

INTRODUCING
THEOLOGICAL
INTERPRETATION
OF SCRIPTURE

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Recovering a Christian Practice

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To Paul Beals, Joe Crawford, Jim Grier, Carl Hoch, David Kennedy, John Lillis, and David Turner—seminary teachers who taught me basic biblical and theological skills, and whose friendship nurtures my vocation. (2 Tim. 2:2, 14–26)

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Introduction

From Karl Barth to “Postmodern” Theory

In the 1990s the quest to recover distinctively theological interpretation of Scripture began in earnest. Books by Francis Watson, Stephen Fowl, Kevin Vanhoozer, and others poured forth advocating this new, yet old, way of engaging the Bible. The purpose of the book that you hold in your hands is to tell the story and map the major themes of this movement (part 1), as well as to address some tough questions to clarify its future direction (part 2). Part 1 therefore tends to focus on what advocates of theological interpretation hold in common, while part 2 faces some of the movement’s internal arguments. Before we pursue major themes and challenges of theological exegesis, however, we need some background regarding the story of its renewal. Therefore this introductory chapter begins by briefly sketching how theological interpretation of Scripture declined in the first place, due to the rise of “critical biblical scholarship.” Then we examine Karl Barth as the forerunner of its recovery, before focusing on two groups of Christians who, having retained some aspects of theological exegesis despite its modern decline, are poised to join the recovery efforts. Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics both found themselves caught “between faith and criticism” for much of the

twentieth century, but now some of them seem ready to join a small band of mainline Protestant scholars who are on a quest to renew Scripture interpretation theologically.

Criticizing Critical Biblical Scholarship

Exegesis of the Bible—the effort to understand or interpret its meaning—is a centuries-old endeavor. Often we contrast it with eisegesis, which “reads into” a text something that is not there rather than leading out (the etymology of “exegesis”) what the text says. Even before the modern age, figures such as Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin believed that early Christian practices of engaging Scripture were frequently guilty of eisegesis. Catholic interpretation understood Scripture to have four senses, or dimensions, of meaning. Founded on the one literal sense (e.g., the word “Jerusalem” as the actual city), one also sought the three spiritual senses: (1) the allegorical, whereby the text somehow points us to Christ (e.g., Jerusalem as the church); (2) the tropological, or moral, import of the words for our lives (e.g., Jerusalem as the faithful soul); (3) the anagogical, or future, reference of the text (e.g., Jerusalem as the heavenly city, center of the new creation). The Protestant tendency to reject allegory—in theory, even if not entirely in practice, sticking with the “plain sense” as the only legitimate dimension of Scripture’s meaning—appropriated Renaissance humanism in part. In addition, it continued developments from within medieval Roman Catholicism itself, such as the increasing value placed on the literal sense by Thomas Aquinas and others. Yet Protestant critiques did not establish the Reformers’ approach(es) to Scripture as a new European norm for long: soon came the Enlightenment, and a newly “critical” age.

We have just surveyed some exercises in hermeneutics—efforts to understand the nature of human understanding. In this case, hermeneutical reflections concern what it would involve to read and exegete the Bible meaningfully. In that sense, Christians have engaged hermeneutics, and have done so theologically, from the beginning. Among the dominant thinkers who influenced the

premodern Catholic approach were Origen and Augustine. Origen was one of the church fathers who interacted with Greek philosophy; while pursuing careful interpretation using the literary tools of his day, he also appropriated allegory for reading Scripture as a spiritual practice. In *On Christian Teaching* Augustine continued in this vein, carefully plundering his culture’s rules of reading and rhetoric for Christ’s sake, as the Israelites had done with the gold of the Egyptians. The resulting hermeneutics influenced Christian practice for a thousand years and beyond.

