Trinity, revelation, and reading: a theological introduction to the Bible and its interpretation

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TRINITY, REVELATION,
AND READING

A THEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION TO
THE BIBLE AND ITS INTERPRETATION

Scott R. Swain
Nevertheless, a few further refinements are necessary. The rule of faith is derived from the rule of love. Therefore, a genuine understanding of this rule to allow our understanding of the Bible to be enriched as we come to better understand the Trinitarian community. As Daniel J. Boedeker has pointed out, character traits influence religious practice considerably. Fourth, because the Christian community, to employ it is simply to say that we are motivated to approach the text in light of the failure to orient our interpretation of Scripture in light of God and neighbor must be investigated through his mighty acts operating and renewing work, as the community, and aimed at a relationship that is rooted in the context of our covenant. It is simply to say that we are intrinsic to Scripture, the rule of love in interpretation, the fundamental rule of biblical interpretation is called “spiritual reading” (lectio divina): “Reading (lectio) is a linear act, but spiritual (divina) reading is not—any of the elements may be at the heart of this.”

CHAPTER 5

READING AS AN ACT OF COVENANT MUTUALITY, PART TWO: THE PRACTICE OF READING AND THE SHAPE OF INTERPRETATION

I. Introduction

In the previous chapter we considered the implications of the doctrines of regeneration, sanctification, and the church for our understanding of the act of reading. In the present chapter, we will reflect more directly upon the practical dimensions of Bible reading and interpretation. As we will see, the Christian act of biblical interpretation has a characteristic shape. That shape is determined by the nature of the God who speaks to us through Christ and covenant, the nature of Holy Scripture, and the nature of Christian renewal in the church. The shape of Christian reading is not, strictly speaking, a method. Nor is it a fixed sequence. Instead, the four “phases” of interpretation—prayer, explication, meditation, and application, constitute one multidimensional act. Before turning to a discussion of these four

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1 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1.2, 722, 727. Eugene Peterson explains the dynamics of this multidimensional act, which historically has been called “spiritual reading” (lectio divina): “Reading (lectio) is a linear act, but spiritual (divina) reading is not—any of the elements may be at the
phases, however, it is important to discuss the broader context of scriptural reading practices within which these four phases of interpretive action can excel. Too often, we think about biblical interpretation apart from the ways in which churches, families, and individual Christians regularly use the Bible.² The present chapter hopes to remedy this situation, at least in part, by drawing attention to the public and private practices of Bible reading which enable and sustain interpretive excellence.

II. Reading Scripture: Public and Private

It seems too simple to say, but the best way to become a good reader of the Bible is to become a reader of the Bible. The challenges we face in becoming skilled interpreters are enormous. Scripture's literary forms and figures of speech are diverse. Biblical history covers multiple millennia and its teachings are too numerous to count. Consequently, just as those who would become faithful guides must know their territory, so too, those who would gain interpretive competence must acquire an extensive familiarity with the vast terrain of biblical teaching. Two

foreground at any one time. There is a certain natural progression from one to another, but after separating them in order to understand them we find that in actual practice they are not four discrete items that we engage in one after another stair-step fashion. Rather than linear the process is more like a looping spiral in which all four elements are repeated, but in various sequences and configurations. What we are after is noticing, seeing the interplay—elements not marching in precise formation but one calling forth another then receding to give place to another, none in isolation from the others but thrown together in a kind of playful folk dance. . . . Each of the elements must be taken seriously; none of the elements may be eliminated; none of the elements can be practiced in isolation from the others. In the actual practice of lectio divina the four elements fuse, interpenetrate. Lectio divina is a way of reading that becomes a way of living." (Eugene H. Peterson, Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006], 91). For an historical introduction to the practice of lectio divina within the context of monasticism, see Jean Leclercq, The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), chap. 5.

² Hughes Oliphant Old, in the Worship of the Church [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998].

