

Staurology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Narrative: Once More unto the Biblical Theological Breach¹

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INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF THEOLOGY IN READING THE BIBLE RIGHTLY

What does it mean to read the Bible rightly and what role, if any, should theology have in this endeavor? Everyone agrees that the Bible speaks of God and, for that reason, may be deemed “theological.” By way of contrast, the “theological” interpretation of the Bible remains an essentially contested notion, not least because it is not clear what “theologically” means in this context. For instance, does it mean setting forth the theology of the biblical authors themselves, using the Bible to defend a particular theological

tradition (e.g., Lutheran), or deploying theological categories to describe the process of reading the Bible? It is not always clear which of these three possibilities is in view when people refer to reading Scripture theologically.

That there is widespread disagreement about how rightly to interpret the Bible may be the only thing all biblical interpreters agree on. William Blake expresses this poignantly in his poem, “The Vision of Christ,” which concludes with a disheartening couplet:

“Both read the Bible day and night,
But thou read'st black where I read white.”

In our present pluralistic post/modern context, there are of course many more than two reading perspectives: not only black and white, but all the colors that make up the denominational and social spectrum, including, to name but a few, various kinds of Presbyterians, Latino and Latina, African, and Palestinian Christians, as well as the various interpretive communities located somewhere under the rainbow flag of LGBTQ. The conflict of interpretations is nothing new, but today's readers have also to deal with the deeper, and more intractable, conflict of interpretive approaches, interests, and communities.

For their part, Evangelicals just want to be biblical, both because they confess, with the Reformers, the Bible's supreme authority, and because they want to follow Jesus, who similarly identified scriptural texts as God's word written.² Being biblical in one's theology is easier said than done, however. To take but one example: Lutheran and Reformed theologians (I could have chosen other labels) think they're merely expositing the theology of the Bible itself, only to find themselves accused of foisting alien doctrines onto Scripture. Many biblical exegetes may feel inclined to pronounce a pox upon both their dogmatic houses in order to preserve the unadulterated theology of the biblical authors themselves.

The stakes are high: what does it mean to read the Bible rightly and what role, if any, should theology have in this endeavor? In order to address this question, I need to provide some background. What follows is a story about a line and a circle: their early partnership, their later separation, and their prospects for reconciliation. The line and circle in question are creations of Geerhardus Vos, metaphors for the disciplines of biblical and systematic

theology respectively. The two theological disciplines are indeed related—they have the Bible in common—yet it has become hard to tell whether theirs is a love story or a family feud, a story of a strained marriage or a fateful sibling rivalry. It is, in any case, a story about two different ways of reading the Bible theologically.

In his 1894 inaugural address as Professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Seminary, Geerhardus Vos defined biblical theology as “*the exhibition of the organic process of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity.*”³ It is the discipline of hewing closely to the history of special revelation. Vos says theology “will be Biblical in the full sense, only when it not merely derives its material from the Bible, but also accepts at the hands of the Bible the order in which this material is to be grouped and located.”⁴ A biblical passage is not a proof-text to be taken out of context but an element located “within a pattern of God-given contexts,” all of which are encompassed by what we could call the “redemptive-historical” context. As his contemporary champion, Richard Gaffin, puts it, “Biblical revelation has its own structure ... resident in the subject matter itself ... the history of redemption.”⁵

Vos explains that while both biblical and dogmatic theology reflect on the Bible, they do so with contrasting principles of organization: “in the one case this constructive principle is systematic and logical, whereas in the other case it is purely historical. In other words, Systematic Theology endeavors to construct a circle, Biblical Theology seeks to reproduce a line.”⁶ This was no one-off illustration. Vos returns to it some thirty years later in his *magnum opus*, *Biblical Theology*, where he states that both biblical and systematic theology do something with the revealed truth deposited in the Bible: “Biblical Theology draws a *line* of development. Systematic Theology draws a *circle*.”⁷ Vos appears to be contrasting two kinds of reading, the one focusing on organic development (history), the other on intellectual organization (logic).

Fast forward to the present. The “liners” now have their own journals and professional organization, speak their own language and have their own culture, as do the “circles.” What began as a division of labor has become an ugly ditch, forcing readers of the Bible to choose sides, and different career paths: biblical *or* theological studies. Meanwhile, pastors struggle to keep a foot in both camps. On occasion, hostilities break out, hence my subtitle, “once more unto the breach,” a reference both to Shakespeare’s *Henry V* and

to the dividing wall of hostility that too often characterizes the relationship between biblical scholarship and systematic theology.

What follows is an attempt to wade once more unto the breach, perchance to build a bridge—and repair a broken relationship. I begin by briefly rehearsing the birth of biblical theology in the 18th century to its “first death” in 1961. As we shall see, the cause of death had to do with the failure to connect biblical narrative to the reality of God. Next, we consider the rebirth of biblical theology in the late 20th century and the way in which, according to some Evangelicals, systematic theology must decrease in order for biblical theology to increase (cf. John 3:30). I then turn to a specific interpretive issue: how the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ death should be read theologically. Which discourse, biblical or systematic theology, best explains why Jesus had to die on a cross for us and our salvation? In particular, which discourse best explains the significance of Jesus’ loud cry at the moment of his death, a detail all three Synoptic Evangelists see fit to mention? The “travail of biblical narrative” of my title pertains to the interpretive labor required to move from the biblical authors’ categories of thinking to categories that yield thick theological understanding today. This is the task of systematic theology, and the cross marks the spot where the tension between lines and circles approaches its breaking point.

Our account reaches its climax with a proposal that draws upon a third geometric figure, integrating the biblical-theological line and the systematic theological circle in a dogmatic theological *sphere*. In doing so we do not leave Vos behind, but rather retrieve a neglected aspect of his thought: a fruitful, hitherto underappreciated suggestion that will enable readers to glimpse the promised land of biblical interpretation: ontology.

I. TWO ROADS DIVERGE IN THE MODERN WORLD: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FROM GABLER TO GILKEY

Once upon a time, there was no distinction between line and circle. It was not until the Enlightenment that biblical theology was taken out, like Adam’s rib, from the chest of theology *simpliciter*. What God had joined together, Johann Philipp Gabler rent asunder.

The origins of biblical theology as a distinct strategy for reading Scripture freed from confessional constraints may be traced to Gabler’s 1787 lecture

on “The Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each.”⁸ Gabler was troubled by the conflict of interpretations in his day. He proposed biblical theology as an academic discipline whose task was to provide historically accurate descriptions of the NT authors’ ideas of God in their own terms. Doing so would allow the difference between the theology *in* the Bible and theology in accordance *with* the Bible (or imposed *upon* it).

