

Introduction

A New Biblical-Theological Approach to the Unity of the Canon

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Since its origins, the field of biblical theology has been considered a bridge discipline, spanning the gap and staging the dialogue between the historically and exegetically oriented biblical disciplines and the conceptually oriented theological disciplines. As a discipline distinct from either biblical or theological studies, biblical theology proved successful in preventing premature dogmatic impositions onto the interpretation of ancient texts. The field continued to thematize key problems primarily in view of the Christian Bible, such as the relation between the two testaments, and to determine the precise tasks of the two disciplines informing biblical theology: exegesis and theology. Yet the field continues to be uncertain regarding the legitimacy, warrants, and justifications for theological and philosophical claims made in connection to its work. In this volume, a new direction in biblical theology is proposed that seeks to place theological and philosophical questions at the centre of biblical-theological investigation.¹ Our approach presupposes that theological and

¹ This book on the unity of the canon is a further development of the biblical-theological programme set in: Stephen Chapman, Christine Helmer, and Christof Landmesser, eds., *Biblischer Text und theologische Theoriebildung*, *Biblich-theologische Studien*, no. 44 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001). That volume addresses the question of how biblical texts become the objects of theological reception at different stages and contexts in the history of their interpretation. Both trajectories within the Bible and trajectories that are traced from the Bible through the history of theology to the contemporary context are discussed in view of the formation of theological theory. Contributors

philosophical issues are already inscribed into the biblical texts; religious experiences, the nature of reality, and the self/world/God relation are already embedded in the conceptual development recorded by those texts. If the biblical texts are taken as expressions of religion and of a coherent world-view, then the study of the text's historical dimension cannot exclude questions concerning the conceptualization of the subject matter raised by the texts themselves. At the very least, a sensitive hermeneutical theory would address the complex issue of how these texts and their claims about religion and reality continue to be interpreted in different contexts in such a way as to contribute to the ongoing formation of theories concerning religion and reality. If a hermeneutical theory can show that the texts themselves have distinct theological and philosophical presuppositions and make particular theological and philosophical claims, then a biblical theology can also show how these texts are read and continue to be read as documents informing the formation of theological theory. With the possibilities opened by hermeneutics, the three perspectives of biblical studies, theology, and philosophy can be brought into closer proximity in the field of biblical theology. This volume seeks to further biblical theology's enquiry into the theological and philosophical issues raised by the texts through explicit reflection on one of the systematic-philosophical topics underlying biblical theology precisely at a point intersecting biblical, theological, and philosophical interests: the unity of the canon. By considering the key concept of the unity of the canon, biblical theology can engage the issue of its own relevance amid the questions posed in the contemporary world of religion, theology, and the academy.

In this volume, the canon's unity is understood to be constituted by interpretation that itself is a function of the interpretative community, whether scholarly or for the purposes of religious praxis. Furthermore, the interpretation of the canon's unity is itself compelled by a subject matter 'behind the text' that motivates the writing of the text in the first place. When viewed

to this volume are from the biblical, historical, systematic-theological, and practical-theological fields (Albrecht Beutel, Ottmar Fuchs, Eilert Herms, Klaus Koch, Ulrich Luz, John W. Rogerson, Magne Sæbø, Christoph Schwöbel, and Hermann Timm).

as the result of an experience, the original text is itself part and parcel of the history of interpretation as its first moment. If biblical texts are to be relevant for interpreters and communities of faith in successive generations, the foundational texts will be considered open to perpetual interpretation and use. This understanding of the relevance of biblical texts shapes the perspective from which the unity of the respective Jewish as well as the Christian canons is viewed. From this perspective, canon can be considered neither a static entity nor an airtight unified text. Rather, canon is open to its appropriation by successive generations for study and use. As recent studies in the history of the canon's formation, and particularly in research on the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, and non-canonical material have shown, canon has both a certain fluidity with respect to extra-canonical texts and a particular shape used by the community that interprets the text as well as determining the text's canonical character. Given the canon's openness to correction and to the traditions of interpretation, the question arises as to how the unity of the canon can be understood. Both subjective and objective unity characterize the unity of the canon as text. On the one hand, the text remains open to continuous subjective actualization, and on the other hand, an objective subject 'behind the text' guarantees the continuity of the tradition of interpretation throughout the religion's tradition. The unity of the canon is related to the unity of the tradition.

