

THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS ESSAY

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Theological hermeneutics – human understanding and interpretation in light of the identity and acts of the triune God – faces two problematic questions that, I believe, every biblical and/or theological scholar must be prepared to address. First, should the Bible be read in some special sense as divine revelation, or should we read the Bible like any other text? And second, should biblical and theological studies be one discipline, or two?

In what follows, I propose that we can best account for both (1) the relationship between general and special hermeneutics and (2) the relationship between biblical and theological studies by first attending to Scripture's theological location regarding its subject matter – the all-encompassing story, to which it bears witness, of how the triune God creates and redeems a people unto fellowship with himself.

In the first section, I will argue that the Scripture plays an authoritative role in the all-encompassing story to which it bears witness. After briefly summarizing the subject matter of Scripture, I will explain Scripture's role by explaining the relationships between Scripture and (1) God, (2) creation, and (3) God's people. With respect to God, Scripture is the authoritative and inspired word of the triune God, which God uses to reveal himself and redeem his creatures. With respect to creation, because Scripture's subject matter is all-encompassing, there is no domain outside of its purview. And with respect to God's people, Scripture is unavoidably and irreducibly ecclesiological.

Once we clarify the relationship between Scripture and its subject matter, if the story to which Scripture bears witness is true, then the relationships between (1) special and general hermeneutics and (2) biblical and theological studies become much less problematic. In the second section, therefore, I maintain that, because Scripture plays a uniquely authoritative role within its all-encompassing subject matter, theological hermeneutics encompasses both special and general hermeneutics. This has implications for two related hermeneutical triads: the general hermeneutical triad of author, text, and reader, and the special hermeneutical triad of historical, literary, and theological analysis. My approach calls for giving theology pride of place in both triads. That is, the divine author, the Christ-centered text, and the Spirit-led interpretive community of the Church are of primary importance. Nevertheless, due to the historically particular way(s) in which the triune God has revealed himself and redeemed his people, a theological hermeneutic requires attending to the historical and literary particularities of *all* authors, texts, and readers – especially to those involved in the interpretation of Holy Scripture.

Finally, in the third section, I offer an account of biblical and theological studies as a single multifaceted discipline, one that includes both biblical studies and the various theological sub-disciplines of historical, systematic, and pastoral theology. Because Scripture's subject matter is complex, unified, and irreducibly ecclesiological, biblical and theological studies need each other. This has, I believe, implications for how the contested and contentious fields of biblical theology and the theological interpretation of Scripture ought to relate to each other. Furthermore, because the Church's understanding of and participation in Scripture's subject matter is historically, conceptually, and practically complex, the theological subdisciplines need each other.

## SCRIPTURE'S THEOLOGICAL LOCATION

The admittedly diverse texts that make up the Old and New Testaments of Christian Scripture bear witness to a single unified narrative – a sequence of events with its own dramatic coherence and sense – of the triune God's creation and redemption of the world.<sup>1</sup> Crucially, Scripture plays an authoritative role in the all-encompassing story to which it bears witness. After briefly summarizing the subject matter of Scripture, I will explain Scripture's authoritative role by explaining the relationships between Scripture and (1) God, (2) creation, and (3) God's people.

### **Scripture's Subject Matter: The Story to Which It Bears Witness**

What is the story to which Scripture bears witness? It is the story of the identity and acts of God. Regarding God's *identity*, Scripture bears witness to the fact that God is triune. Granted, a common objection to the doctrine of the Trinity is the claim that it nowhere appears in the pages of Scripture. And indeed, despite the favorite trinitarian “proof-texts” in which Father, Son, and Spirit appear together, “no doctrine of the Trinity in the Nicene sense is present in [even] the New Testament.”<sup>2</sup> However, as Jenson persuasively argues, “the doctrine of the

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<sup>1</sup> Or, as Vanhoozer puts it, “the subject matter of the Bible, and hence of Christian faith and thought, is intrinsically dramatic.” Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “A Drama-of-Redemption Model: Always Performing?,” in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meadors, Counterpoints: Bible & Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 155. Indeed, as will be seen throughout this paper, I am heavily indebted to Vanhoozer's “theodrama” model.