³ For a recent theological perspective, see The Divine Voice:基督的声音 [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007].

⁴ Paul J. Griffiths, "Reading the Word of the Bible, 662.

³ Hughes Oliphant Old, in the Worship of the Church [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998].
DIFFERENCES IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE READING

...important means for acquiring such familiarity include the public and private reading of Scripture.

II.a. The Public Reading and Exposition of Scripture

Historically, the public reading and exposition of Scripture has played a major role in Judaism and Christianity. According to Hughes Oliphant Old, this activity “was a cardinal characteristic of Jewish worship.” Moses commanded the priests and the elders of Israel to read the law when they gathered every seven years to celebrate the Feast of Booths (Deut. 31.9-11). Men and women, young and old, citizen and sojourner were to be included in this assembly in order that they might “hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law” (Deut. 31.12).

When Israel returned to the Promised Land after the exile, Ezra the scribe read the scriptures to the people, interpreting their meaning so that the people might understand (Neh. 8.1-8). The Gospels tell us that Jesus participated in this activity as well (Lk. 4.16). Given the firm roots of this practice in Judaism, it is no surprise that, when instructing Timothy regarding his duties in public worship, Paul encouraged him to devote himself “to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, and to teaching” (1 Tim. 4.13).

The public reading and exposition of Holy Scripture is important for a variety of reasons. First, when we consider the fact that “only a tiny minority of Christians have been literate or are so now,” it is clear that for many the public ministry of the Word is the most vital means of exposure to the Bible and its teaching. Second, when the reading and exposition of the scriptures are performed by someone who has taken care to...
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study the text, and who is therefore able to read and explain the text in light of its own cadences, rhythms, and emphases, we gain a better appreciation for the scriptures’ status as “the living and active” Word of God (Heb. 4.12). Third, by providing us with a continuous, orderly exposure to the Word of God in all its parts and portions, and by providing us with a regular opportunity for assembling around that Word as a community, the public reading and preaching of the Bible can help nurture in us the habits of attentiveness. And in visual cultures that seem to foster inattentiveness, this is a precious provision indeed. Fourth, by depending upon the skilled reading and exposition of another, our horizons of biblical understanding are broadened beyond the limitations that characterize a merely individual reading of the Bible. Fifth, and most importantly, the public reading and exposition of Scripture is among the “outward and ordinary means of grace,” i.e., those divinely appointed ecclesial practices by which God communicates the spiritual gifts of Christ and covenant to his people. The scriptures pronounce a special blessing upon those who publicly read and hear their message (1 Tim. 4.16; Rev. 1.3). The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q 155) summarizes the matter as follows:

The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.

Clearly, therefore, the significance of the public ministry of the Word cannot be overemphasized.

7 Hughes Oliphant Old, The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, 3: The Medieval Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 167–68.

II.b. The Private Reading

Along with the public reading also has a vital and constructive competence. In order to note that the contrasting readings is not equivalent to “individual” reading, what happens within the context of the worship and that which happens outside of the bounds of the assembly, order, and its being, order, and that which is called to engage in the manner of Holy Scripture.

Both testaments being associated with teaching (Deut. 6.6–9; 2 Tim. 3.16). The Bible is a lifelong, construction to interpretation are given of parents and other appropriated and externally reading, memorizing, and therefore incumbent as an interpreter.

In On Christian  and instructive discussion on biblical interpretation, a greater proficiency Augustine, the “first to the Bible is “to know them and commit them to memory,” ultimately serves a number.

