WuD	*Wort und Dienst*
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZKG	*Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*
ZThK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

Introduction: Multivalence in Biblical Theology

Christine Helmer

1

The famous definition of biblical theology that Gerhard Ebeling formulated in 1955 identified the fundamental ambiguity haunting the field. Ebeling contrasts two meanings of the term *biblical theology:* "the theology contained in the Bible, the theology of the Bible itself" ("die in der Bibel enthaltene Theologie, die Theologie der Bibel selbst") and "the theology that accords with the Bible, scriptural theology" ("die in der Bibel gemäße, die schriftgemäße Theologie").[1] By "the theology contained in the Bible," Ebeling means a historical description of the theology that is implicitly presupposed or explicitly articulated by the text or the theology structuring the text. This is reached by employing primarily historical and literary strategies in order to contextualize the text's theological claims as historically situated claims. By "theology that accords with the Bible," Ebeling means the theologically normative claims resulting from conceptual-theological analysis that can be verified as congruent with the Bible, although not necessarily historically contextualized by the Bible. The contrast between the theology of the Bible and scriptural theology is, as Ebeling designates it, provisional: "Even if we take these contrasts as a merely provisional characterization, yet it is clear that we cannot be content only to distinguish the two meanings of 'biblical theology.' "[2]

Ebeling's contrast has convincingly set the conceptual parameters for biblical theology. The contrast between historical and theological methods, between the object as described historically and the object of theological construction, exposes the braided trajectories of biblical theology's two foun-

1. Gerhard Ebeling, "The Meaning of 'Biblical Theology,' " in *Word and Faith* (trans. J. W. Leitch; London: SCM, 1963), 1:78; translation of, "Was heißt 'Biblische Theologie'? (1955)," in *Wort und Glaube* (3rd ed.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1967), 1:69.

2. Ebeling, "Meaning of 'Biblical Theology,' " 80; "Was heißt 'Biblische Theologie'?" 70.

dational disciplines. Yet the contrast reflects an ambiguity in the German term for *theology*—theology "in the broad sense" includes both the historical and conceptual fields—that is not adequately captured by the smaller radius that the word *theology* designates in the English-speaking world. Ebeling acknowledges that the term's ambiguity strives for resolution that the discipline's future is driven by the creativity inherent in tension. The English term, however, drives history and theology into sharper contrast than the original German. Theology in English is cast more narrowly as a conceptual discipline; its proclivity to normativity is underlined and consequently contrasted with historical description. If, however, the English term could recapture a hint of the German provisionality, then perhaps the blunt edges between history and theology could be blurred somewhat in order to create a productive tension.

It is the intention of this volume to blur the distinction between historical and theological approaches to biblical theology in order to explore the many ways in which biblical texts are related to theological meanings. A historical investigation into a specific text inevitably notes its multivalence. The text is perpetually embedded in a history of interpretative work. Whether it bears the traces of redactional modification, such as the Deuteronomistic Historian, or whether it exists in a final form waiting to be interpreted, such as the Pauline epistles in the New Testament, the text presents different historical layers for interpretation. With each historical layer, different possibilities for theological meaning are conveyed. The theology of Mark as an early historical layer of the Synoptic Gospels, for example, bears the messianic secret to its bitterly short ending, while the later theology of Luke does not hesitate to make overt claims about Jesus' central significance in history.

