

WRITING A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY: METHODOLOGICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

GEOFFREY GROGAN, FORMER PRINCIPAL OF BIBLE TRAINING INSTITUTE,
GLASGOW

For nearly three years recently my main writing task, a demanding but immensely rewarding one, was the writing of a theological commentary on the Book of Psalms.¹ During this period I gave a lot of thought to the issues of methodology and hermeneutics involved in doing such a work and I am grateful to the editor for giving me the opportunity of sharing something of this with the readers of this journal.

I. A SUCCESSION OF IMPORTANT TASKS

What is involved in constructing the theology of a Bible book? It is a many-sided task.

Basic, of course, is exegesis, in which there is a focus on the historical, cultural and religious context of the text and its first readers, and a multitude of linguistic issues.

Next comes a detailed survey of the book to find its main theme or themes. If there are several, it is important to identify their relationship, how less central themes relate to them and what gives the book its unity. In this way a theology of the book is constructed. In the case of the Psalter, we need to ask if this is affected by its multiple authorship.

Then there is the contribution it makes to biblical theology. Do its distinctive features serve to complement or supplement or even challenge what other books say? What contribution does it make to our understanding of Christ, the climax of the divine revelation?

A further task awaits us. Our interest in Scripture is neither purely historical nor purely academic. We are concerned with its relevance to the Christian life and to the church's witness in the world, so we need to consider the book's relevance to today's issues, including those that are

¹ This is due to be published early in 2008 in the Eerdmans *Two Horizons* series.

theological, philosophical, ethical and pastoral. This task is never-ending and ever-changing, but it must be undertaken in a commentary intended to be of practical value in the church's work.

Is a theology of the Psalter really possible? At first sight, the difficulties may seem insuperable. Here is a body of literature, written over hundreds of years by various authors on many diverse themes, with considerable differences of mood and approach. Seybold shows that there is definite theological intention behind some psalms, instancing hymns like 8, 19, 33, 90, 104 and 136, Wisdom Psalms like 1, 49 and 73, historical psalms such as 78, 105, 106, 135 and 136.² Despite this, however, when considering the Book of Psalms comprehensively, he says that 'a theology of the Psalter would be a most confused affair'.³ There are however two important considerations to bear in mind.

First of all, if a theology of the Psalter is either impossible or valueless, the same must be true of an Old Testament theology and by the same token a biblical theology, yet many such have been written. It is true that there has been much criticism of biblical theology as an enterprise, notably by James Barr. P. Balla explains and seeks to counter these criticisms, while accepting that the practitioners of the discipline can learn from its critics.⁴ An important factor is the ever-increasing conviction of Old Testament scholars that the Psalter's present structure reveals clear theological intent, so that one mind or a group of minds working with common convictions is behind it. This approach to the Psalter shows no sign of abating, and it has important theological implications.

Even if one mind or a united group of minds is behind the Psalter as now structured, could there be thematic conflicts within the book? The analogy of scientific research has some lessons for us here. Apparent antinomies have not deterred scientists from seeking ways of demonstrating the ultimate harmony of the phenomena with which they deal, but have simply spurred them to greater endeavour.

If such disharmonies do exist, did the final redactor fail to see them or were they left unresolved quite deliberately? Unhappily, some biblical criticism seems to suggest that the biblical writers were not perceptive enough to notice what the modern scholar sees so clearly! Why not at least test out the possibility that the redactor knew what he was doing?

² K. Seybold, *Introducing the Psalms* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), pp. 152-8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴ P. Balla, 'Challenges to Biblical Theology' (*NDBT*), pp. 20-7.

If there was a deliberate motive behind such apparent conflict, what was it? Perhaps a reader going through the Psalter consecutively was meant to notice it and so to be provoked to deep thought before finding the book ultimately presenting a resolution. I think this approach best fits the facts, for it accounts for the location of certain important psalms.

If you read through Books 1 and 2 after meditating deeply on the two introductory psalms, you may well ask how such confident assertions about God's blessing on the righteous and his firm establishment of Zion's king can be reconciled with David's many afflictions and, in Book 2, those also of other godly people. Psalms 42 and 43, with their reiterated questions (42:5, 11; 43:5), open Book 2, but each time the questions are followed by the self-exhortation, 'Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.' The questions do not extinguish faith or hope.

As Book 2 closes, 72 strongly confirms the truth of both introductory psalms and then, at the start of Book 3, 73 addresses problems by indicating the eschatological perspective afforded by worship in God's house. In Book 3 problems re-emerge intensely, and 89, closing it, although confidently asserting Yahweh's covenant faithfulness, expresses great puzzlement at the apparent demise of David's dynasty. Then comes 90 at the start of Book 4, encouraging readers to take a Mosaic perspective: to remember that God's revealed purposes long preceded the Davidic covenant, that they are eternal; and getting them also to ponder the role of God's wrath against sin in recent events.

Psalm 106, closing Book 4, shows from history both the constant faithfulness of Yahweh and his people's endemic unfaithfulness. If this book found its place within the developing Psalter during the Exile, the reader would know that this story, with its dual themes, continued right up to that sad event. This psalmist confesses, 'We have sinned, even as our fathers did' (106:6), and the psalm concludes with a plea to the Lord to save them and gather them from the nations (106:47). At the start of Book 5, 107 gladly declares that this has now happened and gives praise to the Lord. Laments do not disappear altogether, especially in the final Davidic group (138-144), but they are greatly outnumbered by psalms of praise and the whole collection ends, very fitly, with a series of psalms that overflow with praise.