8 Augustine, On Christ
9 Indeed, for Augustine, is that we might know. This is emphasized by Matthew, of biblical reading and to know the divine text but to know the is emphasized by Matthew, Theology of Biblical Interpretation [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 2008], esp. ch.
reading and explain rhythms, and emphases, Scriptures' status as "the Word of God." Third, by providing access to the Word of God by reading us with a regular Word as a community, the Bible can help nurture and in visual cultures as a precious provision for skilled reading and biblical understanding that characterizes a fifth, and most important, of Scripture is among those divinely God communicates present to his people. The upon those who pub- (Deut. 6.6-9; 2 Tim. 3.14-15). Familiarization and facility with the Bible is a lifelong process and many of the skills requisite to interpretation are learned at an early age under the tutelage of parents and other teachers. However, these skills must be appropriated and exercised by individuals as well. The duty of reading, memorizing, and familiarizing oneself with the Bible is therefore incumbent upon everyone who would gain proficiency as an interpreter.

In *On Christian Doctrine*, perhaps the most influential text on biblical interpretation ever written, Augustine provides an instructive discussion of some of the ways in which we may attain a greater proficiency as readers of the scriptures. According to Augustine, the "first rule" for becoming a skilled reader of the Bible is "to know these books" and "to read them so as to commit them to memory." Though scriptural memorization ultimately serves a number of sanctifying ends (cf. Ps. 119.11),

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9 Indeed, for Augustine, the fundamental reason for memorizing Scripture is that we might know "the will of God" (*On Christian Doctrine*, 2.9.14). This fits with the broader patristic-medieval synthesis regarding the goal of biblical reading and interpretation, which was not simply to know the divine text but to know the divine teacher through the text. This point is emphasized by Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2008), esp. chap. 3.

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also serves the process of reading. Scripture is characterized by a rich intertextuality. On almost every page, the Bible either quotes or alludes to other biblical passages. Closely related to this phenomenon, the Bible projects an internally coherent symbolic world. Accordingly, symbols in one text shape the way we interpret symbols in another text. Given this fact, much of the biblical message will be lost on us if we are not intimately familiar with the symbolic and allusive features of its textual reality. Memorization is one of the best ways of establishing such intimate knowledge.

For similar reasons, Augustine also encourages us to become familiar with the languages, idioms, chronologies, and customs of the Bible, including even the labor customs exhibited therein, inasmuch as a familiarity with the latter will help us appreciate how Scripture "employs figures of speech derived from these arts." The Bible is in many ways a foreign country. Those who travel abroad are willing to learn the dialects, customs, and etiquette of foreign countries. So too should the reader of the scriptures be willing to learn the "local color" of the Bible's idiomatic, social, and cultural landscape.

Beyond matters of form, which are by no means incidental, Augustine also counsels us to study with great diligence the doctrinal substance of Holy Scripture, its "rules of life" and "rules of faith." As we will read a novel with greater understanding if we have some grasp of its main characters, plot, and themes, similarly, we will read the Bible with greater understanding if we have some grasp of its theological and ethical subject matter. John Calvin inherited this Augustinian insight regarding the hermeneutical function of Christian doctrine and wrote his Institutes of the Christian Religion in order "to treat the chief and weightiest matters comprised in the Christian philosophy" and thereby to provide "a key to open a way for all children of God into a good

11 See Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 2.11.16-2.29.46.
12 Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 2.30.47. According to Augustine, learning to distinguish between the Bible's literal and figurative forms of speech is one of the reader's most important tasks. It is Augustine's attention to this distinction that ultimately gives birth to the medieval fourfold sense.
and right understanding of Holy Scripture.” Augustine’s counsel is repeated in Puritan handbooks of interpretation as well. Unfortunately, many modern biblical interpreters found little use and even contempt for Christian doctrine’s hermeneutical function. Thankfully, however, the tide seems to be changing.

III. Four Phases of Biblical Interpretation

With these observations in place, it is time to consider in a more formal sense the work of biblical interpretation. The necessity and nature of interpretive work is helpfully described by Abraham Kuyper:

In Holy Scripture God the Lord offers us ectypal theology in an organically connected section of human life, permeated by many Divine agencies, out of which a number of blindly brilliant utterances strike out as sparks from fire. But the treasures thus presented are without further effort not yet reflected in and reproduced by the consciousness of regenerated man. To realize this purpose our thinking consciousness must descend into this gold mine, and dig out from its treasure, and then assimilate that treasure thus obtained; and not leave it as something apart from the other content of our consciousness, but systematize it with all the rest into one whole.