Neither Vos nor Gabler have copyright on the term “biblical theology.” They use it in different senses, and it is important to see the continuities and discontinuities. Both associate biblical theology with history, though for Vos the accent is on history as the medium of God’s revelation and redemption, while for Gabler the emphasis is on history as the context for human language and thought. This is no minor disagreement. It is rather a fateful distinction that leads in two different directions, and ultimately to two different scholarly enterprises: theology and religious studies, respectively. For, only a scant hundred years later, NT theology had become in the hands of William Wrede an exercise in setting forth the history of early Christianity, an academic project that could be pursued apart from Christian faith or belief in God.⁹

Many evangelical exegetes sympathize with Gabler’s concern not to let systematic theologians run roughshod over the particulars of the text. The voices of the biblical authors deserve to be heard, not shouted down by the Reformed dogmatic-industrial complex! Reading Scripture with no theological presuppositions, however, means reading it as methodological naturalists, in which case the Bible becomes a document of the university (a historically and culturally conditioned expression of human religion, like any other book) rather than the canon of the church (an authoritative word from God). What Gabler ultimately (and perhaps inadvertently) launched was an *atheological* (I won’t say *atheistic*) way of reading the Bible.

The so-called Biblical Theology Movement that dominated the North American scene from 1945-1961 resisted the tendency to become a subset of religious studies. One of the movement’s leading proponents, G. E. Wright, attempted to read the Bible in a historical-critical manner and, like Vos, have his theological cake too. In his influential book, *God Who Acts*, Wright defines biblical theology as “the confessional recital of the redemptive acts of God in a particular history.”¹⁰ Wright’s heart was in the right place: he wanted to read

the Bible theologically for the church by focusing on revelation in history. Alas, like the walls of Jericho, the Biblical Theology Movement suffered a spectacular collapse, and those who wish to pursue biblical theology must learn from its failure.

As Wright's subtitle "Biblical Theology as Recital" hints, his primary focus is Israel's and the church's "confessional recital" of God's mighty acts, especially the Exodus-covenant act. Significantly, Wright identifies revelation not with the words of Scripture, but with God's mighty acts in history. Critics were quick to point out several problems with the Biblical Theology Movement, but for present purposes the most important of these concerns Wright's notion of an "act of God."¹¹

Langdon Gilkey was the Gideon figure whose trumpet—his 1961 essay "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language"¹²—effectively demolished an entire movement in a scant eleven pages. Gilkey, a systematic theologian, acknowledges Wright's biblical-theological descriptive aim, to adhere as closely as possible to the biblical author's own vocabulary and ideas, yet Gilkey finds Wright's proposal confusing: "its world view or cosmology is modern, while its theological language is biblical and orthodox."¹³ On the one hand, the Biblical Theology Movement employs biblical criticism and maintains the typical modern belief in historical conditioning and the causal continuum. On the other hand, in affirming divine action in history, it denies the modern assumption of a causal continuum of space-time experience. What is ultimately at issue is the framework with which one interprets the biblical narrative, and Gilkey faults the Biblical Theology Movement for its cross-eyed reading of Scripture, that is, for reading Scripture with two incompatible frames of reference: ancient (i.e., supernatural) and modern (i.e., critical). Speaking for moderns like himself, Gilkey insists that that "biblical people lived in the same causal continuum of space and time in which we live, and so one in which ... no divine voices were heard."¹⁴

Gilkey pinpoints what he takes to be the internal contradiction at the heart of the Biblical Theology Movement: "Its claims for history as the framework for revelation were bogus because the 'history' appealed to was not real history."¹⁵ Wright's biblical-theological focus was on Israel's *confession* of God's mighty acts; it is not clear whether Wright himself believes that God *really* acts as humans do (i.e., as one cause among others in the space-time causal continuum). The real focus of Wright's biblical theology is not the mighty acts

of God but, rather, the confessional *recital* of these acts by the biblical authors. In the final analysis, says Gilkey, “the Bible ends up being descriptive not of the acts of God but of Hebrew religion.”¹⁶ God may be the grammatical subject of the biblical verbs, but the real object of the Biblical Theology Movement proved to be religion (anthropology), not God (theology).

For Calvin and most premodern readers, God actually did what the text said he did. By way of contrast, members of the Biblical Theology Movement were unable to specify what God had actually done. For example, they rejected literal interpretations of God speaking to Moses out of the burning bush. Upon closer inspection, then, the acts of God appear less mighty than mighty peculiar, which is why Gilkey speaks of “the travail of biblical language.” The biblical authors spoke univocally of God, whereas we modern readers speak of God only analogically. What, then, is an act of God? To what kind of historical event does it actually refer? According to Gilkey, the Biblical Theology Movement reduced the acts of God: they are not ordinary events in space-time, “but only his inward incitement of a religious response to an ordinary event within the space-time continuum.”¹⁷ It is a devastating critique (and sobering example of theological downsizing).

The Biblical Theology Movement left unclear whether the mighty acts of God are his objective activity in history, faith’s way of interpreting ordinary events, or some *tertium quid*. Gilkey’s verdict: “What we desperately need is a theological ontology.”¹⁸ “Only an ontology of events specifying what God’s relation to ordinary events is like ... could fill the now empty analogy of might acts.”¹⁹ Without an ontology—an account of what things *are*—the language of biblical theology, and the Bible, remains hopelessly equivocal. “And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?” (1 Cor 14:8). If we are to understand in our terms what the biblical authors are saying in theirs, we need a clearer conception of the reality of God and of how God acts—in a word, *ontology*. Biblical interpreters who lack ontology resemble Athenians who worship an unknown God (cf. Acts 17:23).

II. NARRATIVE AND ONTOLOGY: THE GREAT EVANGELICAL DIVIDE IN READING THE BIBLE THEOLOGICALLY TODAY

Gilkey’s essay, published in 1961, marks what I am calling the “first death” of biblical theology, though what passed away was neither Gabler’s nor

Vos's version but an unstable mixture of the two (viz., the Biblical Theology Movement). Some fifty years later, the landscape has changed. There is little left of Gabler's dream for a "true" biblical theology of the OT and NT, both because postmoderns have called into question the modern dream of disinterested historical description and because of the perception that it is more accurate to speak of *theologies* in the plural than it is a single unifying theology. In the words of the Yale OT scholar John J. Collins: "Biblical theology is a subject in decline.... The decline is evident in the fact that an increasing number of scholars no longer regard theology as the ultimate focus of biblical studies, or even as a necessary dimension of those studies at all."²⁰ The situation is different among Evangelical scholars who affirm divine inspiration of the Bible, yet even here there is often a tendency to concentrate on linguistic and literary matters, or ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman backgrounds, rather than the theology of the biblical authors. Gilkey's challenge—to articulate a theological ontology—remains unanswered.

Interestingly enough, one factor has remained constant through all the twists and turns of recent approach to biblical interpretation: Evangelical scholars continue to depict the relationship between biblical and systematic theology in terms of line and circle. For example, Don Carson says that biblical theology resorts "primarily to the categories of [the biblical] texts themselves."²¹ So far, so Vosian. Yet whereas Vos emphasized history as the medium of divine activity (i.e., revelation and redemption), many contemporary Evangelical biblical theologians focus on history as the medium for human experience and thought.

One of my favorite biblical theologians, James Hamilton, states that the goal of biblical theology is not merely to describe but to adopt the perspective of the biblical authors, to see things the way the biblical authors interpreted and understood them. This means becoming familiar with the Bible's "symbolic universe," that is, the symbols and stories that communicate the worldview of the biblical authors: "We want to see the world the way they did, and we want to think about it that way, too."²² Indeed, the biblical symbols inform who *we* are in the story too, and how we should live as we wait for the story's end, the second coming of our Lord.²³ This type of biblical theology preaches! It also raises the question: whatever happened to systematics?

