

'THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION' AND ITS CONTRADISTINCTIONS

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Summary

The label 'theological interpretation' has been used recently as a technical term to denote a certain approach to Scripture. This development is most unfortunate, not least because it implies that other approaches, especially historical criticism, cannot be equally theological in focus. The use of this term in such an artificially narrowed way creates the false impression that anyone wanting to do exegesis in the service of the Church must do so according to the particular practices of the 'theological interpretation' movement. The implied argument is hardly an argument at all, and it promotes a number of poor hermeneutical habits.

1. Introduction

Some terms denote more indirectly than directly—that is, they carve out a meaning by way of excluding something rather than by direct reference. When a movement puts its weight behind this type of term, its designation-by-negation can be operative even where the term takes the form of a (positive) direct reference. Brevard Childs' narrowed use of the word 'Scripture' (as in the title of his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*) is a poignant example of this sort of thing. For Childs, to read Scripture as 'Scripture' means to refuse a number of aspects of the historical-critical project—including some central ones, like a commitment to authorial intention. The way Childs used 'Scripture' implies that approaches incommensurable with his outlined approach—specifically, the approaches found in other Old Testament

introductions—do not constitute readings of ‘Scripture’ *per se*.¹ Here the refitting of an everyday term with an artificially narrowed definition creates an unusual capacity for rhetorical heavy-lifting.² The fact that the definition has been custom-fitted for his own programme escapes the notice of most readers.

The purpose of this article is to suggest that the term ‘theological interpretation’, as used in current theological parlance, is cast from the same mould as Childs’ ‘Scripture’. As such, the term is not at all helpful, at least where fair representation is the goal. Like Childs’ ‘Scripture’, ‘theological interpretation’ has the effect of stemming options that should remain open, *at least* beyond the stage of laying out definitions.

2. ‘Theological Interpretation’ as a Technical Term

‘Theological interpretation’ is a term very much in vogue. It is a term that a number of recent biblical interpreters use to describe a broad set of hermeneutical approaches to Scripture, all of which share one important feature: they all view the ‘true’ meaning of Scripture as derivative of its active role within the Church *today*. In other words, these approaches locate meaning in some (supposed) aspect of Scripture that transcends its (human) authors.

Most discussions of ‘theological interpretation’ (or ‘theological exegesis’) note the difficulty of defining the term. Viewed positively, ‘theological interpretation’ denotes a number of approaches for reading Scripture within the shadow of the Church. But while the ambiguity of the term remains, there is often enough particularity within the attempts

¹ Daniel Driver exemplifies this artificially narrowed definition of ‘Scripture’ by approvingly referring to Childs’s 1979 book as ‘a bid to understand the Old Testament as Scripture’ (‘Later Childs’, *PTR* 14/1 (2008): 117-29, esp. 118 (emphasis original)). According to Driver, ‘What we have in Childs is an effort (struggle) to understand the Bible’s form and function as Scripture in every generation of faith’ (‘Later Childs’, 127-28). The implication seems to be that those scholars who read the Bible according to the so-called ‘Enlightenment’ principles scorned by Childs, including those who read it as a theological authority, are not really reading it as ‘Scripture’. This artificial narrowing of the term ‘Scripture’ tends to forestall any serious consideration of whether such a use of the term is justified by anything implied in Scripture itself, or in what the original canonisers had to say about the nature of Scripture. In other words, ‘Scripture’ becomes a sort of spring-loaded term, accomplishing the work of an argument without any of the requisite reasoning.