Biblical theology's relevance for contemporary discussions within both the academy and religious communities is a function of hermeneutical engagement with biblical texts. These texts originate through a process of interpreting a distinct world-view and religious experiences structured by that world-view. Biblical texts continue to function as an interpretative force in relation to the various contexts in which the texts are received. The relevance of biblical texts is determined by how they are engaged in different contexts. They are engaged as relevant when they are used in the interpretative task of the tradition to answer questions concerning the fundamental constitution of the tradition. In this way, the texts have a unity-shaping function in relation to the distinct tradition in which they are interpreted and to the plurality of interpretative choices yielded by the tradition for the respective context. The interpretative task as a whole both

establishes the parameters of the unity of the tradition from the side of the given text and establishes the relevance of the texts by choosing to agree with the unifying parameters of the given tradition. Furthermore, interpretation establishes relevance by engaging, developing, and altering the choices offered by the texts as distinct guides for the subsequent formation of religious, theological, and philosophical theories. By posing the question of relevance, biblical theology asks questions concerning the agreement with unity in terms of both text and tradition as well as interpretative decisions that privilege one theologically relevant choice over another. Some proposals for unity have been mapped out from a stance internal to the biblical traditions themselves, as the study of intra-biblical theological trajectories, such as covenant theology including its various conceptions within the Bible, shows. Other approaches are more concerned to characterize the tradition extending beyond the canonical boundaries of the text, moving the question of relevance toward a project of updating interpretations founded on parameters set at the origins of interpretation itself. Acknowledging the relevance of these texts for making interpretative choices, other approaches focus on carving out new possibilities for the formation of religious practice. Engaging texts in new contexts for the formation of theory and praxis establishes their relevance.

Biblical theology addresses its own relevance when it clarifies the question concerning the actualization of biblical texts. Texts are actualized in successive generations of academic study or in communities of faith when they are interpreted and used. It is possible that without actualization, the texts would become dead letters rather than conveying the living tradition of the respective religion. The viability of these texts is demonstrated when their actualization in contemporary contexts addresses the reality of that actualization. If relevant, the biblical texts and traditions must then in some way contribute to the determination of contemporary reality. This consideration is more than just posing the hermeneutical question regarding the interpretation of one world-view from the perspective of another standpoint. It has to do with the philosophical question of reality and its determination. In this volume, we consider the biblical texts to be proposals regarding a particular religiously construed reality and its determination in light of foundational religious

commitments. The texts' impact on the determination of reality affirms the continuity of traditions and confirms the openness of traditions to a diversity of models interpreting reality within differing contexts. Hence the question of the philosophical determination of reality invites biblical-theological reflection on this philosophical issue. By addressing the philosophical question, biblical theology then takes these texts into theological consideration in view of religion as it is constituted by particular understandings of reality. Such a consideration necessarily includes the questions of epistemological justification for knowing reality, especially as a supplement to substantive claims made about that reality. The philosophical factor in biblical theology's engagement with reality opens up the biblical texts to their relevance for determining foundational commitments to the world that inevitably structure any thinking and activity taking place within the world.

By highlighting the relevance question with the question concerning reality, biblical theology can view biblical texts in light of their unity and diversity. As a hermeneutical and philosophical question concerning the biblical material in its actualization, unity is seen to be more than the mere unity constituted by texts. The unity of a world-view presupposed by different texts and the unity of the religious tradition they fund are issues encompassing a unity extending beyond textual boundaries. Furthermore, the unity constituting tradition is informed by the dynamic diversity of historical, theological, and philosophical proposals that continue to be engaged, rejected, and accepted. It is to the topic of unity that this volume is dedicated. In this book, the question of the canon is posed in terms of unity drawn from plurality.

The unity of the canon is posed as a significant biblical-theological question in view of its relation to religious traditions. For the Jewish and Christian traditions, the canon has been appropriated as a unity by each successive generation. Irrespective of concrete determination, and in spite of the different evaluations of its literary boundaries by different strands of tradition, the canon continues to be received as a unity. The history of the canon's effects (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) demonstrates the continued perception of the canon in this way. This perception holds for both the ways in which a religious community uses the canon and the ways in which it is studied as the object of hermeneutical-

theological reflection. Religious communities attribute to the canon as unity an authority that informs the interpretative tradition of those communities. The tradition-constituting function of canonical interpretation is a function of the canon's unity. The interpretative balance consists of highlighting parts of the canon for articulating the norms of faith and morals in view of the whole. Conversely, the whole remains the potential storehouse of parts for correcting one-sidedness in theological, liturgical, and spiritual formation. Seen as unity drawn from plurality, the canon sets wide parameters for future hermeneutical legitimation of its theological possibilities. Textually closed canons do not preclude the possibility of investigating and acknowledging the plurality and even non-uniformity of theological proposals within the various biblical traditions.

