

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: BRIDGE OVER MANY WATERS*

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ABSTRACT

Biblical theology's bridge-building capacities are studied in this paper by mapping out a historical trajectory of the discipline, and by addressing the possible novel directions the field might take in the future. An epistemological parameter and a structural parameter were set by Gabler that continue to inform the contemporary discussion. In order to open up the discussion to hermeneutical, philosophical and systematic theological questions, the paper offers a proposal for a text theory, and addresses its implications for some concrete questions posed recently in biblical theology. A final section sketches various currents in biblical studies and theology that are having an impact on the field.

Introduction

The term 'biblical theology' expresses the discipline's bridge-building nature. Since Gabler (1992; first published in 1831) defined the field in his famous 1787 inaugural address at the University of Altdorf, biblical theology was intended to span two theological disciplines separated by the birth of historical-critical biblical study. If Protestant Orthodoxy had discouraged a 'free' investigation of the canon by upholding its supernatural status, then the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries delivered the Bible from dogmatic constraints. With the Enlightenment advocacy of reason's forum as the judge of theological claims, the relationship between biblical studies and dogmatic theology was changed forever. Historical studies exercised reason's freedom over supernatural dogmatic claims, and hopes

* I would like to thank Katie Goetz for her assistance in preparing this manuscript for publication.

were pinned on biblical theology to re-connect what reason had driven apart. The peace, however, that biblical theology was supposed to seal was a fragile one. Was biblical theology a descriptive historical discipline, or could its theological orientation be used to make prescriptive claims concerning doctrines and morals? Furthermore, was it supposed to study ‘the theology contained in the Bible’, meaning ‘the theology of the Bible itself’, or was it to articulate the ‘theology in accordance with the Bible, scriptural theology’ (Ebeling 1960: 49)?

The tensions embedded in the original intention of biblical theology might prove to be advantageous to the current theological scene. As disciplines make efforts to overcome fragmentation, as isolated discourses attempt to become permeable to other discourses for the sake of communication and understanding, bridge-building disciplines, such as biblical theology, might be exactly what is needed. With new insights from cultural studies, the history of religions, and regional theologies, as well as discoveries from extra-canonical material and the Septuagint, biblical theology might just prove itself to be a discipline, building more bridges, and therefore determining new theological directions.

It is the purpose of this essay to map out the historical trajectory of biblical theology in such a way as to expose its bridge-building capacities for possible novel directions the field might take in the future. If biblical theology is to continue conceiving the relationship between Bible and theology, then it must address the epistemological issues at stake in bridging historical and speculative (conceptual) reason, take into account the conceptual connections between biblical studies and theology, and envisage dialogical models incorporating results from the study of religion and culture. In this paper, I will describe the controversies and challenges characterizing biblical theology by concentrating on epistemological, conceptual and dialogical issues. The first section will focus on the parameters of the contemporary discussion as set by the historical origins of the discipline. I will concentrate on biblical theology’s epistemological presupposition, the distinction between historical and speculative reason, as well as the field’s twofold orientation, the academic and ecclesial audience, that have defined the major controversies in the field. The second section aims to open up the biblical theological discussion to hermeneutical, philosophical and systematic theological questions by laying out a distinctive text theory. Borrowing from the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), I outline a text theory by configuring the relation between text, experience, and authorial intention in order to open up the text to a transhistorical dimension of reality ‘behind’ it and to subjective interpretations of

that reality ‘in front of’ it. The third section looks at some concrete questions, posed recently in biblical theology, that are implied by the text theory laid out in section 2. These questions concern, specifically, the unity of the canon, biblical interpretation in view of claims concerning reality, and the linguistic potential of biblical texts for theological fixing. The fourth section concludes this paper by sketching various currents in biblical studies and theology that are beginning to play important roles in determining the future of biblical theology.

1. *Parameters of Biblical Theology*

It was Schleiermacher who clearly saw that the parameters for a historical series were set, either implicitly or explicitly, at the origins of that series (1990: 44). Any ensuing development naturally evolved as a result of the constants constituting the series at the site of its original appearance. In this section, I will briefly look at the origins of biblical theology to then expose the parameters shaping the current discussion.

Biblical theology was defined as a distinct research program in the late eighteenth century (Janowski 1998). In his famous inaugural address delivered at the University of Altdorf on March 30, 1787, theology professor Johann Philipp Gabler (1753–1826) proposed two types of biblical theology, each informing the field’s parameters until the present day (1992). On the one hand, Gabler defined a first type of biblical theology that would uncover the theology of biblical writers by means of historical investigation (1992: 497). On the other hand, Gabler proposed a second type of biblical theology ‘in the stricter sense of the word’ that would tease out the universal notions of religion (1992: 501). As Knierim has accurately pointed out, this second comparative task establishes that the ‘principal concepts of the authors reflect (commonly accepted ideas) of what is universally valid, while at the same time it must be recognized that the universal validity of the authors’ ideas is just as era-specific as their own ideas themselves’ (1995a: 520). By ingeniously distinguishing between a historical type and a normative type of biblical theology, Gabler set the two parameters of the bridge-building field of biblical theology.