² See John C. Poirier, ‘The Canonical Approach and the Idea of “Scripture”’, *ExpT* 116 (2005): 366-70.

to illustrate ‘theological interpretation’ to highlight some serious problems with how the term is used by those who make it their own. If the term is meant as a term of contradistinction to *other* approaches (esp. historical criticism), it is straightforwardly implied (is it not?) that those other approaches are somehow *not* theological.³ What the term inscribes on a literal-descriptive level is thus a different field of contradistinctions from the design traced out in its use as a technical term. This disparity between the literal-descriptive and the ascribed-content aspects of ‘theological interpretation’ makes it one of the most unfortunate terms to come along in a great while. Why does a reading only become ‘theological’ when it buys into one or another aspect of the linguistic turn (especially as read through its Reformed precursors)—rather than when it is (by any other name) simply *theological*?⁴

The technical use of ‘theological interpretation’ as a term of contradistinction makes it sound like other modes of reading are *not* theological at all, which is plainly wrong. Was C. H. Dodd’s exegetical work on the kerygma not theological?⁵ What about Ben Meyer’s

³ E.g. Daniel Treier writes of a ‘movement toward recovering theological interpretation of Scripture’ (‘In the End, God: The Proper Focus of Theological Exegesis’, *PTR* 14/1 (2008): 7-12, esp. 7). Treier clearly has something other than the centuries-old method of historical criticism in view, thereby implying that historical criticism is *not* ‘theological interpretation of Scripture’—even when dealing with a text like Romans or Galatians. Treier elsewhere gives a well-rounded survey of all the avenues within this approach, *none* of which (apparently) is historical criticism. See Daniel Treier, ‘Theological Hermeneutics, Contemporary’ in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005): 787-93.

⁴ Markus Bockmuehl complains, ‘[T]he bandwagon of “theological interpretation” and “ecclesial reading” is in danger of becoming overpopulated with a variety of very diverse, not to say irreconcilable, approaches’ (*Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*, [Studies in Theological Interpretation, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006]: 158). This is another indicator that ‘theological interpretation’ means something much narrower than ‘exegesis that is theological’: who would complain about a label providing an umbrella for irreconcilable approaches if it were intended as such? In light of Bockmuehl’s remark, I was surprised to hear him say (in a paper presented at the 2008 Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting) that when he wrote his book, he was unaware that ‘theological interpretation’ was a movement per se. He seemed to say (in 2008) that he had not regarded ‘theological interpretation’ as a technical term. But the complaint quoted above indicates that he did regard it as a technical term to some extent, in that he regarded ‘theological interpretation’ as a near synonym to ‘ecclesial reading’, a purported synonymy that I consider rather unfortunate.

⁵ See C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936).

discussion of *Christus Faber*?⁶ What about the work of G. E. Wright, Paul Minear, Floyd Filson, and other representatives of the so-called ‘Biblical Theology’ movement?⁷ Very few members of the ‘theological interpretation’ movement would count James Barr among their number. In fact, Barr is a favourite foil for those trying to show what ‘theological interpretation’ is *not*. Yet Barr’s exegesis is often theological through and through. There is just as much theology in Barr’s corrective reading of Genesis 1–3 as there is in the Barthian reading that Barr attacks. In fact, were it not for the theological payoff, Barr probably would not have written about Genesis 1–3 at all.⁸ So why is the one interpretation of Genesis 1–3 styled ‘theological interpretation’, and the other treated as its opposite number?⁹

To add to the confusion: when representing ‘theological interpretation’ to outsiders, its proponents typically define the ‘method’ in question in a more generous way than their actual procedures

⁶ See Ben F. Meyer, *Christus Faber: The Master-Builder and the House of God* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series 29; Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick, 1992).

⁷ The whole ‘Biblical Theology’ movement was subjected to an unfair critique by Brevard S. Childs, who characterised its position as an inconsistent compromise of values (*Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970): 13–87). Childs’s critique was funded by the same views about the nature of Scripture that fund the current theological interpretation movement. On its own terms, as well as on *Scripture*’s own terms, there was nothing problematic about the ‘Biblical Theology’ movement’s basic pursuits.

