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SZÓLÍTÓ SZAVAK THE POWER OF WORDS



TANULMÁNYOK FABINY TIBOR
HATVANADIK SZÜLETÉSNAPJÁRA

PAPERS IN HONOR OF TIBOR FABINY'S
SIXTIETH BIRTHDAY

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Ezzel szemben lépett fel a 18. századi pietizmus, amely az észhit ellenében a gyakorlati, lelki vallásosságot, a hit érzelmi átélését hangsúlyozta. A mozgalom német ága a belső tapasztalat fókuszát miatt nem foglalkozott a hagyománnyal. John Wesley anglikán lelkész azonban teológiai professzor volt, és az ógyházi írókat a reformátoroknál jobban ismerte. Ezért ő, illetve a halála után egyházzá szerveződő metodista lelkiségi mozgalom a tradícióban a helyes írásértelmezés négy kulcsának egyikét látta – az Írás belső összefüggései, a józan ész fénye és a közös keresztény tapasztalat mellett.

A 19. századra a felvilágosodás a hagyományellenes liberális teológia, illetve a modernizmus a tudományos haladáshat révén állította kihívás elé az egyházat. A katolikus válasz az antimodernizmus volt, amely az egyház, illetve a pápai tekintély megerősítését célozta, a protestáns egyházak pedig vagy beadták a derekukat a teológiai liberalizmusnak, vagy a fundamentalizmus mellett döntöttek. Ez utóbbi, konzervatív teológiai és lelkiségi irányzat a verbális inspirációt, a protestáns ortodoxia biblicizmusát és katolicizmusellenességét ötvözi, így negatívan áll a hagyomány fogalmához is. Mivel ebben a lelkiségben a *sola scriptura* jelentése inkább *nuda scriptura*, sok hamis és szélsőséges tanítás talajává is vált.

A 20. század közepén jelent meg az evangélikalizmus, amely ugyancsak konzervatív mozgalom, de a fundamentalizmustól több ponton is eltér, és igen sokszínű. Egyrészt bizonyos – a teremtéssel, a végső időkkkel és az egyházrenddel kapcsolatos – tanokat nem tekint az igaz hit jelének. Másrészt ebben a mozgalomban indult el a szabadegyházi lelkiség mai belső problémáinak felismerése, és az ókeresztény egyház iránti intenzív tudományos és hitéleti érdeklődés (*Evangelical Ressourcement*).

Napjaink protestáns lelkiségét általában a *sola scriptura* szlogen-szintű emlegetése jellemzi. Luther hermeneutikai programja dogmatikai hivatkozásalappá vált: bárki „egyedül” a Biblia szövegét idézve nekiállhat a maga módján teologizálni, az Egyháztól függetlenül, mint az ókori eretnekek.⁸ A hit szabályának és az egyetemes keresztény zsinatok hitvallásainak jelentősége az elmúlt két évszázad angolszász vulgárprotestantizmusában így szinte teljesen erodálódott, és ez új felekezetek, szekták elburjánzásához vezetett.

Ideje lenne tehát Luthert újraolvasni és -értelmezni, mielőtt rá hivatkozva a magunk módján értelmeznénk a Szentírást.

⁸ Tertullianus, „Pergátló kifogás az eretnekekkel szemben”, ford. Erdő Péter, in *Tertullianus művei*, szerk. Vanyó László (Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 1986), 415–457.

ARE THE SCRIPTURES HOLY?¹AN ESSAY IN CRITICAL DOGMATICS IN HONOR
OF TIBOR FABINY

PAUL R. HINLICKY*

Eberhard Jüngel has rightly pointed out that “the place of the conceivability of God [is] a Word which precedes thought.”² Here, however, a pertinent differentiation from the earliest years of the Reformation is needed.³ Luther tried to answer a critical objection to his Bible-based critique of the sale of indulgences, as if to say: “By what right do you contradict customary teachings and practices of the church and presume to correct or purify them?” Luther famously appealed to the Word of God and offered straightforward exegetical arguments from the Bible about the meaning of texts to justify reformatory teachings, namely, that 1) repentance, or turning to God, concerns the whole life of the believer, 2) that divine mercy cannot be bought or sold but only received in faith as a free gift, and 3) that therefore the true treasure of the church is the gospel of the grace and glory of God in the crucified and risen Christ, which should be openly exhibited, freely offered and purely explained for the sake of the penitent.⁴ In this way, Luther sought to liberate the Bible for its proper, i.e., Spirit-intended usage simply by using the Bible properly to critique the religion business and commend news from God that is truly good.

