

The Journey of Reading Scripture

BY J. TODD BILLINGS

The developing school of theological interpretation of Scripture encourages us to read the Bible as God's instrument of self-revelation and saving fellowship. This school of interpretation approaches Scripture as part of a transformative journey of coming to know the Triune God in Christ.

A wide range of voices claims that a crisis of biblical interpretation is taking place. But contrary to many pundits, the crisis does not simply involve a decline in the Bible's authority. For even when the Bible is interpreted authoritatively, it is not necessarily interpreted as *Christian Scripture*.

Consider, for example, a recent Christian bestseller that offers a "Bible diet." The book claims to enable better concentration, improve appearance, increase energy, and reverse the process of "accelerated aging." To want to improve your appearance and energy level, do you have to be interested in knowing God or Jesus? Of course not. There is nothing intrinsically Christian about the advice.

Similar trends appear in the numerous Christian books that promise biblical solutions for success in finances, relationships, and family. These books can help Christians see implications of their faith for various aspects of life, but they often communicate that the Bible is the authoritative answer book to felt needs and problems. This message centers on the individual and his or her preferences, and does not interpret the Bible in a way that calls felt needs into question or looks beyond them.

It is not just well-meaning writers but also many biblical scholars who fail to approach the Bible as Christian Scripture. Some approach it only as ancient history, using it as a piece of evidence in answering archeological or sociological questions about the ancient world. Other scholars try to reconstruct the thought of a book or author. A scholar can write an in-depth essay about Paul's theology without ever considering that God could be addressing the scholar's own time through Paul's ancient texts.

Partly due to the inadequacies of many popular and scholarly approaches to the Bible, an increasing number of scholars have advocated an approach toward Scripture called the "theological interpretation of Scripture." They encourage us to read the Bible as God's instrument of self-revelation and saving fellowship. This school of interpretation includes a wide range of practices, but all of them move us toward approaching Scripture as part of a transformative journey of coming to know the Triune God in Christ.

THE SPACIOUS RULE OF FAITH

When examining how we interpret Scripture, we should pay attention to our functional theology of Scripture: how our use of Scripture reflects particular beliefs about what the Bible is. Two common approaches to using Scripture today are particularly problematic.

Some start with a detailed blueprint of what the Bible says, then read individual passages of Scripture as if they were the concrete building blocks to fit into the blueprint. They translate each passage into a set of propositions or "biblical principles" that fit the established details of the blueprint. With this approach, the task of interpreting Scripture becomes a matter of discovering where in our theological system a particular Scripture passage fits.

Others prefer a smorgasbord approach. Imagine a huge cafeteria loaded with food of many kinds for many tastes; you are at the cafeteria with the members of a small-group Bible study. Can you imagine what some of the other members of the group would choose to eat? I suspect that there might even be patterns based on age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, but each person chooses which foods to feast on based on his or her appetite. In the smorgasbord approach to Scripture, the Bible becomes the answer book for our felt needs and personal perspectives.

With both the blueprint and smorgasbord approaches, we are in control. We end up using Scripture for our own purposes. The Bible may be viewed as authoritative, but it either provides confirmation of our preconceived ideas or divine advice for felt needs.

Blueprint readers rightly sense that one cannot read the Bible without bringing some theological presuppositions to the table; we each come with assumptions when we open its pages. Smorgasbord readers rightly believe that the Bible is a book through which God addresses us; it is not just a book of ancient history, doctrine, or worldview. A theological reading of Scripture makes use of both of these assumptions, yet in a deeper and fuller way.

Instead of providing a detailed blueprint, a theological reading brings a map for a journey of faith seeking understanding. The map does not give all the answers; in particular moments of the journey, we can be confused and puzzled by what we find in a particular Scripture passages. But we trust that in this journey, the God of Scripture encounters us again and again, both with comforting signs of his presence and surprises that confound us, yet may open new vistas. Reading Scripture is not about solving puzzles, but discerning a mystery. Through Scripture, we encounter no less than the mysterious Triune God himself.