⁸ See James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991 Delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). In point of fact, Barr’s exegesis in most of his books is theological in one way or another. This is often missed because Barr’s critics have mischaracterised the relation of his exegesis to theology. E.g. according to Walter Brueggemann, ‘Barr believes that only descriptive work is legitimate and any confessional impetus is a discrediting mark’ (‘The ABC’s of Old Testament Theology in the US’, *ZAW* 114 (2002): 412–32, esp. 422). But Barr’s understanding is that theological use of Scripture can only begin after proper ‘descriptive work’ (much the same as Dodd, Joachim Jeremias, F. F. Bruce, et al. held)—*not* that a ‘confessional impetus’ is wrong. Whether that ‘descriptive work’ is theologically driven is immaterial. If Barr complains, on occasion, that a given exegesis is theologically driven, he means that the exegete *cheated* the text for the sake of theology, not that a theological interest is wrong.

⁹ To name one example of the happy marriage of historical criticism and theological interpretation (in the non-technical sense): Philip F. Esler recently published an extended defence of numerous historical-critical methodologems, remarking, all the while, that his ‘intention in writing is an avowedly theological one’, and that the goal of his work ‘is to outline an approach to interpreting the New Testament that is directed toward its continuing to maintain and foster Christian life and reflection’ (*New Testament Theology: Communion and Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005): 1, 11).

suggest—generous, that is, in the direction of my suggestion that ‘theological interpretation’ should simply denote ‘exegesis that is theological’. Stephen Fowl even offers a definition of ‘theological interpretation of the Bible’ that speaks simply in terms of its effect: ‘theological interpretation’ is that mode of interpretation that causes its practitioners to live faithfully before God.¹⁰ Fowl’s definition is pragmatic, but it gives little indication of what ‘theological interpretation’ really entails.

These pragmatic definitions suggest that the term denotes any and all interpretation performed in the interest of theology. But if the term were as wide as that, what does it convey? Why should such an approach be called anything other than a ‘confessional’ approach? On the terms of these pragmatic definitions, there is no significant difference between ‘theological interpretation’ and confessionally interested reading of the text. But that would put the bulk of historical-critical studies within the ambit of ‘theological interpretation’, which clearly is not what the proponents of this method have in mind. For many of them, historical criticism represents the approach of the *academy*, not the church. Historical criticism, on this account, *cannot* be theological, as it directly represents the use of Scripture for purely non-theological interests.¹¹

If one looks hard enough, one will find that not all definitions of ‘theological interpretation’ are equally bad. Michael J. Gorman, for

¹⁰ Stephen E. Fowl, ‘Know Your Context: Giving and Receiving Money in Philippians’, *Interpretation* 56 (2002): 45–58, esp. 45.

¹¹ Many proponents of ‘theological interpretation’ would probably say that I have overstated their antipathy to historical criticism—as many of them, in fact, have given a wholly constructive place for historical criticism within their approaches. But instead of defining the *meaning* of the Bible in referential and intentionalist terms, which is the core commitment that causes the critical reader to read through a *historical* lens, proponents of ‘theological interpretation’ begin with a different poetics, one that causes them to use historical criticism rather episodically and haphazardly (if at all). The limited role that Richard E. Burnett awards to historical criticism is instructive, esp. as he strives to show its fundamental value for ‘theological interpretation’. According to Burnett, historical criticism, ‘[a]t its most basic level, ... is a method used to understand the concrete humanity of texts’ (‘Historical Criticism’ in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 290–93). Burnett’s retention of a subservient role for historical criticism amounts to an overturning—in deference to discrepancies in Scripture’s field of referents—of Calvin’s claim that Scripture contains no human ‘admixture’ (*Commentary* on 2 Tim. 3:16). The rest of Calvin’s bibliology basically remains in place for proponents of ‘theological interpretation’, however, and it would appear that the privileging of a Reformed bibliology (in spite of its being adapted to a human element) is what renders the historical-critical understanding of scriptural meaning merely subservient.