Nevertheless, unity-shaping, hermeneutical-theological reflection does not begin once the canon is closed. Rather, the interpretative activity of the tradition begins within the biblical traditions. Religious, theological, and philosophical positions are already fixed by the text synchronically on a variety of historical layers and diachronically through the arrangement of books within the canon. It is one task of biblical theology to investigate the synchronic and diachronic plurality of these traditions for the purpose of determining which traditions have had an impact on the formation of communal identity and the formation of hermeneutical-theological traditions. The tradition conveys unity beyond the canon's boundaries, extending the concept of canonical unity to the unity of the tradition. Insights relating the unity of the canon to the unity of the tradition is this volume's key contribution to the discussion of unity. Canon cannot be considered without the religious traditions and hermeneutical trajectories that it funds and for which it is relevant. In view of these relations, canon is inevitably connected to reality.

Theological understandings of the unity of the canon also require that the question of unity be put under a microscope. Even when articulated at a minimal level of content, the biblical text's theological claims inform the trajectories of theological themes threaded through the Bible. There is theological reason for reading the texts in their respective contexts in relation to the contemporary situation. The texts as such narrate God's history with God's people; they tell of God's salvific acts in history.

If these claims concerning God's activity are valid for biblical times, then they are relevant to the respective situation in which the texts are read. With this overarching theological theme in view, the interest in unity does not imply a hegemonic command that all speak in the same way about God. The particulars of the biblical texts do differ from each other in theological focus. Sometimes they even contradict each other in relation to particular theological perspectives on a theme. By presupposing theological relevance of biblical texts, biblical theology must think about unity as the continuity of theological themes from then until now.

If the unity of the canon is not considered in the sense of a closed scriptural list, then how might unity be conceived? The argument unifying all contributions in this book is that the unity of the canon is hermeneutically constituted. Unity is a function of interpretation. The unity is 'outside' not 'inside' the text. It is imposed onto the text by its hearer or reader, by a community of interpretation or by academic scholars, whether from an intra-biblical or an extra-biblical location. It is also in great part constituted by communal beliefs about which writings were inspired by God. As hermeneutically obtained, unity is not a licence for interpretative abandon. Rather, subjectively constituted unity is related to the reality of a unity-constituting feature of the text that is often referred to in this volume as the unity 'behind' the text. By this phrase, the question of unity is referred to the question of reality. The reality behind the text as its referent provides the occasion for understanding the transcanonical unity establishing the continuity between biblical and post-biblical traditions.

The unity established by the tradition opens up the tradition to the possibility of manifold interpretations. Unity is a function of complexity as interpretation recontextualizes particular interpretations of the text in different interpretative contexts. Recontextualization is a critical process; the semantic heterogeneity of biblical texts shows that the texts do not contribute to the determination of an interpretative context in a uniform or flat way. As an open critical process, interpretation is, however, informed by a minimum of agreement creating the conditions for open possibilities in the first place. Traditions of interpretation arising from the biblical traditions are informed by a

minimum of hermeneutical presuppositions, quite likely a common faith that is shared by all participants in the entire trajectory from the authors or tradents of the biblical texts to their modern recipients. The texts contain the potential for unity that is subsequently actualized in ongoing theological interpretation.

The inclusion of both Jewish and Christian perspectives in this volume particularly focuses the question of common elements in interpretative perspectives through consideration of the unity of both Jewish and Christian canons. Although Jewish and Christian interpretative traditions assume different interpretative conditions, they share common presuppositions regarding both the unity constituted by interpretation, and the reality behind the text constituting the text and its interpretations. In this volume, similarities regarding construals of subjectively and objectively constituted unities can be observed, even when different canons, such as the Hebrew Bible, Oral and Written Torah, the Old Testament or Septuagint, the New Testament, or the diverse Christian Bibles (e.g. Roman Catholic, Protestant) are considered.

While it is impossible to address the full range of questions that might emerge, the essays collected in this volume each access important questions concerning the unity of the canon from the authors' various biblical, theological, and philosophical perspectives. In the first essay, 'Transhistorical Unity of the New Testament Canon from Philosophical, Exegetical, and Systematic-Theological Perspectives', Christine Helmer takes up the question of the intra-systematic unity of the canon. Drawing on Friedrich Schleiermacher's work, she discusses the canon's unity in terms of a transhistorical essence remaining constant throughout the historical trajectory of the Christian religion. The goal of theological enquiry is to grasp the essence in its various historical manifestations. The canon is a philosophical construct that minimally fixes the essence in language. At the origin of the Christian religion, the literary representation of the essence is most 'pure' due to its proximity to the originating impulse of the religion. In Christian terms, the original apprehensions of Christ and his redemptive work are fixed as ideas in texts. Exegetical theology's task is an infinite search to determine which texts and passages best represent the original fixing of these apprehensions of Christ for the tradition that follows.