<sup>2</sup> Rusch notes that the binitarian NT formulas are: Rom. 8:11; 2 Cor. 4:1; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:20; 1 Tim. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:21; and 2 John 1:13. The trinitarian NT formulas are: Matt 28:19; 1 Cor. 6:11; 12:4ff.; Gal. 3:11-14; Heb. 10:29; 1 Pet. 1:2. William G. Rusch, ed., *The Trinitarian Controversy*, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980), 2. Without denying the importance of such passages, Jenson rightly laments those who “scrabble around in the Bible for bits and pieces of language to cobble together into a sort of Trinity-doctrine – usually with intellectually lamentable and indeed sometimes heretical results.” Robert W. Jenson, “The Trinity in the Bible,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 68, no. 3–4 (2004): 196.

Trinity is indeed in Scripture, *if* one abandons modernity's notion that statement in so many words as formulated is the only way that a doctrine can appear there.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, the *narrative* of Scripture portrays the Trinity “by telling a history of God with us that displays three enactors of that history, each of which is indeed other than the other two and yet is at the same time the same God as the other two.”<sup>4</sup> These three *dramatis personae Dei*, or “persons of the divine drama,” appear throughout Scripture as God – “as a *persona* in Israel's story – of which he is simultaneously the author.”<sup>5</sup> YHWH – the God of Israel who created the world and delivered through the Exodus – is the Father by virtue of Jesus' address of him as such.<sup>6</sup> The Son is Jesus of Nazareth by virtue of this same address, but also in light of passages such as Psalm 2, appropriated in Hebrews 1 to identify Jesus as the divine Son.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the Spirit appears as a

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<sup>3</sup> Jenson, “The Trinity in the Bible,” 197. Emphasis original. Also, for a similar argument to Jenson's, which focuses on the text of Philippians 2, see David S. Yeago, “The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis,” *Pro Ecclesia* 3, no. 2 (1994): 152–64.

<sup>4</sup> Jenson, “The Trinity in the Bible,” 199. The divinity of the Father is perhaps the easiest to note throughout the Bible. On the divinity of the Son, see: John 1, 10; Col. 2; Phil. 2; and Heb. 1. On the divinity of the Spirit, see: 1 Cor. 2:11; Heb. 3:7-10; and 10:15-17. I have here stuck to the contours of Jenson's argument in lieu of the common arguments for the divinity of Son and Spirit, e.g.

<sup>5</sup> Jenson, 198–202. The phrase “*dramatis personae Dei*” is Jenson's adaptation of Tertullian's verbiage.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. John 5:16-23; Jenson, 199. Although this could perhaps be oversimplification, cf. Marshall's claim that “the Father is the God of Israel, the Son is the God of Israel, and the Holy Spirit is the God of Israel, yet they are not three Gods of Israel, but one God of Israel.” B. Marshall, “Do Christians Worship the God of Israel?” in *Knowing the Triune God* (ed. J. Buckley and D. Yeago; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 258; quoted by Geoffrey Wainwright, “Trinity,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 817. Nevertheless, Jenson's main point still stands, by virtue of Jesus' address to the Father establishing both Fatherhood and Sonship within the Trinity.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ps. 2:7; Heb. 1:1-14. In addition, Jenson focuses on showing the presence of the Trinity in the OT, where it is so often neglected, by positing that the Son shows up via the themes

*persona* of the story, first in the Old Testament as the Spirit of YHWH which gives life and “keeps the creation moving toward its fulfillment,” and then in the New Testament as the one in relationship between the Father and the Son, who is poured out upon the Church.<sup>8</sup> To say the very least, the classical formulation of the Trinity did not arise from a scriptural vacuum.