Early Christians taught that Christians should—indeed, must—approach Scripture with a basic theological map in hand. By the second century, Irenaeus spoke of the “rule of faith” as a way to understand the basic Christian story with which orthodox Christians (versus Gnostics) should approach the Bible. This “rule of faith” was not the invention of detached scholars, but an account of the gospel and Christian identity rooted in baptism: one reads Scripture as a follower of Jesus, baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, early baptismal creeds—statements of faith—had a Trinitarian character (e.g., the Apostles’ Creed) that provided the basic content of the “rule of faith.”

Why was and is this necessary? The Bible is a large book, and even careful readers can interpret it in a variety of ways. But not all of these ways are *Christian* ways of reading Scripture. For example, one can read the Bible in a way that sees the God of Israel as a severe, judging God, as the antithesis of the God of Jesus, who is supposedly only a merciful God without judgment. But this is not a Christian reading of the Old and New Testaments. In the early centuries of Christianity, the rule of faith helped make sure that Christians held the Old Testament with the New—that the God of creation and covenant is also the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

The Trinitarian rule of faith has been a critical element of Bible reading from the early church through the Middle Ages and the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers emphasized that Scripture (not church tradition) was the only final “rule of faith.” Yet, Luther, Calvin, and others made it clear that they heartily affirmed a basic, Trinitarian theological approach to Scripture. In interpreting the Old Testament as well as the New, Reformers sought to read Scripture in light of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God’s promises in creation and covenant, applying it to the Church as disciples of Christ.

Many contemporary scholars have sought to revive this basic Trinitarian rule of faith. For example, as R. R. Reno says in the preface to the *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, the multivolume series “advances upon the assumption that the Nicene [Trinitarian] tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture.”¹

The term *rule* in “rule of faith” is best thought of in terms of “measure.” The rule gives a sense of the center as well as the periphery in biblical interpretation. It does not decide the meaning of specific Scripture passages in advance. Instead, it gives a sense of scope in the journey of reading Scripture, forging a path to deeper fellowship with the Triune God. It gives us a map for our journey into a new country. The new world into which God brings us via Scripture is wide and spacious, but it also has a specified character. It is a journey on the path of Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit in anticipation of the final, culminating communion with the Triune God.

THE BIBLE IS FOR DISCIPLES

Does the theological interpretation of Scripture require specialized training? While the movement’s adherents (Kevin Vanhoozer, Joel Green, and Stephen Fowl, among others) encourage engagement with pre-modern commentators and modern biblical criticism, they have great confidence in the ability of ordinary congregations to approach the Bible as God’s Word.

Two dynamics are often overlooked in contemporary approaches to biblical interpretation, especially those grounded in historical-critical assumptions. The first is the work of the Spirit in illuminating Scripture, and the second is interpreting the Scripture “in Christ.” Congregations around the world, though, cultivate a sense of these two realities as they pray for the Spirit’s illumination, worship the Triune God, and apply Scripture to their community of discipleship and witness. Of course, these practices are

no guarantee of faithful biblical interpretation, but they are indispensable dynamics for interpreting the Bible *as Scripture*. The indwelling of the Spirit in the Christian community, as one located “in Christ,” uniquely equips the Christian community to interpret the Bible as God’s Word.

Approaching the Bible with such theological assumptions is anathema to many biblical scholars today. Theological convictions, many assume, are an adversary rather than a potential ally of faithful biblical interpretation. There is a genuine concern behind this objection: aren’t we supposed to get our theology from the Bible rather than impose it on the Bible? Those who object in this way usually grant that we cannot be unbiased

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in our interpretation, but add that we should “bracket” our theological presuppositions as we approach the Bible.

While it is right to seek our theology from the Bible, others note that theological convictions and practices like worship make Bible reading more fruitful and faithful rather than less. As Reno claims in the preface to the Brazos series, theological doctrine “is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions.”²

Consider the following scenario: as a congregation gathers, they give thanks for the love and majesty of God the Father, worship Jesus Christ as their saving Lord, and confess the communal working of the Holy Spirit. These are basic features of healthy Christian worship. Worship both expresses and shapes the loves and theological convictions of the worshippers. Now, after the opening of worship, we hear a text from the Gospel of Luke—containing a narrative and the words of this same Jesus. Do we really want to ask the congregation to “bracket” their love and conviction that Jesus is Lord at that moment? The congregation is approaching Luke’s text with a certain disposition, but that disposition can actually make the hearing of Luke’s text *more* fruitful rather than less for the sake of Christian discipleship—particularly if it displays an openness to hear through the text from Jesus Christ as Lord of the Church.