¹ This essay is adapted with permission by the publisher from Paul R. Hinlicky, *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 171–192.

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² Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. D. L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 154–155.

³ The following paragraph is drawn from Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 7–8.

⁴ *Luther's Works* (St Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1955–86, hereafter *LW*), *LW*, 31: 77–252.

Luther quickly discovered, however, that opponents could challenge his interpretations of Scripture by construing texts differently, questioning his selection of texts, or pointing to contradictions in the Bible leading to endless disputation that could only be settled in turn by the teaching authority invested in the papacy.⁵ In consequence, after some back and forth in the course of controversy the question was refined in Luther's mind. He took the question opponents were asking at bottom to be: "How can you appeal to the Word of God when there are so many words of God?" To this more nuanced question respecting religious pluralism, Luther replied that he was speaking of the word from the God of Israel that first of all speaks to us Gentiles, making us people of God, namely (citing Rom. 1:3), "the gospel concerning his Son."⁶ This answer, with its supposition of a pluralism of words from God, informs the answer to the question posed in the title, "Are the Scriptures holy?"

A theology is "biblical" accordingly if, and when, it thinks with the Bible taken as a canonical narrative that tells of the eternal Father who is determined by the costly missions of his Son and Spirit to redeem the creation and bring it to fulfillment. Theology is then thinking after God's thinking (Mark 8:33, followed by 9:7), counting the cost that is the Christ crucified. This cost to God is what makes grace free to sinners and thus accounts their faith in Christ alone, who is this costly gift from God, to justify before God. On the other hand, no matter how peppered with Bible verses, if a theology tells some other story to think some other thoughts it is not biblical. To set such boundaries for faith's thinking by telling the story of God's history with humanity and to direct theological attention to the narrative coherence within is the authoritative function of the Bible in theology.

Yet this boundary setting of theological normativity is but a secondary implication of the Bible's primary work as the Spirit-given language shaping faith to conformity with God's purpose in a world surfeit with religious options. Here the canonical narrative identifies the God of the gospel by revealing his *oikonomia* for the obedience of faith in a world where many other schemes of liberation and summons to obedience are available. So the Bible is much more than a theological norm and its normativity is misunderstood if this broader role in the hands of the Spirit holistically to form the theological subject in instruction, meditation, and prayer and so on is neglected. The Holy Scriptures are holy in making their readers holy and so come to function normatively in theology as rule of faith.

⁵ See Luther's account of the debacle in *LW*, 31: 307–325.

⁶ *LW*, 31: 346. *LW*, 35: 358.

In this rendering of its authority as deriving from its power to sanctify in the Spirit's hands, the Bible is received in faith as faith's own elemental language that as such provides the matrix in which Christian theology takes place. It is received in faith as a gift from God the Holy Spirit bound up with the Spirit's sovereign initiative at Pentecost, delaying the *Parousia* of the Lord for the sake of the mission to the nations (Mark 13:10), to tell and to teach all that Jesus, sent by his Father, has said and done.⁷ The process of biblical canonization as the Spirit's selection and integration of texts is bound up with the mission to the nations just as the mission to the nations provides the hermeneutical key to the Bible's theological function.

With the Bible theology can thus tell whether the discourse and the iconography are about Jesus, his Father and their Spirit and so know that we are in that place in the world among many others called out by the gospel in order to be gathered and sent on as the Body of Christ. If the discourse and iconography are other, we simply are someplace else in the world. The Bible in this way authoritatively maps the ever open, ever fluid economic distinction between the *ecclesia* and the nations from which it is gathered. Just so the Bible ever challenges every form of *Kulturchristenheit* (acculturated Christendom), every formation of *Volkskirche* (church of the ethnic group) as blurring injuriously the most fundamental of dogmatic distinctions.

