

PRACTICING THE GOSPEL IN A POST-CRITICAL WORLD: THE PROMISE OF THEOLOGICAL EXEGESIS

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The argument I want to put forward is a straightforward one. I want to insist that, if we are to engage in a genuinely theological exegesis of Christian Scripture, then both disciplines, biblical studies and systematic theology, must change.

In making such a claim, I grant that, when I describe “biblical studies” and “systematic theology,” I am referring to two aggregates of interests and practices that resist narrow definition. I further grant that those who practice biblical studies and those who practice systematic theology may find in my presentation that their work has been, at least to some degree, caricatured. By way of response, I offer two reflections.

First, I recognize that aggregates are masses held together by *something*, by some adhesive agent that invites examination. Within theological schools, although the departments of biblical studies and theological studies may share a relationship of mutual respect and even support one another as representatives of what are often known as “the classical disciplines,” the assumptions and practices they represent are constitutive of two different, stable, epistemic communities, each regulated by standards of excellence and aims that are generally mutually exclusive. Only rarely does one find mutual respect giving way to the sort of integrative work or interdisciplinarity where fresh epistemic trails are blazed, where the concerns of, say, systematic theology actually shape the ways in which biblical studies is conducted. More pervasive has been the suggestion that it is the task of the student to search for paths of integration among the thickets of a curricula whose presuppositions mask, perhaps even hinder, integration. More pervasive are those scholars who are trained according to accredited standards that guard the one discipline from what are typically regarded as the naïve or colonizing efforts of the other. From the side of biblical studies, the consequence of such developments is the ghettoizing of biblical studies and an identity crisis for practitioners of this discipline. As Werner G. Jeanrond remarked already a decade ago, “What can the study of the Bible offer to the diverse interests of students late in the twentieth century? What is the contribution of biblical studies to the academy, to society at large and to the

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different Jewish and Christian communities? In other words, what is the discipline of biblical studies good for these days?"¹

My second response is that my purported caricature of systematic theology is perhaps less inculpatory than common perceptions of systematic theology among biblical scholars, and the same may be said of my alleged caricature of biblical studies when compared to common perceptions of biblical studies among systematicians. Biblical scholars often look disapprovingly at systematic theology as an exercise in philosophical abstractions, endlessly organizing one aspect of the Christian belief system in relation to another. John Goldingay, for example, thinks of systematic theology as a discipline that emerged in a Greek context with the task of working out the gospel's significance in the framework of Greek thinking, with ideas taking the place of the story of Scripture. Presumably, this concern with analytical and systematic synthesis lies behind John Goldingay's stark assertion, "If systematic theology did not exist, it might seem unwise to invent it. . . ."² Antipathy toward the other discipline is not solely from the side of biblical studies, however. As theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas remarked to me some years ago, "New Testament scholars ought to be lined up and run off of a cliff!" Whether Hauerwas intended to echo biblical images of *Gehenna* is unclear to me, but the reverberations were nonetheless sonorous. Although I am sure that one could find countervailing evidence, an ongoing, unscientific inventory among my colleagues in the areas of theological studies at the various institutions where I have taught has yet to identify a systematic theologian who admits intimacy with the *Journal of Biblical Literature*.

Granting, then, that I am painting with a broad brush, I want to urge that the consequent mural nonetheless retains representative value. Let me repeat, then, my proposal: If we are to engage in a genuinely theological exegesis of Christian Scripture, then both disciplines, biblical studies and systematic theology, must change.

I. RETHINKING BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

As I press forward the need to rethink biblical and theological studies, I will tackle three "-isms": foundationalism, objectivism, and propositionalism. These, I will suggest, have been woven tightly into the fabric of modern biblical and theological studies, though in our present, postcritical era, these have begun to unravel.

It is widely agreed that "biblical theology" has operated with the methodological distinctives put forward at the end of the 18th century by Johann

¹ Werner G. Jeanrond, "After Hermeneutics: The Relationship between Theology and Biblical Studies," in *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (ed. Francis Watson; London: SCM, 1993) 85–102. Cf. Markus Bockmuehl, "To Be or Not to Be: The Possible Futures of New Testament Scholarship," *SJT* 51 (1998) 271–306.

² John Goldingay, "Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000) 138.