So then we can see that a psalm of resolution opens each book, dealing with issues raised in the preceding book. We might compare the Psalter with Job and Ecclesiastes. In each case, the main body of the book compels us to think deeply, but in each the end shows the chief tensions resolved so that we can discern its overall positive message. It may be

objected that Job is no parallel, because we are 'let into the secret' in the opening two chapters, but this also happens in the placing of Psalms 1 and 2 at the start of the Psalter.⁵ In all three books faith is beset by problems and, despite them, refuses to give up.

A further objection to a theology of the psalms may be raised from their poetic nature. Poetry is by its very nature allusive, open to more than one interpretation. In fact, Max Turner identifies psalms, along with proverbs and wisdom-speech, as 'designed for all to use in different ways' and as 'interpreter-open'.⁶ Certainly Christian believers, facing quite different situations, have often found a relevant message from God in the same psalms. In 77, for instance, the psalmist's trouble is never specified, but the way it is handled can provide a model for believers with all kinds of problems.

Yet there must be limits to this interpretative openness, as Jesus indicated when confronted with a distorted interpretation of 91:11, 12 (Matt. 4:5-7; Luke 4:9-12). Satan's interpretation is ruled out, for the promise of protection is made to one who makes the Lord his dwelling (v. 9) and who loves God (v. 14). Moreover this psalm occurs within a Psalter that begins with 1, in which the righteous are commended and the wicked condemned.

If Psalms 1 and 2 are truly introductory, establishing major non-negotiables, then psalm interpretation must observe the moral limits imposed by 1 (for a promise abstracted from this moral context is bound to be null and void), and also the regal limits, both divine and human, set by 2. The moral nature of God and his faithfulness to the Davidic covenant promises may at times be difficult to reconcile with some experience of the psalmists, but these foundational truths cannot be abandoned and replaced by a different theology. Their assertions are vindicated before the book is finished.

What about the psalm superscriptions? After Brevard Childs, biblical theologians have normally engaged with the final form of the text, the form we have in our Bibles. Without doubt then these headings must be

⁵ Note also how the Servant Songs, which have an ever-deepening note of suffering, commence by affirming God's delight in his servant (Isa. 42:1), with his vindication promised not only at the end of the fourth Song (Isa. 53:12) but also at its beginning (Isa. 52:13-15)

⁶ M. Turner, 'Scripture and Theology', in J. B. Green and M. Turner (eds), *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 56.

included. If they are interpretative, they should be taken seriously within a theology of the psalms.

It is ideas that we are looking for, ideas expressed in words, but never to be confined to what may be found through a concordance. After the fashion of James Barr, whose work on semantics so strongly emphasised this,⁷ Robert Davidson reminds us that 'theology can never be cribbed or confined within one set of words', and he illustrates this from the similarity of structure, experience and theology (trusting in God's faithful love) between 56 and 57, despite the fact that, of the two, 56 alone speaks of trust and 57 alone of God's faithful love.⁸

The theology of the Psalter is not, for Christians, theologically complete. Some psalms raise questions rather than give answers, sometimes not answered in the whole Psalter, nor even in the whole Old Testament, but, as we shall see, only in Christ. It is a true theology, but not final.

The nature of biblical theology has been long debated, and this debate has many facets. How does biblical theology relate to exegesis? What grounds are there for confining it to a particular canonical list of books? How does it relate to Old and New Testament theology? Is it by nature an historical or a normative discipline? If historical, how does it differ from a history of Israel's religion? If normative, how does it differ from systematic theology?

Many of these questions are not in fact new. For instance, when S. Pickard calls for theologians humbly to seek general truths from patient exegesis, he does so in a comment on John Locke's contention that there should be straightforward focus on biblical exegesis rather than on systematic theology. Pickard is really arguing for good biblical theology.⁹

These questions cannot here be addressed as they deserve to be. Helpful discussions may be found in the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.¹⁰ The teaching faculty of Moore College, Australia, has laid special

⁷ J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

⁸ R. Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: a Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1998), p. 182.

⁹ S. Pickard, "'Unable to see the Wood for the Trees", John Locke and the Fate of Systematic Theology', in Pfitzner and Regan (eds), *The Task of Theology Today: Doctrines and Dogma* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), pp. 105-37.

¹⁰ *NDBT*, especially Part 1, 3-112; see also R. Smith, *Old Testament Theology: Its History, Method and Message* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), pp. 15-93.

emphasis on biblical theology. Graeme Goldsworthy, for instance, has written a number of simple and non-technical but by no means simplistic books, such as *Gospel and Kingdom* and *According to Plan*, the latter intended as an introduction to biblical theology.¹¹

Dealing with the text's final form does not mean historical and other issues are unimportant, but it does recognise biblical theology as a task of *Christian* scholarship. It is the final biblical text which meets Christians with divine authority in every age of the church.

The principle promoted by Childs has proved germinal, stimulating other scholars. C. Seitz, for instance, remarks that 'a fresh intellectual horizon for Old Testament studies is the rediscovery of the complex network of intertextuality that binds all texts together, not only in their canonical shape in the Old Testament, but more especially as this intertextuality is taken up and filled to fullest capacity in the New'.¹²

This is certainly true, is heartening, and is already showing valuable results, as Seitz's own book demonstrates. Although his book is about Deuteronomy, he comments also on the relationship between the Psalter and so-called 'Deutero-Isaiah'. He questions Westermann's view that in Isaiah 55:3 the dominion promised in the covenant between God and David is transferred from the king to the people.¹³ He says, 'One must seriously ask whether such an answer, bold or surprising, would ever be a satisfactory answer to the lament of Psalm 89'.¹⁴

The Bible writers operate with presuppositions. We allow for this in the New Testament, assuming a background of Old Testament theology, but it must also be true of the Psalter. When for instance the Exodus is mentioned, the psalmist will know more details than appear in his text. So Turner argues that 'it is engagement between the writer's utterance and the implied presuppositional pool that establishes the determinate... authorial discourse meaning, otherwise called "communicative intention"'.¹⁵ So

¹¹ See G. Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984) and *According to Plan* (Leicester: IVP, 1991).