Be it crude or sophisticated, on the other hand, "biblicism" is the deformation of "proof-texting" without the preceding appreciation for the Scripture as matrix of theology or critical dogmatic reflection on the emergence of the Scriptures from God's history with his people to serve as the primary rule of faith. Biblicism attempts "to bypass logical, hermeneutical, and metaphysical questions probing the truth-value of Christian beliefs by direct appeal to arbitrarily selected texts of Scripture."⁸ The proof-texting method of Protestant orthodoxy is well-known and mercifully abandoned by all today who would intend to talk responsibly about God and the world before God and the world – also, then, by contemporary evangelicals.⁹ But modern historical criticism too, in spite of uncounted and significant advances in understanding the genres and occasions of biblical texts that can be ignored only at the cost of cognitive seriousness, does not in principle avoid this arbitrariness. In some ways

⁷ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (NY & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 178.

⁸ Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity*, 228–231.

⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), particularly on *scientia*, knowledge of God, 265–305.

it exacerbates it. Historical criticism is, or too often operates, as biblicism of a higher order.

In so far as historical criticism discovers the past and leaves what it discovers there, of course, it cannot be accused of arbitrariness, but rather of precision. Just this is what historical criticism is supposed to do, i.e. critically to know the text by discovering its historical origin and contextual sense. This necessary critical work at the same time is not and cannot be theology, knowledge of God. It is rather knowledge of the second Isaiah, or the Yahwist writer, or the redactor of those traditions we call the Deuteronomic, and so on. The problem of sophisticated biblicism arises for two reasons.

First, historical criticism in its pretense to non-theological, trans-confessional objectivity forgets that it has an audience to which it is accountable as it forgets that the Scripture it studies is preserved for the sake of an audience. The very existence of these writings as something for us to examine presupposes a decisive historical event, namely, their deliberate preservation in writing and further as canon, as rule of faith. Thus, second, the particular content of canonical texts, both in their own voices and in their interactions with one other by virtue of their written preservation in the emergent canonical tradition, articulate *claims to truth regarding God*. In other words, the texts are theological in their very content and this content as theology is not reducible to originating occasions without a dogmatic decision against their claim to truth. In being committed to writing and so preserved, these texts intend theology, knowledge of God, not only for their own moment but for the future. This theological content is what made the texts eligible in the first place, so to say, for inclusion in the genre, Scripture, while the genre of Scripture itself arises from sorting and selecting such particular theological claims to truth in a discerning process of theological tradition, just as Paul remarks regarding the Easter testimony he both records and develops in 1 Corinthians 15:1–8.

Being written down and preserved for the instruction of future readers in the continuing community of faith, then, Scripture as genre denotes selected texts that are held to transcend their immediate historical context. Indeed, joined with other such theological testimonies as Scripture, they acquire new meanings by their interactions, as they must, when theology itself is taken as “scriptural reasoning” (Peter Ochs)¹⁰ that produces knowledge of the God of the Bible for us today. In just this way the canonical text is not merely or even primarily a record of something in the past, but theological scripture that aims

¹⁰ Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation. Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

to engage us as sanctified subjects including making us its thinkers in our own missiological situation.

How then can historical criticism say anything whatsoever about the claims to truth the text bears, since that claim to truth cannot be a matter only of what was said but also and indeed chiefly of what is being said through the tradition of Scriptural reasoning up to today in and for the community that believes with the scriptures? Historical criticism surely can debunk abuses of the Bible that claim proof where only a sign from faith for faith is given; it can surely expose *eisegesis* (reading into the text) in distinction from *exegesis* (drawing out from the text). It can test the coherence of contemporary claims by comparison with original meanings. But it is arbitrary if on the basis of historical critical expertise biblical scholars opine regarding contemporary theological questions emerging out of the *ecclesia's* use of the biblical canon as the scriptural matrix of its thinking about God and creatures. This is especially so if such opinionating takes place by lifting up favored texts, or rather favored scholarly constructions of texts, without critical dogmatic labor in logical, hermeneutical and metaphysical testing of claims.

The last two centuries are fraught with such episodes of sophisticated biblicism that for example favored prophet over priest, narrator over sage, or the faith of Jesus over the faith of Paul, or eschatology over apocalyptic, and so on. This kind of expert but hermeneutically arbitrary opinionating frequently becomes the ersatz substitute for critical and consequent theological thinking in contemporary Euro-American Christianity. Acute minds within biblical studies have regularly borne witness to this fundamental confusion, for example, Albert Schweitzer in his demythologization of the “quest for the historical Jesus” or Johannes Weiss in his exposé of the confusion of Jesus’ proclamation of the imminent reign of God with 19th century progressivism.¹¹ Sophisticated biblicists facilely quote the Bible, but their deliverances turn out on examination to be oracles of the *Zeitgeist*.