Philipp Gabler.³ He sketched a three-stage process by which one might move from historical analysis of the biblical texts to a biblical theology: (1) careful linguistic and historical analysis; (2) engagement in a synthetic task, the purpose of which was to identify those ideas common among the biblical writers; and (3) arrival at the timeless and universal principles of the Bible. If one were to engage in dogmatic theology, one would begin with these transcendent ideas so as to adapt them to particular contexts. In this way, the Bible (especially the NT) was positioned as the fountainhead of all theology—indeed, as theology’s epistemic foundation. With variations, this essential process has carried the day for many interpreters up to the present—both with respect to the necessity of taking the biblical texts objectively, freed from the shackles of Christian doctrine, and with regard to the presumed priority of the meaning of the biblical texts thus rendered. One thinks of the now-famous articulation of the task of biblical theology by Krister Stendahl, who distinguished between “what it meant” and “what it means”—and so, between biblical studies and theology,⁴ a distinction that has reached axiomatic status in the field. Heikki Räisänen insists that Gabler was right in his programmatic distinction between the historical and theological tasks of the exegete, for example, just as Peter Balla affirms in his reassessment of the field that the task of NT theology is distinct from systematic theology; for Balla, the NT is viewed as “source” for theology but is not itself “faith seeking understanding.”⁵ In his introduction to a “biblical theology of the New Testament,” Peter Stuhlmacher outlines his own three-stage hermeneutic: (1) historical analysis of the biblical texts; (2) historical reconstruction of the relationship among these elements; and (3) interpretation of this reconstruction for its relevance to the present.⁶ Indeed, contributions to the genre “a theology of the New Testament” in the past three decades generally signify the ascendancy of this way of construing the theological mission of biblical scholars, almost invariably pointing to the foundational, “descriptive task”—in Stendahl’s words: “[O]ur only concern is to find out what these words meant when uttered or written by the prophet, the priest, the evangelist, or the apostle—and regardless of their meaning in later stages of religious history, our own included.”⁷

The end result is that biblical studies has largely been denuded of what had been presumed to be its inherent religious interests; biblical scholars were not to be regarded as theologians, but rather, especially, as philologists

³ See John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, “J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality,” *SJT* 33 (1980) 133–58.

⁴ For a comparison of Gabler and Stendahl, see Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “Johann Philipp Gabler and the Delineation of Biblical Theology,” *SJT* 52 (1999) 154–57.

⁵ Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990); Peter Balla, *Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise* (WUNT 2/95; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

⁶ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, vol. 1: *Grundlegung: Von Jesus zu Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992) 12.

⁷ Stendahl, “Biblical Theology,” in *IDB* 1.422.

and historians, and in our theological curricula and faculty organizations they occupied locations bespeaking their foundationalist roles, such as “biblical foundations” or “division one” or “area one.” Biblical studies was cast as the servant of theology, with the focal question, “Can the biblical data, taken objectively, carry the theological weight of subsequent theological propositions?” So, for example, if the church was to have a secure foundation for its claim regarding the divinity of Jesus, then it was important to find hard evidence for that claim already in the Scriptures, and not simply in the early creeds.

In the environment that developed, in order for data to be “hard,” it needed to be historical; that is, secure foundations for theological discourse were historically defined. How much historical data would be required was a matter of debate, but, for example, historical Jesus studies have been energized in the twentieth century through attempts by some to save the church from its theology and, by others, to demonstrate that the church’s faith rests securely and squarely on the strong pillars of what Jesus actually did and said.

This sort of foundationalism, formed deep in the superheated core of historical positivism, has suffered from tectonic movements in the philosophy of history. I refer, for example, to the tension in the writing of history between the general and the particular, the importance of teleology and causation, and the inevitability of selectivity and partiality in historiography.⁸ This means, on the one hand, that the person (or community) responsible for the telling is forever engaged in the making of choices of what to exclude and include, and how to relate one event to another. Decisions are required, and not only for the obvious reason that, if everything “were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25), but also to escape the democratization of events whereby nothing has significance because everything is of equal consequence. And yet, decisions involving valuation are inescapably subjective, oriented as they are around a particular teleology and chain of cause-and-effect. Historians are concerned with what they and their communities deem to be significant among the many events that might have been recorded, and in the relationships among the events that are recounted. If this “significance” is parsed theologically, this does not make the consequent narrative any less “historical.” The paradox of history/writing, as Albert Cook labels it, is that verification and narrative come into focus in every single sentence. Historiographical accounts cannot be peeled, layer after layer, as if the interpretive husk could be separated from the historical kernel, since each “layer” has both an interpretive and a documentary force. This means that history/writing must be experienced and judged globally and cannot be disconfirmed event-by-event.⁹

