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Whither Biblical Theology?

An Assessment of the Theological Hermeneutics of
John J. Collins, Walter Brueggemann, and Michael Fishbane

By

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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

Whither Biblical Theology?

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By Kevin J. Barbour

This study addresses the contemporary status and practice of biblical theology within academic biblical studies. Chapter one assesses the persisting vague relationship between theology and biblical studies, and highlights the fact that biblical theology (in particular) has been seen as a subject in severe decline over the past few decades within some scholarly quarters. In part, this is due to an apparent impasse over what sort of activity "biblical theology" entails within the increasingly pluralistic and diverse field of academic biblical studies.

As a way forward through this apparent impasse, this study turns toward an examination of the hermeneutical strategies of three prominent and influential scholars in the field: John J. Collins (chapter two), Walter Brueggemann (chapter three), and Michael Fishbane (chapter four). The bulk of this study is devoted to some of the major works of these scholars over the course of their respective careers, with particular attention to how their thoughts on biblical theology—or the relationship between theological discourse and the Bible—developed over the years. The goal of these chapters is to discern, describe, and offer some critique of their respective interpretive strategies and their conceptualizations of the task of biblical theology.

The final chapter of this study argues that biblical theology remains a necessary and vital aspect of academic biblical studies. This chapter offers a tentative synthesis of the approaches of Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane as conceived through a dialogical lens for a constructive biblical theology. A dialogic epistemology, borrowed from the thought of Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin, is employed to reconceptualize the activity of biblical theology. Finally, a concrete example of such a re-imagined constructive biblical theology turns toward the book of Ecclesiastes for the purpose of illustration.

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Special thanks is also owed to Dr. Carol A. Newsom—easily one of the most astute and fascinating persons I have ever known—for her encouragement and comments on earlier version of this study. Dr. Newsom and her work have always inspired me, and led me to an enduring interest in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Additionally, recognition is owed to Dr. Joel LeMon. I am ever thankful for his sense of humor, and his unwavering demand that I always reckon with the formidable contributions of historical criticism.

Finally, this project would never have been possible without the initial encouragement of Dr. Dennis T. Olson to pursue a Ph.D in biblical studies. Many years ago, Dr. Olson taught me how to think both theologically and pastorally. Dr. Olson remains a teacher among teachers, a pastor among pastors, and my mentor.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my wife, Allison Warren-Barbour, for putting up with me daily, especially as I felt I measured out my life with coffee spoons. I love you.

This study is also dedicated to Anya and Isla whom I love fiercely: I hope that some day, some form of biblical theology will enable the texts to speak to you too.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION
AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONTEMPORARY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND ACADEMIC BIBLICAL STUDIES

The relationship between biblical studies and theology within contemporary academia should be no mere trifling theoretical question for scholars: it remains a concrete and even urgent one. Any answer that speaks to this question has some very practical consequences. This is because the relationship between academic biblical studies and theological studies cuts to the heart of the purpose of biblical education among many established educational institutions: liberal arts colleges, large public universities, private research universities, divinity schools, and seminaries. The question about the relationship between biblical studies and theological studies also concerns the relationship between various academic departments within these institutions: religious studies programs, departments of ancient Near Eastern studies, Jewish studies departments, Old Testament departments, New Testament departments, departments of "Systematic" Theology, departments of "Practical" Theology, and so forth.

Many educational institutions, even by their very departmental structure, do not immediately reflect any clear sense of the relationship between the Bible and theology—if there is any relationship whatsoever. The Bible is "taught" throughout academia, but to what purpose? Is the purpose of such education that of secular

humanism and knowledge for its own sake? Is the purpose of biblical studies to educate citizens about the interrelatedness between Western culture (including its society and laws) and the Bible? Is the purpose to train specialist historians and linguists in the interest of "original" biblical meanings intended by their various authors? Is the purpose to educate professional theologians and clergy? Does the purpose of biblical scholarship properly include a combination of some or all of these things?

One might suppose that any pedagogical approach to the Bible simply depends upon the nature of an institution: seminaries, one assumes, exist for the express purpose of training professional theological clergy. If this is the case, then it is interesting that Dale Martin has observed—across the board, from "liberal" to "conservative" schools and across various types of institutions—that the primary mode of biblical pedagogy (whether actually, or according to student perception) remains *historical criticism*.[1] If this is so, how is a student specifically meant to make a cognitive leap from history-critical scholarship to theology? No doubt, historical criticism has produced remarkable insights into the biblical texts for over two centuries, but the contributions of historical-critical activity in the interest of theological reflection often remain unclear. The relationship between history and theology (insofar as it specifically relates to the Bible) remains a contested one. Martin himself is doubtful that students are able to move from historical-critical

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[1] Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 17.

study to theological reflection on their own, and that they are certainly not taught *how* to do so.[2]

If the relationship between biblical studies and theological studies remains unclear within contemporary academia, it appears that the practice of "biblical theology" no longer offers any compelling solution to the problem, as there is no consensus regarding what, precisely, "biblical theology" is. Moreover, John J. Collins observed over twenty years ago: "[b]iblical 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."[3] Collins observes that biblical theology is simply no longer on the "cutting edges" of scholarship in the opinion of many scholars.[4] The changes within the discipline over the course of twenty years is perhaps a mixed blessing: while the field of biblical scholarship has expanded to include a veritable smorgasbord of methodologies and approaches that have achieved all manner of substantive academic contributions, "biblical theology" has allegedly become a bit passé. The consequence has been one of a general contemporary confusion over the status and practice of "theology" in relationship to the biblical texts—in some cases, happy dismissal, in other cases, apathy, in yet other cases, an uphill struggle to either maintain or reestablish the importance of "biblical theology" within the increasingly diverse and pluralistic context of biblical scholarship.

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[2] Ibid., 17, *passim*.

[3] 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: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 1.

[4] Ibid.

The present study intends to offer an overview of three specific contemporary proposals regarding the relationship between the Bible and theology. It has two goals. The first goal is to clarify the hermeneutical approaches of John J. Collins (chapter 2), Walter Brueggemann (chapter 3), and Michael Fishbane (chapter 4), and account for their own treatment of "biblical theology" or the relationship between the Bible and theology. Here, the primary concern is with the precise interpretive strategies employed by these three scholars in their treatment of the Bible toward theological ends. This is because Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane all aim to articulate the task and purpose of biblical theology (or the Bible's relationship to theology) in some way, and operate according to fairly implicit hermeneutical models. Their assumptions and hermeneutical procedures need be made explicit. These chapters will remain in conversation with the book of Ecclesiastes in particular, and in light of the specific hermeneutical procedures of Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane. Second, the present study will contend that the relationship between biblical studies and theology need not be limited to overly narrow hermeneutical approaches, if "hermeneutics" is to be understood as an attempt to overcome the historical gap between the "meaning" of an ancient text and the proper "interpretation" of such texts within a contemporary milieu. Chapter 5 will therefore suggest an alternative conceptualization of the task of "biblical theology" (again using the book of Ecclesiastes for the sake of example); a task that is chiefly undertaken for the sake of contemporary "theological appropriation" of biblical texts.

What Do We Mean by "Biblical Theology?"

Some scholars still aver that "biblical theology" is passé, just as John Collins observed over two decades ago. There are two obvious problems with this judgment, however. The first is that the very term "biblical theology" (and the exact activity it indicates) remains so contested, so staggeringly varied in actual practice, and—in some cases—so poorly conceptualized as to be practically useless as a term for any one definitive activity, especially as each theological study seems to offer different starting points, different methods, different results, and each routinely operates with different hermeneutical (and general philosophical) assumptions.[5] Moreover, does the term "biblical theology" designate something that is *intrinsic* to the biblical texts, describe a *constructive* activity of a modern interpreter, signify a *descriptive* activity of a modern interpreter examining the text in its historical context, *label* a certain scholarly movement in the 1940s-1950s,[6] *designate an approach* that assumes the New Testament of the Christian Bible as its object alongside the Hebrew Bible,[7] or *distinguish an activity* that is somehow separate from dogmatic, systematic, or even "practical" theology?[8] Regarding this last point,

[5] For a concise assessment of the contemporary diversity in "biblical theology" (even when scholars allegedly employ the same methodology) see Ben C. Ollenburger, "Introduction" *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future* (ed. Ben C. Ollenburger; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), esp. pp. 377-80.

[6] Referring in this case to the "Neo-Orthdox" movement in biblial studies inspired, in part, by Karl Barth.

[7] For example, Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 10-11, emphasizes the difference between "Old Testament Theology" and "biblical theology" where the latter, in his view, assumes both testaments.

[8] For a discussion regarding whether the biblical texts *are* theology or merely *theological* and thus the confusion involved in the term "biblical theology" see James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 246-252.

Luke Timothy Johnson observes that the term "biblical theology" can be misleading in that it "indicates distance from the world of Scripture, for it suggests the possibility of a theology that is not biblical, and a study of the Bible that is not theological."[9] In sum, there appears little consensus regarding what "biblical theology" even is, what it entails, and what it may then hope to achieve. Lest one assume that this state of affairs is a novel one, Ben Ollenburger reminds us that already in 1828, Ludwig Otto Friedrich Baumgarten-Crusius discerned at least *six* ways in which scholars of his own time employed the term "biblical theology."[10]

The second problem with any claim that "biblical theology is passé" is that plenty of modern biblical scholars still regard the theological interpretation of the Bible to be a vital and compelling aspect of biblical scholarship. Whether "biblical theology" and "the theological interpretation of the Bible" are equivalent, however, is open to debate. Still, the theological interpretation of the Bible in some form or another thrives in many quarters. While a number of examples could be cited, one might simply point out that in 2005 and 2007 respectively, the introduction of the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (2005)[11] and *The Journal of Theological Interpretation* (2007)[12] would seem to contradict a view that "biblical

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[9] Luke Timothy Johnson, "Imagining the World Scripture Imagines," *Modern Theology* 14:2 (1998): 170.

[10] Ollenburger, *Old Testament Theology,* 3. Ollenburger cites this diversity of opinion surveyed in Ludwig Otto Friedrich Baumgarten-Crusius, *Grundzüge der Bihlischen Theologie* (F. Frommann: Jena, 1928).

[11] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

[12] Joel B. Green, "Introducing the Journal of Theological Interpretation," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1 (2007): i-ii.

theology," broadly conceived, is no longer a vital part of the discipline. Rumors of its decline seem to have been greatly exaggerated. It must be stated that such publications do prefer the label "theological interpretation of the Bible" rather than "biblical theology," and this may be an effort to distinguish recent work from earlier large-scale works of "Old Testament Theology," or may aim to avoid some of the terminological pitfalls noted above.[13] Still, with over 160 contributors to the *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible* from various backgrounds, one is hard pressed to declare biblical theology or theological interpretation "passé" with too much confidence.[14]

Biblical Theology: Passé or Impasse?

Perhaps a more accurate way of describing the present state of "biblical theology" or the "theological interpretation of the Bible" in the broader arena of biblical scholarship would be "impasse" rather than "passé."

One is tempted to settle upon "impasse" as a more accurate descriptor because the specific activity of "biblical theology" still seems to contend with the same difficulties, problems, and unanswered questions that it has dealt with since its inception (if one agrees with the majority of scholars that the inauguration of modern "biblical theology" began with Johann P. Gabler's 1787 address at the

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[13] It is also possible, but not entirely clear, that a preference for the term "theological interpretation of the Bible" is used to distance contemporary approaches from that of the "biblical theology *movement*" (a term referring to the Neo-Orthodox trend of the 1940's and 1950's). The official end of the "biblical theology movement" is often attributed to Brevard Childs' *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970). Cf. Ollenburger, *Old Testament Theology,* 117.

[14] Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation*, 7-12.

University of Altdorf: "An Oration on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each").[15] For example, in discussing the purpose of *The Journal of Theological Interpretation*, Joel Green cites eight "important" questions that the journal aims to address. At least four of these same questions can be said to echo Gabler's own primary concerns over 200 years ago. Green writes:

- What is the role of history and historical criticism in theological interpretation?
- What is the relationship between exegesis and doctrine?
- Does theological interpretation extract theological claims or principles from the Bible?
- Does theological interpretation draw up the plans for a theological superstructure towering above a biblical foundation?[16]

One need only compare these questions to Ollenburger's assessment of Gabler and the broader beginnings of modern "biblical theology" in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to recognize the similarities:

> By the end of the eighteenth century it had become clear that historical interpretation—and more precisely, historical-critical interpretation—offered a fresh and also different understanding of the Bible . . . [which] provided new and much more adequate foundations for dogmatic (or systematic) theology . . . it would not be too strong to say that, at its beginning, biblical theology was this controversy: it was an inquiry into the question how a historical study of the Bible should relate itself to dogmatics. *Historical interpretation made biblical theology possible*, and it also raised the most pressing issues in the discipline it helped to create. Primary among these was how to determine what in the Bible remained of universal and abiding validity in view of its irreducibly historical character.[17]

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[15] Ollenburger, *Old Testament Theology*, 497-506. See also J. Sandys-Wunsch and L. Eldridge, "J.P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of his Originality," *SJT* 33 (1980): 135-58.

[16] Green, "Journal of Theological Interpretation," ii.

[17] Ollenburger, *Old Testament Theology,* 4 (emphasis mine).

Thus to return to Green's "important" questions, Gabler and his early successors (especially Gerhard Lorenz Bauer and Ludwig Otto Friedrich Baumgarten-Crusius)[18] were similarly wrestling with the relation of history and historical study to theology, the relationship between text interpretation and dogmatics (or doctrinal) theology, the quest to extract "universal" theological claims and principles from the Bible, and thus the attempt to ground dogmatics upon a biblical foundation while preserving separate functions for both "biblical theology" and "dogmatic theology." One can see the immediate problem that developed when historical-critical inquiry matured and began to unearth sources and redactional layers to the point where any sense of a "unified" Bible or any degree of univocality of its voice or perspective were radically thrown into question and eventually dismissed outright.[19] When historical-critical inquiry concludes that *nothing* seems abidingly valid, coherent, or universal in the texts, what else can be said? The biblical scholar who wishes to be a sort of "biblical theologian" is therefore relegated to the role of a biblical historian, having nothing else to say beyond the realm of history. Ironically, "biblical theology" becomes a casualty of historical-critical inquiry despite the fact that both enterprises were originally founded as allies and developed in relation to the other. Historical interpretation made biblical theology possible, but later it seems to have made it *impossible*—at least in the

[18] Ibid., 3, 5, 11.

[19] Or, as it has been phrased by Carol A. Newsom, "Bakhtin and Dialogic Truth," *JR* 76.2 (1996): 290-306: "Critical biblical scholarship was founded on the perception that the Bible was not monologic. It lacked precisely those features that characterize monologic discourse. Biblical criticism used the evidence of contradiction, disjunction, multiple perspectives, and so forth, to make the case for the Bible's heterogeneity," 293.

manner originally conceived by Gabler. Thus, the current "impasse" that characterizes contemporary biblical theology was present from its very inception according to the paradigm that Gabler set forth, and modern-day scholars continue to engage the same issues that preoccupied Gabler from within that paradigm.

Biblical Theology v. Scholarly Commentary for the Sake of Theological Appropriation

Having problematized "biblical theology" as both a concept and activity, and having demonstrated that the "theological interpretation of the Bible" still suffers from many of the same problems and issues of the former, it is perhaps easy to overlook the most basic and fundamental issue that nevertheless persists despite the problems: that however one assesses the legacy of biblical theology and its problems, why should anyone *still care* about "biblical theology?" What is at stake? Who is "theology" (in relation to the biblical documents) for? What does it achieve? If "biblical theology" is, in a sense, dead, then one may have little interest in trying to resuscitate it. If enormous and comprehensive tomes entitled "Theology of the Old Testament" are considered passé, then perhaps one feels little need to object, disagree, or write a new one. But it is difficult to let go of "biblical theology" in one form or another since it remains (in my judgment) one of the few links between academic biblical scholarship and various communities of faith who wish for a deeper theological understanding or appropriation of the biblical texts. Dale B. Martin writes:

> There are few places in our societies where people are taught to think theologically in an adult way. Most churches don't do it. Most schools don't do it. So whereas modern adults mature in their views of

> psychology, personhood, and nature itself, they continue to act like children in their assumptions about God, faith, right and wrong when discussed religiously . . . This approach is no less true for interpreting the Bible. Just as the doing of theology is a skill that must be learned if one is to progress from a childish faith to a mature faith, so people must be taught how to read the Bible with mature theological lenses.[20]

Can rigorous academic study ultimately be reconciled with an overriding concern to catalyze or encourage the theological appropriation of biblical texts for contemporary audiences? What would the contours of this type of scholarship look like? What is a "mature theological lens" and how would the biblical scholar cultivate it, and then presume to instill and nurture it in others? One notes that such concerns for the theological appropriation of the Bible cannot be dismissed as somehow motivated from a "biblical fundamentalist" stance or a "conservative" ideology. Dale Martin is no fundamentalist.

Therefore, the present study is interested in "biblical theology" as a type of biblical scholarship that is simply, but pervasively, geared toward the theological appropriation of the biblical texts. If "biblical theology" cannot be practiced as Gabler has described it (as it has been, in part, complicit in dissolving the link between biblical studies and faith communities, as well as theological studies conceived more broadly according to Martin's work), then it is to a mode of scholarship that the present study will tentatively look to restore the relationship between academia, church, synagogue, and interested public. As will be argued, this particular mode is a sort of commentary that is conceptually rigorous, but requires a certain epistemological shift as suggested in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his

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[20] Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible,* 73-74.

notion of "dialogism."[21] The conceptualization of biblical suggested here finds its emphasis upon imagination,[22] and is primarily geared toward the elucidation of potential meanings[23] that have been embedded in the biblical texts over the course of history. This is not to suggest an abandonment of "hermeneutics" altogether and to advocate a return to "pre-critical" views of the biblical texts. To do so would erroneously propose that "historical" or "original" meanings no longer offer substantial challenges (and vital insights and contributions) to contemporary interpretation. Nevertheless, the present study will suggest that historical-critical attempts to recover "original" meanings, and hermeneutical strategies to somehow merge them with our contemporary horizons should not unduly overshadow or trump the vast potential of biblical texts to "mean" and continue to mean.[24]

An Analytical Assessment of Contemporary Approaches to Theological Interpretation

If one is interested in exploring possible modes of scholarship that are interested in the "potential" of biblical texts, one is first obliged to examine current proposals

[21] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics* (ed. Caryl Emerson; trans. Caryl Emerson; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 78-100, esp. 79-82. Cf. Carol A. Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *JR* 76, no. 2 (April 1996): 290-306; esp. 291-92.

[22] The call for "imagination" in biblical scholarship is not a new one, and in chapter 5 I will suggest some possible routes for such "imagination." Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, "Imagining the World Scripture Imagines," 170.

[23] The view that texts exhibit an inherent potential to take on new meanings over the course of time, and grow beyond their original historical context will be explored further in chapter 5. For example, this idea is suggested by Mikhail Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff" in Speech Genres and Other Late Essays (eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; trans. Vern W. McGee; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

[24] Cf. Bakhtin, "Response to a Question," 4.

regarding the ways in which biblical scholarship even counts as "theological" (or does not) and the corresponding hermeneutical strategies employed by those who attempt theological interpretation. This is a daunting challenge, for there is no shortage of suggestions within the pluralistic climate of current scholarship. If the contemporary practice of theological interpretation has become a vast array of approaches, "diverse in its aims, its conception of the material with which it works, its methods and contexts, assumptions and convictions, participants and publics,"[25] then one need naturally wonder whether any means exists by which to assess such staggering diversity. While some would certainly celebrate this diversity, others would probably acknowledge that innumerable diverse "voices" are, in the end, just so much noise.[26] In an attempt to sort through all the noise, one questions whether sufficient work has been done to describe, analyze, and critique any of the major current proposals regarding the task of theological interpretation of the Bible, let alone put them into conversation with one another.

Herein lies the bulk of the following study: a comprehensive, analytical critique of three contemporary approaches to theological interpretation of the Bible. The conversation partners—John J. Collins, Walter Brueggemann, and Michael Fishbane—have been selected due to the diversity of their proposals, their

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[25] Ollenburger, *Old Testament Theology*, 380.

[26] For example, Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1998), argues that the current fragmentation and methodological pluralism in biblical studies more generally (cf. Rolf Rendtorff, "Directions in Pentateuchal Studies," *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 5 (1997): 43-65, who attributes this trend to the loss of Wellhausian source consensus) is symptomatic of a much broader "philosophical pluralism" since different philosophies undergird different methods, and that unexamined biases involving epistemological, ontological, and anthropological assumptions everywhere influence text interpretation. One may similarly argue that a plurality of approaches to the specific practice of theological interpretation is indicative of the same philosophical and hermeneutical pluralism and thus demands closer attention and critique.

differences in religious and academic backgrounds, the variances between their hermeneutical approaches and assumptions, and their nearly unquestionable degree of prominence and influence within biblical studies more generally. Briefly, Collins is in many ways a traditional historical-critic and heir of Gabler, Brueggemann is a biblical theologian and author of a highly influential single volume "Theology of the Old Testament," and Fishbane's "inner biblical" exegesis and engagement with postbiblical tradition throughout history has earned him a reputation as a "postcritical" scholar.[27] In what follows, a chapter is devoted to a study of each figure. While each survey will be attuned to the possibility of diachronic development in each scholar's thought, the primary goal is description, clarification, and analysis of their hermeneutical (and philosophical)[28] approaches and their attitudes toward "theology," "biblical theology," and the theological interpretation of the Bible. Thus a possible way forward through the "impasse" of major competing voices in theological interpretation is first by a thorough, yet concise, engagement with three leading voices.

In his essay regarding the "future" of biblical theology, Mark Brett writes that the "substantive issue" facing scholarship is not how dogmatics relates to the Bible but "how we are to *evaluate* both the undeniable diversity of the biblical canon and

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[27] Peter Ochs, ed., *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation* (repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 3, 5.

[28] Leo G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History. Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). For general discussion of the relationship between biblical theology and philosophical foundations, see Hans-Peter Müller, "Bedarf die alttestamentliche Theologie einer philosphischen Grundlegung?" in *Alttestamentlicher Glaube und biblische Theologie: Festshcrift für Horst Dietrich Preuss* (eds. J. Hausmann and H. J. Zobel; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992), 342-51.

its multifarious influences throughout history . . . we need a value-oriented style of research which deals with both ends of the hermeneutical problematic, both the diversity of the canon and the diversity of interpretative communities."[29] While one might sympathize with his position, an equally substantive issue is how we evaluate works of scholarship that claim to be "biblical theology" or "theological interpretation" in all their own pluralism and diversity. Finally, if scholarship needs a way to deal with "both ends of the hermeneutical problematic, both the diversity of the canon and the diversity of interpretative communities," then the primary interest in the final chapter of this study is to suggest routes to interpretive "imagination"—not just diversity—in the interest of nurturing the theological creativity of biblical scholars and interpretive communities into the future.

[29] Mark G. Brett, "The Future of Old Testament Theology," *Congress Volume: Oslo* (eds. André Lemaire and Magne Sæbø; VTSup 80; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 465-88. 470 (emphasis mine).

CHAPTER TWO: "BIBLICAL THEOLOGY," HISTORICAL CRITICISM, AND THE WORK OF JOHN J. COLLINS

> I became a theologian because the scientific treatment of the Bible interested me; only gradually did I come to understand that a professor of theology also has the practical task of preparing the students for service in the Protestant Church, and that I am not adequate to this practical task, but that instead despite all caution on my own part I make my hearers unfit for their office.
>
> -Julius Wellhausen
> upon his resignation from the theological
> faculty at the University of Greifswald
> April 5th, 1882[1]

In many ways, John J. Collins is the contemporary exemplar of classical historical-critical biblical scholarship as it has been practiced since the late eighteenth century, albeit carried out with greater nuance and humility than some of his more positivistic forebears. Collins' work within the field of biblical studies has enjoyed wide influence as he has held positions at the University of Notre Dame, the University of Chicago, and Yale University. While his contributions to biblical scholarship are wide-ranging and varied, Collins manages to account for the very best of what historical-critical biblical scholarship has to offer while carving out a space for "biblical theology" as a legitimate and compelling exercise within

[1] Quoted from Rudolf Smend, "Julius Wellhausen and His *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*," *Semeia* 25 (1982): 1-20. Cf. John J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 6.

academia. While Collins' work is not above critique, there is certainly much to be commended in it, and his willingness to engage in a critical dialogue with a diversity of approaches must be applauded.

The Early Work of John J. Collins

Generally speaking, Collins has been nothing if not consistent over the years in the manner in which he conceives of both biblical scholarship and the way biblical theology relates to biblical studies. Already in 1979[2] the key emphases of history (and critical historiography) in relation to theology, the demand for a thoroughgoing methodological skepticism, the call for critical debate and dialogue, and the assumed need for an epistemological common-ground upon which to base such dialogue are apparent in his work. These emphases reoccur throughout Collins' work in the three decades since, as will be demonstrated.

Collins begins his 1979 article entitled "The 'Historical Character' of the Old Testament in Recent Biblical Theology" by asserting the necessity of historical study for biblical theology. Just as historical-critical methods arose hand-in-hand with the inauguration of biblical theology since J.P Gabler,[3] "the fact remains that a great part of the OT is concerned with allegedly historical events, and any theology of the OT

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[2] John J. Collins, "The 'Historical Character' of the Old Testament in Recent Biblical Theology," *CBQ* 41 (1979).

[3] Johann Philipp Gabler, "An Oration On the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each," in *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future* (ed. Ben C. Ollenburger; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbraun's), 499-506. Cf. J. Sandys-Wunsch and L. Eldridge, "J.P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of his Originality," *SJT* 33 (1980): 135-58.

must take account of this fact."[4] For Collins, the would-be biblical theologian is necessarily a historian. But the immediate problem is perhaps all too familiar by now: most of the alleged biblical history cannot be independently corroborated, and, furthermore, historical and archaeological evidence demonstrate that significant portions of it (the Exodus, the settlement narratives, etc.) appear to fall short of historical fact. Borrowing from Barr, Collins is thus primarily concerned not with "history" as such, but with the "history-like"[5] character of the biblical writings, the proper ways in which to analyze such quasi-historical writings, and the necessity of historical-critical methods in probing the alleged historical claims of these writings while ultimately informing any theological portrait culled from them. In a sense, Collins seems to imply that the ideal critical scholar is to be both historian *and* literary critic, simultaneously attuned to "history" and "story." Already one senses here that Collins preempts and attempts to mitigate—by combining "history" and "story"—what will eventually become a divide between advocates of historical-critical methods and proponents of literary approaches to the Bible more characteristic of contemporary biblical scholarship.[6] In any case, Collins seeks to define what it means to be a "critical" biblical theologian.

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[4] Collins, "The 'Historical Character,'" 186.

[5] Ibid., 187.

[6] See, for example, John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 11, where he cites a perceived rift in the contemporary biblical studies between the so-called "historical critics" and the so-called "literary critics" where "each party on the whole regard[s] the other as largely worthless."

Critical v. Confessional Scholarship

In order to clarify what counts as "critical" scholarship, Collins utilizes "confessional" approaches and their treatment of biblical history as a foil. This is initially accomplished through an examination of the "confessional"[7] position of Roland de Vaux. For Collins, de Vaux's is a "classic expression of what has been called the traditional 'morality of knowledge,'" where faith and belief are deemed virtuous and doubt deemed sinful.[8] Drawing upon Van Harvey, de Vaux's view is contrasted with a different morality of knowledge—that of the critical historian—which turns methodological skepticism (or, to put it more forcibly, doubt) into a virtue. Collins writes:

> The choice is not between religious dogma and the equally dogmatic views of secular historians. Rather, what is at issue is whether the historicity of specific events can be guaranteed by faith and so removed from the sphere of *critical debate*. From the viewpoint of the critical historian any event or conclusion may in principle be questioned in the light of new evidence or argumentation. An historian may believe and assert that Joshua captured Jericho, but if that belief is questioned in the light of archaeological or other evidence, the only *rational* response is to show *how that evidence can be explained*.[9]

Thus, Collins values methodological skepticism in that all claims (biblical or otherwise) are subject to Cartesian doubt in the interest of rational critical debate. Because René Descartes emphasized a thoroughgoing epistemological doubt and the

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[7] Collins, "The 'Historical Character' of the Old Testament," 189.

[8] Ibid., 188.

[9] Ibid., (emphases mine).

elevations of an autonomous, individual "knower," *all* claims are subject to the rigors of scientific evidence, explanation, and argument. The implication is that such comprehensive doubt offers an objective foundation upon which any scholar (regardless of religious conviction) may, in principle, build. Confessional faith commitments, for Collins, too often require that "main historical questions are not open to dispute"[10] and are merely accepted as matters of faith. While Gerhard von Rad, Collins explains, held that the impetus to affirm biblical facts was misguided (and probably should not matter anyway), de Vaux sought a foundation of his own: historical facts certainly mattered "since it involves the truthfulness of God and the foundation of our faith."[11] According to Collins, G.E. Wright voices the same sentiment (pace von Rad) even more sharply: "Now in Biblical faith everything depends on whether the central events actually occurred. . . . To assume that it makes no difference whether they are facts or not is simply to destroy the whole basis of the faith."[12] Here, one notices a perhaps widely held and understandable assumption (see below) that conflates the veracity of historical biblical fact with the very legitimacy of faith itself. Faith requires facts. If the Exodus is not a historical fact, and if the settlement is not a fact, then faith is apparently in vain. Hence, de Vaux is confessional in the sense that he "begins with a traditional faith, and accepts the specific biblical statements as facts on the authority of that faith."[13] For de Vaux,

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[10] Ibid., 188.

[11] Ibid., 187 (emphases mine).

[12] G. E. Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 53-57. Cf. Collins, "The 'Historical Character' of the Old Testament," 189.

[13] Collins, "The 'Historical Character' of the Old Testament," 189.

although historical facts certainly matter, such facts cannot always be "grasped by historical methods."[14] According to Collins, De Vaux recognizes the legitimacy of critical historiography to the extent that it confirms matters of faith, but critical historiography is certainly not allowed to challenge that faith or to have the final say. For Collins, this is problematic. He summarily points out that "De Vaux's position offers no common basis for *dialogue* with a critical historian who does not share his faith."[15] The foundation of faith—in contrast to the foundation of doubt—is an unacceptable starting point for Collins: it is exempted from critique, it offers no epistemological common ground for dialogue, it is too subjective, and it cannot therefore be considered "critical" in any—it seems—rigorous, thoroughgoing, or formal sense. The ground of faith cannot offer the neutral epistemological territory that the common-ground of doubt can.

Critical Scholarship and a Common Ground for Dialogue and Debate

The basic stance of a thoroughgoing methodological skepticism means that not even basic biblical claims about Israel's early identity can be taken for granted. Drawing from Harvey (who himself relies on John Locke), Collins writes, "If the biblical theologian is guided by the critical ideal of 'not entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proof it is built on will warrant' then the controversial

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

evidence for early Israelite history can hardly inspire deep conviction."[16] In this vein, he continues:

> Any of the alleged acts of God, such as the Exodus, could also be explained from other perspectives, without appeal to divine intervention . . . if [historical events] can only be seen as acts of God from the particular perspective of faith, they evidently cannot be established as such by critical historiography, and so they forfeit the claim to objectivity that might be derived from independent verification. 'Facts of history' can only be established by historical methods, and whatever can not be established by these methods cannot be called historical fact…[17]

However, Collins immediately continues with a strong caveat:

> That is not to say that only those things that can be verified by historians can have actually happened. Historical criticism can never deny the possibility that a particular event (natural or supernatural) may have taken place. The point is that a mere possibility should not be classified as 'historical fact.'[18]

In this case, then, Collins successfully demonstrates both the major strength and major limitation of what he variously terms "critical historiography" and "historical criticism" and "historical methods" (all apparently terms that denote the same critical scholarly activity), again in contrast to "confessional" approaches: the strength is that it trades in only what is objectively knowable and verifiable while merely entertaining that perhaps anything is possible (and all the while avoiding the methodological flaw of any pretense to absolute certainty which would preclude further discussion) while its major weakness is that it is, at best, *evasive* in regard to claims about divine activity, the miraculous, and the supernatural. Although

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[16] Ibid., 190.

[17] Ibid., 191.

[18] Ibid.

historical methods have been lambasted in the past for the arrogance with which its practitioners pursued some alleged "objective" truth, Collins' more reasoned and demure approach seeks only probabilities and likelihoods based upon evidence and are subject to debate. Again, his singular refusal to substitute any confessional, dogmatic, or faith-driven assumption prior to the task of critical inquiry is impressive. But does it provide enough for theology to work with? We must eventually return to this key question.

The Bible as "History-Like" Myth or Paradigmatic Story

If the material of the Bible does not really offer anything like a reliable, verifiable, factual "history" (as de Vaux and Wright maintained) then what precisely is this material? As stated previously, the material is "history-like" for Collins. Historical-critical reconstructions that starkly differ from the falsifiable "history-like" claims of the biblical texts need not pull the rug out from under the foundations of faith in the way that de Vaux or Wright might think. Collins argues that "[w]e must surely allow that an imaginative, poetic or mythical, elaboration can often capture the 'real' character of an event more adequately than a purely factual, verifiable, account."[19] Furthermore, he suggests that "a 'history-like' narrative might be 'true' in other ways than by reference to historical events," and (in reference to von Rad) that "[p]rogress in the theological appreciation of the OT 'acts of God' could only be made

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[19] Ibid., 197.

by recognizing that ‘history’ is not the appropriate category for these narratives.”[20] Should scholars thus abandon historical-critical methods since the actual historical facts are unavailable to us? By no means. “Since the biblical narratives have the appearance of history,” Collins writes, “the question of whether, or how far, they should be read as informational inevitably rises . . . the question of historicity cannot be simply ignored.”[21]

Having dismissed the assumption that biblical texts are historically factual in any facile sense, and having briefly reviewed Barr’s notion that “story” is a better descriptor, Collins pushes further in suggesting that the most appropriate terms are “paradigmatic stories” or “myths . . . whose significance lies in their expression of some recurring aspect of the human condition.”[22] Scholarly preoccupation with only the historicity of the Exodus event, for example, seems to miss the point. Collins argues that

> The significance of such an event cannot be adequately appreciated by merely asking whether it happened. We must also ask in what way the event illuminates the subsequent experience of the community, and indeed, what implications it may have for humanity at large . . . [the] revelatory status [of these stories] need not depend on their supposed historicity. In short, the imagination of a community can be captured by a story no less than by an event.”[23]

Importantly, however, the fact that these myths are simultaneously “history-like” distinguishes from other types of myth: while both may express recurring aspects of

[20] Ibid., 193, 194.

[21] Ibid., 195.

[22] Ibid, 196.

[23] Ibid., 197.

the human condition, the chronological sequence of biblical stories indicate that the "truth to which they point is not timeless or static but is precisely the truth of historical change, which is the root at once of human contingency and human hope."[24] Collins' recommendation that a paradigm shift in the conceptual view of biblical texts from history to story must take place for any theological appropriation of the texts as it avoids the tendency to conflate biblical history with fact.

Collins in the Intervening Years: 1980's and 1990's

When one compares Collins' earlier work to that of the influential 1990 article "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible"[25] (first printed in 1990, though republished in 2005), for example, one is struck by the overall consistency of its content and emphases. This latter work again shares an emphasis on the historical nature of the theological enterprise, the distinction between critical and confessional approaches, the call for methodological skepticism, the need for an epistemological common ground between participants in dialogue/debate, and the continued relevance of the biblical texts for modern readers.

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[24] Ibid., 202-203.

[25] John J. Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" in *The Hebrew Bible and its Interpreters*, eds. William Henry Propp, Baruch Halpern, and David Noel Freedman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 1-17. The chapter was reprinted again in 2005: John J. Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible" in *Encounters with Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 11-23. Collins points out, 1, that the original article is reprinted unchanged. The citations that follow are from the 2005 reprint.

The Four Principles of Historical Criticism

The article itself opens provocatively: Collins claims that "biblical theology is a subject in decline," and that this alleged 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."[26] Despite the fact that sociological criticism and literary criticism are those activities on the "cutting edges" of biblical scholarship, Collins nevertheless again seeks to articulate the task of biblical theology as it is conceived from the perspective of historical criticism.[27] Here, he is even more explicit regarding the four assumptions (the first three drawn from Troeltsch,[28] the last his own) upon which historical criticism rests: (1) the principle of criticism or "methodological doubt" where all claims are subject to revision and "historical inquiry can never attain absolute certainty but only relative degrees of probability,"[29] (2) the principle of analogy where all historical events are "similar in principle" and that "the laws of nature in biblical times were the same as now,"[30] (3) the principle of correlation where "phenomena of history are interrelated and interdependent" and subject to the "sequence of historical cause and effect,"[31] and (4) the principle of autonomy where "neither

[26] John J. Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" 11.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ernst Troeltsch, "Über Historische und Dogmatische Methode in der Theologie" in *Gesammelte Schriften* (vol. 2; Tübingen: Mohr, 1913), 729-53.

[29] John J. Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" 12.

[30] Ibid., 12.

[31] Ibid.

church nor state can prescribe for the scholar which conclusions should be reached."[32] When applied consistently, it is these four principles that comprise "critical" scholarship in counter distinction to confessional approaches to the biblical texts, and which form the basis of Collins' conception of "biblical theology." Of course, the question—which will eventually need to be addressed (see below)—is whether principles of critical historiography are adequate to amount to some sort of "biblical theology" or whether historiography remains exactly *that*: a history, even if that history is one of Israelite religious thought.

The Inconsistency of the "Biblical Theology Movement:" Critical v. Confessional

While Collins again champions the historical-critical underpinnings of the task of biblical theology, he has apparently learned much from the mistakes of the past. In this regard, Collins draws attention to the post World War I development of "biblical theology," the neo-orthodoxy movement, and theological biblical scholarship that continued into the 1970's. He summarizes its well-rehearsed "internal contradictions."[33] In "biblical theology" as practiced by Wright and von Rad among others throughout this time period—according to Collins—dogmatic assumptions often trumped the historical-critical veneer of these works. In short, their appropriation of historical criticism was only partial and logically inconsistent with

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., 13.

their respective confessional stances. Again, Collins relies here on enumerating the problems with confessional bias in the same way he has previously relied on de Vaux. Collins writes that "[t]he problem is not that the theologians brought presuppositions to the text, since this is also true of event the most 'objective' historians, but that their theological presuppositions were inconsistent with the historical method on which they otherwise relied."[34] For instance, von Rad's insistence on the need to elucidate the biblical salvation "history" while concurrently accepting a very different (and ultimately irreconcilable) *actual* history as reconstructed by scholars has ultimately proven problematic, and his detection of "law" and "gospel" within the Pentateuch certainly does seem driven by Lutheran dogmatic concerns rather than demanded by the text itself.[35] The incompatibility of historical criticism and "confessional" faith indicates that "biblical theology can only proceed in one or the other of two ways: by abandoning historical criticism, at least in theological matters, or by reconceiving the theological aspects of the discipline."[36] Collins will opt for the latter route.

The Need for a Common Ground for Dialogue and Debate

To his credit, Collins does not wish to "bracket out" questions regarding the significance of the biblical texts for modern readers, but still claims once again that historical criticism is the best option to provide a common ground for scholarly

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[34] Ibid., 14.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., 14-15.

discussion and debate regarding biblical texts. Here, Collins engages Brevard Childs—one of the foremost advocates for the study of the canonical shaping of the Bible for the purpose of theological exposition and appropriation in the twentieth century. His most pointed critique of Childs, for example, is that Childs offers no such common ground. He writes:

> If biblical theology is to retain a place in *serious* scholarship, it must be able to accommodate the best insights of other branches of biblical scholarship and must be conceived broadly enough to provide a context for *debate* among different viewpoints. Otherwise it is likely to become a sectarian reservation, of interest only to those who hold certain confessional tenets that are not shared by the discipline at large. Child's dogmatic conception of the canon provides no basis for *advancing dialogue*.[37]

Two observations are relevant here: first the odd introduction of the term "serious" scholarship—is there an alternative type? One wishes that Collins might clarify what precisely constitutes "serious" scholarship, and subsequently address its implicit corollary. I return to this issue in chapter five. Secondly, it is important to note that the critique is partly a pragmatic one: while Childs may be guilty (like de Vaux) of a "confessional" stance that allows an a priori dogmatic estimation of what constitutes the "canon" prior to any analytical task, it is simultaneously critiqued for its *practical* consequence of allegedly disallowing dialogue due to that stance. This is later rendered more explicit when Collins writes: "the inevitability of presuppositions should not be taken as an invitation to excel in bias. Some presuppositions are better or more adequate than others. One criterion for the

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[37] Ibid., 16 (emphasis mine). The implication that there is an "unserious" sort of biblical scholarship is a troubling one, as it essentially posits either a hierarchy or division among scholarly approaches. This disturbing idea will be addressed more thoroughly both later in this chapter, and in chapter five of the present study.

adequacy of presuppositions is the degree to which they allow dialogue between differing viewpoints and accommodate new insights."[38] "Dialogue" and "debate" and "conversation" are buzzwords for Collins, recurring throughout his work during this period, and as seen already in some of his earliest writings. If the work of biblical theology has a telos, it ostensibly consists of providing fodder for critical debate and dialogue amongst scholars in the interest of "advancing" that dialogue.

The Practice of Biblical Theology:
Analyzing God-language and Determining Genre

The question of praxis still remains: while the theoretical presuppositions are clear, what exactly does a biblical scholar *do* when engaging in "critical" biblical theology according to Collins? For him, the answer is that the task overlaps with a "history of religion" approach as an activity of "historical theology" and is one source (among many) for contemporary theology.[39] In practice, "[i]f biblical theology is to be based on critical methodology, then its task is the critical evaluation of speech about God…"[40] Here, one is to understand that biblical theology is not, it seems, discernably separate from the history of Israelite religion. Collins states that "[i]t is the specialization [within the history of religion] that deals with the portrayal of God in one specific corpus of texts," and the actual practice or activity of biblical theology "should clarify the meaning and truth-claims of what was thought and believed from

[38] Ibid., (emphasis mine).

[39] Ibid., 18.

[40] Ibid.

a modern critical perspective."[41] Again, from these statements, one gathers that (1) biblical theology is an aspect of the history of religion, and (2) the application of biblical theology is limited to particular texts rather than generalized from various texts or the "canon" as a whole, and (3) the would-be biblical theologian has a descriptive task of identifying what was once thought or believed about God. In this sense, "meaning" is historically rooted in a different place and time, and the task is to recover and describe it. Collins may offer an interpretive approach, but it cannot accurately be described as a hermeneutic capable of mediating between "historical meaning" and contemporary appropriation of such "meaning."

When historical criticism is unable to verify the historical veracity of the text, the primary contribution it can make according to Collins, then, "lies in its clarification of the various genres in the biblical text and the different expectations appropriate to them."[42] This is in alignment with the "paradigm shift" from one of history to that of "story" in biblical theology.[43] Here, one senses a potential problem: "genre" identification can be considered a "literary" activity, and the relationship between historical-critical examination and literary analysis is not clearly explained or accounted for. Nevertheless, citing Barr, Collins explains that this shift means no longer reading for "information" (and particularly for historical information) but for

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

an appreciation of the text's aesthetic value.[44] In fact, for Collins, the usual practice of biblical theology may be working from an inadequate notion of "history" and "historiography" (as historical fact) to begin with: "[i]f history is understood more adequately, with due allowance for the blend of fact and fiction that it necessarily entails, it may well be the better genre designation for much of biblical narrative."[45] Later on, Collins continues in this vein when turning back to the biblical portrayal of God:

> If we recognize that much biblical 'history' is fiction, in the sense of Ricoeur's poetic language, then we must also recognize that statements about God must be interpreted in the context of that fiction . . . The modern reader, however, who can no longer accept the historical truth value of Genesis or Exodus, can only choose between inaccurate historiography and imaginative fiction. It is not clear why fiction should appear the more disastrous of these alternatives, if we free ourselves of the prejudice that equates fiction with falsehood and accept it as a fundamental way of apprehending reality.[46]

Such an approach might also recognize a category difference between God as a character within the biblical story and "the living God" of the universe—the former plays roles that are mundane and functionary and "are not necessarily always pointers to transcendence."[47] Assertions about God are similarly subject to ideological critique: such language may then be seen as "rhetorical devices to

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[44] Ibid., 19. Again, it is not clear how historical-critical endeavors are to appreciate aesthetic value. Of course, this is not to claim that the historical critic *cannot* do this, but the route to such appreciation is unclear.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., 21.

[47] Ibid.

motivate behavior."[48] Biblical texts must be assessed as *proposals* regarding metaphysical truth, but any assessment of their respective truth value is beyond the competence of the critical scholar according to Collins, lacking any shared criterion by which to make such judgments.[49] In short, theology is "an open-ended and critical inquiry into the meaning and function of God-language" and "biblical theology" contributes to this larger picture, whereas the biblical theologian is "to clarify the genre of the biblical material in the broad sense of the way in which it should be read and the expectations that are appropriate to it."[50] For Collins, this is the task or primary activity of biblical theology as he conceives it: a descriptive activity of the "God-language" used in various texts (which are always rooted in a specific historical context), and accounting for various literary genres according to the historical conventions that they employ, and the expectations for the types of meaning appropriate to them.

Collins in the Early Twenty-First Century: Accounting for the Postmodern

At this point it should be clear that, for Collins, the stakes are high when it comes to the question of "foundations." In order to enable dialogue, he has claimed, one must establish some common ground: the historical. In the early twenty-first century, Collins begins to exhibit a greater concern for another essential aspect to this common ground: the ethical. This is most apparent in the 2005 work "Is a

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[48] Ibid., 22.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

Postmodern Biblical Theology Possible?" In it, Collins is highly critical of postmodern approaches to the biblical texts, while maintaining his previously held positions. Yet in the course of the discussion it here becomes clear that the thrust of the article is not really about biblical "theology" as such, but rather a question of its ethical dimension. He writes, "the relevance of the Bible to the modern world has never depended only on its metaphysical affirmations. It has *always lain largely in its ethical teachings*."[51] Thus, self-consciously "postmodern" biblical theologies like Walter Brueggemann's (and any other "nonfoundational" theology for that matter which conceives of "reality" as an interested textual construction) cannot then proceed to sneak the Bible on top of the debris remaining from the collapse of all other meta-narratives.[52] In essence, Collins' critique remains the same. Collins writes, "like most nonfoundationalist theologians, Brueggemann wants to exempt the sacred text from the suspicion to which all other metanarratives are subjected,"[53] which, he suggests, is similar to Brevard Childs' "reverential" or "submissive posture" toward the text which automatically exempts it from ideological criticism.[54] It is, in sum, the usual suspect of confessionalism. For Collins' any theological approach to the Bible must be willing to subject the Bible to the

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[51] John J. Collins, "Is a Postmodern Biblical Theology Possible?" in *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman's, 2005), 148; emphasis mine.

[52] Cf. Leo G. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (OBT; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).

[53] Collins, "Is a Postmodern Biblical Theology Possible?" 145.

[54] Ibid., 142.

"external warrants" of "other traditions" like "the Enlightenment,"[55] appropriate "historical context[s]"[56] and the "full tradition of moral discussion in the Western world."[57]

Perhaps taking a page from the books of those very postmodern intellectuals whom he distrusts, Collins' rhetoric is powerful. The long threatening shadow of an incipient moral relativism looms over his examples, garnered everywhere from Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini (and Foucault's support of the Iranian revolution),[58] German anti-Semitism during World War II (and Paul de Man's anti-Semitic writings),[59] Hitler,[60] the Holocaust,[61] and the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.[62] Clearly, this is not a world in which "relativism" should be an option. Collins is particularly disapproving of Stanley Fish's explicit refusal to ground responsive political action after September 11th in anything beyond the "democratic ideals we embrace, without grasping for the empty rhetoric of universal absolutes."[63] Collins laments that, apparently according to Fish, "these democratic ideals are not preferred because they are superior by any universal standard. Rather

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[55] Ibid., 146.