This prayerful work of digging and assimilating the treasures of Holy Scripture determines the characteristic shape of biblical interpretation. To that characteristic shape we now turn.

III.a. Prayer

It is striking how many times in Psalm 119—an extended meditation on God’s written Word, the Torah—the psalmist begs for

16 For a recent attempt to retrieve Augustine’s interpretive approach, see Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).
17 Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, 567.
divine assistance in order that he might understand and obey God's word. The following list is merely representative, not exhaustive:

Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes (v. 5).
Let me not wander from your commandments (v. 10).
Blessed are you, O Lord, teach me your statutes (v. 12).
Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word (v. 17).
Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law (v. 18).
Put false ways far from me and graciously teach me your law (v. 29).
I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart (v. 32).
Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end (v. 33).

The psalmist prays for an obedience that is steadfast (v. 5) and consistent (v. 10), that excels (v. 32) and perseveres (v. 33). He also acknowledges his dependence upon divine grace for spiritual perception (v. 18), receptivity (v. 32), and understanding (vv. 12, 29, 33).

Prayer is the most rational possible course of action for the Christian reader of Holy Scripture. After all, in Holy Scripture we face a grand and glorious terrain of revealed truth, so wonderful that the possibility of taking it all in is immediately ruled out. And yet, we are called to meditate on this Word (Josh. 1.8; Ps. 1.2), to walk in it (Ps. 119.1), and to praise it (Ps. 56.4, 10).

The sheer magnitude of scriptural teaching alone makes our calling impossible apart from divine assistance. Add to this our innate blindness, our fallen will and passions, and our tendency toward sloth in this calling and the desperate nature of our situation as readers becomes quite clear. If there is to be any possibility of success in reading Holy Scripture, the Spirit of truth and light must shine upon us: opening our eyes, renewing our wills, and awakening us to action.

The good news is that God has promised to bless our reading. Thus Paul encourages Timothy: "Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything" (2 Tim. 2.7).
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This is perhaps the most precious promise that exists for the reader of Holy Writ. We may confidently apply ourselves to this otherwise impossible task because God has promised to grant us success— "the Lord will give you understanding." According to Whitaker: "He that shall be content to make such a use of these means, and will lay aside his prejudices and party zeal, which many bring with them to every question, will be enabled to gain an understanding of the scriptures, if not in all places, yet in most; if not immediately, yet ultimately." 18 In prayer, exegetical reason takes its proper place and, like Mary, sits at the feet of Jesus (cf. Lk. 10.39). And because it is confident in God's fatherly generosity, exegetical reason asks, seeks, knocks—and finds (Lk. 11.10–13).

III.b. Explication

Whereas prayer gives voice to the Christian's longing for the pure milk of the word (1 Pet. 2.2), explication represents "the descriptive moment" of biblical interpretation. 19 Each text of Holy Scripture says one thing and not another. Moreover, each text says what it says in a fixed grammatical and literary shape and within a specific historical context. In explication, the reader gives "reverent attentiveness to the particularity of the texts in all their detail." 20 According to David Yeago, "The first mandate of faithful ecclesial reading" is "Pay attention, meticulous attention, to what the scriptures say; strive to do justice to the way the words go in the text." 21 As Eugene Peterson observes, this "meticulous attention" that we give to following the words of the text in their grammatical, literary, and historical contexts— "exegesis" in the strict sense of that term— "is the farthest thing from pedantry." According to Peterson, "exegesis is an act of love. It is loving the one who speaks the words enough to get the words right. It is respecting the words enough to use every

18 Whitaker, Disputation, 473.
means we have to get the words right. Exegesis is loving God enough to stop and listen carefully to what he says.22