¹² C. R. Seitz, *Word without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 12.

¹³ Some scholars interpret 148:14 in harmony with this understanding of Isaiah 55.

¹⁴ Seitz, *Word without End*, pp. 156-7.

¹⁵ M. Turner, 'Scripture and Theology', p. 49. See also S. E. Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture', in J. B. Green and M. Turner (eds), *Between Two Horizons*, pp. 71-87, who follows Mark Brett.

then, semantics plus context plus presuppositions determines meaning. We will therefore at times need to ask questions about these assumptions.

Suppose we sometimes find the theology of the psalms difficult to reconcile with other aspects of Old Testament and of biblical theology? We must be completely faithful to the meaning of the text, not trying to effect reconciliation by artificially contrived interpretation, but we will ask if the apparent antinomies are complementary rather than contradictory. If so, this will give us a nuanced interpretation with much potential for enriched understanding and praxis. John Goldingay's monograph on Old Testament theological diversity is of value in this respect.¹⁶ We have already suggested this approach to the apparent antinomies within the Book of Psalms itself.

In seeking for a common mind both in the Psalter and in the whole Bible we are in line with the historic convictions of the Christian church, as well as those of the Jewish synagogue, in believing the ultimate author of all Scriptures to be the Spirit of God and that it is not just human minds we encounter there but his.

We must now consider systematic theology. This expounds and justifies the beliefs of the Christian church or a section of it, and normally involves engaging with wider contemporary concerns. So, although its main convictions will be unaltered from one generation to another, their expression will reflect something of the changing intellectual environment. If a systematic theology expresses the beliefs of a section of the church, this will mean facing challenges posed by the differing doctrinal positions of others. Inevitably too, systematic theology will engage with the philosophical concerns of the day. Here it will face both opportunities and dangers, for dialogue may produce confrontation or compromise or else a mixture of the two. Inevitably, through its engagement with philosophers and others who hold positions which deny its beliefs, systematic theology will pass over into apologetics, the defence of the faith.

Most systematic theologians seek to demonstrate the biblical basis of the beliefs they expound. The Psalter's importance for this task is considerable, for it touches so many theological topics. Here is a wealth of material about God, about human beings, about the godly community, about the purposes of God for his people and his wider purposes in the world, and so on, all concerns of systematic theology.

¹⁶ J. Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

Can we stop there? No, for Christian doctrine is truth for living. Stephen Motyer has well asked,

What role in biblical theology do our contemporary interests play? We wrestle with issues of power and powerlessness, poverty and injustice, wealth and paternalism, and questions of gender, race and culture, religious and ideological pluralism, sexual morality, globalism, consumerism, individualism – to name but a few! These are all issues not specifically (or only tangentially) addressed by the biblical “history” of salvation in the Bible.

He asks whether theology can help us with such issues.¹⁷ It must or else it will risk losing all credibility. It is remarkable how many of these issues are touched on in the psalms.

Inevitably then our treatment of the psalms needs to be very broad, taking in not only systematics but such related studies as Christian ethics and *pastoralia*, both founded on it, just as applied science and technology are founded on pure science. Christian ethics and *pastoralia* bear witness to the fact that Christian theology is for real people faced daily with real decisions about how to live their lives in a real world.

2. SOME SEARCHING QUESTIONS

We will consider first of all the relationship of theology to other disciplines.

We have already identified exegesis and systematic theology as major scholarly disciplines bearing on the Christian church’s theological task, the one concerned with the biblical documents in their original setting and the other with those same documents in the setting of today’s church and world. Does this mean we may still recognise the distinction between what the text meant and what it means? This has been widely questioned by philosophers of language. Certainly there are real difficulties in this distinction, but we cannot dispense with it entirely. The worlds of the Old Testament and of today are obviously very different, just as biblical Israel and the Christian church today are two different religious societies, even though in both cases the later emerged out of the earlier and still bears some marks of that emergence. Deeper questions put by philosophers of language, especially those posed by Deconstruction, will be considered later.

¹⁷ S. Motyer, ‘Two Testaments, One Biblical Theology’, in J. B. Green and M. Turner (eds), *Between Two Horizons*, p. 153.

Many different disciplines have been employed by scholars to aid their elucidation of Scripture's meaning. If however the Bible is hermeneutically self-sufficient so that it contains everything needed for its own interpretation, and if we accept the Reformation principle that, following the Holy Spirit's own method of giving us knowledge of God, Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture, how can any other studies be permissible, let alone valuable or even essential, in its exegesis and exposition?¹⁸

It is abundantly clear that one subject cannot be ignored, and that is linguistics. The Bible comes to us in words, and words in their contexts have meanings. An intimate knowledge of Hebrew and Greek is obviously of real value in the study of Scripture, for the Bible's inspiration applies specifically to its original documents, written in Hebrew (with Aramaic) and Greek.

We must then ask questions about the text, bringing into play principles of textual criticism, for the Bible's importance means we should try to secure as pure a text as possible. Textual scholars tend to be in wide although not always total agreement on the principles to be employed in deciding between variant readings.

The Bible is ancient literature, so literary and historical studies play their part, raising questions about the approach to literature and historical writing at the time the Bible was written. Then there are also studies like anthropology and the history of religions, plus such matters as approaches to science.