example, defines ‘theological interpretation’ as ‘biblical interpretation that takes the Bible not just as a historical and/or a literary document but as source of divine revelation, witness to God’s creative and salvific activity, and/or (minimally) significant partner in the task of theological reflection—thinking about God and about the world and humanity in light of God’.¹² Gorman’s definition is helpfully broad, because it includes a second ‘and/or’ by which ‘theological interpretation’ can mean simply ‘interpretation that is theological’. Unfortunately, Gorman obscures this improvement by adding eight principles for theological interpretation (‘Incarnation, Universal, Communal, Canonical, Coherence, Charismatic, Transformative, and Constructive’), none of which should really be necessary for proper ‘theological interpretation’.

The term ‘theological interpretation’ is problematic because it implies that historical criticism is *not* ‘theological interpretation’, even when the latter is aimed at elucidating a clearly theological passage (e.g. in Paul), and when it is undertaken specifically for theological purposes. This terminology is unfortunate, because it makes it appear that historical criticism, in principle, is *not* theological. It is as if the theological interpretation movement thinks that the goal of historical criticism is always strictly historical, in the sense of being interested only in human history as sealed off from the effects of divine agency, rather than in history in the sense of determining what really happened. When historical criticism is (rightly) defined as the latter, and not (as the theological interpretation movement has it) as the former, its fruit can be just as theological as any other approach.¹³

It is not difficult to see that the ‘theological interpretation’ movement is a victim of its own insularity. In recent books like Mark

¹² Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (rev. edn.; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2008): 144.

¹³ ‘Historical’ reading refers to more than a method—it also refers to the theory of meaning that one brings to the text. To read a text ‘historically’ is to read it with an intentionalist hermeneutic. In that sense, ‘historical-critical reading’ is *not* merely one method within a handbag of tools. Rather, it represents both a method and a fundamental view of texts as conveyors of meaning and truth. It assumes that the meaning of the biblical text is the meaning given it by the original author, and *not* the meaning it appears to be given by its canonical setting, or by the church’s tradition, or by the reader, etc. As far as I can see, nearly every recent proponent of ‘theological interpretation’ is opposed to this stance.

Bowald's *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics*,¹⁴ or Daniel Treier's *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*,¹⁵ everything proceeds from the assumption of a 'divine authorship' view of Scripture. When Bowald tells the reader that it 'is assumed' throughout his book that the 'dramatic increase in the interest in theological interpretation of Scripture' is both 'good and necessary',¹⁶ he seems completely unaware of how many unvoiced assumptions underlie the one that he voices. Those who argue for the lateness or artificiality of the divine authorship model (e.g. Barr, Barton, etc.) are typically viewed as if their arguments are based on grounds other than Scripture, and those who allow historical criticism to hold the key to Scripture's meaning are often characterised as hanging on to an outmoded Enlightenment worldview, as if pre-Enlightenment hermeneutics were not just as concerned with authorial intention and the referentiality of sacred texts.

3. When is Exegesis Theological?

The 'Prolegomena' in the Spring 2008 *Princeton Theological Review* ponders the suggestion that 'it is attention to divine agency that makes exegesis truly theological'.¹⁷ The problem with expressing it that way, however, lies in the assumptions that seem to hide behind the term 'agency', as proponents of 'theological interpretation' seem to think in terms of a divine agency in *the hermeneutical task*, rather than (or in addition to) the divine agency explicit within the soteriological events narrated in Scripture.

Referring to a narrow band of hermeneutical approaches as 'theological interpretation' is obviously calculated to make the scholar or student reason as follows: 'Since I desire to read Scripture as a theological text, in the shadow of the Church (so to speak), I should embrace the methods and assumptions of "theological interpretation". By the same token, I should keep my distance from those methods and assumptions that "theological interpretation" avoids'. Most proponents

¹⁴ Mark Alan Bowald, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics: Mapping Divine and Human Agency* (London: Ashgate, 2007).