Explication calls for a host of related skills if it is to be done with excellence—and love needs no motivation for excellence in relation to the beloved! To the extent that giftedness and opportunity allow, therefore, reverent attentiveness to the way the words go requires: (1) That we learn the original languages of Holy Scripture (Hebrew and Greek—and Aramaic if we dare). (2) That we familiarize ourselves with the nature of figurative language, and that we gain competence in distinguishing figurative language from literal language. (3) In the case of particular texts, that we attend to the author, occasion, scope, and structure of a given text, and that we familiarize ourselves with what comes before and after a text in order to appreciate its place within the flow of an author’s argument. (4) That we compare our texts with parallel texts, whether texts by the same author, within the same genre, within the same canonical corpus, or texts bearing similar themes. (5) That we compare a given text with dissimilar texts for, given Scripture’s unity, when teaching from one passage seems to contradict another, this may indicate a misunderstanding on our part with respect to either passage.23

As we have seen already, the development of interpretive skill is always a communal enterprise. It is expedient therefore for the reader of Scripture to seek assistance from more seasoned and trustworthy readers as he or she seeks to develop exegetical judgment. Whitaker explains: “since the unlearned know not how to make a right use of these means, they ought to have recourse to other persons better skilled than themselves, to read the books of others, to consult the commentaries and expositions of learned interpreters, and to confer with others.” Whitaker’s counsel remains quite relevant, as individualistic approaches to biblical interpretation have achieved nearly normative status in many Christian circles. Nevertheless, he goes on to add an important qualification: “But, in the meanwhile, care must be taken that we do not ascribe too much to them, or suppose that their interpretations are to be received because they are theirs, but because they are supported by the authority of those who have labored at their labours advice, permission, or use them always cautiously still to retain our own light upon the aid of teachers of spiritual authority, nor should us to the exercise of our own exegetical judgment.

III.c. Meditation

Meditation represents “interpretation.25 In meditating on Scripture in light of Scripture, Scripture is a single book, having one central subject and one ultimate aim (the least we wish to understand, we must attend to the Author of Scripture as a whole.

Jesus reprimanded the people to Moses to find eternal life. Moses bore witness to his death and appeared to the two disciples of the eleven, Jesus rebuked and “interpreted to them” (Lk. 24.25) as an option for the Christ. Christ has come, “the way, the truth, and the life— that Christ, God, in One, that Christ suffered the light of these gospels, and as God, Christ’s incarnation as the whole of scriptural teaching.”

23 These five examples are drawn from Whitaker, Disputation, 468–72.
24 Whitaker, Disputation, 468.
26 Luther, Bondage of the Will.
Exegesis is loving God what he says. 22 That giftedness and opportuneness to the way the original languages of Hebrew and Aramaic if we dare). With the nature of figurative (hence in distinguishing figurative. (4) That we compare texts by the same author, same canonical corpus, or when teaching another, this may indicate a respect to either passage. 23 The moment of interpretive skill is expedient therefore for us to improve the exercise of our own exegetical reason.

Meditation represents “the reflective moment” of biblical interpretation. 25 In meditation, we seek to understand a given text of Scripture in light of Scripture’s overarching message. Ultimately, Scripture is a single book, written by one divine author, concerning one central subject matter (Christ and covenant), and with one ultimate aim (the love of God and neighbor). Therefore, if we wish to understand what God is saying in a given text, we must attend to the ultimate context of his self-communication, Scripture as a whole.