In all its variety, such practice was theological: Christians read the Bible as Scripture, authoritative as God’s Word for faith and life; thus, to interpret Scripture was to encounter God. This remained true for the Protestant Reformers, but not for all Europeans when hermeneutics began to grow more formal two centuries later. In 1787 the German scholar J. P. Gabler delivered a lecture entitled “An Oration on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each.” The title sets forth his agenda clearly: a new distinction between biblical theology as a historical enterprise and dogmatic theology as a normative one. Gabler was not interested in the history of religions alone; rather, apparently he thought that this distinction would allow the Bible to speak more clearly without theology drowning out its voice.¹

These were the heady days that led to the formation of the modern university at Berlin in 1801. The German model quickly set standards for the founding of American research universities such as Johns Hopkins, influencing before too long schools in the British Empire as well, some of which could trace their heritage back to the medieval university in Paris. Very soon, for interpretation of the Bible to result in knowledge of the truth, it had to be critical—scientific in the only sense that people felt possible for an enterprise of the humanities dealing with texts to attain (the German word for such an academic discipline is *Wissenschaft*). To

1. For introductory reflections on Gabler’s significance, see Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 5, 15–16; Craig G. Bartholomew, “Biblical Theology,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (hereafter *DTIB*), ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 84–90.

be critical, in this case, meant focusing on the historical, exploring the cause-and-effect relationships behind events and actions. The causes that we can explore critically, however, seem to be human—natural or social—not divine. Historical criticism of the Bible, therefore, meant focusing on the times and places of the texts’ production as well as their historical references, and doing so objectively: seeking results to share with everyone, unbiased by personal experience or perspective.² What would such objectivity exclude? It would rule out interpreting the Bible as Scripture, with positive reference to beliefs in or encounter with God.

Today a new movement, often under the banner “theological interpretation of Scripture,” seeks to reverse the dominance of historical criticism over churchly reading of the Bible and to redefine the role of hermeneutics in theology. Here I will tell the story of that movement, before offering in later chapters an interpretation of its key tenets and exploring its possible future. We begin by examining the crucial stimulus for recovering theological exegesis.

Karl Barth: Pioneer of Theological Criticism

In 1915 Karl Barth found himself pastoring a church upon graduation from university. Distressed by the lack of anything to preach from the liberal verities of his theology teachers, and dismayed that those teachers signed on to the German war effort, Barth began to rediscover the Bible. This resulted in the launch of his Romans commentary, famously labeled a “bombshell dropped on the playground of the theologians.” Barth continued to revise the work, which went through six editions; the second edition particularly, published in 1921, involved substantial reworking.

2. It is important to note the variety of meanings for the term “historical criticism”; the label does not denote a single approach. For an overview, see Richard E. Burnett, “Historical Criticism,” *DTIB* 290–93. Karl P. Donfried suggests that the general phenomenon discussed here should be called “‘historical biblical criticism,’ by which is meant the attempt to understand what the biblical author wished to convey to the audience for which he wrote” (“Alien Hermeneutics and the Misappropriation of Scripture,” in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 22).

Barth also drafted several versions of a preface for the original. There, as well as in letters to friends, he anticipated the reactions that his commentary would receive.

The Romans Commentary

Many have viewed Barth’s *Der Römerbrief* not as a commentary but rather as a virtuoso performance of theology or as a piece of spiritualized interpretation. Biblical scholars in particular have often felt that Paul’s letter is largely absent or at least distant from Barth’s vision, while historical critics have seen Barth’s exegesis as “pneumatic,” or spiritual (which, for them, is not a compliment). Yet, as John Webster insists, we must attend to Barth’s self-understanding, at least initially: he sought to write a *commentary*.³ In his original preface Barth wrote, “If we rightly understand ourselves, our problems are the problems of Paul,” and he spoke of being “bound to labour with Paul.” He also affirmed that “the historical-critical method of Biblical investigation has its rightful place,” although he acknowledged that “were I driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper, more important justification.”⁴ However, Barth felt that he did not have to choose.⁵

It is not as if Barth was unaware of modern developments in hermeneutics. As Richard Burnett shows, Hans-Georg Gadamer was not off the mark to call *Der Römerbrief* a “virtual hermeneutical manifesto,” and Barth did not fail to comment regarding the pioneering work of Friedrich Schleiermacher on hermeneutics.⁶

3. John Webster, “Karl Barth,” in *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 205–23.

4. “The Preface to the First Edition,” in Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 1.

5. Barth affirmed this in his preface; his retention of a place for historical criticism is emphasized in Bruce L. McCormack, “Historical-Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis of the New Testament,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 5 (Summer 1991): 211–25.

