

# Same song-sheet: different tunes? Biblical scholarship and systematic theology on reading the Bible

Stephen Plant and David Horrell

*Dear Dave,*

We both read the Bible, but do we read it in different ways and for different purposes? How can I make sense of how I use the Bible as a theologian and how you use it as a New Testament scholar? When answering theological or ethical questions, do New Testament study and 'systematic' theology pull together, or do they pull in different directions?

My questions won't surprise you. It is characteristic of many biblical scholars to think that theologians make up what they say as they go along, without much reference to what the Bible says. It is equally characteristic of theologians to think that biblical scholarship takes place in isolation from theology, or even from the Christian faith. I hope that neither of us would be quite so dismissive. So, how would you express the relationship between our disciplines?

*Stephen*

*Dear Stephen,*

There are several points I could pick up from your letter, but I shall focus on the key issue you raise: the relationship between biblical studies and theology and the ways in which their respective practitioners approach the Bible. I should perhaps preface any substantive comments with a caveat: I am an individual, with my own (quirky?) perspectives and interests, and it is hard to speak objectively about a whole discipline, namely New Testament studies, or more broadly biblical studies, especially when that discipline is currently so diverse, even fragmented, in its range of approaches. Still, here goes!

I think that biblical studies as a whole stands in a somewhat ambivalent relationship to systematic theology. Many biblical scholars are Christians of some tradition or other, and it is clear that much biblical

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study is undertaken with the aim of justifying some particular contemporary theological position (obvious examples are lengthy studies of baptism [adults only or infants too?], homosexuality, justification by faith, and so on, in the New Testament).

Less pejoratively put, much biblical study is intended as a part of the wider theological task: understanding ancient texts as best we can in order to help us formulate what we should think now. However, the origins of modern critical biblical study lie in post-Enlightenment attempts to study the Bible free from the constraints of religious dogma, to read the Bible 'like any other book', in other words, without having to presume its accuracy or immunity from criticism. Even if theologians operate with quite different presuppositions about the Bible from these tenets of historical criticism, it seems to me that we have all learnt from the critical and historical study that the past centuries have produced and have been liberated (I think the term is apposite) to treat the biblical text in all sorts of ways.

Historical studies of the New Testament – understanding the texts in the light of the context in which they were produced – have been seen as **providing some controls on legitimate interpretation**, helping us to see what the text might and might not have originally been intended to mean and thus constraining the range of uses to which we might now put the same texts, guarding us against what scholars like Bruce Malina refer to as **ethnocentric and anachronistic interpretations**. But that kind of role for biblical studies tends to presume a kind of objectivity and detachment on the part of the biblical scholar: biblical scholars tell us what it meant then, theologians work out what it might now mean. The problem with that, as has become increasingly clear in recent decades, and as is implicit in some of the points I make above, is that **biblical scholars do not, and could not possibly, approach their studies with disinterested detachment**. Every questioning of the past is shaped by the contemporary interests and location of the interpreter, where 'location' should be taken to include gender, class, race, and so on, as the liberation and feminist theologians have taught us.

That contemporary realisation complicates things a good deal, and accounts, at least in part, for the current diversity within New Testament studies: the discipline now lacks any dominant paradigm. Historical-critical studies stand alongside all sorts of literary, contextual, and self-consciously perspectival readings of biblical texts.

I realise I haven't actually got round to saying much about how a New Testament scholar might approach the Bible in relation to ethical

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questions, or about what key contributions biblical scholars might bring to contemporary ethical or theological discussion. There's much I could say on this, but first I'd better see what your response is to what I've already written. Have I clarified anything, or merely muddied the waters?

*Dave*

*Dear Dave,*

I'm glad that 'many biblical scholars are Christians'; many theologians are Christians too!

It goes without saying that my concerns have nothing to do with the Christian commitments of individuals, whether experts in New Testament studies or in theology. I'm concerned with the possibility that some ways of reading the Bible are virtually uncoupled from theology so that a critical way of reading the Bible and a theological way of reading the Bible amount to unrelated enterprises.