But the Scriptures are holy in forming the obedience of faith as they are read and received according to the Spirit’s mind and intention to redeem and sanctify the “profane” that the Creator has claimed for the Beloved Community.¹²

¹¹ Christopher Morse, “‘If Johannes Weiss is Right...’ A Brief Retrospective on Apocalyptic Theology,” in *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Joshua B. Davis and Douglas Harink (Eugene: Cascade, 2013), 137–153.

¹² According to Luther’s *Disputation on the Divinity and Humanity of Christ*, we do not surpass biblicism until we achieve theological interpretation that makes the claim to truth for the sense intended by the Spirit for us today: “heresy lies in meaning not in words” (# 57) because heresy consists in “understanding the Scriptures other than the Holy Spirit urges” (# 64). See Paul R. Hinlicky, “Luther’s Anti-Docetism in the *Disputatio de divinitate et humanitate*

As George Lindbeck wrote now almost a generation ago. "The primary function of the canonical narrative [is] to render a character [...], offer an identity description of an agent," namely, God as the One who is determined by his Son and Spirit to redeem and sanctify. It does this,

not by telling what God is in and of himself, but by accounts of the interaction of his deeds and purposes with those of creatures in their ever-changing circumstances [...]. The primary focus is [...] on how life is to be lived and reality construed in the light of God's character as an agent as this is depicted in the stories of Israel and Jesus.¹³

To understand "God" in the way that entails our sanctification we have to enter the Scriptural world and learn there of this supervening order of costly grace, that the "Creator" is the almighty Father who through his Word and Spirit creates all things for the Beloved Community and is self-determined, by the pledge of his own divine life, to bring it to pass – a pledge made to Abraham and fulfilled on Golgotha, hence also in each believer's own Gethsemane of the soul when and where in the matrix of the Scriptures they too are born anew to holiness of life.

But does entering "the strange new world within the Bible"¹⁴ mean leaving the common world behind? Lindbeck denied this inference and spoke of the common world theologically "re-described in Christian terms."¹⁵ But how do we account for this very distinction that Lindbeck seems to take for granted between the scriptural world and the common world? Have we here no more than a version of Barth's initial observation of the positive fact that the Christian community exists as that form of life in the world that ventures to speak

Christi (1540)," in *Creator est creatura: Luthers Christologie als Lehre von der Idiomenkommunikation*, ed. Oswald Bayer and Benjamin Gleede (Berlin & NY: Walter De Gruyter, 2007), 184–185; cf. also 169–180.

¹³ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 121.

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 28–50.

¹⁵ Lindbeck lifts up Augustine as the model for this kind of theology: "the whole of his theological production can be understood as a progressive, even if not always successful, struggle to insert everything from Platonism and the Pelagian problem to the fall of Rome into the world of the Bible" (*Doctrine*, 117). Theologians like Augustine "re-describe" extrabiblical reality in distinctly biblical terms. Lindbeck consequently claims that the "reasonableness" of Christianity is not found in its conformity with some other discourse of "secular rationality" (Milbank) that is regarded as more "true," but is "primarily a function of its assimilative powers, of its ability to provide an intelligible interpretation in its own terms of the varied situations and realities adherents encounter" (*Doctrine*, 131).

of God on the basis of a putative word from God? Bluntly, that the Bible exists and purports to tell of God? Certainly, a pragmatically oriented account of theological knowledge affirms, as did Bonhoeffer in *Creation and Fall*,¹⁶ that we are neither at the beginning nor at the end but in the middle, *in medias res*. We cannot and do not transcend and should not try to. But can we communicate outward a claim to truth from the Word that forms us in our theological particularity? How so? If not, has the mission to the nations become impossible and theology as scriptural reasoning ghettoized? Then, contrary to the present hypothesis, the originating claim for the Scripture as a missiological gift of the Spirit has been undermined. A ghettoized theology of the Bible alone contradicts what the Bible is.