The key to blurring the history-theology distinction relies on the double presupposition that history is interested in theology and that theology is a historically located conceptual discipline. Ebeling's definition of biblical theology as a "theology contained in the Bible" presupposes that the biblical texts are interested in making claims, potentially transhistorical claims, about the relations of persons to others in community and personal relations in community to God. The historical analysis of texts includes the description of the claims that the text makes about theologically significant relations. Ebeling's understanding of a "theology that accords with the Bible" suggests a theology that is constructed outside the Bible and that can be shown to be articulated within specific parameters set by scripture. On a closer look at the ways in which theological theories are formed in the Bible, particularly through tradition-historical and canonical approaches, Ebeling's "scriptural theology" can be seen to be an intrabiblical phenomenon as well. Scriptural theology at both its locations involves the application of the criterion of "accordance"

that is itself the result of a community consensus that can change with time. The historicization of scriptural theology blurs any clear and static boundary between history and theology. If this book's aim is the blurring of history and theology as a potentially creative resource, then it should not immediately raise the specter of dogmatic imposition. Nervousness around the potential dogmatic-theological distortion of the historical text arises quite probably in a conceptual framework pitting an ahistorical theology against the historically responsible study of texts. The claim of theology's historicity can alleviate this anxiety. By deliberately rooting its claims in history, theology frees historical studies to be strengthened by its conceptual analysis.

The aim of this book is to show how historical and theological approaches are mutually reciprocal in the study of the relations between biblical texts and their theological meanings. This is framed by the presupposition that the biblical texts are theologically underdetermined. As points of reference for ongoing religious traditions, biblical texts are given to be redacted, rewritten (*fortgeschrieben*), contextualized, actualized, and interpreted in places at a distance from the original composition. Theological claims are made and continue to be made through processes of the texts' recontextualization and reconceptualization.[3] The formations of theological theories, whether intrabiblical or extrabiblical, whether uniformly consistent or radically different from each other, are answers to the texts' invitation to explore their textuality, historicity, and referents. Why and how biblical texts are open to a variety of possible theological meanings is the issue at the heart of this volume.

The question concerning the relation between text and theology builds on the results of its predecessor volume, *Biblical Interpretation: History, Context, and Reality*.[4] The *Biblical Interpretation* volume looks deliberately at the relation between text and the claims about reality that the text makes. Text interpretation cannot evade the question concerning reality; the understanding of a particular text involves an analysis of the historical and metaphysical commitments that the text claims. The formation of theological theory, as is argued in the various chapters of *Biblical Interpretation*, is intimately related to historical and metaphysical questions. Historical context shapes the relevance of theological standpoints. The third-century controversy surrounding God's body, for example, resulted in theological decision-making that had an enormous impact on the Christian tradition's understanding of divine

3. I find this distinction proposed by Rolf P. Knierim to be very helpful (*The Task of Old Testament Theology: Substance, Method, and Cases* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 84–85).

4. Christine Helmer, with the assistance of Taylor G. Petrey, eds., *Biblical Interpretation: History, Context, and Reality* (SBLSymS 26; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005).

incorporeality.[5] Historical processes determine the appearance or erasure of theological content and detail; the emergence of transcendental Idealism in nineteenth-century Berlin, for example, contributed to the rise in Trinitarian speculation and ultimately to the early twentieth century's proclamation of the Trinity as the systematic key to Christian theology. Philosophical questions concerning the reality of being, specifically the reason for existence and freedom's choice for evil, are questions forming the ground on which theological concepts are conceived. Furthermore, the text's metaphysical and historical claims to reality exercise hermeneutical constraints on theological interpretation. A Leibnizian power-appearance metaphysic, for example, shapes Schleiermacher's philosophical commitments, which he uses to interpret the soteriology of Col 1:15–20 in a universalist direction.[6] Issues of historical context and metaphysics presupposed both by the text and its interpreters are fundamentally significant to hermeneutical issues concerning theological claims about reality. If theology lays claims to the status in reality of its subject matter, then it must work together with those disciplines that provide accounts of reality.

