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— A Guide for Study and Discussion —

THE THEOLOGICAL
INTERPRETATION
OF SCRIPTURE

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THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION, SECOND NAIVETÉ,
AND THE REDISCOVERY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

R. W. L. MOBERLY

Summary

Walter Moberly begins by documenting the eclipse of the Old Testament and theological approaches to its interpretation in traditional ecclesial and modern academic contexts. Adopting Paul Ricoeur's concept of second naiveté as an interpretive model for integrating these contexts, he then discusses conceptual resources for accomplishing this integration in a theologically productive manner. After critically engaging specific examples of recent attempts to revitalize theological interpretation, he offers a reading of Genesis 4 that highlights the Old Testament's character as an independent theological witness whose voice is not exhausted by its New Testament reception.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does Moberly mean by "second naiveté" and how might this concept help us heal the rift between traditional and modern approaches to biblical interpretation?
2. Discuss the conceptual tools and resources Moberly identifies for pursuing the task of theological interpretation in contemporary contexts. Is the canonical approach the author advocates capable of engaging these resources in a constructively critical fashion? Why or why not?
3. What does it mean to read the Old Testament as a "pre-Christ" witness? Is it possible to read the story of Cain and Abel on its own terms, while at the same time reading it as Christian scripture, or must one choose between the two?

THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE AND ITS FUTURE

STEPHEN E. FOWL

Summary

Stephen Fowl argues that theological interpretation is an approach to reading scripture that keeps theological concerns primary. Theological interpreters are free to make use of the insights gleaned from historical methods, provided they serve the primary end of bringing the church into a deeper love of the triune God and our neighbors. In order to accomplish these ends, the cultivation of interpretive virtues such as charity and prudence are vital for nurturing wise interpretive judgments that will sustain the primacy of theological concerns in their interpretive work. The virtues of truth-seeking, truth-telling, and patience are also foundational for the proper practice of theological interpretation in faith communities formed by word and sacrament.

Questions for Discussion

1. Fowl argues that the advent of the multiplicity of interpretive approaches to the Bible has resulted in a “fascinating fragmentation.” He further suggests that, for theological interpreters, this “fragmented state of affairs is more like an opportunity.” Do you agree? Why? Why not? How is this an opportunity? How might it be a threat?
2. Fowl believes that historical criticism should not be disregarded by those seeking a theological interpretative, even though it may not be the final word. Do you agree? How important is historical context for theological interpretation? Why is it important? Why is it not?
3. Fowl suggests that theological interpretation should be guided by such virtues as charity. He implies that ancient authors are not judged charitably if judged by contemporary standards. What do you think of this? How would it change things if we sought to understand elements in the biblical texts that might be offensive to modern ears, rather than simply condemn?

ANACHRONISM OR ILLUMINATION?
GENESIS 1 AND CREATION *EX NIHILO*

SUSANNAH TICCIATI

Summary

Over against those who argue that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* has been improperly applied to Genesis 1:1–2, Susannah Ticciati argues for the appropriateness of creation *ex nihilo* as an interpretive rule for reading these verses. Engaging alternative readings of Genesis 1 by Catherine Keller and Karl Barth, she advances a case for its ongoing validity in terms of its ability to sustain the truth-telling capacity of these verses in changing, postbiblical frames of reference. Creation *ex nihilo* clarifies the nature of God’s redemption by providing the interpretive framework in which the contextual naming and healing of sin is made possible.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the differences between traditional and modern ways of translating Genesis 1:2. How do these differences affect our understanding of the act of creation?
2. Compare and contrast the author’s reading of Genesis 1:2 with the readings of Catherine Keller and Karl Barth. What are the main points of difference between these three approaches, and which do you find persuasive?
3. What criterion or interpretive rule does Ticciati appeal to in order to justify her defense of the traditional doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*? Do you find this criterion persuasive? Why or why not?

IDOLATRY AND THE PERIL OF THE NATION: READING JEREMIAH 2 IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

BUNGISHABAKU KATHO

Summary

Working with Jeremiah 2, Katho applies the biblical situation to the African situation through developing parallels. He argues that Africa, like her ancient counterpart Israel/Judah, needs to learn from history. In Katho's view Africa and Israel/Judah are both alienated from God, giving place to other systems of thought and leadership, which have been sinful.

