Scriptural Impressionism: The Use of the Bible in Katherine Sonderegger's *Systematic Theology*, volume 1

R. W. L. Moberly*

I have benefitted greatly from reading Katherine Sonderegger's *Systematic Theology*, volume 1, *The Doctrine of God*.[1] It is a book of acuity, depth, and wisdom, with valuable proposals for better understanding the grammar and dynamics of Christian belief in God. Others in this journal will discuss Sonderegger's theology as such. My particular brief, as a biblical scholar, is to engage with her use of scripture.

Sonderegger's Rootedness in Scripture

Sonderegger has drunk deeply from many wells, especially that of Karl Barth. Like Barth, she understands the task of theology to be fundamentally an articulation of the meaning and implications of the Bible: "The doctrine that follows in this volume seeks to listen to Holy Scripture, to feed on it, and from its riches, to bring forth the Divine Perfections of the One God. We seek to confess who and what God is in biblical idiom, guidance, and subject matter" (p. xvi); "Not 'philosophy' or 'tradition' supplanting and grounding Holy Scripture—precisely not that! Rather Holy Scripture guiding, grounding, and giving rise to philosophical concept, subject matter, and preoccupation: that is our pathway!" (p. 494).

Also like Barth, Sonderegger eschews Protestant scholasticisms that tend to circle around issues of biblical inerrancy and historical

---

* Walter Moberly is an Anglican priest who has worked for over thirty years at Durham University. His prime concern is biblical literacy, and the development of a better ability to read ancient Israel's scriptures as scripture for today. His most recent books are *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Baker Academic, 2013) and *The Bible in a Disenchanted Age: The Enduring Possibility of Christian Faith* (Baker Academic, 2018).

[1] Katherine Sonderegger *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2015). Pagination references in parentheses in my text are to this book.

reliability. She practices a "second naiveté" (though this is not a term that she herself uses) that acknowledges the work of modern biblical criticism, yet she employs a very light touch in interacting with biblical criticism on the ground that it does not really engage the Bible's all-important subject matter. In a manner reminiscent of Barth, she speaks of the Bible "in its concrete particularity, its fallibility and frailty" (p. 505), and she is clear that "Christians do not understand or embrace or rest at ease with every last verse of Scripture; it remains a strange book, sometimes an alien and terrible one" (p. 265). The important thing is that "we simply confess that the Bible is not 'like any other book'" (p. 514), and the point of this confession is clear: "To say that the Bible differs from all others is to say that people *find God there*" (p. 515). Indeed, "because Holy Scripture is unlike any other book, we are encountered in its pages by its living Spirit, guided and shepherded by Him . . . shown the places where we should turn aside to behold the unconsumed Fire that is to be found there" (p. 527). Thus the real problem for so much biblical criticism and interpretation, like much other human thought, is the way humans turn in on themselves and so fail to engage with the God who is there: "We err . . . in our stubborn refusal to cauterize each moment of positivity by the annihilating Invisibility and Formlessness of Almighty God" (p. 528). By contrast, "As we drink in the Scriptures, we will at last slake the thirst for a holy and good God" (p. 271).

Sonderegger also offers some memorable readings of the biblical text. For example, I was struck by her use of the story of Jonathan and David to illuminate the meaning of "God is love": "In this remarkable covenant love we spy, as at a great distance, the eternal Love that radiates down through earthly loves, a compatibilism that allows—commands!—us to raise our eyes upward as we gaze upon the things of this earth" (p. 497). She notes the imbalance in the biblical account: "We hear nothing about David's traits or attractions or even his notice of Jonathan—a remarkable one-sidedness dominates this love story" (p. 497). But this too is instructive: "Jonathan looks on David with love, without merit or preparation or initiative on his part. How much more the Lord of Love sends down His rain on the just and the unjust" (p. 499). And she ties this reading into central concerns of her overall account of the reality of God in this world: "To be sure, we cannot ignore the manifest Christological foreshadowing in this lowly, self-giving love of Jonathan for heedless David." Nonetheless, already within the context of the Old Testament, "we must say that the One

God, the Beautiful One, can burn with an eternal Love that gives itself away, that communicates without notice or thanks, that hides itself away in a world too proud to be loved" (p. 500).