It is, I believe, sad but fair to say that systematic theology, as a strategy for reading Scripture, is today viewed by many Evangelical biblical scholars with

a fair amount of suspicion. Let me be clear: I'm not accusing anyone of hate crimes, just a little prejudice. The bias is best seen when Evangelical scholars describe biblical theology as working inductively with the Bible, whereas systematic theologians, by organizing doctrines topically, "impose a structure not transparently given in Scripture itself."²⁴ Whereas biblical theology works with the concepts and categories of the biblical authors and follows the flow of redemptive-history, systematic theology uses categories drawn from church tradition or contemporary culture, flying over redemptive-history at 30,000 feet. Some view systematic theology as "anti-line": "its organizing principles do not encourage the exploration of the Bible's plot-line, except incidentally. The categories of systematic theology are logical and hierarchical, not temporal."²⁵ The basic problem seems to be that systematic theologians read the Bible with categories drawn from elsewhere than the Bible, and it "is very hard work to be informed by them without being controlled by them."²⁶ As the apostle Paul might have written: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive systematics, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (with apologies to Col 2:8—and my fellow theologians).

If Gilkey was suspicious of biblical theology for its *lack* of ontology, Evangelical exegetes tend to be suspicious of systematic theology because of what they consider to be an *excess* of ontology. Perhaps these Evangelicals subscribe, even if only subconsciously, to a variation of the Hellenization thesis, namely, von Harnack's claim "that the Nicene doctrine of the incarnation was the result of a Hellenizing process through which Greek metaphysical concepts and categories were imposed inappropriately on the claims of the New Testament."²⁷ Carson, for his part, is content to observe that systematic theology is "further removed" from the Bible than exegesis, and that biblical theology serves as a bridge between exegesis and theology.²⁸ However, if biblical and systematic theology are to live harmoniously in the same house, caring for the church of God (Acts 20:28), then they need to decide how to work together. Who washes up after dinner, and who takes out the trash?

Generalizations are always precarious—there are potential counter-examples under every bush—but it seems to me, and a few others, that this prejudice against systematic theology has led to an alarming theological illiteracy in our churches. This is bad news not simply for systematic

theology, but for the project of reading the Bible well. Carl Trueman sounded the alarm in 2002 when he suggested that the rebirth of biblical theology among evangelicals, which was a good thing, may be in danger of becoming too much of a good thing. We understand that the Bible contains a narrative that culminates in Christ, but the triumph of biblical theology, says Trueman, “has come at the very high price of a neglect of the theological tradition.”²⁹ Trueman fears that attention to the economy (how God acts in history as recounted in biblical narrative) has led to a neglect of ontology (who God is in eternity) and the kinds of issues hammered out in the church councils over centuries as concerns the doctrine of God. To put it in Vosian terms: the line has swallowed up the circle. The danger is that “a divine economy without a divine ontology is unstable and will collapse.”³⁰ In fact, the collapse has already begun, as evidenced by open theism.³¹

Vos, in his inaugural lecture, calls biblical theology dogmatic theology’s “younger sister,”³² but in Trueman’s mind the more apt description might be “naughty little sister” whose behavior has turned systematic theology into a “poor relation” and historical theology into a useless appendix.³³ Trueman, a historical theologian, is not simply bemoaning the low status of his own academic discipline. No, his chief concern is that an exaggerated emphasis on the divine economy “effectively cuts the church off from probing ontological questions ... demanded by reflection upon the biblical text.”³⁴ The real concern pertains to what it means to read the Bible theologically: “We need ontology as well as economy if we are to do justice to the Bible’s teaching on who God is and what he has done.”³⁵

III. THE TRAVAIL OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE: MAKING SENSE OF JESUS’ DEATH ON THE CROSS

The gospel is the announcement of what the triune God has done in and through Jesus Christ to renew creation and restore right relations with God. The travail of biblical narrative, and the vocation of theology, reaches their apex just here, in *staurology* (from the Greek *stauros*, meaning *cross*): the attempt to explain how and why the cross is a criterion for knowing God, a necessary condition for salvation, and the climax of the history of redemption. Making sense of the meaning, significance, and necessity of the cross provides the perfect case study for my claim that theology serves the

project of reading the Bible well. The project of faith seeking understanding of the Passion narratives pierces even to dividing the soul and spirit of theological discourse, namely, biblical and systematic theology. And, once again, a Wright—not G. E. but N. T.—stands at the center of the fray.

Tom Wright is in many respects the quintessential evangelical biblical scholar. He is a believing biblical theologian who above all wants to get the NT authors right, even if that means going against received human tradition—even Protestant tradition. For Wright, getting the biblical authors right means reading them on their own terms and in their own contexts, which is to say, in accordance with their first-century historical horizon. This is why he considers second-Temple Judaism so important: it represents the shared framework of thought with which the apostles sought to express the significance of Jesus' death. This is also why he has a low view of systematic theology. In his judgment, both patristic and Reformation atonement theories distort the biblical story by imposing external interests and foreign categories: they did not think about the death of Jesus in terms of metaphysical essence or penal exchanges but, rather, in terms of exoduses and exiles.³⁶

Wright insists that the biblical authors' worldview is expressed in story form. During the period of Second Temple Judaism, the prevailing meta-narrative was that the nation of Israel, while physically returned from Babylonia and Persia, was still in a theological state of exile from God. Jesus believed that his mission was tied up with Israel's return from exile, which is to say Yahweh's return to Zion: "Many if not most second-Temple Jews, then, hoped for the new exodus, seen as the final return from exile."³⁷ On this telling, "Israel's exile was a punishment for sin but also a sacrifice for sin, so that her forlorn punishment in a foreign land becomes a means through which sin was expiated."³⁸ Hence when Israel finally "returned from exile" and the Temple once again inhabited by the Lord, there would be the real forgiveness of sins. This is the story that informs the biblical authors' staurolgy: "Paul the apostle believed ... that the 'exile' had been brought to an end—by Jesus' death on the cross."³⁹ All this to say that, for Wright, "return from exile" is the narrative template or script that Jesus followed and performed in his own life and ministry: "Jesus was proclaiming and performing the signs of national deliverance, calling Israel to exile-ending-repentance, all of which would result in a new exodus, the

renewal of the covenant, a rebuilt temple, the reconstitution of the Jewish nation, and the vindication of Israel over the pagan nations.”⁴⁰ Everything depends on getting that storied framework right: “narrative analysis sheds a positive flood of light—direct light, not surreptitious moonbeams—one passage after passage of tricky exegesis, and problem after problem in the theological coherence of the [Pauline] letters.”⁴¹

For Wright, then, reading the Bible theologically means thinking with the biblical authors’ storied thoughts after them, in their terms and historical context, in particular, Israel’s ongoing exile.⁴² Biblical theology is the line that connects the dots: between Israel’s exodus and Jesus’ new exodus, between Israel’s (and Adam’s) exile and the return from exile. The cross makes sense in this storied framework: “the new Passover (liberation from enslaving powers) is accomplished through the rescue from exile.”⁴³ Right understanding depends on interpreting Jesus’ death within this story: “Take them out of this story, and you will put them into a different one, most likely some version of the abstract ‘works contract’ in which sinful human beings are heading either for hell or heaven.”⁴⁴ This is a dig at systematic theology and the concept of penal substitution, which Wright dismisses as a modern answer to a medieval question about how guilty individuals get right with an angry God through God’s punishing Jesus.