If we accept the inspiration of Scripture and regard it as literature with divine authority, how legitimate are such studies? We need to do some clear thinking here.

Without doubt all studies affecting exegesis are important and in some cases, such as language and textual study, essential, but biblical scholars need to examine their own presuppositions and those of other scholars carefully. For instance, historical comments sometimes assume that miracles do not happen or that they are to be viewed as subjective impressions rather than objective facts.

Interpreting literature raises epistemological issues and also questions about worldviews, and here we need special care, for Scripture has its own

¹⁸ See A. N. S. Lane, 'Sola Scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan', in P. E. Satterthwaite and D. F. Wright (eds), *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 297-327. See also G. W. Grogan, 'Is the Bible Hermeneutically Self-sufficient?' in A. N. S. Lane (ed.), *Interpreting the Bible: Historical and Theological Studies in Honour of David Wright* (Leicester: IVP, 1997), pp. 205-21.

worldview. A scholar holding a high doctrine of Scripture will seek to operate with the biblical worldview and this will inform his or her approach to the various disciplines employed. The importance of so doing can hardly be exaggerated. We also remember, of course, that all truth is God's truth,¹⁹ and that the world of nature is often employed in Scripture to illustrate that special realm of grace that meets us in Christ.

Systematic theologies from different cultures and various periods of Christian history will have some relatively fixed elements, reflecting the wide measure of agreement between official church statements of doctrine, and also some that are peculiar to each. Credal statements like the Apostles' Creed and the Westminster Confession of Faith are historically conditioned yet are widely recognised as valid expressions of Christian truth. On the other hand, there are issues peculiar to particular Christian groups and these too need to be addressed.

We have noted that various disciplines are employed in exegesis. This is also true in systematic theology. Even Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament*, which is biblical rather than systematic theology, is replete with footnotes relating it to many other modern disciplines, especially linguistic philosophy and the social sciences.²⁰ In systematic theology, the theologian engages with these disciplines not so much in connection with the meaning of the text at the time of its writing, but rather with its significance for us today.

A student once delighted me by saying a very simple thing: 'everything's theology'. She had grasped a fundamental truth: theology touches every aspect of life. This is certainly true of the theology to be found in the Psalter, which is related to the extremely varied experiences of the psalmists.

The task we are discussing here, although valuable and fascinating, is not easy. Mays, writing of the language-world of the psalms, stresses the way their language clashes with our thinking today. He says, 'It is traditional, not contemporary. It works with poetry and metaphor instead of science and technique. It unites rather than compartmentalizes. It sees the world as a project in creation rather than a problem of physics. It centers on a sovereign god [sic] instead of a sovereign self.' He goes on to say that we should view this dissonance not simply as a problem but as

¹⁹ See A. Holmes, *All Truth Is God's Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

²⁰ W. Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme and Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

confronting us with the language of faith.²¹ It is important for us to see it this way if the psalms are to perform for us their divinely-given purpose as Holy Scripture, God's word for living.

Questions about subjectivity and biblical authority

A biblical commentary is concerned with understanding the text. This raises important questions about the interpreter if the work is not just a free meditation but a serious exercise in understanding and explanation and also in application. To what extent is the commentator – any commentator – likely to be objective? Can any make a credible claim to objectivity?

This is particularly important if this is the word of God meeting the reader as authoritative for her or his life. The psalms are quoted as God's word in the New Testament and recent biblical research has identified the Psalter as a book with an overall message. Many scholars reckon those responsible for its final structure saw it not only as a book to be used for praise but also as Scripture for study, meditation and practical implementation. Psalms of the *Torah*, like 1, 19 and 119 emphasise written instruction. A further feature is the way the psalmists, faced with problems, find assurance by reflecting on great past acts of God, themselves recorded in written form.

But is it right to base so much on what is written? This kind of question faces the Bible reader who is aware of wider currents of thought, and it has done so more and more acutely over a period of two hundred years or so.

The influence of philosophy on theology has been profound ever since biblical truth entered the non-Judaic world, especially the world of Greek philosophy. At Alexandria for instance Philo and other Jewish thinkers sought to demonstrate that Moses and Plato spoke with one voice, the latter copying the former. Then came the evangelistic thrust among thinking Greeks which took place in the early Christian centuries.

Many changes in Christian theology over the years have reflected changes in the prevailing philosophy. This is very marked in nineteenth-century theology, which went through a number of phases as it came to be influenced successively by Romanticism, Hegelianism, Kantianism²² and Evolutionary philosophy. The twentieth century has seen it influenced chiefly by Existentialism, Marxism and various forms of the philosophy

²¹ J. L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), pp. 9-10.

²² Although Kant's dates are earlier than Hegel's, his main influence on theology was later.

of language. The peak of existentialist influence has passed, but the other two still confront us. We will look first of all at the philosophy of language.

Descartes divided reality into the mind and the external world, and the Enlightenment promoted the importance of rational thinking. Kant, however, argued that there are severe limits to what reason can establish. He distinguished between *phenomena* and *noumena*, that is between things in the external world as they appear to be and as they actually are. He argued that we cannot gain noumenal certainty from *phenomena*, or, to put it another way, that reason cannot establish metaphysical conclusions by sense-perception. Kant's influence has been enormous, and since his day problems in epistemology, the philosophy of knowledge, have largely dominated philosophical discussion.

Kant's general outlook began to affect theology when theological judgements came to be treated as similar to metaphysical ones. So for instance the influential Ritschlian school in the latter part of the nineteenth century declared that we can discover what value the early Christians placed upon Jesus Christ, but we cannot say whether or not they were right in so doing, as this would be to make metaphysical judgements.