This is a robust use of Scripture, which has much to offer to an often-puzzled church. Instead of focussing on seemingly endless problems and difficulties in the Bible, Sonderegger redirects Christians to "the one thing needful," the reality of the living God as mediated by the Bible. In terms of the biblical idiom to which Sonderegger directs us, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

And yet . . .

What Is the Role of Classic Philological Concerns?

Sonderegger articulates a sophisticated account of God as One and of divine Aseity, which she roots respectively in the Shema (Deut. 6:4-5) and the burning bush narrative (Exod. 3). These are indeed key passages in the Old Testament for an understanding of God. Yet despite the space devoted to their discussion, there is a surprising lack of any detailed philological and exegetical work, such as one might expect to inform the interpretive task. The Hebrew term *echad*—"one"—that is predicated of God in Deuteronomy 6:4 is duly noted (as is its Greek counterpart *heis*; p. 4). But its actual role in its immediate context receives no attention (other than in relation to the warning against idolatry in Deut. 4), nor is there an inquiry into other possibly illuminating uses of *echad* (or *heis*) elsewhere in the canon. If one wants to know what words mean, should one not look at their usage elsewhere?[2]

Sonderegger explicitly raises the question of the role of philological study in her discussion of "I AM THAT I AM" in Exodus 3:14, and, remarkably, relativizes it in relation to the real task of engaging the subject matter:

> We need not . . . distract ourselves with precise word study of this curious Name form. No, the Lord's pronouncing of His own Name, His declaration of his own invincible life as *I*: that possesses the sole glory in all Scripture. . . . Why all

[2] The depiction of the beloved as "one," that is the "one and only" focus of love, in Song of Songs 6:9 is well-known as a likely illuminating use (see my *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2013], ch. 1).

> this discussion of the verb *to be*, in Hebrew and its cognates? Could it not be because we too, like the Israelites of old, cannot stand in the breach, cannot bear this Disclosure and Name, cannot contemplate the End that is this Omnipotent I. . . . We might be tempted to call our constant preoccupation with textual matters a rebellion against the very God who declares Himself here. (pp. 221, 222, 223)

To be sure, she immediately backs off a little, and does find a positive role for biblical philology: "But we need not see it only this way, need not place our Scripture study in its worst light. Rather, we might see here a marker, always indirect, always partial, of the centrality of this text: we cannot leave it alone. As a sign that speaks, our fascination with these word studies discloses, as a kind of symptom or symbol, the Ineffable who speaks beyond all hearing." But she then reverts: "Our very resistance is tribute to its Power and our acknowledgment of it. In its own idiom, our distracting word study is a fence around the Torah. We must cover our hands when we take up this text to protect ourselves from its searing Holiness" (p. 223). Biblical philology is seen predominantly, even if not necessarily, to involve rebellion or resistance or distraction in relation to the biblical subject matter. Missing is any clear sense that philological study can be intrinsic to the very task of engaging the subject matter. We study Hebrew and Greek because we really want to know what the biblical text does, and does not, mean, and because we are aware of our own proclivities to misread the text through projecting our own notions onto it.

Sonderegger fascinatingly discusses the "I AM THAT I AM" in terms of divine subjectivity and objectivity, but not in terms of what the Hebrew does, and does not, mean (an admittedly difficult question!), or the role of the words in the Exodus narrative. For example, she repeatedly refers to the divine *I* ("His declaration of his own invincible life as *I*"), with no acknowledgement that the Hebrew does not use the first-person pronoun *I* (*ani* or *ānōkhi*), but rather a verbal form in the first person that lays no emphasis on *I*. Nor does she discuss the Greek of the influential Septuagintal rendering, "I am the one who is," which does indeed use the personal pronoun, *egō*, but whose logic seems not to be identical with that of the Hebrew. My concerns may no doubt seem rather low-level in relation to Sonderegger's. And, of course, philological and exegetical inquiry must be supplemented by other enquiries. But in the absence of rigorous