The two sides that biblical theology was to bridge were themselves sub-disciplines of theology that had grown apart during the eighteenth century. This development was part and parcel of the Pietist and Enlightenment advocacy for an investigation of scripture by reason. Both Pietism and the Enlightenment aimed to free access to scripture from the Protestant Orthodox strictures of supernatural beliefs and dogmas, although each did so for

different reasons (Schmid 1961: 38-91; Heppe 1978: 12-46). The Pietists prescribed the personal study of the Bible in order to enhance an individual's experience of Christianity, and Enlightenment thinkers appealed to reason, particularly empirical reason, to explore the historical origins and development of the Christian religion through the Bible. With the encouragement of the rational study of the Bible, biblical theology emerged alongside dogmatic theology as its own discipline.

The distinction Gabler drew between biblical theology and dogmatic theology betrays both a Pietist predecessor and an Enlightenment partner. Over one hundred years before his own lecture, Gabler's distinction was articulated by Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) in his text that launched the Pietist movement, *Pia Desideria* (1675) (Spener 1964 and Landmesser 2003: 48-50). The programmatic text outlined Spener's own 'pious wishes' to separate biblical theology from dogmatic theology in order to access the plain truth of a godly life described in the Bible and to avoid the 'scholastic' theological controversies (1964: 49-55). At approximately the same time that Gabler delivered his famous lecture, Semler distinguished between a public ecclesial and private 'free' use of scripture in order to similarly encourage a rational investigation of scripture empty of the polemics of confessional dogmatic theology. In his four-part *Treatment Concerning the Free Investigation of the Canon* (*Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon*), published between 1771 and 1776, Semler did not reject outright church teaching concerning the Bible's inspired status, but advocated the study of the canon by rational means as an endeavor alongside dogmatic theology (1967: 17-21). Given the growing rift between biblical theology and dogmatic theology, it was finally Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) who, in his own religious treatise *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), rejected the last vestige of a dogmatic taint in biblical theology and set up his own philosophical program. Kant advocated philosophical theology as a discipline that 'must have complete freedom to expand as far as its science reaches, provided that it stays within the boundaries of mere reason and makes indeed use of history, language, the books of all peoples, even the Bible, in order to confirm and explain its propositions, but only for itself' (2001: 61 [6.9]). Philosophical theology was not allowed to impose its insights onto biblical theology, which, as the prerogative of the 'divines', would continue to co-exist alongside its scientific counterpart. The Pietist affirmation of biblical theology to encourage individual access to the Bible, and the Enlightenment appeal to a philosophical theology that would eliminate any vestige of ecclesial imposition

onto the rational study of the Bible, would pave the way for a historical study of scripture without dogmatic coercion.

With his second type of biblical theology, however, Gabler envisioned his program as a bridge to dogmatic theology. It is on this point that Gabler has been most misunderstood (Knierim 1995a: 547-50). The philosophical conceptuality informing Gabler's vision is characteristic of the Enlightenment issue concerning the relation between history and eternity. Gottfried Wilhelm Freiherr von Leibniz (1646–1716) painted the backdrop by distinguishing between contingent truths, truths of fact, and necessary truths, truths of reason (1991: 120). This distinction was later appropriated by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81), who formulated the central philosophical claim that shaped the relation of historical studies to theological doctrines. The 'accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason' (Lessing 1957: 53). In order to bridge Lessing's ugly ditch, Gabler conceived his second type of biblical theology. This biblical theology has religion in view, and religion is divine. Or more precisely, religion is 'passed down by the doctrine in the Scriptures', that 'teach[es] what each Christian ought to know and believe and do in order to secure happiness in this life and in the life to come' (Gabler 1992: 495). The eternal truths of religion are the object of the biblical theology's second type that is to be distinguished from dogmatic theology as the discipline mediating eternal religious truths for the present day (Gabler 1992: 495-96). The eternal truths of religion are inevitably incarnate in historical garb. Hence, the task of biblical theology 'in the stricter sense of the word' is to arrive at the universal religious notions thematized by a biblical author and then to subsequently leave these results to dogmatic theological mediation. In addition to a historically oriented task, biblical theology aims to glean out the universal notions normative for a particular religion. With these two tasks, biblical theology's origins betray the oscillation in its status as a historically descriptive and as a theologically prescriptive discipline.