So much for Scripture’s witness to the triune *identity* of God. Regarding God’s *acts*, Scripture bears witness to the narrative of God’s creation and redemption of a people unto perfect fellowship with himself. Admittedly, there are ways of improving upon the common “creation – fall – redemption – consummation” framework for summarizing the story or “theo-drama” to which Scripture bears witness.<sup>9</sup> However, as long as it is emphasized that redemption includes Israel, Jesus, and the Church, I think that this four-part framework is sufficient for our purposes.

At creation, God extends the fellowship he has eternally enjoyed as Trinity outward to that which is not God, especially to human beings, his “image-bearers,” who were to extend his rule and reign throughout creation (Gen. 1-2). However, at the fall, humans reject both the Creator and their creaturely vocation, rupturing fellowship between God and humanity, between humanity and itself, and between humanity and the rest of creation (Gen. 3).

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of the angel of the Lord, the name of the Lord, and the glory of the Lord. Jenson, “The Trinity in the Bible,” 200–203.

<sup>8</sup> Jenson, 199, 204; cf. Gen. 1:2; Ps. 51:11; Isa. 11:2; Ezek. 37:1-14; John 14:15-31; Acts 1:7-8; 2:1-41; Rom. 1:4; 8:11.

<sup>9</sup> “Theo-drama” is a term borrowed from Hans Urs von Balthasar by Kevin Vanhoozer, who approvingly mentions N.T. Wright’s “five-act” framework (creation, fall, Israel, Christ, church), despite preferring the following slightly-modified framework: (1) creation, (2) election of Israel, (3) Christ, (4) Pentecost and the church, (5) consummation. See Vanhoozer, “A Drama-of-Redemption Model: Always Performing?,” 174. Samuel Wells prefers: (1) creation, (2) Israel, (3) Jesus, (4) church, (5) eschaton. See Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 53.

Nevertheless, God does not abandon creation to exile and decay, but rather redeems it. God calls Abraham and the nation of Israel back to unity with himself through covenant. He endeavors to pull them – and through them as a priestly nation, the world – back from the ruptured relationships into covenantal fellowship and oneness.<sup>10</sup> However, the faithless Israelites repeatedly eschew the loving faithfulness of their God, leading to the exile of the nation.<sup>11</sup>

At the incarnation, the Trinity stretches through the Son to meet all humanity – as a Jewish man in the midst of Israel – in its state of partial exile, to fulfill the global mission of Israel.<sup>12</sup> As God enters our midst as Jesus Christ, he pushes us to the side in our perverted attempts to secure our own existence. Without succumbing to sin’s siren call, he is fully affected by it, bringing sinful human nature into the life of God and thereby intensifying the divine reaction against it into an ultimate tension. The one ultimately worthy *to* exile is now also the one ultimately worthy *of* exile.

At the cross, the Trinity stretches to the utmost, as the Son of God, worthy to mete out the sentence of exile, instead goes into exile – into the far country of the grave – bearing the consequences of sin for the sake of humanity’s salvation. At the death of Christ, the Trinity has stretched to its limit, and yet humanity is left in a state of partial exile as before. However, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the exiled Son of God is vindicated as the Savior of the world and brought back from the far country of death. Through this movement of the Son into

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<sup>10</sup> See foundational covenant passages, such as Gen. 12, 15, throughout the Old Testament.

<sup>11</sup> Consider, for example, the curses for covenantal unfaithfulness found in Deut. 27:14-26; 28:15-68, culminating with the threat of exile.

<sup>12</sup> As Irenaeus and Athanasius proclaimed: “God became what we are so that we might become what He is.”

the utmost exile and back again, sin itself is offered up to destruction. And crucially, all humanity who is united to him by grace through faith – everyone who is therefore in Christ – gets caught up with the Son in his return to the eternal life and love of the Triune God.<sup>13</sup>

### **Scripture’s Role in the Story to Which It Bears Witness**

Having summarized the story to which Scripture bears witness, we now turn to Scripture’s authoritative role in the story. What authority does Scripture have in the story, and what function/role does it play? I will attempt to answer these questions by explaining the relationships between (1) Scripture and God, (2) Scripture and creation, and (3) Scripture and God’s people, the Church.

