Trinitarian Hermeneutics and the Unity of Scripture

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Debates over the unity of Scripture lie at the heart of the practice of Biblical Theology, for Biblical Theology in the classic sense concerns itself with reading the Christian Bible as *tota Scriptura*, that is, as a unified whole. Biblical Theology is therefore by definition a two-testament enterprise. Yet reading the Bible as a two-testament witness has been rendered problematic for a number of reasons. Chief among these reasons, at least from the standpoint of the present writer, is the modern church’s loss of contact with the theological and ontological underpinnings that form the ‘subterranean substructure’ unifying the two testaments. After a number of years of being involved in both preaching and teaching within the church, it has gradually dawned on me that our understanding of the unity of Scripture is primarily tied to two things. The first concerns our understanding of Scripture’s literal sense, for this more or less determines what we think it means to read the Bible *literally*, and the second concerns the theological commitments with which we approach Scripture, commitments which may or may not have a basis within Scripture itself. For reasons that will shortly become apparent, these commitments are often embodied in what we might call a ‘rule of faith’. This is simply one way of stating the fact that to read the Bible literally not only involves us in a particular understanding of its literal sense, but also invokes certain theological categories or ‘rules’ for reading it.

The scope of this essay precludes the possibility of engaging in a full-scale study of the way in which so-called ‘scientific’ approaches to exegesis have eroded the semantically rich and robust nature of Scripture’s literal sense, and in any case, I am persuaded that even those who have resisted this erosion grow nervous when they hear talk about using a ‘rule of faith’ to interpret Scripture. Ever since the days of early modernity, the desirability of gaining a theologically neutral access to Scripture’s literal sense has been applauded by those engaged in the enterprise known as ‘scientific exegesis’. While a certain skittishness and even outright

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1 See Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville, KY: WJK 2001) 13-15. Seitz locates the decline of this older understanding of Biblical Theology in the turn toward speech-act theory, the philosophy of language, and matters of general hermeneutical concern among contemporary evangelicals: “The turn toward hermeneutics as a general discipline...has not so much offered a resolution of older theological questions, historically considered, as it has changed the subject” (14).


3 Although many helpful studies are now available on this important issue, Brevard Childs’ 1977 essay is in my opinion still indispensable for gaining a basic understanding of the issues at stake. See Brevard Childs, “The *Sensus Literalis* of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem,” in *Beiträge zur altestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli Zum 70. Geburtstag* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977) 80-93.
opposition to theologically ‘ruled readings’ of Scripture is to be expected from tough-minded
historicists, allergic reactions to ruled readings also continue to find expression in the
hermeneutics of modern evangelicalism. In a recent book published by Zondervan on apostolic
hermeneutics, one looks in vain for a discussion of, let alone an engagement with, contemporary
discussions of the rule of faith and its relationship to apostolic readings of the Old Testament.4 If
one has a right to expect such discussions anywhere among evangelicals, surely it would be in
the context of hermeneutical debates over the legitimacy of apostolic practices for reading
Israel’s scriptures, for it is precisely there that the theological and hermeneutical inevitability of
invoking a trinitarian rule of faith for reading Scripture emerges in the early apostolic church.5
Yet serious discussion of this issue in recent evangelical treatments of apostolic hermeneutics is,

How did matters come to this? Is the continuing presence of this allergy in evangelical
circles to be attributed to the fact, as one recent writer has suggested, that evangelical heirs of the
Reformation have been “slow to avail themselves of the rich pre-Enlightenment theological
heritage to critique modernity and have instead vilified postmodern thought in a continuous
attempt to defend a modernist version of Christianity”?6 That such is the case, at least with
regard to evangelical approaches to Scripture’s literal sense, appears to be true, thus verifying the
truth of Karl Barth’s perceptive observation that “Liberal Modernists and conservative
Evangelicals are both children of the same Enlightenment Father.”7 In order to help readers come
to terms with the historical roots of this problem and especially its implications for approaching
Scripture’s literal sense in terms of a rule of faith, it is necessary first of all to engage in a bit of
historical reconnaissance for the sake of clarifying the impact of scientific exegesis upon modern
evangelical reading strategies for exegeting Scripture, especially its implications for the erosion
of theologically ruled readings of Scripture in the modern church. I will then turn to a discussion

Zondervan, 2008). The concept of ‘the analogy of faith’ is briefly discussed on pages 53-54, but the concept is
basically interpreted in terms of the Reformation principle that ‘Scripture interprets Scripture’. While the present
writer agrees with this hermeneutical principle, it does not address the precise point under dispute in the early
apostolic church’s use of a christological and proto-trinitarian rule of faith for reading Israel’s scriptures.