It is, first, the epistemological presupposition of Gabler's conception that continues to be reflected in biblical theological discussions. Presupposed is the tension between historical and speculative reason. On the one hand, historical reason considers empirical data while, on the other hand, speculative reason grasps the essence of that data, determining the parts in relation to the whole. Although some epistemological programs, such as Gabler's and Schleiermacher's (Schleiermacher 1996 and 2002b), presuppose a continuum between the two types of reason, it is more often that an epistemological dualism of the type articulated by Lessing haunts biblical

theology. As a bridge discipline, biblical theology seems to manifest the dualist tensions presupposed by the dominant Kantian epistemological theory.

In the history of biblical theology, the tension seems to characterize the way in which the historical aspect and the theological aspect are configured in relation to each other. If historical and speculative reason are presupposed to be two independent types of reason, then the historical and theological aspects to biblical theology are construed independently from each other, at a minimum, and in loose connection to each other, at a maximum. In his famous essay on biblical theology that has been discussed as the subject of a recently published collection of essays (Räisänen, *et al.* 2000), Stendahl sets up the parameters for biblical theology along epistemologically dualist lines. He claims that biblical theology is a historically objective and descriptive, not a prescriptive, science (Stendahl 1962). The tension portrays the types of questions asked in trying to relate historical description to theological prescription. Is biblical theology first and foremost a historical endeavor, with theological implications conceived as an appendix to the project? Or does biblical theology begin by defining a concept, deemed to represent the 'center of scripture' (*Mitte der Schrift*), that is then traced through a religious trajectory? Examples such as von Rad's concept of credo (1962) or Eichrodt's concept of covenant (1983) illustrate the presupposition of a theological concept that informs historical research (Childs 1992: 102-103; Barr 1999: 29-37). Or is it biblical theology's task to trace a tradition history (*Traditionsgeschichte*) from the Old Testament through intertestamental literature to the New Testament, as proposed by Gese (1981) and Stuhlmacher (1997, 1999 and 2002) of the Tübingen school, and to ground this trajectory in a philosophical theory of revelation? Or is biblical theology 'neither descriptive nor confessional' but 'systematic', as Knierim advocates for Old Testament theology (1995b: 18)? If biblical theology is to be more accurately understood as a bridge from the Bible to theology, then the epistemological question must be clarified.

Theology's two-pronged interest is also set in Gabler's program. For theology, Schleiermacher summed up its two interests as the scientific and the ecclesial interest (1999 §17, proposition [83] and 1990 §9 [5]). As a science, theology is a discipline governed by the same rules that scholarly consensus has established for the attaining of knowledge in an intersubjective academic context. And as a 'positive science', theology, like law and medicine, obtains its principle of organization from outside

its academic realm (Schleiermacher 1990 §1 [2]); the ecclesial interest is informed by the church.

Biblical theology, like all sub-disciplines of theology, is caught at the crossroad between an academic and an ecclesial interest. The intersection is focused primarily on the extent to which the ecclesial interest should play a role in the methodologically controlled investigation of scripture. As a historical discipline, should biblical theology be distinct from the more ecclesially oriented discipline of dogmatic theology, as Barr has argued (2004)? Or should biblical theology's subject matter be ecclesially oriented by virtue of the church's decision to regard the canon's final form as normative, as Childs has claimed (1992: 71)? If biblical theology is to continue to successfully bridge its academic and religious interests, then the balance between the two must be specified.

The relation between historical and speculative reason and the two-pronged interest characterizing biblical theology are the parameters set in Gabler's paradigm that continue to have an impact on the contemporary discussion. It now remains to be shown how a text theory can be conceived so that philosophical and hermeneutical questions, even the truth question, can be addressed by biblical theology.

2. Text Theory of Biblical Theology

If a bridge from the Bible to theology is to be built, then an understanding of the biblical text in view of its subject matter must be clarified. By analyzing the relation between text, experience and reality, a biblical theology would yield the philosophical conceptuality governing how a text is understood in view of theological issues. In this section, I appeal to Schleiermacher's philosophical and theological thought in order to outline a text theory that determines the text as the product of an author's experience of reality.