[56] Ibid., 145.

[57] Ibid., 146.

[58] Ibid., 149.

[59] Ibid., 148.

[60] Ibid., 160.

[61] Ibid., 155.

[62] Ibid., 149-150.

[63] Ibid., 150.

[for Fish] 'our convictions are by definition preferred, that is what makes them *our* convictions.'"[64] Of course, for Collins, this is unacceptable since al-Qaida might claim the same about *their* convictions, and there would be no appeal to any sure foundation or vantage point from which one might make a final judgment. Thus Collins writes, "Fish seems to regard dialogue as pointless."[65] Consequently, Collins (using Lévinas) suggests that the imperative "to care for others" is a possible "universal principal in ethical discussion,"[66] and appears to hold out the possibility that "genuine dialogue"[67] across cultures may help in facilitating contested points of view and notions of "justice," for instance.

Indeed, Collins writes that biblical theology and ethics "remain viable enterprises for people who are willing to enter a conversation in good faith and to pursue consensus, but not assume it."[68] In light of our alleged postmodern condition, the need for dialogue and consensus appears more important than ever. Yet again, Collins argues that we still need a common ground upon which to build that dialogue. For him, this remains a historical approach rather than a confessional

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[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid., 157. But, claims Collins, caring for neighbors is "a compelling one, not necessarily the only one." Collins, one need point out, is at great pains to suggest how this imperative to care for a neighbor is not exactly from the *Bible* (apparently since there is too many examples of anything but care for one's neighbor found in the Bible), yet one is still left with the impression that Collins biggest fear is to locate this ethical "foundation" in the Bible, which might "exempt" it from "external warrants" (cf. 19). For Collins to locate a foundational ethical imperative *in* the biblical text would open him up to the same critique he levels against Childs: a "reverential" or "submissive posture" toward the text that is somehow exempt from critique.

[67] Ibid., 151.

[68] Ibid., 161.

approach, or "a matter of making an argument by appeal to assumptions and knowledge *shared by the participants in a particular conversation*. Historical criticism *sets limits* to that *conversation* by *limiting the range* of what a text may mean in a particular context…so that it cannot mean just anything at all."[69] Historical criticism thus retains its priority of place, especially in light of contemporary pluralism and the call for unbiased dialogue.

A Critique of Collins' Approach to Biblical Theology

In my own view, Collins chiefly succeeds at what he sets out to do: to carve out a place for a sort of "biblical theology" under the larger rubric of academic, pluralistic, historical-critical biblical scholarship. This assumes, of course, that one agrees that "biblical theology" is properly a descriptive task and an activity of historical theology akin to a history of Israelite religious thought. Again, for Collins, "biblical theology" is the exposition of the meaning and function of "God language" in various biblical texts considered within their appropriate historical context.

Of course, this does not mean that his position is beyond reproach. I suggest a two-pronged critique of Collins' overall position: that his conceptualization of biblical theology is simultaneously both under-theorized and over-theorized. It is under-theorized in the sense that it asserts the need to prioritize the "historical context" as the arbiter of meaning and interpretation without attending to some substantial theoretical and ideological problems associated with the concept of "context" itself. One does well to ask: what do we *mean* by "context?" The ensuing

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[69] Collins, *Encounters With Biblical Theology*, 2 (emphasis mine).

discussion will therefore engage—in some depth—with some "postmodernist" critiques of "context" as a concept.

One might question whether a "postmodernist" critique is appropriate in the case of Collins' work. It is suggested here that a critique rooted in "postmodernist" thought is especially warranted in the case of Collins, as Collins invites such critique by first addressing whether a "postmodern biblical theology" is possible. One might argue that "postmodernist" work—if engaged—is often only superficially engaged in biblical studies, and so part of the present task is to present some of the specific contours of theorists like Jacques Derrida. Unfortunately, Collins' own work is largely dismissive of "postmodernism," while failing to substantively engage any of the specifics of "postmodernist" thought or challenges. If Collins is free to critique postmodernism, it seems appropriate that postmodernism be allowed to critique Collins.

Moreover, Collins proposal for "biblical theology" is over-theorized in the sense that, as consistent and rational and well-reasoned that it may be, it overcompensates for perceived intellectual problems (the absolute "foundations" required for scholarly discourse) at the expense of making sense of biblical texts for real-life (and often "confessional") audiences—those who are perhaps *most* interested in the Bible. His version of "biblical theology" may actually be a hindrance for the contemporary theological appropriation of biblical texts. In this manner, Collins' work on "biblical theology" is subject to the charge of a sort of "theoretical over-abstractionism" and therefore remains open to a significant degree of ethical critique. In short, Collins provides an interpretive strategy for understanding the

"theological" thought of ancient Israel, but lacks a hermeneutic by which the texts might be rendered "meaningful" for contemporary audiences. For the remainder of this chapter, I will dwell at some length on these two primary critiques.

An Under-theorized Concept: What do we Mean by "Context?"

First, it should be fairly clear that most of Collins' work in "biblical theology" is actually nothing of the sort. It is foremost writing *about* biblical theology. It is primarily concerned with the conditions under which biblical theology is to be done in order to be deemed "critical," the role of historical criticism in accomplishing it, the problems inherent in "confessional" approaches, and the end-goals of debate, dialogue, and consensus toward which it works. It is worthwhile to again cite a central tenet within Collins' proposal: he argues that historical criticism is "a matter of making an argument by appeal to assumptions and knowledge shared by the *participants in a particular conversation*. Historical criticism sets limits to that *conversation* by limiting the range of what a text may mean in a *particular context*…so that it cannot mean just anything at all."[70] Elsewhere he writes that historical criticism itself consists of a variety of methods, but continues:

> What these methods have in common is a general agreement that texts should be interpreted in their *original* context, in light of the literary and cultural conventions of their time . . . few historical critics would deny that a text may take on new meanings in changing circumstances . . . But historical critics usually assume a hierarchy of meanings and regard the historical context as basic or primary."[71]

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[70] Ibid., 2 (emphasis mine).

[71] Collins, *Bible after Babel*, 4 (emphasis mine).

By what critical criterion does the scholar make such a judgment regarding the "original" context? By what criterion does one navigate a "hierarchy of meanings" in order to decide what is "basic" or "primary?" The choice of "context" is therefore not a neutral affair, but an ideological one in that it (to use Collins' phrase) "sets limits" for interpretation. If texts do take on "new meanings in changing circumstances" then which of this multiplicity of "historical contexts" (after all, there is clearly more than one) should become the arbiter of meaning or the one to finally constrain interpretation?

Along these lines, how "critical" and rigorous is the notion of *context* anyway? One is inclined to think that since the "death of the author" has been declared so long ago that "context" might fill the vacuum left in its wake: Foucault once mused that the "author" (though might we now simply substitute "context"?) is "a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses . . . [it is] the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning."[72]

In short, the possibility of misinterpretation (due to a "proliferation of meaning") must be minimized by scholars like Collins who then prioritize the historical context in order to get things right. Hidden within this assertion is the notion that a once-present performance of a putative writer-speaker-producer within a certain "context" must be the ultimate arbiter and "stabilizer" of meaning.

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[72] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984* (eds. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose; New York: New Press, 1994), 390-391. Later, Foucault entertains the possibility that another "system of constraint" might inevitably follow should the "author function" lose its privilege. Is not "context" just such a constraint?

This is all as if to say that the meaning of the book of Qohelet, for example, can be determined if we understand not the writing in the book, but if we imagine that such writing was actually performed or uttered at some specific moment in a specific "historical context." In fact, focusing on the writing can actually be dangerous and detrimental to understanding according to some "postmodern" theorists precisely because writing tends to break with all contexts—but we are getting too far ahead of ourselves.

There are a number of ways in which to probe the notion of "context" but Jacques Derrida has offered some of the most incisive criticism. Such criticism is worth exploring in detail. In "Signature Event Context" Derrida addresses the problematic notion of "context" as it is deployed in American speech-act theory—particularly in the work of J. L. Austin. Austin was a philosopher and theorist who stressed, like Collins, the contextual nature of (to use Austin's term) the performative utterance.[73] Derrida muses: "But are the conditions of a context ever absolutely determinable? ...Is there a rigorous and scientific concept of *context*? Or does the notion of context not conceal, behind a certain confusion, philosophical presuppositions of a very determinate nature?"[74] Derrida goes on to doubt that context is a very helpful critical concept in that it is virtually unlimited (it is never saturated or completely determinable), and that this structural non-permeation must then entail a displacement of writing (here Derrida begins to question the

[73] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (eds. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà; 2d ed.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

[74] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context" in *Limited Inc.* (ed. Gerald Graff; trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1-24; cf. 3.

text/context distinction to which we will return). Jonathan Culler succinctly writes, "Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless."[75] While it is easy enough to admit that context is boundless in the sense that it can never be fully described (again, which if described at all must obviously be done retrospectively in and through language to construct a "historical setting"—history as "represented" textually, or simply another "text" with aspirations to "context"), it is perhaps only with greater effort that one understand what Derrida means by a "structural non-saturation" of context that entails "a certain generalization and a displacement of the concept of writing."[76]

It is important to remember here too the double-sense of the word "context" as it is usually taken: a textual-linguistic context of words alongside other words, and a "real world" context (for Collins a "historical" context) allegedly somewhere "outside" a given text. With this in view, we might consult Derrida for a fairly sensible and perhaps commonly held description and assumption of what writing actually is as it occurs in some "real-world" or "historical" context:

> If men write, it is (1) because they have to communicate; (2) because what they have to communicate is their "thought," their "ideas," their representations. Thought, as representation, precedes and governs communication, which transports the "idea," the signified content; (3) because men are *already* in a state that allows them to communicate their thought to themselves and to each other when, in a continuous manner, they invent the particular means of communication, writing.[77]

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[75] Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 123.

[76] Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 3.

[77] Ibid., 4. Here, Derrida is summarizing Condillac's account of language and communication.

Thus, in this model, there is a privileging of the spoken utterance, which precedes writing (though the "idea" precedes both). Writing is merely the representation of speech, a negligible utilitarian vehicle for the all-important uttered "idea" which writing does not seem to affect. Said in another way, it is represented as something analogous to a spoken dialogue between two partners: the simple transference of an ideal content (fully transparent and consciously present to itself) at a fully present moment of utterance, in which its fully present sender transmits it to a fully present addressee.

Yet since writing indicates the *absence* of both sender and addressee (who are no longer present when one is dealing with a text), writing is conceived as a modified "extenuation" of presence: writing, viewed as a representation of speech, seems to fix the problem of absence, a supplement that wards-off any sense of radical or total absence.[78] But, the sender is radically absent once he or she puts a mark upon a page, no longer around to clear up misunderstandings and delimit meanings and further clarify intentions or helpfully describe their exact historical milieu (particular after his or her death). Thus, the written marks "will constitute a machine which is productive in turn, and which [an author's] future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder its functioning" even despite the lack of any attachment to a "real-world" referent.[79] Moreover, the addressee must also be radically absent (not only a distant or modified absence) if writing in general is to make any sense at all—it must be readable (iterable, repeatable) despite the absolute absence of any

[78] Ibid.," 5-6.

[79] Ibid., 8.

addressee whatsoever. This is because any written code, to be a code at all, must include within its very structure the incipient possibility of repetition and decipherment regardless of any empirically given receiver.[80]

We now see the problem of presences, and can perhaps push on a bit further in our assessment of "context" (and the historical-critical reliance upon this concept) by provisionally citing Derrida's concept of the "instituted trace." This idea is inspired (though probably not "intended") by Saussure. Speaking of Saussure and the notion that the relationship between signifier and signified is "arbitrary," Derrida remarks that any symbolic mark implies the structure of the "instituted trace" in a given symbolic system: it indicates both that there is "no 'natural attachment' [of a signifier] to the signified in reality" and that it "cannot be thought without thinking the retention of difference within a structure of reference where difference appears *as such* and thus permits a certain liberty of variations among the full terms."[81] While this "retention of difference" applies to words (for example "sadness" must be conceived not as a term with positive "meaningful" value in itself, but only in differential relation to "despondence" and "blue" and "down" and "melancholy" and "happy" in English (and these other words too, in turn, exhibit endless differential relationships with *yet more* words), it also applies to thinking of

[80] Ibid., 7-8.

[81] Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; 2d ed.; Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 46-47.

"origins" and "presences"—in fact, this absence-becoming-presence character of the trace must first be thought before any "entity" can be thought at all.[82]

Perhaps the best way to articulate this concept for the present discussion is to return to the above dialogue between two partners. How may one know that the speaker or even the context is "present?" Is it not, in fact, that presence only occurs in the non-space and non-time between what we call "past" and "future"—that it can only be conceived differentially in an endless series of different and deferring "presences" that are no longer or not yet truly "present?"

In sum, the experience of pure presence does not exist according to Derrida.[83] Of course, no one would deny that speakers often speak and are understood at certain times and places, but thinking this *differánce* (difference and deferral) carefully must lead one to question the privilege of those uttering "presences" that writing allegedly "represents." Written signifiers are readable even if severed from any "real-world" referent, any certain present (the patient reader will note that "Sophie barked in the yard" is understandable even if that reader has neither met my dog Sophie nor seen my yard; there is no natural attachment of signifier to signified in reality). Writing theoretically continues to function despite utter non-presence, and its author exerts no final control of the meaning of his or her written marks which continue to act in turn precisely "because he *has not employed his absolutely actual and present intention or attention,* the plenitude of his desire to say what he means, in order to sustain what seems to be written 'in his

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[82] Ibid., 47.

[83] Cf. Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 10.

name.'"[84] Intention cannot be exhausted by the written mark, nor limited by "context." An immediate consequence of writing then entails a radical break between "presences" of author and reader and the notion of "semantic transport of the desire to mean what one says."[85]

Prior to returning to Collins and a concrete example of all of this from the book of Ecclesiastes, we must cite extensively once more from Derrida. This is to further refine the discussion of iterability, which we have seen is nothing other than a necessary structural component of the written sign itself, of its instrinsic readability and repeatability. Even the spacing between signifiers allows such signifiers and phrases to be isolated "out of context" and quoted elsewhere, in a new context (linguistic and "real world") which in turn must prompt yet another context, repeating this process *ad infinitum* (as the reader will notice, I have quoted from Wellhausen at the outset of this chapter of "mine" partly in order to emphasize the point).[86] Derrida writes:

> …the possibility of disengagement and citational graft which belongs to the structure of every mark, spoken or written, and which constitutes every mark in writing before and outside of every horizon of semio-linguistic communication; in writing, which is to say in the possibility of its functioning being cut off, at a certain point, from its

[84] Ibid., 8 (emphasis mine).

[85] Ibid., 8-9.

[86] Ibid., 9. The use of the opening quotation in this chapter partially demonstrates Derrida's concern: it is Wellhausen's writing, but placed into a different "literary context" and removed from its "historical context," and may serve very different purposes than its "original" meaning. It is Wellhausen's words, but also now "my own" as I quote them. So whose language is *this* dissertation? Whose writing is this? Where did it *originate*? It is *mine*, but is it also not a patchwork of quotations from elsewhere—cited and un-cited—including phrases and wording and concepts and pieces of argumentation borrowed purposely and accidentally from other sources, other teachers, other writings and contexts whose "sources" are not always certain?

> "original" desire-to-say-what-one-means and from its participation in a saturable and constraining context. Every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be *cited,* put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchorage… What would be a mark that could not be cited? Or one whose origins would not get lost along the way?[87]

Perhaps, by this point, the reader is tired of so much theory and abstraction, that we must now turn to the more *serious* business of "application" to demonstrate "real-world" significance (an accusation that must, incidentally, admit a certain detachment of signifier from referent in its own way). The consequences of this discussion are particularly compelling for the book of Ecclesiastes, for example.

Collins and Ecclesiastes?

Often overlooked by biblical critics is the fact that the book of Qohelet consists of an extended quotation. The third-person anonymous voice that most scholars call the "frame narrator" of the book occurs in 1:1-2 and 12:9-14 whereas the remaining portion overwhelmingly consists of the first-person voice of Qohelet.[88] Like most of the wisdom literature, its "historical context" has been notoriously difficult to isolate, though arguments for the Persian period based on socio-economic and linguistic grounds, or the Hellenistic period based on philosophical and conceptual

[87] Ibid., 12.

[88] See, for example, James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (OTL 26; Philadelphia: Westminster 1987), 39, 55-58 or Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth* (ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. O.C. Jr. Dean; Herminia; Minneapolis: Fortress 2004), 39-42.

grounds will no doubt continue.[89] Again, we note that the presupposition here is often that settling its "context" will be the key to its "meaning" based upon what can reasonably thought to be the conceptual worldview of its speaker to a present audience in that context (or, if writer, presumably the present moment of his or her intention, fully present and transparent to itself, captured within the written mark, within that context). Immediately, with Derrida in mind and still working with the traditional text/context distinction, we are confronted with a new set of problems: (1) allowing for the "frame narrator" hypothesis, it is clear that this narrator quotes Qohelet. The biblical critic is constrained to admit that Qohelet's words themselves have already been "taken out of context." Whose historical context may thus be cited to constrain the "meaning" of the book? The narrator's or Qohelet's? (2) Biblical critics often allow that Qohelet's discourse quotes *other* proverbs,[90] which again, must already be taken "out of context." The same problem regarding whose historical context determines the meaning again presents itself; what is the appropriate contextual "origin?" (3) Supposing that scholarship can settle a historical minimum context from which to work for 450-150 BCE, is there a "center" to that context which can be reasonably determinative for the "meaning" of the book (is it social, or political, or intellectual, or domestic, or religious—and how could one decide?). Collins himself attempts to bypass the issue: "As in the case of other Wisdom books, however, exact dating is not crucial here," and this is because

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[89] C.L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (ABD 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 21-36, continues to defend a Persian-period date for the book, while most other scholars default to a Hellenistic date. For the latter, see Kruger, *Qoheleth,* 21-22.

[90] C.L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 79, 88 *passim*; James Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 29, 132-140, *passim*.

"Qoheleth is primarily concerned with aspects of life, and death, that are pertinent to all times and places."[91] If so, then, how is the historical-critic to isolate meaning within a generalized and unclear historical context? Further still, it would appear that Qoheleth has little to say that might be "theological" according to Collins' model, as the book has little to say about God. Perhaps Barthes words are particularly appropriate here: "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture," where the "power" of the writer is simply "to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any of them."[92] In sum, the search for an "original" historical context for the book of Ecclesiastes is infinitely deflected and deferred within the writing itself, leading only to more "contexts" and quotations, texts and citations with no certain origin or center. Picking any one of them to constrain this endless deferral of meaning is possible, but arbitrary, and must be recognized as such.

Collins is certainly not ignorant of problems of iterability and context—as cited previously, he writes that "a text may take on new meanings in changing circumstances." Similarly, John Barton too (in citing an example from Borges) observes that "[a] text can in [some] sense change its meaning over time, but by dint of becoming a new text verbally identical with the original one."[93] He explains: "We use quotations from the Bible, from Shakespeare, from other works in quite a different sense from what they have within those works, and are perfectly happy to

[91] John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress), 519.

[92] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *Image Music Text* (trans. Stephen Heath; New York: Noonday Press, 1968), 146.

[93] Barton, *Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 84.

mean by them what *we* mean, not what the texts in question originally meant."[94] Interestingly, Barton here cites himself in reference to a previous book that he has written, re-using a term to explain this phenomenon which he has previously called "creative transcription."[95] This, however, further complicates the quest for meaning in Ecclesiastes, for example: has the "frame narrator" resorted to a "creative transcription" of Qohelet's text—one verbally identical to that of Qohelet's discourse, but not quite what Qohelet "originally meant?" Has Qohelet quoted (misquoted?) and "creatively transcribed" traditional proverbial sayings within his own discourse with no regard for what these "originally" meant? Such questions again concern points of historical "origin," where the notion of "creative transcription" presupposes a textual ground and certain foundation to distinguish between original inscription and creative transcription. Instead of such stable ground, even supposing one takes the entire "text" of Ecclesiastes (abandoning the "frame narrator" hypothesis for the "book") as a point of departure, one rather finds an unstable "text" that bleeds into its margins, melds into other texts, and stumbles into other "contexts" while seeming to evade its own "origins."

Thus the text/context distinction increasingly becomes suspect. To read at all requires the reader to assent to, and take part of, the text's "context"—endeavoring to identify with (however minimally) and understand its language—thus confusing

[94] Ibid., 84 (emphasis mine).

[95] Ibid.

any certain boundary where text ends and "context" begins.[96] One furthermore reads from one's own "real-world" context, always out of the text's historical context, but also within its peculiar linguistic context, which is (confusingly) also "the text."[97] As Bennington notes, "[t]here are only contexts, and one cannot proceed to make the usual text/context distinction unless one has already taken the text in itself, out of 'its' context, before one demands that it be placed back in."[98] Moreover, such demands are inevitably "already interested and cannot be neutral."[99] This is pace Collins' explicit claim, however, that historical criticism provides a "neutral" ground for dialogue among people with different faith commitments and perspectives, since delimiting any historical "context" (out of an infinite number) is itself already interested.

Derrida certainly allows that there may be a place for talk of historical settings in interpretation,[100] but it cannot determine the whole of "meaning." After all, if Derrida had been told that any "serious" interpretation of Saussure must be limited to Saussure's historical context and authorial intent in order to clarify Saussure's "truth," then perhaps there would have been no "Derrida" at all. Rather,

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[96] Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, "Derridabase," in *Jacques Derrida: Derridabse/ Circumfession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 91.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Bennington, "Derridabase," 90.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Derrida, "Signature Event Context," suggests that (as an alternative to Austin's performative) one might construct "a differential typology of forms of iteration" where "the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance," (18). Derrida likewise does not seem radically ahistorical either; he rather seems cautious about how appeals to "history" are used and abused, see Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 128-30, Bennington, "Derridabase," 85, 87-90.

the project of Derrida's reading of Saussure was "to follow, through Saussure, a line of thought that Saussure cannot be said to have mastered, nor even to have completely articulated, but which opens onto questions that Saussure himself, and linguistics as a science or discipline, certainly cannot contain."[101] In short, Derrida can be said to have understood Saussure in a way that Saussure never quite understood himself, and his "creative transcription" of Saussure's text (by taking it out of "context" and ignoring Saussure's original "intentions") is precisely what led to Derrida's creative reading of Saussure and the beginning of his deconstructive program.

To conclude this section, it must be stated outright that the foregoing foray in "postmodern" theory—especially that of Derrida—is not intended as a blanket affirmation of the "postmodernist" program. An explanation of some of the intricacies of Derrida's account of language is not intended as some unequivocal endorsement of that account. Exposition does not necessarily imply agreement (and the present discussion will return to "postmodern" theory and certain accounts of language in the next chapter). Nor is the foregoing discussion an attempt to entirely dismiss the historical-critical enterprise. A reasonable person will still likely argue that interpreting a text within a "historical context" still seems to "work" in some practical sense, and produces certain insights and contributes to the scholarly discussion. What Derrida and Barthes have provided, however, is a barrage of objections, rooted in some complex theoretical thought, to a rather uncritical reliance upon "context" as the key to "meaning." At best, the appeal to "context" can

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[101] Geoffrey Bennington, "Derrida's Reading of Saussure" in *Other Analyses: Reading Philosophy* (eBook; Atlanta: Bennington, 2004), 235.

be vague. Thus, the most basic objection to Collins' position remains: is the evaluation of a text within a "historical context" what makes a certain type of scholarship unbiased and "critical" rather than biased and "confessional?" John Collins has attempted to engage "postmodern" thought in "Is a Postmodern Biblical Theology Possible?" but it is clear that some of the more substantive issues and arguments raised by theorists like Jacques Derrida have not been addressed. It seems that "context" is rather easy (and perhaps necessary) to invoke, but remains fraught as any definite "critical" concept, and our choices about which historical contexts to invoke are anything but neutral, unbiased, and free of value judgment.

Theoretical Over-Abstractionism:
The Argument for "Common Ground"

If Collins may be critiqued for offering an under-theorized reliance upon historical "context," it is perhaps ironic that certain other parts of his proposal strike one as overly theoretical. By this, I mean only to indicate that his conception of "biblical theology" occasionally stumbles over abstract intellectual "problems" that do not seem to actually translate into actual, real-life problems. For Collins, "biblical theology" is viable as an academic discipline since it serves the interest of "public discussion regardless of faith commitments" and furthermore that "it is concerned with the truth-claims and ethical values presented by the biblical text." Again, it is "critical" because such ethics and truth-claims are always "open to question."[102] Collins' commitment to responsible public engagement is commendable, as is his

[102] Collins, "Is a Postmodern Biblical Theology Possible?" 3 (emphasis mine).

readiness to set aside confessional differences in the interest of scholarly dialogue, and his faith that this can be done in a relatively dispassionate manner upon the common footing of historical criticism—which is allegedly indifferent to religious commitments. Commenting on Levinson, for example, Collins' single-minded commitment to dialogue is again evident when he writes:

> One of the great strengths of historical criticism has been that it has created an arena where people with differing faith commitments can work together. The bracketing of religious identities and faith commitments has allowed dispassionate assessment of historical and literary questions, even when this might seem subversive to the religious identities in question…there is much that can be discussed [about distinct articles of faith] from a neutral perspective…[103]

and also that

> Perhaps the outstanding achievement of historical criticism in this century is that it has provided a framework within which scholars of different prejudices and commitments have been able to debate in a constructive manner.[104]

Yet with all of Collins' sensitivity to issues of difference and dedication to an inclusive and authentic dialogue, his argument for the "neutral" value of historical criticism and the common ground that it provides, one needs to remember that it simultaneously serves to exclude certain biases and assumptions at best (especially confessional ones), or exclude some actual participants from the "conversation" at worst. This is precisely because it "sets limits" and dictates the rules by which the discussion must proceed. From one vantage point, Collins is open and inclusive; from another, he sponsors a very exclusive scholarly program. Collins implies that without a historical approach we are destined to have a text that can "mean just

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[103] Ibid., 4.

[104] Ibid., 16-17.

anything at all" since there is no sure foundation to mediate amongst passionate and conflicting faith commitments (although one wonders if any number of "commonalities" between scholars might satisfactorily lead to dialogue). Thus Collins may even serve to preclude the sincerest form of dialogue—an impassioned one that makes no apologies for commitment and so demands authentic engagement rather than polite scholarly deference.

Therefore just as Collins critiques of Childs are based, in part, upon pragmatic (or practical) grounds—that Childs' confessional view of the canon discourages dialogue with those who do not share the same view—Collins is subject to the same critique. Collins seems to overestimate the ability of historical study to provide an adequate "common ground" necessary to engender fruitful discussion and debate. Logically speaking, it is true that perfect agreement requires absolute assent to the exact same assumptions and premises as another speaker in a dialogue. But, one might well ask if this ever really happens? Again, logically speaking, this is the ideal scenario as long as one's chief value is consensus instead of (for example) the process of dialogue itself. But it is odd that Collins would value consensus so highly in light of his own "principle of criticism" which suggests a thoroughgoing hermeneutic of suspicion, even—or maybe especially—toward any "consensus" view. As Lyotard states, the goal of debate and dialogue is *not* consensus since consensus is always merely "a particular state of discussion."[105]

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[105] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*: *A Report on Knowledge* (trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi; Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984) 65, cf. 61.

So one might well doubt if it's quite true that a "confessional" approach like that of Childs serves to undercut dialogue as Collins avers.[106] It may seem correct on the face of it, but in fact Collins' own practical engagement with Childs proves that, in practice, such a demand for a common ground (as a prerequisite for dialogue) rings somewhat hollow. The fact that Collins is able to extensively engage Childs (and other scholars with a "confessional bias") on matters about "biblical theology" itself seems a very productive dialogue. Collins' own conception of "biblical theology" is constructed in view of (and in contrast to) the "confessional" variety that others like de Vaux, Childs, Levenson, and von Rad supposedly promote. Throughout his work, Collins is clearly in "dialogue" with these other scholars who enable him to sharpen and refine his own position. Their presuppositions—all of which may be different and begin from different starting points—it turns out, do not categorically exclude the possibility of dialogue with Collins. Nor do those different presuppositions exclude a very real opportunity to learn and grow from the work of other scholars, even to "provisionally entertain" and appreciate their respective presuppositions without necessarily agreeing with them. They only truly exclude an

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[106] See John Goldingay, "Review: *Encounters With Biblical Theology,*" Int 66, no 1 (2007): 88-90. Goldingay writes, "Collins sees a difference between his allegiance to this framework [of critical historiography] and the confessional position of the biblical theologians he mentions. They privilege certain positions and exempt them from the requirement of supporting arguments, and that takes biblical theology out of the public discussion. Privileging historical criticism is not analogous, because the distinctive mark of historical criticism is that any position is open to discussion in light of new evidence. *This does not seem to me a convincing case for the existence of this difference*. Even if individual historical-critical theories are open to discussion, those three separate principles of historical criticism are not. Conversely, biblical theology is just as committed to rethinking positions as historical criticism is. Of course, it rethinks positions in light of its own framework, its recognition of a particular canon. But so does historical criticism," (89, emphasis mine).

admittedly elusive search for absolute agreement and consensus. Dialogue need not be a means to an end. It may be a valuable end in itself.

Moreover, Collins' conception of some ideal scholarly dialogue is vague in the sense that it is still not clear how any of the proposed participants in that discussion are supposed to move from a history of Israelite religious thought to "theology"—if at all. If "biblical theology" were practiced in the way that Collins envisions it, it seems reasonable to assume the products of such historical studies would be somehow valuable to various confessional communities despite all of their biases. Here, we might tentatively call this "theological appropriation" for contemporary communities of readers. Again, there is no hermeneutical path provided for such appropriation, and a disallowance of confessional biases from the outset tends to limit the "biblical theology" discussion to the domain of scholarship alone. Collins would seem satisfied with this situation, and—in fairness—"theological appropriation" is not his primary concern. From my own perspective, though, this is problematic because this entire matter crosses over into the realm of public responsibility. If "biblical theology" is only a historical discussion among objectively-minded scholars who have set aside religious commitments, there still seems to be a corresponding responsibility to engage "confessional" interpretations of the Bible that are occurring in all corners of society: churches, temples, synagogues, etc. This is not so much a methodological critique of Collins as it is an ethical one: what recourse is available to the scholar beyond somehow convincing the Mormon or the Free Will Baptist to set aside their prejudices and attain some "common ground" before talking of the Bible and its "theology?"

Another reason why Collins' conceptualization of biblical theology suffers from overly-theoretical abstraction is that it purchases the possibility for dialogue with others at the expense of entering into a more authentic dialogue with the biblical texts themselves. Again, it does this while simultaneously neglecting those whose practical "confessional" commitments call for a more sophisticated theological approach (or hermeneutic) than Collins' model allows. A thoroughgoing methodological skepticism puts the texts under such a pervasive shadow of doubt and such a demanding burden of proof that story (rather than history) is all the texts might aspire to after all—even if it is a "paradigmatic" one. According to Collins' view of "biblical theology," and in a manner of speaking, the biblical texts can be critiqued, but cannot (so to speak) talk back, offer any critique of their own, or meet such strenuous standards of evidence.[107] The texts may be judged according to the bar of modern ethics, but the texts have no recourse to do any judging of their own. Their metaphysical claims may be explained or discounted, but not affirmed. The God portrayed therein as a literary character may be described, but cannot be granted any ontological status beyond the page upon which God appears. One may examine the "theological" claims in the text (always within the "historical context," regardless of how vague this allegedly "critical" concept is) and the basis upon

[107] See Goldingay, "Review: Encounters," 90: "To give the various presuppositions of historical criticism the power to trump every other value means we can never escape from the limitations of our worldview. For my students, a key aim of biblical interpretation is to make the Bible say things they agree with, because they do not feel free to reject openly anything the Bible says. Collins does not need to do that, because he feels free to disagree with the Bible. But the disadvantage of both stances is the same. We can never learn, or rather, we can learn only within the framework of what we already believe. Doing biblical theology within the framework of historical criticism, as within any other framework (e.g., dispensationalism or feminism), can enable us to make individual discoveries and can resource the beliefs we already have, but we cannot broaden the framework."

which they are made alongside some requisite observations about the "genre" of a given text, but is that really all? Is this sufficient?

Since Collins explicitly mentions his own admittedly academic context ("My context…is an academic one, and my concern is for developing an approach to the Bible that takes account of current scholarship as fully as possible"[108]), one does well to consider the implied audience of any proposal regarding "biblical theology." As a professor in the Yale Divinity School, his current actual audience is an academic one, while the implied audience of his writing is largely other scholars and an interested secular "public." Yet it is unclear why the latter audience would care about theology in general, let alone biblical theology, at all. Neither can Collins explain why this abstract audience *should* care. His proposal does enable anyone, in principle, to engage in the discussion of "biblical theology" (of a very particular sort) regardless of religious presupposition. But in theoretically addressing this abstract "everyone" Collins succeeds in concretely addressing no one, that is, no one in particular. The pragmatic, lived reality of the biblical scholar is one where law schools train lawyers, and medical schools train medical doctors, so it is still reasonable to assume that divinity schools, theological schools, and seminaries train theologians. Such aspiring theologians do not always have the luxury of choosing to forego confessional or religious presuppositions and are expected by their respective audiences (whether it be their presbyteries or future synagogues or future congregations or future study groups, etc.) to use them, and to use them in a sophisticated manner that is "critical" in its own right. Or worse, the biblical scholar

[108] Collins, *Bible after Babel*, 134.

is expected to compartmentalize: to bracket out or pretend that religious conviction and presupposition is not vital and central to one's self-identity, and that it should not substantively impact one's scholarship anyway (although claiming one's identity as a woman in feminist scholarship or liberationist among liberation theologians are acceptable to Collins, even though it is unclear why these particular biases should be allowable and not also threatened with the charge of "excelling" in bias). While Collins' proposal takes a rather lofty view of the critic and scholar (who is uniquely enabled to stand over-against religious tradition and authority), it cannot offer much in the way of praxis for the "critic" who merely wishes to stand in continuity with, and as a sophisticated and critical (in its own way) transmitter of a body of tradition. A basic genre competence and ability to describe biblical "God-language" cannot summarily meet the practical requirements of mature theological reflection. As Dr. Dale B. Martin—a colleague of John Collins at the Yale Divinity School—has written:

> There are few places in our societies where people are taught to think theologically in an adult way. Most churches don't do it. Most schools don't do it. So whereas modern adults mature in their views of psychology, personhood, and nature itself, they continue to act like children in their assumptions about God, faith, right and wrong when discussed religiously . . . This approach is no less true for interpreting the Bible. Just as the doing of theology is a skill that must be learned if one is to progress from a childish faith to a mature faith, so people must be taught how to read the Bible with mature theological lenses.[109]

And so it is with this comment that the present chapter will come to an end: on the issue of pedagogy. After all, an academic scholar is always (and perhaps foremost) a

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[109] Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 73-74.

teacher. This is an issue that cannot be finessed: every scholar must apparently decide whether a commitment to an abstract idea of intellectual honesty and logical rigor (as they see it) simultaneously constitutes a studied avoidance of the practical realities and pragmatic needs of one's students. This too is a question of ethics and responsibility. The question of pedagogy remains, especially in relation to historical criticism, and the problem was already apparent in 1882. This chapter opened with a quote from Julius Wellhausen, offering his rationale for resigning from a theological faculty: "only gradually did I come to understand that a professor of theology also has the practical task of preparing the students for service in the Protestant Church, and that I am not adequate to this practical task, but that instead despite all caution on my own part I make my hearers unfit for their office." The "practical task" or pedagogical orientation of the biblical scholar perhaps deserves more consideration than Collins gives it. And so, as my own dialogue with Collins draws to a close, and despite the differences among our assumptions and our overall lack of "common ground," I recognize (as further proof of the tenuousness of the "common ground" argument) that I have indeed learned much from him and am grateful for that. Despite our lack of consensus, the dialogue—as I see it—has been eminently worthwhile.

Conclusion

To conclude, Collins never explicitly discusses the issue of scholarly identity, yet his writings on the relationship between theology and biblical scholarship overwhelmingly (and perhaps unintentionally) amount to and chiefly convey what counts as "critical" scholarship, and so implicitly who counts as a critical scholar.

These are, of course, important questions. But the implications of Collins' work are a mixed blessing insofar as his work tends to draw fairly opaque boundaries: once one carefully delineates and defines what counts as *serious* critical scholarship, one simultaneously excludes what is implicitly "unserious," "uncritical," and (thus) non-scholarly—or in other words, what need not be granted any further discussion. This may seem utterly trite and obvious, but exclusion of the "unserious" may be more of a subtle ideological maneuver (regardless of intention) rather than the inevitable rational judgment of the ostensibly "unbiased" and "critical" scholar. This should be deemed wholly unacceptable in that it is inimical to Collins' ideal of open dialogue between scholars. In this regard, his approach is problematic in that it attempts to establish the broadest neutral basis for dialogue between scholars of varying perspectives (the basis of "history" and "historical context") while excluding the biases of those perhaps for whom the biblical texts are *most* important and valued (those of a confessional faith). To still participate in the conversation, any confessional presuppositions must be "bracketed out" with the effect of requiring a compartmentalized identity and, in this sense, a pretense or fictionalized version of one's self. Any *a priori* valuation of biblical texts (whether it be ontological status, existential commitment, or otherwise) issues from an *a priori* dogmatic bias rather than something inherent to the texts themselves, and so (for Collins) unacceptably subordinates biblical criticism to religious dogmatism. While this all makes for good academic scholarship, it remains under-theorized in its rather uncritical bias toward a vague notion of a historical "context" to determine meaning, and overly-theorized in that it exaggerates an abstract commitment to a "common ground" for actual

dialogue and debate to be worthwhile. Moreover, the actual practice of Collins' "biblical theology" appears only to be a type of "history of Israelite religious thought," and offers no viable hermeneutic by which contemporary readers might actually appropriate such "historical meaning." To Collins credit, however, it must be said that he really does provide a plausible niche for a rather qualified version of "biblical theology" to be carried out within academia, although it is severely constrained, its precise audience(s) are uncertain, and its ultimate *practical* and pedagogical usefulness is not guaranteed. He manages to incorporate a variety of methods and approaches that might be employed to accomplish it. He therefore builds upon previous work, while working toward consensus, under the assumption of progress. But whom, ultimately, does such a thin version of "biblical theology" serve?

CHAPTER THREE: THE BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

> When the church conducts its liturgy, when the church reads the Bible, when the church declares the gospel, it engages in a counteract, counteracting the world so long dominant among us. The most important resistance to this evangelical counter-imagination does not come from militant secularists. It comes from well-intentioned believers who are infected with modernity.[1]
>
> -Walter Brueggemann

The previous chapter has provided a summary and critique of the work of John Collins and his conceptualization of the task of biblical theology. Now we turn to the very different approach practiced by Walter Brueggemann. Collins would likely label Brueggemann's practice of biblical theology a "confessional" one. While some of the differences between these two scholars can be attributed to their academic context (Collins is currently a professor at Yale University, and Brueggemann is an emeritus professor of the Old Testament from Columbia Theological Seminary), other differences need be attributed to deep philosophical and hermeneutical differences between them, as well as to very different notions about whom any alleged work of biblical theology or theological interpretation should serve.

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 55.

Reductively, one could argue that the terminus of such work for Collins is academic dialogue, and perhaps the interested secular public, and only tangentially communities of faith. For Brueggemann, works of biblical theology are intended to address Christian and Jewish faith communities and their leaders, and perhaps only tangentially any interested secular academy or broader public. Whereas Collins attempts to remain as objective as possible, Brueggemann dismisses objectivity as neither possible nor desirable. While Collins largely embraces the ongoing Enlightenment project of modernity, Brueggemann will resist and reject aspects of Enlightenment thought, and eventually attempt to give justice to an alleged "postmodern" situation at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The following will attempt to trace certain trajectories of thought within various works of Walter Brueggemann's career from the 1970s to the late 1990s. The purpose here is to provide the most comprehensive account possible, and attempt to do justice to the density of his thought and the remarkable consistency he has maintained over the course of his prolific career. Since much of Brueggemann's work since 1997 has remained conversant and relatively consistent with the vision set forth in his landmark *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, the following discussion and critique will primarily focus on this particular work.

Brueggemann's Early Work: A Theological "Tract for the Times" in the 1970's

A cursory overview of Walter Brueggemann's earliest writings reveal a thought process deeply steeped in the theology of Karl Barth and other neo-Orthodox theologians, as well as the broader reformed Calvinist tradition more generally. In

this regard, Brueggemann's hermeneutical process was profoundly and pervasively *dialectical* even in his earliest works. Specifically, this is to say that his arguments tend to proceed based on a posited opposition between two polar claims, where one claim is countered with the second, and each claim mutually illuminates and corrects the other. Such reasoning always results in a certain *tension* that can then be probed and examined in an expository manner.

The Early 1970's: In Man We Trust

It likewise appears that, for Brueggemann, the historical context[2] of the ancient biblical texts may be dialectically illuminated via one's contemporary situation, and vice versa. One can suppose that Brueggemann took Barth's oft-paraphrased (but never definitively cited from Barth's work) dictim to heart: that theology must be done with a Bible in one hand, and a newspaper in the other.[3] Considering the sociopolitical turmoil of the 1970's, whether it be the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, the ongoing Vietnam War, the destabilization of the Middle East, or the threat of global nuclear proliferation, one senses that such issues are never far from the purview of Brueggemann's early scholarship. In 1972's *In Man We Trust*, for example, he writes: "I have argued here that for our moment in cultural history,

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[2] While the previous chapter has problematized the notion of "context" as a critical concept, I use it here and throughout the remainder of this chapter because Brueggemann himself uses this word, and because consideration of "context" (in all of its facets) is still necessary for interpretation despite the fact that it may not yield assured, objective, positivistic, or ideologically neutral results.

[3] Princeton Theological Seminary, "On Barth, the Bible, and Newspapers," *Center for Barth Studies* <http://www.ptsem.edu/library/barth/default.aspx?menu1_id=8457&id=8450> (last accessed 16 February 2014). The exact source for this particular phraseology has not been established, although personal interviews and anecdotal evidence suggest that this is indeed a paraphrase of Barth's position.

these elements in Scripture [ones that 'affirm the world, celebrate culture, and affirm human responsibility and capability'] provide our best opportunity to make contact between biblical faith and the culture in which we do our 'faithing.'"[4] In addition to drawing an explicit connection between the Bible and modern culture, one needs to note the "we" and "our" in such phrases—Brueggemann aligns himself very early on with what he terms the "faith of the church,"[5] and this church is often his intended audience: he explicitly recognizes that "this is a book which has been nurtured in the church and is addressed to it."[6] It is precisely this embrace of a confessional identity and allusions to an urgent contemporary circumstance in need of a theological discourse that immediately distinguish Brueggemann's work from that of John Collins.

Notably, Brueggemann states that his attempt to articulate wisdom literature as a vital biblical tradition in *In Man We Trust*, for example, "constitutes a considerable threat to the theological establishment that dominates much of Protestantism," and that the "major features of wisdom theology stand in direct contrast to the central tenets of much church faith" via its celebration of everyday

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[4] Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972), 7. This book was subsequently republished in a second edition: see Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (2d. ed.; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006). This chapter aims to examine Brueggemann's work in a chronological fashion. Therefore, first editions will be cited wherever appropriate in an effort to trace the development of Brueggemann's thought chronologically, and without immediate consideration of any later revisions to his earlier works.

[5] Ibid., 7.

[6] Ibid., 8.

life and broader culture.[7] Thus, even within his earliest work, while Brueggemann may be writing *for* the church, he simultaneously and vigorously writes *against* it and in *opposition* to it. The degree to which Brueggemann's confessional affiliation ultimately biases his scholarship may be debated, but it is clear, regardless, that he routinely understands his work as an overt challenge to received confessional dogma and tradition.

Furthermore, Brueggemann also offers some frank challenges to earlier theological scholarship. Speaking of von Rad, for example, he writes:

> The whole scholarly enterprise which understands Scripture in terms of the "mighty deeds of God" structures Scripture around the decisive *intrusions* of God into the historical process. Thus, the Exodus event is a *disruption* of the Egyptian situation. The return from exile is a *disruption* of the Babylonian arrangement . . . Theologically we have valued the *discontinuities* and ignored the continuity of abiding order in culture and the texts which affirm them.[8]

Thus, *In Man We Trust* attempts to recover and emphasize wisdom literature as a corrective to an established theology that has been primarily interested in God's "mighty deeds" over the commonplaces of everyday life and culture.

Finally, and also in contrast to scholars like Collins, Brueggemann is candid about his own cultural location as an interpreter within his early work. At the conclusion of *In Man We Trust*, he offers the following reflection:

> I find myself doing a kind of theology which I do not expect myself to be doing. Each time it surprises me because it is in some ways a radical departure from all that I have been taught and think I believe. If I were more pious I would say I have been unable to resist the guidance of the Holy Spirit. *I prefer to say I have been pressed by the*

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[7] Ibid., 14.

[8] Ibid., 23 (author's emphases).

> *times*. In that context my Scripture studies lead me this way and it makes sense *in light of our times* as I understand it… No doubt in being pressed this way and led to these conclusions is largely determined by my autobiography, as is the case of most of the people engaged with the turnaround of theology. The same is true of every theology, and perhaps it is really the autobiography *of our generation*. From that it may follow that it is only *a tract for the time*, perhaps a very brief time, but just now it is a tract that should be offered.[9]

Consequently, even in his earliest thought, Brueggemann seems to acknowledge that biblical theology, as he understands it, is never finished. It is an endeavor taken up again and again, always in light of the contemporary situation of a new generation, and illuminated by a careful, rigorous, and indeed "critical" study of the biblical texts.

The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions

Needless to say, Brueggemann does not understand "critical" in the same methodological and epistemological sense that Collins does, nor does he rely on Troeltsch's principles of historiography as criteria to define the term. In this early period of his work, Brueggemann does believe that the task of biblical theology is a *historical* one, however. In *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions,* published in 1975, he argues that "the Old Testament represents the clash of faith tradition and *historical fact*."[10] He maintains that the "word of God" never occurs within the biblical texts as a sort of "eternal announcement," but is always "a 'tract for the times,' addressed to a particular crisis and to bring newness into history . . . always

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[9] Ibid., 124-25 (emphases mine).

[10] Walter Brueggemann and Hans Walter Wolff, *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 11. Cf. Walter Brueggemann and Hans Walter Wolff, *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* (2d. ed.; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982). Citations are taken from the first edition.

addressing an issue, always in history, for history, transforming history, always confronting person or community in a particular crisis."[11] Biblical theology is—in this sense—a historical undertaking (though we will see how this early view is further qualified in his later work). Simultaneously, however, he holds that biblical theology is not purely historical in any facile sense, and must also reach beyond history alone. For Brueggemann, a literalist (or fundamentalist) view that claims that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, for example, may not hold up under *historical* scrutiny, but the scholar who would stop there misses the fact that such a claim is foremost a "statement about the *theological authority* claimed by the books and attributed to them."[12] Biblical literature still may serve an important *theological* function even when historical evidence is found wanting or wholly insufficient.

While biblical theology is a historical enterprise, it is also a *critical* enterprise. The preface to *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* seems to illustrate another aspect of Brueggemann's dialectical approach when he claims that the essays within the book

> …are also studies in method. In high evangelical fashion they hold together the best *critical thinking* of disciplined scholarship and the *deepest passion to hear the text as God's word*. The authors are convinced that we need not choose between *critical awareness* and *passion*, and indeed that we may not have one without the other.[13]

He continues:

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[11] Ibid., 125. Here, one is also tempted to hear allusions to a Neo-Orthodox "theology of crisis" as well.

[12] Ibid., 123.

[13] Ibid., 7 (emphases mine).