Of course, the classic Christian theological position would seriously question making theological judgements a mere subset of metaphysical ones. Theological judgements are not speculative, at least in intent, but grounded on divine revelation accepted as authoritative. The Ritschlians, by taking the contrary position, surrendered the possibility of any theological certainty.

During the twentieth century there was a major development of interest in the philosophy of language. This is because our thinking, whether about the external world or about ourselves, tends to be carried on by the use of words. Philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Russell and Ayer examined the relationship between the world we encounter and the words we use to describe it. They had mathematical and scientific interests as well. It is not surprising then, that Ayer argued that the only statements that make any sense are tautologies, like the equations of mathematics, or that are, at least in principle, scientifically verifiable. So then, according to his philosophy, not only are theologians banned from making affirmations about a reality behind the world of phenomena, but such affirmations do not even make sense!

The theologian might feel that under such 'persecution' it would be best to retreat to the biblical text. Here, at any rate, there might be something objective to study. Even here however theologians found

themselves under attack from later developments in the philosophy of language, especially from deconstruction.

The period since the Second World War has seen the emergence of the varied approaches of structuralism, transformational grammar, reader-response criticism, speech-act theory, and deconstruction. The relationship between the author, the text and the reader is of concern in all these approaches, with the focus particularly on the part played by a person's mind in reading books and listening to speech. In their turn these approaches raise issues in psychology and sociology, and, in some cases, psychiatry and biology. Even general literary and historical studies raise questions as to the relationship between a text and its interpreters.²³ The relevance of such movements of thought to understanding Scripture is obvious.

The structuralists and proponents of transformational grammar are interested in the deep structures of human communication, the psychological patterns common to all human thinking and communication, while reader-response criticism is concerned with the fact that a person's understanding of literature tells us as much about the person concerned as about the literature itself. Speech-act theory views speech as a form of action and considers what it is that the text is designed to do, whether this be to inform, to indoctrinate, to challenge, to infuriate, and so on. Some of these approaches can be of value to biblical interpreters; for instance in making them aware of the subjective factor in their own reading.²⁴

Derrida's post-modern philosophy of language, known as Deconstruction, however, goes much further. It is the view that a text is anything but a stable reality as we confront it in our external world. There is no objective meaning in either speech or literature but rather a multiplicity of meanings reflecting the multiplicity of hearers or readers. All who read a book, for instance, bring to it different minds, different

²³ For general introductions to the modern philosophy of language as it affects biblical studies and theology, see A. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) and *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); K. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998) and F. Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

²⁴ A study by R. J. Berry (ed.), *Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), provides a reader-response approach.

experiences, different prejudices, so that no two readers will find in it precisely the same message. It is pointless asking what is the author's intention in writing, and he or she has no control over the text once it has gone out into the world of readers. The text sets sail on uncharted seas without either compass or the possibility of putting down an anchor. For this reason, we can never say, 'the text means this and it does not mean that'. If Deconstruction is right, there can be no authoritative literature, for everything depends on the reader's interpretation, not the writer's intention.

It goes without saying that the issue raised here is of great importance for it questions not only the objectivity of the contemporary theologian but that of the biblical writers themselves. If there can be no objective meaning in literature, there can be no path leading from the biblical text to theological certainty.

This deeply sceptical outlook must of course affect not only religion but law. It is a basic presupposition of law that a legal text should be understood in the sense intended by its formulators and that those in society who are subject to it may be brought to book for transgressing it. Not only so, but if no communication, either written or spoken, can have objective meaning this surely means the end of all rational communication in words and even ultimately the end of human civilisation as we know it.

Biblical assurance contrasts very strongly with the uncertainty which has dominated modern philosophy for so long, and which seems to have reached its nadir in Deconstruction. What should be our reaction to its challenge, in relation to the biblical literature in general and the Book of Psalms in particular?

Some writers advocate extreme subjectivism. A. M. Cooper, for instance, says, 'The meaning of the psalm is nothing more or less than the way we, as readers, appropriate the text and *make* it meaningful' (emphasis his).²⁵ There is little wrong with this if a psalm is simply a poem, but if it is also the word of God we would expect it to have objective meaning which we need to hear and respond to.

C. H. Bullock takes a completely different point of view when he says, 'Because there are so many human paths down which we may walk as we read the Psalms, the temptation is to assume that we can make our own paths and thus require the Psalms to authorise our ways. But the Psalms cannot mean all things to all people, despite their assorted thoughts and

²⁵ A. M. Cooper, 'The Life and Times of King David According to the Book of Psalms' in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Poet and Historian: Essays in Literary and Historical Biblical Criticism*, Harvard Semitic Studies 26, (Chico, CA, Scholars Press, 1983), p. 131.

emotions. The historical element remains the control.²⁶ His last statement runs counter to the deconstructionist outlook.

These comments are all the more interesting in view of the fact that Bullock himself, in a fascinating chapter, seeks to read the psalms successively through the experience of the psalmists themselves, of the editors, the readers, the apostles, the literary critics and finally students.²⁷ Even this may not be completely exhaustive, for there may well have been several editors at different stages and we can detect particular groups of psalms, such as the Songs of Ascents, which were presumably put together by somebody for a special purpose at some stage. To see the relevance of literature from the past to my present situation is however quite different from giving that literature a meaning foreign to the author's intention.