The historical and philosophical emphasis of the predecessor volume leaves open the question concerning multiple possibilities for theological commitments that are themselves a function of textual multivalence. Biblical texts by virtue of their redaction and incorporation into larger genre sequences lay claims at different textual layers to different theological meanings. Canonical arrangement of books contextualizes the biblical text's final form for theological purposes, while preserving other distinct witnesses to its subject matter, to use Brevard Childs's terminology in view of the Christian Bible.[7] For some texts, early layers witness to an original *Sitz im Leben* from which traditions and liturgies grew. The Psalms, for example, have an original cultic location that is then transposed into another theological key when cited in relation to the New Testament passion narratives (e.g., Matt 27:46's allusion to Ps 22:1). Later layers as written stories catch glimpses of both their earlier oral sources and the processes of their dissemination. The books attributed to

5. See Karen Jo Torjesen, "The Enscripturation of Philosophy: The Incorporeality of God in Origen's Exegesis," in Helmer and Petrey, *Biblical Interpretation*, 73–84.

6. See my essay, "The Consummation of Reality: Soteriological Metaphysics in Schleiermacher's Interpretation of Colossians 1:15–20," in Helmer and Petrey, *Biblical Interpretation*, 113–31.

7. Childs distinguishes between "the Old Testament's witness to God's redemptive will in the context of the history of Israel" and "the New Testament's witness to God's redemption through Jesus Christ in the context of the early church." See Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 91, 93.

Israel's prophets, for example, contain prophetic words in direct speech, yet extensive historical information is brushed out in the process of transmission. Erasure in the final form allows the prophet's message to find addressees in communities other than the original group for which it was intended.[8] Textual multivalence can also be a function of the text's final form. The challenging question concerning the relation of the Hebrew Bible to the Christian Bible, which is composed of two Testaments, is the question concerning the possibilities inherent in the Hebrew Bible for different theological meanings. Those meanings are carried by possibilities in the text's content and form. The question of Jewish-Christian relations, then, is the question concerning the recognition of multivalence within one's respective religious tradition. It is scholarship on the Bible from both historical and theological perspectives that again and again challenges the tendency to unified interpretation by carefully drawing distinctions, classifying text material, and ultimately keeping open the plurality of interpretative options.

The view that only one theological meaning is generated by a particular biblical text is earnestly challenged in this volume. It is this view that is related to a supersessionist strand in Christian theology, yet has other manifestations, particularly framed by a Christian theological fascination for singular truth obtained by revelation. One challenge to this view looks at the nature of theological abstraction from the particular: theology's task is to abstract the universal from the particular, an action that is an inevitability of conceptual processes of making sense of the world and of communicating that sense in linguistic terms. Speech is itself constituted by the particular and the universal, thereby making interpersonal communication presuppose at least a minimum of conceptual abstraction. This kind of abstraction is most evident in biblical-theological projects that explicitly gather up concepts serving as orienting focal points, as in the search for the center of scripture (technically in German, die *Mitte der Schrift*), or in a theology of the New Testament that presupposes a high level of abstraction to claim a theology coherent and consistent across the diversity of Gospels and epistles. The reduction of predicative diversity is not in and of itself a problem in theology—abstraction requires a certain blurring of the particular in order to offer the orientation that only uniformity of meaning can provide. A problem occurs when theological abstraction negates particularity, as is the case with the anachronism that has lost contact with original meanings. A problem arises when theological abstraction imposes conceptual unity on a text. The traditional supersessionist reading of the Christian use of the Old Testament in semantic

8. Ibid., 170–71.

identity with the New Testament is a case in point. A theologically underdetermined canon that is open to theological possibilities is a perspective that requires a carefully balanced understanding of theological abstraction in view of determination by particularity.

One key aspect to the text–theology relation is the tailoring of a particular method to tease out the complexity of the text in relation to a theological position. Christian A. Eberhart's chapter on Gen 22 shows, for example, that theological decisions sometimes associated in the tradition with a text are, on closer look, a function of a process of theological concept formation that involves many steps of abstraction from the alleged foundational text. The analysis of this process involves redaction history in addition to text-critical issues. A strict philological analysis—a careful look at the text's grammar, syntax, verb tense, and distinctive terminology—is required when the text contains the hermeneutical parameters for theological interpretation. Luther, for example, translated the "ascension Psalms" (2 and 110) in a Trinitarian-theological direction only after studying the passage's grammatical and syntactical features in Hebrew more deeply.[9] The analysis of a distinct passage within a larger canonical segment also demands a sensitivity to theological pluralism in addition to historical-critical study. The history of Christianity can be read as a history of interpreting salvation from two perspectives, from the Matthean perspective of a "secondary conditioning of salvation" and from the Pauline perspective of "justification by faith."[10] If the canon includes vastly differing opinions on one of its central themes, then theological pluralism too can be entertained.