#### Scripture and God

With respect to God, Scripture is the authoritative and inspired word of the triune God, which God uses to reveal himself and redeem his creatures. But what does it mean for Scripture to be inspired by God? I agree with Henry’s definition of inspiration as “a supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit on divinely chosen agents in consequence of which their writings become trustworthy and authoritative.”<sup>14</sup> However, I would add that the writings are specifically trustworthy and authoritative toward the divine ends of revelation and redemption. That is, God inspires human authors to communicate his word to human audiences for the sake of fellowship and communion with them.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 15:20-22. As the nexus of redemption and re-creation, the resurrection is crucial – for the focus of the atonement is not merely to sentence sin with its proper exile, but to fulfill God’s creative purposes for unity and participation in the divine life.

<sup>14</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, “Bible, Inspiration Of,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 127.



The authority of Scripture, then, rests in its divine provenance. As Webster rightly states, “Scripture is authoritative because it is instrumental in bringing the word of God to bear upon the thought and practices of the church.”<sup>15</sup> Or, as Vanhoozer summarizes it, “the Bible not only reports the word of God but is itself a form of the divine address.”<sup>16</sup> In this way, the triune God makes himself verbally present to his creatures through Holy Scripture. The Bible, therefore, plays an authoritative role in the story to which it bears witness, because it is God’s own witness to his own identity and acts.

### Scripture and Creation

With respect to creation, because Scripture’s subject matter is all-encompassing, there is no domain outside of its purview. I will have more to say about this below (see “Theological Hermeneutics: Both Special and General”). For now, it is enough to note that it is impossible to take up a perspective completely outside of the story to which Scripture bears witness, for the story encompasses all created space and time, as well as their origins and ends. Though Scripture plays a distinct role in the story, as opposed to other created realities, whether trees or thermodynamics, it is inherently related to the rest of creation – especially to God’s people.

### Scripture and God’s People

The story of Scripture includes and is intertwined with the story of God’s people, beginning with the story of Israel, and then, through Jesus the Messiah, the culmination of

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<sup>15</sup> John Webster, “Scripture, Authority Of,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 725.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 24.

Israel's story, continuing into the story of the Church.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, Scripture is unavoidably and irreducibly ecclesiological.

While certain accounts of the canonization of Scripture make it sound like the Church (rather arbitrarily) selected certain texts and deemed them authoritative, theologically-speaking, it is the other way around. As Webster rightly maintains, “the process of canonization is properly to be understood, not as an act in which the church creates an authority for itself by determining a set of normative texts, but as an act of acknowledging antecedent authority imposed upon the church from without.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, although the Church undoubtedly had a role to play in the canonization of Scripture (just as human authors had a role to play in the writing of Scripture), Scripture, as God's word, creates and sustains the Church.<sup>19</sup>

I agree with Watson's claim that Gadamer's concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* is theologically helpful in describing the relationship between Scripture and Church. The Church can be viewed as the *Wirkungsgeschichte* – the “effective-history” – of Scripture. The text of Scripture exerts initiatory agency on the Church, and the Church exerts responsive agency on Scripture.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the Gadamerian concept on its own does not replace the necessary

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<sup>17</sup> Jenson is, I believe, right to insist on the following: “Whatever hermeneutical gaps may need to be dealt with in the course of the church's biblical exegesis, there is one that must not be posited or attempted to be dealt with: there is *no* historical distance between the community in which the Bible appeared and the church that now seeks to understand the Bible, because these are the same community.” Although, of course, there is plenty of historical distance *within* the community, which must be addressed by both biblical and theological studies. Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Works of God*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 279. Italics original.

<sup>18</sup> Webster, “Scripture, Authority Of,” 726.

<sup>19</sup> Webster, 726.

<sup>20</sup> Francis Watson, “Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture: Why They Need Each Other,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 2 (2010): 135.

constant guidance of the interaction between Church and Scripture by the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, it can help to clarify how this interaction takes place.