> These essays provide and insist upon an alternative [to the view that reason is an enemy of faith], namely that *critical* discipline is a sure way in which the text is opened to a fresh hearing and the way in which its real authority is received among us. The authority of the text is not substantiated by pious disregard of what we know, but by mobilizing our best *critical* faculties for understanding and taking the text seriously.[14]

For Brueggemann, the rise of positivistic historical-critical scholarship may be partially responsible for eroding the alleged "authority" of the Bible, yet all contemporary interpreters have been influenced by this "scientific scholarship" in some way, and such scholarship has furthermore "achieved invaluable gains for us and we may not discount them."[15] Scholars are not free to neglect the conclusions of earlier historical scholarship in the interest of an ahistorical theological interpretation. Again, however, Brueggemann seeks to reach beyond any reductive historical-critical model since such a narrow approach meant that

> [i]nevitably the text came to be treated as a piece of evidence to be examined and explained. It was cut off from the community which fashioned and preserved it. Any advocatory dimension, whether ancient or contemporary, was lost and the text became an "it." It did not propose a *subject* to be taken seriously, but became an object to be explained. Obviously there can be no dialogue with an "it."[16]

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[14] Ibid., 7 (emphases mine). The odd but repeated appeals throughout all of Brueggemann's work (and during every period) about taking the text "seriously" serves an important polemical and ideological function against an implicit "unserious" alternative that does not, in fact, exist. No interpreter, to my knowledge, sees their own treatment of the text as "unserious." To claim to take the text "seriously" is merely to say that one's reading is legitimate, while other approaches to the text are ostensibly illegitimate. Notably, Collins' similar use of the word "serious" is usually applied to a scholarly approach or certain mode of scholarship (see chapter 2) whereas Brueggemann's use of the term is often applied to a manner of reading the text itself "seriously." This may be the seed of an eventual idea that comes to fruition in Brueggemann's work in the 1990's: that the "text" is all there is, and therefore all questions of history and ontology need be bracketed out in the task of biblical theology.

[15] Ibid., 14.

[16] Ibid., 14 (emphasis mine).

Such a notion of understanding the biblical text as a *subject* (or as *proposing a subject*) rather than an *object* will remain a cornerstone of Brueggemann's work throughout his career. He liberally draws upon the historical-critical scholarship of Wellhausen, Gunkel, Noth, Albright, and von Rad[17] yet also claims that "[s]criptural study has had its time of excessive manipulation of the text without attention to its strange claim to power."[18] Methodologically, and typical of his dialectical thought process and preoccupation with tensions during this period, Brueggemann recommends a balance between the scientific and the artistic modes for biblical exegesis and interpretation, between the analytical and synthetic, between scholarly discipline and poetic imagination—in short, a balance between what he sees as typified by the approach of Wellhausen on one hand and that of Gunkel on the other.[19] Only such a balance or "tension" between "scholarly discipline and artistic sensitivity" might achieve a modicum of "responsible" interpretation.[20]

Brueggemann also differs from many traditional historical-critical scholars in that he sees no essential need to constrict biblical interpretation to a period *only* within its original historical context. "For us," he writes,

> it is important to note that the choice of which stage of development to study heavily influences both methodology and conclusions. It is important for students of the literature to avoid a preoccupation with any single stage and to perceive the literature in its total career, as

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[17] Ibid., 15-28, cf. 28.

[18] Ibid., 14.

[19] Ibid., 20.

[20] Ibid., 22, cf. 20.

> being on the move in relation to the needs and imagination of the community which is in dialogue with it.[21]

For example, Brueggemann subscribes to a tradition-history approach which recognizes that the simple "tribal stories" posited by Gunkel in the book of Genesis were subsequently reworked and redacted into the present form as we have them now—along with von Rad (and Wolff), he affirms that such stories were *theologically* recast and reworked as expressions of faith. Thus, it is possible that "[t]hey now bear a message originally not part of them."[22] For von Rad—according to Brueggemann—the activity of "preservation and transmission is a theological one"[23] and that this theological process can be discerned within the text itself.[24] Therefore Brueggemann appears to agree with von Rad when the former writes that "[t]he Pentateuch did not arise in a vacuum but was made by a confessional community which worked carefully and knowingly, to shape its tradition to match its confession."[25] As such, "a confessional construction is not one the interpreter brings to the text. It is one he already finds there."[26] Unlike Collins, during this early period Brueggemann saw "confessionalism" as inherent to the biblical material itself rather than a sort of contemporary anachronism.

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[21] Ibid., 24.

[22] Ibid., 25.

[23] Ibid., 26.

[24] Ibid., 27.

[25] Ibid., 24.

[26] Ibid., 27.

While the majority of *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* concerns the work of Hans Walter Wolff (who himself was heavily influenced by von Rad[27]), Brueggemann's own distinctive voice is never difficult to discern.[28] The influences of von Rad and Wolff on his own work seem to further provoke a desire to move beyond traditional historical-critical scholarship, or to press the conclusions of such scholarship into the service of theological exposition. For example, he writes that

> If the documentary hypothesis is to be an effective tool of exegesis, as is here maintained, then the node of meaning is to be found at the precise moment when the old material is claimed by the faithful and addressed to the crisis at hand. Wolff's hermeneutic tries to show in every text Israel's struggle to keep its faith and yet seriously respond to its cultural context… Wolff's hermeneutic draws the interpreter into the circle where something decisive is happening. The meeting between the text and our own time hopefully can be a contest of great moment.[29]

Brueggemann's own attempt to apply Wolff's "kerygmatic methodology" to the P source exemplifies this move of putting historical-critical insight into the service of theological exposition, while also claiming that such an approach "appreciate[s] the dialectic of past-tradition and present situation."[30]

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[27] See Gerhad von Rad, "Das formgeschichtlichte Problem des Hexateuch" in *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1958), 58-75. Cf. Brueggemann, *Vitality of Old Testament Traditions*, 29.

[28] Brueggemann, *Vitality of Old Testament Traditions*, 39. While Brueggemann is explicitly commenting on Wolff's own hermeneutic, his sympathy with it is everywhere apparent. In fact, he even refers to it as "our hermeneutic" when he writes, "[b]ut *our own hermeneutic* suggests that the transforming process was powerful and persistent; and that whoever uses this approach will be drawn into the text's insistence on change. The interpreter, too, will be called upon to become what he never was before," 39 (emphasis mine).

[29] Ibid., 38.

[30] Ibid., 101-113, 113.

The Land

It is perhaps *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, first published in 1977, that marks a significant milestone in Brueggemann's early work.[31] It was written in view of a crisis in categories, when what was done in the name of "biblical theology" usually fell somewhere on a continuum between mere repetition of the pronouncements of dogmatic theology on one hand and a purely history-of-religions approach on the other.[32] This formulation intends to draw attention to the tension that lies between normative prescription and historical description. Embracing this dialectic, the task of Old Testament theology proper is then to work within this tension. Brueggemann begins the book with an observation about his own contemporary cultural situation: the study partly addresses "the urgent questions of the institutions in modern society concerned with a deep sense of rootlessness,"[33] since "[t]he sense of being lost, displaced, and homeless is pervasive in contemporary culture."[34] The other pole to the dialectic[35] constructed here is that "[l]and is a central, if not *the central theme* of biblical faith,"[36] and that

[31] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). For the most recent edition, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (2d. ed.; Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

[32] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land*, ix.

[33] Ibid., xv.

[34] Ibid., 1. No appeal is made to any specific research in order to substantiate this claim. One supposes this is simply Brueggemann's own reflection and assessment.

[35] For a brief account of "dialectic" here, see Brueggemann, *The Land*, xvii. Brueggemann acknowledges that his categories are similar to that suggested by Rolf Rendtorff, "although I have dealt more fully with the themes and developed them more *dialectically*," xvii (emphasis mine).

[36] Ibid., 3 (emphasis mine).

"[t]he Bible itself is primarily concerned with the issue of being displaced and yearning for a place."[37] Thus, Brueggemann turns to three different "histories of the land" in ancient Israel as a hermeneutical "prism"[38] or methodologically thematic way of organizing his study in biblical theology: the movement into the promised land, the movement into exile, and movement into the kingdom.[39] It is important to emphasize that this is not *actual* history but *remembered* history. Brueggemann writes that "[i]n each case the historical sequence might have culminated differently, but it was *experienced* and *remembered* in these concrete directions."[40]

I call this three-fold schematic of Brueggemann's a "milestone" in his work because it marks the first instance where he explicitly attempted to organize the majority of the Old Testament[41] into a heuristic framework. It is a framework not dictated by dogmatic categories, nor rigidly construed in historical categories, nor imposed upon the text from without, but—as he claims—is authorized by the text itself. Brueggemann claims that "my awareness of the movement of history to (a) *land*, (b) *exile*, (c) *kingdom* came not at the beginning but only at the end of my work. This three-fold pattern has grown out of the texts themselves, for that is how Israel's

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[37] Ibid., 2.

[38] Ibid., 184.

[39] Ibid., xv.

[40] Ibid., xv (emphases mine).

[41] Here, and in this entire chapter, I predominately use the term "Old Testament" rather than "Hebrew Bible" simply because it is the term most used in Brueggemann's work. I recognize that both terms are fraught with problems—none of which I will dwell on here.

story was remembered and retold."[42] This movement furthermore operates under the dialectic of "grasp and gift" of land (variously called landlessness-landedness, or even crucifixion-resurrection),[43] addressing the human problem of "homelessness" and rootlessness.[44]

Importantly, *The Land* too is necessarily historical *and* critical, but not historical-critical. Brueggemann writes:

> I have persistently been mindful of *critical* scholarly judgment, which I take most seriously. I have not knowingly violated any seriously established *critical* judgment. But my concern has been elsewhere. I have wanted, on the one hand, to avoid an arid historicism which makes the history closed, dead, and absolute, for then it is not history as the Bible embraces it. On the other hand, I have wanted to keep the imagery historical and not let it become general detached "myth" in a vacuum, a practice now much in vogue.[45]

Here one senses that Brueggemann seeks an alternative understanding of "history" and historical investigation, but the precise nature of this alternative understanding is not yet fully articulated. Later, and especially in the 1990s, Brueggemann will return to this issue.

Also significant in *The Land* is the interpretive decision to provisionally engage the New Testament through a heuristic framework derived from the Old Testament. Brueggemann acknowledges that this decision may be "innovative" and is candid about the risks of a particularistic reading that claims too much for the "history of the land in a narrowly Christian way," but expresses a desire that his

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[42] Ibid., xv (emphases original).

[43] Ibid., 194.

[44] Ibid., 187.

[45] Ibid., xvi (emphases mine).

study encourage fresh dialogue between Jews and Christians.[46] Jews and Christians, for him, share in the dialectic of "grasping and waiting" and "keeping and losing" with regard to land and land theology.[47] His rationale for such New Testament engagement is succinct, blunt, and unapologetically confessional: "I am compelled by my faith stance and my interpretive decisions to determine where land theology leads if it is understood as moving toward the New Testament."[48] But he also regards "[a]lternative Jewish readings" in different contexts and with other hermeneutical presuppositions as "equally appropriate and legitimate."[49]

Brueggemann also expresses hope that there is "a legitimate suggestion here of fresh ways in which the *intent of the text* might be discerned" within New Testament scholarship.[50] This is an interesting comment because it suggests that texts have intents of their own—not just sources and authors. One is tempted to attribute Brueggemann's eventual insistence on the phenomenon of the text in its entirety, its particular rhetoric, and the inescapable problem of textuality first articulated here: if texts have intents, then the would-be interpreter should primarily be concerned with the text itself, and only the text as it stands.

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[46] Ibid., xvii.

[47] Ibid., 169.

[48] Ibid., 168.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., xvii (emphasis mine). Cf. 170.

Like Collins, Brueggemann is also concerned that new categories of hermeneutical reflection promote “dialogue” and “new interfaces”[51] between Christians and Jews,[52] between Marxism and Christians,[53] and between churches and the socially “dispossessed” (“the young, the black, the poor, the women”),[54] among other such dialogue partners. Unlike Collins, he does not concede that an apparent lack of common ground obviates dialogue, or precludes its very possibility. Indeed, dialogue is particularly urgent wherever institutions have historically marginalized others in the interest of preserving power. Brueggemann’s enduring attention to issues of power and powerlessness in society are embedded even in his earliest work. In the flourish of his own trademark rhetorical style and characteristic indictment of Protestant Christian churches, Brueggemann writes:

> While the issues are complex, few things have contributed more to our wrong understandings of theology than our false spiritual interpretation of scripture which has made landlessness a virtue instead of a condition for receiving land. And from that interpretation has come the notion of poverty (landlessness) as a virtue. We have so interpreted the Bible away from its agenda and so focused on spiritual matters that we have not caught the power of its claim or the richness of its dialectic. Not only have we failed to hear the gospel with its staggering promise but we have, perhaps unwittingly, embraced the status quo inequities of landlessness and landedness. Spiritual Christianity, by refusing to face the land question, has served to sanction existing inequalities.[55]

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[51] Ibid., 189.

[52] Ibid., 190-191.

[53] Ibid., 191-192.

[54] Ibid., 192.

[55] Ibid., 193.

The Prophetic Imagination

Such a critique of modern society and social inequality (that is predicated upon a certain ideology) is continued in *The Prophetic Imagination,* first published in 1978, and draws attention to Brueggemann's growing interest in sociological criticism.[56] Careful attention is due this work because it was long one of Brueggemann's best-selling books,[57] but also because it marks an explicit turn toward the power of language and rhetoric in a way that his earlier work did not. The purpose of the book is fairly straightforward, as he opens in the preface by stating that "[t]he time may be ripe in the church for serious consideration of prophecy as a crucial element in ministry."[58] He continues by claiming that the ancient Israelite prophets, "understood the distinct power of language, the capacity to speak in ways that evoke newness 'fresh from the word.'" He continues: "It is argued here that a prophetic understanding of reality is based on the notion that all social reality does spring fresh from the word."[59] This one of the earliest examples of Brueggemann's emphasis on the power of language to construe reality.

Typically, Brueggemann begins the book with the foundational notion that "[w]hat we understand about the Old Testament must be somehow connected with

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[56] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978). This work was subsequently republished: Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001). Citations are taken from the first edition.

[57] This claim was made by Patrick D. Miller, introduction to *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure,* by Walter Brueggemann (ed. Patrick D. Miller; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), xv.

[58] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 9.

[59] Ibid., 9.

the realities of the church today."[60] The dialectic between current context and ancient text persists unabated. The contemporary crisis, as he reads it, is one of the church's enculturation "to the American ethos of consumerism" across both the theologically conservative and theologically liberal constituents. He alleges that both parties have lost a clear sense of identity due to their abandonment of faith tradition.[61] A recovery and reappropriation of the church's faith tradition is ostensibly the only weapon of resistance against consumerist culture, with the latter's characteristic "depreciation of memory" and its "ridicule of hope."[62] Brueggemann continues:

> It is the task of prophetic ministry to bring the claims of the tradition and the situation of enculturation into an effective interface. That is, the prophet is called to be a child of the tradition, one who has taken it seriously in the shaping of his or her own field of perception and *system of language,* who is so at home in that memory that the points of contact and incongruity with the situation of the church in culture can be discerned and articulated with proper urgency. In what follows, I will want to urge that there are precise models in Scripture for discerning prophetic ministry in this way.[63]

Programmatically, Brueggemann again commends a dialectic between modern culture and faith tradition, between text and interpreter, and again suggests that the biblical texts provide "models" that have their own integrity.

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[60] Ibid., 11.

[61] Ibid., 11.

[62] Ibid., 11; cf. 12.

[63] Ibid., 12 (emphasis mine).

"The tradition," he writes, "and contemporary scholarship are likely to be in some sort of *tension*, and we must try to be attentive to that."[64] He proffers what he sees as reductionisms amongst theological conservatives and liberals regarding the prophet, where the former overemphasize the prophet's knowledge of the future, and the latter overemphasize the role of social critic and activist played by the prophet. Such roles need also to be held in tension, as Brueggemann argues that the "*task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us*."[65] This is concretely accomplished not in responding to certain crises from time to time, but in sustained "critique" of the dominant consciousness and its values. A "prophetic ministry" is to "energize" an "alternative community" of faith toward a new future, a different time, and a transformed situation.[66] Notably, such prophetic activity requires a "ministry of imagination" as the envisioning of such alternative futures. The aim is to break through the apathy of the dominant consciousness, which would ideally have everyone think that it is the only "thinkable" one.[67]

This exact dynamic occurs in the biblical texts, Brueggemann argues, where the dominant consciousnesses have issued from Pharoah in Egypt, or from Solomon

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[64] Ibid., (emphasis mine).

[65] Ibid., 13. (author's emphasis).

[66] Ibid., 13, 14.

[67] Ibid., 45.

in Jerusalem, and this is labeled a "royal consciousness."[68] He claims that "[o]ur faith tradition understands that it is precisely the dialectic of criticizing and energizing which can let us be seriously faithful to God."[69] Such a "faith tradition" takes Moses as paradigmatic, and views his prophetic role as one who engages in social critique of Egypt, and who energizes the early Israelites toward a new social reality in the promised land.[70] Moses aids in exposing the religion of "static triumphalism" of Egypt with "the religion of the freedom of God" among the Israelites, and counters Pharoah's "politics of oppression and exploitation" with a "politics of justice and compassion."[71] This is chiefly accomplished via the power of language, according to Brueggemann. When remarking on Exodus 15, for example, he writes:

> It is only a poem and we might say rightly that singing a song does not change reality. However, we must not say that with too much conviction. The evocation of an alternative reality *consists at least in part in the battle for language and the legitimation of a new rhetoric*. The language of the empire is surely the language of managed reality, of production and schedule and market. But that language will never permit or cause freedom because there is no newness in it. Doxology is the ultimate challenge to the language of managed reality and it alone is the universe of discourse in which energy is possible.[72]

Furthermore, the prophetic ministry urges a confrontation with the reality of suffering and death—aspects of life that the dominant consciousness suppresses in

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[68] Ibid., 28-43.

[69] Ibid., 14.

[70] Ibid., 15-16.

[71] Ibid., 16.

[72] Ibid., 26 (emphasis mine).

denial, apathy, or simply succumbs to in "numbness."[73] To embrace death would be to acknowledge endings that are beyond one's control; it would be to relinquish power.[74]

For example, the "royal consciousness" of the Solomonic establishment—according to Brueggemann—"embodies the loss of passion, which is the inability to care or suffer."[75] On the other hand, the pathos of Jeremiah indicates that he is the "clearest model" for an imaginative prophetic ministry as he "embodies the alternative consciousness of Moses in the face of the denying king.[76] Similarly, Second Isaiah sought to "energize" an exilic people gripped with "despair."[77] Brueggemann again cites the key dialectic here: "[t]he riddle and insight of biblical faith is the awareness that only anguish leads to life, only grieving leads to joy, and only embraced endings permit new beginnings."[78]

Conclusion: Brueggemann at the End of the 1970's

A reader quickly grows accustomed to the relentless drum beat of *dialectic* in the 1970s and throughout all of Brueggemann's work. Dialectics abound, and are responsible for his insistence on the interaction between historical past and contemporary present, between ancient text and current context, between the

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[73] Ibid., 46.

[74] Ibid., 47.

[75] Ibid., 46.

[76] Ibid., 51.

[77] Ibid., 72-73.

[78] Ibid., 60.

interpretive roles of both the scientist and the artist, and between certain thematic poles (like landedness-landlessness) discerned within the biblical text itself. Moreover, his program in the 1970s was not to dismiss historical criticism, but to rely upon its conclusions in order to move beyond them, and to qualify and nuance historical criticism's more positivistic tendencies. It is often not *actual* history that concerns the biblical text according to Brueggemann, but a "remembered history." Brueggemann understands that remembered history is not always open to a formal or objective historical analysis in the way often conducted in past biblical scholarship.

Additionally, Brueggemann first attempted to capture the Old Testament into a certain thematic organization centered upon "land" during this early period in the 1970s. This theme allegedly issued directly from the text itself (and was not projected *on* to the text), and was seen to have urgent contemporary social implications: it was "a tract for the times." This notion is true of all Brueggemann's earliest work: ancient text and a pressing contemporary issue are always held in dialectical tension. Such a dialectic means that the Bible is not always an *object* to be critiqued but a *subject* that has its own things to say—we may subject it to certain analyses only as we ourselves are subject to its own particular voice. Brueggemann preempts any such distinction between "confessional" and "critical" in that biblical scholarship often must challenge those very confessional perspectives. This must be done on the basis of the biblical text and its language. Brueggemann's ever-growing awareness that language shapes reality was first suggested within this early period. Indeed, the power of rhetorical language to evoke alternative realities (and not just

prophetic language in particular) will become vitally important to his later work, yet it derived from his early discussion of biblical prophets.

Development and Nuancing: Brueggemann in the 1980's

In this present attempt to summarize Brueggemann's work chronologically, the aim is simply to observe how the trajectory of earlier ideas undergo modification; how certain concepts are nuanced, how others are abandoned, and how some once-minor suggestions go on to take center stage. With this in mind, one might accurately depict Brueggemann's work throughout the 1980's as one of a general refinement of his earlier ideas, while the phenomenon of language and rhetoric took on an ever larger significance.

Genesis

Brueggemann's 1982 commentary on the book of Genesis claims, like much of his earlier work, to be an "exposition of Genesis [that] comes out of the church and is addressed to the church."[79] More specifically, "[i]t is the purpose of this exposition to consider the texts as they address the community of faith in its *present context*."[80] Thus Brueggemann is explicit about the justification for—and hermeneutical consequences of—such a decision. For instance, such a stance again mandates recognition of a tension between the notion of present-day "canon" and ancient biblical text. He writes:

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[79] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (IBC; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 1. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (2d. ed.; IBC; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 2010). Citations are taken from the first edition.

[80] Ibid., 5 (emphasis mine).

> These are [biblical] materials *from the ancient world* which are *becoming the canon* of the church. Our exposition must face the whole range of possibilities in that process of becoming. While the material has been declared canon, in a more functional way it *becomes* canon in the time when we take it normatively. Yet in becoming canon, it does not cease to be material shaped by and cast in the ways of the Near East. A theological interest in canonical material neither permits nor requires us to abandon what we know about the world in which the material was shaped."[81]

Just as in Brueggemann's earlier work, even a study overtly in the service of a confessional community is historical to a degree, but the interest is in how such historical material was cast and consequently "becomes" accepted canon. For him, this casting was accomplished when the texts came to be related to the theme of "promise." Brueggemann explains: "as the texts are drawn closer to promise, either by redaction, traditioning, or exposition, they come more fully to be the normative literature to which we attend."[82] The label of "canon" is not made for the sake of expository convenience, but is an "old and deep decision made by the community of faith," with the consequence that one assumes (1) the text yields "important disclosures about our life and faith" and (2) the text "indicates the kind of expectations we may have and the kinds of questions we may ask."[83] In short, to "identify the material as canon is to recognize the importance and legitimacy of theological exposition."[84] Thus, even greater attention to the canonical shape of the text emerges within Brueggemann's work in the 1980's—and one infers that such

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[81] Ibid., 3 (author's emphases).

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid., 3.

[84] Ibid., 4.

attention reflects to some degree the influence of Brevard Childs (even despite some of Brueggemann's insistences to the contrary).[85] Still, one should note that just as academic contexts grow and change, so must one's approach to the biblical texts within a new contemporary situation.

Moreover, Brueggemann recognizes that Genesis is neither myth nor history, but primarily an exercise in story-telling. This is a position not completely unlike Collins' recommendation that the biblical text be construed as "fiction"—though with some important differences (see below). Brueggemann writes,

> it is about a memory that is transformed, criticized, and extended each time it is told. It is a tradition in which there are no objective controls but only the perception and passion, imagination and discipline, of those who care for the memory . . . Thus our exposition must avoid all the *solidity* which appeals to myth and all the *proof* which rests on history . . . The story can be told in more than one way. It has more than one meaning depending on the way it is told and the way it is heard . . . The listening community knows that the events now being presented may matter as much to "us" as to the original participants. These stories are not timeless, but there is a coincidence so that the events of another time may loom with authority in the present time. Thus, the old concrete events may intrude upon and transform the present situation.[86]

One notes that the dialectic between ancient text and contemporary situation remains one of Brueggemann's guiding ideas; also the notion that there are "concrete events" depicted in the biblical texts that legitimate historical inquiry. Concurrently, one must notice that to claim the story "has more than one meaning"

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[85] Therefore this influence should not necessarily be construed as agreement, as Brueggemann is often critical (fairly or not) of Childs. For a discussion of some of the differences between Childs and Brueggemann, as well as some major points of agreement, see Dennis T. Olson, "Biblical Theology as Provisional Monologization: A Dialogue with Childs, Brueggemann, and Bakhtin," *Biblical Interpretation* 6, no. 2 (April 1998): 162-80.

[86] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 4 (author's emphasis).

militates against total objectivity or achieving a final result. This hints at a certain plurality of meaning which prohibits reductive certitude. In the 1990s, Brueggemann will move much further in this direction.

Also important is the caution with which Brueggemann operates, aware that his confessional orientation risks marginalizing Jewish interpreters and interpretations. He writes, "[t]he best faith that can be kept with Jewish brothers and sisters is to be honest and candid about our presuppositions and to hold them in the presence of those brothers and sisters."[87] This may be viewed as an alternative to the insistence on an epistemological and hermeneutical "common ground" that Collins calls for and finds in historical criticism. As if Brueggemann foresees Collins' position, he objects "[t]his expositor is suspicious of attempts to use less than candid language about confessional orientation in an effort to arrive at interpretations which are 'common.'"[88] He explains that his own use of the phrase "listening community" primarily—but not exclusively—indicates the church, then further notes "[t]hat is, perhaps, an important difference between *critical exegesis* and the task undertaken here. Exposition of this kind is addressed to someone."[89] One infers that "critical exegesis" is therefore addressed to anyone. Taken theologically, the text is not an *object* that can somehow be separated from claims it makes upon an actual, real-life reader. He continues: "[t]he exposition, like the text, addresses those prepared to engage with, respond to, and be impacted by the text and its exposition.

[87] Ibid., 7.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid., 85 (emphasis mine).

The work to be done in this kind of exposition is in dialogue."[90] Again, the text, construed theologically as a subject, must always be allowed a voice of its own, but that voice never only engages the Protestant Christian reader. Brueggemann therefore urges that his own exposition not be seen as polemical against (or ignorant of) Jewish readers and interpreters, but that his Christian vocabulary might be translated "to their own particular idiom."[91]

Indeed, Brueggemann becomes increasingly attentive to Jewish readers during the 1980's and their own "dialogue" with the text. He consequently begins to further broaden the intended audience of his work beyond the Christian church (and the Protestant church in particular, even despite the overt confessional particularism of his Genesis commentary). Later, this trajectory of thought—and an increasing awareness of an undeniable diversity among all interpreters and their commitments (Jewish, Christian, or otherwise)—will be used to indict all forms of exclusivist "objective" interpretation. This is especially due to the historically hegemonic tendencies of Western discourse and its complicity in ignoring, subverting, or excluding other perspectives.

The Message of the Psalms

Also pertinent to the development of Bruggemann's thought during the 1980's is the emergence of another heuristic (or paradigmatic) scheme—this one is an attempt to

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[90] Ibid., 8.

[91] Ibid., 7.

illuminate (but not wholly comprehend or "straitjacket") the Psalms.[92] While again acknowledging a debt to critical scholarship (especially Gunkel, Mowinckel, and Westermann) and the current "form-critical consensus," his three-fold categorical scheme of the psalms as instances of "orientation-disorientation-new orientation" is geared toward new theological insight.[93] As with his previously proposed heuristic scheme (the "prism" of land-landlessness) and his characteristic tendency to thematize, Brueggemann is similarly careful to claim that "I have concluded at the *end of the study* (and not as a presupposition) that the shape and dynamic of the Psalms can be most usefully understood according to the theological framework of crucifixion and resurrection," (which, for him, is analogous to the orientation-disorientation-new orientation framework), and he insists that this is without emphasizing any degree of exclusivism or any desire to "Christianize" the Psalms.[94] Brueggemann never shies away even from understanding the Old and New Testaments as dialectically related. Additionally, his exposition is always very clear to insist that his interpretive categories are derived from the text itself, and not some foreign schematic imposed on the text. The text provides its own standard and categories for interpretation; the critic does not supply it from elsewhere.

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[92] Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 9. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function" *JSOT* 17 (1980): 3-32.

[93] Ibid., 9; cf. 18-19.

[94] Ibid., 10. Emphasis mine.

The Message of the Psalms is unique in that the study is an explicit attempt to be "postcritical."[95] The term is odd, and this appears to be the first sustained usage of it within Brueggemann's work. He explains his own use of the term as an activity that attempts to show "how the Psalms may function as voices of faith in the actual life of the believing community . . . I want to show that a pastoral agenda can benefit from critical scholarship and need be neither excessively popular nor obscurantist."[96] Later on he explains that a "precritical" understanding of the Psalms—which was derived from the "devotional tradition of piety"—often relied upon the texts as a theological resource, whereas a "critical" and "well-established scholarly tradition" emerged with a modicum of historical consensus. Still, little dialogue was effected between these two tendencies and competing perspectives.[97] Therefore, the dialectic proposed here falls under the rubric of postcritical scholarship in that scholarly and devotional traditions might be mutually illuminating; so "the formal gains of scholarly methods may enhance and strengthen, as well as criticize, the substance of genuine piety in its handling of the Psalms."[98]

Also notable here are the echoes of *The Prophetic Imagination* and allusions to a dominant or "royal" consciousness that had immediate implications for his contemporary situation. In the 1980s, the Cold War loomed large in American public

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[95] Ibid., 9-10.

[96] Ibid., 10.

[97] Ibid., 15-16.

[98] Ibid., 16; cf. 18-19, 21.

discourse and public consciousness (especially as the USSR—the stereotypical antithesis of American consumerist capitalism—began a period of economic and political destabilization, eventually leading to its 1991 collapse), along with the attending threat of nuclear warfare that came with it. Brueggemann writes that

> The Psalms are profoundly subversive of the dominant culture, which wants to deny and cover over the darkness we are called to enter. Personally we shun negativity. Publicly we deny the failure of our attempts to exercise control. The last desperate effort at control through nuclear weapons is a stark admission of our failure to control. But through its propaganda and the ideology of consumerism, our society goes its way in pretense. Against all of this the Psalms issue a mighty protest and invite us into a more honest facing of the darkness.[99]

For Brueggemann, one never escapes one's contemporary situation. Just as the 1970s reflected its own particular situation dialectically relevant to the biblical texts, the 1980s brought new concerns. One therefore may as well admit that interpretation is always destined to speak within a contemporary situation. This also is a key difference between historical-critical scholarship alone and Brueggemann's attempts to accept it while moving beyond it. He recognized that Gabler, Westermann, Albright, von Rad, Gunkel, Wolff, Wellhausen, and indeed every single biblical scholar has been a product of their time, has shared in a contemporary/ancient dialectic unique to their own circumstances, and must never be too harshly faulted or neglected because of that. The search within historically centered theological scholarship, and also biblical studies in general, had been to continue to evolve in the hope of finally establishing the likeliest of conclusions, the most proper of interpretations, and thus a sort of "truth" that was not itself subject

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[99] Ibid., 12; cf. 22-23.

to the vagaries and whimsy of the historical process. Brueggemann, however, completely accepted and fully embraced his own contemporary situation, and recognized the elusiveness of such "truth." His work on the Psalms is yet another tract for the times—no less than his earliest proposals found in *In Man We Trust*—and such work is always provisional and never complete.

Moving Toward the 1990's: Sociological and Literary Approaches to "Truth"

David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory

The ambiguous title of the brief book *David's Truth In Israel's Imagination and Memory*, first published in 1985, is significant to the present discussion for two reasons.[100] First, Brueggemann is candid about the book's methodology: he employs a dialectic of sorts that holds sociological analysis and literary criticism in tension.[101] The tendency of the former is to examine a text within its social context (often lacking in appreciation for the text's aesthetic "power…to redescribe reality"), whereas the latter examines a text with little or no reference to context (often lacking in appreciation for the social forces that lie behind the text).[102]

Aside from this dialectic, the book is important from an epistemological standpoint, for it is concerned with the "truth" of David in particular. Brueggemann emphasizes that it is not a "historical" David that he is after, which is unavailable to

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[100] Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

[101] Brueggemann, *David's Truth*, 9-10.

[102] Ibid., 9.

us anyway.[103] This figure is "no doubt a literary, imaginative construction, made by many hands. So we must settle for that. We cannot get behind the literary construction."[104] It is the "constructed" David that Brueggemann proposes to study, whom the "tradition" has preserved (at once an imaginative and literary figure), and who is "*the engine for Israel's imagination and for Israel's public history.*"[105] This is an important epistemological move, for it draws an explicit distinction between "facticity" or "what happened" with "what is claimed, what is asserted here about reality."[106] The latter concerns "truth," and the former is simple historicity.[107] Such a notion of truth admits to a degree of polyvalence, and "cannot be reduced to a single formulation."[108] Such "truth" can apparently only be captured by a variety of competing perspectives.

There are four principal presentations of David about which the book is concerned (1 Sam 16:1—2 Sam 5:5; 2 Sam 8-20 and 1 Kings 1-2; 2 Sam 5:6—8:18; 1 Chron 10-29), each reflecting "different hands in different contexts for different

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[103] Ibid., 13.

[104] Ibid., 14.

[105] Ibid., 13, 14 (author's emphasis).

[106] Ibid., 14.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Ibid., 15; cf. 17, where Brueggemann writes: "the question of truth in life does not yield to scientific certitude. Our exegetical methods have sometimes done us a disservice in this regard. In our modern world, we so easily imagine that truth has to do with facticity, and then the religious community is busied with certitude. But the truth of David here yields no certitude, certainly not any facticity, but nonetheless glimpses of reality. That is how it always is, though we struggle with technical reason. These narrators understood, and so can we, that our truth always comes with scars."

purposes."[109] In short, each constitutes a "proposed reading of reality from a certain angle of vision," that never completely cohere, but "when taken together, they function in a mutually corrective way, so all these portrayals are needed to present the full reading of David made in the tradition.[110] None should be *historically* dismissed as derivative, or favored for being more "original," or judged aesthetically superior: all must be held in tension.[111] For Brueggemann, the "Bible makes the truth available only as narrative, even if we want more."[112] He even claims that "the truth about ourselves and all of life is finally polyvalent. How odd it is that the biblical text knows this best!"[113] One might also judge this particular scheme to offer a slight challenge—not fully articulated or even acknowledged—to Brueggemann's dialectical constructions. Here, he speaks of a tension consisting of a multiplicity rather than a tension consisting of two. I will have cause to return to this somewhat implicit and unacknowledged challenge to dialectics.

Hope Within History

Taken together with the notion that "truth" is polyvalent, of particular note is the chapter "Living Toward a Vision: Grief in the Midst of Technique" in the 1987 book

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[109] Ibid., 15.

[110] Ibid., 18.

[111] Ibid., 111-112.

[112] Ibid., 16.

[113] Ibid., 17.

Hope Within History.[114] The book consists of a compilation of originally independent lectures, loosely structured around the themes of hope and history in the Bible. In this particular chapter, one sees an extension of *The Prophetic Imagination* in the sense that both the contemporary world and biblical world involve competing consciousnesses or traditions. Brueggemann begins the chapter in typically dialectic fashion by claiming that the Hebrew Bible is "fundamentally a literature of hope" while contrasting this with the Hellenistic and scientific "dominant intellectual tradition of the West" which is "a tradition of order."[115] The latter is decidedly not a tradition of hope as it attempts to learn and understand, but also often to "master and control."[116] Thus, both hope and order may be necessary, but exist in tension with one another. Brueggemann identifies and illustrates hope as a dominant theme throughout the patriarchal narratives, prophetic literature, apocalyptic literature, and even points toward the shared legacy of Jews and Christians who both wait in hope for a messiah.[117] He continues:

> Viewed from the perspective of the dominant (and dominating) operating assumptions of our cultural context, the massive statement of hope contained in these texts seems foolish or, if not foolish, at best irrelevant. That is, it doesn't seem to touch the "real world" which appears so permanent. The promises belong to a different rationality and are presented precisely by poets and storytellers who operated (from our modern perspective) with a quite doubtful epistemology . . . The issue of the juxtaposition of hope and knowledge is at the heart of the crisis now to be faced in our culture. The traditions of *scientific*

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[114] Walter Brueggemann, "Living Toward a Vision: Grief in the Midst of Technique," in *Hope Within History* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 72-91.

[115] Walter Brueggemann, "Living Toward a Vision," 72.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Ibid., 73-78.

> *knowledge and power* seem oddly alienated from the traditions of hope. The tradition of hope means a relinquishment of control over life, not in the sense of being out of control, but in the sense of governance being entrusted to this Holy One whom we cannot explain . . . It is thus an important question in our society about what happens if the managers of scientific knowledge can no longer entertain serious, concrete hope beyond our knowledge. Under such conditions, control becomes defensive and perhaps oppressive."[118]

Here, Brueggemann offers a biblically-based alternative to a Cartesian epistemology rooted in the rationalistic and scientific bases of the Enlightenment with its aspirations to progress.[119] An epistemology rooted in hope, he argues, transforms consciousness. In fact, he goes on to claim that "[t]his hope has nothing to do with progress."[120] Hope always sees the present as provisional.[121] Hope serves a "revolutionary function."[122] Hope resists the "system" with its dominant ideology.[123] Brueggemann maintains that "biblical faith is suspicious of the system," and that the function of such an "unreasonable" and "exotic" hope is "to provide standing ground *outside the system* from which the system can be evaluated, critiqued, and perhaps changed… Hope is an immense human act which reminds us that no system of power or knowledge can finally grasp what is true."[124] In short "truth"—according

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[118] Ibid., 79-80 (author's emphasis).

[119] Ibid., 101. Brueggemann writes: "That is the problem of faith and that is the discernment now made about our Enlightenment self-deception: that our ways of transcending trouble [of grief, hurt, rage] may *suppress* but do not *nullify*," (author's emphasis).

[120] Ibid., 80.

[121] Ibid.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid., 81.

[124] Ibid., 81 (author's emphasis).

to Brueggemann's sociological critique—is unavailable according to the dominant system, rooted as it is in an Enlightenment rationality.

Israel's Praise

This critique carries into 1988's *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* where Brueggemann pursues a sociological criticism of the Psalms, with particular attention to the current pastoral office and the act of liturgy as a "social enactment of reality."[125] The "convergence" of Psalm, pastor, and liturgy reflects "our new post-Enlightenment epistemological situation. It is no longer tenable to imagine that there is a 'given' world into which we may fit, and which we have only to describe, and to which we may bear witness."[126] Instead, we are "world-makers" according to Brueggemann, who construct social reality.[127] The cult within ancient Israel and its act of praise in the Psalms is not to be understood as a mere responsive act addressed to God, but as a creative act constitutive of a social community.[128] Brueggemann continues:

> An important epistemological shift that is happening in our generation is evident in the shift of scholarly investigation generally, the shift in scripture study from *historical* to *literary*, and the shift from the valuing of *facticity* to the celebration of *imagination*. These shifts are all of a piece. They reflect the failure and loss of confidence in Enlightenment modes of knowledge, which were aimed at technical control. We are coming to see that conventional modes of historical-critical investigation—our excessive preoccupation with facticity—

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[125] Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), x.

[126] Ibid., x.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid., 6-7.

> are congenial and subservient to an Enlightenment notion of reality that assumes that the world is a fixed, settled object that can be described, characterized, analyzed, and finally controlled in an objective way.[129]

It is this explicit break with an Enlightenment epistemology that will carry Brueggemann into the 1990s.

Conclusion: Brueggemann at the Close of the 1990s

In sum, one notes seven main continuities within Brueggemann's scholarship in the 1980's with the previous decade: (1) the utilization of a thoroughgoing dialectical approach primarily interested in tensions; (2) a methodological tendency to thematize the biblical materials in order to articulate such dialectical tensions into a comprehensive heuristic framework dictated by the text itself; (3) an unapologetic interest in viewing the ancient text as dialectically related to the interpreter's present; a present that the text addresses with its own particular voice; (4) the pervasive belief that biblical texts offer an alternative to the oppressive dominant consciousness of both ancient context and contemporary context; (5) a reliance, though increasingly qualified, upon historical-critical scholarship and its methods; (6) a commitment to both faith communities and critical academic scholarship; and (7) an attempt to view the Old and New Testaments as dialectically interrelated.

On the other hand, the 1980s showcased six primary modifications and emerging emphases in comparison to Brueggemann's earlier work. These modifications are significant, particularly considering the trajectory of his thought into the 1990's. They include: (1) a growing emphasis upon the primacy of

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[129] Ibid., 12 (author's emphases).

textuality—that one has no immediate access to any actual history "behind" the text; (2) the influence of a canonical approach which emphasized the "becoming normative" aspect of canon, indicating a certain dynamism of a text always "on the move;" (3) growing emphasis upon the polyvalent character of the text and even "truth" itself; (4) an increasing appreciation for the growing demographical pluralism and diversity among scholarly interpreters themselves, especially Jewish interpreters; (5) increasing methodological attention to both sociological and literary approaches; and (6) a recognition of the problems associated with an Enlightenment epistemology and a consequent attempt at "postcritical" scholarship.

Much of these newer emphases were nurtured within an academic climate deeply in conflict: the 1980s witnessed the apex of the so-called "theory wars," primarily in the embattled disciplines of philosophy and literary studies. This was due to conflicts between post-structuralists and structuralists and the rise of the so-called "postmodern" situation. By the 1990s, when the "theory wars" had died out in an apparent stalemate, and interest in theory had generally waned, critical theory finally "trickled down" into biblical studies. The resulting influence of so-called "postmodernism" in biblical studies was inevitable. Brueggemann, always well-read in intellectual developments outside of biblical studies, was among the first to embrace our alleged "postmodern" situation in *Old Testament Theology.*

The 1990s and Brueggemann's Own Postmodern "Linguistic Turn"

It was in the 1990s that Brueggemann's earlier works culminated in what are now probably the two most important and influential books of his career: *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (1992) and the massive tome

Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy (1997). It is for this reason that these two books will be assessed in detail, with particular attention to how the themes and concerns of the preceding two decades reached their fullest articulation therein.

In these books, Brueggemann's early reliance upon tradition-history is muted, while sociological criticism and literary-rhetorical analysis are clearly the preferred methodological approaches. Additionally (and despite some of his own claims and qualifications to the contrary), both books witness Brueggemann pulling further away from historical-critical inquiry, and pressing further in the direction of examining historical criticism's complicity with Enlightenment rationalism, positivism, and autonomy. Brueggemann reiterates the argument that historical criticism (as it was originally nurtured within an Enlightenment context) possesses its own innovative epistemology—an epistemology alien to that of the biblical texts themselves. Brueggemann also acknowledges the near absolute scholarly consensus of an irreducible pluralism among the texts of the Bible. This consensus involves a concurrent emphasis upon the provisional nature of any interpretive activity, and an insistence that interpretation itself is always interested advocacy of a particular sort.

Moreover, as the demographical landscape of biblical scholars had changed from an exclusive earlier (and predominantly white-Anglo-Protestant-male) constituency, the scholarly arena began to exhibit the same pluralism and diversity analogous to the texts themselves. Brueggemann welcomed and encouraged these new perspectives within the discipline of biblical scholarship as inevitably enriching

the theological conversation. Thus Brueggemann conscientiously attempted to make more room at the interpretive table—an act consistent with his view that an interpreter can never (and should never) escape her contemporary situation or commitments. Throughout these books, however, Brueggemann retained a dogged resolve to ensure that the Bible remained theologically available and meaningful for modern communities of faith in all of their own diversity.

Additionally, Brueggemann's dialectical approach remained the methodological *modus operandi* most appropriate to the text itself. Later, I will have cause to return to the issue of dialectic, as Brueggemann finally appears to exhaust the potential of such an approach. He seemed to stretch the dialectical method to its limits, even to the point of wearing it thin and threatening collapse.

Still, perhaps the most important and pervasive change within this period of Brueggemann's work—particularly in the late 1990s—coincided with an intellectual climate whose effects had already rippled throughout the 1970s and 1980s in the disciplines of linguistics, philosophy, and literary theory. Namely, this was the so-called "linguistic turn" or turn toward the philosophical problem of language itself (some of which we have already seen in the previous chapter in discussing aspects of the work of Derrida). The 1990s were when the impact of post-structuralism, critical theory, and so-called "postmodernism"[130] were felt in the discipline of biblical studies. Therefore the most distinctive marker of this period for

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[130] I purposely use the qualifier "so-called" in referring to "postmodernism," "postmodern," and "postmodernist" because it is still not a settled academic question whether such intellectual theory marks an actual departure from "modernism," or is simply complicit with a skeptical romanticism that has always challenged positivistic rationalism within the high modern period.

Brueggemann became the issue of language itself, and its relationship to "reality." While Brueggemann's earlier work—particularly on the prophets—emphasized the power of prophetic speech to "redescribe reality," this idea was comprehensively broadened to include the entire text of the Bible.

The Early 1990s: *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text*

Many of these ideas appear in Brueggemann's 1992 collection, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* in one form or another. Certainly older ideas are clearly recognizable in the book, as some of the essays were written during the previous two decades. For example, he still retains the belief that the search for a single "center" for organizing an Old Testament theology is untenable, while perhaps somewhat contradicting or qualifying his earlier attempts at thematization.[131] He writes that "[t]he Old Testament is a literature of richly diverse voices. It cannot be reduced to any single theme or set of themes. Its pluralism is vigorous and unavoidable."[132] Still, despite this irreducible textual pluralism, theological exposition still must say something. On this apparent impasse, he writes:

> Old Testament theology must and may proceed by *the offer of theses* for conversation and critique without exposition that includes and accounts for everything. The theses *may not add up to a grand design*, but they may permit the *building of a consensus* about the shape and

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[131] Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (ed. Patrick D. Miller; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 1-2. Later, Brueggemann writes that, "[s]ociological criticism forces us not only to recognize pluralism but also to acknowledge that any obvious and easy theological, transcendental claim is denied to the text. We are left with a series of local theologies whose advocacies are in deep tension with each other. Moreover, these various local advocacies cannot be harmonized and are not easily or readily adjudicated," (68).

[132] Ibid., 91.

> character of the task. My urging here is that we… accept a mode probably more appropriate to our cultural moment of scattering and our intellectual moment of hermeneutical self-knowledge.[133]

Again, just as Brueggemann's cultural situation has changed from the 1970s and 1980s, so too must the task of Old Testament theology and theological interpretation.

Brueggemann notes that a number of his contemporaries have "offer[ed]" such "theses" regarding theological interpretation. These scholars have proposed a general shape or organization to that task that suggests an unresolved tension in the text between two proposed poles involving certain motifs (such as Paul D. Hanson's "cosmic and teleological"[134] or Claus Westermann's "blessing and deliverance"[135] or Samuel Terrien's "ethical and aesthetic"[136]). Such poles "must be kept in an ongoing tension and not resolved in either direction."[137] He continues: "[t]hat very tension may be the *central dynamic of Old Testament faith*."[138] Brueggemann proceeds to suggest his own dynamic and "bipolar" structure that again relies both upon the sociological analysis (cf. Norman K. Gottwald)[139] of a God who is "in the fray" of everyday life, and upon rhetorical and literary analysis (cf. Brevard S. Childs and

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[133] Ibid., 114 (emphases mine).

[134] Ibid., 100-101.

[135] Ibid., 96-98.

[136] Ibid., 98-99.

[137] Ibid., 2

[138] Ibid., (emphasis mine).

[139] See esp. Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*: *A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979).