⁸ Cf., e.g., Albert Cook, *History/Writing: The Theory and Practice of History in Antiquity and in Modern Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁹ Cook, *History/Writing* 55–72.

As a result, the pressing questions become, on the micro-level, “How is this event related causally to that one?” and, on the macro-level, “What end is served by narrating the story in this way (rather than some other)?” The task of reading historical narrative locates itself less in relation to concerns with *validation*, therefore, and more in terms of *signification*. And, in the end, this means that the meaning, truth, and authority of Scripture’s historical narratives cannot be tethered to or made dependent on modernist notions of history or historical veracity. Instead, with biblical narratives, the essential truth-claim with which we are concerned lies above all in their claim to speak, as it were, on God’s behalf—that is, to interpret reality in light of God’s self-disclosure of God’s own character and purpose working itself out in the cosmos and on the plain of human events. In this sense, the authority of these documents, read as Scripture, rests in their status as revealed history.

I recognize that, in mapping this path, I have vacated biblical studies of the sorts of claims to scientific, neutral analysis that have been its bread and butter. We can trace the rise already in the late-eighteenth century of the distinction between *natural religion* (religion accessible through reason) and *positive religion* (based on religious authority, whether human or divine, and especially on Scripture and the classical creeds), with the result that “natural religion” came not only to eclipse revealed religion, but actually to rewrite its grammar. With religion understood as a rational enterprise, emphasis fell upon global (rather than local) truth claims, and theological statements especially took the form of propositional statements. Work in the philosophy of history is joined by work in other fields, including most recently the neurosciences, in insisting, against the professed neutrality of biblical and theological studies, that we have no access to a ledge from which to gaze upon the sources of our faith. We who search for a place to stand so as to gain leverage for modernist readings of the Bible search in vain.

It is increasingly clear from neurobiology that meaning-making is central to our day-to-day experience, and that we will go to great lengths to construct stories that provide a context for understanding and interpreting what we perceive to be true. My brain imposes structure on the data it receives from its sensory organs, contributing to a baseline conclusion that my sense of reality is both embodied and interpreted within the framework of my formation as a social being. My “perception” of the world is based in a network of ever-forming assumptions about my environment, and in a series of well-tested assumptions, shared by others with whom I associate, about “the way the world works.” Ambiguous data may present different hypotheses, but my mind disambiguates that data according to what I have learned to expect to see. Similarly, we typically explain our behaviors not by physical and chemical chains of cause-and-effect, but through the historical narratives by which we collaborate to create a sense of ourselves as persons. Memory, then, is not passive retrieval of information, but active reconstruction through which we seek coherence. Our sense of who we are is profoundly nested in our long-term memories, which, then, are the prerequisite

for self-representation. “She isn’t herself,” we say of persons suffering significant lapses of memory, whether caused by a traumatic brain injury, for example, or by the tragedy of Alzheimer’s disease.

What is more, because we are intensely social beings, the stories we tell about ourselves, through which we construct our sense of self, are woven out of the threads and into the cloth of the stories present to us in our social world and communal traditions. The story we accept sets the terms of what we take to be true, normal, and good. It serves as a conceptual scheme that is at once *conceptual* (a way of seeing things), *conative* (a set of beliefs and values to which a group and its members are deeply attached), and *action-guiding* (we seek to live according to its terms).¹⁰ Our brains, from their neural pathways right down to their synapses, are continually in the process of being sculpted by our interactions, by our experiences, and by the narratives that surround us like the air we breathe. Consequently, embodied human life performs like a cultural, neuro-hermeneutic system, locating (and, thus, interpreting) current realities in relation to our grasp of the past and expectations of the future.¹¹

II. A FUTURE FOR THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF SCRIPTURE

1. *The contribution of narrative theology.* Consequently, the way forward is one that will take seriously the importance of narrative—that is, a narrative theology. By “narrative theology” I refer to a constellation of approaches to the theological task typically joined by their antipathy toward forms of theology concerned with the systematic organization of propositions and grounded in ahistorical principles, and their attempt to discern an overall aim and ongoing plot in the ways of God as these are revealed in Scripture and continue to express themselves in history.