Of course, a theological reading of Scripture can have pitfalls as well. But the solution is not to surrender the Bible to scholarly experts. Rather, it is to regain a sense of the place of Scripture in God’s drama of redemption, and to enter into the task of reading Scripture with openness to being reformed and reshaped on our path of dying to the old self and living into our identity in Christ.

THE PLACE OF COMMENTARIES

Still, we should also avoid another extreme: interpreting the Bible alone, without others. In our day, some assume that the individual is an omni-competent biblical interpreter. No need for commentators, no need for a community of faith; just me, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit.

While sometimes the slogan “sola scriptura” is used to justify such an approach, it is a serious distortion of that Protestant principle. During the Reformation, the Bible was not read alone. Instead, communities of worship and discipleship were the setting of biblical interpretation. Moreover, Reformation exegetes consulted exegetes through the ages, and refined their knowledge of biblical languages and other critical skills of biblical interpretation.

The theological interpretation of Scripture movement seeks to reunite what modernity has divided: discipleship and critical study of the Bible. For example, in *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine said that Jesus Christ, as the incarnate God-human, is the “road” to our heavenly homeland.³ Thus, all Scripture is interpreted in light of Jesus Christ. All scriptural interpretation must lead to our growth in love of God and neighbor.

Along with this, however, Augustine claimed that knowing Greek and Hebrew is very valuable for interpreting Scripture. He said that reading Scripture engages the disciplines of history, rhetoric, logic, and what we would call cultural anthropology. Like Augustine, the theological interpretation movement has sought to bring together discipleship with the academic study of Scripture.

While historical-critical study of the Bible is both necessary and helpful, on its own it is not sufficient for interpreting the Bible as Christian Scripture. Building upon Augustine, we can say that a Christian interpretation of Scripture necessarily leads to love of God and neighbor; if it fails to edify in this way, then it does not matter how much linguistic and historical study was done. It is not interpreting the Bible as Christian Scripture.

For example, how should one interpret as Christian Scripture the Psalms which curse the Psalmist's enemies? Is a historical-critical inquiry on its own adequate, forcing one to set aside consideration of Christ and his command to love our enemies? No. Instead, with the bulk of pre-modern commentators, we need to interpret the Psalms in a way that leads us deeper into Christ and his way of discipleship. Using these Psalms to hate our personal enemies rather than love them is not an exegetical option. There is not just one way to do this—and pre-modern commentators can engage our imagination about the possibilities. Indeed, the clarity with which pre-modern commentators face the question of how to interpret the Bible as God's Word—even difficult parts of the Bible—is one of the reasons for renewed interest in pre-modern interpretation today. As Thomas Oden notes in his *General Introduction to the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, "a profound yearning broods within the heart of evangelicals for the recovery of the history of exegesis."⁴

Thus, it is fruitful not only to interpret Scripture with a functional Trinitarian rule in a community of faith, but—particularly for those designated to teach or preach the Bible—to read it with pre-modern as well as modern commentators. Yet, regarding methods of reading the Bible, Fuller Seminary New Testament scholar Joel Green reminds us that "any and all methods must be tamed in relation to the theological aims of scripture and the ecclesial context within which the Bible is read

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as scripture.”⁵ As suggested by Augustine, a wide variety of interpretive methods can be used, but they are used toward the end of reading Scripture as God’s powerful word to the Church, a community of disciples growing in the image of Christ.

CHRIST IN FOCUS

A key feature of much work in theological interpretation has been the revival of some form of “spiritual” interpretation, such that the Old Testament not only has a historical sense, but also a spiritual sense – in the form of allegory or typology – that extends to Christ and his Church.

But doesn’t such reading violate a historical reading of the text itself?