James Muilenburg)[140] of a God who is "above the fray" of history and the historical process.[141]

Brueggemann's proposal characteristically relies on earlier scholarship while attempting to move beyond it, and he again seeks to mutually correct sociological and literary-rhetorical approaches to the biblical text via the other.[142] For example, he suggests that the biblical texts reflect a tension between a sociological "embrace of pain" from "below"—one that arises from the ambiguity of everyday historical experience in light of a textual discourse that is ultimately "structure-legitimating."[143] This is held in an unresolved tension with a text that simultaneously attempts to break free of such historically-rooted pain and aims for a "normative" truth about God from "above." This tendency is related to a prevalent "common theology" that is not unlike that of Israel's neighbors.[144] He writes: "The God of Israel is thus presented variously as the God above the fray who appears like other ancient Near Eastern gods and as a God who is exposed in the fray, who appears unlike the gods of common theology, a God peculiarly available in Israel's

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[140] See esp. Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) and James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969): 1-18.

[141] Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 2-4; cf. 60-62, 112-113.

[142] Ibid., 95-96. One notes that this is also the dialectical method in assessing the tradition-history approach of von Rad and the covenant-as-"governing category" approach of Eichrodt in order that these two poles mutually correct the other. Brueggemann routinely attempts to reduce matters to binary categories for such a method to work properly, and it is always left to the reader to judge the merits and shortcomings of such an approach.

[143] Ibid., 5

[144] Ibid., 4, 5. . The term "common theology" is taken from Morton Smith, "The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 71, no. 3 (Spring 1952): 135-47. Brueggemann then proceeds to nuance and develop this term in light of Gottwald's sociological understanding.

historical experiences."[145] Brueggemann's project here is primarily an attempt to work out this central tension or dialectic within the biblical texts.

Thus, while Brueggemann is heavily informed by the work of Gottwald, he resists the latter's treatment of God as a mere "*function of the social process*,"[146] and insists that Old Testament theology must not reduce Yahweh to mere sociological platitude. Such theology must also understand Yahweh as a "*free agent* who has a life and interiority all of God's own."[147] Against purely literary analyses, attention to socio-historical forces ensures that the text is not reduced to mere aesthetic fiction. Nevertheless, it is "common theology" of a contractual[148] type that "has given the decisive shape to Old Testament faith" within the Mosaic law traditions, the theological perspective of Deuteronomy, much of the prophetic literature, and some of the wisdom literature (in this last instance, primarily Proverbs).[149] In these texts, God is demanding and just, people get what they deserve, and social institutions exist in order to ensure that such an order persists. The primary function of such

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[145] Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 5.

[146] Ibid., 9 (author's emphasis).

[147] Ibid., (author's emphasis). This view implies a certain ontological claim about God which will later be modified in the late 1990's. Later, Brueggemann also writes, "Old Testament theology, as distinct from sociological, literary, or historical analysis, must assume some *realism* in the text—that the poets and narrators in Israel do, in fact, speak the mind of God…In claiming this realism, I mean to reject the notion that these texts are simply human probings or imagination as Israel discovers more of God and finds, in fact, that the stern God is gracious. Rather, serious theology must insist that God's self-articulation comes as disclosure, so that the biblical artists enter into the struggle in which God is involved," (19, author's emphasis).

[148] Ibid., 42. Brueggemann articulates this as a "quid pro quo—a mode that serves to legitimate structure in heaven and on earth." This seems to involve the contractual nature of Israel with a God who demands, authorizes institutions, judges, blesses, and holds the Israelites accountable within an authentic relationship.

[149] Ibid., 9, 15; cf. 62-63 on the structure-legitimating role of Proverbs.

common (or contractual) theology is thus to preserve order within the status quo, "both with reference to the rule of God and with reference to the legitimacy of social institutions." This preserves and ensures a certain "moral coherence" within the world.[150] Consequently, Brueggemann argues that the "main dynamic of the Old Testament is the tension between the celebration of that legitimation and a sustained critique of it."[151] Elsewhere, he synonymously refers to this tension as "cultural *embrace*" and "cultural *criticism*,"[152] or Israel's religious life in reference to its God as both "iconic" and "aniconic,"[153] or as "conservation" and "transformation,"[154] or "the legitimation of structure" and "the embrace of pain"—where the former is moral, theological, social, political, and economic, and the latter is its "transformative" and "critical" tradition.[155] The celebration of social culture is risky and has the potential to give rise to "evil" and idolatry, since "the Bible believes that evil is not natural but is largely initiated by human arrangements of power and ideology, contrived by some, costly to others, and given various religious legitimations."[156]

The critique of social culture and its legitimation by the latter pole is manifest in "the issue of pain" as it is understood in the biblical texts—the embrace

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[150] Ibid., 10.

[151] Ibid., 17.

[152] Ibid., 114 (author's emphasis).

[153] Ibid., 118-144.

[154] Ibid., 144.

[155] Ibid., 118.

[156] Ibid., 70.

of a sustained protest against the status quo and the alleged coherence and validity of common, contractual theology (which, as we have seen, may even amount to ideology). This is found most prominently in the lament psalms,[157] the book of Jeremiah,[158] the cries for help amidst oppressive bondage in Egypt, and the book of Job,[159] for example. Such pain-embracing offers a crucial but minority voice in the Old Testament. It remains in tension with the status quo character of common theology even despite its minority status.[160] In fact, such a tension always remains unresolved. Brueggemann writes:

> It has to do with social valuing of the pained and the pain-bearers—the poor, the useless, the sick, and the other marginal ones. A theology of contractual coherence must excommunicate all the pained and pain-bearers as having violated the common theology. Indeed, the presence of pain-bearers is a silent refutation of the legitimated structures.

It is God who "takes this hurt as the new stuff of faithfulness" and "[i]n response, this God makes an intervention in the historical process against the legitimated structures of the day and delegitimates them."[161] Brueggemann then—characteristically—draws an analogy with his own modern cultural situation of "arms advances" and consumerist culture, even musing that "[t]he issue in our own time (and I suspect in every culture) concerns the management and resolution of

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[157] Ibid., 27-30, 84-86.

[158] Ibid., 33.

[159] Ibid., 32-33, 86-91.

[160] Ibid., 26.

[161] Ibid., 20, 25.

pain, both personal and public."[162] Again, Brueggemann always and pervasively has an eye toward a particularly pressing contemporary situation, yet these always change as time marches on.[163]

Regarding this pole of embracing pain, this side of the tension can apparently be further subdivided into yet another dialectic for Brueggemann. This has certain implications for Old Testament ethics. Here, he proposes the experience of human hurt and hope as key to Israel's ethical and religious reflection—even calling it a canonical "norm."[164] Furthermore, he labels this experience of hurt and hope "…characteristic aspects of Jewish experience and discourse."[165] This can be illustrated, for example, through the Exodus narrative when the Israelites initially cry out to God. God listens, embraces and internalizes that pain, and responds (Exod 3:7—8). Brueggemann writes: "Israel cries out to God; God enters the hurt; God makes a promise. That promise is elementarily and characteristically a promise of land, a zone of well-being, justice, freedom, peace, safety, and dignity."[166] The hope which results from promise is always a theological act, as the text depicts a God "unlike the other gods of that ancient context" who has bound God's self to the

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[162] Ibid., 21.

[163] Ibid.; cf. 64-66 on the attempt to silence voices of "hurt" and "hope" in our contemporary context, whether "*technical ideology,*" unchecked historical-criticism (see below), or "*moralistic, scholastic religion,*" (author's emphases).

[164] Ibid., 70; cf. 91, 93.

[165] Ibid., 45.

[166] Ibid., 52.

"needs, hopes, and destiny" of a particular people—constituting an "extraordinary theological break in religious history."[167]

Such hope may even be *the* fundamental theological act, and this hope offers a solution to the problem of textual pluralism. Brueggemann writes:

> In the face of the rich pluralism and passionate interestedness of the biblical text in its various local voices, the text everywhere is concerned with *the costly reality of human hurt* and *the promised alternative of evangelical hope;* that is, the Bible is peculiarly preoccupied with the themes of hurt and hope. Those public realities, mediated through various textual traditions in the Bible, constitute a biblical basis for asserting theological, moral norms."[168]

Thus, Brueggemann proffers a dialectically thematic solution to the problem of textual plurality. To the scholarly consensus about the irreducible pluralism of the Bible, he offers the dialectical rubrics of structural legitimation and marginal critique. This can be subdivided into the dialectics of social organization and socio-ideological abuse on the one hand, and the reality of hurt and power of hope on the other.

The dynamic of hurt and hope constitute a type of protest or criticism against prevailing arrangements of social power. Such a critique protests against "voicelessness" within public social discourse, as the suppression of hurt results in "psychic numbing" in a society consequently devoid of compassionate

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[167] Ibid., 50, 71.

[168] Ibid., 70 (author's emphases); cf. 77, where hurt and hope constitute a "common thematic" despite textual pluralism. Later, Brueggemann calls hurt and hope a "common theme," (93). Elsewhere he writes, "I do not argue that all of the Torah narrative and law is ordered according to the issues of hurt and hope. I suggest only that these motifs are present in powerful and shaping ways," (81).

understanding and thus any attempt to rectify or transform that situation of hurt.[169] The minority voice of hurt and hope therefore offers "[t]he primary critical function of the Bible," which is "to keep the voice of hurt present in the social process."[170] The only alternative to hope is a "*deep despair*," where hope and transformation are unavailable in society.[171] Thus, one notes that Brueggemann views such a situation as a matter of life and death not only within the biblical texts, but as one particularly important to our contemporary social situation. Brueggemann claims that "the institutions of elitist culture, of technological media, and of the powerful corporate economy have little patience with such voices."[172]

So the Old Testament is not monolithic. It even exhibits a certain dynamic involving both movement and an "incongruity in the person of God."[173] As common theology depicts a God who ensures institutional and moral order, there is consequently an "*intensification of Yahweh's anger*" in response to Israel's disobedience and repeated violations of this order.[174] At the same time, the texts depict a God capable of "an enormous patience, a holding to promises even in the face of disobedience, a resistance to the theological categories that conventionally

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[169] Ibid., 92

[170] Ibid.

[171] Ibid., 93 (author's emphasis).

[172] Ibid., 92.

[173] Ibid., 24.

[174] Ibid., (author's emphasis).

give God self-definition."[175] The tension between the celebratory common theology and the embrace of pain applies as much to the very character of God as it does to Israel, since "the text permits entry into the disclosure of God's own life, which is troubled, problematic, and unresolved."[176]

Some claims in *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* seem to provide the seeds out of which Brueggemann's later work will grow. His growing attention to the pervasive issues of textuality and discourse itself is still not yet fully articulated, but he does make gestures toward it. For example, Brueggemann writes, "Israel was shaped as a distinctive community by the *character of its discourse*. The Old Testament *as an embodiment of that rhetorical world* is odd and crucial because it mediates ethical reflection through *disclosures of hurt and articulation of hope*."[177] Elsewhere, he emphasizes that hurt and hope are always "voiced" or that they are "mediated through time in *speech*."[178] He continues, "[s]uch *mediating speech is constitutive* for Old Testament ethics and represents another aspect of its oddness and cruciality. When we insist on the voiced quality of ethics, we are driven to *textuality*…"[179] He contends that "[h]urt and hope as experienced social reality and as proclaimed theological reality are *given voice in a distinctive rhetoric*… [o]nly recently have we paid attention to how Israel speaks its

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[175] Ibid., 24.

[176] Ibid., 18-19.

[177] Ibid., 45 (first two sets of emphases mine, the final is the author's).

[178] Ibid., 58 (emphasis mine).

[179] Ibid., 58-59 (emphases mine).

faith in the text."[180] Furthermore, "[w]e are now aware that the *rhetoric in which faith is cast* is crucial for the passion, power, authority, and credibility of faith. In the end, *the Bible is an exercise in rhetoric*, and we must pay attention to its particular, specific casting."[181] Such repeated emphases on rhetoric and discourse has always played a key role in Brueggemann's work, but will emerge as a primary organizing category within Brueggemann's 1997 book.

Concurrent with the rhetorical nature of the text, however, Brueggemann is clear that Old Testament theology need not *only* attend to the text itself. He writes that to engage in Old Testament theology "as distinct from rhetorical or literary criticism or history of religion, is likely to understand one's self as nurtured by and accountable to a concrete community of reference that has already decided some things."[182] Again, Brueggemann insists on the situated-ness of interpretation, so it always possesses a "partisan quality."[183] This is in contrast to any alleged "objective" stance within the academy and "against the hermeneutical notion that wants to keep every statement of commitment in some kind of state of tentativeness."[184] He continues:

> I think that we must recognize that doing Old Testament theology requires that such decisions of reference cannot be held in abeyance and must be acknowledged as proper to the work, and they are proper to the work even if subject to close scrutiny. The scrutiny,

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[180] Ibid, 73 (emphasis mine).

[181] Ibid., (emphasis mine).

[182] Ibid., 113.

[183] Ibid.

[184] Ibid.

> however, must not be *that* such a decision of reference has been made but *what* it is in particular. Thus a community of faith must make a decision about reference. The academy may criticize and assess the decision, but it may not fault the community or the proposal of a theology for having made such a decision.[185]

A hermeneutical awareness about one's own "community of reference" and how it shapes one's scholarship and one's conclusions need be recognized instead of faulted outright.[186] This is contra historical criticism's own epistemological assumptions and commitment to an unbiased objectivity. In short, such a statement stands in marked contrast with Collins' division between "critical" and "confessional" options.

One consequently sees more frequent critiques (though heavily nuanced) of historical criticism in this period of Brueggemann's work. Regarding the contemporary attempts to silence aspects of hurt and hope (first exegeted from the biblical texts), he writes:

> In my field of Scripture study, *historical criticism* has become a mode of silencing the text by eliminating its artistic, dramatic, subversive power*. I do not wish to overstate my critique of historical criticism*. It is, nonetheless, increasingly clear that historical criticism is no objective, disinterested tool of interpretation, but it has become a way to trim texts down to the ideology of Enlightenment reason and autonomy and to explain away from the text all the hurts and hopes that do not conform to the ideology of objectivity. In the end, the text is thereby rendered voiceless.[187]

Such invective, however, does not escape a sort of dialectical treatment itself. So it is that Brueggemann also argues against "religionists" on the opposite side of the

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[185] Ibid., (author's emphases).

[186] Ibid., 115.

[187] Ibid., 65 (emphases mine).

spectrum, who are—for example—preoccupied with literalist readings and the "fulfillment" of prophetic promises "as though they were in fact predictions."[188] Nevertheless, historical criticism bears the brunt of the indictment here. The apparently opposite tact of historical-critical inquiry to that of "religionists" remains that

> historical criticism has been preoccupied with locating the date and setting for each [prophetic] promise. The effect of such preoccupation is to explain away the power of hope, for such scholarship seeks a time and place of utterance that are palatable and minimize the abrasion of the promise. Such a critical approach fails to notice that such rhetoric is never palatable to established power. The preoccupation among scholars to determine what is "genuine" or "not genuine" among the promises amounts to a refusal to take the promise on its own terms.[189]

One duly notes a wish not to "overstate" his critique of historical criticism. Yet Brueggemann highlights historical criticism's alleged embarrassment over the text as it stands, as it seeks to get behind or around the text's central claims. His implication that historical criticism (and its practitioners) are complicit with "established power" and the enforcement of an analogous status quo, contractual, "common theology" of the biblical texts is, one must admit, exceedingly harsh. He writes:

> These texts make claims that are of great urgency in our common life. Otherwise, we would not spend our life on them. It is important that we are not so fascinated with method, so content with writing for each other, so preoccupied with subjective niceties that we do not have our say to the human culture around us out of these texts. That is, is it not, the purpose of humanistic study? . . . some in our culture have a great stake in keeping our study marginalized in scholarly niceties in order

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[188] Ibid., 83.

[189] Ibid., 83.

> to keep the main claims [of the biblical texts] from visibility. The way to do that is to stay with formal issues in the avoidance of substantive claims, to be endlessly critical, to avoid any act of anticipation. Doing biblical theology is obviously difficult. It could also disturb critical slumber.[190]

Brueggemann subsequently argues that there has been a "shift in method" over the preceding decade that increasingly attempts to "take the text as a whole."[191] This constitutes an attempt "to bracket out those redactional possibilities that have preoccupied an older method."[192] He continues: "[t]exts may not be assessed any longer 'from the outside,' according to our critical control, but must be appreciated for their fullness . . . the theological claim of the text cannot be bracketed out methodologically."[193]

We will see a return to—and even bolder emphasis of—these ideas in Brueggemann's 1997 monumental work. Therefore it is to this work that we now turn.

The Late 1990s: *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*

If *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* can be viewed as a work that culminates in *Theology of the Old Testament*: *Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*

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[190] Ibid., 117.

[191] Ibid., 306.

[192] Ibid., 306.

[193] Ibid., 306-307.

(1997),[194] one can also observe a trajectory that finally issues in a nearly complete turn toward language and rejection of standard historical inquiry as inadequate to the specific practice of Old Testament theology. It is important to recognize that this is not a wholesale rejection of historical inquiry in relation to biblical theology, but an absolute and unwavering insistence that it needs to be reconceptualized. After all, Brueggemann relies upon much of the critical work that has preceded him, and he recognizes the importance of such work. He states as much when he writes that "there is no doubt that historical criticism, broadly construed, is crucial for responsible biblical theology"[195] But the phrase "broadly construed" is key here. Brueggemann advocates for due consideration and reassessment of the methods and conclusions of standard historical-critical scholarship from an epistemological standpoint (and hence does not condone a return to "precritical" interpretation), but rejects its positivistic and allegedly objective stance. His sociological tendencies (which mandate attention to sociological history) would not allow wholesale

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[194] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

[195] Ibid., 726. This statement regarding the necessity of historical criticism for biblical theology contradicts certain criticisms that have been leveled against Brueggemann's work. For example, see Paul D. Hanson, "A New Challenge to Biblical Theology," *JAAR* 67, no. 2 (1999): 447-60. Hanson writes, "Brueggemann embraces a rhetorical approach that rejects concern for the historical setting of texts and denies the significance of aspects of divine reality apart from their embodiment in biblical speech. His caricatures of historical criticism and theological discussion about the "real" God behind/beyond biblical speech identify them with positivism and rationalism, leading to dismissal of both as useless legacies of the Enlightenment," (448-49). This assessment of Brueggemann's overall project seems itself a caricature and gross oversimplification of Brueggemann's work—particularly as Brueggemann merely criticizes the positivistic tendencies of historical criticism and does not advocate for a thoroughgoing dismissal of historical criticism.

dismissal.[196] Therefore while historical-critical scholarship should not be rejected, Brueggemann suggests that it must be responsibly appropriated.[197]

Brueggemann thus manages to sever the link between objective Israelite history and biblical theology as first proposed by Gabler.[198] Importantly, this is also a rejection of Gabler's idealistic "pure notions" as somehow separate from historical contingency, and so the biblical theologian's Gablerian task of accounting for that history.[199] There are no pure notions as there is no assured objectivity, and for Brueggemann, historical contingency is primarily applicable to the contemporary interpreter herself and her present intellectual climate. In a sense, Brueggemann inverts the priority and treatment of ancient history within historical-critical scholarship: theological inquiry prioritizes present "history." The premise of *Theology of the Old Testament* is rather simple, belied by the daunting size of the book in which it is presented: biblical theology is concerned with the entire text (and only the text) of the Bible as it stands, in all of its pluralism and diversity, as the

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[196] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 728.

[197] Ibid.

[198] Ibid., 13. Brueggemann here offers his own assessment of Gabler's legacy.

[199] Johann Philipp Gabler, "An Oration On the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each" in *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future* (trans. John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldridge; ed. Ben C. Ollenburger. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbraun's, 2004). Gabler writes: "But let those things that have been said up to now be worth this much: that we distinguish carefully the divine from the human, that we establish some distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology, and after we have separated those things which in the sacred books refer most immediately to their own times and to the men of those times from those pure notions which divine providence wished to be characteristic of all times and places, let us then construct the foundation of our philosophy upon religion and let us designate with some care the objectives of divine and human wisdom," (502).

testimony of Israel offered to this and every new generation. It nevertheless takes Brueggemann 777 pages to navigate such pluralism in order to present this idea.

The usual emphases—particularly the thoroughgoing dialectical approach and mutually correcting sociological criticism[200] and literary criticism[201] in Brueggemann's earlier work—reappear in 1997, with four central interrelated but reorganizing changes. These are (1) a complete break with an Enlightenment epistemology (that is, rational and objective knowledge achieved by an individual Cartesian "knower" and marked by a methodologically requisite stance of skepticism and doubt);[202] (2) a resulting commitment to the text itself and emphasis upon its rhetoric alone; (3) the proposal of a "courtroom trial" metaphor for understanding the competing diverse theological claims of the biblical text in a manner that is "characteristically Jewish;" and (4) a thoroughgoing attempt to write

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[200] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 49-53. Regarding sociological criticism, and relying upon Gottwald, Brueggemann writes that such criticism, "has disrupted the assumptions of innocence that has prevailed in the older positivistic historical-critical reading…what has passed for objective reading (and still does in some quarters) is often the work of a privileged elite who agreed upon methods of reading that kept the text in the sphere of ideas where it did not come into contact with material advantage and disadvantage," (52). Thus sociological criticism applies as much to scholarship as it does to the biblical texts themselves, since, "every textual utterance in the Old Testament needs to be understood as engaged in the realities of power, the securing of power, the maintenance of power, or the legitimating of power," (51).

[201] Ibid., 53-59. Regarding rhetorical criticism, Brueggemann avers that it "enables the reader to stay close to the text itself and does not assume that something more important, either historical or theological, lies behind it. At the same time, it is important to recognize, given the generative character of the text, that much that is theological lies 'in front of the text.' A theological interpreter should not be so protective of the text as to shrink from that generative extrapolation," (56).

[202] Ibid., 49. On this point, it should be stated that Brueggemann does not necessarily choose to make a break with Enlightenment epistemology. Rather, he sees it as a contemporary fact—already articulated by Leo G. Perdue in *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (OBT; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995)—that need only be acknowledged: Brueggemann writes that "it is likely that we have not yet understood with sufficient clarity the epistemological break before which we now stand," (49).

a comprehensive work of biblical theology within a so-called "postmodern" situation. The implicit goal of Brueggemann's book consists of an attempt to allow the text itself the credibility and integrity of its own voice in a world of competing voices. Brueggemann again treats the Bible as a subject rather than a mere critical object, but this is now a guiding principle of the entire book. One may accurately call these four issues "changes" in his thought not because they are necessarily new to Brueggemann's works, but because they become the focal points around which all of his other ideas become organized.

The Indictment of Enlightenment Epistemology

Regarding this first organizing category—the break with an Enlightenment epistemology (as originally exemplified by René Descartes and John Locke)—Brueggemann exhibits a sort of subtle return to pre-Enlightenment traditions, albeit recast in a post-critical idiom that does not neglect critical scholarship. To take one example, he summarizes (and appears to sympathize with) with the views of Martin Luther and other Protestant Reformers when he writes:

> This "voice of the Bible" speaks its truth and makes its claim in its own categories, categories that are recurringly odd and unaccommodating. The substance of that truth is God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the God known decisively and uniquely in Jesus of Nazareth. The Bible bears primal witness to and discloses this God, without any intellectual, epistemological accommodation to any other categories.[203]

Such a view of the Reformers lies in stark contrast to the "alternative epistemology" offered by Descartes subsequent to the Reformation with the onset of the

[203] Ibid., 3.

Enlightenment in Europe. Brueggemann explains: "[t]hat alternative epistemology focused on the human agent as the unfettered, unencumbered doubter and knower who could by objective reason come to know what is true and reliable."[204] Brueggemann links this rise of objective reason (as an arbiter of truth) to the rise of historical criticism, and with the development of an alternative scholarly tradition as opposed to *church* tradition. The result was that texts were sorted according to various historical (or perceived meritorious) criteria (i.e. identifying sources and redactional development, or identifying inherently preferred texts according to the criteria of more "original" writings in contrast to "later" writings). Texts and their history were accounted for and explained, but the "revelatory claims" of the Bible were neglected. Brueggemann starkly claims that "[t]he outcome was to make the biblical text subservient, at least methodologically, to the rational claims of the interpretive elite."[205] The role of the autonomous critic was elevated, as there was "an enormous sense of confidence vested in the 'knower' (described by Descartes) who used the correct methods, so that all of history could be readily available for analysis and dissection."[206] Those who were once ostensibly subservient to the biblical text (such as the Reformers) became masters of it, and the modern biblical critic was born.

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[204] Ibid., 8.

[205] Ibid., 10.

[206] Ibid., 47.

Although not explicitly stated, Brueggemann appears to take some now familiar critiques of Descartes to heart.[207] In order to claim an autonomous epistemological foundation for all knowledge as captured by the Cartesian phrase *cogito ergo sum*, one must recognize the logically prior problem that language immediately presents. This linguistic problem complicates the quest for autonomy. In order for there to even be a solitary "I" who thinks, such language first depends on a "you" against which an "I" can constitute and conceptualize my very thinking and being in the first place. There can be no "I" in a vacuum; it is always an "I" *in relation*. That "you" presents a problem for any alleged foundational and autonomous "I" who thinks.[208] In short, autonomy is an illusion obviated by Descarte's own language. Furthermore, Jacques Derrida's much misquoted, much maligned, and much misunderstood claim that "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" ("there is nothing outside the text")[209] indicates that there is no way around the problem that language presents: of course there is a "reality" out there in which we live, but it is described and accessed for an "other" (a "you") in and through language itself. According to this view, "reality" itself is equivalent to "context," and "context" itself is routinely and necessarily accounted for by a written or spoken "text." In a manner of speaking, one does not have access to an unmediated "reality" (or "context")

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[207] Many of such critiques leveled against Descartes are summarized in Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (rev. ed.; New York: Routledge, 2005).

[208] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 47, cf. 133. Brueggemann is closest to an articulation of this linguistic phenomenon when he speaks of an "I" and "Thou" relationship; a relationship that is foreign to the program of Cartesian doubt and its thoroughgoing emphasis upon individual autonomy.

[209] Jacques Derrida, "Introduction to the Age of Rousseau," in *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press) 158-159, cf. 163.

without first going through language, and so one cannot ever get around, above, below, or through the "text."[210]

Accurate depiction of language or not—and consciously articulated this way or not—Brueggemann appears to subscribe to a similar line of thought as it constitutes one of the centerpieces of a so-called "postmodern" worldview and the philosophical "turn" toward language. The choice is not between an autonomous "critical" scholarship and a fideistic "confessional" scholarship (as John Collins would have it) because, as Brueggemann writes, "*the Cartesian program of autonomous reason, which issued in historical criticism, is also an act of philosophical fideism*."[211] Commitments abound. Appeal to "historical context" in order to gain objective ground is "not neutral but is itself theory-laden, engaged in an ideological practice."[212] Moreover, instead of any historical "reality" that consists of a reconstructed historical context, we have only a biblical text. Any actual history is profoundly unavailable to us (and could only be described textually anyway—a text that always and endlessly displaces, defers, and finally replaces the very "reality" it

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[210] There are great many problems with this view of "reality" as it relates to language. For instance, it would appear that a pre-verbal child or person unable to speak has no access to "reality" in relation to an "other." The immediate "postmodern" response, as discussed in chapter two, would likely argue that the issue cannot be separated from a discussion of time, and its attendant problem of "presence" and "absence." As discussed there, postmodern viewpoints often dismiss pure presence as an illusion, as each "present" moment becomes past from moment to moment. "The present" can only be accessed retrospectively, and this can only—so the argument goes—be done via spoken or written language. Every "present" moment of "reality" must be *retrieved*. For the extreme "postmodern" view that virtually sees "text" written all over "reality" (and everything we see, touch, taste, or hear) see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (trans. Sheila Faria Glaser; Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[211] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*., 17 (author's emphasis). Here, Brueggemann cites Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (eds. John Cumming and Garrett Barden; trans. W. Glen-Doepel; 3d ed.; New York: Continuum, 2004); and Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (trans. John Cumming; New York: Continuum, 1975).

[212] Ibid., 17.

once innocently purported to deliver).[213] The biblical text is above all a *testimony* according to Brueggemann—there is no way around its rhetoric—and it offers no immediate access to any alleged "reality" behind the text.

Importantly, however, it would be a mistake to believe that Brueggemann faults and consequently neglects the development of modern rationalism and the rise of historical criticism. Modern historical criticism has made massive gains, and cannot—and should not—be ignored.[214] Such claims may begin to strike a casual observer as somewhat hollow due to Brueggemann's own "linguistic turn." One might even construe these assertions to indicate that past historical-critical scholarship has been valuable, but the task of biblical theology must self-consciously move beyond the activities of historical-critical approaches.

Brueggemann is again extremely clear on this point, made long before in *In Man We Trust*: "*in every period of the discipline* [of biblical theology]*, the questions, methods, and possibilities in which study is cast arise from the sociointellectual climate in which the work must be done.*"[215] Again, any claim to autonomy—the lone "I" without any "you"—is an illusion. Scholarship cannot be practiced in a vacuum; it can only be practiced within a definite sociointellectual climate. Therefore Enlightenment scholarship was not as neutral, unprejudiced, and objective as it

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[213] By no means should the reader assume that explanation of "postmodern" assessments of language, text, and reality implies personal agreement. The goal here is merely to flesh out the "postmodern" intellectual background upon which Brueggemann relies, and which he never does fully articulate.

[214] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 14; cf. Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust,* 124-25

[215] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 11 (author's emphasis).

claimed to be, and hindsight has shown that it ultimately exhibited a "prejudice against prejudice."[216] Earlier scholarship trafficked in a positivistic modern rationalism that either sought to explain away the text's theological claims or simply ignored these aspects of the text altogether. Once again, academic historical scholarship—according to Brueggemann's analysis—positioned itself above the text, and the Bible became "an object of study in the context of the metahistory of positivism" requiring the critic to "distort or deny the most defining characteristics of the text itself."[217] Most scathingly, Brueggemann frames the issue thusly:

> The [contemporary] media industry and its well-funded, vacuous appeal have nearly emptied speech of testimonial power. It is my judgment, moreover, that historical criticism of a positivistic kind in Scripture study has conspired both with such vacuousness, because the informed interpreter—the educated critic—is permitted to talk about everything except the theological Actor in the text and the claims made by that theological actor. I do not know if the necessary courage and imagination are now available in order to sustain the extravagant, costly, counterrational utterance that will mediate Yahweh in concrete ways.[218]

Accordingly, Brueggemann believes that the theological claims of the text—in all of their stark and often contradictory pluralism and irreducible diversity—must be dealt with courageously and head-on. Scholarship at the end of the twentieth century, in his eyes, had decisively moved on from this earlier Cartesian epistemology toward a postmodern sociointellectual climate.[219] He defines this

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[216] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 241-245. Cf. Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 14.

[217] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 15.

[218] Ibid., 703.

[219] Ibid., 86. Brueggemann also aligns himself with categories "postliberal" and "nonfoundational," (86). To this end, he seeks to "exposit the theological perspectives and claims of

generally as "the breakup of any broad consensus about what we know and how we know what we know… no interpretive institution, ecclesial or academic, can any longer sustain a hegemonic mode of interpretation."[220] Thus, the contemporary work of Old Testament theology "must live and work in an interpretive context that focuses on pluralism and adjudication between competing rhetorical and ideological claims."[221] The text, as also life, is complicated, messy, and ultimately lacks a unified and coherent metanarrative according to this trajectory of thought. Nor does the text escape the philosophical and epistemological problems that language presents in relationship to "reality."

So what is to be done? Where can a "biblical theology" turn when an autonomous, objective, positivistic history has failed to deliver the assured results scholars once sought? Rather than bracketing out biases, faith commitments, confessional identities, truth claims, and their evaluation (as in Collins) one can always turn to language itself and bracket out "history" for a time in the name of a constructive biblical theology.[222] And this bracketing out of history—rightly or wrongly—is precisely what Brueggemann does in our so-called "postmodern"[223] situation as he (and our prevailing sociointellectual climate as Brueggemann reads it) breaks with an ostensibly obsolete Cartesian epistemology. To come full circle,

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the text itself, in all its odd particularity, without any attempt to accommodate to a larger rationality, either of modernity or of classical Christianity," (86).

[220] Ibid., 709-710.

[221] Ibid., 14-15.

[222] Ibid., 118; cf. xiv

[223] Ibid., cf. 91. Brueggemann, drawing upon Ricouer, also calls this a "postcritical" situation.

the Reformers were not the only ones to claim that "[t]his 'voice of the Bible' speaks its truth and makes its claim in its own categories . . . without any intellectual, epistemological accommodation to any other categories."[224] Brueggemann, in a "postmodern" mode, does the same.

Brueggemann's own "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte"

The Bible clearly consists of text, and such text can be critically examined without any necessary recourse to a reconstructed historical reality. Admitting the pervasive influence of Karl Barth regarding both his view of rhetoric and his dialectical method,[225] Brueggemann consequently (and controversially) claims that "*[t]he God of the Bible is not 'somewhere else,' but is given only in, with, and under the text itself,*"[226] and that "*I shall insist, as consistently as I can, that the God of Old Testament theology as such lives in, with, and under the rhetorical enterprise of this text, and nowhere else, and in no other way*."[227] Similarly, he can claim that "even with reference to God, the imaginative, generative power of rhetoric offers to the hearer of this text a God not otherwise known or available or even—dare one say—not otherwise 'there.'"[228] This constitutes a stark separation between rhetoric and

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[224] Ibid., 3.

[225] Ibid., 16-20.

[226] Ibid., 19 (author's emphasis).

[227] Ibid., 66 (author's emphasis).

[228] Ibid., 58.

ontology; between the text and historical reality.[229] Indeed, although he does not explicitly say so, this is Brueggemann's own particular version of Derrida's "il n'y a pas de hors-texte."

Oddly, it is here that we also find the greatest similarity and point of considerable agreement between Walter Brueggemann and John Collins. One would be remiss to only consider these scholars in opposition to one another. While they are perhaps *mostly* that, one needs to remember that Collins too is concerned with the Bible's unavoidable "statements about God." Collins has written the following:

> If we recognize that much biblical 'history' is fiction, in the sense of Ricoeur's poetic language, then we must also recognize that statements about God must be interpreted in the context of that fiction . . . The modern reader, however, who can no longer accept the historical truth value of Genesis or Exodus, can only choose between inaccurate historiography and imaginative fiction. It is not clear why fiction should appear the more disastrous of these alternatives, if we free ourselves of the prejudice that equates fiction with falsehood and accept it as a fundamental way of apprehending reality.[230]

While Brueggemann appears to resist any temptation to call the text a "fiction," Collins' distinction between God as a character within biblical fiction and the transcendent "living God" confessed by faith communities appears to be a major point of contact between these two scholars. Collins insists that the former plays roles that are mundane and functionary within that biblical fiction and "are not necessarily always pointers to transcendence."[231] Brueggemann seems to

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[229] See John J. Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible" in *Encounters with Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 19. Brueggemann's position here, at least, is not entirely different from that proposed by John Collins (see below).

[230] Ibid., 21.

[231] Ibid.

wholeheartedly agree, while even moving one step further: there is no transcendent God accessible beyond the text; there is "nothing outside of the text." For Brueggemann, there is no direct access to Collins' "transcendent" God. God is only found "in, with, and under the text," and it is always and only the text and its particular and irreducible rhetoric with which the biblical theologian is concerned.[232]

Brueggemann's insistence on text alone appears to be the contemporary equivalent to the classical Protestant notion of *Sola Scriptura*.[233] Nevertheless, it cannot be said that this particular construal somehow allows the biblical texts to be interpreted over against confessional tradition. As has been seen, Brueggemann is always hermeneutically self-aware[234] and knows that the contemporary situation of a given interpreter, her community of reference, and her prior commitments—rooted in one tradition or another—always influence interpretation, even in and through her complete engagement with the "text alone." Brueggemann succinctly

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[232] Cf. Hanson, "A New Challenge to Biblical Theology," 455. Hanson writes that "[t]he first step in interpretation entails questions about the setting(s) of the text in the social/religious history of Israel. Without question, blunders will be made in reconstructing such settings, and the process of criticism is ongoing, but this is not to diminish the importance of striving to understand biblical texts within the concreteness of Israel's historical existence lest a new form of idolatry arise in identification of the real God with human constructions." One might say that Hanson has missed the point of Brueggemann's entire project here. Brueggemann is not wholly dismissing questions of history or their usefulness, but is merely bracketing them out in order to emphasize the role of Israel's rhetoric in a constructive biblical theology. Brueggemann's project is explicitly a rhetorical one. Questions regarding the historical setting of a particular text may be the first step in historical-critical interpretation, but it need not be in the case of a project that is emphatically rhetorical.

[233] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 107.

[234] Ibid., 73. Brueggemann is aware that "interpretive judgment is never innocent or disinterested and may be decided variously," whether based on personal inclination, social milieu, or theological background (73). He writes: "[i]t behooves the interpreter, therefore, to have a good bit of self-knowledge in rendering such a verdict, and a good measure of modesty in defending that verdict," (73).

states the matter: "*[s]cripture cannot be understood apart from the ongoing role of communal tradition*."[235] As previously discussed, the work of scholars like Eichrodt and von Rad "resonated with their own particular time and place . . . their brilliance is their context-specificity."[236] One must make no mistake that Brueggemann's call for "text alone" simultaneously neither permits nor allows for any degree of interpretative autonomy or disinterested objectivity whatsoever.

At the same time, one need not portray religious and confessional bias as an oversimplified choice between "confessional" and "critical" scholarship (cf. Collins). Indeed, responsible theological interpretation might confirm traditional ecclesial understandings, but must also be articulated even where it appears to "clash with, challenge, and undermine seemingly settled church theology."[237] An alleged "confessional" scholarship has the potential to become profoundly anti-confessional whenever it is critical of traditional ecclesial understandings. As previously discussed, this particular responsibility of theological interpretation had been made very early on in Brueggemann's career. The opposition between "confessional" and "critical" scholarship as Collins understands such terms is therefore problematized in Brueggemann's work. Ecclesial communities may tend toward reductionist closure and a sort of systemizing theological positivism, but responsible interpreters engage in a disruptive task in confronting a nonsystematic text in order

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[235] Ibid., 4 (author's emphasis).

[236] Ibid., 38.

[237] Ibid., 107.

to demonstrate that the text itself precludes such closure and certitude.[238] Yet again, this activity always confronts the "text alone" without seeking merely to get "behind" it in some fashion, or for whatever reason.

The aspiring biblical theologian confronts only a biblical text. Brueggemann argues that "[w]hat we have available to us is the speech of this [Israelite] community, which has become text, and which is our proper subject of study," and which "bracket[s] out" any alleged history.[239] The key to understanding this text is not that it aims to reference or deliver some historical "reality" (nor is it a "fiction" as Collins understands it) but that it contains only what can be called "testimony" or a textual construal of an ultimately inaccessible historical "reality." It is a proposal, not a fiction. It does not apprehend reality (Collins' phrase), it constructs and construes reality.[240] It offers an alternative construal to what people usually take as "real." The best way to understand this endlessly pluralistic and dynamic dimension of the text, Brueggemann argues, is through the metaphor of an adjudicating courtroom trial. And a court trades only in testimony.

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[238] Ibid., 107.

[239] Ibid., 118. One reasonably senses some inconsistency and some considerable risks here. It is difficult, and perhaps impossible to deny that the biblical texts themselves are concerned with an actual history. Moreover, and as stated previously, Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament* cannot be said to completely ignore all historical discussion. Perhaps this is the reason that Brueggemann is careful to qualify this alleged bracketing of history when he writes that "we *tend* to bracket out all questions of historicity," (118, emphasis mine). A tendency is not the equivalent of a blanket dismissal. Moreover, Brueggemann often relies upon the insights of historical criticism, but never confuses such insight as "biblical theology" itself.

[240] Ibid., *passim*; cf. 71 for one such example: "In sum, then, our postmodern situation, which refuses to acknowledge a settled essence behind our pluralistic claims, must make a major and intentional investment in the practice of rhetoric, for the shape of reality finally depends on the power of speech."

Brueggemann's Courtroom Metaphor

The most novel notion within *Theology of the Old Testament* is probably Brueggemann's suggestion that the entire Bible be understood through the metaphor of a courtroom proceeding.[241] Such a suggestion allows him to bypass the choice between "historical truth" and "imaginative fiction" that Collins puts forth. Matters are not so clear-cut as "truth" and "fiction" allow, as determining what really happened in the arena of a court is always something adjudicated and decided retrospectively on the basis of testimony alone, and never directly given.

The courtroom trial metaphor is employed because (1) the pluralistic text and its rhetorical claims are always in dispute with other texts; (2) the biblical witness offer different and competing accounts of "reality" through their rhetorical testimony (which are always interested, and which advocate differing theo-ideological perspectives); (3) "reality" cannot be accessed directly in some unmediated way, and can only be decided on the basis of testimonial language; and (4) the court is still "in session"—so to speak—and nothing has been decided once-for-all, leaving a remarkable degree of openness and resistance to closure. Additionally, although Brueggemann never claims it, one is tempted to point out that biblical "testimony" and biblical "witness" have always been common ways

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[241] Ibid., 134. The understanding of a courtroom trial metaphor was first proposed by Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Lewis S. Mudge; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). Brueggemann's novel contribution was to use this as a major organizing principle for a comprehensive Old Testament Theology.

(usually in religious contexts) to describe the biblical writings.[242] The courtroom metaphor has a degree of precedence within certain traditions.

In order to illustrate the rationale for proposing the courtroom metaphor, a specific example is helpful. Regarding the issue of theodicy, Brueggemann writes:

> Israel's text is not capable of or willing to give a resolution to that question. Israel's text, and therefore Israel and Israel's God, are always in the middle of an exchange, unable to come to ultimate resolution. There may be momentary or provisional resolution, but because both parties are intensely engaged and are so relentlessly verbal, we are always sure that there will be another speech, another challenge, another invitation, another petition, another argument, which will reopen the matter and extend the provisional settlement. Thus Israel's religious rhetoric does not intend to reach resolution or to achieve closure.[243]

Brueggemann asserts that the way to properly depict this unsettled engagement is via the courtroom trial metaphor. The "largest rubric" in which to understand Israel's speech and its corresponding text "is that of testimony."[244] Yet again, as in any court of law, such testimony does not offer "reality" but is a "mixed matter of memory, reconstruction, imagination, and wish."[245] It is up to the court to navigate the various testimonies and witnesses in order to best decide what version of events is to count as true and reliable, as they have no direct access to the event itself apart

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[242] Here, one needs to recognize the traditional Christian distinctions between the Old "Testament" and the New "Testament." "Witness" is common parlance within many liturgical settings, and such language is also not foreign to scholarly treatment of the Bible. See Christopher R. Seitz, *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004).

[243] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament.*, 83.

[244] Ibid., 119.

[245] Ibid., 120.

from these witnesses.[246] He writes, "[i]n the trial situation, presumably, some actual event or experience occurred to which appeal is made and which is under dispute…The actual event, however, is enormously supple and elusive and admits to many retellings."[247] "Reality" is thus not simply mediated, but it is construed. Theologically speaking, when human testimony is accepted as reliable and true, it is therefore accepted "as revelation that discloses the true reality of God."[248] In the context of the court, such testimony is profoundly unsettled: "*Old Testament theology, when it pays attention to Israel's venturesome rhetoric, refuses any reductionism to a single or simple articulation;* it offers a witness that is enormously open, inviting, and suggestive, rather than one that yields settlement, closure, or precision."[249]

Brueggemann defines such testimony literally as "theo-logos," or explicit speech about God. This is usually a phrase, captured in a grammatically complete sentence, and "organized around an active verb that bespeaks an action that is transformative, intrusive, or inverting."[250] The subject of such a sentence is God, who enacts a "new situation or a changed circumstance."[251] At other times, certain

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[246] Ibid., 120-121.

[247] Ibid., 120.

[248] Ibid., 121. Brueggemann also writes, "[a]fter the witnesses have been heard (presumably witnesses in dispute), a verdict must be given. A judgment is made about which witnesses are trustworthy. When the verdict is given, reality is decided," (135).

[249] Ibid., 149 (author's emphasis).

[250] Ibid.

[251] Ibid., 123.

testimonial claims are more generalized via the use of adjectives[252] or nouns (routinely employed as metaphors)[253] used to describe God. Often, this "strange grammatical practice serves to give a version of reality that flies in the face of other versions of reality…which it judges to be false."[254] Such grammatical complete sentences are the "core claim of Israel's faith."[255] Much of this "core testimony" amounts to resolutely unsystematic portrayals of God, proffered in "a mass of detail, a collage of discrete texts."[256] Nevertheless, "[t]his work of fashioning a larger, coherent portrayal of Yahweh is the proper work of an Old Testament theology."[257] According to Brueggemann, schematization (not "systematization") of an admittedly diverse array of concrete testimonies is both "required work" and the most "profound hazard" of Old Testament theology.[258] Careful, responsible, and admittedly risky reductionism is in order to account for Israel's primary testimony.

While it is this primary (or "core testimony" or "core affirmation" or "consensus testimony")[259] that "is intended to generate an accepted, *normative*

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[252] Ibid., 213-215.

[253] Ibid., 229-230.

[254] Ibid., 124.

[255] Ibid., 125.

[256] Ibid., 267.

[257] Ibid. Brueggemann clearly here resists the "enterprise [of] commenting on one text at a time," (267) in favor of work that "construe[s] out of the texts a rendering of God." This is simultaneously the "great hazard of an Old Testament theology" (267) as an interested and biased affair.

[258] Ibid., 267-268.

[259] Ibid., 318, *passim*. Brueggemann uses all of these phrases interchangeably to describe "core testimony."

narrative construal of reality in which the members of Israel can live,"[260] there is also a subsequent act of "cross-examination" in any courtroom trial. This does not seek to "obliterate" the core testimony, but rather ensures an "ongoing exchange" and is properly reflective of the "disputatious" character of the biblical texts according to Brueggemann's metaphor.[261] He writes:

> Thus a reader of the Old Testament, I suggest, must accept cross-examination as a crucial part of the way in which Israel makes its presentation of disputatious testimony concerning Yahweh. It does not know any other way to speak. As a result, it is evident that Israel's countertestimony is not an act of unfaith. It is rather a characteristic way in which faith is practiced.[262]

Therefore the "countertestimony" that emerges from such cross-examination must be held in dialectical tension with core testimony, and never consists of alternative options that one might choose over the other. Brueggemann alleges that "[t]o choose either mode of testimony to the disregard of the other is in my judgment not only to cheat the testimonial corpus, but to misunderstand the dialectical, resilient, disputatious quality that is definitional for this faith."[263]

Countertestimonies are variable and pluralistic in nature, and are not always captured by a grammatical sentence,[264] but generally resist the normative aspect of

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[260] Ibid., 134 (emphasis mine).

[261] Ibid., 317.

[262] Ibid., 318.

[263] Ibid., 400.

[264] Ibid., 359. Brueggemann here maintains that some countertestimony "is not found in what we would regard as self-conscious theological statements in the Old Testament, such as the ones we have considered in Israel's core testimony. Rather the evidence occurs almost inadvertently, in contexts of extreme emotional investment, or as a by-product in the narratives that seem to be concerned with other matters… Because of the ad hoc nature of the evidence, we are reduced to a rather ad hoc approach," (359).

core testimony by issuing challenges derived from the lived experiences of day-to-day life. It has three primary facets that challenge any normative construal of the character of God and God's world: (1) the "hiddenness" of God as often claimed by wisdom traditions; (2) "ambiguity or instability" of life as portrayed in many biblical narratives; and (3) "negativity" routinely depicted in texts as a voiced complaint when God apparently fails to enact justice.[265] Thus Brueggemann may say that "Israel's characteristic candor about its life puts its own core testimony in some jeopardy and leaves the truth of the matter still to be adjudicated."[266] Questions of "where?" and "why?" and "how long?" addressed to God in the search for justice,[267] complaints, laments, and expressions of a sense of abandonment (chiefly due to exile and the temple's destruction)[268] are all examples of such countertestimony. Moreover, it is argued that the Bible's practice of countertestimony is theologically necessary. According to Brueggemann, "*Israel as witness knows that if Yahweh is not endlessly criticized and subverted, Yahweh will also become an absolute, absolutizing idol.*"[269] The text itself is unsettled, and is simultaneously reflective of the unsettled nature of the character of God.[270] Indeed, "on occasion" certain texts portray God as

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[265] Ibid., 318-19.

