or they might have performed the sacrifices on their own as did the Vestals in the blood sacrifice to Bona Dea (Schultz 2006). In the worship of Dionysus, for example, women served as priests and took a prominent role. Diodorus Siculus reported that the older women offered sacrifices, and Pausanias said that only the women could see the god because they performed the secret rites (Bowden 2010). Kraemer (1994, p. 88) concluded, "gender was not a determinative negative factor in attaining and executing religious offices and the attendant honors, privileges, prestige, and power accrued to those who had fulfilled such civic responsibilities".

This is not to say that women were always equal to men in religious practices. The Vestal Virgins serve as a complex example of women's involvement in the Roman cult. Vestals were selected from leading families to guard the sacred hearth of the city. The vestals held the important task of making sure "that the Roman's public sacrifices were ritually pure and effective" (Kraemer 1994, p. 29). This vital and honored role, however, had its limitations, not only by class, but also by behavior. Women also had to remain virgins to stay in this role, thus prohibiting this honor from most women and opening the door to viewing them as something other than a typical "woman" (Sawyer 1996, p. 127). Inequality was present in other arenas as well. In the home, the wife ideally needed to be subordinate to husband, (Schultz 2006) and in the official Roman cult, they were not allowed to hold the highest office of Pontifex Maximus.

The presence of the Scriptures of Israel indicates, however, that the author of Hebrews was working (not exclusively) but primarily with a Jewish cultic model. Arising out of ancient Judaism's concepts of ritual purity, women did not serve as priests in the Jewish tabernacle or temple. The exception comes from Leontopolis, where an inscription from 28 BCE notes a Marin, a priestess. Nevertheless, Sawyer (1996, p. 75) argued, "the Leontopolis inscription is extremely rare, and far too sparse to allow us to conclude with confidence that women had any significant cultic functions within Judaism". It seems that women were involved in synagogues and in religious societies, but not as priests.

Some Jewish groups outside the temple complex would have afforded women spiritual experiences cast in priestly descriptions. Other Jews of the time articulated worship and prayer in priestly terms. Philo believed a special class existed that can approach God. He called them priests and prophets and talked of them throwing off the veil (*Gig.* 53–60) to come to God. He affirmed the importance of the functional priests in Israel (*Migr*. 92), but also imagined a larger group of Israelites carrying out priestly functions, such as being representatives for the nations (*Abr.* 98), and following the law (*Spec*. 1.243), especially in the practices of Passover (*Mos*. 2.224). Philo described the *Therapeutae*, a contemplative group which included women, in priestly terms. He compared the women with Greek priestesses by virtue of their purity (*Comtempl.* 8.68). He compared the simplicity of their food to the sobriety of the sacrifices of the priests (9.73; 10.81, 82). Joan E. Taylor (2006) argued that such statements indicate that the *Therapeutae* functioned in priestly ways along with the men in their group. The Qumran documents as well describe prayer as a replacement for the sacrifices they cannot offer in the temple. Prayer was "a sacrifice offered in righteousness" (*CD* 11.20–21) or a "burnt offering" (Nitzan 1994, p. 285).

Along with these, Hebrews imagines prayer and worship as a priestly act open to more than just the official priests. Consequently, while Hebrews' invitation to women to come into the holy place in the presence of God shares some similarities with the cultic practices of Greco-Roman religion and the spiritual descriptions of fellow Jews, in his text, the community is invited into a realm to perform actions that in a Jewish cultic setting would dominantly be associated with men (Cohick 2009).

## 5. Conclusions

A simple reading of Hebrews, especially in its original language, seems to indicate a lack of interest in women. For those who consider this Christian Scripture, that absence is not simply an unfortunate historical reality, it could indicate disrespect from a fellow believer, and even more challenging, a divine preference for the male. Without question, the author of Hebrews employed masculine language for the congregation because it was common to use male terms to speak of mixed-gender groups. This masculine language could indicate that authors assume that males are normative and females must transform to adhere (DeConick 2011).