5 By way of contrast, compare the sharp distinction at work between theological accounts of apostolic reading
practices and hermeneutical accounts of the same in a recent essay by Peter Enns, “Fuller Meaning, Single Goal: A
Christotelic Approach to the New Testament Use of the Old in Its First-Century Interpretive Environment,” in Three
2008) 167-217, esp. 206-209. On the implications of Enns’ argument for reading Israel’s scriptures according to a
trinitarian rule of faith, see further the discussion below.

6 Jens Zimmermann, Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation
(Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) 17, emphasis mine.

7 Cited in Brevard Childs, The Church’s Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 126.
of the Old Testament’s role in sanctioning the trinitarian rule of faith at work in early apostolic hermeneutics. In brief, my argument will be that the issue of the Bible’s unity ultimately turns on the legitimacy of its relationship to the trinitarian rule of faith underlying that unity, and that the sanctioning authority for this rule ultimately finds its ground in the theological and ontological claims of Israel’s scriptures, that is, in what in time would come to be called the Old Testament.

‘Scientific exegesis’ as a catholic and objective science

In this essay the phrase ‘scientific exegesis’ functions as a convenient shorthand for an approach to biblical exegesis that began to gain ascendancy in the church during the Enlightenment period. As such, its birth in the life of the church more or less coincides with the dual advent of modern scientific method and the rise of historical consciousness in early modernity. It also contrasts with a rival approach to biblical exegesis styled ‘theological exegesis’ by late modern exegetes, most notably Karl Barth, who were attempting to break free of the long shadow that scientific exegesis was casting over the reading practices of the modern church. Because this term is obviously also one of more recent vintage, and may therefore carry certain liabilities of its own, some may object to its usage. Be that as it may, the term embodies an anti-modernist refusal to allow the theological and historical aspects of biblical exegesis to be pulled apart in the name of ‘objectivity’. In this respect the practice of theological exegesis maintains a meaningful point of contact with the exegetical practices at work in premodernity and the early church in particular. Its usage will therefore will be retained here.

This does not mean, of course, that theological exegesis should be understood as a fundamentally ahistorical approach to exegesis that merely falls into the opposite error inherent in scientific exegesis. Taking the Bible’s literal sense seriously, as well as the redemptive acts it bears witness to, necessarily involves us in historical questions. Any attempt, therefore, to invoke theological exegesis in the name of escaping difficult historical issues is to misuse and misunderstand the term. To be sure, the reading of Scripture’s historical sense in theological exegesis inevitably diverges from readings of historical sense at work in scientific exegesis. However this is not because theological exegetes are disinterested in Scripture’s historical sense, but because they understand historical sense in a fundamentally different way than their ‘scientific’ counterparts. It is this distinction, rather than the tired contrast between the historical

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8 As perceptive readers of this essay will soon discern, my arguments at this juncture have been decisively influenced by the work and writing of Christopher Seitz on this matter. The indispensable role of the Old Testament in shaping the early apostolic church’s rule of faith has been a recurring theme in Seitz’s writings for many years. See for example his introductory comments in Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 6. More recently, see the review essay “Canon, Narrative, and the Old Testament’s Literal Sense: A Response to John Goldingay’s ‘Canon and Old Testament Theology’”, Tyndale Bulletin 59:1 (2008) 27-34, esp. 30-32, and his forthcoming book The Character of Christian Scripture (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic).

interest of modern exegesis, on the one hand, and the theological or even spiritualizing interests of premodern exegesis on the other, that marks the key difference between the two approaches to exegesis being contrasted here. In the practice of theological exegesis, theology and history belong together as constitutive elements in the providential economy by which God produced Scripture, a fact which unites its approach to exegesis with premodern reading strategies for interpreting Scripture. Again, at issue is not a simple dichotomy between theological and historical readings of Scripture, but a different understanding of ‘history’ and ‘historical sense’. \(^{10}\) The hallmark of theological exegesis, therefore, is not that it does not concern itself with historical questions. Rather, that which distinguishes it most clearly from its troublesome, scientific stepchild is that it does not allow historical questions to function independently of the church’s theological reflection on Scripture.

In contrast to the practice of theological exegesis, advocates of scientific exegesis usually proceed upon the assumption that the church’s dogmatic traditions obscure rather than clarify the historical dimension inherent in Scripture’s literal sense. In many ways J. P. Gabler’s 1787 Altdorf address establishes both the historical agenda and anti-dogmatic tone for modern understandings of what it means to practice scientific exegesis. \(^{11}\) To be sure, one should keep in mind that Gabler’s project was motivated by ecumenical intentions. Many ‘scientific’ projects of this sort were up and running in the late 18th century in other disciplines as well, for instance, the discipline of philosophy. Just as Immanuel Kant hoped to develop a method in philosophy which would place philosophy ‘on the sure path of a science’, thus putting an end to philosophical speculation impeding the progress of philosophy, so also Gabler hoped to develop a method for biblical exegesis that would put an end to the ‘speculative exegesis’ inherent in the church’s dogmatic traditions and creeds. In this way he hoped to bring about more unity in the church by finding a method that would place a critical or objective control upon the speculative excesses of traditional biblical interpretation, thereby overcoming the ‘fatal discords’ and ‘sects’ it had fostered in the life of the church. It is crucial to recognize, however, that Gabler’s proposal for achieving this catholic goal involved reconfiguring the boundaries of Biblical Theology’s subject matter in a more restrictive sense so as to exclude the church’s dogmatic reflection on Scripture (dogmatic theology) from the enterprise of Biblical Theology proper. \(^{12}\)