[266] Ibid., 319.

[267] Ibid., 319-21.

[268] Ibid., 321-22.

[269] Ibid., 332 (author's emphasis).

[270] Ibid.

"devious, ambiguous, irascible, and unstable."[271] God is "capable of negative, destructive acts toward Israel,"[272] and God "is capable of violence, and indeed the texture of the Old Testament is deeply marked by violence."[273] Christianity—it is argued—has too often reduced the biblical text to testimony alone apart from countertestimony in attempts to systematize, but the two must always be held in tension.[274]

Here again is an illustration of the alternative epistemology that Brueggemann seeks. Core testimony can be (provisionally) thematized, but countertestimony consists of subtle challenges, here and there, and bit by bit, to that core witness.[275] Brueggemann writes, "[o]ne can begin to grasp the distinctive power of this mode of discourse by contrasting it with the generalizing claims and procedures of the classic Greek tradition," and so too classical Christianity by extension.[276] He contrasts this with what is termed a characteristically "Jewish" mode of discourse that "refuse[s] to accept the universalizing of dominant Western

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[271] Ibid., 359.

[272] Ibid., 378.

[273] Ibid., 381.

[274] Ibid. Cf. Hanson, "A New Challenge to Biblical Theology," 454: Regarding Brueggemann's portrayal of God, Hanson writes that this "[t]heologically, is the most important issue raised by Brueggemann's theology, since, contrary to Brueggemann's intentions, his description of God could reinforce a tendency deeply rooted in Christendom of contrasting an Old Testament God of wrath with a New Testament God of love." Hanson seems to ignore Brueggemann's explicit attention to the problem, and that the Old Testament not be reduced to a God of "wrath."

[275] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament,* 324.

[276] Ibid., cf. 327.

modes of reason."[277] Though the text lies at some historical distance from the communities of contemporary Jews, characteristically "Jewish" modes of discourse and the discourse of the Old Testament are cited as correlative.

The dialectic of testimony and countertestimony does seem to require some nuancing, however. One might be so bold as to label it a weakness in Brueggemann's dialectical scheme: testimony and countertestimony do not account for all that is theologically relevant within the biblical texts. He therefore offers a degree of modification to the scheme: just as witnesses under questioning in a courtroom may digress from the script planned by an attorney when presenting a case, so also superfluous testimony is sometimes offered on the stand. This falls under the rubric of "unsolicited testimony."[278] Reasons for this, Brueggemann alleges, are varied. It may be because Israel acts as a bold and unrestrained witness before the nations, it may be because Israel seeks to present the entire picture in the fullest possible detail, or it may be because Israel is "peculiarly insightful" in its "utterance of Yahweh."[279] Here, Brueggemann argues that unsolicited testimony goes well beyond the nature of core testimony when he writes, "Israel's testimony to Yahweh includes

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[277] Ibid., 325. Brueggemann cites an alleged "elasticity" within Jewish tradition and interpretation, which "invites and requires endless, ongoing interpretive work, never reaching closure, but always being responsive in ways that preclude final settlement… [i]nterpretive openings and resources permit the written Torah to be reread afresh in endlessly imaginative ways," (595).

[278] Ibid., 407-408. Like the "ad hoc" nature of countertestimony, unsolicited testimony also appears to lack systematization or any easy methodological schematic for identifying it. For example, and writing on the subject of human personhood, Brueggemann writes, "[t]he Old Testament provides few texts that explicitly and intentionally address the questions we are considering. Rather the evidence is provided 'on the run' and in an ad hoc fashion," (460).

[279] Ibid., 408.

a recognition that the…interaction between Yahweh and Yahweh's partners cannot be contained in such a simple grammatical construct."[280]

For example, there is an authentic relationship of mutual interaction and mutual influence (most fully represented by the concept of "covenant") between Israel and its God. Both parties are always in a sort of dynamic flux, always changing and never static in relation to the other (this mutuality, however, does not cancel out God's simultaneous incommensurability, incomparability, and sovereignty).[281] The "transactional" nature of this mutual relationship cannot be understood in terms of "Aristotelian logic" and can only be presented as yet another dialectic between God's sovereign "freedom" and simultaneous "passion" for Israel.[282] God is both completely free and completely committed as a God who is always a God-in-relation (and correspondingly, Israel is always Israel-in-relation, which flies in the face of any possibility for Cartesian autonomy).[283] The authentic relationship between God and Israel is always mutually challenging and changing, lacking in any reducible consistency. Texts that illustrate this relationship—or partnership—fall under the rubric of unsolicited testimony. They depict, one might say, a multidimensional aspect to testimony and countertestimony alone that prevents

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[280] Ibid., 409.

[281] Ibid., 409-410.

[282] Ibid., 410-411.

[283] Ibid.; cf. 445, 451, 453, and 464 for a "biblical understanding" of personhood as a transactional person-in-relation that therefore exists as "a critical protest against all modern notions of humanness that move in the direction of autonomy," (451). One sees plainly here how Brueggemann attempts to preserve a Bible that is on par (or on a level playing field) with the modern critic or interpreter; the Bible is allowed its own voice and ability to "talk back" to the critical interpreter as if in authentic relationship to one another.

this initial dialectic "from being flat, one-dimensional, and readily exhausted."[284] Brueggemann proceeds to analyze this God-in-relation to Israel, to particular people, to the nations beyond Israel, and to all of creation via specific biblical texts.[285] Other relations might be articulated and explored, but Brueggemann limits his exposition to these four relationships to provisionally elucidate aspects of the Bible's "unsolicited testimony" not contained by the testimony-countertestimony dialectic.

Beyond core testimony, countertestimony, and unsolicited testimony, the Bible finally consists of "embodied testimony." It is, one admits, not immediately clear how one is to summarize this final proposal of Brueggemann's—especially in regard to the courtroom metaphor. He writes, "[i]t is now necessary to step away somewhat from our governing metaphor of testimony, inside of which we have attempted to stay until now . . . For after Israel has given witness to the relatedness of Yahweh, one who hears the testimony still wonders: What in fact is the *nature* of this relationship?"[286] One wonders how "embodied testimony" can still be "testimony" upon stepping back from "our governing metaphor of testimony." Nonetheless, Brueggemann writes:

> It is daring of Israel to insist on relatedness with Yahweh. But to be specific about that relatedness requires that along with the daring of Israel's utterance, we pay attention, as best we can, to the practices that give the testimony *concrete embodiment*.[287]

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[284] Ibid., 411.

[285] Ibid., cf. 411.

[286] Ibid., 567 (emphasis mine).

[287] Ibid., 568 (author's emphasis).

Thus here Brueggemann appears to recognize that core testimony, countertestimony, and unsolicited testimony have exhausted their usefulness, and yet still more is needed to complete the theological exposition. This is attention to how Israel matched "practice to rhetoric" in mediating the "presence, power, and purposes" of God.[288] An examination of "utterance" has apparently given way to an examination of "praxis." God may only be revealed "in, with, and under" the rhetorical operation of the text, yet Brueggemann also asserts that "Yahweh is generated and constituted, so far as the claims of Israel are concerned, in *actual practices* that mediate . . . it is a question of characteristic social practice that generates, constitutes, and mediates Yahweh in the midst of life."[289] Brueggemann appears to recognize this problem too: [i]t has been my wont to say that Yahweh's 'natural habitat' is the text of the Old Testament, and there is no Yahweh outside this text. Now I intend to push behind that textual-rhetorical claim, to say that Yahweh's habitat is *in these* [social] *practices*."[290] The Torah, the king, the prophet, the cult, and the sage all mediate Israel's God, or (as in the prophets, for example) make God "palpably available as threat and as possibility" via an utterance that ultimately "mediated disruption."[291] This appears to be a major caveat to the previous claim of the thoroughgoing "textuality" of God, as it is concerned with action and presence and suggests an ontology quite apart from the text itself.

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[288] Ibid.

[289] Ibid., 574 (emphasis mine).

[290] Ibid., 577 (author's emphasis).

[291] Ibid., 649. Here, Brueggemann specifically has the prophet in mind.

To take another example, in reflecting upon the cult as a phenomenon that mediates God, Brueggemann writes:

> The textual traditions concerning Israel's worship are rich and diverse. They are agreed, however, in their primary claim that the cult, in its many forms and expressions, mediates Yahweh's "real presence." In worship, Israel is dealing with the person, character, will, purpose, and presence of Yahweh. While this presence is *mediated* by ritual and sacramental practice, it is the *real presence* of Yahweh that is mediated. Thus these texts about worship seek to articulate and make available real presence.[292]

Or, when reflecting on Israelite sages, Brueggemann writes:

> Wisdom teachers as a mode of mediation for Yahweh are peculiarly important because, unlike the other modes of mediation we have mentioned, the wisdom teachers live very close to concrete, daily reality and give to Israel a sense that Yahweh is present in, with, and under daily, lived experience."[293]

It appears difficult to reconcile such positions with Brueggemann's previous claim cited above: that "*[t]he God of the Bible is not 'somewhere else,' but is given only in, with, and under the text itself*"[294] and that "*I shall insist, as consistently as I can, that the God of Old Testament theology as such lives in, with, and under the rhetorical enterprise of this text, and nowhere else, and in no other way*."[295] Despite this apparent contradiction, what is perhaps most important to glean here is that by recognizing these embodied, concrete religio-social[296] institutions, there is never a

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[292] Ibid., 650 (author's emphasis).

[293] Ibid., 688.

[294] Ibid., 19 (author's emphasis).

[295] Ibid., 66 (author's emphasis).

[296] Ibid.; cf. 681. Here—commenting specifically on the role of the sage—Brueggemann writes, "[o]ur purpose here, however, is not to explicate wisdom theology, but to consider the embodiments of wisdom in regularized social, institutional practice…my comments here can at most

flight from text to some Platonic, ideal, transcendent, generalized theological articulation about God that is somehow removed from day-to-day experience.[297]

Indeed, one might say that Brueggemann's commitment to sociological methods (along with his literary/rhetorical method) requires him to revisit such ideas from his earlier work in order to balance out the literary portrayal. Above, one recalls that Brueggemann's proposed dialectic between literary and sociological approaches mandates some attention to social institutions and practices. God is never a God in any "abstract" theological sense, but a real, mediated presence within the prosaic lived-reality of Israelite life according to Brueggemann. While he draws such a conclusion from the biblical text itself, there simultaneously seems a hidden polemic at work yet again—against the alleged generalizing and reductionist tendencies of Western thought, and perhaps even in support of the mediating aspects that exist within contemporary liturgical life. Brueggemann seems, one might argue, to qualify his thoroughgoing rhetorical position because Christian tradition has always recognized a certain dialectic of its own, captured by the phrase "word and sacrament" (text and action) that mediate a "real presence." Just as one might viscerally react to the notion that "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" and intuitively grasp its insufficiency, Brueggemann appears to recognize the need for a certain divine ontology that is mediated apart from the text alone. He seems to be

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reflect the general, provisional consensus of scholarship," (681). What Brueggemann intends by "embodied" testimony consists of socio-institutional practices, and his (now routine) qualification of offering only "provisional" analysis is again emphasized.

[297] Ibid.; cf. 697. Brueggemann writes that "[w]hat I most want to insist on in this connection is that in these actual, concrete social enactments, it is Yahweh, in all of Yahweh's density, who is mediated. Indeed, I would go further to say that if it were not for these forms of mediation, Yahweh, as known in Israel's testimony, would not be available to Israel," (700).

backtracking. Perhaps a properly theological perspective recognizes that a God who is allegedly sovereign cannot be imprisoned within language, or ultimately subject to its attendant problems—even if we humans are destined to be so troubled.

Biblical Theology in Question: Addressing the Naysayers

Brueggemann concludes his *Theology of the Old Testament* in part by attempting to address two common objections to the practice of biblical theology that should be noted here. In his view, such objections are (1) a recognition that the inarguably pluralistic character of the text disallows all reduction, such that any attempt to engage in biblical theology is impossible; and (2) that theological interpretation is "authoritarian" (due to its historically ecclesial bias and its complicity with the enforcement of church dogmatism) and therefore "coercive," and hence, undesirable.[298] In response, Brueggemann seeks to preserve the text's pluralism without undue reductionism (usually via dialectic categories focusing on the disputatious character of the text). Furthermore, despite the peril of reductionism, he insists that the "metanarrative" pieced together from the text is always only "summons" and "invitation," never coercion.[299] Resistance to the practice of biblical theology, in Brueggemann's judgment, is chiefly due to the "wounds" of reductionism or coercion. In full candor, he muses that such wounds

> are kept hidden or are denied in the name of scientific distancing. My impression, further, is that this aversion to theological interpretation occurs especially among Roman Catholic scholars who have suffered

[298] Ibid., 716. Brueggemann does not use the word "undesirable," but this is how one might reasonably understand his larger point.

[299] Ibid., 725.

> at the hands of an imposing, insistent magisterium, and among scholars with a Protestant upbringing in which coercive social control was confused with the God given in the testimony of Israel . . . such scholars [may] tend to regard Enlightenment rationality with a kind of naive innocence, as though that perspective were not as ideology-laden, and ultimately as reductionist and coercive, as any ecclesial interpretation ever could be…. It is my hope that I have modeled a responsible way of doing Old Testament theological interpretation that is a genuine alternative to these stereotypical modes that so deeply offend and so profoundly wound.[300]

Just as Brueggemann sees the biblical text as offering an alternative construal of reality despite its inherent pluralism, Brueggemann attempts to offer an alternative model of responsible theological scholarship that is neither overly reductionist nor coercive, and that celebrates and embraces the contemporary pluralism among interpreters.

Brueggemann in the 1990s: A Summary

1992's *Old Testament Theology* and 1997's *Theology of the Old Testament* marked the decade of the 1990s as offering a rather robust if not complete articulation of Brueggemann's thought over the course of his career. In 1992, Brueggemann maintained that the shape of Old Testament theology must never be assumed, but always proposed in every new contemporary situation. To this end, scholars must offer theses aimed at a provisional scholarly consensus. Within Brueggemann's own work, such proposals amounted to a "bipolar" scheme that exhibited a rough degree of consensus. Brueggemann then suggested his own "bipolar" categories. Methodologically, this required a conceptualization of a God "in the fray" and a God "above the fray," and so mandated the employment of literary and sociological

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[300] Ibid., 717.

methods. His own bipolar schematic aimed to address the problem of textual pluralism, and amounted to an overall discernment that the text can be understood through a "hurt" and "hope" dialectic—categories that therefore offer a "canonical norm." In contrast, one senses a faultering of this dialectical approach in 1997's *Theology of the Old Testament* (where a simple testimony-countertestimony dialectic does not suffice, and requires the identification of other types of "testimony"). Still, Brueggemann's overall approach culminated with his conceptualization of courtroom "testimony." Finally, a growing impatience with the hidden ideological commitments of an Enlightenment epistemology is evident, along with the historical-critical enterprise it eventually spawned. One comes to see this impatience in Brueggemann as a type of ambivalence: historical criticism has been good for academic scholarship, but the conflation of historical investigation and theological exposition has had mixed results at best. The practice of biblical theology is not primarily a historical one.

Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament* is often taken to be the first comprehensive attempt to articulate a "postmodern" biblical theology.[301] In organization, the exposition is primarily guided by concerns (1) to break with an

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[301] See Hanson, "A New Challenge to Biblical Theology," 459. Hanson seems to readily accept that Brueggemann's work is a "postmodernist" one, and conflates this term with its alleged "deconstructive" emphasis. Hanson asks: "Is the post-modernist deconstructive emphasis on dismantling traditional structures of ethics and belief to set the agenda for a new biblical theology that eschews substantive questions in favor of the flux of incoherences and relativity? Must adherence to newer literary approaches to the Bible be viewed as mandating repudiation of efforts to reconstruct earlier stages of biblical tradition?" In light of the present discussion of Brueggemann's work, (1) Brueggemann hardly seems to dismantle "traditional structures of ethics and belief" in any discernable or obvious way as he is accused by Hanson, (2) Brueggemann does not "repudiate" historical reconstruction but rather consciously employs a rhetorical approach to the text that brackets out questions of historicity, and (3) one might finally question whether Brueggemann's work can really be described as "postmodernist" in any substantive way (as discussed below), let alone that Brueggemann's work constitutes any such putative "deconstructive" activity.

Enlightenment epistemology; (2) to emphasize the rhetorical nature of the text alone, consequently eschewing questions of history and ontology;[302] and (3) to employ the courtroom trial metaphor with its various types of testimony. It departs from typical accounts of a "postmodern" worldview in at least one major facet, however. For Brueggemann, the would-be Old Testament theologian is not to hold a deep suspicion or incredulity toward all metanarratives.[303] He claims that the "work of Old Testament theology, it seems to me, is an articulation of a metanarrative that is a strong contrast to the metanarratives currently available in our society…."[304] While uncomfortable with the term "metanarrative" and its simultaneous temptation toward extreme "reductionism" and possible "hegemonic potential,"[305] Brueggemann argues that the Old Testament itself offers no metanarrative, but only "offers the materials out of which a metanarrative is to be construed."[306] The suggestion of an alleged loss of confidence in all metanarratives is usually attributed to Jean-François Lyotard,[307] but Brueggemann does not accept this assessment (one, of course, may take issue with his piecemeal appropriation of postmodern thought—see below). He writes: "I prefer to think that our situation is one of conflict and competition between deeply held metanarratives, which are seldom enunciated

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[302] Ibid., cf. 718, 722.

[303] Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*: *A Report on Knowledge* (trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi; Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984).

[304] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 558.

[305] Ibid., 558.

[306] Ibid., 559.

[307] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

and only evidenced in bits and pieces."[308] Thus, since reality is never "given" but always construed, the Old Testament theologian is charged with provisionally articulating an implied biblical metanarrative that offers a genuine—and possibly subversive—alternative to others. The agenda here is in "offering an alternative version of reality that creates new perspective, new possibility, and new activity well beyond the assumed world behind the text."[309] The biblical text itself is thus "an enterprise of *counter-reality*… it summons its hearers to an alternative reality."[310] In Brueggemann's perspective, therefore, the concept of a biblical metanarrative does not do violence to the pluralism of the text and, despite textual diversity, a certain biblical "constancy" may be identified, dialectically teased apart, and articulated.[311]

Describing Brueggemann's Hermeneutic in Six Steps: A Summary

Perhaps most importantly, it is also in 1997 that the reader discerns a precise hermeneutical approach proposed by Brueggemann. It is not made quite as explicit as depicted here, but it is instructive to describe—especially as Collins in comparison neither has nor necessarily needs any identifiable theological hermeneutic. Brueggemann's approach, once described, can be appropriated by others who wish to engage in the task of biblical theology as he sees it (although it might be more narrowly construed and limited to specific texts). Brueggemann's general hermeneutical approach can be described in the following way:

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[308] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament.*, 712.

[309] Ibid., 58.

[310] Ibid., 76 (author's emphasis).

[311] Ibid., 723.

(1) One must first account for one's socio-intellectual formation and honestly acknowledge one's biases, commitments, and communities of reference before approaching the text. This often requires a recognition of some pressing contemporary need to be held in dialectical tension with the (often very different) concerns of the ancient text. Such a hermeneutical awareness hearkens back even to Brueggemann's earliest work, as discussed above in *In Man We Trust.*

(2) One must approach the text in its canonical entirety, however "canon" is construed by one's specific community of reference. One must allow for dialectical contact and maintain a tension between ancient text and one's contemporary context. The biblical text must be allowed its own integrity. The text must not be treated as an object, but as something subject to critique, and a subject that critiques. Criticism goes both ways; both interpreter and biblical text must be allowed a voice.

(3) One must bracket out historical and ontological concerns and submerse oneself in the rhetoric of the text alone. Only then can one amass specific textual evidence (contained within grammatically complete sentences) where God is the subject, and which describe actions, lists attributes, or employs specific metaphors for God. Such evidence provides the normative, core testimony of Israel. The actual account of core testimony by an interpreter is inevitably reductionistic to some degree, but such exposition must occur.

(4) Only then can one proceed to mine the text for examples that challenge or contradict such normative claims. These examples of dispute fall under the rubric of countertestimony. Such examples must be held in dialectical tension with core

testimony, and this tension can be explored in an expository manner, which itself militates against excessive reductionism. Countertestimony itself usually cannot be reduced, nor can it be easily systematized.[312]

(5) One must give due attention to textual examples of seemingly extraneous detail that serve to provide a fuller testimonial picture. Such detail chiefly depicts a tension between God's irreducible sovereignty and God's intense relatedness. God is always a God-in-relation. This amounts to Israel's unsolicited testimony.

(6) One must finally consider how the texts claim to mediate the "reality" of God within common, everyday social life, rooted as it is in a particularistic textualized history. This requires sociological analysis, as such embodiment is rooted in institutional structures. Additionally, the examination may explore the ideological freight with which such institutions are invested. This amounts to embodied testimony where the reality of God is, the text claims, made truly present and available.

These six steps, taken together, enable the biblical theologian to provisionally articulate a complex, dynamic, non-systematic (albeit interrelated) portrait of theological testimony that nevertheless amounts to a sort of theological metanarrative. It is subject to critique, just as our contemporary situation (and our

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[312] Ibid., 359. Since countertestimony may be "inadvertent" and never amounts to anything like a "consensus" testimony, nor does it consist of grammatically complete sentences or "self-conscious theological statements," it stands to reason that such countertestimony stands little chance for thematization (359). At times, Brueggemann seems to indicate that core testimony, on the other hand, can certainly be thematized. But he is careful here too: "One can indeed thematize Israel's great and characteristic utterances about Yahweh—but not for long," (209).

socially ingrained metanarratives) are subject to critique by it.[313] As such a dynamic depiction, it always resists closure, and it cannot be exhausted.[314] Its never-ending dialectical motion in relation to the ever-changing present ensures that new shades of meaning can always be detected in the text. The construction of such meaning always depends upon perspective, granted by a unique point-of-view, which issues from wherever an interpreter happens to stand. And finally, the product of any such theological interpretation ever remains a "tract for the times."

Assessing and Critiquing Walter Brueggemann's Contribution

It is only with the luxury of hindsight that one can assess and critique the work of Walter Brueggemann while appreciating its merits. The merits of his work are everywhere apparent and require no lengthy exposition: he attempts to do justice to the pluralistic nature of the text and the increasing diversity among its interpreters. He affirms that certain commitments, whether feminist or liberationist or post-colonial or confessional, are important and valid. More significantly, these commitments can be constructive in their dialectical engagement with the text and their enrichment of scholarly dialogue. He (mostly) resists theological oversimplification and is able to navigate the diversity of biblical materials. He validates—though qualifies—previous advancements made by historical inquiry, and affirms the continued efforts of historical examination. He does not return to

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[313] One may reasonably sense that this phenomenon of reciprocity would require some form of religious commitment to the text from the outset, or some notion of biblical authority. The issue of biblical authority will be addressed in detail within chapter four and five.

[314] This insistence is evident in Brueggemann's comparisons to Jewish discourse, cf. note 273 above.

pre-critical interpretation, though also manages to appreciate and validate some of its contributions. He offers a specific hermeneutical approach that other scholars can emulate. He addresses the oft-hidden ideological commitments of various biblical texts and of those interpreters within his contemporary situation. He protests against an obsolete notion of interpretive autonomy. He emphasizes the integrity of biblical texts as a subject rather than mere critical object. He preserves the academic value and rigor of theological inquiry within seminaries and schools of theology that ultimately mean to train theologians. His work is valuable to professional ministers and rabbis while often remaining accessible to laypersons. He can be seen as making room within the secular academy for theological conversation without excluding anyone (or their biases) from such a conversation in principle.

Yet just as Brueggemann recognizes that an interpreter never escapes her current academic climate and contemporary situation, now in 2014 one is perhaps in a better position to offer a retrospective critique. While this chapter has attempted to demonstrate the full trajectory and development of Brueggemann's work over the course of three decades, the following critique will primarily be limited to his 1997 work. This is partly due to expediency, but mostly because the book is generally viewed as the culminating work of his career.[315]

The following critique consists of two primary points of contention, though each concerns an array of sub-issues: (1) One must assess whether Walter

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[315] See, e.g., Patrick D. Miller's endorsement of *Theology of the Old Testament* as the "culmination" of Brueggemann's work (inside cover, first page, unnumbered).

Brueggemann's work is truly "postmodern," whether he is accurately described as a "postmodernist," and indeed whether our present situation is a "postmodern" one. Here, a brief digression into "postmodern" accounts of language is in order, as is a brief return to the work of John Collins in contrast to that of Brueggemann. (2) One must question the degree to which Brueggemann ultimately does—or can—disavow an Enlightenment epistemology (predicated on autonomy) considering his pervasive reliance upon dialectical thought. Here, one can appropriately address both the degree and quality of his thematizations as required by his commitment to dialectics.

Is Brueggemann a "Postmodernist?" Are We All?

Now, in 2014, it is doubtful that the world finds itself in a "postmodern situation," at least in the manner articulated by Lyotard in the 1980s. Brueggemann may be more accurate when he modifies Lyotard: nearly two decades removed from his *Theology of the Old Testament*, the general atmosphere is one of competition between partial and conflicting "metanarratives" rather than a loss of confidence in all metanarratives. This is perhaps analogous to contemporary anthropological and psychological theories of identity and selfhood, some of which suggest that selfhood is multiple, fractured, piecemeal, permeable, or even contradictory.[316] Depending on

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[316] One such example is the notion of a "dialogical self" as originally articulated by psychologist Hubert Hermans, who based his theories on the thought of Mikhail M. Bakhtin. Hermans's theories are summarized by Hetty Zock, "The Existential Self in a Culture of Multiplicity: Hubert Hermans's Theory of the Dialogical Self" in *In Search of Self: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Personhood* (ed. Wentzel Van Huyssteen and Erik P. Wiebe; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 163-81. Zock explains: "The 'I' can take various positions, depending on particular social contexts. Thus, it was Bakhtin who, even more than [William] James did, led Hermans to challenge the notion of the unity of the self and the distinction between self and other (Hermans 2001C: 244-48). The 'I,' Hermans points out, is plural, too, and the 'other' is an integral part of the self," (167-68). For similar

context, for example, one may be a mother, a student, a Jew, a daughter, a friend, a wife, a stranger, a scholar, a comedian, a hobbyist, a musician, a sister—and assume different personas, often quite different, in all of these relationships and contexts.[317] Moreover an "I" is always incomplete, partial, shifting, progressing, regressing, and cognitively re-assessing just who—exactly—"I" am. So just as an "I" is not stable, not finalized, ever-changing, and ever-dependent on context, so are the narratives by which people live, form values, give structure to their lives, and ultimately conceptualize their own identities. The current socio-intellectual and cultural situation is not one of a general incredulity toward metanarratives, but better one that realizes that there was never any "meta" in the first place.[318] "Metanarratives" are simply scholarly and philosophical constructs, out-of-touch with actual lived realities. Can any living person wholly subscribe to a metanarrative (whether socialist, idealist, capitalist, Christian, or the like) without exhibiting a degree of exception, departure, compromise, or adaptation from it and to other alleged "metanarratives?" The situation[319] is likely more of competing, partial, conflicting, and often contradictory "metanarratives"—that is, among different construals of reality that compete for our attention and assent, and carry both explicit and

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explorations of selfhood from a theological point of view, see Pamela Cooper-White, *Many Voices: Pastoral Psychotherapy in Relational and Theological Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

[317] Cf. note 321 below and Mikhail Epstein's conception of a "multividual."

[318] A concise argument for the "end" of theory within contemporary academic thought has been written by Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (Cambridge MA: Basic Books), 2003.

[319] By "situation," this term is meant in a similar manner to Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, which is to say the current general sociointellectual and cultural climate of the Western world.

implicit ideological values.[320] The "postmodern"—it turns out—may itself just be another extreme form of skepticism and critique within the ongoing project of modernity, and not any simplistic abandonment or across-the-board departure from certain abstract "metanarratives."[321]

The lasting impact of so-called "postmodernism"—understood as a multiplicity of theoretical concepts that have produced a variety of applied critical theories—is therefore precisely in its critical value. Such critical theory tends to challenge long-standing and deeply held assumptions and beliefs, particular within Western culture, literature, and philosophy. "Postmodernist" conceptions can be useful as critique. Importantly, Brueggemann does not exactly "use" theory based upon "postmodernism" nor does he function as a "postmodernist" scholar; instead, he seems to believe that our contemporary situation simply is a postmodern one. Here again, a distinction is crucial: Brueggemann assumes a "postmodern" situation rather than explicitly employing "postmodernist" critical theory. Brueggemann *himself* is not a "postmodernist." As will be argued, a postmodernist (as especially

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[320] On the competition of ideological values, see, e.g. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

[321] See Jon D. Levenson, "Is Brueggemann Really a Pluralist?" *HTR* 93.3 (2000) 265-94. Levenson likewise questions whether Brueggemann is really a "postmodernist:" "Indeed, if we take as definitional Jean-François Lyotard's influential characterization of postmodern thought as the suspicion of metanarratives, Brueggemann, for all his invocation of postmodernist terminology, would not qualify as a postmodernist at all... In spite of Brueggemann's frequent employment of the postmodernist rhetoric of subversion, protest, and plurality, what he actually envisions is more like the liberal vision of a public space in which different interpretations compete freely in the firm conviction that through this process the truth will eventually win out" (266), and Levenson later writes, "[i]n short, although Brueggemann identifies himself as a believing Christian, the vantagepoint from which he surveys Judaism and Christianity is one situated within the Tanakh/Old Testament and perceived independently of both. This, of course, implies in turn that we can view the Old Testament/Tanakh in and of itself, apart from the Jewish, Christian, or other interpretive community in which we stand. It is hard to imagine an implication more at odds with postmodernism than that," (271). Beyond Levenon's assertions, it is further argued below that very little of Brueggemann's work seems to rely upon postmodern theory or practice.

exemplified by the work of Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard) subscribes to certain assumptions and views about language and reality that cannot be found within Brueggemann's work.

Revisiting Collins and Critiquing "Postmodernist" Views of Language

It is instructive at this juncture to revisit the previous chapter and the "postmodernist" critique of John Collins prior to returning to Brueggemann. This is to address some possible objections to postmodernist accounts of language, to clarify the differences between "postmodern," "postmodernist," and "postmodernism," and to offer an assessment of "postmodernist" accounts of language. The aim here is to clarify the relationship between "postmodernity" in general and Brueggemann's work in particular.

As suggested in the previous chapter, one can rely on "postmodernist" theory (or the individuals who use critical theory rooted in the ideas and arguments that generally go under the banner of "postmodernism") to challenge the posited notion that "critical" biblical scholarship is different from "confessional" scholarship because the former relies upon historical inquiry of a text within a recoverable context, and is therefore more "objective." To reiterate a point from chapter two, this "objectivity" is not very objective, as it rests on a critically unexamined notion of "context."

But from an opposing perspective, there is a tendency among modernists and historical critics to view "postmodernism" with suspicion, as postmodernist theory appears to offer an uncompromising argument—either postmodernist conceptions of language are completely correct, or irredeemably incorrect. The postmodernist

account of language, it may be argued, can tolerate no nuance or modification or exception. But this objection is unfortunate. One need not accept Derrida's account of language or reality in its entirety to concede his fundamental point: that "context" always involves certain choices about what to include and what to exclude as relevant in interpreting a given text.[322] Of course Derrida would agree that "context" is absolutely and unavoidably necessary—it is just not a guarantor of "correct" interpretation.[323] One must necessarily and responsibly (and textually) delimit a "context" (since all text is bound by it) but in such delimitation one must always make certain exclusions.[324] Such a choice is not value neutral, nor can it objectively guarantee proper meaning according to Derrida's account.[325] By offering such a thorough account and critique of the very notion of "context," Derrida's argument would put the onus of intellectual responsibility on Collins to clarify and explicitly account for what he understands "context" to be, how it is useful as a critical term, how one is to responsibly delimit context (with its necessary inclusions and exclusions), and how this can produce results that are relatively objective and can provide some sort of "foundation" for dialogue in a way that so-called confessional approaches cannot. Seen in this light, any alleged degree of interpretive distortion (according to Collins), caused by Brueggemann's own confessional bias is thus more an ideological charge than an impartial, objective assessment.

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[322] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context" in *Limited Inc.* (ed. Gerald Graff; trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1-24.

[323] Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, "Derridabase," in *Jacques Derrida: Derridabse/ Circumfession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 91.

[324] Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 8-10.

[325] Ibid., 12.

Of course, in a fuzzy, vague, and indeterminate way, one needs to admit that a judicious textual reconstruction of context helps in interpreting a given text.[326] Just like imperfect language, such an imperfect interpretive approach ultimately seems to "work" just fine. Still, Collins cannot allege that such applied "postmodernist" theory is simply incorrect in its argumentation due to its inflexible account of language, and therefore that its criticisms need not be addressed. In other words, one does well to understand the theoretical arguments that undergird "postmodernism" without the need to agree with all of them, and many of the critiques that "postmodernists" offer still stand and must be answered—such as whether "context" can always sufficiently bear the critical weight that is placed upon it. Even pragmatically speaking, such arguments are worth entertaining in that they frequently advance the discussion among scholars (which is Collins' ultimate goal), even among scholars who would resist or deny the premises, the arguments, or many of the conclusions of postmodernist thought.

Collins himself clearly recognizes the need to address such critiques in principle, as evidenced in his own book on the legitimacy and possibility of a "postmodern" biblical theology.[327] This particular endeavor, moreover, subjects Collins' own analysis itself to a "postmodernist" critique. Turnabout is fair play. This is why the critique offered in the previous chapter is appropriate. Unfortunately,

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[326] Here, the terms "textual reconstruction" of a "context" in order to interpret a "text" are used in a way that these terms are generally understood, and not according to Derrida's abstract and complex account of such terms.

[327] Cf. John J. Collins, "Is a Postmodern Biblical Theology Possible?" in *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman's, 2005). One perhaps more accurately asks if a "postmodernist" biblical theology is possible rather than Collins' more vague title, as it would ask if a biblical theology that rests upon postmodernist theory is possible.

Collins' own account of the "postmodern" and the activities of "postmodernists" is somewhat superficial and reactionary, and fails to engage some of "postmodernism's" more substantive claims and challenges. Collins' critique is reactionary because his book reflects a profound discomfort with nonfoundationalism, but by primarily reflecting a concern with the collapse of ethics it ostensibly engenders.[328] Michael Legaspi, for example, penned an incisive response to Collins' book, ultimately questioning whether Collins offers any actual, reasoned defense of historical criticism itself.[329]

Postmodernist theories should be seen as critical tools. Sympathy and selective deployment of such theory does not equal wholesale acceptance, however. Derrida's overall challenge to the notion of "context" can be accepted while questioning the ultimate view of language it proposes. But on what basis? Why should one not buy completely into the fractured worldview of "postmodernism" wholesale, and its specific theoretical accounts of language in particular?

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[328] Collins, "Is a Postmodern Biblical Theology Possible?" 161.

[329] Michael C. Legaspi, "What Ever Happened To Historical Criticism?" *RelSol* 9 (2007): 1-11. Legaspi writes: "*The Bible after Babel* is an important book because it bears startlingly clear witness to the fundamental commitments of modern biblical scholarship, and, in so doing, unintentionally sounds the retreat for an entire discipline, revealing that "historical criticism," from the point of view of an eminent historical critic, is no longer concerned with history in any fundamental sense. What was once an intellectual program for making sense of the Bible appears, in this book, to have become a sociopolitical proposal for regulating dialogue. In coming to the defense of the scholarly mainstream, Collins defends not historical criticism but *academic* criticism," (2, author's emphasis). Legaspi continues: "Postmodern interpretive frameworks pose fundamental challenges to conventional biblical scholarship, and Collins has attempted to meet them. In responding to perceived challenges, Collins returns to what he believes are the foundational commitments of historical criticism and steps forward to offer not a robust defense of history or of historical inquiry, as one might expect, but only a plea for liberal academic values. Collins's true scholarly mode reveals itself to be *academic* criticism and not *historical* criticism," (9, author's emphasis).

To the "Postmodernists:" Language is Not a System of Difference

The answer is simple, and some challenges to "postmodernist" accounts of language (especially that of Derrida) are fairly straightforward. All such accounts of language rely upon the notion that there is no "essential" or meaning of words because they have no "positive" value. This claim leads to the unavailability of meaning, rather than its immediate availability. One may consult a dictionary after encountering an unknown word, for example, but all one finds there are more words. "Postmodernism" (again defined as a series of theoretical concepts rooted in post-structuralist argumentation) maintains that words only exist in an endless series of differential relationships to yet more words; that "meaning" is elusive, always and endlessly deferred because there is no "essential" relationship of a word to its referent, and thus to its supposed "meaning" (expressed as the alleged arbitrary relation of a signifier to a signified within the sign).[330] As is well-known, the "postmodernist" shorthand for this conception owes a debt to Ferdinand de Saussure, and they paraphrase his claim as a sort of dictim: *language is a system of difference with no positive terms.*[331]

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[330] Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy* (trans. Alan Bates; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1-28.

[331] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. Roy Harris; 3d ed.; 1983 repr.; Peru, IL: Open Court, 1998). One need recall that Saussure himself did not write the *Course in General Linguistics*, as it consists of a compilation of lecture notes culled from his students. It is said that Saussure argued: "Everything we have said so far comes down to this. *In the language itself, there are only differences.* Even more important than that is the fact that, although in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds, in a language there are only differences, and *no positive terms*," (118, author's emphasis).

An alternative to this position has been suggested by Mikhail Epstein, among other linguists and literary theorists.[332] According to Epstein, words do in fact appear to have some positive value whether it is an essential aspect of the sign or whether it is located in the mutual engagement of a text-speaker with a reader-listener. The evidence of this consists in the phenomenon of new words, albeit of a specific variety. Epstein's book *PreDictionary* suggests new terms—particularly appropriate from politics to digital media within contemporary discourse—that never existed before, by wholly or partially combining previous words. The new whole is not necessarily just the sum of the parts: there is a sort of "inbreaking" of new meaning within the alleged "system" of language that appears to transcend a mere juxtaposition of previous terms or "signs." In other words, the new terms often intuitively "make sense" (in the interaction of reader with Epstein's text) even prior to the explicit definition he then proposes. Rather than a Saussurian conceptualization of language, where language is merely a system of differences, Epstein theorizes that there are blank spaces within the ever-open system of language, and that such spaces can be positively filled with new words. Briefly, two examples are:

> **obamanna** *n* (*Obama* + *manna*, from the Bible) – high expectations of miracles that Barack Obama may produce as the U.S. president.
>
> Don't expect **obamanna** immediately falling upon us after the inauguration.[333]

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[332] Mikhail Epstein, personal communication, November 5, 2008. Epstein's view (see below) contradicts Derrida's fundamental notion of *différence.*

[333] Mikhail Epstein, *PreDictionary*: *An Exploration of Blank Spaces in Language* (Berkeley: Atelos, 2011), 66.

> **multividual** *n* (Lat *multus*, many + Lat *individuus*, indivisible) – a multiple-personality individual with many selves.
>
> Psychologists have noticed the emergence of a protean type of personality combin-ing properties of different individuals: not a schizophrenically split personality, but a healthy **multividual** who cannot be confined to a single self.[334]

In this view of language, "multividual" does not immediately makes sense because "multi" and "individual" exist in an endless series of differential relationships with other words, but because the new word exhibits a positive value which previously did not exist. Language is not a system of difference with no positive terms: language is an open system of blank spaces to be filled *positively* by new words. Words must possess either some degree of positive inherent "meaning" or there must be some positive value of a word between two communicating subjects since language is never a closed system, new words emerge all the time, they do not always or yet have any clear differential relationships to existing words, and one surprisingly may intuitively grasp a "meaning" which truly never existed before. If one accepts Epstein's argument, many "postmodern" accounts of language (exemplified by Derrida) begin to fall apart since they are predicated on a nonessentialist and resolvedly differential system of negative relations. This does not mean that one may dismiss all "postmodernist" argumentation, since their theoretical analyses and critiques nevertheless remain substantive (such as the discussion of "context" above) despite some of the questionable intricacies and

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[334] Ibid., 43.

assumptions of their argumentation. Therefore the never-ending quest for "meaning" is not so dire as "postmodernists" would have us believe.

Brueggemann the Modernist in a Supposedly Postmodern World?

The preceding discussion illustrates that Brueggemann's work is a good example of an approach that does not appear to accept or employ some of the basics of "postmodernism:" it only attempts to account for an alleged "postmodern" situation. But this "postmodern situation" is certainly not that of Lyotard. Brueggemann's appropriation of "postmodernist" thought is vague, piecemeal, and heavily qualified. He does not agree with Lyotard that there has been a loss of confidence in all metanarratives, but claims that there are merely competing metanarratives. As previously highlighted, Brueggemann's claim that the identification of "testimony" in the Bible, captured within a grammatically complete sentence about God, certainly does not coincide with Derrida's account of language as the deferral of meaning. Furthermore, Brueggemann does not delve into "postmodernism's" tedious intricacies. Like Collins, Brueggemann too relies on a rather uncritical notion of "context," but never implies that it is a guarantor of meaning or the road to an unbiased "critical" interpretation as opposed to "confessional." In fact, Brueggemann's actual use of the term "postmodern" is reticent, and almost apologetic:

> As yet no consensus exists about how to characterize the new sociopolitical interpretive situation, but here I shall use the term *postmodern*. I have no special brief for that term, but take it as a shorthand reference to the end of a cultural period that was dominated by objective positivism that made a thin kind of historical scholarship possible, and that granted interpretive privilege to certain advantaged perspectives. Without lingering over the term itself, I

> suggest several facets of our new sociopolitical-interpretive situation that operate with reference to doing Old Testament theology.[335]

Brueggemann then proceeds to detail and embrace the notions of an irreducible pluralism among texts and interpreters, the resistance to reductionism and suspicion toward all-encompassing interpretive accounts, the relative elusiveness of objective truth and meaning, the epistemological and ideological biases among even the most rigorous advocates of scientific objectivity, the minute attention to texts and the phenomenon of rhetoric, the recognition that "reality" is not given but constructed, and the belief that ideology lies at every level of social institution in a quest for power and the preservation of the status quo. Importantly, however, these notions are not the exclusive intellectual property of a new "postmodern" situation (as depicted by Lyotard or Derrida) or even of a specific "postmodernist" praxis. They are perhaps just the result of an increased hermeneutical awareness within the ongoing project of modernity.[336] If this is accurate, Brueggemann is not a postmodernist, nor does he employ any theory rooted in "postmodernism;" indeed, as noted earlier, there remains no consensus that our present situation is indeed a "postmodern" one.

Brueggemann remains a "modernist," and perhaps far more of an Enlightenment modernist than he realizes. A thoroughgoing hermeneutical awareness, a call for humility in one's conclusions, and an acknowledgment that

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[335] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 61 (author's emphasis).

[336] See, e.g., Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (trans. Frederick G. Lawrence; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), esp. 81-105, 160, 180-81, 210, 286. Habermas generally maintains that scholars like Derrida and Foucault undercut their own critique of modernism by relying on concepts drawn from modernist discourse itself. If correct, such "postmodernists" merely remain extreme voices within an ongoing modernity.

absolute certainty is always elusive are not necessarily hallmarks of postmodernist theory alone.[337] Awareness and humility do not automatically or necessarily equal a departure from modernity. Modernity still marches on, and all we can do is move forward with it.

The Enlightenment Dilemma:
Brueggeman's Modernist Dialectics and Discourse

Brueggemann moves forward as well, and his recognition that interpretation is always provisional and part of a larger conversation is certainly humble. Yet perhaps the most obvious critique of his work is one that he repeatedly acknowledges himself, yet never escapes. The following will argue that there is a fundamental contradiction between Brueggemann's resistance to "reductionism" and his pervasive tendency toward it. He repeatedly warns against "excessive" reductionism, but how is one ever to know how much reductionism is acceptable? Based upon what criteria?

The problem goes deeper still. It really has to do with his reliance upon a dialectical reasoning while attempting to resist reductionism. To set up a binary "dialectic" perhaps always mandates some degree of reduction, as the whole of the Old Testament must conform to one or the other dialectical theme or category (see below). Brueggemann fails to address the complicity of his own dialectical undertaking with a necessary reductionism. So, he disavows the search for a

[337] Cf. John Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" 12. In this regard, it is clear even from the decidedly non-postmodern viewpoint of Collins that "absolute certainty" is now recognized as impossible and that the proper aim of scholarship is to attain "relative degrees of probability," (12).

"center" to the biblical texts, and his dialectical reasoning precludes any such search for the "center," but one notes the following claims:

> The Old Testament is a literature of richly diverse voices. It cannot be reduced to any single theme or set of themes. Its pluralism is vigorous and unavoidable. I submit, however, that its pluralism is a sustained reflection on the most central and foundational of human experiences. These various literatures in different ways concern the irreducible human realities of hurt and hope.[338]

One senses a possible contradiction here, expressed within a few short sentences, between an irreducibly pluralistic biblical text that simultaneously concerns itself with "hurt and hope."[339] This delicate contradiction is the direct result of his dialectical approach: the pluralistic text "cannot be reduced" to a "set of themes," and yet Brueggemann simultaneously offers a dialectical scheme according to the themes of "hurt" and "hope." He argues that there is no center to the biblical texts, but then claims that there is a "central" aspect of human experience. If the texts—despite all of their diversity and pluralism as emphasized within the first part of the above quotation—reflect this "central and foundational" human experience, then is there not some sort of center after all? One might reasonably claim that a dialectical approach always mandates some degree of reductionism, and so the actual issue again is really a question of how much reduction is acceptable. In the absence of any criteria, Brueggemann offers only a general admonishment that the interpreter not do it too much.

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[338] Ibid., 91.

[339] One does well to remember that the hurt-hope dialectic hearkens back to Brueggemann's *Old Testament Theology* as discussed previously, and is not a new thematic suggestion.

Brueggemann's reliance on dialectic is suspect in other ways. His appropriation of a dialectical approach is apparently rooted in the neo-Orthodox tradition of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, but one should also note its origins before these 20th century thinkers. Brueggemann's criticism of Enlightenment epistemology is certainly relentless, yet he neglects the fact that while dialectical reasoning might have arisen with Plato and classical Greek philosophy, it was revived within the context of the Enlightenment, and appropriated by Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Engels, and others.[340] Brueggemann's dialectical reasoning is the product of an Enlightenment epistemology and not necessarily an alternative to it. It seems tenuous on one hand to suggest a break with Enlightenment epistemology (born out of historical criticism's collusion with Cartesian autonomy), while simultaneously relying upon dialectical reasoning on the other hand, which similarly presumes an autonomous knower. A dialectical method is therefore complicit with autonomous reason. Brueggemann does not address this complicity, and one wonders if the dialectical approach that undergirds his own literary-sociological method really can be separated from autonomy.[341] Therefore despite all of his protests against Enlightenment autonomy, perhaps not even Brueggemann can escape an epistemology that was forged in the Enlightenment, that emphasizes an autonomous knower, that is reasoned through reductionist binary categories, that produces a rational argument, and that promotes a thesis through standard,

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[340] See, e.g., John Rees, *The Algebra of Revolution: The Dialectic and the Classical Marxist Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

[341] Of course, one legitimately wonders if any currently known academic approach is not complicit with autonomous reason, or if standard academic discourse would even be possible without it (see below).