The aim of clarifying a text theory is to determine more precisely the object of biblical theological investigation. What is the object of biblical theology? To answer this question, one must look at the two conceptions that biblical theology has inherited. From the Enlightenment, on the one hand, the Bible is to be read like any other book, as Benjamin Jowett formulated in 1860 (p. 377). Following this imperative, hermeneutics became the field establishing the rules that governed the study of all literary texts. For the Bible, a special hermeneutics only came into play if philological idiosyncrasies of the Hebrew background of New Testament Greek were considered (Schleiermacher 1998a: 39-44). From Protestant Orthodoxy, on

the other hand, the Bible is to be regarded as the book of all books, a sacred text whose external clarity is guaranteed by a doctrine of pneumatological inspiration, its spiritual subject matter truly grasped according to the internal clarity supplied by the testimony of the Holy Spirit. As such, it is the infallible source of theological knowledge and doctrine. These two conceptions about the text stipulate differently the way in which the human object (biblical authors and their experience) is related to the divine object (authorship of the whole canon as the source of infallible truth). Is the object a 'word' that stands over and against the tradition as a critique of the tradition and one's respective political context, as Barth regarded the Bible (1975: 1/I, 111-20); or, is the Bible to be studied as 'the first member in a series' (Schleiermacher 1999 §129, proposition [594]), grounding the parameters of the tradition by its proximity to the original events of the religion, as Schleiermacher saw it? A biblical theology must at least acknowledge that both the Enlightenment and Protestant Orthodox conceptions of the Bible shape the way biblical theology determines its object.

In order for a biblical theology to methodologically justify its bridge-building activity, it must explain how a text's historical elements are fitted to a religiously understood and theologically conceived reality. One proposal for such a text theory has been conceived by Schleiermacher. Although his is not the only way to understand a text in view of reality, Schleiermacher's proposal is representative because it takes into complex account the relation between hermeneutics, philosophical dialectics, and theology as those elements informing a text theory. For Schleiermacher, the text is not the sole reality to be investigated; the text is not an artifact without an author. Rather, it is a transcript of an author who has fixed, in literary form, an experience of a reality according to some intention. As transparent to both authorial intention and reality, the text offers an individual or communal—in cases, for example, of a school—construal of reality that renders the hermeneutical parameters for 'understanding particularly the written discourse of another person correctly' (Schleiermacher 1998a: 3), as well as conveying that reality for subsequent readers to experience for themselves (Helmer 2004b). The claim concerning the subjective construal of a transhistorical subject matter is a particularly important point for biblical interpretation. If the Bible is supposed to contain records of an experience of a reality and these records are construed in religious terms, then biblical theology has as its task the 'correct' understanding of the religious world-views conveyed by the text. A key element of a text theory in view of reality is both the text's claim of a transhistorical reality and its construal of that reality in a religious world-view that has

shaped and continues to shape religious history. In Christianity, to use Schleiermacher as an example, the *Christus praesens* is the person behind the text, yet construed by it, who continues to make an experiential impact on individuals throughout the church's history. Both a philosophical dialectic describing a philosophical conception of reality and experience and a theological construal of religious experience connect with a biblical hermeneutic in order to justify for biblical theology a fully fleshed explanation of the text and its claims of experience and reality.

What Schleiermacher's text theory offers to biblical theology is the mechanism of how an experience is fixed in a text. Schleiermacher understands the text to be the 'written discourse of another person', thereby supposing an affinity between all human individuals to rest with the structure of expressing experience. Discourse is an anthropological necessity, accompanying experience as the necessity to communicate it to others. In the first speech of his famous speeches *On Religion*, Schleiermacher appeals to this necessity as the reason for addressing the cultured despisers. 'I speak to you as a human being about the holy mysteries of humanity according to my view... It is the inner, irresistible necessity of my nature; it is a divine calling' (1998b: 4 and 5). The subject that is communicated is the subjective construal of a reality that has made an impact on the respective speaker. The impact is construed individually, according to the principle of coherence governing the author's expression (Helmer 2004a). As such, a discourse's authorial intention is intimately tied to reality through the respective author's experience. Furthermore, the sheer fact of communicating experiences constitutes a community of persons (Schleiermacher 1999 §6 [26-31]). By necessarily communicating individual experience, a community of mutual expression is created. As a vehicle of communicating different authors' experiences, the Bible creates the church.

In Schleiermacher's work, the transparency of a text to authorial intention and experience is best captured by his understanding of the New Testament (Helmer forthcoming a). This collection of texts is composed of various literary fixings of experiences that a group of people whom Schleiermacher names 'evangelists' (not the authors of the canonical New Testament books) had of Christ. The impact of Christ's person called forth specific impressions of his work that were initially circulated individually as stories, then compiled at third or fourth hand (e.g. Matthew and Luke), and finally categorized systematically in terms of the doctrine of redemption. Although there is one reality as a referent of stories and doctrine, that reality is diversely construed in the almost infinite number of ways that it

has been experienced by individuals throughout the church's history. The different New Testament texts make claims about the transhistorical reality of Christ's person and work that continue to set the parameters for idiosyncratic Christian experience, its doctrine and ethics.