In summary, Scripture plays an authoritative role in the all-encompassing story to which it bears witness. It is the authoritative and inspired word of the triune God, which God uses to reveal himself and redeem his creatures. Furthermore, because Scripture's subject matter is all-encompassing, there is no domain outside of its purview. And finally, Scripture is irreducibly ecclesiological.

#### THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS: SPECIAL AND GENERAL

Having clarified the relationship between Scripture and its subject matter, if the story to which Scripture bears witness is true, then the relationships between (1) special and general hermeneutics and (2) biblical and theological studies become much less problematic. To the first relationship we now turn. Properly understood, theological hermeneutics is both a special and a general hermeneutic.<sup>21</sup>

Because Scripture plays a uniquely authoritative role within the story of its subject matter, theological hermeneutics is a *special* hermeneutic. That is, we do not read Scripture exactly like any other book, because Scripture is unlike all other books to the extent that it is the inspired and authoritative word of the triune God, used to reveal himself and redeem his people unto fellowship with himself. Given the explicitly theological subject matter of Scripture, it is ill-

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<sup>21</sup> Treier notes that theological hermeneutics can refer to at least two possible projects, the first focused on general hermeneutics and the second focused on special hermeneutics. With some trepidation, due to the numerous complexities involved, I have taken his comment that "the two projects can occur simultaneously" as an invitation to do so. See Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 136; Daniel J. Treier, "Theological Hermeneutics, Contemporary," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 787.

advised to attempt to shoehorn Scripture into a general hermeneutic that is designed to work apart from a theological perspective. Although some may accuse such an explicitly theological approach as “special pleading,” I maintain that a special, theological hermeneutic of Scripture is necessary to interpret Scripture according to its subject matter.

Does this mean, then, that theological hermeneutics becomes a ghettoized discipline? Not necessarily. Because Scripture’s subject matter is all-encompassing, theological hermeneutics is also a *general/universal* hermeneutic. Indeed, it will only appear like a disciplinary ghetto to the extent that one has not yet been shaped by Scripture’s subject matter. I am in agreement with Jenson’s claim that “we read the relation between the strange world the Bible opens and our familiar world the wrong way around, and so are in a hopeless situation from the start.”<sup>22</sup> He continues: “When the Bible lacks force in the church,” (and, I would add, in the academy!), “it is regularly — from the time of the apostles to post-Christendom — because we presume that the ‘real’ world is some other world than the one that opens in the Bible, and that what we have to do is figure out how to make the Bible effective in the putatively ‘real’ world.” This is an ill-fated enterprise, for “the Bible is in fact ineffective and irrelevant in our so-called ‘real’ world, because the Bible does not acknowledge that our ‘real’ world deserves the adjective.”<sup>23</sup>

Because the story to which Scripture bears witness is the story of the real world, theological hermeneutics is a general and universal hermeneutic.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert W. Jenson, “The Strange New World of the Bible (2008),” in *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 149.

<sup>23</sup> Jenson, 150.

### Implications for the Hermeneutical Triads

This has implications for two related hermeneutical triads, the general hermeneutical triad of author, text, and reader, and the special hermeneutical triad of historical, literary, and theological analysis. My approach calls for giving theology pride of place in both triads. That is, the divine author, the Christ-centered text, and the Spirit-led interpretive community of the Church are of primary importance, for they determine how we ought to interpret everything else, including historical and literary analysis, as well as all other authors, texts, and readers.

Does this mean, then, that theology *dominates* all other disciplines? Will we quickly find ourselves insisting upon a puritanical regulative principle as the standard of human knowledge, rejecting claims to knowledge of anything – whether physical quarks or human quirks – not mentioned in the pages of the Bible? No, not necessarily. For, although I maintain that theology is, as it were, the queen of the sciences, she is a kindly ruler. That is, due to the historically particular way(s) in which the triune God has revealed himself and redeemed his people, a theological hermeneutic requires attending to the historical and literary particularities of *all* authors, texts, and readers – especially to those involved in the interpretation of Holy Scripture. Furthermore, plenty of Scriptural teaching would seem to suggest that theological “insiders” must remain intellectually humble, open to the possibility that theological “outsiders,” whether methodological naturalists or adherents of other religions, might have much to teach them about the world.<sup>24</sup> As Treier notes, “often non-Christian interpreters will understand – that is, develop