It is possible, to be sure, to interpret Jesus’ crucifixion with conceptual schemes drawn from elsewhere. The philosopher Hegel reduces biblical symbols to metaphysical concepts without remainder, transforming the historic Good Friday into a “speculative Good Friday,” according to which God (Being) absorbs death (non-being) resulting in resurrection (New Being or Becoming). This is not systematic but philosophical theology, however, and it is indeed non-biblical and sub-evangelical. Unfortunately, Wright does not seem to see any significant difference between philosophical and systematic theology, or to recognize any legitimate role for the latter. Systematic theology works with concepts taken from elsewhere than the first century, yet for Wright right reading is all about “interpreting Jesus’ death in the same way that the early Christians did.”⁴⁵ The circle that is systematic theology is, for Wright, a noose that strangles first-century voices.

Wright’s exasperation with the monstrous regiment of systematicians is palpable in a recent essay on theology and the historical Paul: “If there

is supposed to be a marriage of biblical studies and theology, then as Paul says about marriage in Ephesians 5—but in a different sense—it is a great mystery.”⁴⁶ Again, the core of Wright’s critique is that systematic theology neglects the first-century Jewish context and thus distorts Paul’s texts: “if you want to understand how ideas and phrases are used in the first century it helps to look at the first century, not the fourth century [i.e., Nicaea] ... (still less the sixteenth century AD [i.e., the Reformation]!).”⁴⁷ Systematic theology stumbles when it forgets the overarching story of Israel’s exodus, exile, and return from exile in favor of Greek categories. It is “the theologians’ flight from history ... that has done the real damage.”⁴⁸

Can Wright’s telling of the story bear the theological weight he puts onto the symbolic events of exodus and exile? This way of posing the question highlights the travail of biblical narrative specific not to G. E. but to N. T. Wright. Wright’s Second Temple Jewish God-story is doing all the hard, theological load-bearing, work. However, as Richard Hays has observed, Wright’s narrative “is not exactly any of the specific stories actually told by the Evangelists; rather, it is a critically abstracted construct, the master metanarrative of the Bible ... as told from within the perspective of late Second Temple Judaism.”⁴⁹ Ironically, Wright’s tendency constantly to revert to this master metanarrative risks suppressing the voices of the particular biblical authors, just like systematic theology (allegedly) does! Other critics question Wright’s narrative on the grounds that there is no real evidence that first-century Palestinian Jews actually thought of themselves as still-in-exile. According to James Dunn, “The most serious weakness of Wright’s grand hypothesis is his inability to demonstrate that the narrative of return from exile was a controlling factor in Jesus’ own teaching.”⁵⁰ Michael Bird, similarly, worries “that ‘exile’ is perhaps far too plastic of a concept to be regarded as *the* conceptual framework for an entire Jewish meta-narrative.”⁵¹

Both biblical and systematic theologians want to read the Bible theologically, but the relationship has been strained to the breaking point. No one wants a divorce, but Wright is not alone in citing irreconcilable hermeneutical differences. Clearly, it is high time for disciplinary marriage counseling, a way to reconcile these estranged approaches to reading the Bible theologically. I therefore propose in what follows a way forward, one

that involves thinking through biblical narrative in *historical*, *redemptive-historical*, and (for lack of a better term) *ontological-historical* perspective.

IV. ENTERING INTO THE PROMISED LAND (ONTOLOGY): THE GEOMETRICS (AND DRAMATICS) OF THE CROSS

I take my cue from Alister McGrath: “The genesis of doctrine lies in the exodus from uncritical repetition of the narrative heritage of the past.”⁵² Biblical narrative gives rise to doctrine whenever we are puzzled by something in the story, such as, why Jesus had to die a bloody death. Story thus gives rise to systematics. More pointedly: *narrative raises questions that only ontology can answer.*

Ontology

My principal claim under this heading is that ontological clarification is less a Greek colonization of biblical narrative than an essential ingredient in reading theologically. Reading Scripture rightly involves knowing not only something about what authors are saying (their sense; *verba*) but also what they are talking about (their referent; *res*).⁵³ Historical context (and biblical theology) is crucial for the first task, but what about the second?

Gerald Bray claims that “the great contribution which patristic biblical hermeneutics can make to modern debates lies at the ontological level”⁵⁴ where we wrestle with questions pertaining to referents, such as “Who is God?”⁵⁵ Jesus himself asks his disciples an important *Who* question: “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt 16:15; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20). Rightly to understand the passion narrative *theologically* ultimately requires not only first-century Palestinian but fourth-century Nicene categories, without which, we cannot say *what kind* of “who” Jesus was/is. This is the force behind Robert Jenson’s *what if* question: “what if the church’s dogma were a necessary hermeneutical principal of historical reading, because it describes the true ontology of historical being?”⁵⁶ Remember Gilkey’s concern about the lack of attention to the ontology of divine acts and Trueman’s concern that we not lose the ontological aspect in our zeal for the economy. *What if* the doctrine of the Trinity were necessary for the right understanding of the story of Jesus’ death?⁵⁷

Systematic theologians are not ontology’s only advocates. Brevard Childs contends that biblical interpretation is incomplete unless and until

it illumines the subject matter or *res* of the text, the one God made known in Jesus Christ.⁵⁸ It is a fatal mistake to deal with the identity of God “only in terms of its historical sequence. This ... would restrict the doctrine of God to the divine workings within a historical trajectory of past, present and future: God, Christ, Spirit.”⁵⁹ Childs understands by ontology a kind of reflection about a subject matter that transcends temporal sequence.⁶⁰ Without ontological reflection, “it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to talk about the God of Old and New as a unified being.”⁶¹

Geometrics

I do not wish to be misunderstood: biblical theology, with its particular attentiveness to the redemptive-historical context, is absolutely necessary.⁶² My concern is that we not flatten out biblical understanding to first-century horizons only in our evangelical zeal to be biblical.

Flat is the operative concept. We have, after all, likened biblical theology to a line. Let “geometrics” stand for two-dimensional thinking, the kind that employs lines and circles, among other figures, to represent the world. Edwin Abbott’s 1884 classic book, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, is a work of satirical science fiction that uses a two-dimensional world to offer critical commentary on Victorian hierarchical values. The inhabitants in Flatland are lines, circles, and triangles “whose whole experience is confined to a [two-dimensional] plane”—or, to put it in hermeneutical terms, a horizon of meaning.⁶³ A line is one-dimensional because there is only one direction it can go (say, east to west). In Flatland, there is a second dimension as well (north-south). Still, all the experience of the inhabitants takes place on something like a table top, like a graph with x and y axes only.