¹⁵ Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

¹⁶ Bowald, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics*, ix.

¹⁷ Peter Kline, 'Prolegomena', *PTR* 38 (2008): 5-6, esp. 5.

of ‘theological interpretation’ probably do not consider this mode of reasoning to be a merely rhetorical calculation—they really think that strict adherence to the historical method represents an ‘academic’ mode of reading the Bible (viz. a way of reading it as something other than ‘Scripture’). But even that would not justify such an unhelpful use of terminology. Scholars and students should be allowed to choose their allegiances on the basis of substantive arguments rather than terminology with inbuilt assumptions.

Another factor in the rise of a ‘theological interpretation’ movement is the felt need on the part of many to respond to some recent calls to dismiss theology from university-based study of the Bible. In the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, Richard Hays defines a twelve-point programme for reading with ‘eyes of faith’ over against the programmes of Heikki Räisänen, Wayne Meeks, Michael V. Fox, and Hector Avalos—all of whom have questioned the practice, or the university presence, of a confessional approach to biblical studies. (Hays writes in terms of ‘theological exegesis’ rather than ‘theological interpretation’, but the terms are essentially interchangeable.) By defining ‘theological exegesis’ over against these representatives of anti-confessionalism, Hays creates the impression that those who do not do things as the ‘theological exegesis’ movement does then are keeping company with those who oppose the use of the Bible for theology.¹⁸ Hays writes that Räisänen ‘bemoans the fact that

¹⁸ Hays writes that ‘theological exegesis’ is ‘a complex *practice*, a way of approaching Scripture with eyes of faith and seeking to understand it within the community of faith’ (‘Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith: The Practice of Theological Exegesis’, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1 (2007): 5-21, esp. 11). It soon becomes apparent that ‘within the community of faith’ means more than just ‘through faith’, and its function within the sentence is to equate reading ‘with eyes of faith’ with an ecclesial hermeneutic. Hays lists twelve ‘identifying marks’ of theological exegesis: it (1) ... is a *practice of and for the church* ... (2) ... is *self-involving discourse* ... (3) ... [makes] *historical study* ... *internal to [its] practice* ... (4) ... attends to *the literary wholeness of the individual scriptural witnesses* ... (5) ... can never be content only to describe the theological perspectives of the individual biblical authors ... (6) ... does not focus chiefly on the hypothetical history behind the biblical texts ... (7) ... [uses] *language* ... *intratextual in character* ... (8) ... find[s] itself drawn into the Bible’s complex web of *intertextuality* ... (9) ... is committed to the discovery and exposition of *multiple senses* in biblical texts ... (10) ... knows itself to be part of an ancient and lively conversation ... (11) ... goes beyond repeating traditional interpretations; ... produc[ing] *fresh readings*, ... [and] (12) ... [represents] the way that God, working through the text, is *reshaping us*’ (‘Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith’, 11-15). It is worth noting that Hays does not found this list on the unpacking of any other stated commitment—viz. he does not say that a ‘Barthian’ or ‘postliberal’ reading programme will feature these aspects—only that ‘theological

for more than a hundred years the truly historical project of NT interpretation was sidetracked by the influence of confessional neo-orthodox theology, because of the influence of Barth and Bultmann'.¹⁹ It is instructive to ask whether Räisänen's frustration is well placed. Certainly one can be 'confessional' without being 'neo-orthodox'. Anyone interested in a theologically focused reading of the Bible might well have as much to say against Barth as Räisänen does, yet Hays reasons almost as if that field of possibility is closed to us. For Hays, the road to recovering an authentic 'theological exegesis' can only lead through Basel and New Haven, but in place of supports for that view, Hays only gives us more detailed maps of Basel and New Haven.