Systematic theology considers the unity of theological thought in relation to the canon emerging from the work of exegetical theology. From her conceptual vantage-point, Helmer presents the idea of a canon in continuity with the unity of the tradition as well as a canon that is open to correction and historical development.

In 'From Literature to Scripture: The Unity and Plurality of the Hebrew Scriptures in Light of the Qumran Library', Armin Lange draws on his research on the Dead Sea Scrolls to expose a complex process of canonical formation that lays the groundwork for later Jewish and Christian canons. This process involves the historical move from authoritative literature to a view of authoritative literature as scripture. Lange documents this new concept by analysing the citations of and allusions to scripture in the non-biblical texts from the Qumran library in particular and from ancient Judaism in general. The next question Lange addresses concerns the reason for the new concept of scripture. He finds his answer in the religious reforms of the years 175-164 BCE that shifted a temple-centred piety to a scripture-centred piety. Jewish identity is re-configured in terms of its relation to scripture that, in turn, establishes the unity of the developing canon. Lange demonstrates the unity of the canon in historical perspective in the interpretation of scripture and in the constitution of religious identity.

In his essay, 'Unity and Plurality in Jewish Canons: The Case of the Oral and Written Torahs', Benjamin D. Sommer addresses the unity of the canon in relation to tradition. Sommer is less concerned with the Bible as a closed corpus than with a sense of *transcanonical unity*, the unity encompassing the entire tradition. The relation of rabbinic theology to biblical tradition clarifies what Sommer means by transcanonical unity. The relation of Written Torah to Oral Torah exposes a point at which Written Torah does not have obvious priority over Oral Torah. Questions concerning the authoritative hierarchization of texts cannot be easily answered. Sommer's considerations make clear that canon lists do not determine the canonicity of authoritative scriptures. Rather, a transcanonical unity between Written and Oral Torah, which can be ultimately understood in terms of Oral Torah, accounts for the unity of the tradition. Against the backdrop of the complex relations between Written and Oral Torah,

Sommer sketches a modern Jewish approach to the canon's unity and authority, an approach that engages a dialogue with modern Jewish theologians, rabbinic texts, and the interdenominational pursuit known as biblical criticism.

In his essay, 'Unity: Within the Canon or After the Canon', James Barr addresses questions concerning the unity of the canon as a classic question in biblical theology. For Barr, questions concerning unity are to be posed at four different levels of increasing complexity regarding the relation between texts and tradition. Barr's own understanding is oriented to a final level of unity spanning the differences and similarities of biblical books in comparison with the important traditions that emerged from post-biblical times. For Barr, this raises questions concerning the relation of biblical theology to doctrinal theology in their distinct formations. Doctrinal theology extends beyond the textual boundaries of the canon to include the post-biblical traditions. With this development, extra-biblical material is theologically integrated into the tradition, and through this process, the biblical texts gain their significance. What biblical theology and doctrinal theology have in common is an understanding of the reality to which the Bible refers. This reality is to be distinguished from its text; it lies behind the text. By the distinction between text and reality, Barr sees a unity of subject matter for both biblical theology and doctrinal theology. The distinction also serves to keep both theological enterprises open to future developments.

A semantic perspective of the New Testament canon is provided by Christof Landmesser in his essay, 'Interpretative Unity of the New Testament'. For Landmesser, texts describe a determinate access to the world; they aim to give something of the world to be understood. Textual access to the world is the product of an encounter with the subject matter of which the text speaks. The materially determined interpretational access to the world offered by the New Testament is of unique significance. New Testament texts are interpretational constructs that attempt to understand the world against the backdrop of the biblical traditions and under the condition of faith in Jesus Christ. Through his semantic approach, Landmesser advances the idea that the New Testament texts can be considered interpretational objects. As interpretational objects, the texts open up a plurality of interpretational accesses to the world, and compel an open-

ended interpretation procedure that cannot be reduced in complexity, closed prematurely, or exhausted. Landmesser holds that, even when all differences are considered, the unity-shaping moment is faith in Jesus Christ. A plurality of interpretations is the result of both interpretational processes taking place in differing contexts and of inconsistent or incoherent interpretative attempts. If, for human beings, the world is never concluded, then the task of Christian theology will continually be the recontextualization of the New Testament texts in each interpretative context.