This philosophy's total scepticism needs to be resisted at least at the historical level. A Bible book often makes reference, for example, to people and events from a past time. Even if we do not accept the way the past is being interpreted (or the way we interpret how it was interpreted!), we cannot treat the book as a modern product. Even this deep level of scepticism must surely recognise a difference between the past and the present. As Vanhoozer says, 'Meaning is historical. What one does with language depends on the particular language, the state of that language, and the linguistic and literary resources one has at a given time and place.'²⁸ Knapp and Michaels, in incisive criticism of Derrida and those who think like him, argue that meaning and the author's intention are not simply related but identical.²⁹

It is difficult too to avoid noting the theological and moral nature of the biblical writings. This feature shows up sometimes even in narrative, for instance when we encounter 2 Kings 17 in reading the Books of Kings. Can we really justify a use of this literature which runs counter to the theological and moral intention of the writer? Of course, we may feel free to do so, but it would be unethical for us to say that our way of handling the text is in any sense proper interpretation. As Vanhoozer says,

²⁶ C. H. Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001,), p. 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-56.

²⁸ K. J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, p. 234.

²⁹ See S. Knapp and W. B. Michaels, 'Against Theory', in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 11-30; S. Knapp and W. B. Michaels, 'Against Theory 2: Hermeneutics and Deconstruction', in *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1987-1988), pp. 49-68.

'Hermeneutic non-realism, for which meaning is made rather than discovered, is unethical; non-realist interpretation may provide interesting reading, but it is ultimately unreliable as testimony, for it cannot point to what is other than itself.'³⁰ So then exegesis has not only its proper sphere but also its proper discipline, for its task is limited to seeking and explaining the meaning of the text.

If the Psalter is the word of God, we must go on to apply it to the people of our contemporary world, but we must be sensitive to both horizons (to use Thiselton's word), both the horizon of the psalmists and our own. This is particularly important in preaching if we are to communicate the eternal word to the people of our place and time. In this interaction between two horizons, however, the two are not equal, for it is the Bible that acts as the authority. There must therefore be some positive relationship between our contemporary application and the meaning of the text. Not only so, but the contemporary interpreter needs to be able to demonstrate that relationship or be convicted of unethical misuse of the text.

Yet despite what has been said, the Bible reader believing in Scripture's authority can learn a positive lesson from Deconstruction. We cannot claim absolute objectivity, still less final authority, for our own reading of the biblical text. We need to come to the text with due humility and in a spirit of willingness for self-criticism. If others view the meaning of the text differently, we must at least give them the opportunity of telling us how they understand it and be prepared to learn from them.

By a strange turn in the history of ideas, there are some ways in which the gulf between the world of the psalms and post-modernity is not as great as that between post-modernity and modernity. The modern thinker is confident in the interpretative and ordering abilities of human reason, while the post-modern strongly questions this. The psalms are full of questions and psalmists sometimes say, in effect, about the world of their own experience, 'It does not make sense!'

Yet on the crucially important issue of the objectivity of divine revelation the psalms diverge sharply from post-modernity.³¹ Many psalms that ask questions also contain expressions of confidence in God's ultimate control. The post-modern has no certainties to fall back on. She or he may

³⁰ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, p. 440.

³¹ For a description of post-modernity, see P. Sampson, V. Samuel, C. Sugden (eds), *Faith and Modernity* (Oxford: Regnum Books/Lynx Communications, 1994), several chapters in which indicate points of continuity and discontinuity between modernism and post-modernism.

be interested in 'spirituality', but is there any way of evaluating the various spiritualities available in the religious supermarket? For the psalmists there is a clear distinction between the truth of Yahweh's revelation and the untruth of paganism and its associated idolatry.

Not only so, but the post-modern knows no metanarrative, no 'big story' within which his or her own little story finds its place, while for the psalmists there is the great story of God's historical dealings with his people forming the context for their individual stories. It is what God has revealed through this story that saves bewilderment from becoming despair.

The works of Anthony Thiselton and Kevin Vanhoozer are particularly valuable in addressing issues raised by the philosophers of language.³²

Another question arises: if in any discipline the scholar's mind brings organizing principles to the subject matter, can the resulting system have any objective value? To what extent does the theologian's already formed outlook affect his or her interpretation of Scripture? It was a merit of Cornelius Van Til that he raised the general presuppositional issue very strongly, even if there may be some dispute concerning his approach to some particular issues.³³ Such questions even concern Bible translation. R. L. Thomas, in an appendix to his book, *How to Choose a Bible Version*,³⁴ argues that theological bias is bound to come into play if a translator chooses dynamic equivalence over verbal equivalence as his or her translation method. In all this, the interpreter faced with Scripture, just like the scientist contemplating the natural world, should be concerned humbly to seek its internal logic and then to display this.

The hermeneutics of suspicion is very much in vogue. At the popular level, many people regularly apply it to politicians, advertisers, journalists, in fact to any they suspect of having a hidden agenda behind their assertions. Some newspapers specialise in applying it to the pronouncements of the government of the day, while some of their readers apply it to those papers themselves! Taken to extremes, it can lead to a totally cynical view of society.

³² A. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons and New Horizons in Hermeneutics*; K. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*

³³ Both aspects may be found in his small monograph, *The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel* (London: Tyndale, 1950). See also G. L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Reading and Analysis* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998).

³⁴ R. L. Thomas, *How to Choose a Bible Version: Making sense of the proliferation of Bible translations* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2000), pp. 163-91.