From the perspective of the inhabitants of Flatland, circles and triangles look like lines. To prove it, Abbott asks us to imagine putting a penny on a table, and then placing your eye at the level of the table. Observed from the side, the penny will cease to look like a circle and will resemble a straight line. The narrator in Flatland is a square (named, appropriately enough, A. Square). Here’s how he describes a visit by a triangular acquaintance: “If our friend comes closer to us we see his line becomes larger; if he leaves us it becomes smaller.”⁶⁴ Abbott’s story recounts the narrator’s visitation by a mysterious three-dimensional sphere. However, A. Square is unable to fathom what is happening. Think about it: when a three-dimensional sphere

intersects a two-dimensional plane, the result is always a circle (if seen from the top) or, if seen by someone on Flatland's plane, where there is no up or down, a line! The narrator thus has great difficulty comprehending the nature or ontology of the sphere, even though the sphere reveals itself and speaks: "I am indeed, in a certain sense a Circle ... and a more perfect Circle than any in Flatland, but to speak more accurately, I am many Circles in one."⁶⁵ (Note: this is the central "I am" revelatory saying of the story). Needless to say, A. Square is still unable to comprehend what a sphere is—"spherehood"—which Abbott, an Anglican priest, playfully calls "the Gospel of the Three Dimensions."⁶⁶ Chapter 17 of *Flatland* is entitled "How the Sphere, having in vain tried words, resorted to deeds." The rest of the book recounts how the Sphere commissions A. Square to be an apostle of the third dimension: *depth*.

N. T. Wright refers to his project of interpreting Paul's writings in light of his first-century Second-Temple historical context as "thick description."⁶⁷ However, in light of my parable of Flatland his claim falls, well, rather *flat*. Biblical scholars are by training inclined to listen for the voice of human authors in their original historical context. Systematic theologians must do more: they must understand both what the authors are saying *and* what they are talking about. Biblical scholars explore and exposit the length and width of the text, as it were, systematic theologians the breadth and depth. The church needs both disciplines, working in tandem, to hear everything God is saying. Reading the Bible theologically, I submit, is a three-dimensional affair, involving biblical, historical, and systematic theology alike.

Dramatics

If we are to continue thinking about the relationship of biblical and systematic theology in terms of lines and circles, let us at least proceed with Reinhold Niebuhr from two-dimensional geometrics to three-dimensional dramatics: "The Bible conceives life as a drama in which human and divine actions create the dramatic whole. There are ontological presuppositions for this drama, but they are not spelled out."⁶⁸ We need not leave Vos entirely behind, for both in his inaugural lecture and *Biblical Theology*, he says, "The Bible is not a dogmatic handbook but a historical book *full of dramatic interest*."⁶⁹ I want to build on Vos's insight, noting in particular how drama – story made flesh – is "thicker" than narrative and calls for ontological reflection. Hence my thesis: the "line" of biblical theology is actually the *plot line* of a unified redemptive-

historical drama. And the “circle” of systematic theology is actually a form of *plot analysis*, a sphere that plumbs the ontological depths of *who* and *what* the actors in the drama are: “At the heart of Christian theology ... there lies the continual interpenetration of dramatic and ontological.”⁷⁰

The history of redemption is not flat, a two-dimensional this-worldly series of causes and effects but, rather, the work of the triune God who transcends it. The biblical texts assume God’s revelatory and redemptive activity and, according to Francis Watson, any attempt to seal off NT studies from the OT, or the concerns of systematic theology, “*systematically distorts* their subject matter.”⁷¹

The missions of the Son and Holy Spirit that make up the economy of revelation and redemption are properly grounded in the eternal processions that make up the Trinitarian life of God in himself: “theology proper precedes and governs economy.”⁷² It follows that we will understand God’s mighty acts rightly only when we identify the divine acting subject(s) correctly, and this “can best be accomplished by first contemplating the infinite depth of God in himself, out of which his temporal acts arise.”⁷³ It is the vocation of systematic theology always and everywhere to remind us that God “belongs to a different ontological order.”⁷⁴ Elsewhere I refer to this as (John) Webster’s law of “immanent domain,” according to which we do justice to the drama of redemption only when we are clear about the ontology of the saving agents: Father, Son, and Spirit.⁷⁵ To see how this is so, let us consider one often overlooked detail in the account of the moment of Jesus’ death.

V. JESUS’ LOUD CRY ON THE CROSS: A BRIEF CASE STUDY IN THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

All three Synoptic Gospels report that from the sixth hour “there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour” (Matt 27:45). According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus twice cries out with a loud voice. Most of the theological attention has been directed to the first instance, in which Jesus cites Psalm 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46).⁷⁶ Here I want to examine the second cry, the event at the moment of Jesus’ death, and its immediate effects.

Interestingly, N. T. Wright passes over this passage in his own examination of the saving significance of Jesus’ death. Jesus’ loud cry was apparently for

naught: “Nobody, on the evening of Jesus’s crucifixion, had any idea that a revolutionary event had just taken place.”⁷⁷ Wright acknowledges that the centurion overseeing the execution “muttered something about Jesus really being ‘son of God,’”⁷⁸ but he writes it off because, in the centurion’s first-century world, “of course” the phrase referred to Caesar. The centurion’s reference may be ironic, but cannot be taken as a bona fide confession of Christian faith.

On my reading, by way of contrast, Jesus’ loud cry, and what happens in its aftermath, provides a precious clue to plumbing the depths of Jesus’ person and work. Consider, first, the sheer fact of Jesus’ crying out with a loud voice (*phōnē megalē legōn*). The same Greek phrase occurs in the Septuagint, also in the context of darkness, when the Lord spoke the Law to Israel on Mt. Sinai (Deut 5:22). But second, that Jesus cries out with a loud voice is entirely unexpected in the first-century horizon of Roman crucifixions: “Ordinarily, victims of crucifixion weaken bit by bit and lapse into unconsciousness before dying without even a whimper.”⁷⁹ In stark contrast, the Synoptic Evangelists report that Jesus remains strong “right up to and at the moment of his death or, better, *in* his death . . . superhumanly so.”⁸⁰ This detail comports with earlier hints that Jesus is determined to die⁸¹, having “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51, 53), and with his own claim, “No one takes it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (John 10:18).

Luke corroborates the voluntary nature of Jesus’ death by supplying the content of Jesus’ loud cry, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46), a citation from Psalm 31:5 that signals trust in God despite the fateful schemes of adversaries (Ps 31:11-14). This comports with Matthew’s narrative description “And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit” (Matt 27:50) and with Mark’s even briefer “and breathed his last” (Mark 15:37). The loud voice, combined with Jesus’ “dismissing” his spirit, serves “to highlight his death as an act of will.”⁸²

Jesus’ two loud cries serve as bookends to his death: “In the first, Jesus expresses the depth of his suffering, the seeming abandonment of ‘my God.’ In the second, Jesus expresses the reality that he can confidently entrust, his very life-engendering spirit, to his loving ‘Father.’”⁸³ The saving significance of Jesus’ death occurs just here, in and between these two cries, where Jesus gives himself up for the sin of the world (John 1:29; 1 John 2:2), enacting the final stages of his active and passive obedience, fulfilling the roles of supreme high priest and supreme sacrificial victim alike (Heb 9:26).