According to Hays, the direction in which Räisänen, Fox, Meeks, and Avalos are headed inevitably leads to a place where 'the very project of studying something called the Bible becomes intellectually incoherent'.²⁰ He finds support for this judgement in a remark by Robert Jenson: 'outside the church, no such entity as the Christian Bible has any reason to exist'.²¹ Hays correctly notes that the Bible 'is a collection of documents gathered by and for the church to aid in preserving and proclaiming the church's message',²² but if he intends to follow what Jenson means by this, then he is making an unjustified move from the preservationist function of Scripture to a churchly-readerly hermeneutic whose main support is the problematic claim that Scripture somehow *belongs to* the Church.²³ Unfortunately, *that* notion

exegesis' will. Of course, this does not allow for 'theological exegesis' to stand simply for 'exegesis that is theological in focus'.

¹⁹ Hays, 'Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith', 7.

²⁰ Hays, 'Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith', 10.

²¹ Quoted in Hays, 'Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith', 10.

²² Hays, 'Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith', 10.

²³ This claim lies behind another remark by Jenson: 'the question ... is not whether churchly reading of Scripture is justified; the question is, what could possibly justify any other?' (quoted in Hays, 'Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith', 10). It is instructive to quote the larger context of Jenson's words: '[I]f, say, the doctrine of Trinity and Matthew's construal of the passion do not fit each other, then the church lost its diachronic self in the early fourth century at the latest, and the whole enterprise of Bible reading is moot. The question, after all, is not whether churchly reading of Scripture is justified; the question is, what could possibly justify any other?' (Robert W. Jenson, 'Scripture's Authority in the Church' in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003): 27-37, esp. 28-29). Contra Jenson, to move from accepting that 'the church lost its diachronic self in the early fourth century at the latest' (which of course is a highly tendentious way of expressing it) to the idea that 'the whole enterprise of Bible reading is moot' requires a rather large leap. For one thing, it completely passes over the idea that 'the whole

(viz. that Scripture *belongs* to the Church) has received new life recently, partly from the aforementioned reaction to calls to remove theology from university-based biblical studies.

The suggestion that ‘theological interpretation’ owes much of its strength to the Church/University suit and countersuit is based on more than just Hays’ reference to that setting. The debate between the Church’s and the University’s modes of reading Scripture—along with the notion that these represent necessarily opposed approaches—has been thematised in recent writings. According to Markus Bockmuehl,

The last two decades of the twentieth century saw a hardening of opposing points of view on whether New Testament interpretation should rally around a synthetic stance of Christian faith or rather explicitly bracket out such a stance. Recent salvos in this battle have been fired on the one hand by writers like Philip Davies (1995), Werner Jeanrond (1996), Heikki Räisänen (2000a), and Jacques Berlinerblau (2005), who argue in different ways that as a public, university-based discipline the Bible can be treated only in strictly nonconfessional fashion as a document of religious history.... On this reading, the future of New Testament studies as an academic discipline in the universities must lie in regrouping around a strictly secular phenomenological study, in which a Christian theological interpretation can have no part.

A number of contrary writers, however, have in recent years taken up salient insights of postmodern hermeneutics in order to plead for the legitimacy of an unabashedly Christian theological perspective. This alone, it is argued, is most clearly in keeping with the New Testament’s normative canonical function in the communities of faith for whom it was written and by whom it is received to this day. Leading scholars in this interpretative “growth industry” include Brevard Childs, Peter Stuhlmacher, Luke Timothy Johnson, Stephen Fowl, Joel B. Green, and Francis Watson, among others, although each of them manifests distinctive emphases.²⁴

Note that the named representatives of the celebrated ‘growth industry’ are all outspoken advocates of ‘theological interpretation’. No mention is made of theologically motivated historical critics (e.g. Larry

enterprise of Bible reading’ might be aimed at correcting tendencies within the Church, or at checking the correctness of what is being preached (as the Berean model from the book of Acts shows). As far as I can see, reading Scripture actually becomes a moot enterprise much more quickly on the grounds of Jenson’s ecclesial hermeneutic than on any other grounds. And the question of “[W]hat could possibly justify any other” reading of Scripture than a churchly reading?’ has a number of valid responses, the most obvious one being that Scripture has preserved for us the voice of the apostles, on whose authority the church is founded.