Jesus reprimanded the Pharisees for searching the Law of Moses to find eternal life while failing to see that the Law of Moses bore witness to his person and work (Jn. 5.39). When he appeared to the two disciples on the Emmaus Road, and later to the eleven, Jesus rebuked their failure to understand the prophets and “interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Lk. 24.25-27; cf. 44-47). Meditation, then, is not an option for the Christian reader of Holy Scripture. Because Christ has come, “the seals are broken, the stone rolled away from the door of the tomb, and that greatest of all mysteries brought to light—that Christ, God’s Son became man, that God is Three in One, that Christ suffered for us, and will reign forever.” 26 In the light of these gospel realities—the unveiling of the triune God, Christ’s incarnation, atonement, and enthronement—the whole of scriptural teaching is illumined (cf. 2 Cor. 3-4). We may

22 Whitaker, Disputation, 473.
24 Luther, Bondage of the Will, 71.
not therefore assume that we have understood any text of the Bible properly until we have considered how it pertains “to Jesus Christ and his messianic dominion.”

As Yeago observes, meditation has both “diachronic” and “synchronic” dimensions. The diachronic dimension of meditation requires us to reflect upon the redemptive-historical context of a given passage of Scripture, the way in which a text relates to and communicates the unfolding economy of redemption. In order to better appreciate the redemptive-historical context of a text, we may ask ourselves the following questions related to God’s kingdom, covenants, and Christ.

(1) With respect to the kingdom of God: Where does this text stand in relation to the unfolding drama of the kingdom? Specifically, to which of the following epochs of God’s unfolding kingdom does this text primarily attend? If ours is an Old Testament text, does its subject matter primarily concern:

1. The pattern of the kingdom: God’s good design for creation in the beginning
2. The perished kingdom: Humanity’s revolt and God’s curse
3. The promised kingdom: God’s promise in the protovangelium and the extension of that promise to the patriarchs

29 Note: These three themes are organically related in the scriptures and are separated here only for heuristic purposes.
30 For a helpful approach to analyzing the unfolding kingdom of God, see Graeme Goldsworthy, According to Plan; and idem, Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), esp. chap. 8.
31 Adapted from Vaughan Roberts, God’s Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 22-25. Compare this with Wright’s “five-act model” of redemptive history, discussed in The New Testament and the People of God, 139–44; more briefly outlined in, Scripture and the Authority of God, 89–93.
understood any text of the old or New Testament as diachronic and how it pertains "to Jesus Christ our Lord..."

meditative-historical context in which a text relates to the economy of redemption. In the meditative-historical context of

God: Where does this text fit into the drama of the kingdom? If ours is an Old Testament text, does its subject matter primarily concern:

the partial kingdom: The initial fulfillment of God's redemptive promises in the exodus, wilderness wanderings, conquest, and kingdom under David and Solomon

the prophesied kingdom: The history of decline in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, exile, and return; visions of Israel's restoration and the fulfillment of God's promised kingdom?

If ours is a New Testament text, does its subject matter primarily concern:

the present kingdom: The Father fulfills and establishes his kingdom through the incarnation, death, resurrection, and enthronement of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ

the proclaimed kingdom: Following the outpouring of the promised Spirit, the apostles announce the fulfillment of God's kingdom in Christ, gather and build the church, and anticipate Christ's return

the perfected kingdom: The consummation of the kingdom in a new heaven and new earth?

Having identified our text's epochal focus, we may ask: What are the relationships between this text and earlier and later moments in the unfolding story of the kingdom? What common patterns and/or surprising developments are there between this text and earlier/later kingdom events and epochs? How does this text anticipate and/or announce the kingdom that has come and is coming?

(2) With respect to covenant: Under what covenant administration does this text operate (e.g., Adamic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, New)? How are the divine name and the history of divine benevolence on display in this text? What covenant promises, stipulations, and sanctions are in view? How do the various characters in this text (God, individual members of the covenant community, the covenant community as a whole) demonstrate faithfulness or unfaithfulness with respect to the covenant(s)? What is the relationship between the covenantal themes on display in this text and the covenants that
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precede and follow this text in redemptive history? As Scott Hahn observes, the various biblical covenants are Janus-like: they look backward to earlier covenant administrations and forward to future covenant administrations. 32