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<sup>24</sup> Admittedly, this claim needs a fair amount of theological exegesis to back it up. While I do not have space for thorough argumentation on this point, consider, for example, the lessons that Pharaoh (Gen. 12:18-20) and Abimelech (Gen. 20:8-18) taught Abraham, or the apparent moral and theological superiority of the Ninevite sailors compared to Jonah (Jonah 1:4-16).

various capacities for communicative action in relation to – texts far better than Christians will.”<sup>25</sup>  
 This takes nothing away from the authority or scope of Scripture or its subject matter.

Therefore, although some readers may object to the extent to which I am willing to give theology explicit priority over all other disciplines of human understanding, I would answer that doing so actually ends up requiring and resourcing other intellectual disciplines better (from a theological perspective, at least) than they could do so on their own. In sum, then, because Scripture plays a uniquely authoritative role within its all-encompassing subject matter, theological hermeneutics encompasses both special and general hermeneutics. What does this mean for the relationship between biblical and theological studies? Should they be one discipline or two (or more)?

#### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES: A MULTIFACETED DISCIPLINE

Given the enormity and the importance of Scripture’s subject matter, I here offer an account of biblical and theological studies as a single multifaceted discipline, one that includes both biblical studies and the various theological sub-disciplines of historical, systematic, and pastoral theology. Because Scripture’s subject matter is complex, unified, and irreducibly ecclesiological, biblical and theological studies need each other. Furthermore, because the Church’s understanding of and participation in Scripture’s subject matter is historically, conceptually, and practically complex, the theological subdisciplines need each other.

#### **Biblical and Theological Studies Need Each Other**

Because Scripture’s subject matter is complex, unified, and irreducibly ecclesiological, biblical and theological studies need each other. In many churchly circles, this assertion would

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<sup>25</sup> Treier, “Theological Hermeneutics, Contemporary,” 792.

not be met with much resistance. However, in the (modern) academy, biblical and theological studies have been kept increasingly separate. Since the academy is the sphere in which biblical and(/or) theological studies is/are located as (an) academic discipline/s (see how confusing this gets?), we must reckon with the academic division.

In their survey of the “original unity and subsequent separation” of biblical studies and systematic theology, Rowe and Hays helpfully observe that the separation of the two disciplines is a relatively recent phenomenon.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, they (approximately) trace the modern division to the eighteenth century, paradigmatically to J.P. Gabler’s 1787 inaugural address regarding the distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology.<sup>27</sup> Broadly speaking, in Gabler’s wake, biblical and theological studies have, at worst, ignored each other’s contributions entirely and, at best, functioned as a sort of disciplinary layer-cake, with the results of each discipline being transmitted to the other for separate and subsequent handling.

Is this “layer-cake approach” the best we can hope for? I do not think so. To do justice to their complex, unified, and ecclesiological subject matter, both biblical and theological studies need each other at all stages of the various processes involved in their subdisciplines. On the biblical studies side of that relationship, I believe that the focus ought to be on the complexity of the Bible’s subject matter. As Rowe and Hayes maintain, the arguments in favor of “the implicit unity between biblical studies and systematic theology...do not preclude an emphasis within biblical studies on the distinctiveness and particularity of the diverse texts [of Scripture].”<sup>28</sup> If, as

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<sup>26</sup> C. Kavin Rowe and Richard B. Hays, “Biblical Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 435.

<sup>27</sup> Rowe and Hays, 440–42.

<sup>28</sup> Rowe and Hays, 451.