Western academic discourse—even if this thesis apparently results in an unresolved "tension."[342]

This raises the problem of standard, academic discourse in relation to the discourse of biblical theology. For one so attuned to matters of text and rhetoric, it would seem that Brueggemann would recognize this problem with respect to his own work. Contemporary academic discourse itself is a certain modernist genre of writing, and—recognized or not—it too was forged and conventionalized according to the precepts of an autonomous individual knower who presents a reasoned thesis through rational argumentation. It too is inseparable from an Enlightenment epistemology and an emphasis upon scholarly autonomy. Perhaps this is also an inescapable problem, as there are no readily apparent alternatives to such contemporary modernist academic discourse. The closest possible alternative would probably be the writing of Derrida himself, whose dense, playful, opaque, and near inimitable style danced around theses and was carefully constructed precisely to resist reductionism—which is all why his work is endlessly difficult and frustrating, incapable of easy summation, at times perhaps borderline arrogant, and consequently whose stylistic prose is unlikely to inspire exact imitators.[343] This is because academic discourse still has claims to make and arguments to support.

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[342] See also Levenson, "Is Brueggemann Really a Pluralist?" 275: Levenson also questions the degree to which Brueggemann can really escape Enlightenment influence and discourse when the former writes: "In fact, the openness to Judaism in Childs's work is unthinkable without the liberalizing influence of the Enlightenment; allegiance to the premodern Christian tradition cannot account for it."

[343] See, e.g., Terry Eagleton, "Marxism without Marx," in *Ghostly Demarcations* (ed. Michael Sprinker; New York: Verso, 1999), 83-7. On Derrida's prose, Eagleton writes, "The portentousness is ingrained in the very letter of this book, as one theatrically inflected rhetorical question tumbles hard on the heels of another in a tiresomely mannered syntax which lays itself wide open to parody."

What would an "Old Testament Theology" look like that resisted the thesis of any individual knower, that avoided all reductionism, that abandoned rationalistic academic discourse, and that still tried to say *something*? Would it be possible, if such were attempted, to even say anything?

Of course, there is clearly a textual pluralism in the Bible, and Brueggemann is undeniably correct to assume that an exercise in biblical theology or theological interpretation must say something. It is worth returning to a quote cited earlier in order to critique it. On the apparent impasse between textual pluralism and need for reductionism, Brueggemann writes:

> Old Testament theology must and may proceed by the offer of theses for conversation and critique without exposition that includes and accounts for everything. The theses may not add up to a grand design, but they may permit the building of a *consensus* about the shape and character of the task. My urging here is that we… accept a mode probably more appropriate to our cultural moment of scattering and our intellectual moment of hermeneutical self-knowledge.[344]

This point is well-taken. Still, Brueggemann neglects to address the issue not only of the amount of permissible reductionism, but the precise quality of such reductionism that allegedly add up to certain "theses." Consequently one is no longer concerned here with the precise extent of reductionism but the specific expense it must ultimately cost to offer such theses. What is to be done with the inevitable loss caused by schematization and thematization? What determines an "acceptable loss?"

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[344] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 114 (emphasis mine).

The Issue of Reductionism:

Unexamined Problems of Quality

Some general problems with Brueggemann's reductionisms have been suggested, and it has been noted that he is pervasively aware of the problem without offering any way to assess the quantity of permissible reductionism. Many other examples of the 'must reasonably reduce'/'must not reduce' tendency might be cited. But there is also a problem with not just the degree of allowable reduction, but the value or quality of such reductionism itself, the expense which it incurs, and the further contradictions it might engender.

For example, Brueggemann seems to stand on shaky ground by offering blanket generalizations of what constitutes the "characteristically Jewish,"[345] while simultaneously emphasizing the general "Jewish" propensity to resist generalization. Of course, Brueggemann is not ignorant of the problem here either: "This practice of speech concerning hurt and hope is *characteristically Jewish*. Admittedly, such a claim is extremely problematic, both because any characterization of Jewishness is endlessly difficult and because our argument is largely circular."[346] To Brueggemann's credit, however, his is not the last word. He repeatedly emphasizes the "provisional" nature of all conclusions—and this is especially applicable to his generalizations and reductionisms. Brueggemann is consistently aware of the problem of thematizing piecemeal evidence for fear of irresponsible reductionism and running roughshod over the pluralistic evidence in

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[345] See ibid., 457, but also *passim.*

[346] Ibid., 75 (emphasis mine).

order to provide coherence. In articulating the subject of "humanness" in the Bible, for example, he writes:

> [The evidence] provide[s] no clear scheme. I propose only to piece the fragmentary evidence together in this particular way *provisionally*; I do not want to reduce the elusive evidence too tightly. Enough emerges of a *pattern* in such an undertaking, however, to suggest what life in relation to the sovereign, faithful One can mean.[347]

Brueggemann attempts to identify patterns and "summarize and schematize" while admitting that "[o]ur attempt to do this, of course, depends on piecing together bits of testimony that do not easily or intentionally form a pattern," and only allows one to "roughly suggest the tendency in Israel's testimony."[348] In other places he claims that "the [textual evidence] can be construed and pieced together somewhat differently from the way I have done it."[349] Regarding the subject of prophecy, for example, he writes: "[a]ny generalization about prophecy is likely to fail to comprehend the data, and yet our interpretive task of necessity entails an attempt at generalization."[350] Moreover, he also claims that "we must take care that we do not engage in excessive reduction,"[351] while simultaneously maintaining that "any summation is bound to be somewhat reductionist."[352] Still, at other times: "I am aware that I have reached a high level of thematization and consequently a high

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[347] Ibid., 485 (emphasis mine).

[348] Ibid., 518.

[349] Ibid., 552.

[350] Ibid., 622.

[351] Ibid., 649.

[352] Ibid., 695.

level of reductionism."[353] One duly notes that Brueggemann is always aware of the perilous task of thematization for the sake of exposition, whether it be core testimony, countertestimony, unsolicited testimony, or embodied testimony.

Here one only means to suggest that the quality of Brueggemann's reductionisms can sometimes be found unacceptably inadequate and wanting. Qualifications about the provisional nature of his effort to identify patterns may recognize the problem of degree in reduction, but does not address the final quality of these reductions in light of the multidimensional nature of the biblical texts. Even the smallest textual omissions can have profound theological consequences. The most obvious example is that even Brueggemann's most comprehensive dialectic of "hurt" and "hope," or his most all-encompassing schematization of "testimony" and "countertestimony" (even with the additional categories of "unsolicited" and "embodied" testimony) still ignore what may be very theologically significant and theologically valuable texts: in all 777 pages of his *Theology of the Old Testament*, no citations from the books of Esther or Ruth are to be found—not even one.[354] Perhaps this is to be expected due to the nature of the courtroom metaphor: Esther can contain no core testimony as it never explicitly mentions God, and the explicit role of God in Ruth is rather limited, and certainly beyond the "grammatical sentence" formulation. The other option includes countertestimony, but nothing in these books would seem to easily fit this category or overtly challenge "core"

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[353] Ibid., 700.

[354] In fact, both books are only mentioned once in passing and on a single page, and only with reference to the work of Phylis Trible. See ibid., 99.

testimony, and little in these books would seem to reflect much mediation of the divine or "embodied testimony." That leaves only the option of "unsolicited testimony," but these books are not primarily concerned with depicting a God-in-relation in any straightforward manner. Still, one might reasonably find Esther and Ruth "theological" in some manner (or at least important for theological interpretation), yet how they fit into Brueggemann's courtroom schematization in left unexplained. Of course, Brueggemann is aware that no scheme can comprehend everything, but one would hope that any proposed schematic would not ignore two entire biblical books.

A final example that challenges the quality of Brueggemann's reductionism is his tendency to view blocks of material or even entire books in an unacceptably monolithic way. This seems to do an intolerable degree of violence to the complexity and plurality of the material that he otherwise seeks to retain—it is a matter not of the amount of reduction, but the skewing of evidence to fit the scheme. Reductionism often comes at high cost. One immediately apparent example of this is his treatment of the book of Ecclesiastes.

Brueggemann and Ecclesiastes

Brueggemann claims (with much of the book of Proverbs as an exception) that "wisdom theology insists that the primary testimony is not everywhere adequate or effective."[355] In much of the wisdom material—characterized as "sapiential countertestimony"—there is an "assertion that life in the real world is inscrutable

[355] Ibid., 335.

and cannot be controlled or predicted; there is something deeply loose and volatile about life in the world. *This is an insight much accented later by Ecclesiastes*."[356] Later on, in a reductive move not at all uncommon within all of biblical scholarship in general, Brueggemann writes:

> At the very edge of the Old Testament, culturally and epistemologically, the Book of Ecclesiastes gives us the residue and outcome of that shrill and incessant voicing of negativity… By the time we arrive at the far edge of negativity in Ecclesiastes, we have the parallel impression of countertestimony: a hostile witness, going through the paces but not really caring if anyone is persuaded by this utterance of guarded negativity.[357]

The book of Ecclesiastes, in Brueggemann's view, contains only three brief accounts (captured within a few short verses) of core testimony: God's rule is long-term, God is a judge who is just, and God gives gifts.[358] Yet under Brueggemann's further scrutiny, these examples of core testimony basically amount to lip-service in view of the broader program of the book, as these assertions "cannot be taken apart from its context and the tone in which it is cast."[359] This context is allegedly one of "massive frustration, for none of it is coherent, reliable, or sense-making" and so Qohelet "pushes past these convictions… to assert the inscrutability of Yahweh."[360] Even any positive emphasis such as Ecclesiastes 9:7 "sounds pro forma" and "more than a

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[356] Ibid., 350 (emphasis mine).

[357] Ibid., 394.

[358] Ibid., 394.

[359] Ibid., 395.

[360] Ibid., 395.

little cynical."[361] As for God, "[t]here is only silence on Yahweh's part, perhaps to match the resignation and the cold concession of the witness."[362] Even more starkly, Brueggemann claims that "Ecclesiastes has lost any passion or impetus to cry out to Yahweh."[363]

Here is not yet the place for a digression about the unfortunate history of stalemate and puzzlement over the book of Ecclesiastes within academic scholarship, the tendency of Western interpretation to almost solely classify the book as "positive" or "negative" or its author as an "optimist" or "pessimist." These issues will be addressed, however, in chapter 5.

So here, it will only be suggested that Brueggemann's dialectical approach reaches its furthest conceptual limit and is finally exhausted, as it cannot account for a text so resistant to all reductionist schemes. The problem here is not just with Brueggemann; the problem lies within the whole of contemporary scholarship: no existing hermeneutical strategy has been sufficiently articulated that can acceptably account for this particular text. Moreover, Ecclesiastes is perhaps one of the best examples of a major challenge to any existing hermeneutical approach to theological interpretation, but it is not the only example, for the lack of coherence found within Ecclesiastes is almost a microcosm of—or a metaphor for—the entire Bible. Of course there are many other biblical texts that cannot be summarily reduced without significant harm to the plurality of its voices (and despite its lone speaker,

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[361] Ibid., 396.

[362] Ibid., 398.

[363] Ibid., 398.

Ecclesiastes certainly contains an irreducible multiplicity of voices, as will be argued). In brief, dialectics are finally insufficient because the Bible is irreducibly *multilectic*.

Conclusion

Brueggemann's dialectic between "hurt" and "hope," and "testimony" and "countertestimony" (even if one views "unsolicited testimony" and "embodied testimony" as caveats or even "catch-alls" for the remaining biblical material) mandates the same sort of "monologization" and dismissal of Qohelet's strange "testimony" as has been the tendency within biblical scholarship.[364] The irresistible urge to reduce, classify, and schematize is perhaps so great and compelling within scholarly discourse that it is not certain we can avoid it—particularly as the rules and conventions of traditional academic discourse inadvertently enforce this requirement. If no hermeneutic exists that can do justice to the multiplicity of a book like Ecclesiastes, is there any wonder why none exists to adequately account for the entire Bible? Brueggemann's dialectics and his courtroom metaphor are inarguably second to none in contemporary attempts to thematize the whole (or most) of the Hebrew Bible, and biblical scholarship is inestimably indebted to him. This accomplishment is unparalleled, and no critique should lightly dismiss Brueggemann's work. His hermeneutical strategy is beyond reproach in accounting for much of the diversity among texts and exhibits an ethically sound appreciation for a diversity among interpreters.

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[364] The problem of "monologization" is taken from the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin, and will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

Yet the twenty-first century (postmodern or not) must finally leave dialectics behind, as this approach may also be complicit with an insufficient Enlightenment epistemology also in need of modification—not because it pretends to objectivity, but because it mandates a degree and quality of reductionism that may be judged insufficient. Brueggemann is quite right to recognize problems with an Enlightenment epistemology, but dialectics do not quite offer the only solution to our present theological task. Dialectical approaches cannot fully do justice to particular biblical texts (whether Esther, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, or others), let alone the "text alone" in its rhetorical entirety. A bipolar thematic approach can account for a tension between two metaphorical stars in the sky, but cannot appropriately illustrate an entire metaphorical constellation. Brueggemann can account for much of the biblical text, but cannot—in the last analysis—account for everything. One might claim that Brueggemann has admirably taken a comprehensive scheme as far as it can go among current scholarship, but there remains room for similarly imaginative routes to theological interpretation that do not necessarily aim for comprehensiveness.

Chapter five will suggest that a dialogical approach is another constructive and imaginative route to theological interpretation, and offers an alternative to a dialectical approach. First, however, the work of Michael Fishbane deserves consideration. Fishbane will serve to provisionally complete the present assessment of the contemporary state of theological interpretation within biblical scholarship.

CHAPTER FOUR: MICHAEL FISHBANE, "INNER-BIBLICAL EXEGESIS" AND JEWISH THEOLOGY

> God is a reality for human life wherever humans attest to God's presence, through the character and commitments of their lives. Covenant theology can guide a person toward such a lifelong testimony. But it can only cultivate a certain sensibility toward God's presence; it cannot prove it.[1]
>
> The task of theology is lifelong; an ongoing centering within life—in preparation for death.[2]
>
> -Michael Fishbane

Alongside John Collins and Walter Brueggemann, Michael Fishbane is the third scholar with whom the present study will engage. In doing so, the goal is to partially but sufficiently account for the current state of theological interpretation of the Bible within academic biblical studies from three particular—yet prominent and influential—perspectives. Again, the present study is not meant as an exhaustive and comprehensive overview of the contemporary state of theological interpretation of the Bible. One needs to acknowledge that this study does not account for the contributions of women and minority scholarship, for example. Still, the prominence and influence of Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane must

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[1] Michael A. Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 110.

[2] Ibid., 206.

minimally suffice to provide a window into which one may glimpse—however dimly—the current state of "biblical theology" or theological interpretation of the Bible within contemporary academia.

To this end, one must reiterate the institutional weight behind these three scholars. Notre Dame University, the University of Chicago, and Yale University (Collins) are top-tier educational establishments, Columbia Theological Seminary (Brueggemann) is an internationally recognized Presbyterian institution, and Brandeis University and the University of Chicago (Fishbane) are similarly distinguished. The repute of these institutions alone virtually guarantees a receptive audience for the work of these scholars. It is currently from the formidable platform of the University of Chicago that Michael Fishbane speaks.

Unlike the Roman Catholic background of Collins or the Protestant background of Brueggemann, Fishbane is a Jewish scholar. While the degree to which Collins' religious background influences his scholarship is debatable, both Brueggemann's and Fishbane's are undeniable if not always palpable. Fishbane is an expert in rabbinic literature, Jewish thought, and biblical studies who appears to operate from an unapologetically faith-based perspective. There will be cause to return to this fact later in the discussion. The primary purpose of the present chapter, however, is to offer an overview of Michael Fishbane's contribution to the area of theological interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, and his corresponding thoughts on theology in general.

Jewish Scholarship and the Enterprise of "Biblical Theology"

It has been claimed that many Jewish scholars have been generally resistant to (or outright disinterested in) the enterprise of "biblical theology."[3] A variety of reasons have been cited for this tendency, but mostly fall into two separate but overlapping categories: the philosophical and the historical.

First, there appears to be a common stereotype that Greek philosophical influence upon early Christianity is simply incompatible with the early Rabbinic thought (or philosophy) from which Judaism emerged. The philosophical heritage of the two traditions, it is sometimes argued, spurred an irreconcilable difference between Jewish and Christian foundations. The Greek influence upon early Christianity led Christian thought toward theological essentialism, confessionalism, and dogmatism (indeed, to "foundationalism" itself).[4] The Nicene Creed and the Apostle's Creed are examples of this, as their profession differentiated between those who are "Christian" as opposed to "non-Christian," and provided a measure for group membership via a Christian statement of faith rather than Jewish membership via ancestral heritage. This bottom-line confessionalism, or so the argument goes, is contrasted with the open and ongoing nature of Jewish

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[3] See most famously, Jon D. Levenson "Why Jews are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," in idem, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 33-61.

[4] Levenson observes that "The effort to construct a systematic, harmonious theological statement out of the unsystematic and polydox materials in the Hebrew Bible fits Christianity better than Judaism . . . The impulse to systematize among Christians tends to find its outlet in theology. Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Tillich, and Rahner, to name only a few, have no really close parallels in Jewry," (ibid., 51).

philosophical and theological thought. This ongoing development is evident in texts like the Mishnah, Talmuds, collections of midrash, the writings of medieval commentators, and the work of contemporary commentators that extend beyond the Hebrew Bible itself. Early Jewish philosophy emphasized open dialogue and debate, which necessarily led to a resistance toward "foundations" as Jewish thought was capable of adaptation and exhibited toleration toward difference.[5] According to Fishbane, Judaism has a "highly inflexible sense of destiny and direction" for the Jewish people while retaining a "remarkable capacity for variation and reemphasis [which] has helped the religion to adapt to new historical features and to transform them into authentic expressions of Jewish life and belief."[6] One might cautiously state that Christianity tended toward a closed theological system whereas Jewish thought tended toward philosophical openness.[7]

The historical aspect of the argument for a Jewish resistance toward "biblical theology" is based upon textual evidence. For example, the phenomenon of a "closed canon" was established within early Christianity in regard to the biblical texts in contrast to ongoing Rabbinic commentary and the written continuation of Jewish

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[5] Levenson, for example, writes, "The unending Protestant quest for repristinization that spawns this great [theological] involvement in the Christian Bible finds scant parallel among the Jews," (ibid., 46).

[6] Michael A. Fishbane, *Judaism: Revelations and Traditions* (Religious Traditions of the World; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 24.

[7] See Levenson, "Why Jews are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," 53. Levenson states his essential agreement with Susan Handelman about the tendency of Western thought toward abstraction in contrast to the concreteness of rabbinic thought, though is rightly wary of these sort of simplifications. Cf. Susan A. Handelman, *Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (SUNY Series on Modern Jewish Literature and Culture; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).

sacred and authoritative texts throughout history.[8] Indeed, Fishbane states that "Judaism characteristically understands itself by commenting on its own earlier traditions."[9] The historical argument for a Jewish indifference toward "biblical theology" then contrasts this Jewish self-understanding with the Protestant Reformation and its emphasis upon *Sola Scriptura*, which allegedly left a theological vacuum where Roman Catholic "tradition" once stood. This return to a single body of text—"the Bible"—required a theological interpretation which was necessary to fill the vacuum. *Sola Scriptura* and the "theological interpretation" that it spawned is contrasted with the formidable textual tradition of the Jews throughout history. Protestant Christians are therefore destined to begin their theological thought *Sola Scriptura,* anew, afresh, and *ad fontes* each time because—it is sometimes alleged—there is no vast historical tradition upon which one may fall back wherever *Sola Scriptura* is invoked.[10] "Biblical theology," according to some, simply became a Protestant compulsion and obligation. Indeed, the long-standing affiliation of "biblical theology" with Christian Protestant scholarship is a problem that any Jewish "biblical theology" must confront.[11] Additionally, the historical argument for a Jewish resistance toward "biblical theology" is fraught with the brutal historical realities of the previous century. A Jewish wariness is justified—especially if any

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[8] Levenson writes that "[the early rabbis] attitude toward the Hebrew Bible and theology in general was more relaxed and more pluriform" in contrast to the urgency of early Christianity and its apocalyptic tendencies," (ibid., 39).

[9] Fishbane, *Judaism*, 12.

[10] Levenson, "Why Jews are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," 45.

[11] Ibid., 45.

Protestant theological or ideological thought is somehow complicit with the Holocaust. No doubt, a guarded stance toward "biblical theology" prior to joining the ranks of the Protestant cause is understandable. If this assessment is even remotely correct, not only is "biblical theology" not interesting to Jews, but might even be viewed as a perilous endeavor.[12] Based upon historical realities, a Jew's lack of involvement in "biblical theology" may come as no surprise.

It is possible that such Jewish resistance to "biblical theology" contributes to a broader academic impulse to sometimes shun the term "biblical theology" in favor of something more inclusive. As discussed in chapter two with the work of John Collins, this may be a retreat into historicism and philology, which are areas of study that any Jewish, Christian, or non-religious scholar can impartially work side-by-side (even if Collins himself would like to call some of the results of such work "biblical theology" rather than a history of Israelite religion). If "biblical theology" is an activity inseparable from the theological agenda of Protestantism, an impulse toward academic inclusivism may spell a general shift from anything theological whatsoever (at least in a manner exemplified by Walter Brueggemann). If theological engagement with biblical texts persists in some quarters of scholarship, there is perhaps no longer a "biblical theology" (singular) but only piecemeal studies and theological interpretations (plural) of the irreducible multiplicities of biblical theologies (plural), conducted according to various methodologies and theoretical conceptualizations. Thus, another possible reason for a general academic resistance

[12] Levenson remarks: "One reason for the distance Jewish biblicists tend to keep from biblical theology is the intense anti-Semitism evident in many of the classic works of that field." (ibid., 40; cf. 41, 43).

to "biblical theology" is its historical impulse toward reductionism and essentialism, ignoring the diversity of biblical texts. Maybe too often, "biblical theology" has operated under the assumption that there is a "center" to the texts, or that biblical texts can be reduced to a sort of theological essentialism that is so apparent in the traditional creeds of Christianity. According to some scholars—and perhaps a great many—the diversity of interpreters within the field has contributed to a general consensus that the term "biblical theology" simply cannot be salvaged.

Admittedly, this evaluation of the academic landscape is somewhat speculative. Still, it is in general alignment with Collins' assertion that "biblical theology" is an activity in decline.[13] Despite such claims of decline amid the increasing pluralistic field of biblical studies, it will become apparent that Fishbane, despite his Jewish religious commitments, apparently takes no issue with some of the activities and concerns of "biblical theology." Nevertheless, Fishbane offers a very different understanding of the term "theology" in comparison to that of John Collins or Walter Brueggemann.

Fishbane's Early Literary Approach to the Hebrew Bible

One of the explicit objectives of Fishbane's first major work, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts*[14] is "to teach a properly literary reading of the biblical text" which seeks "to bring the modern reader to a confrontation with the

[13] John J. Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" 11.

[14] Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979).

deepest levels of literary and religious coherence in the Bible."[15] It is noteworthy from the outset that Fishbane makes no clear distinction between what is "literary" or a literary approach to the text, and what is "religious." To read the Bible at all, in a sense, is to read *religiously*. For example, Fishbane foremost insists that "the Bible is a religious teaching,"[16] and that his own aim is to elicit a "new encounter with the words of this text."[17] These fundamental propositions will remain unchanged throughout the duration of his career.

Fishbane's emphasis upon the textuality of the Bible is not far apart from one of Walter Brueggemann's own primary emphases. To Fishbane, the Bible is a text, and must only be understood as "revelation" in the sense that "through its words, the world of a text, and the multiple worlds of its many texts, are disclosed."[18] An interpreter, or reader of this text, is a requirement if this text to have a "renewed life."[19] The act of reading reveals "latent meanings" within the "dialectic" between a reader and the text.[20] The reader and the text are interdependent within this dialectical process.[21] Actual access to biblical "meaning" is dependent upon "stylistic conventions" perceived within the text. It is through these stylistic conventions that one is able to grasp "some of the dynamic unities within diversities which help

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[15] Fishbane, *Text and Texture*, ix.

[16] Ibid., xi.

[17] Ibid, ix.

[18] Ibid., xi.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., xii.

constitute the Hebrew Bible."[22] So according to Fishbane, there are "unities" (plural) to be found in the Hebrew Bible.

It is noteworthy that Fishbane's approach draws heavily from the literary criticism of the late 1970s and 1980s—a period contemporaneous with his own first book. His approach employs strategies familiar to that particular field of study and moment of time. "Close reading," for example, is not so much a concrete method as it is a general strategy of careful and engaged reading that is attentive to recurrent words, themes, motifs, evidence of purposive literary structuring, characterization, narrative pacing, and so on. Though Fishbane acknowledges no outright debt to any other academic discipline, literary or otherwise, his hermeneutical approach appears most similar to those routinely applied by his English literature colleagues. Nevertheless, in Fishbane's view, there are conventions that pervade the biblical text in particular which set it apart from other types of literature. Theme words, for example, are repeated throughout many narrative cycles, which "[give] a text special texture."[23] Fishbane indicates that stylistic literary repetitions often occur at a "surface level" or "horizontal view" which "can be complemented by a vertical one which attempts to disclose dialectical tensions operative beneath the surface of the text."[24] Some of these dialectical tensions are "*barreness/fertility*," and "*nonblessing/blessing*" and "*exile/homeland*" within the Jacob cycle in Genesis, for

[22] Ibid., xiv.

[23] Ibid., xii.

[24] Ibid., xii.

instance.[25] There are thus "polarities" and "dramatic tension"[26] in the biblical texts that "undoubtedly reflect deep hopes and anxieties in ancient Israelite culture."[27]

It is a general feel for these literary "textures" and stylistic practices that produce meaning according to Fishbane. He writes: "[t]hrough such stylistic means, *latent* networks of intra- and intertextual meaning may be perceived by an interpreter."[28] This statement is important, because it implies that "meaning" is something concealed or not explicitly manifest in the text due to its latency. Only through the active participation of a reader can it be "perceived." For example, meaning is found through the perception of certain literary cycles in Genesis, which attest to a "stylistic structuring."[29] The literary cycles within Genesis 1:1—11:32, for example, are a result of the "creative coordination of traditions."[30] The ordering of material is intentional, and the entire Jacob cycle is stylistically coordinated.[31] The "style" of the text is inseparable from its "meaning."[32]

Nevertheless, Fishbane resists complete reliance upon "internal textual features" and claims that these texts belong to a particular culture, rooted in history, and so "the interpreter must be familiar with the contemporaneous ancient Near

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[25] Ibid., 60-61. Emphases original.

[26] Ibid., 60.

[27] Ibid., 62.

[28] Ibid., xii.

[29] Ibid., xii-xiii.

[30] Ibid., 28.

[31] Ibid., 40.

[32] Ibid., 8.

Eastern literatures and cultures," even if they are "always a means and not an end for the biblical interpreter."[33] Here, it is clear that Fishbane does not intend to abandon historical-critical work, but is equally clear that comparative endeavors are secondary to the text itself. A reader of Fishbane's work might wish to know exactly *how* much historical understanding is necessary for a proper reading however, especially as Fishbane does not address this problem.

Still, and perhaps most significantly, the Bible is special: it is not just any text according to Fishbane—but neither can the text itself be divinized. The biblical texts reflect "but one humanized expression of the religious imagination… they are pointers to the image of God by man [sic], and projections of the images of man [sic] on God."[34] Fishbane is careful that the text not be conflated with the divine, and thus amount to a "verbal icon."[35] He argues that biblical texts "will not stand between man and God; they will rather bring us—the readers—beyond its literary formulations and to the nameless and Unconditioned One, the Lord of life and death."[36] A text is powerful, and language is powerful—and through biblical language one encounters the divine. When discussing the opening chapters of Genesis, for example, Fishbane remarks that "[m]an [sic] must surely have intuited and experienced very early the magical power of words to create reality and control

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[33] Ibid., xiii; cf. 12-15.

[34] Ibid., xiii. The emphasis upon "imagination" is characteristic of Fishbane's work in general throughout his career, and chapter five will return to the implications of stressing "imagination" for theological interpretation of the Bible.

[35] Ibid., xiii.

[36] Ibid., xiii.

imagination… Language both constructs a universe of meaning and becomes the means whereby that universe is presented to consciousness."[37]

As previously noted, Fishbane does claim a certain degree of coherence for the Bible as a whole. He illustrates this notion, for example, by examining the "Eden motif" throughout various texts.[38] He claims that "the exegetical alignment of Eden-imagery in diverse biblical texts manifests a latent form of intertextual coherence which, reciprocally, transfigures our very understanding of the Bible-as-a-whole."[39] Fishbane traces this Eden motif throughout Genesis,[40] Exodus,[41] the monarchic period,[42] Isaiah,[43] Ezekiel,[44] and Joel.[45] Still, Fishbane is hard-pressed to specifically identify how "intertextual coherence" transforms our understanding of the Bible as a whole. Additionally, he appears open to critique on subjective grounds: what degree of thematic continuity is required to substantiate an acceptable intertext? How many word repetitions must occur before a motif is identified and deemed viable? If the reader and text share in a mutually dependent dialectical relationship,

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[37] Ibid., 3.

[38] Ibid., 111.

[39] Ibid., 111-112.

[40] Ibid., 112-113.

[41] Ibid., 113-114.

[42] Ibid., 114-115.

[43] Ibid., 116-117.

[44] Ibid., 118-119.

[45] Ibid., 119-120.

what happens when the backgrounds and experiences of a multitude of readers are radically different? Fishbane does not substantially engage these questions.

In sum, however, Fishbane's early hermeneutic is literary in nature, aligned with the same literary techniques (rather than fully wrought methodologies) that an English literature specialist might employ. Of course, for Fishbane, the Bible is no *mere* book. He writes that the "hermeneutical task" that "we face ever and again" occurs when

> …the reader of the Bible will confront the repeated or key words and themes of a biblical text, and so enter that text on its own terms. Whether these particular words or themes will remain the most significant ones for purposes of interpretation can never be known in advance. Nor can one know in advance what literary forms and structures will emerge to organize our analytic judgments. *Miqra* is thus a "calling out" to follow the lead of a text's words, themes, and structures . . . it is not only a text or an external world but God Himself who is revealed . . . the spaces and silences of texts remind us of the risks of interpretation—but also of its most profound hope: to find in a world of words a disclosure of the mystery of creation.[46]

This passage reflects the general hermeneutical procedure of Fishbane's earliest work, and it is quite literary in nature—though his later work will not remain quite the same. Importantly, however, his recognition of "key words" will become a cornerstone of his later work, as will his conviction that the Bible is foremost a "religious" text and should be interpreted through a religious lens. Furthermore, Fishbane later develops a greater interest in the future development of biblical texts rather than their "original" meaning and literary structuring, but retains a concern for the intersection of texts and imaginations. Nevertheless, as much as Fishbane's

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[46] Ibid., 141-142.

early hermeneutical approach is literary, it is at the same time profoundly theological.

Fishbane's Inner-Biblical Exegesis

The next major publication after Fishbane's 1979 work *Text and Texture* was entitled *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*.[47] This book was markedly different in scope and intent from its predecessor. The goal of *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* is primarily to answer the question: "When did the Jewish exegetical tradition come to be formed?"[48] Fishbane's answer is that an early form of this exegetical tradition can be traced back to the Hebrew Bible itself. In contrast to his earlier literary approach, Fishbane's second book engages in "inner-biblical exegesis." He writes: "since the Hebrew Bible has an exegetical dimension *in its own right*, and this varies text by text and genre by genre, it also stands to reason that the Hebrew Bible is the repository of a vast store of hermeneutical techniques which long preceded early Jewish exegesis."[49]

Fishbane amasses a great deal of evidence to bolster his view that exegetical activity is not a post-biblical phenomenon but present already within the received Masoretic text (MT). Scribes, for example, "not only copied what came to hand but also responded in diverse ways to the formulations which they found written in earlier manuscripts."[50] Some of the evidence which attests to such scribal activity

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[47] Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1985).

[48] Ibid., 2.

[49] Ibid., 14, emphasis mine; cf. 19.

[50] Ibid., 23.

includes (1) the use of "technical terms" or "signaling devices" that are employed within the MT, (2) variances in parallel texts within the MT (and in comparison to the LXX and Samaritan Version), and (3) "redundant" and "disruptive" explanatory scribal comments—often using deictic elements.[51] Occasionally, it appears that scribes were motivated by theological concerns, and altered texts accordingly. Fishbane avers that this was sometimes carried out in the interest of piety, such as the concern to preserve "divine and royal honour."[52] Fishbane argues that such alterations can also be isolated via parallel texts and comparisons between textual versions.[53] Thus, scribal activity already reflects a long tradition of interpretation taking place within the Bible itself.

Fishbane's book—particularly in contrast to his earlier work—is extremely technical in nature. His argument for inner-biblical exegesis ranges across genres and involves lengthy examinations of legal material, aggadic material, and mantic texts. Legal inner-biblical exegesis, for instance, was "distinctively concerned with making pre-existent laws applicable or viable in new contexts."[54] After a lengthy examination of various biblical legal materials, Fishbane writes:

> Moreover, may it not also be validly supposed that the authoritative status which the Pharisees eventually gave their oral legal exegesis—such that this *traditio* was accepted as a virtual second Torah supplementing the primary written *traditum*—may also in part derive from an older tradition which remembered that the final legal

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[51] Ibid., 42-43; cf. 44.

[52] Ibid., 74.

[53] Ibid., 66-67.

[54] Ibid., 282.

> *traditum* of the Hebrew Bible is itself a blend of human *traditio* and divine *traditum*? . . . [This] is merely to propose that underlying the Pharisaic doctrine of two Torahs may be an older inner-biblical tradition which had long since endowed species of the legal-exegetical *traditio* with an authoritative, even divine, status.[55]

According to this view, the relation between *traditio* and *traditum* are interdependent and dynamic from the very beginning.

Thus the biblical texts, in Fishbane's view, were living and breathing documents that spanned across history, accruing layers of interpretation, and were always subject to exegetical activities. "Meaning" itself, Fishbane seems to imply, was not stable or immutable as the texts were copied and compiled. Aggadic inner-biblical exegesis, for example, "characteristically draws forth latent and unsuspected meanings" and "shows how a particular law (or topos, or *theologoumenon*) can transcend its original focus, and become the basis of a new configuration of meaning."[56] Such a view of the texts, methodologically speaking, takes the historical-critical activity of tradition history and inverts it. No longer is Fishbane concerned here with tracing the biblical text back to earlier versions or an oral prehistory; he instead takes the text and follows the contours of its continual interpretation and reinterpretation moving forward through history.[57]

For all of Fishbane's lengthy exposition and thorough review of textual revisions, additions, comments, and reinterpretations of legal, aggadic, and mantic material within the Bible, he nevertheless remains rather tentative and modest in

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[55] Ibid., 277.

[56] Ibid., 283.

[57] Ibid., 7.

his conclusions. He writes, "…that an identifiable trajectory of exegetical elements can indeed be traced from the received corpus of the Hebrew Bible to the recorded texts of the early Jewish exegesis is, in my judgment, a valid *minimal* conclusion."[58] His study merely suggests—while admitting that the evidence remains "historically inconclusive"—that "exegetical techniques and traditions developed locally and cumulatively in ancient Israel from monarchic times and continued into the Graeco-Roman period, where they served as a major reservoir for the Jewish schools and techniques of exegesis then developing."[59] Nevertheless, his detailed study succeeds in demonstrating that a process of interpretation and reinterpretation can be discerned within the biblical texts themselves.

Fishbane is clear that an "inner-biblical exegesis" remains unsystematized and resists reduction. There is no single exegetical "methodology" that can be discerned within the process of textual transmission. Fishbane is clear that the Bible does not quite reach the more "complete" and "stylized" exegetical traditions of classical Judaism in the post-biblical period, and the biblical materials remain "sporadic, unsystematic, and contextual in nature."[60] Still, Fishbane urges that scholarship clearly understand that "exegesis" is neither a purely modern nor a purely post-biblical affair:

> The whole phenomenon of inner-biblical exegesis requires the latter-day historian to appreciate the fact that the texts and traditions, the received *traditum* of ancient Israel, were not

[58] Ibid., 527. Emphasis mine.

[59] Ibid., 525.

[60] Ibid., 543.

> simply copied, studied, transmitted, or recited. They were also, and by these means, subject to redaction, elucidation, reformulation, and outright transformation."[61]

As good a case as Fishbane makes for inner-biblical exegesis, however, his approach appears open to criticism on one major point: how is one to replicate Fishbane's hermeneutical procedure? His own admission is that inner biblical exegesis lacks systematization. So how is another to identify it? Fishbane's later work will expand the work of inner-biblical exegesis into a fully-blown Jewish theology. The replication of Fishbane's hermeneutical activity seems to be a vital procedure for reconstructing, debating, and critiquing the specifically biblical aspect of that theology. Evidence of scribal interference, it appears, must always deal in likelihood and possibility rather than hard evidence. Cases may be built and carefully presented, but Fishbane is (at times) open to the critique of unsubstantiated conjecture. While perhaps that is the lot of nearly all biblical scholarship, Fishbane's own admission of only minimally valid conclusions may not inspire confidence in the most methodologically precise of biblical scholars.

Fishbane and Explicit Hermeneutical Reflections

The next major work by Fishbane that is relevant to the present discussion was published in 1989—a book entitled *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical*

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[61] Ibid., 543. Here is also a note in passing that the biblical scholar is a "latter-day historian." One needs to note, however, that his earliest work accepts literary approaches as important and valid. Additionally, the fact that Fishbane is concerned with the foreward trajectory of historical development rather than a primary concern with the earliest contextual meaning of texts (an activity perhaps most characteristic of historical-critical approaches) separates his work from the standard practices of historical criticism.

Hermeneutics.[62] The book is a compilation of various essays, most of which were originally delivered as lectures dating from 1975. It aims at a more general readership.[63] This emphasis upon accessibility is important, as it acknowledges that the audience of biblical scholarship extends beyond academia, reaching the general public and addresses (or ought to address) the perceived needs of particular communities of faith. In the preface to the book, Fishbane discusses Hermes from Greek mythology (the figure from which the word "hermeneutics" is derived). He remarks: "it seems to me that Hermes is the complex representation of a creative force by which we shuttle from our living present to the past, crossing the boundaries of time in order to revive bygone texts along with ourselves, their readers."[64] This sense that biblical texts "revive" readers, just as readers revive those texts, hearkens back to *Text and Texture* where both reader and text experience "renewed life" in the act of interpretation.[65] Such "renewed life" is not the exclusive property of specialized biblical scholars, and the relative accessibility of the work emphasizes this fact.

Thus, for Fishbane, hermeneutics is precisely the way in which "cultures renew themselves."[66] It is for nonspecialist readers, and not only for the scholar. In

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[62] Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

[63] Ibid., x.

[64] Ibid., ix.

[65] Fishbane, *Text and Texture*, xi.

[66] Fishbane, *Garments of Torah*, ix.

the first chapter of *The Garments of Torah*, and another discussion of inner-biblical exegesis, he explains the importance of a particular culture:

> One of the great and most characteristic features of the history of religions is the ongoing reinterpretation of sacred utterances which are believed to be foundational for each culture. So deeply has this phenomenon become part of our modern literary inheritance that we may overlook the peculiar type of imagination which it has sponsored and continues to nurture; an imagination whose creativity is never entirely a new creation, but one founded upon older and authoritative words and images.[67]

The emphasis here is upon continual reinterpretation, and the particular imagination amongst people and cultures that this creates and sustains.[68]

The first chapter of the book anticipates the basics of *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* and the phenomenon of inner-biblical exegesis. Despite the relatively late date of the writing, the Chronicler, for example is a "voice of a present hour, but also a voice which verbalizes older language for the sake of the reappropriation of the tradition."[69] The need for exegesis, already present and identifiable in the biblical texts themselves, "arises out of a practical crisis of some sort—the incomprehensibility of a world or a rule, or the failure of the covenantal tradition to engage itself."[70] Fishbane again argues that many assume that exegesis and the interpretation of texts is a post-biblical phenomenon, but its origins are deeply apparent and embedded in the biblical texts already. He further claims that the "most characteristic feature of the Jewish imagination, the interpretation and

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[67] Ibid., 3.

[68] Ibid., 4. According to Fishbane, readers within particular *cultures* have imaginations.

[69] Ibid., 16.

[70] Ibid., 16.

rewriting of sacred texts, thus has its origin in the occasional, unsystematized instances of exegesis embedded in the Hebrew Bible."[71]

A notable feature of *The Garments of Torah* is that Fishbane's opinion about the theological status and function of the biblical text is not always easy to identify. It is readily apparent that "theology" is not easily separated from the biblical texts themselves and later interpretations and exposition of those texts—especially since the text itself is the product of exegetical work.[72] Later, post-biblical interpreters seem to "do theology" just as the texts and their own self-commentary "are doing" theology—but it is not immediately clear if Fishbane's own writing counts as "theology." When he discusses the philosophical work of Martin Buber, for example, it is difficult to ascertain where description of Buber's work (whether considered philosophical or theological work) and implicit agreement with such work coincide. For Buber, to read and study the Bible is to experience a personal transformation. Fishbane explains:

> [W]e enter a text as we enter dialogue—piecemeal; and we build up an interpretation dialectically—through corrections, queries and responses. This process, of course, is the famous hermeneutical circle; and its living dynamic, as we now see, is dialogical. In both cases (in living and in study), only readiness is a prerequisite: a readiness to

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[71] Ibid., 18.

[72] Proof of this assumption may be found when Fishbane writes: "The solution to the exegetical issue is less convoluted…classical midrash is in fact no poor man's piety but the heroics of rabbinic hermeneutics. It provides a way of becoming master of the text and its theology while simultaneously acknowledging the independent authority of Scripture," (ibid., 26-27). Elsewhere, Fishbane writes, "The foregoing discussion would serve to pit Cosmos vs. History, the gods of Nature vs. the God of Omnipotent Will, as mutually exclusive religious options. Indeed, the official Israelite theology in its various genres—historiography, psalmody, prophecy—is fundamentally rooted in this bifurcation," (ibid., 55). Italics mine.

> hear and to be changed, to reject and to debate, to find oneself and to find another.[73]

Later, Fishbane writes: "The isolation of theory from practice, and of so-called objective historical research from the enduring (subjective) teaching of a text, was not [Buber's] way. These, he believed, were false and tendentious dichotomies. As against Western hermeneutics generally, Buber sought to integrate research, reading, and life instruction."[74] One assumes Fishbane's agreement with such analyses, but the differences between Buber and Fishbane's own feelings on the matter remain cloudy. Still, Fishbane's own work—taken as a whole—seems to seek the same integration of scholarship and the practice of faith, and so it is theological in this sense.

To this end, and beyond the erudite analyses of the textual approaches of Martin Buber (and Franz Rosenzweig), *The Garments of Torah* is most notable in its attempt to recover the viability of a "sacred text."[75] Fishbane suggests that one of Judaism's defining historic contributions is the notion that the infinite divine can be accessed and portrayed via finite human language.[76] This process is not simplistic, and it is certainly not without risks, however. He writes:

> [O]ur hermeneutical hope is in the indissoluble link between the divine and human *textus*—the divine *textus* being the texture of truth as it converges upon itself, and the human *textus* being our rationalized versions of this divine texture in culture. On the other side, our existential poverty is our unawareness of this link, and our

[73] Ibid., 89.

[74] Ibid., 93.

[75] Ibid., 122.

[76] Ibid., 128-129.

> exegetical proclivity to cross over too fast from the one *textus* to the other. Too soon do we close the terrifying gap between the divine infinity and a human world of words; too incautiously do we transform the *mysterium tremendum* into the *fascinosum* of social celebrations and familiarity.[77]

Interpretive activity is a precarious one: to too hastily capture the infinite with finite words is perhaps to conflate the human and divine "textus" and likely overestimate one's adequacy to the task. Exclusivistic interpretations that lean toward ideological absolutism are often the result.[78] Interestingly, Fishbane suggests that the Bible itself may help us avoid this, and may help to recover the notion of a sacred text because the Bible illustrates (1) our most concrete attempt to access the divine through language, depicting the necessary risk of moving from human to divine "textus," and (2) the phenomenon of a clearly demarcated and complete text that still bears the unresolved historical imprint of competing views, "symbol systems," and ideologies that are identifiable, in part, via inner-biblical exegesis.[79] Fishbane does not merely throw up his arms at the undeniable plurality of the biblical "text." Instead, it is through this plurality that the Bible perhaps sponsors its own sense of

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[77] Ibid., 129. Author's emphasis.

[78] Ibid., 129.

[79] Ibid., 130-131. Cf. Peter Ochs, *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation* (ed. Peter Ochs; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008). In Ochs' evaluation of Fishbane as a "postcritical" scholar, the former writes that in *The Garments of Torah*: "Fishbane thus draws a tripartite distinction among the scriptural word as *symbol* (the subject of Part I) and the *interpretive contexts* of its referentiality or *meaning.* He divides these contexts into two sets: the contexts of scripture's historical primordial meanings (the subject of Part II) and of its present meaning (Part III), which is also the interpretive context of his own inquiry. Restated in terms of the postcritical paradigm, Fishbane has argued, *first* that modern scholarship has errantly dichotomized subjective and objective approaches to the study of scripture; *second,* that this scholarship maintains the dislocation of the modern self from scripture as a source of speech and, thus, of God's love; *third*, that the route to relocation begins with the performative study of innerbiblical exegesis itself: scripture displays the route to its own reclamation" (37). In short, the proper response to traditional, historical-critical scholarship is to challenge its tendency to "objectively" separate the reader from the text, for in doing so, the reader is unable to participate in the speech-world of the text itself, and so to relocate one's self in the context of divine love.

sacrality: "Just as the Hebrew Bible was the original cultural sponsor of raging differences, so may it now sponsor the eruption of a prophetic voice: critical of the potential dangers of human symbolic systems, and an advocate for their fragility and plurality."[80] Elsewhere, Fishbane alleges that the Bible may offer "a new type of sacredness" that is "not the sacredness of the raging, exclusive vision, but the sacredness of the chastened, inclusive one."[81] In this way, the Bible might become "a model for the plurality of visions of multiform humanity."[82] Through personal reading the Bible may become sacred "insofar as its images and language shape our discourse, stimulate our moral and spiritual growth, and simply bind us to past generations which also took this text seriously."[83]

Personal reading and interpretations of biblical texts, though, can avoid the vagaries of eisegesis. Interpretations are publically shared, disclosing the sacred while appropriately chastening such disclosure via the interpretations of others.[84] Fishbane continues:

> Perhaps, we imagine, it is in the transcendental convergence of all interpretations—literary as well as personal—that the divine Reality may be approximated. Or is this our supreme fiction in a Bible-sponsored culture, which asserts that verbal images may purchase truth? If so, the ultimate sacral possibility of the Bible may then lie in its capacity to reprove the very pretensions to meaning through language which it has itself sponsored. So viewed, the transcendent sacrality of the Bible is more than a vision of a transcendent divine

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[80] Ibid., 131.

[81] Ibid., 131.

[82] Ibid., 131.

[83] Ibid., 132.

[84] Ibid., 132-133.

> fullness prior to speech. It may rather lie in teaching that God's truth transcends all linguistic pretensions to meaning. By this rule, the Bible itself, with its own pretension to present a humanly conditioned divine voice, would also be radically transcended.[85]

The Exegetical Imagination and Third-Order Theological Scholarship

Published in 1998, Fishbane's *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* is noteworthy in that it reveals a curious phenomenon about biblical and theological scholarship as practiced in academia.[86] Clearly, from the title, the book is concerned with Jewish theology, but the book is not constructive or prescriptive. Fishbane is not concerned with elucidating a "Jewish biblical theology" in the manner of Protestant scholarship. Here, Fishbane's concern is ultimately a historical theology rooted in the Hebrew Bible, yet traced far beyond the biblical texts into Rabbinic thought.[87] Like some of Fishbane's earlier work, his aim is to "afford a perspective on the history of religious ideas as exegetical trajectories."[88] It is an attempt to demonstrate how Jewish thought is ultimately entrenched in the Hebrew Bible, while it accrues (and continues to accrue) many interpretive layers throughout history via Rabbinic commentary and explication. Two noteworthy features are emphasized in this book, which are features that come to the fore from Fishbane's previous work: (1) that academic work in biblical theology is perhaps

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[85] Ibid., 133.