(3) With respect to Christ: Where does this text fit in relationship to the climax of redemptive history, the gospel of Jesus Christ? If it is an Old Testament text, what patterns in this text (including persons, events, institutions, and themes) anticipate (either by way of positive comparison or by way of contrast) the Christ who comes to fulfill those patterns? 33 If it is an Old Testament text, does Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament require a transformation in the way that we apply the instruction of this text? 34 If so, what transformation does it require? If it is a New Testament text, how does it announce that Christ has indeed come and/or how does it spell out the implications of his coming? In what ways does this text present Jesus Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of all God's kingdom and covenantal purposes?

If a diachronic reading considers a given scriptural text in relation to the unfolding economy of redemption, a synchronic reading considers a given scriptural text as a slice of the canonical whole. The synchronic dimension of meditation involves reflecting upon a given passage in light of Scripture's status as a unified literary and thematic work. We must therefore ask: What recurring canonical motifs and symbols does our text display? And how does its distinctive presentation of these motifs and symbols enrich our understanding of God's word? In synchronic analysis, we contemplate the ways in which a specific text contributes to our overall understanding of Scripture's theological and ethical teaching as summarized in the rule of faith and the rule of love. How does our text contribute to the knowledge of God? What does it reveal about the way God manifests the fullness of life that is needed for life and way? A common error in interpretation occurs when such addressed in the text by the interpreters will seek insistent understanding of given text.

III.d. Application

God's final purpose is to bring their children, according to how they might offer their life and neighbor (Rom. 12:1). All Scripture is profit for our development (Rom. 3:16-17). Consequently, the rule of faith and rule of love states, “Without this can be only a historical idle speculation, in both cases, is that our observational assimilation.” 37

32 Kinship by Covenant.
33 See Edmund P. Clowney, Preaching Christ in All of Scripture (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); and Sidney Greidanus, Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
35 See Clowney’s discussion of the Zwinglian formula: “A common error in interpretation occurs when our knowledge of God’s final purpose is that our observational assimilation.”
37 Barth, Church Dogma.
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Does it reveal about the life that God requires of his people? And how does our text communicate the glory of the Mediator, who manifests the fullness of God’s grace and invests us with all that is needed for life and godliness?

The best approach to meditative understanding will seek to make both diachronic and synchronic connections to Scripture’s overarching message in light of the distinctive thematic emphases and literary shape of the text being analyzed. The question of meditative understanding is: What and how does this text refract the light of Christ and covenant in its own particular way? A common error in the “meditative phase” of biblical interpretation occurs when we draw interpretive conclusions about Christ and covenant from a particular text which are true as a matter of general theological principle but which are not as such addressed in that particular text. Mature biblical interpreters will seek instead to wed an increasingly rich and sophisticated understanding of Scripture’s overarching message with an increasingly attentive appreciation of the particularities of a given text.

III.d. Application

God’s final purpose in the gospel is to transform his redeemed children, according to the image of his beloved Son, so that they might offer themselves freely and fully in service to God and neighbor (Rom. 8.29; 12.1–2; 2 Cor. 3.18; Rev. 22.1–5). All Scripture is profitable for accomplishing this end (2 Tim. 3.16–17). Consequently, the reading of Scripture is not complete until we have considered application, “the appropriative moment” of biblical interpretation. As Karl Barth states, “Without this phase of interpretation, “observation can be only a historically aesthetic survey, and reflection only idle speculation, in spite of all the supposed openness to the object in both cases. The proof of our openness to the object is that our observation and reflection on what is said leads to assimilation.”