The philosophical form of such scepticism has its modern roots in Marx and Freud amongst others.³⁵ These two came at the idea from different angles. Marxists with their class-war outlook maintain that stories like those of Dickens, apparently showing real social concern, actually promote the interests of the wealthier classes because they solve problems of poverty not by radical social change but by largesse. So the rich retain their wealth and power and add to it self-congratulation. Marx held too that the motive of supporting the ruling classes is a major one in religion and so in religious literature. Julia Kristeva sought to show that this happens at the intertextual level too, so that a text is appropriated by another writer to serve his or her personal agendas, often, she thought, a male dominance agenda. Freud saw hidden agendas as often hidden even from the writers and speakers themselves and as arising from the Unconscious, where unacceptable feelings, largely sexual, are repressed.

There is some value in this approach too for biblical interpreters. We may have hidden agendas ourselves, probably hoping to find our own theology in the text. Perhaps there are darling ideas or projects we want to pursue and promote and which we hope Holy Scripture will sanction. C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape* wanted Wormwood, in tempting his Christian 'patient', to get him to view Christianity as valuable simply for providing good arguments for patriotism or pacifism.³⁶

It is possible too to misuse the Bible's theological terms. A glance at the contents page of *The Christian Faith* by Schleiermacher³⁷ may suggest it is traditional Christian theology, while reading it discloses that it is a kind of theological Romanticism employing biblical terms. Even while we criticise him, we must remember that we too are not only fallible humans but sinners to boot. Remembering both facts when reading the Bible is salutary and in fact aligns us with the outlook of the great Reformers.

Self-criticism is important because we often do not realise we are bringing agendas to the text. John Goldingay rightly says that sometimes the use of scriptural terms by theologians 'may obscure the fact that their framework of thinking is that of another culture'.³⁸ It may in fact obscure it even from themselves.

³⁵ The phrase 'masters of suspicion' was coined by Paul Ricoeur, who applied it to Freud, Marx and Nietzsche in *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 32-6.

³⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942), pp. 39-43.

³⁷ F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, (ET, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928).

³⁸ J. Goldingay, 'Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology', in J. B. Green and M. Turner (eds), *Between Two Horizons*, p. 128.

It is naive to think we can approach the Bible without theological presuppositions. Let me say, quite frankly, that I approach biblical theology as a conservative evangelical. As a theological conservative, I regard Scripture as divinely authoritative and so the right approach to it to be a humble one, the outlook of one desiring to be taught, and moreover to be taught by God through the text itself. I am not only conservative, but a conservative evangelical, which means I seek to interpret the Old Testament in terms of the New Testament gospel, because it seems to me that this is the way the New Testament itself operates. So then my conservatism means respect for the Old Testament material, which must be understood first of all in terms of its Old Testament context, and my evangelicalism means respect for the New Testament's understanding of it.

I would not, of course, maintain that only conservative evangelicals can or do take the text of Scripture with due seriousness. This would be to espouse an extremely arrogant position. My own stance, however, does mean that, whatever may be true of others, I am forced, *by my own theological outlook*, to treat the Book of Psalms, both in its Old Testament and in its full biblical setting, very seriously.

This is of course no absolute guarantee of objectivity, for there can be no such guarantee in any approach to literature, but it does at least mean that my presuppositions require me to seek objectivity and to do so self-critically. It is occasionally alleged that the trouble with conservative evangelicals is not that they are too biblical but that they are not biblical enough! We need to prove this wrong by good theological practice.

What about the Scriptures themselves? Do their writers also have hidden agendas? Are they in fact, whether knowingly or unknowingly, promoting the interests of the ruling classes? Some authors think this true at least about some aspects of Old Testament teaching. We need, however, to ask what presuppositions these writers themselves bring to the biblical literature when they so understand it. For example, there are Marxist presuppositions in Norman Gottwald's influential study *The Tribes of Yahweh*³⁹ and they have clearly affected the thought of Walter Brueggemann, a major contemporary interpreter of the Book of Psalms. Commenting approvingly on Gottwald's standpoint, he says that 'as issues of power, interest and ideology are operative in the text, so they are also operative in interpretive work. That is, various readings of the text are also informed and driven by the class location of the reader. What emerges... is

³⁹ N. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979).

that as there are no innocent texts, so there are no innocent readers.⁴⁰ If this is so, of course, we may legitimately ask if this is also true of readers such as Gottwald and Brueggemann.

Marxism emerged out of Hegelian thought, and Brueggemann's classification of psalms as those of orientation, disorientation and reorientation, very useful in some ways, sounds distinctly Hegelian.⁴¹ It gets nearer Marxism if the orientation is seen to be related to a social establishment. Brueggemann sees a significant aspect of the importance of the psalms of disorientation because they express dissatisfaction with the prevailing social order.⁴²

Other groups not strictly, or at least not necessarily, social classes have felt at times to be disadvantaged, such as racial groups and women. Some feminist interpreters of Scripture, for instance, see hidden agendas behind the writings of some of the biblical authors whom they see as chauvinists seeking to maintain male dominance in society.

Space does not permit detailed consideration of such allegations, but a point made by Oliver O'Donovan is highly relevant. He remarks that almost the whole vocabulary of salvation in the New Testament has a political pre-history. He refers to salvation, justification, peace, faithfulness, faith and, above all, the Kingdom of God,⁴³ and he points out that these came into the New Testament from the Old. Undoubtedly this kind of language is very much part of the Book of Psalms.

Of course much of the language of religion and of theology is based on analogy. This might seem to foster the hermeneutics of suspicion still more, until we recall that the Old Testament and the Psalter present God's rule as not only authoritative but benevolent, with a great concern for the oppressed. O'Donovan says, 'That Yahweh, as king, exercises royal judgement in the causes of individual worshippers who call upon him is the very heart of the personal soteriology of the Psalms (e.g. Ps. 9:4).'⁴⁴

Not only so, but Christian theology must never forget that this divine revelation comes to its ultimate manifestation in Christ. N. T. Wright

⁴⁰ W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), p. 52.