Jesus' loud cries strongly suggest that we are dealing with a key moment in the Father-Son relationship. Earlier I claimed that we must have recourse to Trinitarian theology in order to do justice to the economy of redemption. What shall we say, then, about the Holy Spirit, who is not explicitly mentioned in this passage? Let me make three observations. First, the crucified one is the same Jesus who was conceived by or out of or from (*ek*) the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:20), which speaks to the uniqueness of his person. Second, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus at his baptism in the form of a dove, which speaks to the uniqueness of his work or mission (Luke 3:22). Third, we see evidence of the Spirit's empowering presence in the signs Jesus performs (Matt 12:28). There is therefore ample textual evidence that the Spirit continues to empower Jesus *right up to the very moment of his expiring*. When Jesus then calls out to the Father in a loud voice, "Into your hands I commit my spirit," we may rightly surmise that "Jesus, the Son, humanly gives himself in the Holy Spirit to his Father . . . and within that one intertwining act of giving and receiving, humankind's salvation is achieved."⁸⁴ We understand the cross rightly only when we rightly identify Jesus as "the Father's Spirit-filled incarnate Son."⁸⁵ The Son gives up his human spirit to his Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. Hence, in Thomas Weinandy's words, "the salvific 'loud cry' . . . gives voice to the Trinity."⁸⁶

That Jesus' loud cry was no ordinary shout is confirmed by what happens next. Mark reports that the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom, and that when the centurion "saw how he died" (Mark 15:39 NIV)—that is, the way he breathed his last (Mark 15:39 ESV)—he confessed, "Truly this man was the Son of God."⁸⁷ What exactly did the centurion see/hear? The historical phenomena surrounding Jesus' death would have been baffling to a first-century Roman soldier not familiar with Israel's history or Scriptures, particularly the Songs of the Suffering Servant. Some commentators suggest that the centurion's comment was sarcastic; others that the centurion meant only to commend Jesus as "a son of God" (a title used for Roman emperors). Reading all three Synoptics together rules out sarcasm, for Luke says the centurion praised God (Luke 23:47), which in Luke is the typical response when a person experiences a mighty act of God (Luke 2:20; 5:25, 26; 7:16; 13:13; 17:15; 18:43). Clearly, the Evangelists want us to understand the centurion as referring to "God's Son."⁸⁸ Again: what did the centurion see?

Jesus' loud cry marks the climax of his death scene ("It is finished"—John 19:30), yet the curtain (of the Temple) does not come down, as it does at the end of a play, but is rather torn in two, from top to bottom (Mark 15:38). Talk about drama! Mark uses the term, *schizō*, which he uses on only one other occasion in his Gospel, immediately after Jesus' baptism, when "he saw the heavens being torn open" (Mark 1:10) and the Spirit descending as a dove as a voice from heaven declares Jesus to be the Son of God (Mark 1:11)—the very thing the centurion says when he sees not heaven, but the temple curtain, torn in two.⁸⁹ Mark is here implying that God is the active agent in both tearings.⁹⁰ And to these two tearings we can add a third, for from John's Gospel we know both that Jesus referred to his own body in terms of the temple (John 2:21) and that the "veil of his flesh" (cf. Heb 10:19-20) was torn when one of the soldiers (could it have been the centurion?) pierced his side with a spear (John 19:34).⁹¹ There may also be a veiled reference to Isaiah 64:1 ("Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence"), suggesting that the cross of Christ is an eschatological event presaging the return of God's empowering presence in the form of God's Spirit.

Matthew goes out of his way to direct our attention to the link between Jesus' loud cry and expiration on the one hand and the tearing of the temple curtain by saying, "And behold" (Matt 27:51)—"pay attention!" The implication is that if readers see what the centurion saw, they too would confess that Jesus is the Son of God. In logic, the *post hoc* fallacy has to do with mistaking chronological sequence with causation: "Since event Y followed event X, X must have caused Y." On the contrary: mere temporal order is non-causal. However, the narrative logic in Matthew and Mark strongly suggests that Jesus' expiration enables new access into God's presence: "Thus, unlike the old temple with its restricting curtain, Jesus, the new temple, provides open and unencumbered entrée to God."⁹²

Robert Gundry makes the intriguing suggestion that just as the force of the Spirit's coming "down" causes the heavens to be torn open at Jesus' baptism, "so the force of Jesus' exhalation of the Spirit [breathing out] causes the veil of the temple to be 'torn in two.'"⁹³ H. M. Jackson agrees: "What moved the centurion to confession was the simultaneous observation not only of the gigantic outer curtain of the Temple being torn in two from top to bottom but also of the fact that it was the powerful expulsion of Jesus'

breath that caused the curtain to tear.”⁹⁴ Mark’s Gospel records the sequence of events as follows:

- v. 37 “Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last”
- v. 38 “And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom”
- v. 39 “And when the centurion . . . saw that in this way he breathed his last”

Gundry comments: “The veil-rending has not interrupted the two references . . . to Jesus’ expiration, then, so much as it has detailed the visible effect of his expiration.”⁹⁵ Seeing Jesus expire *in this way*, such that the force of his last breath (the exhaled Spirit) ripped apart the temple curtain, is thus what prompts the centurion’s confession, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39)⁹⁶—an echo of the voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism, when the heavens were torn open, that also declared him “my [God the Father’s] beloved Son” (Mark 1:11).

As this brief case study demonstrates, biblical narrative—particularly the climactic episode of Jesus’ death on the cross—raises questions that only ontology can answer. According to Frances Young, “the NT consistently presents the activity of Christ and the Spirit as the work of the one true God . . . Under pressure that relationship had to be articulated in ways that the NT writers themselves had not envisaged, but it was always there, at least in narrative form.”⁹⁷ She’s thinking, of course, of the Trinity, the doctrine that identifies Jesus as the eternal Son who is *homoousios* with the Father, the bedrock identification for understanding Jesus, and thus for a right understanding of the drama of redemption, including its climax. As Fred Sanders (almost) says, “the Trinity without the atonement is abstract; but atonement without the Trinity is ultimately unintelligible.”⁹⁸

Webster rightly alerts us to the importance of historical *and* theological interpretation: “If we only look at the saving economy . . . from the angle of its temporal occurrence, we may mischaracterize the kind of temporal occurrence it is.”⁹⁹ The death of Jesus is good news, for us and our salvation, only if it is the death of one who was *homoousios* (“of the same nature”) with God: “trinitarian teaching instructs us in how to read those narratives rightly, and it does so by specifying the identity of their active subject.”¹⁰⁰ The history that culminates in Jesus’ cross and resurrection, when described to its ontological depths, is the mission of the eternal Son. Remembering this

preserves the contribution of biblical theology even as it deepens our reading of the Bible with categories drawn from systematic theology.¹⁰¹ Here is one way to summarize what happened at the climax of the drama of redemption, using categories drawn both from Scripture and systematics in order to provide a theologically thick description: Jesus accomplishes redemption by exchanging his status as covenant Lord (the eternal Son of God) for that of covenant servant (Israel's Messiah) in order to fulfill Israel's (and Adam's) covenant vocation and receive Israel's (and Adam's) covenant curse (exile from God's presence) in their place in order to procure the covenant blessing (filial adoption into the family of God) for God's covenant people (Jews first, and then Gentiles).