philology and exegesis, how can we be confident that high-flying conceptual work is genuinely developing what stands in the biblical text?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Sonderegger consistently depicts mainstream biblical scholarship as superficial, reductive, and theologically barren: "We will not travel far in the school of Scripture . . . by suggesting that all this Fire and entreaty in the book of Numbers is 'primitive religion', soon to be supplanted by a more favourable rationalism or scholasticism or progressivism" (p. 284); or "No consolation for us the historicizing thesis of distinct traditions and sources, stitched together with a visible, even clumsy seam right across the whole fabric" (p. 434). That such work fills the library shelves cannot be denied. To be sure, Sonderegger engages a little with Brevard Childs and Walter Brueggemann, who have arguably been the two outstanding Christian interpreters of the Old Testament in recent years. However, I miss engagement with other constructive contemporary biblical interpreters who also work (mostly) in the US and write in English: Christian scholars such as Pat Miller, Terence Fretheim, John Goldingay, Christopher Seitz, Ellen Davis, Gary Anderson, Stephen Chapman, Brent Strawn, Phyllis Trible, Phyllis Bird, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, or even myself, or Jewish scholars such as Moshe Greenberg, Jon Levenson, Michael Fishbane, Benjamin Sommer, Joel Kaminsky.

Sonderegger's seeming uninterest in philological and exegetical, as distinct from theological and philosophical, precision appears also in what is probably her fullest extended scriptural engagement, her reading of Numbers (pp. 271–300). Numbers is indeed a challenging book for any Christian interpreter, as Sonderegger fully recognizes: "a book that appears unpromising in every respect" (p. 271). She seeks to acknowledge the difficulty of the material by designating the book as "apocalyptic," whose strangeness in fact mirrors the realities of human life. She also sees the book as built on a tension between two theological conceptualities: on the one hand, immutable divine power as articulated by Balaam, "God is not a human being that he should lie" (Num. 23:19); on the other hand, divine mutability as seen in the encounters between the LORD and Moses, where the LORD responds to Moses' intercessions. This living relationship between creator and creature reveals the true nature of divine omnipotence. It also shows that Numbers points to Christ: "What we overhear in the agonized intercessions and entreaties of Moses and Aaron is the very prayer of that Prophet and Priest who fell on his face before the Lord in that dark garden, across the Kedron ravine. The book of Numbers is the

event and literary remains of the inner life of Christ. In broken fragments we read of Christ's own mind in Gethsemane, His own Inwardness on the cross" (p. 293).

This is a moving reading. But how much of Numbers are we really hearing? When Sonderegger cites Balaam's words in Numbers 23:19, "God is not a human being that he should lie," she does not explore the point they are making in the story, where they preface Balaam's pronouncement that he must bless Israel (23:20). That is, although Balak wants Balaam to curse Israel, Balaam is expressing the LORD's unswerving commitment to bless them, as expressed in his initial words to Balaam in Numbers 22:12. Balaam cannot evade this commitment (though initially he tried because of the money he was offered, until his donkey and the angel stopped him!) but must fulfill it.[3] Sonderegger, however, quickly moves to see Balaam's words as articulating a classic theological concern: "This oracle *belongs* to Israel . . . yet it seems to speak another tongue, breathe another air. For this is the portrait of the Almighty God that enters into the scholastic metaphysics of the Latin Church. . . . In Balaam's prophecy we seem to overhear the birth of 'classical theism'" (p. 279). To which a short response is, Well, not really—that is to discount its narrative context. And although divine sovereignty and responsiveness is genuinely present in Numbers, it is not especially characteristic and so does not obviously constitute Numbers' particular contribution to a doctrine of God.

Are There Differing Valid Approaches to the Biblical Text?