Let me pick up what you say about the origins of modern biblical criticism in post-Enlightenment attempts to study the Bible 'free from the constraints of religious dogma'. This phrase gets exactly to the key difference between how NT study reads the Bible and what I take to be reading the Bible as a theologian. (Of course, you're right to observe that we can only speak as individuals and not as representatives of our whole discipline. David Kelsey has demonstrated that theologians read the Bible in several rather different ways, of which my proposals resemble just one [*The Uses of Scripture in recent theology*, David Kelsey, London: SCM, 1975].)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed what I want to say in a letter to Ruediger Schleicher (8<sup>th</sup> April, 1936):

First, I want to confess quite simply that I believe the Bible alone is the answer to all our questions, and that we only need to ask persistently and with some humility in order to receive the answer from it. One cannot simply read the Bible the way one reads other books. One must be prepared to really question it . . . that is because in the Bible it is God who speak to us.

Bonhoeffer understood well enough that it is perfectly possible to read the Bible ‘like any other book’, for example, with the critical tools of your trade. One can read the Bible as history or as literature, ‘free’ as you put it ‘from the constraints of religious dogma’. But, for Bonhoeffer, and I agree with him, these are not *Christian* readings. The tools of biblical study are useful: they may help us to achieve a biblical text that is faithful to the oldest manuscripts; they can suggest how a gospel was assembled; they can illuminate the nature of the conflict between Peter and Paul. I also agree that NT study may provide ‘some controls on legitimate interpretation’, that is, that there are some things that the Bible can’t mean (though I sometimes regret that certain allegorical and typological readings that earlier generations of theologians used have been lost).

But, helpful and interesting though these achievements are, they are almost always surface matters. A Christian reading the Bible wants to know what God is saying now, in this place, to the individual and the church to which she belongs. You do not need to know the most recent thinking on the Synoptic Problem to get the theological drift of Mark’s story of blind Bartimaeus. Not only is it very difficult (I actually think it’s impossible) to read the Bible ‘objectively’ (as you properly acknowledge), it is not even *desirable* to read it objectively, from a Christian point of view. **The point of reading the Bible** is not to discover what Mark or Paul or John thought: **it is to open oneself to God as he reveals himself there.**

I exaggerate the contrast to make my point, but my underlying conviction is genuine enough: New Testament study must abandon any pretence to objectivity, whether posing as historical objectivity or social-scientific objectivity and subordinate itself to a theological reading of the Bible that asks of each passage (Bonhoeffer again): ‘What is God saying to us here?’

*Stephen*

*Dear Stephen,*

In terms of the conviction you express, I – and most biblical scholars – would agree about abandoning any pretence to objectivity, but would insist that any such pretence was largely abandoned some time ago. However, I would reject the second part of your proposal, that New

Testament study must 'subordinate itself again to a theological reading of the Bible . . .' I want to insist that a wide range of approaches in biblical studies, historical, text-critical, social-scientific, along with theological readings, all make important contributions to the particular task the theologian attempts. The disciplines of theology and biblical studies, as I see it, are different, but (in an overall sense) complementary and sometimes overlapping, not opposed, as you seem to imply.

Could one read Bonhoeffer differently? 'One cannot *simply* read the Bible the way one reads other books' (no, of course not, as a theologian) . . . one must '*really question it*' – because the business of considering what God is saying to us is so serious. Couldn't that underpin an approach in which all the skills the biblical scholar brings – those that pertain to reading the Bible as any other book, but others too – are seen as an essential part of any really serious questioning of the text? As I see it, biblical studies has a *disciplining* role in terms of contemporary use of the Bible.

It is disciplining in part, and quite simply, because biblical scholars spend their time reading biblical texts, closely and carefully, attending to their shape, structure and content. But it has a disciplining role also because biblical scholars tend to draw attention to the *diversity* apparent within the material, thus checking any easy synthesis, or any dogmatic perspective which erases the distinctive voices of various texts.

Biblical studies also discipline the use of Scripture by illuminating the cultural and historical settings of the texts, and thus reminding us of the extent to which 'the past is a foreign country' (L. P. Hartley). This can limit any easy presumption that the biblical authors were talking about the same things we want to talk about, or facing the same problems.

But why would it be a loss – and precisely a loss *to theology* – if New Testament study were to follow your conviction and subordinate itself to the theological task of asking 'What is God saying to us here?'