²⁴ Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*, 55-56.

Hurtado, Gordon Fee, Graham Stanton, Martin Hengel, etc.). The ‘growth industry’ is portrayed not merely as a view that Davies, Jeanrond, Räisänen, and Berlinerblau are unable to accept, however, but more particularly (and problematically) as *the* alternative to Davies, Jeanrond, Räisänen, and Berlinerblau. This gives the appearance that the only ‘unabashedly Christian theological perspective’ (or ‘synthetic stance of Christian faith’) is to accept some form of pneumatic or ecclesial exegesis. This brings to mind Jon Levenson’s complaint that ‘Christian theologians’ have “preempted the categories” of biblical theology.’²⁵

Of course, there is nothing unusual about a movement’s tendency to consign all competing views to the *massa perditionis*. This happens frequently, and it is accomplished nearly as often by refitting an existing terminology. (This sort of thing happens especially often in a vibrantly insular context.)

4. ‘Theology of the Word’ or ‘Theology of the Christ Event’?

The association of historical criticism with atheism sometimes runs deeper than the rhetoric. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (editor of the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*) even associates Barr’s and John Barton’s understanding of the Bible as a record of Israel’s encounters with God (rather than as the ‘Word of God’ itself) as a type of ‘agnosticism’, or a ‘denial’ of a more-than-deistic God:

Critics typically find it difficult to conceive of a literal communication from God: “The text of Scripture is not God’s word spoken to us: it reveals God as the one *about* whom, *not* by whom, various types of literature are written” (Barton 72; cf. Barr 131). Modern biblical criticism’s agnosticism as to the divine origin of Scripture is likewise agnosticism, or perhaps outright denial of God as a living, breathing, and speaking communicative agent.²⁶

²⁵ Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993): 44. Levenson here borrows a phrase from Henry Kissinger.

²⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘Word of God’ in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005): 850–54, esp. 851. The references to Barton and Barr are to: John Barton, *People of the Book?* (Westminster John Knox, 1988); James L. Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1973).

Vanhoozer's charge that '[c]ritics typically find it difficult to conceive of a literal communication from God' is hardly fair, in that neither Barr nor Barton dismisses the 'Word of God' model on the ground that it is 'difficult to conceive' of such a model in the abstract. Rather, they dismiss it on the grounds that neither Scripture itself, nor the earliest Christian account of Scripture, puts forth such a model.²⁷ Vanhoozer's comments could be compared to those who proclaim that 'God is powerful enough to preserve Scripture from error', to which one might respond that it is not a question of what God *can* do, but of what God *did* do.²⁸

But the most troubling part of Vanhoozer's passage is the way he turns this supposed 'difficulty to conceive of a literal communication from God' into a ramp for agnosticism and/or a principled deism. He charges that 'agnosticism as to the divine origin of Scripture is likewise agnosticism, or perhaps outright denial of God as a living, breathing, and speaking communicative agent'. There is nothing about Barr's and Barton's view of Scripture that entails that God does not move or speak—it is simply a denial that Scripture is fundamentally intended as