CONCLUSION: THE PHILADELPHIA STORY (REVISED)

The story of the relationship between biblical theology and systematic theology that, for me, started in Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) and has continued through Flatland (Cambridge) and beyond, is nearing its end. Though not without its conflicts, I view it as a romantic comedy in which they all—line, circle, and sphere—live happily ever after.

I have argued that biblical and systematic theology refer not simply to disparate ways of organizing the doctrinal content of Scripture but to contrasting yet complementary ways of reading the Bible theologically. In particular, I claimed that systematic theology is itself a practice of reading that in its search for understanding attends particularly to the ontological dimension that specifies the nature of the principal actors (Father, Son, and Spirit) and the meaning of their mighty acts.

The three dimensions required for reading the Bible theologically correspond to three contexts. First, "Vosian" biblical theology attends to the historical trajectory of both revelation and redemption (the line). Second, "whole Bible theology" corresponds to the organic relation of all the events that make up the drama of redemption (the circle). Herman Bavinck calls these two dimensions the "genetic-synthetic" readings, and they correspond to the original historical and literary-canonical contexts respectively.¹⁰² Yet this is not the end of the story for, as Vos rightly reminds us, "we ourselves live just as much in the NT as did Peter and Paul and John."¹⁰³ The third,

redemptive-dramatic context thus refers to the life we now live before God, in response to God's word, on the stage of God's world, with God's people, to God's glory. "Theodrama" is the ontological *sphere* in which we live and move and have our historical being, the stage on which God speaks and acts, and the place where God's people respond to God's voice.

Contemporary readers of the Bible are among those who must in one way or another respond to the living and active divine address that comes through Scripture, piercing into our hearts and minds. Whether they incline to the line or circle party, scholarly and lay readers alike are actors in the drama of redemption too. As such, all do well to attend to church tradition and catholic consensus, for we are not the first generation to attempt to read the Bible rightly, or to participate fittingly in its ongoing story. As Bavinck says: "Only within the communion of the saints can the length and the breadth, the depth and the height, of the love of Christ be comprehended (Eph 3:18)."¹⁰⁴ That's four dimensions, but never mind. The point is that historical and systematic theology help the church understand more deeply not simply what the prophets and apostles have said, but what we must say and do on the basis of the prophets and apostles. As I have put it elsewhere: "*Biblical theology describes what the biblical authors are saying/doing in their particular contextual scenes, to their particular audiences, in their own particular terms and concepts; systematic theology searches out the underlying patterns of biblical-canonical judgments, and suggests ways of embodying these same theodramatic judgments for our own particular cultural contexts, in our own particular terms and concepts.*"¹⁰⁵

Gabler's "biblical theology"—the false picture that led to the fragmentation of theology into separate disciplines—is not Vos's. When rightly understood, biblical theology is a vital aspect of reading Scripture well.¹⁰⁶ So, too, is systematic theology. My conclusion may sound paradoxical, but its meaning should now be clear: *theology is most biblical when it is more than "biblical theology," and interpretation is most biblical when it is not less than theological.*

¹ An earlier version of this essay was delivered as the annual Vos Lecture at Geneva College, Beaver Falls, PA on March 20, 2019. I am also grateful to Dr. Richard Averbeck and the PhD students of the Fall 2019 Interdisciplinary Seminar at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for their comments on a previous draft.

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- 4 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 5 Richard Gaffin, "Introduction," *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, xviii-xix.
- 6 Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology," 23.
- 7 Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 24-5.
- 8 See the translation and commentary by John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980): 133-58.
- 9 For more on the contrasting projects of Vos and Gabler, see John Fesko, "On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology," in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church. Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.* (eds. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 445-53.
- 10 G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM, 1952), 13. See further R. L. Hicks, "Wright, George Ernest," in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (ed. Donald K. McKim; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 1060-65.
- 11 See further Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).
- 12 *Journal of Religion* 41 no. 3 (1961), 194-205.
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- 14 *Ibid.*, 196.
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- 16 Gilkey, "Cosmology," 197.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 201.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 203.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 200.
- 20 John J. Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters* (ed. W. H. Propp, B. Halpern, and D. N. Freedman; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 1.
- 21 D. A. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 100.
- 22 James M. Hamilton, Jr., *What is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible's Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 64.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 90, 97.
- 24 Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 101.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 102. See also Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the NT: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Scripture and Truth* (eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 65-95.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 27 Alan Torrance, "Jesus in Christian Doctrine," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (ed. Markus Bockmuehl; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 200.
- 28 See further <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-bible-and-theology-don-carson-nivzsb/> (accessed March 10, 2019).
- 29 Carl Trueman, "Editorial: A Revolutionary Balancing Act," *Themelios* 27/3 (2002), 2.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 31 Open theists take God's interactions (and frustrations) with the world so literally that they conclude God, because related to the world, is "in" time and therefore cannot know the future. This is first and foremost an ontological failing, and leads to a theological interpretation of the Bible that highlights God's vulnerability rather than sovereignty. See the critique of Thomas Oord, an open theist, in my essay "Love without Measure? John Webster's Unfinished Dogmatic Account of the Love of God, in Dialogue with Thomas Jay Oord's Interdisciplinary Theological Account," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19 no. 4 (2017): 505-26.
- 32 Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology," 23.
- 33 See Trueman, "Systematic Theology as Poor Relation," <http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/postcards-from-pa-lookaville/some-thoughts-on-systematic-theology-as-poor-relation-part-one#.XFDM-CZZP8t> (accessed