With a text theory, biblical theology is armed to address the serious philosophical questions of reality and the theological questions concerning the nature of religious experience. In the work of Childs, for example, a presupposed text theory drives the theological questions. Childs distinguishes between text and *res*—or subject matter—in order to launch his biblical theological reflections on the divine reality (1992: 80-90). The Old and New Testaments each distinctively witness to God's identity through creation and God's activity in creation. Childs's canonical approach presupposes the metaphysical distinction between text and subject matter, a distinction that invites theological reflection on precisely God and God's activity as the referents of the text. In other biblical theological scholarship, both Sweeney and Trobisch appeal to authorial intention in relation to the text and its claims concerning reality. For Trobisch, the implied authorship of New Testament books offers a decisive warrant for an 'editorial concept' that is linked to an early second-century first edition of the New Testament canon (2000). The implicit text theory shows that, for Trobisch, authorship provides a clear link to historically dateable reality. In his extensive work on the prophets, Sweeney considers the connection between redaction criticism and an author—or authorial school (1995, 1996 and 1999). The text theory presupposed by Sweeney concerns the unique reality that an author has experienced and subsequently communicates at one of the various redactional layers of the text.

By posing the issue concerning the relation between text, author and reality, biblical theology introduces philosophical questions, both epistemological and ontological, into its purview. Answers to these questions can help flesh out the religious construal of an experienced reality that is impressed upon a text, not as a foreign imposition, but as a legitimate schematization of that reality.

3. New Questions of Biblical Theology

In order to make explicit presupposed philosophical questions, biblical theology has as one of its tasks the reflection on a text theory. This section presents a summary of a recent project in biblical theology that explicitly thematizes philosophical questions on the basis of the text theory outlined above.

Since Gabler, a common view of the biblical theological task is to bring its descriptive side in dialogue with its prescriptive side. If biblical theology is to presuppose an epistemological continuum rather than a discontinuity between the two types of reason, then a potential is created to integrate description and prescription. Such an approach, conceiving biblical theology not as a dialogue but as a study of theological theory that is informed by inner and extra-biblical processes, has been undertaken by a graduate colloquium (*Graduiertenkolleg*), 'The Bible—its Formation and its Influence' (*Die Bibel—ihre Entstehung und ihre Wirkung*), in the Protestant and Catholic faculties of the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen. The biblical theological project, *Biblical Text and the Formation of Theological Theory* (*Biblischer Text und theologische Theoriebildung*), asks the question concerning how biblical texts are received in order to articulate theological claims (Chapman, Helmer and Landmesser 2001). In order to answer this question, an epistemological continuum between historical and speculative reason must be presupposed. Such a continuum guarantees that historical data are truly predicated of the concepts to which they belong and, conversely, concepts are determined by predicates that are accessed by empirical reason and truly predicated of those concepts by the formation of judgments about them. By presupposing this epistemological model, biblical theology moves between a historical-biblical side that determines the historical development of a concept's predicates, and a conceptual-theological side that shows how these concepts inform the way in which theological theories about concepts are developed over time. Theological concepts are filled with predicates in the history of those concepts that extends through the Bible, through church history, and into contemporary systematic and pastoral theology. Theological theory is formed by oscillating between historical and conceptual reason.

The epistemological parameters stipulated by this biblical theological program convey commitments for the future development of the field. On the one hand, biblical theology must continue its commitment to analyze concrete biblical texts. By grounding theological theory in concrete texts, biblical theology can self-consciously retain its proximity to historical-critical study while avoiding premature abstraction from the historical manifold. On the other hand, biblical theology can connect the reception of these biblical texts into explicit thematization of theological concepts. By considering the ways in which biblical texts are received both intra and extra-biblically, biblical theology appeals to new interpretative strategies situating the formation of theological theory in an engagement with the

text, rather than as a function of speculative imposition onto the text. Theology arises through the reception of biblical texts in new interpretative contexts.

A second aspect to this new biblical theological program is its commitment to the explicit posing of philosophical questions in order to help clarify fundamental biblical theological concepts. One significant concept associated with biblical theology since Protestant Orthodoxy and Semler's work is the concept of canon. Introduced as a key category into the biblical theological discussion by Childs, the canon is squarely located at the intersection between the church and the academy in view of the theological question of the Bible's referent and the ecclesial question of an authoritative text regarded as such by the church. The question concerning the canon is intimately tied to the question concerning its unity in view of its transhistorical subject matter (Herms 1997). Given the Christian canon's composition of two distinct testaments, the question concerning unity has been posed by Childs in terms of two distinct witnesses to Israel's God (1992: 78), and more recently by Janowski in a way taking into account the 'dual outcome' (*doppelter Ausgang*) of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament (2000). Janowski sees the outcome of the Hebrew Bible to lie with the rabbinic tradition, on the one hand, and a second outcome to lie with the New Testament, on the other hand, while seeing the unity of both traditions in the unity of God as the text's referent.