²⁷ Vanhoozer claims that 'the word of God is often identified with the words of Scripture', and cites John 10:35; 2 Cor. 6:16-17; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 3:7; 2 Pet. 1:19-21; 3:15-16 as examples. However, none of these verses unequivocally supports his case. John 10:35 does not refer to a 'word of God' view of Scripture, unless Vanhoozer regards the term 'scripture' in this verse in apposition to the term 'word of God', which is difficult to substantiate. 2 Cor. 6:16-17 quotes a pastiche of prophetic passages from the Old Testament, which Paul introduces with 'God said' because they are *prophetic*—not because they are scriptural *per se*. 2 Tim. 3:16-17 likewise does not say that Scripture is the word of God: although *theopneustos* (in v. 16) is almost universally understood to mean 'God-breathed', philological evidence and the context of 2 Timothy support the view that it means 'God-breathing', and that, as such, the term invokes the life-giving qualities of God's breathing. To call Scripture *theopneustos* therefore invokes the life-giving quality that it has a witness to the gospel. (I argue this understanding of 2 Tim. 3:16-17 in a forthcoming article.) Heb. 3:7 introduces Psalm 95 with 'the Holy Spirit says' because the Psalm is presumed to be prophetic, and *not* because it is scriptural *per se*. 2 Pet. 1:19-21 likewise attests to a view of prophecy *within* Scripture as divine: the expression 'prophecy of scripture' means 'prophecy preserved in Scripture' rather than 'scripture functioning as prophecy'. And, finally, I see nothing in 2 Pet. 3:15-16 that implies an equation of the 'Word of God' with Scripture.

²⁸ Vanhoozer begins his article by claiming that the 'conviction' that the Bible is 'somehow ... the word of God' lies '[a]t the core of theological interpretation of Scripture' ('Word of God', 850). He does not explain why viewing the Bible more simply as religious testimony about God's activity, written by those best able to reflect on this testimony, is not amenable to 'theological interpretation'. One does not logically imply the other, except, of course, on the terms of the 'theological interpretation' movement's understanding of what makes interpretation 'theological'.

an agent for these movements and speech acts. Throughout the history of Christianity, many who have taken Scripture as a communication from human writers relaying their encounters with God have had a vibrant grasp of the activity of God in their daily lives. By contrast, one result of the Reformed tradition's heightening of the divinity of Scripture was to view miraculous and prophetic gifts as a surrogate for the canon that was to come, so that such gifts were no longer needed once the New Testament came into being. In other words, while neither Barr nor Barton is the sort to put stock in modern miracles, their preferred model of Scripture was in fact more logically tied to an understanding of God as 'a living, breathing, and speaking communicative agent' than its alternative was.

One of the most important questions for a meaningful and proper taxonomy of the 'types of Christian theology' (to use Hans Frei's phrase) is to ask whether the relationship of the biblical narrative to theology is (properly) mediated through the *text* or rather through the real-world referent *behind the text*. Those who support the former are clearly the more vocal group today, and they typically have thought about the issue at a more theoretical level than others have, although I would argue that their rhetoric has gotten the better of their theorising. They may or may not be the majority in biblical studies circles, but they are clearly a majority in theological circles, at least in North America.

The classificatory query—'Is theological truth text-mediated or event-mediated?'—is helpful on a number of points. For one thing, it provides a useful definition for an otherwise hard-to-define term: viz. the slippery and multifarious notion of a 'theology of the Word'. I suggest that what all theologies claiming this label share is the manner in which they relate the biblical narrative to theology. They all do so through the direct mediation of the text, and *not* through the mediation of the events to which the text refers. For purposes of the present discussion, I suggest using the term 'theology of the Christ event' to denote the conceptual alternative to the 'theology of the Word' paradigm, because the writers of the New Testament thought more in terms of a theology of the Christ event than of a theology of the Word.

5. Conclusion

The term ‘theological interpretation’, as it is used today, represents an attempt to ‘rescue’ Scripture from the supposedly academic programme of historical criticism. As such, the term’s referential field is defined in negative terms—as what it is *not*—even while the term itself seems to be saying something positive, about what makes exegesis theological. The problems with this situation are obvious, as the combination of these factors suggests that historical criticism cannot be theological. As such, ‘theological interpretation’ must be counted as one of the most unfortunate terms to arrive on the scene in some time.

I have not attempted to give an explanation for the rise of the ‘theological interpretation’ movement. My goal has been primarily to identify a state of affairs that might be difficult to recognize from certain vantage points.