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\(^{10}\) Writing in a similar vein with reference to modern caricatures of the early church’s reading practices, Christopher Seitz observes: “Certain forms of allegorical reading, it has been claimed, are ahistorical and must be cast out of the church’s academic (or ecclesial) reading of the Bible...one might well question whether spiritual reading was as temporally disinterested as modern historically minded folk have thought. At issue is likely a different order of temporality, not a spiritual-versus-historical frame of reference.” C. Seitz, Figured Out, viii.


\(^{12}\) Though Gabler and Kant were obviously working in different disciplines, the parallels between their projects are
modern practitioners of scientific exegesis he inspired, Biblical Theology proper no longer involved theological reflection on Scripture, at least not in any fundamental sense, but was now to be understood as a primarily historical enterprise. According to Gabler, Biblical Theology’s true pedigree is historical, that is, of historical origin (e genere historico). The effect of this move upon the dogmatic traditions of the church was to relegate them to a new location twice removed from Scripture. The discipline known as Biblical Theology now stands (in gatekeeper fashion) between Scripture and the church’s dogmatic traditions, thus relegateing those traditions to a tertiary status in the life of the church. Whereas in the period preceding Gabler, the church’s dogmatic tradition established its objectives and received its marching orders by immediate recourse to Scripture, these objectives now depend upon the more foundational role provided by Gabler’s version of Biblical Theology. The discipline of Biblical Theology now intervenes between Scripture and the church’s dogmatic traditions to police the ‘speculative exegesis’ that has hitherto been running rampant and unchecked in the church’s dogmatic traditions. As a result of this new mediatory role, biblical theologians now function as foundationalist truth tellers who bear the judicial burden of judging the fit between Scripture and the speculative exegesis inherent in the church’s dogmatic traditions. Thus while Gabler retains a place for the church’s dogmatic tradition in his project, its subject matter is not only circumscribed and redefined by his recalibration of the discipline of Biblical Theology, but its location is now twice removed from Scripture’s literal sense.

At this juncture at least three things may be said about Gabler’s approach by way of critical evaluation. First, instead of offering an approach to Scripture that was theologically disinterested, it actually exploited ‘history’ for the purpose of imposing a rival theological rule of

striking. In the interests of promoting progress in the discipline of philosophy, Kant effectively redrew the boundaries of the metaphysical map he inherited from his predecessors and thus redefined metaphysics’ proper subject matter. In like fashion, in the interests of progressing beyond the ‘fatal discords’ fostered by the church’s dogmatic traditions, Gabler reconfigured the map known as Biblical Theology, a quasi-canonical act which both restricted and redefined its subject matter.

13 J. Sandys-Wunsch, and L. Eldredge, “J. P. Gabler and the distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality,” SJT 33:2 (1980) 137: “There is a truly biblical theology, of historical origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matters; on the other hand there is a dogmatic theology of didactic origin, teaching what each theologian philosophises rationally about divine things, according to the measure of his ability or of the times, age, place, sect, school, and other similar factors.”

14 As others have pointed out, the approach to biblical interpretation promoted by the famous nineteenth-century English classical scholar Benjamin Jowett fully shares in these assumptions. Cf. for example the editorial remarks of Rusty Reno in a recently launched theological commentary series: “If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding...The disciplines of close philological analysis ‘would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of Scripture is encumbered in our own day.’ The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.” See Reno’s editorial introduction to Peter J. Leithart, 1 & 2 Kings (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) 8.
faith, one which rested upon the confession that Scripture’s literal sense can be accessed apart from the church’s theological reflection and the trinitarian rule of faith it fostered. Thus instead of offering a more neutral and objective approach to the Bible, what Gabler in effect achieved was the substitution of a particular version of historical method for the church’s theologically ‘ruled reading’ of Scripture, a method that now ‘gives the rule’ for the right interpretation of Scripture. \(^{15}\) In other words, Gabler himself does not succeed in freeing biblical exegesis from the influence of a dogmatically driven rule of faith, for an allegedly non-theological medium known as ‘history’ now functions as a regula fidei for biblical exegesis. In keeping with its rule-like character, it now delimits and defines both the range and the scope of that which counts as acceptable exegesis and that which does not.\(^{16}\) His approach is therefore neither neutral nor theologically disinterested, for to adopt it one must have already concluded that the church’s theological reflection essentially tells us nothing about the meaning of Scripture and this is an explicitly theological judgment, albeit negative.