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32 See Clowney’s discussion in Preaching Christ, 32ff.
34 Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1.2, 738.
Because biblical interpretation is an act of covenant mutuality, a living engagement with the living God through his living Christ, biblical interpretation is always personal. As interpreters, we are always making decisions either for or against the truths, promises, and commands of a given text. There is no neutrality here. We are either in the process of further embracing Scripture's truths, promises, and commands or we are in the process of distancing ourselves from them. We are either bringing ourselves into further conformity to God's word or we are slowly drifting away from that which we have read and heard (cf. Heb. 2.1-4). The timing of biblical application therefore is always “Today” (see Heb. 3.7–4.13).

It is important to emphasize, therefore, that the appropriate moment is not simply a matter of turning the message of Scripture to my needs and ends. It is instead a matter of having myself, my needs, and my ends turned to and by God's word in Scripture. Commenting on Karl Barth's approach to the Bible, Eugene Peterson says:

Barth insists that we do not read this book and the subsequent writings that are shaped by it in order to find out how to get God into our lives, get him to participate in our lives. No. We open this book and find that page after page it takes us off guard, surprises us, and draws us into its reality, pulls us into participation with God on his terms.  

The reason for this is that the One who speaks in Holy Scripture always issues the lordly summons: “Follow me.” Understanding the Bible is never simply a matter of following its words. Understanding the Bible is ultimately a matter of following the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14.6). The process of understanding is, in other words, “identical to the process of conversion.”

Because application always emerges as a response to the triune Lord of the covenant, application requires us to ask: Who is God...

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38 Peterson, Eat This Book, 6.
39 Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1.2, 740.
40 Vanhoozer: “To understand the Bible is ultimately to begin walking its way” (Is There a Meaning in This Text?, 438).
41 Henri de Lubac, Scripture in the Tradition, 21.
As an act of covenant mutuality, God through his living personal. As interpreting either for or against the given text. There is no process of further embracing commands or we are in the them. We are either bringing to God’s word or we are what we have read and heard and application therefore is therefore, that the appropriate turning the message of instead a matter of having to and by God’s word in the Lord’s approach to the Bible, this book and the subsequent order to find out how participate in our lives. page after page it takes us into its reality, pulls terms.43

speaks in Holy Scripture “now me.”49 Understanding of following its words. is a matter of following the Life (Jn 14.6).40 The words, “identical to the as a response to the triune requires us to ask: Who is God

further discussion of what it means to “apply” the Covenant of Grace, see Brakel, Christian’s Reasonable Service, 1:449–51.
44 William Perkins’ discussion remains a wise and helpful resource on this topic. See his, Art of Prophesying, chap. 7.
Christ visibly and personally communicates himself and all his benefits to those who by faith receive them. And, through the sacraments, faithful recipients express their gratitude to God and extend their witness to the world. The community that with the Word faithfully receives the water, the wine, and the bread will be a community that renders glory to God and that reveals the gospel to the world.

The ultimate end of application is adoration. As John Webster states, the exercise of exegetical reason brings us “to apprehend, cleave to, and obey God—to ‘contemplate’ in the sense of intelligent adoration.” "My soul keeps your testimonies; I love them exceedingly” (Ps. 119.167). The God who knows and loves himself makes himself known to us in Holy Scripture that we might know and love him as well (Jn 17.3). To this end, application invokes the Spirit’s presence, who sheds abroad the love of God in our hearts (Rom. 5.5) and who sanctifies our self-offering to God (Rom. 12.1-2; 15.16); “Let my soul live and praise you, and let your rules help me” (Ps. 119.175).

IV. Conclusion

It is fitting to conclude the present chapter with Heinrich Bullinger’s summons to all faithful readers of Holy Scripture:

Let us therefore in all things believe the word of God delivered to us by the scriptures. Let us think that the Lord himself, which is the very living and eternal God, doth speak to us by the scriptures. Let us forevermore praise the name and goodness of him, who hath vouchsafed so faithfully, fully, and plainly to open to us, miserable and mortal men, all the means how to live well and holily. To him be praise, honour, and glory for evermore. Amen.

45 Ursinus, Commentary, 351-54.
47 Bullinger, Decades, 57.