It depends on what one means by “historical.” For the majority of Christian history, the historical or literal sense of the Old Testament did not mean that exegetes tried to “unthink” Jesus when they read the Old Testament. Rather, it generally referred to the narrative flow of the Old Testament itself. Thus, in its best instances, the Old Testament’s narrative continued to have integrity even as “spiritual” senses referring to Christ were layered on top of it. The Reformers rightly protested against aberrant forms of allegory that lost sight of the historical sense, but they continued to give spiritual readings of the Old Testament in various forms.

This approach to the Old Testament is rooted in the New Testament itself. For New Testament writers, it is not just the occasional messianic psalm or prophecy that applies to Christ. They read all of Israel’s Scriptures in light of Christ. For example, Hebrews begins with seven citations of Old Testament texts from diverse contexts and genres (the Psalms, Deuteronomy, and 2 Samuel), yet all of them are applied to Christ. How could this be? It is not because of quirky hermeneutics but because of who Jesus Christ *is* in God’s economy of salvation:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being....

Hebrews 1:1-3a

The Son is the fulfillment of such divergent Old Testament passages because even though “our ancestors” did not recognize it in their day, the Son is the Creator who is also the “heir of all things” and has been made known in history in Jesus Christ.

This means that spiritual readings of the Old Testament should not annihilate the Old Testament narrative. When the risen Jesus opened the minds of his companions on the Emmaus road “to understand the scriptures,” he did not suggest that the “law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms”

had been displaced; rather, they had been “fulfilled” in himself (Luke 24:44–45). In the words of Daniel Treier, reading Scripture in a “Christ-centered” way “makes possible spiritual participation in the realities of which Scripture speaks.”⁶

READING WITH CONFIDENCE AND HUMILITY

As John Webster notes, “reading Scripture is an episode in the history of sin and its overcoming; and overcoming sin is the sole work of Christ and the Spirit.” Thus, “reading Scripture is inescapably bound to regeneration.”⁷ As such, we read Scripture expecting to receive a divine word — one of comfort but also of confrontation. God’s Word renews us as it confronts our cultural and personal idols, provides light for our path, and equips us for service in the world.

Thus, to read the Bible as Scripture involves delighting in, memorizing, and dwelling on it. When tempted by Satan, Jesus responds with Scripture he has memorized (Matthew 4:1–11). Colossians 3:16 admonishes believers to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” The Gospel of John shows a Trinitarian dynamic of dwelling in Christ’s word, for the Spirit sent to believers will “glorify” Christ, and “will take what is mine and declare it to you” (16:14). Delighting and dwelling in God’s Word is supremely practical, relating to our finances, family, and bodies. However, we should not enter into it for worldly “success,” but rather as part of our dying to the old self and participating in the Spirit’s new creation in Christ.

In this way, we can read the Bible with confidence, knowing that God acts powerfully through Scripture — in corporate worship, through prayer and memorization, through teaching and witness. We do not have to master Scripture and then make it relevant to our lives; through Scripture, God opens up a new place for us to dwell, a place of fellowship with Christ on a path leading to love of God and neighbor.

We never finish the journey of sanctification in this life. Likewise, we never finish our journey of meditating on Scripture, experiencing it anew in word and sacrament. We wrestle with it even as it sometimes tells us what we do not want to hear, as well as confirming and building up our new identity in Christ. In all of this, Scripture’s value to us is inexhaustible because the Spirit uses Scripture to testify to Christ, the Word of the Father. In reading the Bible as Scripture, we are not the masters. We are being mastered and enlivened by the Triune God.⁸

NOTES

1 R. R. Reno, series preface in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 13–14.

2 *Ibid.*, 14.

3 Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, I.17.

4 Thomas C. Oden, general introduction in Andrew Louth, ed., *Genesis 1–11*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament, volume I (Downers Grove, IL:

InterVarsity Press, 2001), xxi.

5 Joel B. Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007), 125.

6 Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 54.

7 John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, *Current Issues in Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 88-89.

8 This article is adapted from my essay “How to Read the Bible: New strategies for interpreting Scripture turn out to be not so new – and help deepen our life in Christ,” *Christianity Today*, 55:10 (October 2011), 24-30; available online at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/october/how-to-read-bible.html.



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