Second, at issue in Gabler’s approach to biblical theology is not merely a different understanding of the role occupied by history in biblical exegesis, but also a different understanding of history per se. Let us be clear at this point. ‘Original historical context’ in Gabler’s project is not a theologically conditioned category, capable of being subsumed under a dogmatic category called ‘providence.’ Indeed, for Gabler, dogmatic tradition and its attendant concepts were precisely the problem with biblical exegesis. Dogma obscures rather than clarifies because it lacks a clear methodological basis by which to guarantee its objectivity. It is therefore the task of Biblical Theology to generate these objective controls for the enterprise of exegesis. If one then asks where these controls are to be found, Gabler’s answer (in essence) is that they are to be derived from the (presumably) non-theologically conditioned medium known as original historical context. On this approach to exegesis, historical context no longer finds its location in the larger providential economy that produced Scripture, but now functions as a critical control upon its meaning. By means of the privileged access biblical scholars have to this realm, they are specially empowered to place exegesis on the sure path of an objective science, thereby

\(^{15}\) As Bruce Marshall points out in another context, this move is distinctly Kantian: “the independently described subject matter ‘gives the rule’ for the right interpretation of the narratives themselves (to put the point in Kantian terms).” See now Bruce D. Marshall, “Meaning and Truth in Narrative Interpretation: A Reply to George Schner,” in Modern Theology 8:2 (1992) 173-179, quote from 175.

\(^{16}\) Cf. Seitz, “History, Figural History, and Providence in the Dual Witness of Prophet and Apostle”, in Go Figure! Figuration in Biblical Interpretation (ed. Stanley D. Walters; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2008) 1-6, esp. 3: “If readers are imposing meaning through this historical evaluation, choosing one outcome or one phase of development over another, why not set readers free to be the arbiters of meaning as such, and cut loose the so called ‘historical intentions’ said to be there for our discovery in the first place?” Seitz’s remarks not only reveal the Kantian hermeneutic of imposition underlying Gabler’s agenda, but also demonstrate the subjective excesses that inevitably follow in the wake of the discovery that ‘scientific exegesis’ is closely akin to what Foucault has styled ‘a mode of empowerment’. It would appear that the distance separating modernity’s exegetical pretensions from postmodernity’s reader-response approach to meaning is not as great as some might think. Indeed, the transition may be seamless.
overcoming, or at least minimizing, the deleterious effects of the church’s speculative dogmatic
traditions, as well as the ‘fatal discords’ and ‘sects’ these traditions inevitably produce. This is
heady stuff, to say the least, and no doubt accounts for scientific exegesis’s social character as ‘a
mode of empowerment’ (Foucault) whereby biblical scholars effectively occupy the role of an
ecclesial *magisterium* through which the mysteries of Scripture are indispensably made known to
the laity.

Finally, Gabler’s program operated on the basis of the assumption that one could gain an
independent, non-theological access to the Bible’s subject matter, better known in retrospect as
the ‘modern myth of independent access’.17 Because his attempt to restore catholic unity in the
church was fully in keeping with modern sensibilities and priorities, Gabler overlooked the fact
that the Bible’s subject matter determines the mode of its investigation.18 In other words, because
subject matter determines method rather than vice versa, exegetical method must be congruent
with the theological character of Scripture’s subject matter. From this it follows that historical
categories cannot be used to fully illumine phenomena that, while rooted in history, are
ultimately theological in nature. Thus a non-theological approach to interpreting Scripture in
which the practice of exegesis is sharply distinguished from the practice of doing theology
necessarily fosters a hermeneutic of imposition. Instead of enabling exegetes to gain a critical or
objective perspective on Scripture’s subject matter, Gabler’s project actually imposes a ‘rule’ of
interpretation upon it that is ultimately at odds with the theological character of its subject
matter. Herein lies the irony involved in the enterprise known as scientific exegesis Gabler
helped to inaugurate, if not as father, then at least as midwife.