Textual multivalence keeps the canon open to theological possibility, yet even multivalence has its limitations. Hermeneutical parameters, such as the reality to which the text refers, the range of possible meanings presented by the actual text, and the theological frameworks shaping interpretation, are constraints that limit the interpretative possibilities of the text. The formation of a theological claim inevitably requires artificially restricting the text's multivalence, yet such a restriction can also be accountable to canonical diversity by a position infused with modesty. This point is illustrated by David Carr in his chapter, "For the Love of Christ: Generic and Unique Elements in Christian Theological Readings of the Song of Songs." Carr shows how particular aspects of the semantic potential in the Song of Songs are actualized in consistent ways. Interpretations range from the interpersonal erotic relationship to the marriage between the collective and God, yet the range is distinctly focused by a particular conceptual-theological lens. The claim of the text's theological restriction is, furthermore, an interpretative act that requires transhistorical cultivation. So Stephen T. Davis shows in his chapter, "'Who Can Forgive Sins but God Alone?': Jesus, Forgiveness, and Divinity," that the traditional Chalcedonian reading of Mark 2:1–12 persists in its ability to logically and theologically persuade new generations of Christians of its correctness. Multivalence and meanings interact in forming a vibrant theological history. This volume attempts to demonstrate this vibrancy—the dynamic interplay between both elements without prematurely reducing complexity, even allowing different meanings to co-exist in tension with each other. The blurring between the historical and the theological, while admitting the relevant distinctions, can move biblical theology to be in a position to study the theologies arising in the processes of text formation and from the texts as they are read in later religious traditions.

9. See my "Luther's Trinitarian Hermeneutic and the Old Testament," *Mod Theol* 18 (2002): 49–73.

10. On the contrast between the Matthean perspective that stipulates works in addition to the personal salvation given by Jesus and the Pauline elimination of works, see Christof Landmesser, *Jüngerberufung und Zuwendung zu Gott: Ein exegetischer Beitrag zum Konzept der matthäischen Soteriologie im Anschluß an Mt 9,9–13* (WUNT 1/133; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

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Biblical theology's status as a bridge-building discipline is wonderfully poised to address both the historical and the theological dimensions of biblical texts. This volume presents contributions by scholars interpreting the text–theology relation by integrating both aspects. The analyses reflect a common commitment to the specific determinations of particular texts in relation to their respective generation of particular theological meanings. By this concentration on precise relationships, the contributors aim to anchor theological abstraction in the specific grammatical, semantic, and historical understandings of the text and, conversely, to relate particular aspects of the text to the conceptualization of its theological dimensions.

David Carr begins the volume with his chapter, "For the Love of Christ," which addresses the power of the Song of Songs to generate multiple meanings in both Jewish and Christian traditions. Carr demonstrates that the Song's interpretative multivalence in traditions of Jewish and Christian accounts of the divine–human relationship contrasts surprisingly with the literal level's erotic story of an interpersonal relationship. Carr shows how the story is transformed by interpretations that explore the text's semantic potential at multiple levels. The power of the text is gained when its different layers are opened up by interpretative processes.

The relation that C. R. Seitz chooses to focus on in his chapter, "Fixity and Potential in Isaiah," is that between the embeddedness of particular bib-

lical passages in a larger literary whole and the potential of the stabilized passage for a plurality of interpretations. Seitz concentrates his argument on the example of the messianic prophecies in Isa 9, 11, and 7:14 (the reference to the עלמה and her child Immanuel). Who is the referent of these particular passages? Seitz compares his interpretation to the work of Brevard S. Childs and Marvin A. Sweeney and shows that the interpretative decision for the referent—either a historical or an eschatological figure—is theologically shaped by the text's final form.