Although Sonderegger is clearly comfortable with her second naiveté when reading scripture, she shows little concern to help others to attain such an outlook or know how to distinguish a second naiveté (which has taken the measure of critical problems, and is located downstream from them) from a first naiveté (which has not yet understood or done justice to critical problems). For example, she says, "Although the relation between law and covenant, as between law and prophets, or Old Testament law and New, has been a complex preoccupation of Protestant higher critics since the nineteenth century, it cannot unsettle the pattern the Bible itself has built up.

[3] I have discussed the issue of divine immutability and mutability, together with the significance of Balaam's words in Numbers 23:19, in my *Old Testament Theology*, ch. 4.

This is because the proper reading of Scripture—not developed but only named here—is one of continuity with the rabbinic and churchly reading of the Bible" (pp. 12–13); or comparably: "The Bible can never be wholly or properly literature; it never enters into the inert state of 'being a text'" (p. 512). At face value, these claims are simply untrue. Higher criticism *can*, and *does*, unsettle the Bible's own pattern. The Bible *can* inertly "be a text."

Alternatively, when articulating the divine aseity she finds in Exodus 3, Sonderegger says, "When we bow our intellects down before the Almighty Lord, we do not worship an I AM who is a heavenly being, picked out and rendered supreme over other rivals. God's Identity does not individuate" (p. xiii–xiv); "God is not a universal, nor a member of a class, even the only member" (p. 27). Yet in parts of the Old Testament the divine name, YHWH/the LORD, *does* pick out and individuate Israel's deity in relation to other deities in a class with more than one member, as in the following: "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?" or "For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods" (Exod. 15:11; Ps. 95:3). Those who both read Sonderegger and ponder the "plain sense" of the biblical text may well be puzzled. To be sure, a case might be made for reading the Old Testament as a canonical collection in which Genesis 1 frames the reading, and so references to "gods" might be given a sense other than that which they would likely have had for their original authors. But Sonderegger does not make this case.

Again, a small issue that Sonderegger discusses briefly is the identity of angelic beings. She claims that seraphs are "visionary representatives of the cherubim" and are also present "on Jacob's ladder" (pp. 437, 438). In religio-historical terms, the relationship between seraphs, cherubim, and other angels of God is unclear, but identity is unlikely. That a poet or artist might identify them for particular purposes is not a problem. But an exegete surely does not have the same licence.

Put differently, Sonderegger nowhere reflects on the differing interests and purposes, and related questions, with which people may legitimately approach the biblical text: *how* we read the Bible depends on *why* we read the Bible. Insofar as scholars are concerned with the development of ancient Israel's (or early Christianity's) literature and religion as a phenomenon of the ancient world—hardly an invalid enterprise, even if it is less widely of interest now than in the nineteenth century—they may be obliged, as a matter of intellectual

honesty, to recognize that the likely course of historical development was in significant ways other than that of the canonical portrayal.

A Christian theologian, however, qua theologian, need not be concerned with the historical development of religious ideas in the characteristic mode of much modern biblical scholarship. The case has been made by Brevard Childs and others for a "canonical approach" that works with the biblical text in its received form, that interacts fruitfully with premodern readings that also read the text thus, and that seeks to engage with God as the subject matter of the text; and in her account of scriptural exegesis at the end of the book Sonderegger draws on Childs.

Unfortunately, however, she misrepresents his work as only concerned with text and not also with subject matter. She refers to Childs's *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, where she sees his "canonical criticism"—a term Childs consistently resisted, not least because it is likely to lead to the kind of misreading that Sonderegger displays!—as an approach where "the end point, telos, and focal length of this vision is the book itself," and is lacking because "theology has to do with the One God, the Living One" (p. 509). She seems unaware of Childs's other writings, not least his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*,[4] where we read, for example,

> To remain on the textual level is to miss the key which unites dissident voices into a harmonious whole. Rather Biblical Theology attempts to hear the different voices in relation to the divine reality to which they point in such diverse ways. . . . The true expositor of the Christian scriptures is the one who awaits in anticipation toward becoming the interpreted rather than the interpreter.[5]

Moreover, a canonical approach as articulated by Childs still seeks to learn from, and be nuanced by, mainstream historical-critical scholarship, and recognizes its validity on its own terms—not least in recognizing that theological terms and depictions in the Old Testament may not bear the same meanings or purposes as those for which classic theology has used them.