[86] Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[87] Here again, the implication is that a Jewish theologian is a historian, but whose responsibility is to trace the trajectory of theological thought as history moved forward, rather than the identification of an "original" meaning of a biblical text within its original historical context.

[88] Ibid., ix.

most acceptable when it is not "theology" proper, but rather a "third-order"[89] study of other people's interpretations of the Bible throughout history, and (2) the prominence given to "imagination" as a hermeneutical principle.

Fishbane's aim is "to retrieve the inner texture of classical Jewish thinking as an ongoing exegetical process" that is "not found in any given text or complex, but in the unfolding of ideas around key biblical texts over the course of a millennia."[90] Fishbane acknowledges that this scholarly task is a type of "super-commentary"[91]—writing about Rabbinic texts that exegeted biblical texts—a biblical text that itself evinces its own exegetical processes. This seems to be the point when Fishbane claims "that Jewish historical theology lives among the citations"[92] Fishbane equates the present scholarly task with the Rabbinic interpreters of the past. Rabbis wrestled with both careful attention to the biblical texts *and* the history of interpretations of times past, limited by their own historical circumstance and unique "conceptions and concerns."[93] This always serves to renew texts and interpretations, and so "prolong the voices of Scripture through my own exegetical imagination."[94] Fishbane is merely continuing a theological task of interpretation, reinterpretation, and commentary that existed from the very beginning.

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[89] Ibid., 4.

[90] Ibid,. ix.

[91] Ibid., 4-5.

[92] Ibid., 8.

[93] Ibid., 5.

[94] Ibid., 5.

The focus upon "imagination" is key—perhaps *the* key—to an understanding of Jewish exegetical practice throughout history. Again hearkening back to Fishbane's earliest work, such imagination requires attention to the "texture of Scripture" and "to all the verbal conditions and nuances that elicit the exegetical imagination."[95] Fishbane may have moved on from his earliest literary approach in *Text and Texture,* but his appreciation for specific textual details certainly engaged his own literary imagination. Similarly, time and again, Jewish exegetical practice has proven that the slightest textual detail—even down to a single Hebrew character—may engage the "inventive mind."[96] Meaning is derived via endless "citations" and intertexts and word associations: "the exegetical imagination in Judaism rises and falls to the cadence of citations."[97] Rabbinic exegesis is always a "conscious construction" of meaning, based upon the "verbal conditions of Scripture."[98] Most notably, interpretation depends upon "creative readings of [Scripture's] inherent, *God-given possibilities*."[99] Inventiveness, creativity, and imagination are required for these theological processes, which are always based upon a biblical text that is full of dynamic possibility rather than dogmatic rigidity. And possibility is a divine gift.

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[95] Ibid., 1.

[96] Ibid., 1.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Ibid., 2.

[99] Ibid., emphases mine.

Routinely and without exception, the ultimate purpose of exegesis for Fishbane is "the attempt to textualize existence by having the ideals of (interpreted) Scripture embodied in everyday life."[100] It is "[t]his process of world-making [that] is the ultimate *poesis* of the exegetical imagination."[101] In other words, the text and its interpretations can and should be actualized in practice—ritual or otherwise. The goal of the scholar-interpreter is to inhabit the worldview, assumptions, and exegetical practices of earlier interpreters in order to discern their specific contours: "[o]nly thus will a true historical theology be retrieved."[102] This does not appear to call for an abandonment of contemporary biblical scholarship or its methods, but a sympathetic understanding of "pre-critical" exegesis. Nevertheless, and perhaps more importantly, Fishbane appears to criticize any detached, objective treatment of the text. To exegete at all is to participate in the world of the text and all of its interpretations; it is to be claimed—even if unknowingly—by a textual tradition much larger than oneself, and to become transformed by it.

Fishbane's Jewish Theology

Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology was published in 2008, and is perhaps Fishbane's greatest contribution to the topics of theology, theological interpretation, and the Bible thus far.[103] Here, Fishbane skillfully fleshes out the meaning and

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[100] Ibid., 4.

[101] Ibid., author's emphasis.

[102] Ibid., 4.

[103] Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

significance of a "theological consciousness" within contemporary life, unencumbered by what may be typical or customary assumptions about theology as a strictly dogmatic or confessional or biblical enterprise.[104] For Fishbane, "theology" is (as the title of the book indicates) an "attunement" of the self to the biblical texts, to the world, and to the divine.

"Theology" is not something buried within biblical texts alone, requiring a redoubled effort at exegetical excavation, nor is it some systematization of the texts that only occurs in post-biblical history. For Fishbane, theology exists whenever an individual or group seeks to articulate their experience of the divine while simultaneously appropriating the received, historical experiences of others from the past. In this sense, the Bible is a theological document, but theology itself is a discipline and a practice—it is a "spiritual" and a "sacred enterprise."[105] In order for theology to be "honest" and "living" it is subject to continual "reformulation" by each new generation who undertakes the "ever-new attempt to speak of the reality of God and direct the self toward this truth."[106] From statements such as this, it is clear that theological interpretation of the Bible certainly operates with some stark assumptions about the text. The interpreter, according to Fishbane's approach, apparently must take for granted that the texts traffic in theological "truth."[107]

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[104] Ibid. Notably, Fishbane believes that a "theological consciousness" is something that is "cultivated," (*xxi*).

[105] Ibid., 1.

[106] Ibid., 1-2.

[107] Cf. Ochs, *The Return to Scripture*, 39. Ochs insists that Fishbane is "postcritical" in that the latter takes "theological meaning" for granted in his scriptural interpretation. Ochs argues that this constitutes a major challenge to prevailing methods of biblical scholarship, since "meaning" is

As Fishbane defines it, Jewish theology is foremost a hermeneutical theology.[108] Reception and reformulation mandate interpretive activity. Although he does not explicitly define it in such a way, one again notes that Fishbane supplants a common scholarly "hermeneutic of suspicion" with an alternative hermeneutic that presupposes the inherent truth-value of the biblical texts. For instance, he states that his desire is partly to "save the study of scripture from being a merely historical retrieval of information… by reading specific events in this corpus as theological expressions of primordial truth."[109] He continues: "The narratives of scripture thus become paradigms of perennial matters bearing on divine presence (both transcendence and immanence), as well as the human response to them."[110] The notion of biblical paradigms that elicit and continue to call for contemporary human

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unavailable to traditional modes of biblical scholarship. He writes that a "postcritical" perspective routinely exhibits "doubts about modern scholarship's capacity to sponsor pragmatic inquiry when it is called for and to recognize pragmatic inquiry when it is already in place. The postcritical claim is that modern scholarship tends to define rational inquiry on the model of everyday inquiry: as if reason operates only when a community's deep-seated rules of knowledge are in place and when the task of inquiry is strictly referential, that is, to identify facts and norms with respect to these rules. Modern scholarship therefore tends to reduce the pursuit of knowledge to the terms of a binary opposition between referential, rational inquiry (when the deep rules are in place) and non-referential irrational inquiry (when they are not). In the case of scriptural studies, the effect is to assume either that scriptural texts are simply referential (in which case they display their meaning by pointing ostensively [sic] to certain facts or norms) or that they are non-referential (in which case they are either silent or display their meaning only expressively or metaphorically). The postcritical complaint is that this binary opposition excludes the possibility that scriptural texts may have pragmatic reference: that is, they may represent claims about the inadequacy of certain inherited rules of meaning and about ways of transforming those rules or adjusting them to new conditions of life. To the degree that they refer pragmatically, scriptural texts will not disclose their meanings to modern methods of study" (39). In brief, Fishbane himself (especially through his emphasis upon reading as praxis and theology as action—see below) seems to follow this line of reasoning: scripture itself sponsors its own sense of the sacred and its own epistemological mode and so exhibits "pragmatic" reference in this sense. Fishbane implicitly rejects the rational/irrational dichotomy.

[108] Ibid., *xi*.

[109] Ibid., *xi.*

[110] Ibid.

response similarly implies an elevated status of the text itself. No doubt some scholars (such as Collins) would express grave concern over the assumption that biblical texts are "expressions of primordial truth," but it appears that such an assumption is required for theological engagement according to Fishbane.

Also implicit in Fishbane's approach is an apparent refusal to solely operate within the strictures of modern historical-critical scholarship and its methods. His acknowledgment of the history of Jewish interpretation and the plurality of its approaches to biblical texts across time—ranging from the search for a "plain sense" meaning, to allegorical readings, to rabbinic interpretations, to mystical meanings, and so forth—perhaps endows him with a sense that there are merely "diverse modes of attention to textual details."[111] None is given absolute preference, just as none is disparaged or dismissed—as pre-critical or otherwise. In fact, it is partly Fishbane's hope that a *PaRDes* model of interpretation might reclaim its "central position in the mental and spiritual universe of modern Jews."[112] The term "*PaRDes*" is an acronym for four traditional modes of Jewish exegesis. *Peshat* is taken to mean the "plain sense" meaning of the biblical text, *remez* indicates an underlying allegorical meaning of the text, *derash* refers to rabbinic exposition and commentary based upon biblical texts (*midrash)*, and *sod* is the mystical and mysterious meaning of a given text; a secret meaning that is rooted in divine inspiration and spiritual

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[111] Ibid.

[112] Ibid., 156. (ibid., 140-151, *passim*).

insight.[113] Much of *Sacred Attunement* is devoted to the demonstration of a *PaRDes* hermeneutical process as it might apply to Jacob's dream in Gen 28.[114]

Despite an emphasis on traditional modes of Jewish exegesis, Fishbane is not blind to the epistemological challenges that must be faced by contemporary readers, particularly since Kant. He writes that "[n]o honest theology can ignore what we know and experience as moderns, or relegate this to some separate cognitive sphere."[115] For this reason, any attempt at theology must always begin with the world and our specific everyday experience as we receive it. Fishbane is aware that each new generation is limited by its own unique historical circumstances, its own intellectual milieu, and its own particular forms of expression.[116] Theological integrity therefore requires both boldness and humility: "authentic Jewish theology

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[113] Ibid.

[114] Cf. Bernard M. Levinson, "Review: Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology," *Interpretation* 64, no. 3 (2010): 294-300. Levinson writes, "[i]n a *tour de force* demonstration of exegetical dexterity, Fishbane offers four extended readings of the account of Jacob's dream, according to each of the four [*PaRDes*] methods. The goal of the project is to transform Scripture from a repository of past meanings into, in effect, a contemporary revelation," (297). At times, however, it seems that Levinson does not adequately account for Fishbane's emphasis on historical continuity and interpretations and re-interpretations across time; it seems too much to claim that Fishbane seeks to "transform" Scripture into "contemporary revelation." Levinson also asks, "How does [Fishbane's] earlier historical-descriptive work on inner biblical exegesis connect with the theological-prescriptive emphasized in *Sacred Attunement?* The strength that I have always found in Fishbane's work is his demonstration of the ways in which the received tradition was always already itself a product of the reworking of tradition. The academic and historical analysis, in other words, was never merely descriptive or archival, but showed the nuts and bolts of tradition in formation, and was therefore implicitly constructive, (297). It may be that "tradition in formation" has been constructive in the *past*, but Fishbane's goal in *Sacred Attunement* is not to somehow divorce the "historical-descriptive" from the "constructive," but rather to emphasize their essential continuity, and that the present "constructive" task is a contemporary responsibility, geared toward a new time and place, ever in light of a rich, ongoing interpretive past. As argued above, constructive theology, for Fishbane, is intended for a contemporary "theological consciousness" and an attunement to the divine in one's life as it constitutes a call to present action, and that is rooted in an ever-ongoing interpretive past.

[115] Ibid., 13.

[116] Ibid., 1.

has always been marked by strategies of accommodation between the earlier and foundational strata of tradition (such as scripture) and the challenge of quite different moral attitudes or truth claims from the broader intellectual environment."[117] One senses that this phenomenon of authentic theological engagement and revision apparently finds its parallel (and its early evidence) in inner-biblical exegesis itself. On religious traditions in general, Fishbane writes:

> Thus, to the unsuspecting eye, focused on the great body of traditions to be mastered, this complex content had the aura of a sacred and integrated whole. But the traces of revision are nevertheless always discernible in the sources, even when older materials are simply cited or spliced into new anthologies; and this ongoing process of adaptation or clarification attests to the vitality of living theology.[118]

For Fishbane, specific moments of lived experience cause this process of integration and renewal: he variously calls such moments "ruptures" or "caesural moments" in the midst of ordinary life—everything from an instant of awe before nature to the arresting experience of an unexpected death.[119] These "caesural moments" are often life-changing.[120] This is because such moments seize one's consciousness and bring about a new awareness. Fishbane says that "the eruptive, caesural event is kept in mind by a new attentiveness to the contingency of experience, and an attunement to the deeper nature of worldly existence. As this double dimension of existence is

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[117] Ibid., 3.

[118] Ibid., 4.

[119] Ibid., 19. Elsewhere, Fishbane specifically names examples like an earthquake, flood, or birth (20).

[120] Ibid., 19, 20.

infixed in consciousness (as a bimodal *mentalité*), our subjectivity and life-world are transformed."[121]

While such caesural moments seize one's consciousness, they must also inevitably involve something beyond cognition. They are transformative because they lead to action: "This is therefore not only a cognitive insight . . . it also carries a value component, through an awakening to the contingency of existence and a command to respond."[122] Memory and recital keep these moments fresh and alive—the Bible itself is a repository of such caesural moments from a distant historical past. "Theology" itself always directs its attention toward these moments, and the *practice* of theology is the attempt to sustain such mindfulness.[123] Painting and poetry—for example—similarly aim at rupturing our mundane experience, "intentionally disrupting our normal habitude and common perceptions, [whereas] *theology tries to transform this perception of elementariness into a sustained way of life and thought*."[124] Fishbane thereby highlights the real, pragmatic task of theology: "As the exercise of theological thinking unfolds, it directs the human spirit toward an increasingly focused awareness of God as the heart and breath of all existence, and tries to sustain that focus throughout the course of life."[125] Theology serves a sustaining function throughout life.

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[121] Ibid., 20.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid., 22.

[124] Ibid., 48, author's emphases; cf. 24-33, 108.

[125] Ibid., 35.

Thus, theology is for day-to-day living according to Fishbane; it is eminently practical. “Attunement…involves both perception and performance” and so “theology is not merely a type of thinking but a type of living.”[126] Fishbane cites Lev 26:3, noting that theological commitment must be enacted.[127] Theology is specifically Jewish insofar as the general theological task is particularized and rooted in Jewish culture, tradition, and “marked by the accumulation of Jewish interpretations of God’s reality” throughout time—interpretations that are undertaken anew with each successive generation.[128] Jewish theology is characteristically both hermeneutical and performative, and Jewish theology’s emphasis upon inward cultivation finally marks it as transformative.[129] According to Fishbane, thought, word, and deed that are centered upon God is the very practice of *halakha* in everyday life.[130]

As far as the biblical text is specifically concerned, it is Moses and the covenant at Sinai that are “foundational” for Jewish theology.[131] Fishbane points toward Exod 3 which details the Sinai episode began with Moses’ own “caesural” moment before the burning bush, and where an elusive and mysterious God appeared to him. This God refused to be fully revealed, domesticated, or known

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[126] Ibid., *xii*.

[127] Ibid., *xiv.*

[128] Ibid., 44.

[129] Ibid., 44-45.

[130] Ibid., 114.

[131] Ibid., 46, cf. 49, 156.

completely: Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.[132] Fishbane comments: "this initiating induction of Moses into a covenant with God (Exodus 3:15) calls its readers to the need for attentiveness to the ever-new 'I shall be' of Divinity throughout earthly existence."[133] Moses is the paradigmatic figure for the one whose life is irrevocably changed by the ineffable divine presence. The Jewish notion of an ongoing, living, "multifaceted" accompaniment to the Written Torah—the Oral Torah—is testament to the inevitable development, expansion, and transformation that proceeds from this reality.[134] It also indicates the possible inadequacy of a single written biblical text.[135] Jewish hermeneutical theology operates in exactly this manner: "the task of a hermeneutical theology is to interpret sacred scripture in ways that sharpen our religious awareness for the sake of a God-centered life, and to allow our reinterpreted lives to disclose ever-wider and deeper spiritual realities of God's *torah kelulah*."[136] Exegetical practice is not a disembodied and abstract procedure, but "must become direct address" to its practitioner, and concretely appropriated in

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[132] Ibid., 52, 53.

[133] Ibid., 54.

[134] Ibid., 61.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Ibid., 64. It is important to note here that there are three Torahs: Oral, Written, and the torah of God, which is life itself—the *torah kelulah* or Torah of All-in-All. This *torah kelulah* is "an infinite enfoldment of all that could ever be in our world. Only this Torah truly comes from the mouth of God, forever and ever, as the kiss of divine truth upon the vastness of world-being" (61). Also see Walter Brueggemann, "Review: *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology*," *HBT*, 31 no. 2 (2009): 211-15. Brueggemann points out that the "*torah kelulah*" according to Fishbane,"evidences the theological seriousness and thickness of the tradition (and of Fishbane) and shows why [Fishbane's] discussion at some points, perforce and veers toward mysticism; for this Torah is clearly beyond the read of critical reasoning," (211).

one's life.[137] To participate in this hermeneutical process is to participate in the ongoing Oral Torah, which concerns itself with the "revelation" of "potential" meaning.[138] A Jewish hermeneutical theology that takes Moses as its paradigm is a discipline in "covenantal" theology—of remembering and bearing the covenant in mind.[139] Fishbane remarks: "Keeping ourselves attuned to the many interpretive possibilities at the core of life, and guided by the standards of scripture, one may effectuate divine reality—bringing God to a human presence through ourselves, just here in the midst of the vastness."[140] Therefore, one can fairly say that Fishbane's is a "biblical" theology—but the maintenance of a God-centered outlook (and the corresponding actions that proceed from it) for theological living is the goal. Indeed, Fishbane can confidently assert that "[t]he task of theology is lifelong; an ongoing centering within life—in preparation for death."[141] The Bible is just a piece of the overall theological picture—though an important and even paradigmatic one. Still, Fishbane's is an integrated approach to a theology that is at once biblical, historical, practical, communal, and personal.

Fishbane and Ecclesiastes

Despite Fishbane's emphasis upon creative possibility and the attempt to turn the text into "direct address" for a reader, his own reading of Ecclesiastes hardly strikes

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[137] Ibid., 91, cf. 63, 198.

[138] Ibid.,91 cf. 74.

[139] Ibid., 209.

[140] Ibid.

[141] Ibid., 206.

one as imaginative or creative. This seems especially true given Fishbane's belief that interpretation depends upon "creative readings of [Scripture's] inherent, *God-given possibilities*,"[142] To him, Qohelet "throws down the gauntlet of futility. . . For things go round and round like the wind, listing here and blowing there, in a most wearisome way; and habit leads to lassitude and a sense of futility."[143] Surely Qohelet claims this, but that is not *all* that he claims. Ultimately, Fishbane's reading of Ecclesiastes is all-too-familiar, and echoes Brueggemann's own assessment. Qohelet is merely the negative voice of one at the periphery of Fishbane's "covenant theology:" Qohelet's "statements are of the natural self, which assesses experience and collects results and tries to determine which actions would seem to be of the most personal benefit."[144] Qohelet appears to bewail the reality that the broader biblical commands against oppression, the commands in favor of justice, the injunctions to institute honest rulers and judges, the exhortations to remember the past, and the reminders to value life are ignored.[145] In some cases, Fishbane notes that various commands to remember and value life are actually subverted by Qohelet's own claims. The "covenant self," however, is one who finally affirms the duty to fear God and obey the commandments (Eccles 12:13) despite all apparent contradictions that are rooted in personal observation.[146] Fishbane seems to ignore

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[142] Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination,* 2.

[143] Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement,* 173.

[144] Ibid., emphasis mine.

[145] Ibid., 173-174.

[146] Ibid., 174.

many of the more positive passages of the book in favor of a reading that simply condenses (and so largely dismisses) the book as a text wallowing in negativity, until the final decision in favor of covenantal obligation (stated within the space of a single verse) is finally affirmed. The dichotomy of the "natural self" versus the "covenantal self" merely rehearses standard scholarly reductions of the book into "negative" versus "positive" categories. Bernard Levinson has similarly questioned Fishbane's treatment of Ecclesiastes. Levinson writes,

> *What is the place of doubt and of theological challenge within any theology, let alone a Jewish theology?* Can doubt have theological integrity? Doubting and questioning is an extensive theme throughout the Bible, evident in the repeated challenges and questions of Moses at the burning bush and in the spirit of Ecclesiastes, so threatening to piety that it had to be contained by a pious colophon at odds with everything that precedes [it]… I raise this question because at points I wondered whether Fishbane's readings in *Sacred Attunement,* which are so passionately concerned with renewal of faith, tended to find continuities and piety in places where Fishbane earlier might have opted to draw attention to critical engagement with the tradition… I see something similar going on in the discussion of Qoheleth, who seems to be folded back into a tradition of piety, consistent with the secondary colophon that urges, 'Fear God and keep his commandments' (Eccl 12:13). Qoheleth does not appear to present a major challenge to orthodoxy.[147]

Fishbane's singular emphasis upon the appropriation tradition and the "renewal of faith" does not always seem to allow for engagement with certain biblical texts that might challenge tradition. While Qohelet is summarily fit into Fishbane's own theological framework without much need for "imagination" or "creativity," it is still quite clear that the great majority of Qohelet's discourse does not depict the easy reception and appropriation of a received covenantal tradition—but perhaps for a specific purpose. As chapter five will discuss, it is possible that say that Qohelet's

[147] Levenson, "Review: Sacred Attunement," 298-99 (author's emphasis).

"conclusion" in 12:13 falls a bit flat. Instead of an easily appropriated tradition, Qohelet seems to mark the entirety of any "received tradition" with a very particular and peculiar accent.

Final Observations and Critique

The preceding summary of Fishbane's work, viewed as a whole, seems to exhibit a certain organic development across the years. Fishbane's entire thought process on theology appears to be an extension of his earliest literary work rather than a departure from it, where his literary approach highlighted certain "stylistic conventions" within the biblical corpus. It is also within his earliest work that one finds an unwavering emphasis that the purpose of reading the Bible was to lead one into "renewed life." The Bible, as Fishbane insisted from the start, is foremost a religious text that addresses a community of faith, and aims to elicit a divine encounter. These claims continue throughout his career. It is perhaps reasonable to suppose that his careful attention to "stylistic conventions" led to the discernment of recurring deictic elements in the text, indicating textual (and theological) expansion *within* the biblical corpus. This led to a focus upon inner-biblical exegesis. Fishbane's work is undeniably historical, but it relativizes any focus upon the "original" meaning of biblical texts in favor of their historical development as history marched on. Essentially, inner-biblical exegesis is the historical record of theology "in action." Contemporary theological-exegetical work merely continues the biblical process of reception, interpretation, and revision. The phenomenon of an Oral Torah bolsters support for this process, as does a long tradition of rabbinic commentary within Judaism.

Even so, Fishbane does not practice "biblical theology" in the manner of John Collins or Walter Brueggemann—but despite this fact, or even because of it, much is to be commended in his work. Fishbane's approach is able to integrate biblical-exegetical scholarly practice as an element of theological practice (and so a sort of "biblical theology") with an eminently practical theology. There is no "abstract v. concrete" theological dichotomy. He practices an exegetical technique in service of theological knowledge that is meant to be lived, and meant to sustain a sort of theological orientation of the heart and mind.[148] Fishbane is not primarily concerned with isolating an original, contextual meaning of biblical texts in order to reconstruct a modern "biblical theology."

Perhaps another major strength of Fishbane's work is that one's faith is not jettisoned from the domain of academic scholarship. Its strength is that it is able to reach a broader audience than the academy alone. It integrates a certain scholarly responsibility and a public responsibility. One does not necessarily need to compartmentalize or "bracket out" religious conviction. Carried out, his approach constitutes a major contribution to scholarly knowledge of the history of biblical interpretation and reception (particularly within Judaism), while simultaneously remains relevant to modern, non-academic faith communities. Theology, according to Fishbane, is life-giving, and it nurtures an ongoing "centering" or awareness of

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[148] Cf. Brueggemann, "Review: *Sacred Attunement*," 213: "Indeed, the accent on mindfulness [about self in the world] suggests that it is a primary aim of this book to expose the mindlessness of our cultural reality and to insist that we are not fated to cultural *mindlessness* that forgets the true self and the true neighbor, which often ends in savage violence." Here, Brueggemann seems to read Fishbane's work in alignment with some of Brueggemann's own concerns as summarized in chapter three: theology and the Bible must sponsor an alternative worldview and "orientation" much different than that of contemporary culture.

God in one's life. In the end, Fishbane certainly appears to agree with Buber: "As against Western hermeneutics generally, Buber sought to *integrate* research, reading, and life instruction."[149] No such tendentious separation is necessary between one's faith and one's scholarship. Fishbane's methods champion an admirable integrity sometimes missing from other scholarly practices.

Additionally, Fishbane is able to confront the reality of the diverse and irreducible complexity of texts within the Bible because it exhibits no need to systematize, synthesize, or integrate the texts in their entirety. His view is in accord with that of Jon Levenson and Gershom Scholem at this point: "…Jewish biblical theology is likely to be, as it always has been, a matter of piecemeal observations appended to the text and subordinate to its particularity. As Gershom Scholem put it when speaking of rabbinic Judaism: 'Not system but *commentary* is the legitimate form through which truth is approached.'"[150] Fishbane's emphases upon difference and plurality and "piecemeal" reflection leads to a certain call to humility on the part of exegetes—also occasionally missing from scholarly practice. In his words: "Just as the Hebrew Bible was the original cultural sponsor of raging differences, so may it now sponsor the eruption of a prophetic voice: critical of the potential dangers of human symbolic systems, and an advocate for their fragility and plurality."[151]

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[149] Fishbane, *Garments of Torah*, 93. Emphasis mine.

[150] Levenson, "Why Jews are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," 54; Gershom Scholem, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism," *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 289.

[151] Fishbane, *Garments of Torah*, 131.

Theology is a precarious venture, always subject to revision and reformulation, and all of its formulations are tentative, and indeed fragile.

Finally, Fishbane finds a place—and puts a premium—upon the role of the human imagination and creativity in interpretation. Exegetical technique is given a dimension not often discussed or utilized within academic biblical studies. As mentioned previously, Fishbane advocates "creative readings of [Scripture's] inherent, God-given possibilities.[152] Biblical texts do not possess a static "meaning" to be deciphered once-for-all, but instead speak to the fullness of possible meanings. Creativity and imagination are the indispensible steps toward a constructive newness that characterizes a living theology.[153]

Fishbane is also subject to a number of criticisms, however. Some might find his articulation of inner-biblical exegesis methodologically imprecise; even arbitrary on occasion. "Signaling devices" in the text are not always easy to identify and not always evidence of scribal commentary, and deictic elements are not always indicative of scribal tampering. Additionally, the identification of appropriate intertexts are notoriously difficult to isolate and rarely inspire any degree scholarly

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[152] Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement*, 2.

[153] Cf. Brueggemann, "Review: *Sacred Attunement*," 212: "these several modes [of *PaRDeS* interpretive practices] are always toward the more imaginative. One can readily see, of course, why serious Jewish interpreters have always been reluctant to be hemmed in by too much 'critical' insistence, for what has been taken as 'critical' among us hardly leads to or even permits the kind of "mindfulness" that concerns Fishbane. The outcome… is to see that textual interpretation is bold and daring, rooted textually, but ultimately leads beyond the text itself to represent the world before the Lord of the covenant." Here, Brueggemann seems to allude to an inherent tension between "imaginative" and "critical" approaches to the biblical texts. Later, Brueggemann even muses, "Fishbane's exposition does not invite a critical response as much as it invites illumination, engagement, and mindfulness that culminate in wonder," (213).

consensus. This is due to an absence of accepted methodological criteria to pinpoint intertexts. Often, choices seem based more upon instinct and subjective perception. Thus, intertexts can never be chosen, they require argumentation in order to justify their appropriateness. Intertexts are never universally obvious nor given.

Moreover, one of Fishbane's strengths may also be liability. The preceding discussion has highlighted Fishbane's emphasis upon creativity and imagination in biblical and theological scholarship (an emphasis also found in the work of Walter Brueggemann, as discussed in chapter 3). Undoubtedly, many scholars will be less enthused by such a call to creativity and imagination. This is because centuries of critical scholarship have chased down the rabbit-hole of "original" textual meaning and authorial intent (always within a particular historical context) within the biblical writings. The theological program of John Collins, for example, recommends a historical-critical approach, consisting of the isolation and reconstruction of Israelite beliefs about God limited to a distant historical past. The pronouncement of a forward-looking "imagination" and attunement to the development of meaning and textual possibility will certainly sound like hopelessly bad news among some scholars—perhaps particularly among the most staunch of historical critics. Has not the "original" meaning of biblical texts been difficult enough to establish? Adding a new forward-looking temporal direction to the efforts of critical scholarship, and introducing a new orientation toward the text inevitably comes with many challenges—and likely many objections.

Similarly, if tradition is always received and reinterpreted as articulated by Fishbane, how flexible can "truth" ultimately be? Fishbane rightly warns against the

fragility of all theological formulations, but he ultimately seems to call for an epistemological shift toward a search for "truthiness" rather than truth itself. Western scholarly discourse itself would need to come to terms with the impossibility of capturing "truth" as such. The likelihood of this ever occurring is far from certain, as evinced by a resistance in many scholarly quarters to similar claims about "truth" made by the so-called "postmodernists."

Still further, John J. Collins' own position regarding scholarly interaction on matters of faith still stands, and is not adequately addressed or refuted by Fishbane. To rehearse the position: Collins essentially argues that scholars may only work together when they stand upon common ground, which requires all religious conviction to be set aside. Collins' own position is iterated to a degree by Jon Levenson's assessment of the scholarly environment as well: "the anomaly is what unites Jews and Christians in biblical studies is a common commitment to a nonsupernaturalistic approach to the text. Partnership is possible only on terms that cast the truth claims of both traditions into doubt."[154] Consequently, work in philology, historiography, and the history of Israelite religion (rather than theology) is allegedly the only common ground upon which Jews, Christians, and secular scholars may stand.

So based on Fishbane's work, how may Jewish and Christian and secularist scholars speak with each other on theological matters?[155] There is no clear avenue

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[154] Levenson, "Why Jews are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," 50.

[155] Cf. Brueggemann, "Review: *Sacred Attunement*," 211: "On the one hand, [Fishbane] finds in Deuteronomy the "deeper spirit of the hermeneutic revolution" (p. 48), an interpretive revolution that was, incidentally, the compelling force of the work of Gerhard von Rad." It may be that there are points of contact between Jewish theology and Christian interpretive tradition, but Fishbane

by which a non-Jew can engage in the conversation about "Jewish theology" proper, even if some degree of cooperation in the field of the history of biblical interpretation is implicit (but never outright stated) by Fishbane.[156] Jews have a different perspective on the Bible: they prioritize the Pentateuch, and additionally possess all matter of religious texts throughout history that Christians do not claim for themselves. Of course, there is certainly a long history of Christian writings and commentary, but these are not ascribed the same degree of authority among Protestant Christians as the Hebrew Bible (with the exception of the New Testament). The magisterium of Catholic Church cannot be cited as analogous to Jewish tradition either, as it is functions as the arbiter of official teaching and theology that finds no easy parallel within Judaism. As Levenson writes: "[l]ike the different conceptions of scripture held by the [Jewish and Christian] traditions, the different organization of the Tanakh and the Old Testament ensures that a biblical theology common to Jews and Christians is impossible."[157] It is uncertain whether non-Jews may contribute to Jewish theological thought in general as constructed by Fishbane—let alone a "biblical theology." Fishbane's is an exegetical theology that is thoroughly rooted and based upon Jewish tradition.

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nevertheless makes no such explicit connections.

[156] Cf. Levinson, "Review: Sacred Attunement," 299. Levinson writes, "*How does Jewish theology conceptualize the non-Jewish other?* I ask the question because the means for obtaining the generative rereadings, and the account of the theophany itself, force us to reflect upon what "Jewish" means in this context. The fourfold method of PARDES is structurally similar to the fourfold method of Christian biblical exegesis in late antiquity: that is, literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical." Here, Levinson suggests possible points of contact of Jewish exegesis with ancient Christian exegesis, but Fishbane makes no similar observation, nor does he point toward any role for the "non-Jewish other" in the area of theology as it is conceived by Fishbane.

[157] Ibid., 55.

Conclusion

To review: Fishbane's earliest work was quite literary in nature, and relied upon an interpretive process that stressed key words, intertexts, motifs, and literary structuring. As an extension of this earlier work, Fishbane began to focus upon "inner biblical exegesis" and identifying those places in the biblical text where interpretation and reinterpretation of earlier theological claims and traditions were present and identifiable through specific literary phenomena. This led Fishbane to claim that the Bible itself is a type of repository for particular hermeneutical activities that are unique to the texts themselves. It is thus demonstrable that a great Jewish exegetical tradition of biblical commentary existed "from the beginning," and is not a post-biblical development. The identification of deictic elements in the text, "signaling devices" employed by scribes, and attention to variations between manuscripts are the evidence of this. As Fishbane's career moved forward, it is clear that he began to think more about "theology" itself, especially in relation to both historical and ongoing Jewish exegetical activities. Ultimately, Fishbane claims that the acts of reading, interpretation, and reinterpretation are theological activities, and the aggregate of such activities constitute a "Jewish theology" whose goal is to keep one "attuned" to the divine. This attunement is accomplished whenever the text shapes the very way that one speaks, whenever the text guides one's spiritual and moral growth, and whenever exegetical commentary ties a religious community and culture together across time. This is despite, or perhaps even because of, a multiplicity of interpretations among the various communities that formed them. Indeed, the recognition of creative processes that led to a rich diversity among

interpretations led Fishbane to highlight the importance of a vibrant exegetical "imagination." This became one of Fishbane's primary concerns. To engage the exegetical imagination is to practice theology and participate in its essential character: theology is something that is alive and living. The key word here seems to be "practice," as theology is something that is both done and lived, and not merely deciphered. His call is therefore for scholars to understand and inhabit those imaginations throughout history—not to dismiss them as pre-critical, ahistorical, or irrelevant.

In brief, theology is practiced in order to sustain a certain mentality and way of living according to Fishbane, primarily through the appropriation and reinterpretation of inherited traditions that shape our imaginations. These imaginations are recorded as words from the Bible and from religious documents throughout history. Imagination is important for both exegetical practice (as it extends a shared theological tradition) and for personal formation, as it shapes and sponsors new theological imaginations that are never completely new. Said differently, imagination is required for appropriation, and is required to foster future re-appropriation. Fishbane's emphasis upon words and language that are meant to sustain a specific sort of living is what the final chapter of the present study will address.

CHAPTER FIVE
A SYNTHESIS OF COLLINS, BRUEGGEMANN, AND FISHBANE: IMAGINATION FOR THE SAKE OF THEOLOGICAL APPROPRIATION

> Apparently, in spite of some of the best intentions of biblical scholars in theological schools, the perceptions of their students and their colleagues sometimes suggests that students are learning mainly historical-critical approaches to Scripture along with the notion that other meanings of the text may be inappropriate or at best secondary.[1]
>
> - Dale B. Martin

> [G]reat works continue to live in the distant future. In the process of their posthumous life they are enriched with new meanings, new significance: it is as though these works outgrow what they were in the epoch of their creation."[2]
>
> -Mikhail Bakhtin

> I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination circles the world."[3]
>
> -Albert Einstein

The preceding chapters have offered a glimpse of the current status and practice of theological interpretation of the Bible and "biblical theology" within contemporary academia. The aim of these chapters has been to offer an overview of the work of

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[1] Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 17.

[2] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; trans. Vern McGee; Austin: University of Texas Press). 4.

[3] Cited in George Sylvester Viereck, "What Life Means to Einstein: An Interview by George Sylvester Viereck," *Saturday Evening Post,* October 26, 1929, 117.

some important scholars in the field, chiefly to outline some of the hermeneutical possibilities that lie before us, and to evaluate the respective strengths and weaknesses of the work of John Collins, Walter Brueggemann, and Michael Fishbane. Together, their work can be considered as various proposals for a sort of "biblical theology." At least three questions still remain to be addressed, however. First, is biblical theology still relevant within the broader discipline of academic biblical studies? Second, if so, are there other conceptual possibilities that might avoid some of the problems identified in the work of Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane? Third, is one such conceptual possibility a synthesis—even if only a tentative one—of the various proposals of Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane for a "biblical theology" that preserves some of their contributions while redressing some of the problems associated with their respective proposals? The discussion below will first address these three issues.

Before proceeding to answer these questions, however, a few definitions are in order. The following discussion understands the term "theology" primarily according to the suggestions set forth by Michael Fishbane: theology constitutes an "ever-new attempt to speak of the reality of God and direct the self toward this truth," and is something that is "living," and always subject to "reformulation."[4] Moreover, theology "directs the human spirit toward an increasingly focused awareness of God as the heart and breath of all existence, and tries to sustain that

[4] Michael A. Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1-2.

focus throughout the course of life."[5] Additionally, theology's purpose is "an ongoing centering within life—in preparation for death."[6] One might claim along with Fishbane that theology *is*, so to speak, a matter of life and death. The following discussion will disagree with Fishbane, however, that "theology" is the equivalent of a "historical theology," even if history is a component of it.

"Theology" in what follows is specifically a "biblical theology" insofar as these "ever-new attempts to speak of the reality of God" remain in perpetual dialogue with the Bible and with previous interpretations of the Bible. Biblical theology is a specific sort of discourse that is constructive, and always serves a purpose: it aims to speak to a particular, concrete audience, and is resolutely confessional in the end. It seeks to enable the contemporary appropriation of biblical texts among actual, living faith communities. So throughout the following discussion, such an "enabling" task is what is meant by the term "theological appropriation" of the Bible. Biblical theology always has a practical and "sustaining" function. So, biblical theology (1) aims to sustain an awareness of God as the source and center of all life for living persons and communities of faith until death and, (2) simultaneously aims to creatively exposit the biblical materials in such a way that enables their continued appropriation into the future. In the discussion that follows, the necessity of imagination for the sake of any such constructive biblical theology will be insisted

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[5] Ibid., 35.

[6] Ibid., 206.

upon.[7] The following discussion will emphasize that "imagination" is a neglected—but ultimately fundamental—virtue within biblical scholarship, and a value necessary for the future of biblical theology and "theological appropriation" of the Bible. In short, if the Bible is to remain contemporarily "sustaining" and "relevant" to faith traditions, it is an imaginative "biblical theology" that makes it so.

The present chapter is divided into four separate but interrelated parts. First, it is argued that a "biblical theology" geared toward contemporary theological appropriation of the biblical texts remains important within the overall discipline of academic biblical studies writ large. This is because biblical scholarship has a pedagogical obligation to train students in hermeneutics, to account for a rich history of theological interpretation of the Bible, and (for at least some biblical scholars) to train and foster a lively theological imagination in service to theological professionals in-training.[8] In order for such a broadly conceived "biblical theology" to be practiced and taught, however, biblical scholars must recognize and reevaluate a general bias within the discipline of biblical studies as a whole toward the

[7] On the importance of "imagination" as a primary value to the theological enterprise, see Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); *idem*, *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). As discussed in the previous chapter, Fishbane is everywhere concerned with the "exegetical imagination." Indeed, according to Fishbane, the "most characteristic feature of the Jewish imagination, the interpretation and rewriting of sacred texts, thus has its origin in the occasional, unsystematized instances of exegesis embedded in the Hebrew Bible" (18). Fishbane claims that the purpose of interpretation is to "prolong the voices of Scripture through my own exegetical imagination" (5). It is the interpreter's responsibility to offer "creative readings of [Scripture's] inherent, God-given possibilities" (2). The value of "imagination" within biblical theology will likewise be emphasized within this chapter in a fashion similar to that found in Fishbane's work.

[8] For an insistence on the urgency of hermeneutical education within biblical studies, see Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible*, esp. 24, cf. 27-28. "Theological professionals" may involve various clerical ministers, rabbis, congregational leaders, and so forth.

localization of "meaning" of biblical texts within an "original" historical past or context.

Second, this chapter will stress—albeit obliquely— the inadequacy of Krister Stendhahl's distinction between what the biblical texts "meant" and what they "mean" in favor of a position that emphasizes what biblical texts "might have meant," what they have "been meaning" throughout history, what they may "presently mean," and finally what they "potentially *could* mean."[9] This understanding will aver that "biblical theology" as articulated by John Collins (and so what the biblical texts "meant" in a particular historical context) is not only insufficient, but actually inhibits a rich theological understanding of the biblical materials, and thus impedes their theological appropriation.

Third, the discussion will evolve to suggest an alternative conceptualization of the task of biblical theology that preserves many aspects of the work of Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane, but attempts to move beyond them. Indeed, the preceding three chapters of the present study have intended to evoke a sort of incipient dialogue between Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane regarding their hermeneutical and theological approaches to the biblical texts. A tentative and provisional synthesis of the work of these scholars is possible, but requires a re-conceptualization of the discourse of biblical theology. Such a re-conceptualization is conceived in light of an epistemology that is largely foreign to prevailing philosophical discourse: an epistemology suggested by the linguistic and literary

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[9] Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. K. Crim; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962).

work of Mikhail Bakhtin.[10] Still, it should be understood that what follows is not a narrowly-conceived "Bakhtinian biblical theology" or a "Bakhtinian approach" to biblical theology. It is, rather, a "biblical theology." Bakhtin merely provides a far-reaching heuristic model in which to view human language and knowledge. This model, it is argued, ultimately underscores the value of imagination to any future approach to biblical theology.

Finally, and lest the discussion become overly theoretical, an illustration of such a possible approach to "biblical theology" will engage the book of Ecclesiastes in some depth. A particular reading of the book will be offered that highlights the "potential" for meaning within it by engaging the imagination, and that primarily seeks to enable future theological appropriation of the book. The primary "mode" of such a reading (construed as "biblical theology") is best described here as "interdisciplinary exegetical commentary." It offers only one of many possible approaches to the text rather than a full-blown hermeneutical strategy or methodology.[11] Again, the reading will seek to do justice to aspects of the work of

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[10] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (ed. Michael Holquist; trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). As an overall critique of Western philosophical discourse and its "monologic" conception of language, Bakhtin writes: "Philosophy of language, linguistics and stylistics [i.e., such as they have come down to us] have all postulated a simple and unmediated relation of speaker to his unitary and singular 'own' language, and have postulated as well a simple realization of this language in the monologic utterance of the individual. Such disciplines know only two poles in the life of language, between which are located all the linguistic and stylistic phenomena they know: on one hand, the system of a *unitary language,* and on the other the *individual* speaking in this language" (269, author's emphasis).

[11] Cf. chapter four. For the notion that "commentary" is a proper mode of theological activity, see Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination.* Fishbane encourages the practice of "super-commentary," which is essentially commenting on biblical texts, and commenting on subsequent commentaries of biblical texts throughout history (4-5). This is because, according to Fishbane, "commentary" is the *modus operandi* of Jewish hermeneutics. He writes that "Jewish historical theology lives among the citations" (8). Cf. Gershom Scholem, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism,"

Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane, yet will also move beyond them. Although the interpretation offered there accentuates the values of imagination for biblical theology, it simultaneously suggests that such “biblical theology” is never entirely a “new creation” somehow independent of those interpretations and commentaries that have preceded it. As noted in chapters 2-4 of the present discussion, engagement with the book of Ecclesiastes is particularly pertinent to a discussion about biblical theology, as past scholarly treatment of the book exemplifies or typifies some of the shortcomings of scholar’s abilities in the theological interpretation of the Bible. Hence, an illustration of biblical theology as it has been re-envisioned below (via Ecclesiastes as a test case) suggests some possible routes toward the future of biblical theology.

Is Theological Interpretation and Appropriation of the Bible Still Relevant?

Dale B. Martin has issued a sort of indictment of the entire discipline of biblical studies, phrased in such a way that cuts to the very purpose of biblical scholarship in relation to theological education in particular.[12] Surprisingly, the challenge he offers is rarely noted or addressed by biblical scholars. In *Pedagogy of the Bible*, Martin basically wonders about praxis—what is biblical scholarship doing, how is it taught, and what does it ultimately aim to achieve?

The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality (New York: Schocken Books, 1971). Scholem similarly writes, “not system but *commentary* is the legitimate form through which truth is approached” (289, author’s emphasis).

[12] Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible*, 17.

While Martin's primary concern involves theological schools—and Protestant ones in particular—his contention is that historical criticism has reigned as the primary or foremost pedagogical paradigm for professional biblical studies.[13] His is not meant to be an exhaustive sociological study of theological schools, although his research is based upon significant analysis of many schools ranging across the "liberal" to "conservative" spectrum. His evidence consists of first-hand observations, the analysis of course data and various curricula, and extensive personal interviews.[14] By "historical critical" he means that "[a]t its most basic level, historical criticism takes the primary meaning of the text to be what its meaning would have been in its original ancient context."[15] This amounts to the "intentions of the author or the meaning understood by the ancient audience."[16] This phenomenon introduces a "gap" between an ancient text and a contemporary historical audience.[17] Various hermeneutical options intend to offer ways in which to overcome this gap, or offer interpretive strategies that are unconcerned with any "primary meaning" altogether. Martin notes that hermeneutical approaches (including literary, feminist, liberationist, reader-response, "perspectival," and social-scientific approaches among others) are occasionally taught in theological schools, but these are usually secondary at best to the primary emphasis on the

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[13] Ibid., ix-x.

[14] Ibid., xi.

[15] Ibid., 3.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 8.

historical-critical enterprise.[18] Martin has, in essence, observed a tacit rule within biblical scholarship that the "original" meaning is the "best" one.

Still further in Martin's view, the separation of biblical studies from other theological and religious specialties has sometimes caused a view that biblical scholars are the "gatekeepers" of biblical and theological "meaning." He writes:

> [T]he vast majority of [biblical professors] believe that they are teaching not only the historical meanings of the texts but also theological appropriations of Scripture, teaching how to move from a critical reading to modern theological, ethical, and cultural application of its messages.[19]

But if the emphasis upon the historical-critical approach remains primary, it is not clear how this process of contemporary appropriation is supposed to work. Students continue to lack an adequate exposure to hermeneutics, and are not taught how to critically evaluate their own assumptions and interpretive strategies. "In the worse cases," Martin writes,

> [P]rofessors of biblical studies are seen as gatekeepers in the reading of the Bible, as exercising a censoring activity over the readings of Scripture advanced by students and other professors, even when the biblical faculty do not see themselves in that role . . . . Apparently, in spite of some of the best intentions of biblical scholars in theological schools, the perceptions of their students and their colleagues sometimes suggests that students are learning mainly historical-critical approaches to Scripture along with the notion that other meanings of the text may be inappropriate or at best secondary. In the worst cases, biblical scholars are actively playing roles of gatekeepers for biblical interpretation.[20]

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[18] Ibid.; cf. 10, 12.

[19] Ibid., 14.

[20] Ibid., 17.

In brief, Martin calls for an explicit education in biblical hermeneutics for theological students—to become critically reflective about what they are "doing" with the text when they read and interpret, and how they therefore view or conceptualize the material that they are interpreting.[21] Interpreters must be critically aware of the assumptions behind their own approaches to reading biblical texts and how meaning is made.[22] Students require exposure to "interpretive theory."[23] This is because seminaries and divinity schools exist for the express purpose of preparing professionals to teach and interpret the Bible for "theological and ethical ends [but who] are not being sufficiently trained in how to think and speak articulately about theological interpretation."[24] One might say that in Martin's eyes, historical-critical scholarship has traded its scholarly accomplishments and its academic success for its practical failure in theological education.