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- ³⁴ Trueman, "Editorial," 3.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4. See also Graeme Goldsworthy's thoughtful rejoinder, "Ontology and Biblical Theology. A Response to Carl Trueman's Editorial: *A Revolutionary Balancing Act*," *Themelios* 28/1 (2003), 37-45 as well as his "The Ontological and Systematic Roots of Biblical Theology," *Reformed Theological Journal* 62/3 (2003), 152-64 and *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 265-72.
- ³⁶ For a brief account of the patristic model, see Benjamin Myers, "The Patristic Atonement Model," in *Locating Atonement: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics* (eds. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 71-88. For a similar critique to N. T. Wright's (that systematic theology imposes foreign categories onto the biblical texts), see David Brondos, *Jesus' Death in New Testament Thought* 2 vols. (San Angel, Mexico: Comunidad Teologica de Mexico, 2018).
- ³⁷ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 209.
- ³⁸ Michael F. Bird, "Jesus and the Continuing Exile of Israel in the Writings of N. T. Wright," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 13 (2015), 213.
- ³⁹ N. T. Wright, "Yet the Sun Will Rise Again: Reflections on the Exile and Restoration in Second Temple Judaism, Jesus, Paul, and the Church Today," in *Exile: A Conversation with N. T. Wright* (ed. James M. Scott; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 80.
- ⁴⁰ Bird, "Jesus and the Continuing Exile of Israel," 214.
- ⁴¹ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 475.
- ⁴² The "continuing exile" is an oft-repeated theme in Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. See also James M. Scott, "N. T. Wright's Hypothesis of an 'Ongoing Exile,'" in Scott, ed., *Exile*, 3-16.
- ⁴³ N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016), 230.
- ⁴⁴ Wright, *Revolution*, 94.
- ⁴⁵ Wright, *Revolution*, 167.
- ⁴⁶ N. T. Wright, "Historical Paul and 'Systematic Theology': To Start a Discussion," in *Biblical Theology: Past, Present, and Future* (eds. Carey Walsh and Mark W. Elliott; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 148.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.
- ⁴⁸ Wright, "Responding to *Exile*," in Scott, ed., *Exile*, 324.
- ⁴⁹ Richard B. Hays, "Knowing Jesus: Story, History and the Question of Truth," in *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright* (eds., Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 49.
- ⁵⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making*, vol. 1 *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 472.
- ⁵¹ Bird, "Jesus and the Continuing Exile of Israel," 231.
- ⁵² Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 7.
- ⁵³ See also Augustine's classic discussion of the relationship between "signs" and "things" in his *De Doctrina Christiana (On Christian Doctrine)*.
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- ⁵⁶ Robert W. Jenson, "Identity, Jesus, and Exegesis," in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (eds. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 50.
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- ⁵⁸ See the discussion in Daniel R. Driver, *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theology: For the Church's One Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 30.
- ⁵⁹ Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 370.
- ⁶⁰ See Childs, "Does the Old Testament Witness to Christ?" in *Evangelium, Schriftauslegung, Kirche: Festschrift für Peter Stuhlmacher zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed., Jostein Adna et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 60.
- ⁶¹ Driver, *Childs*, 259. For another biblical theologian's account of the indispensability of ontology for biblical

- theology, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 50-51, 54-55.
- ⁶² Vos also recognized the importance of literary context, that is, the importance of reading the text on its own literary terms.
- ⁶³ Edwin A. Abbott, *The Annotated Flatland* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 11.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.
- ⁶⁷ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 25, 26, 29.
- ⁶⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Biblical Thought and Ontological Speculation in Tillich's Theology," in *The Theology of Paul Tillich* vol. 1 (eds., Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall; NY: Macmillan, 1952), 216.
- ⁶⁹ Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 26 (my emphasis). See also Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology," 23.
- ⁷⁰ D. M. MacKinnon, *Themes in Theology: The Three-Fold Cord* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1987), 234.
- ⁷¹ Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 7 (emphasis original).
- ⁷² John Webster, *God without Measure* vol. 1 (London & New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 3.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ⁷⁵ See my "Love without Measure: John Webster's Unfinished Dogmatic Account of the Love of God, in Dialogue with Thomas J. Oord's Interdisciplinary Theological Account," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19 no. 4 (2017), 505-26.
- ⁷⁶ Thomas Weinandy observes that the genuineness of Jesus' human suffering does not rob the "my" of its truth: "That 'my' expresses the personal, intimate, unbreakable, and ever anchored Spirit-of-Sonship communion of love between Jesus, the Father's Son, and God, the Son's Father" (*Jesus Becoming Jesus: A Theological Interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels* [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018]), 377.
- ⁷⁷ Wright, *Revolution*, 174.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁹ Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksons, 2010), 216.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.
- ⁸¹ Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 356.
- ⁸² Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 130.
- ⁸³ Weinandy, *Jesus Becoming Jesus*, 381.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 383.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 384.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 383.
- ⁸⁷ That the tearing of the temple veil is somehow linked to Jesus' loud cry is suggested by Mark's use of the conjunction *kai* in 15:38.
- ⁸⁸ Brian J. Gamel argues that the centurion came to understand Jesus' true identity through special revelation, a divine apocalyptic act, represented by the tearing of the temple veil (*Mark 15:39 as a Markan Theology of Revelation: The Centurion's Confession as Apocalyptic Unveiling* [Library of NT Studies 574; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017]).
- ⁸⁹ Timothy J. Gedder lists thirty-five possible interpretations of the tearing of the temple veil (*Watchwords: Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology* [JSNTSup 26; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989], 141-43).
- ⁹⁰ According to Holly J. Carey, "the tearing of the temple veil in Mark serves as an indication of Jesus' vindication because it is (a) a response to Jesus' death, (b) by God, (c) in the form of a miraculous event, (d) which is reminiscent of a prior event in which Jesus was validated by God (baptism), and (e) is followed by a positive response from another observer of Jesus' death (the centurion)" (*Jesus' Cry from the Cross: Towards a First-Century Understanding of the Intertextual Relationship between Psalm 22 and the Narrative of Mark's Gospel* [London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2009], 66).
- ⁹¹ See further J. Ramsey Michaels, "The Centurion's Confession and the Spear Thrust," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 29.1 (1967), 102-109.
- ⁹² Weinandy, *Jesus Becoming Jesus*, 385.
- ⁹³ Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 217.
- ⁹⁴ Howard M. Jackson, "The death of Jesus in Mark and the miracle from the cross," *New Testament Studies* 33 no. 1 (1987), 28.
- ⁹⁵ Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 950.

- ⁹⁶ Gundry argues that Mark 15:39 could be translated “the centurion, who stood facing it [i.e., the temple],” not *him*, which would also explain what it was the centurion saw (rather than heard). See Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 217.
- ⁹⁷ Frances Young, “The Trinity and the New Testament,” in *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (eds. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett; Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 299.
- ⁹⁸ See Fred Sanders, “These Three Atonement: Trinity and Atonement,” *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement* (ed. Adam J. Johnson; London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 19-34.
- ⁹⁹ John Webster, “‘It was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him’: Soteriology and the Doctrine of God,” in *God of Salvation: Soteriology in Theological Perspective* (eds. Ivor J. Davidson and Murray A. Rae; Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 21.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.
- ¹⁰¹ Systematic theology is not opposed to but distinct from biblical theology, both in being accountable to the whole Bible (and not just one author, corpus, testament, or genre) and by providing a thicker (ontological) description of the divine *dramatis personae* and the action.
- ¹⁰² Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* vol. 1 *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Academic, 2003), 65.
- ¹⁰³ *Biblical Theology*, 325-26.
- ¹⁰⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* vol. 1, 83.
- ¹⁰⁵ Vanhoozer, “Is the Theology of the New Testament One or Many? Between (the Rock of) Systematic Theology and (the Hard Place of) Historical Occasionalism,” in *Reconsidering the Relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology in the New Testament* (eds. Benjamin E. Reynolds, Brian Lugioyo, and Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 37.
- ¹⁰⁶ Cf. Gerhard Ebeling: “when rightly understood [biblical theology] points back again to the unity of theology – not of course a unity achieved by abolishing the different disciplines, but a unity consisting in the right theological use of the different disciplines, each of which has its own peculiar task and yet each is ‘theology’ in the sense of participating in the scientific expression of the Word of God” (“The Meaning of ‘Biblical Theology,’” in *Word and Faith* [London: SCM, 1963], 96).