Forms of life presuppose life, that is, the common body. In fact, biblical theology makes a remarkable claim about the common body that cannot but interest anybody who hears it, namely, that it is the precious creature of God, the material bearer of the human person, and thus destined for the redemption of resurrection and glorification in the Beloved Community of God. Making this claim that common human existence is a being-towards-death-and-resurrection, the "strange new world within the Bible" engages the mind of the common world (cf. Paul in Acts 17 at Athens¹⁷). These considerations help to answer a critical objection put to Lindbeck's theory on the nature of doctrine, that it isolates theology from the world and makes cognitive engagement impossible. We are to this extent incorporating Lindbeck's position in arguing that the authority of the Bible in theology for the church's obedience of faith lies in its holiness, not in its "truth," that is, in the claim of God that it makes, not yet on the fulfillment of this claim. It engaged Athenians very much to hear the common body re-described as the precious creature of God, destined for life just as reflection on what would be required for it to be true brought them, whether in faith or unbelief, to the knowledge of God who gives life to the dead and calls into being new worlds.

It is certainly true that Lindbeck's argument reflected his judgment – in principle separable – on the collapse of Euro-American Christendom and the

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, in *Works*, vol. 3, trans. D. S. Bax (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 28–31.

¹⁷ "The meaning is quite simple: If the Gentiles understand that there is one God, the Creator, and if they repent, then they do indeed believe. And then they know that they should always have understood this. Here Luke provides an insight into the structure of faith: he knows that independent of our comprehension, God has always been near at hand; thus unbelief cannot be blamed on God's alleged distance." Hans Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 148.

consequent *de facto* marginalizing of the Christian community into a socio-logically sect-like existence, even if in its theological self-understanding this sectarian existence is ecumenical in orientation and theology's redescriptive ambition is world-encompassing. That is a judgment on our spiritual situation in Euro-America today that the present essay also shares. But, bearing in mind that we are speaking of scholarly theology as an academic discipline that devises and polishes tools of praxis – not preaching strategies which must be as flexible as context demands and opportunity affords – we may meet the objection. By no means is this approach to the Bible as matrix of theology and norm of theology ghettoizing, if theology takes clear account of the double existence of the theological subject as a member, though not citizen, of two kingdoms, by virtue of the common body. The common body is our shared world. If there is a "point of contact," then, it is not modern self-transcendence, but the common body that all share in a common world; this is the suffering and desiring and frustrated body that groans for its redemption, as redescribed in its truth by Romans 8. So Lindbeck's "scriptural world" is this world of the common body, including its own unfailingly religious, often articulately metaphysical self-interpretations, though now as engaged by the gospel and construed anew in the light of God's character as that is known from the Scriptures. This scriptural world is "able to absorb the universe"¹⁸ in the prophetically confrontational and apostolically reconciling ways at the heart of its message of the resurrection of the Crucified One.

Thus the reply to the objection is that it is this specifically theological act of interpretation of the body as creature of God destined for resurrection as known from biblical texts that actually gains rational attention as something pertinent, interesting and worthy of consideration. In words that Josiah Royce composed against both theological apologists and cultured despisers, the Christian claim to truth about the common body may be taken

at least provisionally, not as the one true faith to be taught, and not as an outworn tradition to be treated with an enlightened indifference, but as a central, as an intensely interesting, life-problem of humanity, to be appreciated, to be interpreted, to be thoughtfully reviewed, with the seriousness and striving for reasonableness and for thoroughness which we owe to every life-problem whereupon human destiny is inseparably interwoven.¹⁹

¹⁸ Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 117.

¹⁹ Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 7.

That is not only a matter of philosophical hermeneutics. Theology itself understands that the intelligible interpretation of the common matter of the common world – our experience as body – bridges between theology and other forms of knowledge.