Jenson has suggested, the ultimate test for theology – in both its individual statements and its comprehensive systems – is its success or failure as a hermeneutic for all of Scripture, then one of the tasks of biblical studies is, as it were, to remind theological studies just how difficult of a test it faces, due to the historical and literary complexities of the Bible!<sup>29</sup>

However, on the other hand, theology is required to remind biblical studies that, though the biblical texts be admittedly varied, they bear witness to a unified and irreducibly ecclesiological narrative, held together by the story's author and central character, the triune God. After all, even the moniker “biblical” studies, as opposed to, say, “Ancient Near Eastern” or “Greco-Roman” studies, implies “the theological decision that the particular documents that constitute the Bible are in some way related to one another, as distinct from their relation to other pieces of literature, and are therefore to be treated together.” (Though, as Rowe and Hays also note, this does not settle the question of *how* biblical texts relate to one another.)<sup>30</sup>

### **Implications for Biblical Theology and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture**

This seems like the best time to address the contested and contentious fields of biblical theology [BT] and the theological interpretation of Scripture [TIS]. While I do not have much to add to the ongoing discussion that has taken place between, among others, Bockmuehl, Fowl, Klink and Lockett, and Treier, I do think that conceiving biblical and theological studies as a single, multifaceted discipline adds plausibility to Treier's “middle way” or “Type 3” approach to relating the two disciplines in a distinct-yet-complementary way.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Triune God*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 33.

<sup>30</sup> Rowe and Hays, “Biblical Studies,” 450–51.

<sup>31</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, “Bible versus Theology: Is ‘Theological Interpretation’ the Answer?,” *Nova et Vetera (English Edition)* 9, no. 1 (2011): 27–47; Stephen E. Fowl,



Although I do not claim that this is the only right way to define BT, I admit that I am predisposed to think of the sub-discipline in terms of what Klink and Lockett call the “BT2: History of Redemption” approach, as practiced by, among many others, D.A. Carson.<sup>32</sup> Thus construed, BT’s goal is

to discern the historical progression of God’s work of redemption through an inductive analysis of key themes developing through both discrete corpora and the whole of Scripture. Major themes such as covenant or kingdom constitute the theological connecting fibers between the Old and New Testaments, and these themes necessarily run along a historical trajectory, giving fundamental structure to the theology of the Bible.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, although I readily admit the difficulties involved in defining TIS, the main difference that seems to emerge between BT (thus construed) and TIS is the latter’s willingness to read the Bible (1) following the example of certain “pre-critical” exegetes, (2) through the creedal lens of the “Rule of Faith,” and (3) within the interpretive community of the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>34</sup>

I think that BT and TIS can benefit each other as they seek to deal with the subject matter of Scripture. Without accepting BT’s (occasionally) a-ecclesiological presuppositions, TIS could benefit from BT’s close reading of biblical texts in order to demonstrate the Bible’s coherence on its own terms. How? First, as evidence that churchly interpreters of Scripture, including so-called

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*Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, Cascade Companions (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 24–31; Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); Daniel J. Treier, “Biblical Theology and/or Theological Interpretation of Scripture?: Defining the Relationship,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 1 (2008): 16–31.

<sup>32</sup> Klink and Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology*, 59–89.

<sup>33</sup> Klink and Lockett, 61. The entire definition is italicized in the original.

<sup>34</sup> These are the focuses of “Part 1: Catalysts and Common Themes” in Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*.

pre-critical ones, were not wrong to see a unity in Scripture and its subject matter. Second, the various “key themes” of Scripture that BT isolates can provide TIS with profitable areas for further theological research. On the other hand, BT could use TIS as a reminder that (1) Scripture itself, and not BT’s synthesis of it, is theologically authoritative and that (2) the Bible does not *need* to be interpreted exclusively on “its own terms,” for the story to which Scripture bears witness extends beyond the Old and New Testaments to incorporate the story of the Church and the rest of creation. This may not result in a radical change within BT’s or TIS’s explicit methods (or, perhaps in the case of the latter, the lack thereof), but it would hopefully at least result in greater disciplinary humility and appreciation for (1) the theological authority of Scripture itself, apart from either BT’s or TIS’s elucidations of it, and (2) the Holy Spirit’s role(s) in inspiration, preservation, and interpretation of Scripture throughout the history of the Church.