6. Webster rightly cautions us against appreciating Gadamer’s remark to the point of thinking that Barth’s work is about hermeneutics rather than being

Yet Barth emphasized exegesis, dealing with the actual content of the text, as having priority. Apparently, he held this principle generally for all texts, not just Scripture.⁷ According to Burnett, four basic commitments follow. First, Barth focused on the “subject matter” or “content” or “substance” of the text—and therefore, in this case, the being of the eternal God—as having hermeneutical control.⁸ Hence, second, he held that one must enter into or participate in its meaning.⁹ Some of this language might sound like Schleiermacher’s, but given its emphasis on a human subject feeling connected to the past, the starting point was theological rather than anthropological. For Barth, we do not read “religiously,” as a practice that is located in a pious feature of our generic humanity; instead, rather than conjuring up empathy for the author’s mind-set, we respond to divine gift. Third, then, one must read “with more attention and love” than do the modern scientists, the mere historical critics.¹⁰ And fourth, Barth insisted “upon a reading of the Bible that is more in accordance with ‘the meaning of the Bible itself.’”¹¹

What might this mean? Barth kept the Bible’s language and content together instead of using hermeneutics as a justification for moving behind the text or for translating its words into general, rational principles held to be true on other grounds. This is not to deny the importance of textual criticism in particular.¹² Still, historical criticism is not comprehensive of interpretation but rather is preparatory for it—it is servant, not master. The subject matter

a commentary about Romans. Nevertheless, Burnett’s analysis of the preface drafts shows that Barth was methodologically self-aware, even in his opposition to forms of “hermeneutics.” (It is also important to note that Schleiermacher contributed to hermeneutics not only a focus on anthropology but also appreciation of grammatical and other technical matters.)

7. Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 64.

8. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, chap. 3.

9. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, chap. 4.

10. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, chap. 5.

11. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, 221.

12. See, e.g., “The Preface to the Second Edition,” in Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 6–7.

must have freedom to speak. Therefore, refusing any two-stage views of past versus present, or of what the text “meant” versus what it “means”—for how could we recognize the difference from where we stand, if we are connected to the text at all?—Barth put a priority on paraphrase. What the text says must be restated in other words, which requires making use of concepts and issues contemporary to the interpreter. For Barth, the model exegete is Calvin, however different their work might appear to us. From Calvin we learn a type of criticism that takes the humanity of the biblical text seriously, while, or even for the sake of, keeping its subject matter primary.¹³

Barth as Motivation and Model

It is important to note that Romans was by no means Barth’s only biblical preoccupation. Not only are the volumes of his *Church Dogmatics* saturated with scriptural exegesis—studies of which continue and perhaps are increasing—but he also taught a number of courses on biblical texts: Ephesians, James, 1 Corinthians 15, 1 John, Philippians, Colossians, the Sermon on the Mount, John’s Gospel, 1 Peter (several of these more than once). In addition, he held a combined chair in dogmatics and New Testament exegesis for a time.¹⁴ The point of this list is to overwhelm: if one wants to follow Barth in pursuing theological exegesis, that will mean not a loose relationship to Scripture but rather an overwhelming amount of detailed study. Moreover, Barth did not eschew critical study in favor of “practical” or “pneumatic” exegesis; he saw himself as being more properly critical than the historical critics!¹⁵ In Bruce McCormack’s words, “Barth’s approach would have us raise serious questions about whether the scientific approach is truly ‘scientific’ and whether the practical

13. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, chap. 6.

14. Bruce L. McCormack, “The Significance of Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis of Philippians,” in Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. James W. Leitch, 40th anniversary ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002), v–vi.

15. “The critical historian needs to be more critical”; see “The Preface to the Second Edition,” in Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 7. This is one reason why many of the recent “postmodern” readings of Barth probably miss the mark.

can be truly ‘practical’ if it is not also ‘scientific’ in the sense he advocates.”¹⁶

This is not to say that Barth achieved perfection or that theological interpretation of Scripture today means simply following Barth’s path. The need for ongoing growth is suggested not only by his constant revisions but also by the differences between his Romans and Philippians commentaries. For example, Francis Watson finds in *Der Römerbrief* still “an apparent *disjunction* between what Paul said and what Paul says”—evidence of a critical breach between the past and the present that was largely abandoned by the time Barth treated Philippians.¹⁷ Barth is therefore neither the sole model nor a static exemplar, but he has provided contemporary inspiration for theological exegesis.