Christian A. Eberhart's contribution, "The Term 'Sacrifice' and the Problem of Theological Abstraction: A Study of the Reception History of Genesis 22:1–19," deals with the question whether theological abstraction, while itself a necessary process, adequately captures and represents the meanings of biblical texts. Eberhart focuses on one of the most well-known biblical texts, the story of Abraham and Isaac in Gen 22, and on the story's key concept of sacrifice. He claims that the concept is ambiguous. An original cultic meaning is only marginally relevant to the story of Gen 22 and its reception history in Judaism and early Christianity; a secularized metaphorical meaning seems best to explain its meaning in those traditions. The result for a Christian theory of atonement is, as Eberhart concludes, that any soteriological claims concerning Christ's sacrificial death require a text warrant other than Gen 22.

A distinct focus on the way in which language moves its hearer to come to new theological understandings is offered by Lincoln E. Galloway in "'Consider the Lilies of the Field...': A Sociorhetorical Analysis of Matthew 6:25–34." Galloway argues that theological meaning is a function of the rhetoric of the Sermon on the Mount, analyzing how the rhetorical patterns of the Sermon, its aesthetic devices, and its rhythms, all call attention to the contrast between an ideology of striving for material glory and an ideology that places God as the sole focus of striving. Galloway also shows how the movement toward a greater appreciation for God's sustaining of all human life is effected by the speech's linguistic questions, declaratives, injunctions, and imperatives. Multivalence is a feature of the speech's rhetoric that lends itself to a particular theology of universal divine care.

Gary Gilbert describes the literary and political relation of Luke-Acts to the Roman world in "Luke-Acts and Negotiation of Authority and Identity in the Roman World." Gilbert acknowledges the multivalence in the New Testament concerning political relations and shows that specific narrative tropes and theology constructions of Luke-Acts are decisively shaped by the political relation of dominant to subordinate group. Subtle strategies of resistance characterize this relation that can be read in Luke-Acts only when the historical layer is carefully compared with political features of the Roman Empire and the Second Sophistic.

John Barton focuses his contribution, "The Fall and Human Depravity," on Martin Luther's interpretation of Isa 64:5–12. Luther argues in his refutation to Latomus (1521) that this biblical passage, particularly verse 7 ("all our deeds are like a filthy cloth"), is to be interpreted to mean the depravity of human nature. Barton reconstructs Luther's interpretative method as a particular move of theological abstraction for the dual theological purpose of maximizing sin and maximizing grace. Barton also entertains an alternative reading more in line with modern exegesis in order to show that the same text can yield a different theological anthropology.

In his chapter, "'Who Can Forgive Sins but God Alone?': Jesus, Forgiveness, and Divinity," Stephen T. Davis analyzes the meaning of forgiveness in relation to Mark 2:1–12. This story of the paralytic healed and forgiven by Jesus is paradigmatic for looking at the relation between the divine prerogative to forgive and the christological question regarding the divine nature of Jesus. Davis shows that this passage has presented, in the history of Christian interpretation, both minimalist and maximalist explanations for why Mark attributes forgiveness to Jesus. A maximalist and the traditional Christian orthodox reading attributes the divine prerogative to forgive to Jesus, which Davis argues is the most convincing reading. The argument for the philosophical meaningfulness and theological truth of the divine aspect in Jesus as the explanation for his capacity to forgive sins upholds the traditional Chalcedonian interpretation of this passage.