By the same token, the realities of this shared world of bodily existence constrain what a canonically shaped theology says in this process of interpretation. Scientific discovery simply rules out as antiquated, for example, the predominant opinion in theology just several centuries ago of a six-day creation that had occurred about five thousand years before. The discoveries of the sciences, the events of history, and whatever else is of human significance in the common world of the human body as known in our best available accounts provide the real material of this real world that are to be interpreted and so integrated into a growing, ever modernizing theology, as the theology of the church (ectypal theology) progressively anticipates the knowledge that God has of God and the world (archetypal theology).²⁰

What may rationally persuade non-adherents to consider the theological truth claim of Christian theology is that they find themselves with their worlds cogently interpreted by such "accounts of the interaction of God's deeds and purposes with those of creatures," so that they are won over to the gospel's vision of "how life is to be lived and reality construed in the light of God's character," as we have heard Lindbeck say. At its existential depth, as Wittgenstein knew, it is particularly the experience of suffering redescribed as the "Gethsemane of the soul" (where "soul" means the Hebrew "heart" of the body, not a disembodied intellect) that may lead to a kind of rational persuasion:

Life can educate one to a belief in God. And experiences too are what bring this about: but I don't mean visions and other forms of sense experience which show us the "existence of this being," but e.g., sufferings of various sorts. These neither show us God in the way that a sense impression shows us an object, nor do they give rise to conjectures about him. Experiences, thoughts – life can force this concept on us.²¹

This is so because, biblically understood, bodily "life" at its depth, in the "soul," is through the particularities of one's time the experience of being created by God – "suffering God," as Reinhard Hütter provocatively put it.²²

²⁰ Heinrich Schmidt, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd edition (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1899), 16.

²¹ Cited in *The Christian Theology Reader*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 24.

²² Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice*, trans. D. Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

The theologian who inspired Hütter to this formulation was Oswald Bayer, who himself took inspiration from the Enlightenment gadfly and dissident, Johan Georg Hamann. "Knowledge of God and knowledge of self are not to be separated" but are mediated together "in a specific linguistic medium [...] in the exchange of words between God and the human." Once again, we are not talking here about "visions," but about experience and its interpretation. Just as in Lindbeck, the biblical Word and human self-interpretation arising from it are "literally world-shaping." One's own life-story is not only reflected in it but has its very existence in it, is formed in it and experiences its unity in it. This unity is not that of an "individual substance of reason" that would accidentally have a history. No "I" that I myself would be is at the basis of my life-story. The fact, however, that the human is not an amoeba that dissolves and dwindles away in ever-changing shapes and relations, that in the midst of these changes a continuity nevertheless persists without there being any inherent power to change the self or integrate its changes, as with Proteus – all this results from the fact that God is the primary motif and motive of my life-story. He is the Poet in the radical sense; he is Author. God – an author! God – a writer! This is Hamann's answer to the question [of Bonhoeffer], "Who am I?"²³

The Bible, Bayer claims on behalf of Hamann, "forms the *a priori*, thoroughly accidental, but *a posteriori* necessary condition for understanding self and world [...] one can speak of [the Bible] as a historical *a priori*"²⁴ – what we are calling the "matrix" of theology, when theology itself adopts a pragmatic, rather than theoretical, ideal of the knowledge of God for the interpretation of experience.

This knowledge of self as creature of God is paradigmatically the case in the human experience of becoming the creature God intends by dying and rising with Christ.

Therefore, man in this life is the simple material of God for the form of his future life. Just as the whole creation which is now subject to vanity is for God the material of its future glorious form. And as earth and heaven were in the beginning for the form completed after six days, that is, its material, so is man in this life for his future form, when the image of God has been remolded and perfected.²⁵

"Nature" is the "material" of grace in scriptural reasoning. The book of revelation in this way interprets the book of nature even as the book of nature

²³ Oswald Bayer, *A Contemporary in Dissent: Johann Georg Hamann as Radical Enlightener*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 49.

²⁴ Bayer, *A Contemporary*, 65.

²⁵ *LW*, 34: 138.

presents the material that cries out for true interpretation. If Scripture cannot work in this way to sanctify experience, however, it possesses no authority that theology might otherwise create for it. On the contrary, the use of Scripture in theology as norm is derivative of its function as matrix. As Bayer articulates the primacy of the Bible as matrix, the Bible's "*auctoritas normativa* follows from its *auctoritas causativa* – because of the authority that it has to create faith."²⁶ Concretely, the faith that interprets experience as the creation of God, by conformation to the resurrection of the Crucified One, in this way and by this Word sanctifies the secular. The "truth" of the Bible is not the Bible, but the gospel it bears into the world of experience; and the "truth" of the biblical gospel's interpretation of experience is the coming of the Beloved Community it promises.