*Biblical Theology, the rule of faith, and Israel’s scriptures*

In the wake of Gabler’s attempt to sharply distinguish the discipline of biblical theology
from dogmatics, the canonical glue holding together Scripture’s historical context and its
theological dimension began to come apart. The catholic intentions of Gabler notwithstanding,
what it once meant to read the Bible literally now came to mean *something other than* reading it
according to its theological sense, the effect of which was to drive a wedge between Scripture’s
literal sense and the church’s theological reflection. The ultimate significance of this misguided
quest for ‘a Bible without dogma’ is clear: because exegeting the phenomena known as Scripture
is no longer integrally bound up with theological reflection *from the outset*, the twin ecclesial
practices of exegeting Scripture and doing theology no longer share a hermeneutically significant
link with one another. Rather, the practice of doing theology is now something epiphenomenal
and secondary to the act of exegeting Scripture, something that enters into biblical interpretation

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17 On this and other exegetical myths at work in modernity, see Rusty Reno, “Biblical Theology and Theological
Exegesis,” in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Scripture and Hermeneutics Series vol. 5;

18 See now the discussion by John Webster in *Theology After Liberalism: A Reader* (ed. John Webster & George P.
only after the ‘historical heavy lifting’ involved in biblical exegesis proper has been completed.\textsuperscript{19}

One could argue against modernist disjuncts between exegesis and theological reflection on sociological grounds. As others have pointed out, both anthropological and sociological studies have confirmed the claim that our interpretive practices do not take place in a vacuum, as though human beings were Cartesian egos pursuing the practice of interpretation in objective isolation from their social location within a given community.\textsuperscript{20} It follows from this that the reading and interpretation of any text is always a ruled reading, that is to say, a reading governed by the interpretive paradigms or rules a given interpreter’s community accepts as authoritative. As Thomas Kuhn famously argued, a study of the history of science demonstrates that this sociological truth is no less true for scientific communities than it is for religious ones,\textsuperscript{21} contra the modernist myth of independent access and the quest for objective purity at work in the scientific exegesis fostered by Gabler’s recalibration of the discipline of Biblical Theology.

While obviously true on a sociological level, such an observation ultimately remains on a descriptive level and therefore does not penetrate to the heart of the issue as far as the early apostolic church is concerned. In order to grasp why this is so, we must remember that the early church’s practice of doing theology did not originate in the period following the emergence of its two-testament canon, but ultimately traces its lineage back through the post-apostolic creeds to the scriptures of Israel, the latter of which authorized the church’s earliest theological reflection on Jesus’ earthly ministry and teachings. Thus modernity’s opposition to the role of theological reflection in the church’s exegetical practice does not terminate at a point in time subsequent to the apostolic period and the completion of the New Testament canon, for the apostolic period itself involves theological reflection upon Jesus’ teaching in light of Israel’s scriptures. Modernity’s hostility to theologically ruled readings of Scripture therefore reaches back into the earliest phases of the church’s theological reflection, to a period prior to the emergence of the New Testament canon. Stated more robustly, modernity’s quest for a theologically neutral, non-rulled reading of Scripture ultimately strikes at the christological confession fostered in the apostolic church by the authority of Israel’s scriptures, a confession that ultimately lies at the heart of the unity of the Christian Bible.

Herein lies the ultimate reason why modern attempts to separate exegesis from theological reflection are not only futile from a sociological standpoint, but also impossible. The theological reflection on Israel’s scriptures reflected in the apostolic church’s earliest christological confession is not merely the result of sociological pressures, but ultimately traces

\textsuperscript{19} I owe this delightful image to Christopher Seitz. See Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture, viii.


back to the antecedent authority of Israel’s scriptures, that is, to what in time would come to be called the Old Testament. As Hans von Campenhausen rightly noted in his study of the formation of the Christian Bible:

It is quite wrong to say that the Old Testament had no authority in its own right for the first Christians, and that it was taken over purely because people saw that it ‘treated of Christ’ or pointed toward him... The situation was in fact quite the reverse. Christ is certainly vindicated to unbelievers out of the Scripture; but the converse necessity, to justify the Scriptures on the authority of Christ, is as yet nowhere even envisaged.22

Thus to approach the hermeneutical logic underlying this christological confession on either a sociological or historical level without also taking into account the prior authority of Israel’s scriptures is to remain on a purely descriptive level, thereby failing to reckon with the authoritative textual norm that authorized it.23 Taking this norm seriously requires us to recognize that the apostolic confession that Jesus is one with the God of Israel who sent him was not the product of sociological pressures upon apostolic hermeneutics, but a theological judgment made necessary by claims about the oneness of God’s being inherent in Israel’s scriptures.24 The conjunction of Jesus’ own self-witness and teaching with the authority of these scriptures necessarily fostered a theological judgment on the part of the apostles, namely, that the Incarnation discloses the ontological dimension of Christ’s sonship. The authoritative basis for this christological rule of faith, as well as the theological and ontological truths which authorize it, not only drive us back to Israel’s scriptures, but also lie at the very heart of the Bible’s unity. What this rule discloses is a fundamentally theological truth about that unity, namely, that the unity of the Bible’s two-testament witness rests upon the ontological claim that Jesus is one in being with the God of Israel who sent him.