A primary impetus for narrative theology comes from Scripture itself. This is true, first, in that the bulk of Scripture comes to us in the form of narratives, rather than with a preoccupation with the rational essence of the faith, its dogmatic essentials, so characteristic of theology in the modern period. Second, we find in biblical texts the deliberate work of forming God’s people by shaping their story: “A wandering Aramean was my father . . .” (Deut 26:5–10). The speeches in Acts interpretively render the history of Israel so as to demonstrate the advent of Jesus as its culmination (e.g. Acts 7:2–53; 13:16–41). In a related move, when he affirms that the prophets of old, who testified “in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and his subsequent glory,” were directed by the Spirit (1 Pet 1:10–12), Peter intimates the direction an authentic exegesis of Israel’s story, Israel’s Scriptures, must take. Third, the particular narratives related in the biblical books,

¹⁰ I have borrowed this way of conceiving “conceptual scheme” from Owen Flanagan, *The Problem of the Soul: Two Visions of Mind and How to Reconcile Them* (New York: Basic, 2002) 27–55. Cf. Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹¹ Cf. Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: Guilford, 1999); Stephen P. Reyna, *Connections: Brain, Mind, and Culture in a Social Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 2002).

together with the non-narrative portions of Scripture, participate in a more extensive, overarching narrative (or metanarrative). This is the story of God's purpose coming to fruition in the whole of God's history with us, from the creation of the world and humanity's falling away from God, through God's repeated attempts to restore his people culminating in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, and reaching its full crescendo in the final revelation of Christ and the new creation. In an important sense, the Bible is nothing less than the record of the actualization (and ongoing promise) of this purpose of God in the history of the cosmos.

In recent times, of course, narrative theology has been especially associated with the name of George Lindbeck, for whom faith is a culture that shapes our individuality, our experience, and our emotions. Religion, he argues, is not primarily a collection of true propositions or a deeply personal experience of the transcendent, but a language or culture that enables us to characterize the truth and empowers us to experience the Holy. Being Christian therefore involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus so as to interpret and experience the world on its terms. Hence, the Scriptures are essential in shaping the life-world of God's people. The central stories of Scripture tell us who we are as we make the story of the Bible our own.¹²

Narrative theology has been criticized at various points, three of which invite brief reflection. First, some are concerned about Lindbeck's indifference to the historicity of the biblical story, whether externally referential events comprise the biblical narrative. This, of course, is not a problem solely for Lindbeck or biblical narrative in particular, but has been endemic to discourse on the narrative representation of historical events more generally in the last half of the twentieth century.¹³ Whether fictional or historical, what mattered most seemed to be the "meaning" provided within and by narrative. More recent work in the philosophy of history has urged that "narrative" need not be so much *creation* of significance through the imposition of interpretive frameworks, but rather the *recognition* of thematic and causal ties among events in the real world. Accordingly, the facile dichotomy between "narrative representation" and "external referentiality" is unsustainable.¹⁴

Second, others are concerned with the ambiguity of the phrase, "to inhabit a narrative," so central to narrative theology's interest in theological embodiment and performance. This problem has been thoughtfully parsed by Nicholas Wolterstorff, who concludes that the notion of "inhabiting the world of the biblical narrative" is important when it claims that "the story that *most decisively shapes* our lives must be the biblical story."¹⁵ As I have already indicated, narrative is central to identity formation; who we are as

¹² George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984).

¹³ E.g. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

¹⁴ Jonathan A. Carter, "Telling Times: History, Emplotment, and Truth," *History and Theory* 42 (2003) 1–27.

¹⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Living within a Text" in *Faith and Narrative* (ed. Keith E. Yandell; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 212.

human beings is narratively and relationally shaped and embodied. If we take seriously the theological claim of one church, holy, apostolic, and catholic, then we are led to the corollary that we are the family of God to whom these biblical books are addressed, historically and canonically, and that our theological imaginations find their horizons here, in the narrative of Scripture.