If, on the other hand, the primary question in theology were whether and how the Scriptures are as such "true," wittingly or not we subject the Scriptures to contemporary notions of "truth," themselves historically conditioned, as truly we surely ought to know and acknowledge living today in our condition of cultural vertigo that is the criticism of criticism in postmodernity. The denouement of this line of thought is in such aporia – is what Horkheimer and Adorno called the "dialectic of Enlightenment" in their mournful obituary of National Socialism: "The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, that the Enlightenment upholds against mythic imagination, is the principle of myth itself [...] which critically determines the limits of possible experience."²⁷ We ought to trace this subjugation of Scripture to a myth of immanence to its origins in Baruch Spinoza's seminal treatise on Scripture on the basis of his rigorous philosophy of immanence.²⁸ This progressively more radical dialectic has crystallized in recent years in the attack by the contemporary History of Religions School on the canonicity of Scripture.²⁹

The "canonical delimitation of the textual sources of theology," as I put it some years ago, is now repudiated as "arbitrary vis-à-vis the variety of early Christian voices." The result is that the canon itself has come "more and more to appear as the very essence of the retrospective imposition of a dogmatic framework, the founding act of orthodoxy."³⁰ This is precisely true, though

²⁶ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 77.

²⁷ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 12.

²⁸ Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. S. Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).

²⁹ In several footnotes Robert W. Jenson carries on guerilla warfare against Helmut Köster in his *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, "The Triune God", 5, n. 5; 32, n. 28.

³⁰ Paul R. Hinlicky, "Secular and Eschatological Conceptions of Salvation in the Controversy

the epigones of the History of Religion School hardly grasp its significance correctly. The searching probe along these lines was first made by Walter Bauer in his incisive *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity*.³¹ This culminating objection to Christian theology in the line that runs from Spinoza through the History of Religions School to Bauer strikes at the heart of the matter and as such actually contains a valuable insight. It implies that if, contrary to the intention of the objection, we receive the canonical Scriptures as holy, i.e. in their selection by the Spirit for formation of theological subjects in conformity with the cross and resurrection of Christ, then their holiness is to be sought and found in nothing other than this selection, i.e. this sanctification of texts from out of the mass of contending voices. In just this holy selectivity, of which historical criticism richly informs us, moreover, theology finds their continuing aptitude today to supply criteria by which to discriminate between voices contending for authority in the life of the people of God in mission to the nations. The historical critical interpretation of the 13th chapter of the (historically) first gospel, significantly, uncovers just this motive already in the seminal construction of the gospel narrative.³²

Modern biblical criticism does not beg this question of the true humanity of the Scriptures but puts it to the test. In that sense historical criticism is and indeed remains a true child of the Reformation. By the very same token, however, this unquestionable contribution of modern biblical criticism is ambiguous in this regard. Too often historically the “assured results” of criticism instead betray not only a fallible construction but an intention to make the critic invulnerable to theological criticism by rendering null and void the truth of the Word of God in Scripture and its claim in creed and confession, also on the biblical critic. But biblical criticism does not have to fall into this anti-theological trap.³³ Nor must a canonical theology that thinks consequently in a post-critical way beg the question of the true humanity of the Scriptures. The best theological criticism of the History of Religions scholarship lies in showing, not merely its incapacity as theology to provide for such critical judgments that test the spirits today, but its utter vulnerability to capture by spirits other

than the Holy Spirit of Jesus and His Father.³⁴ In other words, reorientation of the doctrine of the authority of Scripture by pointing in the direction of the proper or holy use of the canon is not necessarily to lapse into pre-critical naïveté but rather to have become justifiably skeptical about the “assured results” of the modern criticism of Scripture after several centuries of experience with it.³⁵ The hermeneutical approach³⁶ to this problematic, on the other hand, welcomes the opportunity to trace historically the decisions of the community of faith, taken as the inspiration of the Spirit, in deciding for and against texts and in ordering selected texts into the canonical whole to discover their integration in issuing knowledge of God.