In view of Childs's and Janowski's conceptual distinction between text and referent, the canon has recently been the object of a new look that takes into account hermeneutical-philosophical questions from Jewish and Christian traditions. In a volume entitled *One Scripture or Many? Canon from Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Perspectives*, the editors, Helmer and Landmesser, pose the question of the canon's unity from a perspective that takes into account the philosophical consideration of a unity 'behind' as well as a unity 'in front of' the biblical text (2004). The canon's unity is studied in terms of both text and tradition; the text is open to the tradition of its interpretation, while features of the text and its referent account for the unity in the respective tradition that the text funds. This approach investigates the question of unity behind the text in terms of a transhistorical force that compels the growth and development of a respective religious tradition. For both Judaism and Christianity, the canon establishes the unity-shaping features of the respective tradition by pointing to its reality. Yet, these unity-shaping features are not at the disposal of the text's interpreters. Rather, transhistorical features are interpretatively grasped in different contexts by individuals and communities located in

front of the text. The philosophical question concerning the reality that shapes both the canon's unity and the tradition it funds is asked in conjunction with the hermeneutical question concerning the actualization of the text in different contexts by its interpretations. Bible and theology are bridged by a biblical theology that asks the questions of reality and relevance.

A closer look at the history of biblical interpretation in relation to the question of reality and relevance is offered by the third segment of the biblical theological project. A volume entitled *Biblical Interpretation: History, Context, and Reality*, is a collection of essays held in conjunction with the 2002 SBL International Meeting in Berlin, Germany (Helmer forthcoming b). This volume reflects an energized interest in the history of biblical interpretation (see also Hauser and Watson 2003), and designs the theme specifically in view of the historically contextual determination of reality. The history of biblical interpretation is interesting for the precise reason that it sheds light on the philosophical question of reality. How can biblical texts be read in order to define, shape and construe reality as it is understood in their original historical situation and in the multiple contexts of their reception? Every interpretation of scripture contributes to a determination of reality, particularly in religious terms of the self-world-God relation. Each occasion of interpretation, whether intra or extra-biblical, makes a claim to reality. The question addresses what the biblical texts disclose concerning their own location and how biblical interpreters conceive a hermeneutical bridge from the original context to their own respective locations. Hence, the philosophical question is hooked up to exegetical work with the aim of developing the theological specification of reality as the religiously conceived relation between self, world and God. In this way, reality that is experienced as religion is deemed relevant for generations of the Bible's interpreters.

If the aim of biblical interpretation is to investigate how the philosophical question concerning reality is a key biblical theological question, then a specification of this question concerns the relation between language and reality. At the 2003 SBL International Meeting in Cambridge, England (Helmer and Galloway forthcoming), the biblical theology seminar specified this relation in view of the way that a text's linguistic structure informs the making of theological decisions, whether intra or extra-biblical. This question draws the connection between precise linguistic analysis, redaction, and theological fixing of a semantic linguistic level. Behind the connection is the philosophical presupposition that the text's meaning is recovered by linguistic analysis, not by psychological/transcendental inter-

pretation (e.g. Gadamer 1993: 302-307). On the basis of language alone, theological meaning is gleaned and a theological fixing of language's meaning is made possible.

This segment to the biblical theological project develops further its philological emphasis by taking seriously the question of language posed since philosophy advocated a *linguistic turn*. Precise linguistic analysis presupposes that there are at least four levels of language: structure, semantics, pragmatics and effect (Landmesser 1999: 28-37). Teased out by philological, grammatical and syntactical study, these four levels of language can be fixed at a number of diverse levels in order to stabilize theological meaning. Assuming the intimate connection between language and reality, a theological fixing makes explicit what is already given in the text, but actualized only in the text's interpretational context. By considering the relation between linguistic analysis and interpretation, differences in content are acknowledged to be 'true' for different layers of the text. Semantic plurality in the Bible is related to the diversity of theological options presented by the text. This insight allows for a plurality of theological fixing; there is no single correct doctrinal interpretation of a text. Rather, semantic plurality introduces multiple possibilities into theological interpretation. The theological actualization of a text is embedded in the text's own potential. Its principal openness to theological meaning is an argument that a theological reading is part of the text's semantic, grammatical and linguistic features, not an alien element read into the text by later interpreters. Diversity does not undermine but rather creates the conditions for the possibility of fixing one layer as a choice among others. For example, Genesis 22 can be theologically fixed by a number of different meanings that are each legitimate if they fulfill specific criteria for their evaluation. Hence, while looking at and acknowledging ways of theologically securing semantic diversity, biblical theology also needs to set up criteria in order to evaluate these fixings. In this way, biblical theology can contribute to the ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue concerning different positions fixed by the same biblical texts.