[4] Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (London: SCM, 1992).

[5] Childs, *Biblical Theology*, pp. 85, 86.

If in our "postmodern" context, downwind of extensive hermeneutical and literary work, historical-critical scholarship should no longer imperialistically seek to rule the scholarly realm and dictate which questions are and are not valid, theologically oriented interpretation should not seek to do so, or appear to seek to do so, either. A plurality of valid approaches to the Bible is a feature of our world, even if some are better than others, depending on the interpretive interest and goal. I think that Sonderegger knows this. After all, she says of her approach that it is "not developed but only named here," and she is happy to speak of "my reading and hearing of Holy Scripture" (p. 93); and so she recognizes that more could be said. But her rhetoric is at the very least incautious and potentially misleading, suggestive of a standoff between mainstream scholarly and "proper . . . churchly" approaches; as such it could be read by the unwary as a kind of ecclesial triumphalism. It is thus also of little help to students or general readers who may want to know how best to practice, and perhaps fruitfully interrelate, differing agendas of biblical interpretation.

Conclusion

I find a puzzling mismatch in Sonderegger's work. She is at home both in scripture and in modern philosophy and theology. Yet she is at home in them in different ways. In the realm of philosophy and theology she displays fine-tuned conceptual and analytical sophistication. She moves easily through the work of many thinkers—among others, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Schleiermacher, William Temple, Rahner, Barth—and offers nuanced understanding and, where appropriate, careful critique. Yet in her handling of scripture such conceptual and analytical sophistication is replaced by a mode of working that I can only depict as poetic, impressionistic, and rhetorically bold and unguarded. The conceptual and analytical sophistication of biblical scholarship (at least, among its better practitioners!) does not appear to be a necessary resource for her. Of course, differing modes of thought are possible and valuable. But when I encounter the impressionistic and the analytical side by side, I feel unsure what to make of the result. Sonderegger's claim is that "we read Scripture, and respond with doctrine" (p. 284). I cannot help wondering, however, whether this is really happening. Sonderegger's contention that sophisticated theological and philosophical conceptualities are

rooted in, and taken from, scripture would surely be more persuasive if scripture itself were read with a comparably sophisticated intellectual rigor. I am concerned that Sonderegger's impressionistic readings may in practice obscure the real likelihood that scripture does not always conceptualize or handle its subject matter in the ways she proposes. Important questions about the relationship between biblical and postbiblical conceptualities become invisible, indeed apparently unnecessary, here.

All this raises an issue of both principle and practice. Those of us who are concerned to hold together the Bible and theology in scholarly work that can nourish and strengthen Christian faith surely need to spend more time talking with and advising each other: How should we handle those issues that are not in our scholarly comfort zone, and how can we know what we should, or need not, read?

However, whatever my reservations, the final word should be given to Sonderegger herself, perhaps as a taster for prospective readers of her book. It would be fitting to conclude this account of her use of scripture with one of the many passages in which she synthetically reads the biblical text in relation to her vision of the task of theology, reusing a classic trope in memorable contemporary mode:

> Truth to tell, how many dull, very dull, doctrines of God have we theologians offered up to our readers, as if theology and theologians did not stand in all their poverty before the fiery Lord God of Israel! . . . To speak of God, to name the Divine Perfections, should be honey in the comb, the river of delight, the freshness and strong elixir of love. Love is the Truth of God, but also the Beauty. . . . Love alone is as strong as death, its passion fierce as the grave. . . . Theology should pant after its God, the Love that is better than wine, for God is beautiful, truly lovely, the One whose Eyes are like doves. Eat, friends—all theology should ring out with this invitation—drink and be drunk with Love (pp. 472–473).