Third, still others concern themselves with whether or how a particular narrative can be identified as “the” biblical or “the” Christian narrative. “Inhabiting the story” would take on a haunting tone if, for example, the defining story were the direful conquest accounts of Joshua. These concerns betray an essential failure to grasp the nature of narrative; three considerations mitigate this issue. (1) Since Aristotle, descriptions of the “narrative cycle” have drawn attention to the importance of the narrative beginning, middle, and end, three “moments” that determine the plot and structure of a narrative by identifying the narrative “need” addressed and resolved within the narrative. (2) Narrative studies distinguish between “satellites” and “kernels”—a logic of hierarchy among narrative events, evaluated according to whether they play a crucial role in the direction the narrative takes, with “kernels” the more pivotal.¹⁶ The question, then, is how one parses the “beginning,” “middle,” and “end” of the biblical narrative, and so identifies certain events over others as cruxes in the development of the narrative. Although certain constraints are unavoidable (since, by any reckoning, creation and new creation serve as the “beginning” and “end”), it is nonetheless possible to read the biblical narrative in a variety of ways. That not all of these would be “Christian” is evident from the intramural disputes within the Jewish people in the first century, leading eventually to the partings of the ways between Jews and Christians; and with respect to the Christian movement, with some groups regarded as heretical even though they based their positions in thoughtful reading of authoritative Scripture. (3) Narratives move forward in the service of a central aim, in relation to which all else is oriented. From this perspective, Scripture is not first and foremost “about” humanity, or even a particular, identifiable segment of humanity, Israel. Nor is the Bible a Christological book, in the narrow sense. Rather, its plot is *theologically* determined. Hence, the hermeneutical key for a Christian reading of the Scriptures is twofold: its recognition that what holds the two Testaments together is the one aim of God and its recognition that the character of God (and thus the nature of God’s story) is paradigmatically manifest in Israel’s release from bondage in Egypt and decisively revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. Accordingly, the “rule of faith” and subsequent creeds of Christian orthodoxy served historically and continue to serve as theological boundary markers for Christian identity, setting the horizons within which the Bible may be read specifically as Christian Scripture.

2. *Theological study of Scripture.* Finally, within the horizons of these considerations, what shape might theological study of Scripture take? First,

¹⁶ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

it would operate on the basis of the theological claim of one people of God, one church, and thus with the hermeneutical motto that the community within which the biblical texts were generated, the community who came to regard these books as canonical, and the community now faced with the need to interpret these texts as Scripture are the same community.¹⁷

Second, then, it would see the contemporary community served by the commentator as the community to whom the biblical text is addressed. Eco's concept of the Model Reader is helpful here: "To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader. The author has to foresee a model of the possible reader (hereafter Model Reader) supposedly able to deal interpretively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them."¹⁸ To engage the biblical text in this way is not to objectify its message in an historical moment now distant from our own, and then imaginatively to allow its message to leap forward to our own time. It is, rather, to embrace the persona of the text's audience as our own. We do not invite the text into a transformation of its original meaning into a new application geared toward our thought forms; rather, the text invites us into a transformation of allegiances and commitments, which will manifest itself in behaviors appropriate to our social worlds. In the case of 1 Peter, e.g. the model readers presumed and sculpted by the text are those who hear their names in the letter's opening, "to the elect who are sojourners of the diaspora" (1:1). Peter's model readers are those who embrace and embody the status of persons whose identity as estranged sojourners in the world grows out of their experience of the new birth, whose lives are radically marked by their membership in a community defined by their allegiance to Christ, whose lives thus stand in an ambiguous relationship to the mores and values of the world around them, and, accordingly, whose forms of existence attract opposition from their neighbors. First Peter is addressed to just such people and is read best by those who share its theological assumptions and those who hear its opening as an invitation to embody its world.

This means that the primary agenda of theological study of Scripture would not be the construction of systematic theology, in the restricted sense of organizing and restating the central propositions of the biblical witnesses. Questions would focus elsewhere—e.g. What sort of world, what sort of community, and what sort of person is this text constructing? Reading these texts as Scripture would thus call for dispositions of humility and expectation before the text, pressing for authentic wrestling with such questions as: To what life-world is this text pointing? With what vision of reality does it confront us? Taking seriously the narrative shape of the biblical canon has the effect of calling upon its readers to choose sides: Will we embrace and serve the divine aim that presses this narrative forward and surfaces in

¹⁷ I owe this insight and its formulation to James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986).