Biblical theology can continue to bridge many disciplines if it succeeds in integrating new scholarship into the creative posing of methodological and substantive questions. If theology is to be informed by biblical studies and if biblical scholarship is to address the theological needs of the contemporary context, then a two-way epistemological street as well as a two-fold mutual interest in sustaining both scholarship and religious traditions must inform the way the biblical theological task is conceived for the present day.

4. *New Currents of Biblical Theology*

Biblical theology is thrown into the currents of new scholarly developments. If biblical theology, however, is to engage these developments, then it must rely on its strength as a bridge-building discipline to bridge the many waters that are currently flowing in both biblical, theological and philosophical directions. My remarks in this section will pertain to how the two intersections outlined in section 1 (historical/speculative, church/academy) can inform the contemporary biblical theological discussion.

From an epistemological standpoint, the two parameters of historical and speculative reason seem to be stretched by the current discussion to a greater degree than was envisaged by Gabler. Both biblical studies and theology have followed the philosophical lead of the *linguistic turn*. The consensus regards the significance of language as the subjective and communal articulation of experience and reality. By turning away from historical positivism, this movement represents an intensified appreciation for the Bible as a literary artifact that has implications for regarding theological interests without apologizing for loose connections to historical claims.

The literary front is literally bursting with new documents and text-critical insights. Documents from the Nag Hammadi library (King 2003), discoveries from the Dead Sea Scrolls (Martinez and Tigchelaar 2000), interest in extra-canonical works (MacDonald 2003), and a new appreciation for the complex relations between the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint (Jobes and Silva 2002) have spurred text-critical and literary-critical biblical studies. Questions concerning the literary and historical complexity of the biblical text have easily merged with hermeneutical concerns so that classic hermeneutical questions have been posed on the biblical side of research. A representative example of this move is 'Reading the Present: The Perception of the Contemporary by Means of Scriptural Interpretation', the jointly organized session of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Hebrew Bible Group held at the 2003 SBL International Meeting in Cambridge on the hermeneutical-philosophical topic of how past texts can be read to shed light on the present (De Troyer and Lange forthcoming). By addressing hermeneutical questions such as this one, biblical studies veers close to posing theological questions concerning the nature of transhistorical religious experience.

The regard of the Bible as literature has allowed some theologians to pose theological questions in a way freed from an obsession with historical fact. In his study of eighteenth and nineteenth-century hermeneutics, Frei

opens up the possibility of regarding the biblical text as a 'realistic-like narrative' (1974: 207-24). With this new designation, Frei marginalizes the question of historical referentiality and paves the way for studying the literary features of the Bible in relation to their theological claims. Frei's work became the model for regarding the Bible as a narrative source for the community of faith's identity, its doctrines and morals. In his own work on the history of Christian doctrine, Lindbeck understands the Bible pre-eminently as a religious text that constitutes the reality of the world for those who use this text as authoritative for thought and action. In this way, Lindbeck writes, '[a] scriptural world is thus able to absorb the universe'; it 'supplies the interpretative framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality' (1984: 117). An interpretative framework is set by the parameters of the biblical narrative itself. Structured from creation to apocalypse, the Bible's meta-canonical narrative lends itself easily to conceptualization in the structure of theological doctrines. Since Anselm of Canterbury, the structure of Western theology's system has been relatively stable, from the doctrine of God and creation of the world, through redemption, terminating with eschatology (Helmer 2003a: 39-40). With readings of the Bible at literary and meta-canonical levels, the transition to theological doctrines has resulted in provoking questions not only of biblical interpretation, but also of philosophical and theological questions concerning the interpretation of reality, and even the truth question.

On the other side of literary and theological studies, the historical front has also been invigorated. Reflecting the current scholarly interest in cultural-historical studies is a renewed study in the history of religions. As Barr has summarized in detail (1999: 100-39, 455-61 and 530-40), influential scholars in this area are Albertz (1994), Gerstenberger (2002), Gunneweg (1993), Räisänen (1990; 1992) and Schmidt (1983). Scholarship in the history of religions poses to contemporary biblical theology the key question since Gabler concerning the relation between religion and theology. If biblical theology is to exercise its bridge-building function, it must clarify its answers to this question made imperative since Barth. By clarifying this relation, biblical theology has the potential for integrating a plurality of scholarly approaches into the posing of its methodological and substantive questions.