What is meant when we speak of the ontological claims made in Israel’s scriptures? An ontological claim is a claim about the nature of God’s being. Israel’s scriptures teach both that God is one (Deut. 6:4), and that he is everlasting and eternal (Is. 40:28). These are ontological claims because they involve claims about who God is in himself, apart from his ‘ad extra’ relations to his creation. As such, these texts are not merely claims about ‘who God is’ in history, but ultimately claims about ‘who God is’ in his being. Both Judaism and Christianity have

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always understood these texts in this way, though of course there have been dissenters. The reason these dissenters have never succeeded in effectively undermining this understanding, however, is precisely because the larger sense and coherence of Israel’s scriptures will not allow it. What conclusions follow from this in light of the Incarnation, God’s supreme act of revelation in history? The conclusion the apostles were driven to by the ontological logic of Israel’s scriptures is that what the Incarnation reveals about the relation of God the Father and Jesus the Son did not begin to be true at the Incarnation. Rather, the Incarnation discloses a relationship between Father and Son that has always been true from eternity, namely, that the Father and the Son are one in their being (homoousios). From this ontological confession it also follows that if the Son’s claim to be the revealer of the Father is true (Mt. 11:27), then the Son has always been the revealer of the Father from eternity. Because this ontological reality about the incarnate Jesus holds true for both testaments, it ultimately establishes the ontological preconditions for the christological witness inherent in Israel’s scriptures.

It is crucial to realize that this christological confession and ‘dogmatic’ line of thought is ultimately authorized by the scriptures of Israel themselves. In other words, it is not merely the later dogmatic traditions of the church that will not allow moderns to escape to these conclusions. Rather, it is ultimately the authority of Israel’s scriptures that will not allow us to understand Jesus’ incarnation in some non-ontological sense, as though his claim to be one with the Father (John 10:30) were nothing more than a historical claim that fails to rise to an ontological level. The only way the apostles could have affirmed this conclusion would have been to reject (in Marcionite fashion) the authority of Israel’s scriptures and attempt to understand Jesus’ self-witness on some other basis. The authority of Israel’s scriptures, however, was neither arbitrary nor dispensable for the apostles, nor did Jesus regard their prior authority as something to be ‘subsumed’ under a more ultimate authority. Jesus’ deference to the antecedent

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25 I am well aware of the fact that exegetes working within the tradition of scientific exegesis often attempt to introduce a red herring into the discussion at this point by arguing that talk of ‘ontological’ categories represents an intrusion of ‘philosophical categories’ into exegesis. At this juncture I can do no better than refer my readers to the apropos comments of C. Kavin Rowe (originally directed at Claus Westermann): “Such questions of ‘being,’ it is presumed, lie at the heart of Greek philosophical thinking, and the attempt to relate them to the Bible is misleading and distorting...That the Bible is not as explicitly concerned with questions of ontology as is Greek philosophy can be readily observed. It does not necessarily follow, though, that the ontological questions of the relation of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit to each other or the divinity and humanity of the person of Christ leave the Bible, especially the Old Testament, behind. In fact, the exact opposite is the case: the continuing authority and use of the Old Testament forced such questions to be addressed.” C. Kavin Rowe, “Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics,” 306-07, emphasis original. For a helpful discussion of the place of ontology in early Patristic exegesis, see Gerald Bray, “The Church Fathers and Biblical Theology,” in Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation, 33-38.

26 Contra Peter Enns, “Fuller Meaning, Single Goal: A Christotelic Approach to the New Testament Use of the Old in Its First-Century Interpretive Environment,” in Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (ed. Stanley N. Gundry et al.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 208: “Rather, it seems to me that the NT authors are subsuming the OT under the authority of the crucified and risen Christ, the one in whom God’s people, and therefore the Scripture that tells their story, now find their coherence” (emphasis original).
authority of Israel’s scriptures is clearly stated in terms of the language of fulfillment in Matthew’s apostolic witness: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Mt. 5:17, ESV).27

The apostolic witness of the New Testament fully shares in this deferential stance toward the authority of Israel’s scriptures. It does not find its ground in ‘the hermeneutical climate’ in which the apostles were preaching and writing, as though it were ultimately fostered by interpreting Jesus’ incarnation in light of the hermeneutical methods and traditions of late Second Temple Judaism. When it comes to early apostolic task of coming to terms with Jesus’ identity, there simply are not a set of ‘hermeneutical givens’ to be had independently of Israel’s scriptures.28 Indeed, as Christopher Seitz has pointed out, that which establishes the distinctly Christian character of Paul’s christological confession in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 is precisely the fact that his confession is fully ‘in accordance with’ Israel’s scriptures.29 Therefore it is simply mistaken to suggest, whether directly or by implication, that early apostolic christology is the product of the conjunction of Jesus’ incarnation and the hermeneutical climate in which the apostles wrote.30 The christological confession and rule of faith at work in the practice of apostolic hermeneutics is not fostered, in the first instance, by starting with the Incarnation and then factoring in the influence of the hermeneutical methods and traditions of late Second Temple Judaism. Rather, it is a product of reading Jesus’ incarnation in light of the ontological claims of Israel’s scriptures, especially the Shema (Deut. 6:4). In sum, the basis for this early apostolic rule of faith and that which it discloses about Jesus’ ontological sonship does not arise in spite of Israel’s scriptures, but is in fact authorized by them.