Let's take an example where it is apparent that the biblical writers did not face our questions and concerns. Suppose our interest were in environmental ethics. Is it not relevant to know what the Hebrew verb *kabash* means in the context of Genesis 1 (Genesis 1:28, where it's generally rendered 'subdue')? Let's not forget that we can only have a stab at translating these words at all on the basis of historical/textual study of their various occurrences, etymology, etc. What contemporary Jewish or Greco-Roman texts might allow us to gain some understanding of Paul's (rather obscure) ideas about the subjection of creation and its future liberation (Romans 8:20-22)? These are only a few more or less

random examples, but they illustrate, I hope, my conviction that for the theologian or ethicist who wants to take the Bible seriously, the products of serious and scholarly biblical study will be an essential resource along with other forms of reflection.

Are you convinced?

*Dave*

*Dear Dave,*

I want to correct an impression I may have given that I concede the 'minimal . . . value of various forms of biblical study' grudgingly. There is nothing reluctant in my affirmation that close engagement with biblical texts, where possible in the original languages, can help a reader see freshly and gain insights into biblical authors and those for whom they were writing. To run with the example you give: of course, looking at the etymology of the Hebrew verb *kabash* aids reflection on Genesis 1. What I resist is the *dictatorship* of critical biblical exegesis, which says that such and such a reading is impossible because the current prevailing scholarly consensus says it is: such consensus can come and go. Even if, in the light of feminist critiques for example, NT scholars are more aware of the difficulties of being objective than once they were, the eggshells of the post-Enlightenment ideal are still *liberally* scattered around (forgive the oblique pun). The idea that certain 'approved' exegetical practices 'discipline' reading of the Bible as Scripture can be misleading. If true, it would mean that every modern scholar is a truer interpreter of the Bible than Origen, or Luther, or Wesley, simply because they're modern. But, as Gregory Nazianzus pointed out, the best theologian is not the one who gives a complete logical account of his subject, but the one who 'assembles more of Truth's image and shadow'.

Naturally, anyone who writes an exam essay on eschatology deserves to fail if they don't know the difference between John and Mark on 'last things'. But, **God is free to use biblical texts in Christian theology and practice just as God pleases.** The Bible is the canon – the measuring rod – of Christian theology on God's authority, not because it has been granted permission to say this or that by the guild of NT scholars, or even by the Church. When you speak of the 'disciplining' role of NT exegesis I fear you limit the freedom of the Bible to speak without constraints. I would distinguish my position from a

'fundamentalist' one not because I sympathise with those who scoff at 'fundamentalists' while a plank of intolerance clouds their own vision, but because I also fear tying God's hands by making an idol of the Bible. So on this at least, as you will surely have guessed, I follow Karl Barth who expressed the view that 'the Bible is God's Word to the extent that God causes it to be His Word, to the extent that He speaks through it'.

Such a view creates all manner of difficulties; but why should that make the approach wrong? (Tertullian once commented, with allowable hyperbole, that 'Christianity is certain because it is impossible'.) With such exegetical freedom how can one distinguish the Spirit-led from the mad? If God acts and speaks freely through Scripture in time and space does that mean God sometimes contradicts Godself? These are important and hard questions, which I believe I can respond to, but which we will have to deal with in our next correspondence.

*Stephen*

*Dear Stephen,*

I would agree that the presumption of detached objectivity still lies beneath at least some, perhaps a good deal, of New Testament study, particularly that which is cast within a broadly traditional historical frame. I would also accept that there is a danger in any approach which suggests a 'dictatorship' operating on the part of New Testament studies, where certain forms of exegesis or interpretation are ruled out by an existing scholarly consensus. To return again to the feminist and liberation theologians, they have helped to show how a 'controlling' scholarly paradigm, perhaps cloaked beneath the claim to objectivity, can in fact be an approach that reflects and sustains the interests and position of a particular class or group. That is, of course, why I chose the word 'disciplining' and not controlling, dictating, or the like, and tried to exemplify that disciplining role in terms of what follows from close engagement with the texts, rather than any particular type or form of interpretation.

While I want to leave room, then, for all sorts of engagements with the New Testament, I find myself nervous about the kind of claim that 'God is free to use biblical texts . . . just as God pleases'. For 'God', whoever she or he may be, does not – even in the work of Karl Barth! – speak, or use the Bible, or anything of the sort, directly, but only through

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human agents who *claim* to be representing God's word but whose claims (which as often as not are also claims to power) must be subject to criticism and suspicion (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:29: the congregations must weigh what is said!). I would be interested in how you do deal with these issues – you acknowledge the importance of a response to them – without accepting a disciplining role provided by careful, close reading of the texts of the sort biblical scholars engage in. Next time, perhaps!

*Dave*