We may briefly trace several lines of Barthian influence. One strand of inspiration begins with the longtime Yale University Old Testament scholar Brevard Childs, who often manifests appreciation for Barth and Calvin. Childs’s “canonical” approach retains historical criticism while giving hermeneutical priority to the “final form” of the biblical text as we now have it. To trace the shaping of the canon is to engage the church already having done theological exegesis in the act of passing the texts on to us.¹⁸ A second strand of Barth’s influence also emerges from Yale, despite Childs’s relative lack of connection to it. When David Kelsey authored *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*,¹⁹ he profiled Barth’s theological focus on the biblical narratives’ depiction of God’s identity in Jesus Christ. Hans Frei, meanwhile, explored the hermeneutical loss of biblical narratives’ meaning due to modern obsessions with their “historical”

16. McCormack, “Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis of Philippians,” xxv.

17. Francis B. Watson, “Barth’s *Philippians* as Theological Exegesis,” in Barth, *Philippians*, xxix–xxx (italics in original).

18. We will study the work of Childs later, in chap. 4. For an overview, see Christopher Seitz, “Canonical Approach,” *DTIB* 100–102. For essays honoring Childs, see Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight, eds., *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

19. *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); reissued as *Proving Doctrine* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

truthfulness.²⁰ Appreciation for Calvin and Barth is evident not only in Frei but also in George Lindbeck, another Yale theologian whose methodological writings shaped a generation of thinkers often labeled "postliberal."²¹ Whether or not a "Yale School" exists, many mainline Protestants interested in theological exegesis display visible affinities with Barth's work.²² Third, while others in the movement accord more with Stanley Hauerwas than with the Yale School, focusing upon the virtues of the interpretative community, Hauerwas, whose PhD is from Yale, still manifests indebtedness to Barth as well.²³ Finally, Francis Watson's crucial contributions to theological hermeneutics, though eclectic and even iconoclastic, likewise demonstrate deep engagement with Barth and with these thinkers from Yale.²⁴

To summarize, then, in the words of Mary Kathleen Cunningham,

Barth's approach, in which theological commitments and exegetical insights are so tightly interwoven, leads to scriptural interpretation that is often counter-intuitive and departs from the standard

20. See especially *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

21. Most relevant here is George A. Lindbeck, "Postcritical Canonical Interpretation: Three Modes of Retrieval," in Seitz and Greene-McCreight, *Theological Exegesis*, 26–51.

22. See David Lauber, "Yale School," *DTIB* 859–61; also George Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 42–57.

23. See, e.g., Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation*, *Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), and his earlier book coauthored with L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). An example of Barth's influence on Hauerwas is the latter's *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001). Hauerwas's Barthian resistance to natural theology seems to fit well with his and others' confessional resistance to critical biblical scholarship.

24. See Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); *Text and Truth: Rethinking Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). For an emphasis on interpretative virtue that is critical of aspects of both Childs and Watson, see Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*.

practices of professional biblical scholars. While Barth's concerns at times intersect those of historical critics of the Bible, enabling him to make eclectic and unsystematic use of their insights, he frequently diverges from their methods and observations altogether because he is operating with a different set of rules and interests. Instead of committing him to the pursuit of extra-biblical sources and textual reconstruction as a means of interpreting biblical concepts, his hermeneutical principles tie him to the linguistic world of the Bible itself. Hence we find him treating texts in their final form, juxtaposing widely separated texts, and appealing to passages in close proximity to the text under consideration. In so doing, he claims to be reading Scripture as it is intended to be read, namely, as a unified witness to its true object, Jesus Christ.²⁵

For modern biblical criticism, historical distance between the text and the present is a problem, while critical distance between text and interpreter must be preserved in the name of objectivity. For those who would follow Barth, by contrast, true objectivity comes in God's gift of Christian freedom, which crosses Lessing's famous "ugly, wide ditch" of historical distance and enables the interpreter to enter lovingly into the text's subject matter. For still others, Barth provides inspiration for checking the dominance of historical criticism over the church, yet he and his followers are overly sanguine about the clarity of the Bible's subject matter. The Christian freedom to which Barth points is a gift from God *in and through the church*; many disagreements among advocates of theological interpretation of Scripture concern how this churchly reception of divine grace works.

"Between Faith and Criticism": Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics

While Barth was undergoing his break from liberalism, Anglo-American evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics worldwide found themselves in between flash points of a larger battle with

25. Mary Kathleen Cunningham, *What Is Theological Exegesis? Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Barth's Doctrine of Election* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 83.