⁴¹ This classification provides the main structure for his book, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, Augsburg Old Testament Studies (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

⁴² W. Brueggemann, *O T Theology, Essays*, pp. 1-21.

⁴³ O. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 22-3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

points out that the Christian story, the Christian metanarrative, as Paul tells it, is like no other, for it is about a death and resurrection effecting release from power-enslavement.⁴⁵ 'We need a powerful Figure to save us; a compassionate Figure to will our salvation. In Christ the supreme Authority Figure suffers and dies out of profound love and grace, in so doing securing his rule over hitherto rebellious sinners. If the alternatives really are a hermeneutics of suspicion or of assent, then assent too must be given its opportunity, and knowing such deep, costly love from such an authority Figure is a powerful means of moving the will to assent.'⁴⁶

3. A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND INTERPRETATION

Deconstruction and the hermeneutics of suspicion, taken together, can produce very deep scepticism. Vanhoozer sums up the post-modern attitude thus: 'Every attempt to describe "what it meant" is in fact only an assertion of *what it means to me*, or worse, *what we will it to mean*' [italics his].⁴⁷ It is worth noting though that these two attitudes are not really compatible. If deconstruction is rigorously pursued, it will undermine even the hermeneutics of suspicion because this is concerned to expose the hidden motives of the writer which, according to deconstruction, is a pointless exercise.

A number of substantial thinkers, some but not all of them Christian philosophers or theologians, while accepting Kant's idea that data from external sources are given structure by the mind, emphasize the role played by a radical change of outlook. Kuhn, the philosopher of science, for instance, recognizes that a paradigm shift may occur in the mind, giving a new outlook and new focus for understanding,⁴⁸ something Kant never appears to have recognized. Dooyeweerd and Polanyi place importance on what Dooyeweerd calls 'the religious root', the fundamental viewpoint which represents a person's deepest convictions.⁴⁹ Lesslie Newbigin's

⁴⁵ N. T. Wright, 'The Letter to the Galatians: Exegesis and Theology', in J. B. Green and M. Turner (eds), *Between Two Horizons*, p. 222.

⁴⁶ Seitz, *Word without End*, p. 42.

⁴⁷ K. J. Vanhoozer, 'Exegesis and Hermeneutics', *NDBT*, p. 55.

⁴⁸ T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

⁴⁹ H. Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 4 volumes (Phillipsburg, NJ, Presbyterian and Reformed; 1969); M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

chapter in *Faith and Modernity* argues, following Polanyi, that every system of thought must rest on an indemonstrable faith-basis, which can be publicly examined.⁵⁰

Dooyeweerd maintains that a distinctively Christian religious root is implanted in the heart by the Spirit of God at the new birth, enabling the believer to recognise Scripture as the word of God. Here, in a twentieth-century writer, is John Calvin's doctrine of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit to biblical authority. If there is a 'hermeneutical circle', we need some point of entry to it, and God's Spirit secures this. It is he too who enables me to recognise the application of God's word to my life. Regeneration changes my religious root but does not of course make me sinlessly perfect, so I can still get things wrong and only imperfectly adjust my life to God's will. Then after beginning with the Spirit (Gal. 3:3), I need to continue to study Scripture in humble dependence on him.

Is this a retreat to a special type of subjectivism? No, for what is given in regeneration also accords with what Scripture actually teaches. For instance, Paul says to the Thessalonians, 'we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe' (1 Thess. 2:13). The regenerative work of the Spirit in the heart and the objective testimony of the Spirit in Holy Scripture confirm each other.

This means there is a distinctively Christian approach to biblical authority. It does not mean there is no place for reason but it recognises that reason must always have a starting-point. Even Descartes, with whom modern approaches to philosophical questions are often reckoned to have begun, had to find such and he found it in his rational faculty. The Christian finds a personal starting-point in faith. Whatever basis of understanding a person may have had before conversion to Christ, at that point a new one is given in the Holy Spirit's decisive act of regeneration. The new life brings with it a fundamentally new mindset, a starting-point for reason, which is now set free to 'think God's thoughts after him'.

This does not mean the Christian never faces difficulties which pose baffling theological problems, but it does mean he or she has fundamental convictions about God given in regeneration and confirmed in Scripture, at the same time acknowledging a personal need for humility. Here then is

⁵⁰ L. Newbigin, 'Truth and authority in modernity', in C. Sugden, P. Sampson, V. Samuel (eds), *Faith and Modernity*, pp. 60-88.

what Vanhoozer calls 'a hermeneutics of humility and conviction', which must be held together in creative tension.⁵¹

If the Book of Psalms is part of an authoritative theological document, the word of God, it is important for us to recognise two things. The first is the value of each psalm considered in itself. After all, these existed as separate entities at first and were presumably valued as such by those who first encountered them. So then we cannot put any of them aside or, in the case of some of the psalms of orientation, see them as teaching 'the common theology' of the Near Eastern world.⁵² They, no less than the psalms of disorientation, contain divine revelation. We also recognize of course that they show the marks of the world of their conception and birth, for they use its terminology which was familiar to those who first read them. When they attack ideas and practices found in that world but alien to their own, they sometimes use its own weapons.

So let us immerse ourselves in this great book of the Bible, allowing its truths and those of the rest of Scripture so to control our thinking that, as someone has put it, our blood becomes bibline, and let us humbly and in dependence on the Holy Spirit, seek to apply its principles in our daily lives in the world.

⁵¹ K. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, p. 466.

⁵² The point of view of Brueggemann, *OT Theology, Essays*, pp. 1-44.