### **Theological Subdisciplines Need Each Other**

If biblical and theological studies ought to be a single, multifaceted discipline, how should we construe the relationships between the various *theological* sub-disciplines? As Jenson claims, if theology asks (with) the Church: “Wherein was what we heard and saw the gospel?” and “What are we tomorrow to say and enact in order to say and enact this same gospel?”, then *historical* theology focuses on the former question and *normative* theology (which encompasses both *systematic* and *pastoral* theology) focuses on the latter.<sup>35</sup> Jenson continues to distinguish between pastoral theology, which focuses on “the exigencies of the church’s daily task,” and systematic theology, which “takes up questions posed not only by current urgency but also by

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<sup>35</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1997, 1:21–22.

perceived inherent connections of the faith.”<sup>36</sup> And yet, because of the historical way in which both the Church’s exigencies and the faith’s inherent connections have developed, at some point these distinctions perhaps begin to lose their importance.

Nevertheless, because the Church’s understanding of and participation in Scripture’s subject matter is historically, conceptually, and practically complex, the various theological sub-disciplines need each other as well. The historical complexity speaks to the need for historical theology, and the conceptual complexity to the need for systematic theology. The relationship between these two sub-disciplines ought to be much the same as that between biblical and theological studies. That is, historical theology, as it were, can remind systematic theology of the historical particularities and complexities involved in attempting to understand, with the Church, the subject matter of Scripture. Systematic theology can remind historical theology of the complex conceptual unity involved in the task, such that, for example, Augustine and Barth can be put into conversation with one another (regarding a variety of theological *loci*) without doing undue violence to either.

What role does pastoral theology play? Both historical and systematic theology must be reminded that the subject matter of Scripture is an all-encompassing story, one in which we all cannot help but participate. Furthermore, as Charry is right to note, theology is properly salutary and “aretegenic” (“virtue-producing”) – and not merely cognitive – for God reveals and redeems for the sake of human flourishing.<sup>37</sup> Pastoral theology, therefore, asks the crucial question: Given our current situation, how do we participate rightly in the all-encompassing story of the triune

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<sup>36</sup> Jenson, 1:22.

<sup>37</sup> Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

God? It thereby prevents historical and systematic theology from losing purchase on their subject matter by forgetting that it *matters* for life as we now live it.

## CONCLUSION

Regarding the enterprise of theological hermeneutics, I have argued that we can best account for both (1) the relationship between general and special hermeneutics and (2) the relationship between biblical and theological studies by first attending to Scripture's theological authoritative location/role regarding its subject matter – the all-encompassing story, to which it bears witness, of how the triune God creates and redeems a people unto fellowship with himself. With respect to God, Scripture is the authoritative and inspired word of the triune God, which God uses to reveal himself and redeem his creatures. With respect to creation, because Scripture's subject matter is all-encompassing, there is no domain outside of its purview. And with respect to God's people, Scripture is irreducibly ecclesiological.

Because Scripture plays a uniquely authoritative role within its all-encompassing subject matter, theological hermeneutics encompasses both special and general hermeneutics. This means that theology is to be given pride of place in both the general hermeneutical triad of author, text, and reader, as well as the special hermeneutical triad of historical, literary, and theological analysis. That is, the divine author, the Christ-centered text, and the Spirit-led interpretive community of the Church are of primary importance. And yet, due to the historically particular way(s) in which the triune God has revealed himself and redeemed his people, a theological hermeneutic requires attending to the historical and literary particularities of *all* authors, texts, and readers – especially to those involved in the interpretation of Holy Scripture.

Finally, I have argued that, given the enormity and importance of Scripture's subject matter, we ought to conceive of biblical and theological studies as a single multifaceted

discipline, one that includes both biblical studies and the various theological sub-disciplines of historical, systematic, and pastoral theology – as well as biblical theology and the theological interpretation of Scripture. Because Scripture’s subject matter is complex, unified, and irreducibly ecclesiological, biblical and theological studies need each other. Furthermore, because the Church’s understanding of and participation in Scripture’s subject matter is historically, conceptually, and practically complex, the theological subdisciplines need each other.

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