Kevin Mongrain focuses his chapter, "Worship in Spirit and Truth: Louis-Marie Chauvet's Sacramental Reading of John 4:21–24," on the contemporary Roman Catholic liturgist's reading of Johannine theology as a whole and John 4:21–24 in particular. Mongrain argues that Chauvet's pneumatic-liturgical interpretation of this passage preserves the multivalent dimension of its sacramental theology, while correcting some of its possible misinterpretations. According to Mongrain, Chauvet does not reduce biblical multivalence when determining theological meaning but preserves a multiplicity of meanings. One key dimension of this theological retention of multivalence is, as other authors also address in this volume, the insistence upon the historical and theological continuity of Christianity with Judaism. Mongrain looks at this relation in Chauvet's reading of the phrase "worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24), which he sees preserving the original connection between the cult and ethics in Christianity and Judaism while pointing out a discontinuity between the two religions.

Bernd Oberdorfer analyzes the difference between Eastern and Western conceptual frameworks determining to a certain extent the readings of particular biblical passages with different Trinitarian theological results. Oberdorfer's chapter, "'...Who Proceeds from the Father"—and the Son? The

Use of the Bible in the *Filioque* Debate: A Historical and Ecumenical Case Study and Hermeneutical Reflections," thematizes the millennium-old question regarding the place of the Spirit in the inner-Trinitarian relations, an issue that continues to divide the two main churches of Christianity. Oberdorfer argues that the difference in articulating the inner-Trinitarian relations stems from different views of how the literal level of the biblical text reveals those relations. The future direction of ecumenical dialogue between East and West can be reoriented by retrieving a broader biblical text basis that reveals the inner-Trinitarian relations to be more complex and reciprocal than the one-way relations of origin.

In my own concluding chapter, "Recovering the Real: A Case Study of Schleiermacher's Theology," I address the issue of multivalence by reconstructing a theory about reality based on the New Testament texts. I use Schleiermacher as a resource to understand how the New Testament is related to the reality of multiple authors and how the many experiences of Jesus recorded in the New Testament categorize their subject matter in terms of the theological correlation between the person of Jesus and his work. The reality of authors and their subject matter also informs the way in which theological concepts are formed. Multivalence is necessary for theological conceptualization because it anchors the theological process of concept formation in reality.

Each chapter demonstrates that the relation between biblical multivalence and theological meanings is complex. In investigating this complex relation, biblical theology can reflect on the complexity of the reality of human religion that moves between openness and constraint, conflict and harmony.

For the Love of Christ: Generic and Unique Elements in Christian Theological Readings of the Song of Songs

David Carr

The Song of Songs (hereafter "the Song") is an excellent example of a text with a plurality of meanings that has served as a theological touchstone for both Christian and Jewish readers.[1] The quote attributed to Rabbi Akiba about the Song of Songs being "the holy of holies amidst the writings" (*m. Yad.* 3:5) is well known, and it well characterizes how many Jewish interpreters understood the Song to be a wellspring of language of praise of the God revealed as Israel's savior in the Torah. Though early Jewish interpreters tended to mine the Song for fragments related to broader discourses, later Jewish interpretations focused more on the Song of Songs as a depiction of the relationship between God and God's people, aspects of the godhead, between passive and active intellects, or the passion of the soul for God.

From an early point Christian interpreters developed overarching interpretations of the Song as a reflection of one or more layers of love relationships. Starting in the third century with literary homilies by Hippolytus and Origen and reaching white-hot intensity with an explosion of commentaries in the thirteenth century, many Christians have understood the Song to be a depiction of various divine–human loves. Generally, such interpreters have taken the Song to be first and foremost a depiction of the history of the love between Christ and the church, but they have often focused as much or more on other (related) love relationships, such as the love of the soul for Christ or the love of Mary (as an image of the church) and Christ. As will be suggested below, these Christian interpretations certainly build on the tradi-

1. Portions of this essay were presented at the History of Interpretation Section of the 2001 Society of Biblical Literature Meeting and as the 2005 Joseph Jackson Memorial Lecture at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary. Thanks go to the hosts and participants of both loci for their help in improving this work.