Similar to the pluralization of the classic historical/speculative intersection, the academy/church intersection is also stretched in fresh directions. In the contemporary discussion, the tension between the two is informed by philosophical theories regarding the inevitable theory-laden perspective

of any research program. As a result, academic theological scholarship is beginning to see a new appreciation of confessionalization that widens its discussion partners beyond its traditional academic Protestant purview. In particular, Protestant denominations that are seeking to provide arguments for their theologies on academic grounds are warming to biblical theology as their foundational academic discipline. Implicitly allying themselves with Spener's recommendation that biblical theology provide the foundation for faith, proponents of these denominations are appealing to this discipline to both retain the Bible as norm and authority for their theological claims, and to show that these claims are derived from a scripture-immanent basis. The work of Fee can be cited in this context (1994). Furthermore, more literal positions on biblical claims, such as the resurrection, are rapidly occupying the center of the biblical theological stage: for example, Wright's most recent work on the resurrection (2003).

In addition to the intra-mural Christian discussion, the field of Jewish biblical theology is currently witnessing a surge. It seems that Levenson's essay, 'Why Jews are not Interested in Biblical Theology', has provoked a discussion that has taken on new energy in precisely this field (1993). In his reply to Levenson, 'The Emerging Field of Jewish Biblical Theology', Sweeney advances the opposite thesis: Jews should be interested in biblical theology to (1) 'serve the interests of Jewish self-identity' and (2) 'to influence the field of Christian biblical theology' (2000: 85). By focusing on the distinctiveness of Jewish biblical theology, Sweeney's appeal articulates the growing consensus in biblical theology that religious commitments do play an important role in the academic theological discussion and, furthermore, that the academic discussion is enriched precisely by contributions issued from different religious perspectives. Especially in view of the discussion of Old Testament theology that has been primarily conducted by Christian scholars until now (Dohmen and Söding 1995), the participation by Jewish biblical theologians (Barr 1999: 286-311) contributes new insights on similarities and differences in regarding a book shared as holy by two religious traditions. Whether the term Jewish biblical theology or Jewish theology, as Sommer has recently proposed (2004), is more appropriate, this development promises to break new ground in inter-religious dialogue that is taking place on academic terrain.

The emergence of contemporary regional theologies is also providing biblical theology with an opportunity to build transcultural bridges. Recent studies of the Bible arising from distinct cultural locations propose these locations as formative for biblical studies and theology. Ground-breaking in this area are: Wimbush's studies of African-American hermeneutics

(Wimbush with Rodman 2000 and Wimbush 2003), a recent thematization of the global context as determinative for biblical theology (Ukpong *et al.* 2002), and Dube's postcolonial feminist readings of the Bible (2000 and 2001). These approaches demonstrate the potential of the Bible to speak to and to be read by a plurality of cultures and languages. If biblical theology honors the Bible's transcultural potential, then it must address questions of unity and diversity at both the textual and the theological level. In theological terms, transcultural unity reflects the common spirit that instantiates religious experiences at the level of individuality, while transcultural diversity reflects the divine pleasure at particularization.

Although biblical theology is an academic discipline that takes place at the intersection of religion and the academy, its object, the Bible, cannot be monopolized by these two institutions. The Bible is also an artifact of popular culture. Given the contemporary Western context of burgeoning spiritual—though not necessarily religious—interests, the Bible has appeared as a piece of cultural memory, permeating secular culture without imposing any hegemonic claims onto its use. Western popular culture is, in fact, saturated with biblical tropes. Pop music unabashedly borrows from biblical imagery to create polyvalence in texts; pop stars boldly wear religious icons as symbols of rebellion and fashion. If the Bible is such a cultural possession, then biblical theology can also study the Bible's reception by popular culture in order to build a bridge to the secular world. Theology has a responsibility to establish its relevance in religious institutions that themselves are squarely located in the world. Biblical theology can support the bridge already built by the Bible by using its resources to influence, educate and enlighten a world that sometimes badly needs theological clarity and careful distinctions.

Conclusion

As the book of all books, the Bible continues to fascinate religious, scholarly and secular imaginations. As a book that is to be read like any other book, the Bible continues to be the object of the love of knowledge. In this essay I have thematized the parameters of biblical theology as a bridge-building discipline at an epistemological intersection and at an academic/ecclesial intersection. I have also sketched possibilities for furthering the biblical theological discussion by outlining the necessity of posing philosophical questions, of clarifying presupposed text theoretical issues, and of inviting hermeneutical questions to provoke theological discussion. A biblical theology can keep its subject matter alive by pressing its biblical

studies' side to be oriented to theological concepts, thereby establishing the relevance of biblical insights for the formation of theological theory. And, conversely, biblical theology can press its theological side to make judicious use of biblical concepts to guide the formation of theological judgments that truly address contemporary questions. In this way, biblical theology can bridge many waters by participating in life's currents and can contribute its unique viewpoint to a world thirsting for the waters of eternal life (cf. Jn 4.14).

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