Moreover, inasmuch as early apostolic reflection on Israel’s scriptures also necessitated theological reflection on the relationship between Israel’s prior testimony to God’s Spirit and Jesus’ sending of the Spirit at Pentecost, one may also say—indeed must say—that Israel’s scriptures played an indispensable role in fostering the trinitarian rule of faith that ultimately undergirds the possibility of reading them as a unified witness to the one God in his triune identity as Father, Son, and Spirit.31 Thus by disclosing the ontological dimension of Christ’s

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27 Cf. the helpful discussion of “Jesus’ Attitude Toward his Bible” in Appendix I of E. Earle Ellis, The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in the Light of Modern Research (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992) 126-130.

28 On the extended case for this claim, see the forthcoming study by Christopher R. Seitz, The Character of Christian Scripture (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic).

29 Chris Seitz, “Creed, Scripture, and ‘Historical Jesus’: ‘in accordance with the Scriptures,’” in The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon, and Creed in a Critical Age, 126-35.


31 For a concise summary of the exegetical arguments supporting this claim, consult C. Kavin Rowe, “Biblical
sonship, the apostolic rule of faith not only gives theological expression to the ontological preconditions unifying the two testaments, but also necessitates a trinitarian reading of Israel’s scriptures. Because Israel’s God is one from eternity, whatever he reveals of himself in history cannot be at odds with who he is in himself, for his revelatory acts are revelatory of his identity. Thus when the Incarnation and Pentecost are read in light of Israel’s scriptures, it follows that what they reveal about the relations between Father, Son, and Spirit also did not begin to be true at a particular point in history. Rather, these historical events disclose a relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit that has always been true from eternity, namely, that Father, Son, and Spirit are at once three in person and one in being.

An evangelical counterproposal?

As noted at the outset of this essay, a recently published book showcasing three major evangelical views on apostolic hermeneutics is strangely silent with respect to the place of theologically ruled readings in apostolic exegesis. Perhaps the silence is not so strange given the shadow modernity casts over a number of assumptions at work in the book. One of the more notable examples of this occurs in Peter Enns’ essay titled “Fuller Meaning, Single Goal: A Christotelic Approach to the New Testament Use of the Old in Its First-Century Interpretive Environment.” Commenting on Paul’s reading of the Old Testament in Galatians 3:15-29, Enns writes: “This phenomenon can rightly be explained in part by means of the theological categories of sensus plenior and typology...But one must recognize that this theological explanation does not address the hermeneutical issues involved.” As the preceding quote makes clear, Enns is willing to grant that theological categories offer at least partial explanations of Scriptural phenomena. However he is also keen to point out that such an explanation of apostolic hermeneutics “does not address the hermeneutical issues involved.” As one reads on in Enns’ essay, it becomes clear that in order to explain the hermeneutical issues involved in the unity of the two testaments, one must ultimately turn, not to the theological and ontological claims inherent in Israel’s scriptures, but to the hermeneutical “methods and traditions of first-century Palestine.”


At issue is not whether these ‘methods and traditions’ shed some light on what Enns elsewhere refers to as ‘the mechanics’ at work in the apostolic readings of Old Testament texts, though one may still question whether his focus upon these methods and traditions has effectively reoriented the center of gravity in apostolic hermeneutics from Israel’s scriptures to their Second Temple environment. Rather, at issue is the question why Enns apparently takes it as a given that one can sharply distinguish theological explanations from hermeneutical ones. The Gablerian pedigree inherent in this approach to apostolic hermeneutics is manifest in the fact that the historical context (or ‘hermeneutical climate’) in which Paul is reading the Old Testament turns out to be more decisive for Paul’s hermeneutics than the Old Testament’s own theological and ontological claims. Indeed, it is precisely because the Old Testament itself plays no significant role in authorizing the theological and ontological claims inherent in apostolic hermeneutics that it becomes necessary to derive as much firepower as possible from the hermeneutical climate in which the apostles were working. One is not surprised, therefore, when he later sums up his understanding of the problem of Scripture’s unity as follows: “The problem before us, put yet another way, is that the ultimate (trans-exegetical) theological coherence between the Testaments, embodied in the person and work of Christ, is expressed hermeneutically by methods and traditions of first-century Palestine.” Enns’ marginalization of the Old Testament’s theological and ontological claims upon apostolic hermeneutics also sheds light upon his (quasi-Marcionite) judgment that the “the NT authors are subsuming the OT under the authority of the crucified and risen Christ, the one in whom God’s people, and therefore the Scripture that tells their story, now find their coherence.” At the end of the day, it is ultimately this subordinationist understanding of the Old Testament that not only reveals the modernist pedigree underlying Enns’ understanding of apostolic hermeneutics, but also underwrites his attempt to make the hermeneutical climate of the apostles do more work than it can in accounting for apostolic reading practices. Given the arguments made in this essay, an alternative to what Enns is proposing might be expressed as follows: The solution before us, put yet another way, is that the theological coherence between the Testaments, embodied in the person and work of Christ, is expressed hermeneutically in a trinitarian rule of faith authorized by the continuing authority of Israel’s scriptures for the early apostolic church.