¹⁸ Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Advances in Semiotics; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979) 7.

these texts, or will we resist and oppose it? The result is that engaging with this narrative involves us in a formative and decision-making process. In short, the biblical narrative is present as an alternative framework within which to construe our lives, and so challenges those who would be Christian by calling for a creative transformation of the stories by which we make sense of our lives and of the world. From this perspective, failure to “stand under” Peter’s message would not be the consequence of historical distance, but theological.

Third, theological study of Scripture would locate itself self-consciously within the particularity of an ecclesial community. On the negative side, this means that theological exegesis cannot hope to serve an encyclopedic role, documenting and passing on all that is known about a given text; nor can it proceed as though its basic concern is with the sort of historical concerns that might satisfy the world of academe or the interests of the wider public; nor can it act as though the measure of validity in interpretation can be taken apart from the great creeds of the church, a concern with the Rule of Faith, and the history of Christian interpretation and its embodiment in Christian lives and communities (*Wirkungsgeschichte*).

Fourth, to engage in theological commentary would not require that one proceed in an antihistorical or ahistorical fashion. That is, the choice between theology and history is a false one. Barth, myopically criticized for despising historical criticism, had no apparent difficulty writing both that, “If we rightly understand ourselves, our problems are the problems of Paul; and if we be enlightened by the brightness of his answers, those answers must be ours”; and that, in commenting on Romans, “I felt myself bound to the actual words of the text, and did not in any way propose to engage myself in free theologizing.”¹⁹ The constraints of working with these texts (taken seriously as cultural products) and the work of theological interpretation need not be mutually exclusive.

It could not be otherwise. After all, all language is embedded in culture, and whatever else they are, biblical texts are cultural products whose communicative aims are at the same time both constrained and mobilized by the contexts within which they were generated. Moreover, the capacity of the Bible to function as Scripture depends in part on its capacity to expose and thwart our own limited, historical horizons. Our interpretive horizons threaten the domestication of Scripture, so that its strenuous demands are trimmed of their challenge. For a well-formulated theological hermeneutic, one needs to secure the status of the biblical text as “subject” in theological discourse, and not only as object. We turn to historical inquiry to help structure a conversation in which values and customs familiar in our communities are juxtaposed with those not simply represented in but actually proposed in Scripture. The relativizing of taken-for-granted concepts such as kinship, wealth, and power has the effect of disorienting the reader and altering perception. In this sort of scriptural engagement, communities of interpretation are challenged and formed with respect to their practices; they find

¹⁹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933) 1, ix.

their theological horizons expanded, their moral imaginations assaulted and sculpted.

III. THE CLAIM OF A NARRATIVE-ORIENTED HERMENEUTIC

One final insight from the study of narrative is crucial: If Scripture's subject and focus is God, infleshed in Jesus Christ, active powerfully and formatively through Word and Spirit, then Yahweh's purpose determines the shape of this narrative and calls upon its readers to choose sides. That is, engaging with this narrative involves us in a formative and decision-making process. How does this aim beckon us? How will we respond? In this important sense, we are concerned less with theological method and more with an intrinsically self-involving theological vision of God, church, Scripture, and world, bound together within the economy of salvation, with the people of God cast as pilgrims on a journey whose destination is known and achieved only by indwelling the divine story that cannot be reduced to principles and rules, but must be embraced and embodied.

These considerations help to reconfigure the task of theological hermeneutics. If, previously, the task was one of *application*, now the task is one of *conversion*. To put it somewhat differently, let us ask the question, "What separates the contemporary reader from understanding and learning from the ancient texts of the Bible?" Scientific exegesis has answered singularly with reference to the historical rift. Theological exegesis focuses elsewhere, on the degree to which we share the theological claims of the biblical text and in terms of our willingness to "stand under" the Scriptures—that is, with reference to our practices of engaging with Scripture in the context of our commitment to live faithfully before the God to whom the Scriptures witness.