The Epistle, however, provides scant evidence to support that assumption. While Hebrews uses sonship language for the community, including the women, it does not issue any further demand that any women suppress their femaleness to be a part of the community. The female members of the faithful of Israel are mothers. Nor does it explicitly

androgenize virtue. Instead, it proclaims that *all* can receive the benefits of the virtue of faith. The sketch of the historical nuances with regard to education, inheritance, and priesthood illuminate where the author of Hebrews fits on that map. For this writing, all—women and men—are connected to the group to whom he was writing by divine provision because they were looking forward to the "something better," the "perfection" that God will bring to them as they join the author and his audience (11:40).

The author painted a picture of this perfection in Chapter 12 which included the spirits of the righteous that have been perfected (12:23). As these women looked forward to a promise (11:13, 39), a promise of perfection (11:40) by the promise-keeping God (11:11; 10:23), they were included with these perfected righteous ones. There will be women on the holy mountain of God. If they are included, that means that they have undergone the education necessary to reach perfection (5:14). As the author described this group as the assembly of the firstborn ones (πρωτοτόκων), these women are included in that inherited place of sovereignty. Finally, in such proximity to God, they reside in a location normally reserved for priests. The author of Hebrews did include women in the educated, royal, and priestly assembly with God. For the women who listened to this sermon, the presence of these women included by the filial terms and concepts functioned as invitations that they too could be educated, inherit, and enter the sacred space along with their fellow male believers.

This author's chief motivation in the use of this language arose out of a Christological conviction. They are all—men and women—sons because they follow the same pattern of relationship with God as that inhabited by *the* Son. The Messiah's maleness was not denied, but neither was it the primary focus. Instead, the primary focus remained his particularly intimate relationship with God. As the addressees were sharers in Christ (3:14), they experienced training as did Jesus, they all looked forward to an inheritance as he did, and they entered sacred space as he has. The author mentioned no barriers of priestly status or ethnicity or gender for being a participant in this family. All participate in the benefits and responsibilities of the Son. Elizabeth Rundle Charles (1888), a 19th-century English writer, made just this connection. When discussing the movement through the veil in Heb 10:14, she spoke of the removal of barriers, including gender, mentioned in Gal 3:28.

While it may very well be dissonant for a contemporary audience of Hebrews, a historically informed understanding of sonship language and themes offers a redefinition of the term whereby male or female provides neither advantage nor limitation but an open invitation into an intimate and empowering relationship with God.

**Funding:** This research was funded by Templeton Religious Trust, grant number TRT0095/58801 and the University of St. Andrews (School of Divinity).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

Allen, David. 2010. *Hebrews*. NAC 35. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group.
Archer, Léonie J. 1983. The Role of Jewish Women in Graeco-Roman Palestine. In *Images of Women in Antiquity*. Edited by Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
Aspegren, Kerstin. 1990. *The Male Woman: A Feminine Ideal in the Early Church*. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, vol. 4, p. 49.
Beavis, Mary Ann, and HyeRan Kim-Cragg. 2015. *Hebrews*. Wisdom Commentary Series 54; Collegeville: Liturgical.
Bloomer, W. Martin. 2011. *The School of Rome: Latin Studies and the Origins of Liberal Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Bowden, Hugh. 2010. *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Brooten, Bernadette J. 1982. *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*. Chico: Scholars Press, pp. 27–30.
Champlin, Edward. 1991. *Final Judgments: Duty and Emotion in Roman Wills, 200 B.C.–A.D. 250*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Charles, Elizabeth Rundle. 1888. *Within the Veil: Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews*. London: SPCK.
Clark, Elizabeth. 1983. *Women in the Early Church*. Collegeville: Liturgical, Message of the Fathers of the Church.
Cockerill, Gareth Lee. 2012. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
Cohick, Lynn H. 2009. *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
Connelly, Joan Breton. 2007. *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Cribiore, Raffaella. 2001. *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