Concluding reflections

The early church’s trinitarian rule of faith emerges at a very early point in the apostolic period not in spite of, but because of the continuing authority of Israel’s scriptures for apostolic reflection on Jesus’ identity. It is precisely because the apostolic church took the prior authority

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39 This judgment coheres with the Karl Barth’s famous observation that the doctrine of the Trinity which proceeded
of Israel’s scriptures seriously that they could not escape dealing with its ontological claims about God when they formed both their christology and pneumatology. Indeed, the state of affairs in the apostolic church could not have been otherwise, given their deferential stance toward Israel’s scriptures. What this means for the actual practice of apostolic hermeneutics is that the question ‘who Jesus is’ necessarily involves us in the ontological and theological claims of Israel’s scriptures from the outset. Unfortunately this is bad news for modern exegetes, since this means (contra the misplaced aspirations of Gabler and modernity) that there is no mode of access to Scripture that can ultimately escape dealing with the church’s earliest theological reflection on Scripture, because the Old Testament’s continuing authority will not allow it. In exegetical practice this means that doing exegesis is always a mode of doing theology, because the Bible is a theologically loaded book that makes ontological and theological claims about God from start to finish. Gablerian attempts to sharply distinguish the church’s practice of theological reflection from both exegesis and hermeneutics are therefore doomed from the outset.

In light of the preceding arguments, two related issues remain to be briefly clarified in closing. As we have seen, because Scripture’s subject matter is theological, exegeting Scripture necessarily involves us in the practice of theological reflection from the outset. In light of this inescapable reality, it is perhaps better (as others have suggested) to speak of Scripture’s plain sense rather than its literal sense. To speak of Scripture’s ‘plain sense’ is to speak of its literal sense in light of a rule of faith, a practice which Childs, Greene-McCreight, Seitz, and a number of others working in biblical studies have now adopted.40 In contrast to the ‘myth of independent access’ at work in modern exegetical practices, talk about Scripture’s plain sense allows us to recognize that we as readers of Scripture necessarily engage in a theologically ruled reading of Scripture,41 that is, a reading fully grounded in theological judgments made necessary by reading Israel’s scriptures in light of Jesus’ earthly ministry and teachings.

Finally, it should be also noted that the trinitarian rule of faith which emerges from this reading is not grounded in an appeal to the authority of the church, but in an appeal to the continuing authority of the Old Testament for the church, for the rule of faith has no independent integrity from Scripture, but necessarily derives from the need to do justice to the ontological and theological claims of Israel’s scriptures in light of Christ. Thus to reject a trinitarian rule of faith

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from the reality of God in Jesus Christ and the implications thereof was “not a battle against the Old Testament, but...was a battle for the Old Testament.” Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics 1/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936) 319, cited in C. Kavin Rowe, “Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics,” 299.

40 See the entry by Kathryn Greene-McCreight on literal sense in The Dictionary of Theological Interpretation (ed. K. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 455-56.

41 Childs’ notes that Ralph Loewe’s study of Jewish approaches to the literal sense of Israel’s scriptures (peshat) demonstrates that Jewish readings of the Hebrew Bible were shaped by traditional teachings taken as authoritative within a given community. Jewish exegesis may therefore also be said to constitute an instance of ‘ruled reading’: “the peshat is that familiar and traditional teaching of Scripture which was recognized by the community as authoritative.” See Childs, “The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem,” 81.
for reading Scripture is not merely to reject the dogmatic traditions of the church, but to reject both the continuing authority of the Old Testament for the church and the trinitarian rule of faith it authorizes, thereby *radically* undermining the theological and ontological logic uniting the two testaments. Apart from the theological and ontological underpinning expressed in this rule, all arguments about the unity of Scripture are ultimately rendered moot. This should not be bad news for modern folk, but good news—the good news of the gospel made manifest by the triune God of Scripture. *Amen.*