In his essay, 'Unity of Scripture Constituted through Jewish Traditions of Interpretation', Avi Sagi shows how Jewish traditions of halakhic interpretation see scripture as a pluralistically constituted, polysemic text. Sagi addresses interpretative plurality by appropriating Nahmanides' fundamental insight that the biblical texts are open to a diversity of interpretations. Halakhic decisions do not reveal the one truth of the text, but Torah binding on the community. Acknowledging the affinity between Nahmanides and modern deconstructionism, Sagi contends that a text cannot be construed independently of its reader; the reader plays a decisive role in constituting the text as a unity by determining its meaning for a particular context. Nevertheless, not just any interpretation goes. By considering Nahmanides' position in his *Commentary on the Torah*, Sagi can claim a text apart from its interpretation. For Sagi, that which is opened up by the sages and their interpretation is the Torah of God. Hermeneutical freedom is regulated by rabbinic rules of interpretation. However, halakhic tradition as such constitutes the Jewish religion by determining the status and meaning of scripture. In this view, the appropriate hermeneutical disposition is one that is open-ended.

In the final paper of this volume, 'The Unity behind the Canon', Nicholas Wolterstorff begins with a crucial distinction: the question concerning the unity *behind* the Christian canon is not identical with the question concerning the unity *in* the Christian canon. Wolterstorff's main argument involves consideration of the Bible as a work. The question of interpretation is taken up in view of the object of interpretation. That which constitutes something as a work lies behind the text. According to Wolterstorff, a work is a unity created by *intention* or

intentional authorization. The Bible as an entirety can be understood in Wolterstorff's sense of unity. Wolterstorff sketches the overarching structure of the Christian canon by connecting the different books in view of their content. The New Testament owes its content to the person of Jesus. The Old Testament is informed by two story lines: the story of creation and providence, and the story of redemption. For Wolterstorff, the Christian canon is to be read in light of this relation between Old and New Testaments. This unified reading does not preclude interpreting individual books as written by individual authors. It also acknowledges the fact that the Old Testament was interpreted by the early church in a way differing from original authorial intention. Yet the stress is on recognizing the Christian canon as a work united by two testaments and authorized as a unity by God. The scriptures, taken as canon, are not God's collected works but God's single work with many chapters.

The unity of the canon is discussed in this volume from a range of perspectives with a variety of canons in view. Questions are raised from the historical perspective concerning the formation and legitimation of differing canon lists and their uses. From the theological and hermeneutical-philosophical perspectives, questions address the function of biblical interpretation for the determination of canon. Reader, author, or interpretative community contribute aspects to the canon's unity as it is seen as a subjectively construed hermeneutical unity. In terms of a subjective determination, the role that the pragmatic context of an interpretation plays is also an important factor in construing the canon's unity. The subjective interpretative unity, however, is related to an objective construal of unity. In differing ways, the unity behind the text, as divine agent, as transcanonical religious experience, or as transcanonical tradition, offer important considerations to answering the question concerning the unity of the canon.

Transhistorical Unity of the New Testament Canon from Philosophical, Exegetical, and Systematic-Theological Perspectives¹

CHRISTINE HELMER

INTRODUCTION

Diversity characterizes the biblical canon when it is viewed for its historical, thematic, and material-theological content. Historical plurality is written into the redactional layers of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Even in descriptions of one and the same event, different narrators relay different stories, each told from a particular historical and cultural location that lends a different interpretational spin to the basic story.² Furthermore, thematic plurality characterizes biblical content. From the aetiology of creation and human origins to architectural design, from ethical injunctions to immoral behaviour, from curses to hymns, the Bible represents its diverse themes in many literary genres shaping the subject matter through different languages.³ And

¹ I thank both Leann Long and Stephen Davis for our conversations on the subject of this essay and for kindly suggesting improvements to the text.

² For example, as Marvin Sweeney has shown, Jeremiah reflects critically upon the Isaian tradition in developing his own understanding of the exile from Jerusalem. Marvin A. Sweeney, 'The Truth in True and False Prophecy', in Christine Helmer and Kristin De Troyer, with Katie Goetz, eds., *Truth: Interdisciplinary Dialogues in a Pluralist Age*, Studies in Philosophical Theology, no. 22 (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 9–26.

³ For a study of how genre shapes subject matter through the different discourses a genre generates (e.g. disputation, hymn, sermon) see Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther: The Relationship Between Genre, Language and the Trinity in Luther's Works (1523–1546)*, Veröffentlichungen