DeAngelo, Mary Rose. 1992. Hebrews. In *Women's Bible Commentary*. Edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville: John Knox Press.
DeConick, April. 2011. *Holy Misogyny: Why Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter*. London: Continuum.
Demosthenes. 1949. *Orations*. Translated by Norman W. DeWitt, and Norman J. DeWitt. 7 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Evans, John K. 1991. *War, Women, and Children in Ancient Rome*. New York: Routledge.
Forman, Mark. 2011. *The Politics of Inheritance in Romans*. SNTMS 148. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Green, Joel B. 2011. Rethinking 'History' for Theological Interpretation. *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5: 159–74.
Hallet, Judith P. 1984. *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Hemelrijk, Emily Ann. 1999. *Matrona Docta: Educated Women in the Roman Élite from Cornelia to Julia Domna*. London: Routledge.
Hemelrijk, Emily Ann. 2015. The Education of Women in Ancient Rome. In *A Companion to Ancient Education*. Edited by W. Martin Bloomer. Wes Sussex: Wiley & Sons.
Hylen, Susan E. 2019. *Women in the New Testament World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Johnson, Luke Timothy. 2006. *Hebrews: A Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
Kittredge, Cynthia Briggs. 1997. Hebrews. In *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*. Edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. New York: Crossroad, vol. 2.
Koester, Craig R. 2001. *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Kraemer, Ross Shepard. 1994. *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religion Among Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Greco-Roman World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Lane, William. 1991. *Hebrews 1–8*. WBC 47a. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
Leiber, Laura S. 2012. Jewish Women: Texts and Contexts. In *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*. Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World. Edited by Sharon L. James and Sheila Dillon. West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, vol. 166, pp. 329–42.
Lucian. 1905. On Salaried Posts in Great Houses. In *The Dependent Scholar*. Translated by Francis George Fowler, and Henry Watson Fowler. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
MacLachlan, Bonnie. 2013. *Women in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook*. London: Bloomsbury.
Magness, Jodi. 2012. *The Archeology of the Holy Land: From the Destruction of Solomon's Temple to the Muslim Conquest*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Milgrom, Jacob. 2016. *From Mesopotamia to the Mishnah: Tannaitic Inheritance Law in Its Legal and Social Contexts*. Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck].
Musonius Rufus. 1947a. That Women Too Should Study Philosophy. In *Musonius Rufus: "The Roman Socrates"*. Translated and Edited by Cora E. Lutz. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Musonius Rufus. 1947b. Should Daughters Receive the Same Education as Sons. In *Musonius Rufus: "The Roman Socrates"*. Translated and Edited by Cora E. Lutz. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Nitzan, Bilhah. 1994. *Qumran Prayer and Religious Poetry*. Translated by Jonathan Chipman. Leiden: Brill.
Origen. 1994. *Against Celsus. Vol. 4 of The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Translated by Alexander Roberts, and James Donaldson. Peabody: Hendrickson.
Osiek, Carolyn. 1994. Reading the Bible as Women. In *The New Interpreters Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck. Nashville: Abingdon, vol. 1, pp. 181–87.
Oudshoorn, Jacobine G. 2007. *The Relationship between Roman and Local Law in the Babatha and Salome Komaise Archives*. Leiden: Brill.
Plato. 1924. *Protagoras*. Translated by W. R. M. Lamb. 12 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Plutarch. 1928. *Moralia*. Translated by Frank Cole Babbitt. 15 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Pomeroy, Sarah B. 1975. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. New York: Schocken Books.
Sawyer, Deborah F. 1996. *Women and Religion in First Christian Centuries*. London: Routledge.
Schultz, Celia E. 2006. *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
Sly, Dorothy I. 2020. *Philo's Perception of Women*. Providence: Brown Judaic Studies.
Taylor, Joan E. 2006. *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria: Philo's 'Therapeutae' Reconsidered*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Thompson, James W. 2008. *Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
Walters, James C. 2003. Paul, Adoption, and Inheritance. In *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*. Edited by J. Paul Sampley. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International.
Watson, Nigel. 2001. 'And If Children, then Heirs' (Rom 8:17)—Why Not Sons? *ABR* 49: 53–56.
Winsbury, Rex. 2009. *The Roman Book: Books, Publishing, and Performance in Classical Rome*. New York: Bloomsbury.

MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel
Switzerland
Tel. +41 61 683 77 34
Fax +41 61 302 89 18
www.mdpi.com

*Religions* Editorial Office
E-mail: religions@mdpi.com
www.mdpi.com/journal/religions

MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel
Switzerland

Tel: +41 61 683 77 34

www.mdpi.com


ISBN 978-3-0365-5012-1