As I put it in an essay some years ago: in that very act of writing down and passing on the historically concrete words of prophets or apostles, sages or scribes, the Word of God is made to transcend its immediate occasion and to extend its meaning into the projected future of the community – yet without ever abandoning the primacy of the historically specific occasion which is preserved and handed on in just this fashion. In this light, we can say that a scriptural community in the world exists in that it stands before (what come to be assembled in time as) canonical texts in disciplined listening to their distinctive, historically specific and precisely as such untranslatable witnesses of the Word of God. Thus – and this is the critical point – this community exists by relying on the Spirit, who once spoke by these prophets, to speak to today’s community anew. The community survives and flourishes if, and only if, this reliance on the same Spirit to speak anew is justified. So far as such confidence is justified, the canonical biblical narrative and the eschatological community of the *ecclesia* imply one another, “for whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).³⁷

I would only add to this account today the further qualification, argued above, that in being placed into a canonical whole the phenomenon of intertextuality

over the Invocation of God,” in *This Is My Name Forever: The Trinity and Gender Language for God*, ed. Alvin Kimmel, Jr. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 222.

³¹ Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity*, ed. R. Kraft and G. Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971; reprint Sigler Press, 1996).

³² Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 864–923, esp. 875, 896, 922–923.

³³ Leander E. Keck, *A Future for the Historical Jesus: The Place of Jesus in Preaching and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

³⁴ Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) is a devastating exposé of the scientific and disinterested history of religions inquiry of Walter Grundmann into Jesus “the Galilean” in service of “racial science.”

³⁵ So also Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 61–114. “We now recognize that there is no interest-free interpretation, no interpretation that is not in the service of some interest and in some sense advocacy. Indeed, it is an illusion of the Enlightenment that advocacy-free interpretation can exist” (63, emphasis original).

³⁶ Such as attempted in my *Divine Complexity*, 1–24.

³⁷ Hinlicky, “Secular and Eschatological,” 224.

arises by means of which Scripture comes to interpret Scripture according to some implicit or explicit *key*.

In Christian theology “the” Scriptures, i.e. the canonical Scriptures form a hermeneutical whole with creed and confession,³⁸ answering respectively the questions: What is the narrative? Who are its agents? What is its import for us? In answering these questions, or what is the same, in reading Scripture theologically, the Scriptures in this extended way work to critique the fallen world, to create in its maw the obedience of faith, to build up the community of this faith called out from the nations and so made holy by the gospel, and to absorb the world of common bodily experience in the cumulative play of ever new interpretation. To quote the Bible in isolation from this hermeneutical complex – as barbaric, supersessionist and triumphalist notions of *sola scriptura* attempt – proves nothing in an epistemological sense; in a theological sense, moreover, it less proves a point than puts the testimony of a theological subject under the judgment of the Word of God. “God said it, I believe it, that settles it” is the motto of theological barbarism. Over against this barbarism, the “destructive” work of modern criticism is fully justified. It is justified in demanding that the words of Scripture be known, at least in first part, by their original sense as human words in their own historical and social contexts. At its best such critical historical knowledge checks arbitrary, unethical and ideological appropriation as that occurs in biblicism, crude or sophisticated. It is justified in requiring that present day users take responsibility for their own appropriations of Scripture and not hide behind the authority of the sacred text that they allege to assert as if without any act of theological interpretation on their own part. The biblical author’s own meaning in time and place is one thing and the meanings created by the Spirit in incorporating that authorship into the ensemble of the Scriptures for the use of the present community of faith in knowing God is another. Knowing this further requires that these latter usages of texts be compatible theologically with the original sense as responsible developments of it, even as new usages cannot but exceed that original sense.

This “excess” is always the risk of faith, but it is not arbitrary. In appropriating texts in theological testimony, the invocation of authoritative Scripture may be likened to taking an oath, summoning the God of the Bible as a witness, projecting God as the ultimate audience of one’s theological testimony and thus submitting that testimony to the *eschaton* of divine judgment. To be sure, the proximate audience of theology is the people of one’s own time and place, just

as it was for the biblical authors. Before fellow human beings, consequently, one does not cite the Bible to make one’s theological testimony invulnerable to criticism, but, on the contrary, to subject it to the proper criticism of one and all who likewise submit to the canon of the Scriptures. It is to invite those who do not to join this theological circle. This is the sense in which all theology that intends to be sacred, or holy, is and must be under the Holy Scriptures.

³⁸ See Hinlicky, “Luther’s Anti-Docetism,” 147–149.