Questions for Discussion

1. Katho has the ancient text speak to a modern African situation by means of noting parallels that he sees as existing between the ancient biblical world and his modern African setting. Do you agree with Katho's analysis? If so, is this a good way of connecting with the Bible? If not, why? What possible dangers might this way of interpreting scripture present?
2. Katho has a positive view of the value of history. He writes, "If we delight in hearing pseudo-history, it will also teach us false values." How does this valuing of history make some of his argument vulnerable, when historical critics suggest that many of the biblical stories, such as those concerning the Exodus, might not have actually happened?
3. Katho suggests that Africa has fallen prey to "the danger of telling the wrong stories." The stories of "tribalism, hatred, child witches, and so on" have led to death. What are some of the "wrong stories" we tell in our local churches, or in the communities and countries where we live?

BLESSED ARE THE IMAGE-BEARERS:
GREGORY OF NYSSA AND THE BEATITUDES

REBEKAH EKLUND

Summary

Rebekah Eklund suggests that reading the beatitudes in conversation with Gregory of Nyssa offers a model for theological interpretation that can enrich the understanding and application of the beatitudes in our day. This may be achieved by adopting Gregory's theological framework for reading the beatitudes in terms of the fall and restoration of the *imago dei* in humanity, though it does not require us to adopt the negative stance toward the human body inherent in Gregory's somewhat complicated and conflicted relationship with Neoplatonism.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is Neoplatonism and how does it relate to Gregory's sequential reading of the beatitudes as ascending stages of virtue? What might be some of the strengths and/or weaknesses inherent in this approach to the beatitudes and the way it shapes our understanding of Christian formation in this life?
2. How does Gregory understand the relationship between divine beauty, the beatitudes, and the formation of Christian desire for God?
3. What is "proto-Pelagianism" and how does the author distinguish it from Gregory's doctrine of Christian formation?

SEEING SILENCE:
SUSANNA'S CHRISTOLOGICAL QUIET

JENNIE GRILLO

Summary

Jennie Grillo reads the account of Susanna's silence in the longer Greek version of the Book of Daniel as a figure of Christ's silence before his accusers. Rejecting the view that Susanna's silence is a product of the narrator's male voyeurism or the control exerted over her by the elders, she explores the way in which the narrative subverts the attempt to reduce Susanna to the silent object of sight, creating instead the potential for a christological reading of her silence. Rather than shrinking from shame, Susanna transfigures it, thereby providing a compelling prototype for the ideology of Christian martyrdom.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does Susanna's silence challenge as well as transfigure the claims to power made by the elders over her body and language?
2. How does the author's interpretation of Susanna's silence compare and/or contrast with the ways in which her silence has been portrayed in the artistic reception of her story?
3. Reflect upon the ways in which the relation between silence, nakedness, and shame are presented by the author. In what ways do these relations help illuminate Christ's passion and crucifixion?

MAKING THE SHIFT TO THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

NATE DAWSON

Summary

Nate Dawson, working with the thought of Stephen Fowl, argues that Christians come together “primarily for the sake of deeper communion with God, one another, and the world.” He believes that a theological interpretation of scripture is best suited for this. However, the world of biblical studies—specifically historical criticism—“often overpowers and disables attempts to interpret scripture theologically.”

Questions for Discussion

1. Dawson does not view historical criticism very favorably. Indeed, it seems that for him historical criticism and theological interpretation are inevitably opposed. Do you think this is a fair evaluation of Dawson’s position? What are the possible benefits of a low view of the value of historical criticism? What are possible dangers?
2. Quoting Kevin Vanhoozer, Dawson asserts that “theological interpretation is not an imposition of a theological system or confession grid onto the biblical text.” Dawson claims that this is true because of an “ecumenical consensus” that begins with an interpretation “of the Bible as a unity and as narrative testimony to the identities and action of God and of Jesus Christ.” Is this sufficient in preventing a theological interpretation from becoming an imposition of a preexisting theological system? Is ecumenical or scriptural unity possible, necessary, or even desirable? How can we adopt an approach to the Bible that not only does not impose preexisting systems, but also makes room for the surprising and unexpected?
3. Dawson states that many church leaders in North America “see theology and serious engagement with scripture as abstract and irrelevant to the life of the church; as a result, churches relegate scriptural and theological concerns to academic theology.” Is this assessment true in your church? What role does scripture play in the theological world of the faith communities that you are part of?