Indeed, one might wish to draw an analogy between professional theological schools and other professional schools. Harvard Medical School—one of the oldest medical schools in the United States (est. 1782)—has as its central mission "[t]o create and nurture a diverse community of the best people committed to leadership in alleviating human suffering caused by disease."[25] The mission of Yale Law School (est. 1824), for example, is "to train lawyers and to prepare its students for

[21] Ibid., 18.

[22] Ibid., 19.

[23] Ibid., 21.

[24] Ibid., 24, cf. 27-28.

[25] "Facts and Figures," Harvard Medical School, last modified 2014 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College, accessed May 7, 2014, <http://hms.harvard.edu/about-hms/facts-figures>.

leadership positions . . . The school long has trained lawyers for public service and teaching," and moreover that "[o]ur students are expected to advance our knowledge and understanding of the law, to expand the reach of the law, and to inculcate knowledge about the central role that the rule of law plays in a free society."[26] By their explicit institutional purpose, such professional schools are not insular, self-serving, or after the pursuit of knowledge for the sake of itself within the academy alone. They are committed to training a "leadership" that serves a publically oriented function ("public service and teaching"), and always has a practical purpose ("alleviating human suffering" or "to expand the reach of the law" in a "free society") in the present. Medical schools and law schools do not primarily aim to educate professionals in "historical medicine" or "historical law," but only do so in order to move beyond them, and in order to suit a present or future purpose.[27]

It is reasonable to suppose that professional theological schools serve an analogous function to these other professional schools: to train a theological leadership to serve a practical, present function.[28] Insofar as theological schools are seen as analogous to professional medical and law schools, they are oriented toward

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[26] "Mission Statements of the Schools of Yale University," Leadership and Organization, last modified 2014 by Yale University, accessed May 7, 2014, <http://www.yale.edu/about/yale-school-mission-statements.pdf>.

[27] Nor would it seem that such medical or legal professions might necessarily equate the "best" or "correct" medical procedures or legal interpretations with the "earliest" or most "original" ones.

[28] Cf. Rudolf Smend, "Julius Wellhausen and His *Prolegomena to the History of Israel,*" *Semeia* 25 (1982): 1-20. As discussed in chapter two, Wellhausen himself is one infamous example of a biblical scholar who regrettably failed to reconcile the relationship between historical criticism and the professional obligation to train theologians: "I became a theologian because the scientific treatment of the Bible interested me; only gradually did I come to understand that a professor of theology also has the practical task of preparing the students for service in the Protestant Church, and that I am not adequate to this practical task, but that instead despite all caution on my own part I make my hearers unfit for their office."

the training of a leadership to address actual public needs. The question then becomes (as Martin has pointed out) one of the relationship between biblical studies and the training of professional theologians. Martin, it should be emphasized, resolvedly insists that there is a place for theological training within academic biblical studies. Martin's answer is that hermeneutical education is the key. While hermeneutics may be vital to an overall solution between biblical scholarship and the education of theological professionals, the remainder of this chapter will argue that a reconceived "biblical theology" (including hermeneutical education) best equips a theological professional to confront practical, public, present needs in society.

Thus some form of approach to the biblical texts is required to fill the gap between the "biblical historian" (or one trained in the manner of historical criticism) and the professional theologian. This is the sort of approach to "biblical theology" that is detailed below. If ultimately judged sufficient, this appears to settle the first question asked in the present chapter. Biblical theology is certainly still relevant within academic biblical studies insofar as real, concrete, living communities of people exist who continue to draw their identities and values from the biblical texts (or at least attempt to). Theological interpretation matters—whether broader academic biblical scholarship will continue to engage it or not—and it matters to hundreds of thousands of non-scholars far beyond the confines of the academy. There is a present public in need of professional theological leadership.

In this sense, scholarly engagement in theological interpretation constitutes an ethical and professional obligation in the interest of theological students in-

training, non-scholars, and non-specialists. These audiences are done a great disservice by an intentional or unintentional refusal to take the biblical texts upon any terms other than their putative original historical context and "original" meaning. At minimum, even among religiously unaffiliated institutions in liberal arts contexts that do not train theological professionals, a history of theological interpretation (including the various hermeneutical principles and strategies and interpretive frameworks that have accompanied them) might relativize the implicit historical-critical bias that the "original" meaning of the Bible is necessarily the "best" or "correct" one.

If There is "Serious" Biblical Scholarship, What Constitutes the "Unserious?"

One might be tempted to dismiss Dale Martin's judgment about the pedagogical failure of academic biblical scholarship (at least in the areas of hermeneutics and theology) as idiosyncratic and overly impressionistic. His claim that the majority of biblical scholarship exhibits a bias toward an "original" or "historical" meaning of the biblical texts over hermeneutical sophistication and contemporary theological interpretation can be corroborated by further evidence, though—however suggestive (rather than definitive) this evidence might be. One might reiterate two important claims made by John Collins almost a quarter century ago:

> [A]n 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,[29]

and also that:

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[29] 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: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 1.

> [I]f biblical theology is to retain a place in *serious* scholarship, it must be able to accommodate the best insights of other branches of biblical scholarship and must be conceived broadly enough to provide a context for debate among different viewpoints. Otherwise it is likely to become a sectarian reservation, of interest only to those who hold certain confessional tenets that are not shared by the discipline at large.[30]

Collins' fundamental distinction, one recalls, is between "critical" and "confessional" scholarship. Collins alleges that the Bible has an "abiding significance" and "enduring relevance" for the world.[31] Michael Legaspi, however, has insisted that Collins does not actually succeed in defending historical-critical approaches to the text in the interest of any "biblical theology" that contributes to its "abiding significance," but rather

> Collins shows that his interest is not actually in specifying how to assess the relevance of the Bible for the modern world but rather in reinforcing the rules of the academy. When Collins justifies the need to consult historical scholarship, he actually has nothing to say about "history" or "historical criticism," . . . it is ultimately the scholar's identity as an heir of "rational humanism" that matters most, because it is rational humanism, in his view, that allows the broadest possible [scholarly] conversation.[32]

One must not press the thesis offered below too far as to label it Collins' actual position, but Legaspi's critique carries with it an implicit and sweeping conclusion: if Collins' primary distinction is between what constitutes critical scholarship versus what is confessional, and Collins actually ends up arguing for an academic sort of

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[30] Ibid., 16 (emphasis mine).

[31] John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 133.

[32] Michael C. Legaspi, "What Ever Happened to Historical Criticism?" *Journal of Religion and Society* 9 (2007) 1-11.

criticism instead of mounting a defense of historical criticism (according to Legaspi), then Collins' opposition is implicitly between what is legitimately "academic" and what is "confessional" rather than what is "critical" and what is "confessional."

Following this line of thought, one finally arrives at a suggestive answer to what constitutes an "unserious" sort of scholarship, which talk of "serious" approaches seem to imply.[33] "Confessional" scholarship, it would appear, is simply not the equivalent of academic scholarship.[34] Biblical theology of a confessional sort either does not seem to belong in the academy because it is either "unserious" or something "less serious" than historical-critical endeavors. According to the extreme logical conclusion of Collins' argument as understood through Legaspi's critique, confessional biblical theology cannot "retain a place in serious scholarship" and this

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[33] See John Barton, *The Old Testament: Canon, Literature, and Theology: Collected Essays of John Barton* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007). Barton writes, "In biblical studies, for various reasons, a 'historical' approach having some affinities with the Romantic style of secular criticism has reigned supreme for nearly two hundred years, and it is only quite recently that *serious biblical critics* have begun to take an interest in other modes of study, which as yet are perceived by most scholars as a single, undifferentiated alternative to historical criticism. For practical purposes most biblical critics will distinguish simply between a historical and a 'literary' approach meaning by 'literary' any way of studying texts that concentrates on features immanent to the texts itself" (111, emphasis mine). Clearly, the suggestion that "serious" biblical scholarship is (or has been) necessarily of the historical variety is not my own idiosyncratic observation.

[34] Cf. Walter Brueggemann and Carolyn Sharp, *Living Countertestimony: Conversations with Walter Brueggemann* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012). Both Brueggemann and Sharp recognize a general bias toward historical criticism and more "technical" scholarship within contemporary biblical studies. Brueggemann has confessed, "On my [alleged] lack of doing technical work: first of all, I find it profoundly boring, but I also am not very good at it. So I think what I do is probably a match for the gifts that I have, and I've sort of come to terms with that" (72). Sharp responds: "I do agree with you that certain kinds of technical skills and knowledge are prized in the North American academy and the German academy too. Handily enough, the inadequacies of folks in those other areas—say, in pastoral application or proclamation—are not held against the practitioners of historical-critical method. But they seem to assume that everyone should have that foundational skill set, and then if you want to go preach in your spare time, go ahead. It's a really warped way, and an arrogant way, of limiting our understanding of the kinds of skills that are important, not only for the Church, but the life of the academy too—for reading these [biblical] texts," (75).

is perhaps why "an increasing number of scholars no longer regard theology… as a necessary dimension" of academic biblical scholarship.[35] In fairness to Collins, again, one should not put words into his mouth. One might reasonably expect that Collins would never explicitly state his position in such an extreme or cavalier way: that confessional scholarship is unserious. Still, the extreme implication of his argument is that according to like-minded historical critics in the field of biblical studies, "biblical theology" is not a "serious" academic exercise.[36] Beyond a confessional setting, the work of Brueggemann, Fishbane, and like-minded theologians is secondary at best to the "serious" work of historical criticism and "critical scholarship" with its historical bias. Dale Martin, it appears, might be correct after all.[37]

Imagination and Creativity Within "Serious" Biblical Scholarship

As long as biblical theology or the theological interpretation of the Bible (as articulated by Brueggemann or Fishbane, for example) is relegated to a secondary status in comparison to historical-critical approaches, or as long as biblical theology is (even if implicitly) considered an activity that is less "serious" than the former, an

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[35] Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" 1.

[36] Barton, *The Old Testament,* 111; cf. no. 26.

[37] Further evidence of this historical bias is likewise suggestive, though not necessarily conclusive. A number of top-tier universities (Yale University and Harvard University among others) have departments in "Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations," of which biblical studies is a subset, thus implying the prioritization of historical study over other approaches to biblical texts. "Biblical studies" therefore falls under the rubric of history and ancient language. By their very name, these are history departments. Furthermore, Emory University does not offer an advanced graduate course in "biblical theology" or theological interpretation of the Bible as part of its core curriculum. Of course, this is not to claim that theological discussion is not an element of other doctoral seminars in all such advanced graduate programs, but it does seem to imply the secondary nature of such a specialization within a pluralistic and non-confessional academic context.

unfortunate hierarchy of scholarship will likely develop: the "serious" historical-critics on top, and the "biblical theologians" on bottom. Worse, creative and imaginative readings of biblical texts that aim for contemporary theological appropriation of those texts will likely be perceived as lesser contributions to the field. For that reason, programs of advanced graduate studies in the area of biblical studies are more likely to neglect the theological import of the texts (which may be in the interest of contemporary appropriation of those texts, for example) in favor of an "original" and "historical" meaning. Yet the reality is that many biblical scholars who are the products of such advanced study will eventually be called upon to train professional theologians.

Again, Dale Martin claims that many would-be professional biblical interpreters are lacking in a certain theological sophistication; a sophistication which requires "creativity" in order to sustain a lively religious (and for him, specifically Christian) "imagination."[38] Here, Martin and Fishbane would seem to agree that "theology" and theological interpretation is ultimately a practical affair that intends to sustain certain ways of thinking, living, and being in the world in the midst of the divine—indeed fostering a certain "theological imagination" among religious communities. Martin writes:

> Theological hermeneutics refers to the practices involved in reading Scripture as guidance and for resources for Christian thinking and living. But theological interpretation of Scripture, in order for it to progress from childish simplicity to mature complexity, must be taught, and learned. It will come naturally for very few people. Seminaries and divinity schools thus have the responsibility to teach

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[38] Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible*, 80.

> their students how to think theologically, and how to teach others to think and read theologically.[39]

Is there a mediating path by which advanced students in biblical studies might at least receive partial exposure to theological hermeneutics, if not full training in "biblical theology?" Is there a "biblical theology" that can preserve—to a degree—the primary concern of John Collins: a lively and inclusive scholarly conversation that can accommodate various perspectives without requiring any particular confessional or religious stance?[40] It has been argued in chapter two that Collins' reliance upon "historical context" to ground biblical interpretation and "meaning" in fact does not provide enough interpretive certainty to distinguish it as a "critical" approach as opposed to a "non-critical" or "confessional" approach to the text. Still, it is conceded that historical criticism, at minimum, might establish tentative likelihoods of historical Israelite assertions and beliefs about God. But for such an approach to become a "biblical theology" as conceived below, one must finally relativize an alleged "original" meaning and resist the temptation to portray such historical meaning as "correct" in the manner explained by Martin. Therefore the conceptualization of biblical theology offered below takes its primary cues from Brueggemann and Fishbane rather than Collins.

This biblical theology also goes further than Brueggemann and Fishbane, though, and emphasizes the future of biblical texts to "continue to mean" (or what they "potentially could mean") rather than what they once "meant" or what they "mean." In other words, if historical-critical work in the manner of Collins focuses on

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[39] Ibid., 74.

[40] Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" 16.

the past, biblical theology, as argued below, is primarily oriented toward the future. This too may be considered the work of "serious" biblical scholarship. As will be demonstrated, biblical theology does allow for some degree of initial collaboration between scholars of all perspectives—religious and non-religious. This re-conceptualization of the task of biblical theology engages the notion of "dialogism." As the purpose of the present study is not primarily to articulate a full-blown hermeneutical alternative to Collins, Brueggemann, or Fishbane, one must settle for some tentative suggestions about how such a reconceived "biblical theology" might look.

Dialogism

"Dialogism" (диалогизм) or a dialogic view of language is usually associated with the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). As opposed to a conception of language proposed by Derrida and Saussure and described in chapter two and three, Bakhtin views language in a different way.[41] According to Bakhtin, Western philosophy and linguistics have typically held to a "simple and unmediated" view of a "unitary language" as executed by a single subject, and so focus on the simple

[41] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics* (ed. Caryl Emerson; trans. Caryl Emerson; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) 78-100, esp. 79-82. Monologic conceptions of language that dominate Western philosophy, according to Bakhtin, see the "idea" (79), "thought" (99), "artistic representation of an idea" (99) and finally "truth" or "unified truth" (81) as the expression of an individual consciousness, or that which is capable of articulation by an individual mind. This contrasts with a "dialogic" conception of "truth." Bakhtin writes: "[i]t is quite possible to imagine and postulate a unified truth that requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that cannot in principle be fitted into the bounds of a single consciousness, one that is, so to speak, by its very nature *full of event potential* and is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses. The monologic way of perceiving cognition and truth is only one of the possible ways" (81, author's emphasis). Cf. Carol A. Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *JR* 76, no. 2 (April 1996): 290-306; esp. 291-92.

"monologic utterance" of an individual that results.[42] In Bakhtin's view, language is not "monologic," but rather pervasively "dialogic." The concept of "dialogism" is not easily summarized, but a few of its features and its implications for biblical theology are highlighted below.

First, dialogism is not a methodological approach but an "epistemological mode."[43] It assumes that

> Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole—there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. Which will affect the other, how it will do so and in what degree is what is settled at the moment of utterance. This dialogic imperative, mandated by the pre-existence of the language world relative to any of its currant inhabitants, insures that there can be no actual monologue.[44]

Here, one finds the assertion that the whole of "meaning" (also understood as "truth" or "unified truth" itself)[45] is not to be found in any individual's "monologue" but is always partial, or "part of a greater whole." Of course meaning exists, but it is doubtful that any one individual can "have" the entirety of it—there is no "monologue" to capture "truth" or the whole of meaning. Indeed, a "monologue" (as traditionally understood as the voice of a single speaker) cannot even exist because all language interacts with "the pre-existence of the language world." The pursuit of

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[42] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 269. Cf. *The Dialogic Imagination*, 269.

[43] Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, glossary to *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin (trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; ed. Michael Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 426.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 81; cf. no. 29.

"truth," and the individual utterances[46] that attempt to capture it within any particular instantiation of language are thus "dialogical"—meaning is not endlessly deferred as maintained by so-called "postmodernists," but is rather located between participants, and as part of a larger, ongoing, and unfinished conversation. To simplify to the point of near-caricature, the postmodernists believe that language means nothing; to Bakhtin, language (construed as utterance) means everything. Of course, this will require further explanation.

A deeper understanding of some of the fundamental notions that underlie "dialogism" is helpful here (and will later become important in the discussion of Ecclesiastes). The view of language and meaning as dialogical is predicated upon the assertion that the phenomenon of language itself is "heteroglossic." In the words of Bakhtin, heteroglossia consists of the

> [i]nternal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence… [a] social diversity of speech types [*raznorecie*] and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [raznorecie] can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of them through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets

[46]Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; trans. Vern McGee; Austin: University of Texas Press). Bakhtin prefers the term "utterance" over any other similar term such as "sentence" because he is always concerned with actual, living, human speakers and writers who "address" another living person. He writes: "[i]f an individual word or sentence is directed at someone, addressed to someone, then we have a completed utterance that consists of one word or one sentence, and addressivity is inherent not in the unit of language, but in the utterance" (99). Cf. no. 50.

> and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization—this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel.[47]

As is clear here, Bakhtin is speaking of heteroglossia and dialogism in the context of a novel. Still, any reader of Bakhtin must note that many of his comments were necessarily limited to exposition in the areas of literature and the novel. Bakhtin was not at liberty to describe his views in terms of all language in general, as this was liable to constitute a philosophical work rather than linguistic and literary work, and such philosophical discourse was prohibited at that time in Soviet Russia.[48] Nevertheless, the claim that heteroglossia extends well beyond the novel and is characteristic of all language is an important one. There is an "internal stratification" within any particular "language" consisting of distinctive "social voices" that range, for example, from various social perspectives: professions, socioeconomic classes, families, ethnic groups, and so forth.[49] There are many voices, all infused with differing ideological perspectives and particular vocabularies, within any given "national language."[50]

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[47] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays* (trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; ed. Michael Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 263.

[48]Mikhail Epstein, personal discussion with the author, October 2008.

[49] Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination,* 259. Bakhtin discusses many such "languages" that have been traditionally ignored by literary stylistics, such as "discourse in the open spaces of public squares, streets, cities, and villages, of social groups, generations, and epochs. Stylistics is concerned not with living discourse but with a historical specimen made from it" (259). These ignored languages are "social dialects" and "professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociological purposes of the day" (262-263).

[50] Ibid., 262-63.

Such "national language" is also referred to as a "unitary language" (represented by a dictionary, for example), which is always essentially posited.[51] It does not really exist except in a very abstract sense—it is the language of everyone, yet no one in particular. There are "centripetal forces" at work within society and its languages to preserve the "unitary language," seeking to centralize, standardize, and establish a system of commonly understood "meanings" of words—a common grammar and shared discourse; indeed a shared language across the whole of a society.[52] Thus, centripetal forces serve a socio-ideological purpose of socio-political centralization.[53] They preserve the ability for anybody to speak and be understood at all. Bakhtin writes, "[u]nitary language constitutes the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces of language."[54] Thus, people write dictionaries and grammars, and social institutions (like schools) perform such centripetal functions to ensure common understandings within language.[55] This is done in order to overcome the social reality of heteroglossia; of the diversity and internal stratification of language. Centripetal forces are the inevitable attempt to resist the "heteroglot" languages within the posited "unitary language."

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[51] Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 140. Cf. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination,* 270.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* 271. This political and ideological function is important as it seeks to "centralize verbal-ideological thought," (271).

[54] Ibid., 270.

[55] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics,* 140.

Thus, every concrete utterance of an actual person consists of a particular instantiation of a pre-existing and essentially posited language. Every utterance relies upon the "unitary language" which always precedes it, but simultaneously acts to disrupt and destabilize it, as these "heteroglot" languages possess their own particular and diverse "socio-ideological" perspectives.[56] Any given, real-life instantiation of speech or "utterance" therefore enacts "centripetal forces" that inevitably pull at the posited "unitary language," serving to disrupt and decentralize it. This is because a "unitary language" does not "mean"—there are only concrete individuals, from various perspectives, in specific times and places that use language to "mean" what *they* intend to mean by a word or phrase. Therefore words and phrases and utterances are always taking on new accents, shades of meaning, and nuances as they are picked up and redeployed in new times and places, brimming with the intentions and agendas of other people from earlier times.[57]

To reiterate: a "unitary" language does not "mean" in itself, but meaning is enacted when a concrete utterance is spoken at a particular time and place, and when I (for example) look to instantiate the abstract "unitary language" to actually mean what *I* mean when using it. Bakhtin writes:

> As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, with his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral

[56] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 272.

[57] Ibid., 293-94.

> and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but it rather exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own… Language is not a neutral medium that passes easily and freely into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.[58]

This enacted language (or "utterance") means that I (for example) participate and rely upon previous "utterances" and the "meanings" according to however I understand them, and through an utterance, direct them toward another person with the hope that the other will understand what "I mean." This is always likewise dependent on another addressee's own understandings of "my" language from their own unique perspective. "Postmodern" accounts of language as discussed in chapter 2 and 3, in comparison, are conceived within an abstract and monologic paradigm and seem to imply that "nobody can say what they mean," whereas dialogism insists that people always and everywhere "say precisely what *they* mean" to another real-life interlocutor. Of course, there is no guarantee that I will be perfectly understood, as centripetal and centrifugal forces are always operating at the same time in the life of any language:

> Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The process of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance… Every utterance participates in the "unitary language" (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces).[59]

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[58] Ibid., 293-294.

[59] Ibid.

This fundamental instability that lies at the heart of all language indicates that "meaning" must therefore be understood as something constructed *between* two consciousnesses. Meaning is not endlessly abstracted and deferred; it is constructed dialogically. "Utterances" always rely upon those that precede it and anticipate a responsive understanding and utterance of another that receives it. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist clarify "heteroglossia" further, explaining that

> [a]t any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions—social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different that it would have under any other conditions.[60]

Here, every "utterance" of an individual person "means" something, just as it participates in an ever-ongoing "meaning," and that that is always "different" (even if verbally identical with a preceding utterance) according to a specific time and place. An "utterance" consequently exhibits a dialogical relationship to all other utterances and meanings from different times and places.[61] Every utterance may be seen as a response to all utterances that precede it regarding any given topic, but are

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[60] Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, glossary to *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin (trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; ed. Michael Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 426.

[61] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. As previously noted, Bakhtin prefers the term "utterance" to any other linguistic expression such as "sentence" or "word" (*pace* Brueggemann's focus on the "sentence" as "testimony" as discussed in chapter three) because of his disdain for abstraction in the field of linguistics, and his insistence on the phenomenon of "addressivity" in language. He writes that "the signifying units of a language—the word and the sentence—lack this quality of being directed or addressed to someone: these units belong to nobody and are addressed to nobody. Moreover, they in themselves are devoid of any kind of relation to the other's utterance, the other's word" (99). Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, bluntly make the same point: "Sentences are repeatable. Sentences are repeatable…. But utterance is by its very nature unrepeatable. Two verbally identical utterances never *mean* the same thing, if only because the reader or listener confronts them twice and reacts differently the second time. Context is never the same" (126, authors' emphasis).

simultaneously oriented toward an anticipated response (or future utterance) that comes after it.[62] In short, past and "potential" future dialogue all intersect within the utterance itself. The totality of meaning or "truth" cannot be limited to any individual consciousness. Moreover, the notion that any given utterance necessarily involves an anticipated, future utterance leads to an appreciation that the "future" must always play an integral role in the ongoing quest for the totality of "truth" itself.

It should be acknowledged that Bakhtin did not say much about the Bible, and that his primary focus upon the novel should give one pause before applying ideas like "polyphony" or "hybridization" (and so forth) to biblical texts, which are not novels.[63] The Bible is certainly not a novel. Yet Bakhtin routinely demonstrates a concern for future "utterances" and the ability of the utterance to live into the future. The lives of written texts (viewed as utterances) necessarily exhibit dialogical relationships with future utterances, and indeed already anticipate them. Bakhtin writes that a written work's "[e]nclosure within [its original epoch alone] makes it impossible to understand the work's future life in subsequent centuries," since, again, a written work continues to "mean," and often its future life is "more intense and fuller than are [its] lives within its own time."[64] Holding Bakhtin accountable to his view of a literary work's "future life," one finds a possible route to new imaginative theological understandings of the Bible that are suggested by such

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[62] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 99.

[63] See Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000).

[64] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 4.

rhetoric (that is, if it can be agreed that the Bible too is a great literary work). Bakhtin claims that, "great works continue to live in the distant future. In the process of their posthumous life they are enriched with new meanings, new significance: it is as though these works outgrow what they were in the epoch of their creation."[65]

For over two centuries, historical-critical scholarship (often in the manner of John Collins) has been more concerned with Israelite history, philology, textual criticism and the search for the elusive "original" biblical documents, form criticism, source criticism, and redaction criticism rather than any attempt to search for "new meanings" within the Bible's "posthumous life"—presumably because the "old" meaning has proven so difficult to get at from the start that we do not need any additional complications. Perhaps such dialogical thinking with its corresponding anticipatory and "future oriented" aspect could be suspect because it sounds too romantic, too subjective, or too aligned with the humanities, as opposed to the supposedly more scientific and historically objective results of historical criticism. But as discussed below, it is precisely with "new meanings" along with "old meanings" that concerns the biblical theologian.

Dialogism as an epistemological mode reconceives the task of biblical theology because it disavows any notion that any individual consciousness can capture the whole of meaning or the whole of a "biblical theology." All individual

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[65] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Response to a Question," 4.

utterances (which may also be understood as "provisional monologizations")[66] participate in a dialogue with others—and this dialogue is ongoing and never complete or "finalizable." A "monologue" is ultimately an illusion, no matter how many books or arguments or scholarly works on biblical theology appear to be complete expressions of a totality of "meaning" expressed by (and located within) a single consciousness—they are all dialogical. And every utterance, according to a dialogical understanding of language and truth, always anticipates a future response.

Dialogism In Relation to the Work of Brueggemann and Fishbane

A dialogic conception of language and truth is not immediately apparent in the work of John Collins. But the works of Walter Brueggemann and Michael Fishbane share some clear affinities with dialogism, despite a few major differences.

Dialogism differs from Walter Brueggemann's dialectics in some ways—particularly as a dialogic conception of "biblical theology" would (1) seem to resist Brueggemann's tendencies to capture the entire biblical corpus under the single courtroom metaphor (however helpful this approach has been, and however helpful future "provisional monologizations" across the entire canon may continue to be), and (2) seem to resist "dialectical" understandings because dialectics assume that understanding and "meaning" can be localized and grasped within a single

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[66] Dennis T. Olson, "Biblical Theology as Provisional Monologization: A Dialogue with Childs, Brueggemann, and Bakhtin" in *Biblical Interpretation* 6, no. 2 (April 1998): 162-80, esp. 175-80.

consciousness.[67] Brueggemann's emphasis is upon biblical rhetoric and he discusses "core testimony" about God among other types of testimony. Core testimony, for example, is to be found grammatically in specific biblical sentences with God as the subject (including verbs and adjectives; predicates alongside the divine noun).[68] This differs from dialogism insofar as dialogical understandings are primarily concerned with the nature of the "utterance" rather than a grammatically complete sentence—and these utterances must be isolated via the notion of "addressivity."[69] Dialogism concerns itself with speech between people, and not necessarily what can be isolated grammatically.

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[67] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 132-133. Cf. Mikhail Epstein and Walter Reed. Class lecture [discussion], Bakhtin and His Circles, October 16, 2008, Emory University, Atlanta.

[68] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 123. It should be noted here that 1. Brueggemann himself tends to conflate the terms "dialogical" and "dialectical" without reflecting upon some of the differences between the theoretical underpinnings or possible differences between these terms, and 2. quite presciently predicts the importance of Bakhtin for the future of biblical theology. Regarding (1), Brueggemann writes that "*the Old Testament in its theological articulation is characteristically dialectical and dialogical….* Jewishness is characterized by dialogical-dialectical modes of discourse, whereas Western Christianity has long practiced a flight to the transcendent…. The dialogical-dialectical quality of the text that keeps God "in the fray" brings one inevitably to the question of theodicy" (83). Dialectics and dialogism are not the same, though, as described above. Regarding (2), Brueggemann clearly recognized the importance of Bakhtin for the future of biblical theology: "I have no doubt that the work of Mikhail Bakhtin will be crucial for future work in this direction in Old Testament study" (83; no. 57). Brueggemann cites, for example, the work of Walter L. Reed, *Dialogues of the Word: The Bible as Literature according to Bakhtin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[69] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics* write that, "Utterances are not the same sort of thing as sentences; there is no possible combination of words, sentences or other linguistic units that can compose an utterance… Utterances may be as short as a grunt and as long as *War and Peace*, and the distinction between them and sentences is not one of length. Even when an utterance is one sentence long, something must be added to the sentence's linguistic composition to make it an utterance. Someone must *say it* to someone, must respond to something and anticipate a response, must be accomplishing something by the saying of it. One can *respond* to an utterance, but one cannot respond to a sentence" (author's emphasis, 125-26). While Brueggemann's courtroom metaphor and suggestion of various types of testimony might share many points of contact with such dialogism, the point here is merely that the selection of "sentence" for "core testimony" is nevertheless speaking in grammatical terms for what is essentially a non-grammatical phenomenon.

Brueggemann does, however, claim that "core testimony" must be held in tension with identifiable "countertestimony" across the biblical texts. This activity certainly paints a broad, unsystematic series of biblical themes, counterthemes, and concerns. Such phenomena are subject to critique by the interpreter, just as the interpreter (and the contemporary world and church, according to Brueggemann) is subject to critique by these textual themes and phenomena. Here, an essential agreement here with dialogism is noted, as all "utterances" are capable of mutual conditioning and correction.[70] According to Brueggemann's hermeneutics, the interpreter is not simply an elevated subject or critic over the textual object, but is subject to the claims of the text and its alternative worldviews. Brueggemann's willingness to always embrace his contemporary context prior to probing the rhetoric of ancient Israel is also a very dialogical one.[71] Further still, a dialogical epistemology seems in agreement with Brueggemann's view that "biblical theology" is open-ended, and perhaps always a "tract for the time[s]."[72]

There are also points of contact between dialogism and the Jewish theology of Michael Fishbane. If Brueggemann's "biblical theology" always begins with the

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[70] Emerson and Holquist, glossary to *The Dialogical Imagination*, 426.

[71] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 1-8. If one accepts that a dialogic relationship can exist between Brueggemann's contemporary culture and ancient Near Eastern culture, then it is illustrative when Bakhtin writes: "In the realm of culture, outsidedness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly…. A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures…. Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched" (7, author's emphases).

[72] Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972), 125.

contemporary interpreter in the present who stands in a dialectical relationship with an ancient text of the past, Fishbane's orientation is—in a sense—the opposite. For all of Fishbane's interest in the biblical texts, his orientation is decidedly toward an ongoing history that happens in the space *between* past and present. The view that "Jewish theology" is essentially an ongoing and unfinalized historical commentary on previous traditions is very much in alignment with dialogism.[73] Inner-biblical exegesis and the process of reception and appropriation that continued into rabbinic Judaism (as attested by the Mishnah, Talmuds, and many rabbinic writings through the centuries)—viewed as a process of debate, disagreement, and expansion—illustrates a lively dialogical process. Bakhtin, one finally notes, might also agree with Fishbane, the latter of whom suggests that the very concept of the sacredness of the biblical texts may lie in their disparity and their tolerance for difference and dispute as a sort of model for the "sacred"—the texts are in dialogue with one another, and with all utterances that precede it, and all commentaries (or utterances) that proceed from those texts. For Fishbane, a recovered sense of the "sacred" may already be found in a biblical text that is endlessly disputatious, holds irreconcilable views, issues competing claims, and shares a plurality of viewpoints with no apparent need to smooth over any of these difficulties.[74] A biblical theology that probes such viewpoints is one that is rooted in dialogism.

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[73] Michael A. Fishbane, *Judaism: Revelations and Traditions* (Religious Traditions of the World; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 12.

[74] Ibid., 130-131.

And so it might appear that Fishbane's conceptualization of "theology" shares the most similarity to dialogical conceptions of language and truth. Nevertheless, Fishbane's emphasis upon a "historical" and "exegetical" theology, as indicated in chapter four, does not adequately emphasize the "future" of the biblical texts to mean, despite Fishbane's talk of "imagination" and "potential."[75] Fishbane's Jewish theology essentially limits itself to Jewish tradition rather than engaging in any cross-confessional interpretive traditions or even secular interpretations and uses of the Bible throughout history. Dialogism, it will be demonstrated, better accounts for "potential meaning" and imagination as vital components of biblical theology. In fairness, Fishbane's concern for "imagination" clearly permeates his thought, and he does entertain the importance of "creative readings of [Scripture's] inherent, God-given possibilities,"[76] but the mechanism(s) by which the creative imagination is nourished, fostered, and executed is not always clear in Fishbane's work. As demonstrated in chapter four, for example, his engagement with the book of Ecclesiastes seems anything but imaginative or creative, and it contributes little toward any discussion of how Ecclesiastes might nurture or foster a sustained consciousness of God in one's life—particularly if many scholars understand Ecclesiastes as a challenge to tradition rather than as an affirmation of it.[77] A full

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[75] Fishbane, *Garments of Torah*, 2, 5, 18, *passim.*

[76] Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination,* 2.

[77] See Bernard M. Levinson, "Review: *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology*," *Interpretation* 64 (2010): 294-300. Levinson essentially notes this point, wondering whether Fishbane's positive emphasis upon sustaining and renewing Jewish tradition is capable of doing justice to a book like Ecclesiastes (298-299).

understanding of dialogism as argued below does suggest some clear routes toward creativity, however. Pressing beyond Brueggemann and Fishbane, a dialogic conceptualization of language has even broader implications for the future of biblical theology.

Dialogism and Biblical Theology:
A Tentative Synthesis of the Work of Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane

It should be noted that attempts to articulate the possibilities of dialogic conceptions of the Bible and possible links to theology are hardly new. Carol A. Newsom has suggested that a perception of the Bible as dialogic discourse provides a possible route for the activity of a "biblical theologian." Speaking of the rich diversity and pluralism of the biblical texts, Newsom explains:

> There are many implicit quarrels in the Bible which need only a little prodding to make them explicit….The biblical theologian's role would not be to inhabit the voice, as the novelist does, but to pick out the assumptions, experiences, entailments, embedded metaphors, and so on, which shape each perspective [within various texts] and to trace the dotted line to a point at which it intersects the claims of the other… it would be a project which would self-consciously go beyond what the texts themselves explicitly say to draw out the implications of their ideas as they can be revealed in dialogue with other perspectives.[78]

The potential for treating the Bible via a dialogical lens certainly may hold much potential for the interaction between the Bible and theology. No critique of Newsom's particular suggestion will be offered here. The dialogical conception of

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[78] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," 305.

biblical theology that is offered below, however, is not the equivalent of Newsom's. This is because dialogism does not apply only to texts across the Bible in relation to one another. As especially implicit in the work of Michael Fishbane, dialogism would equally apply to the history of interpretation and theological appropriation of various biblical texts across time, and even a creative account of those texts to "potentially mean" into the future.

Dialogism, it appears, can offer a sort of synthesis of the work of John Collins, Walter Brueggemann, and Michael Fishbane. This is because dialogism (1) authorizes and enables the legitimacy of historical-criticism (to whatever degree that an "unbiased" isolation of "meaning" within a reconstructed historical context is possible), while still relativizing its import as a mere "part" of an ongoing dialogue; (2) advocates for further study of the history of interpretation and reception of the biblical texts as particular theological utterances of specific times and places, which is similar to Fishbane's emphasis upon ongoing commentary and theological appropriation of biblical texts; (3) legitimizes the biblical theology of Walter Brueggemann, for example, as a contemporary theological expression from a particular confessional perspective that deploys its own particular theological "language," however provisional such a theological expression or book might be,[79] and (4) recognizes that any biblical text (viewed as "utterance") or previous theological commentary on the Bible (viewed as "utterances") always gain new

[79] Cf. Olson, "Provisional Monologization," 162-80. Despite Brueggemann's emphasis upon an irreducible plurality that persists throughout the Bible, Olson reminds that "Brueggemann recognizes the inevitable need to make provisional judgments, to argue for truth claims and to arrive at temporary closures" (164).

meanings in new times and places, just as they must be seen as a response to previous utterances, and anticipatory of future utterances; they all continue the dialogue. This view would seem to advocate for an appreciation for creativity and imagination within biblical scholarship—values that are virtually prerequisite for probing the "potential" meanings of new times and places, and into the future.[80] Imagination concerns itself with what is possible rather than what is.

A dialogical understanding of language in regard to biblical theology therefore accomplishes—to some degree—what Collins' final position commends: it would imply that scholarly discussion is, at minimum, capable of a relatively "unbiased" dialogue, particularly regarding the activities of (1) historical criticism and (2) the history of biblical interpretation and reception. Unlike Collins, a dialogical understanding of language also accomplishes what Collins' position in particular cannot: it does not exclude or relativize the scholarly importance of (3) "confessional" (or "fideistic") contemporary interpretations and works of "biblical theology" (as necessary participants and "provisional monologizations" with respect

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[80] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 7. As will be discussed later, "creativity" and "imagination" should not be taken to indicate a willy-nilly and reckless departure from all theological understandings and interpretations that precede it. Bakhtin emphasizes the notion of "creative understanding," as something of a "reply" within any attempt to engage the language or "utterances" of the past (and so certain constraints must apply to an otherwise limitless creativity). This applies to understandings of the biblical texts within their putative historical milieu, and theological understandings of such texts within their own historical milieu across time, but it is precisely a contemporary interpreter's own unique time and place that legitimates and activates a "creative" understanding. Bakhtin writes, "*Creative understanding* does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are *others*" (7, author's emphases). Furthermore, creative understanding is itself dialogical, and thus always "gives rise to *unexpected* questions" according to Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson in *Creation of a Prosaics*, 99-100 (authors' emphasis).

to the dialogical nature of all language), and/or (4) more imaginative, creative interpretations of Scripture that aim for the future theological appropriation of biblical texts for communities of faith. A dialogical understanding of language affirms the theological import of what the biblical text "meant" (Collins), what the biblical texts "have been meaning" through history (Fishbane), what the biblical texts may "mean" in the present (Brueggemann), and what the texts "could mean" into the future. They are all participants in a broader dialogue, and the ongoing "whole" of biblical theology and theological meaning. As demonstrated below with an example from the book of Ecclesiastes, the biblical theologian's task is to carefully and critically orchestrate such an interpretive dialogue—whether it focus on specific verses, passages, stories, books, or canon—noting its tensions, agreements, disagreements, various emphases, and finally to offer a further rejoinder to the conversation.

Such an approach to biblical theology is able to nurture a rich "theological imagination," as emphasized by Dale Martin, and foster a scholarly exposure to many hermeneutical approaches employed throughout history and into the present.[81] A dialogical understanding indicates that there is no necessary or stark divide between "critical" and "pre-critical" understandings of biblical texts. This is because all individual proposals of "theological meaning" and biblical theology ultimately exhibit dialogical relations relative to one another in an ever-ongoing process of commentary, appropriation, re-appropriation of the biblical materials.

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[81] Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible*, esp. 24, cf. 27-28.

These all transcend the efforts of any single consciousness to fully capture and finalize the discussion. Biblical theology is not dead, so to speak. It lives and is living.

Illustrating Biblical Theology According to an Understanding of Dialogism: Biblical Theology in Ecclesiastes

In an effort to avoid abstraction, a concrete example of such an understanding of the task of biblical theology seems appropriate and necessary. According to Collins, for example, there is little scholarly consensus regarding the book of Ecclesiastes: how it is to be summarily evaluated, how it coheres, and how it is to be historically contextualized.[82] The book is disorganized, lacking in any easily discernable structure.[83] There is perhaps some degree of thematic continuity, but scholarly (and popular) opinion still vary regarding the overall tone, mood, and message of the book.[84] In brief, a text that appears to predominantly consist of a monologue of a single speaker seems to resist every attempt to reduce, summarize, or paraphrase it.

A conceptualization of the task of biblical theology according to a dialogical understanding requires an examination of the book of Ecclesiastes that minimally accounts for (1) its putative "original" meaning(s) and account for its structure insofar as such a tentative and speculative discussion is possible (a "Collinsian" mode); (2) a brief account of the book's history of interpretation and commentary (a "Fishbanian" mode); (3) attention to contemporary significance of the book (a

[82] John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 519.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid., 523.

"Fishbanian" and "Brueggemannian" mode), and (4) the book's "potential" meaning (which is not fully taken into account by any of these three scholars). Taken altogether, with a particular emphasis upon the value of imagination in the interest of step (4), one may offer an account of Ecclesiastes as "biblical theology" everywhere construed as an ongoing dialogue, and always in the interest of the book's future appropriation. If the bias of historical critical scholarship is toward "original" meaning as argued above, the suggestion offered here is that the bias of biblical theology should be a text's future, and imagining its "potential to mean."[85]

Qohelet and Historical Criticism: What Ecclesiastes "Meant"

A dismissal of historical-critical insights is not necessary for biblical theology. It is rather biblical theology's first necessary step. There can be no replacement for rigorous technical and historical work in biblical studies.[86] The contributions and insights of comparative studies, text criticism, archaeology, iconography, and the various methodologies of historical-critical approaches to the biblical texts can certainly offer contributions to biblical theology insofar as such historical-contextual reconstructions and interpretations of textual "meaning" are ultimately

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[85] Conceived in a strict temporal fashion, even works of "contemporary" biblical theology have already, in a sense, become past. It is in light of this strict view of temporality that new works of biblical theology must always look toward the potential future.

[86] Cf. no. 34. It seems entirely legitimate for the biblical theologian to rely upon the technical work of others rather than to exhaustively engage in such work herself. To reiterate this point, Walter Brueggemann, *Living Countertestimony,* has defended his disinterest in such "technical" work in biblical studies: "On my [alleged] lack of doing technical work: first of all, I find it profoundly boring, but I also am not very good at it. So I think what I do is probably a match for the gifts that I have, and I've sort of come to terms with that" (72). One should note that this is not to say that Brueggemann has failed to attend to the technical work of others. Brueggemann merely recognizes that scholars bring different strengths to the field of biblical studies.

viewed as tentative "dialogical utterances."[87] This "tentativeness" is especially important whenever any alleged claim is laid regarding "original" meaning. Such work to recover "original" meaning must neither be considered the only "serious" approach to biblical studies nor should it be equated with the "best" or "only" meaning. Historical criticism does not, and cannot itself amount to "biblical theology" as argued in chapter two. Limiting the "meaning" of the biblical texts to their respective historical contexts itself tends toward monologization, especially through its efforts to "finalize" and fix meaning within a distant and ancient historical past—in other words, to close off the possibility of dialogue.[88] Bakhtin himself would likely argue that an understanding of ancient Near Eastern culture is a necessary *aspect* of understanding the Bible, but also says that it is "fatal to encapsulate a literary phenomenon in the single epoch of its creation"[89] because

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[87] Cf. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, where Bakhtin argues that even such historical work as philology is sometimes complicit with a fundamental misunderstanding of language: "philology with its methods of teaching and studying dead languages, languages that were by that fact 'unities,' Indo-European linguistics with its focus of attention, directed away from language plurality to a single proto-language—all this determined the content and power of 'unitary language'" (271). In short, philology risks mistreatment of language by an understanding of its "centripetal" character without attention to the "centrifugal" forces at work in the life of language. To illustrate, one might reasonably ask, for example, the degree to which Qohelet's *hebel* refrain has been deployed and "accented" within the book of Ecclesiastes to mean what Qohelet may have idiosyncratically "meant" by the term (perhaps now all but unrecoverable), rather than any straightforward "definition" of the word as found in a Hebrew dictionary (and so conceived from the viewpoint of a posited "unitary language").

[88] Morson and Emerson, Glossary to *The Dialogic Imagination*, note that Bakhtin's notion of finalization (or *zaveršen* in Russian) is variously described as "finished, closed-off, finalized [*zaveršen*]…. A dialogized word… can never be *zaveršeno*: the resonance or oscillation of possible meanings within it is not only not resolved, but must increase in complexity as it continues to live. Epic time is [also] *zaveršeno*," (426). Bakhtin specifically uses the example of Shakespeare, but the Bible is an example of a work that lives in such "epic time" (or "great time"). Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, writes: "A work of literature, as we have said, is revealed primarily in the differentiated unity of the culture of the epoch in which it is created, but it cannot be closed off in this epoch: its fullness is revealed only in *great time*" (5, author's emphasis).

[89] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 3.

"[t]rying to understand and explain a work solely in terms of the conditions of its epoch alone, solely in terms of its immediate time, will never enable us to penetrate into its semantic depths."[90] Moreover, limiting the "meaning" of biblical texts to their putative epoch of their creation would not meet the purpose of biblical theology as has been suggested in the present discussion. The route to contemporary appropriation of the biblical texts, for example, would remain unclear at best.[91] Therefore historical-critical work from a dialogical point-of-view might contribute to an overall biblical theology, but its specific claims deserve no preferential treatment as the ultimate arbiter of "meaning," nor do they somehow demarcate a "correct" meaning of the text.[92]

Historical-critical insight has made some important contributions to various understandings of Ecclesiastes, and some that may ultimately be in the interest of biblical theology. Historical criticism has argued that Qohelet,[93] for example, is not

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[90] Ibid., 4. Cf. Peter Ochs, ed., *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation* (ed. Peter Ochs; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008). When discussing the work of Moshe Ginsburg, Ochs points out that the "postcritical" sensibilities of Ginsburg indicate that "[t]he goal of [biblical] interpretation is to expand our attentiveness to the range of semiotic possibilities latent in the text as given: not by reading back to some antecedent [historical] ground against which the text can be measured, but by reading forward from the text in its philological-literary-historical context to the variety of environments in which it can be legitimately interpreted. [Hans] Frei's method is, similarly, to look for semiotic richness within the text rather than outside it and to locate meaning in the relation between the text and its community of interpreters rather than between the text and some antecedent ground" (8). Both Ginsburg and Frei demonstrate an essential agreement with Bakhtin here: a resistance to limit a text to its "immediate time" in the interest of penetrating its "semantic depths."

[91] Cf. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible*, 14, where Martin suggests that a pedagogical emphasis on historical criticism fails to provide students with a link from historical meanings to "modern theological, ethical, and cultural application of [the Bible's] messages."

[92] Cf. Ibid., 17.

[93] The use of the name "Qohelet" in academic analyses of Ecclesiastes is used to either (1) refer to the book of Ecclesiastes itself, (2) to refer to the narrative speaking voice of the book of

King Solomon himself, nor was the book written during the Solomonic period. This is evident from the book's language and use of Late Biblical Hebrew (including the influence of Aramaic on the text, its comparative linguistic similarities to the Mishnah, and the presence of Persian loan-words in the text).[94] Some of Qohelet's concerns find parallel to other ancient Near Eastern texts such as the Egyptian "The Dispute of a Man with His Ba," and so it may be claimed that Qohelet is not necessarily a new creation, but stands in a dialogical relationship with the antecedent wisdom literature of Israel's neighbors.[95] Structural analysis of the book—as viewed through the lens of its earliest historical development—has suggested an attribution to two or more authors, which has led to the "frame narrator" hypothesis.[96] This suggests the likelihood that a secondary narrator has captured the words of Qohelet into one long, extended quotation, just as some of Qohelet's own wisdom sayings are likely borrowed from elsewhere.[97] If so, one may reiterate the possibility that many of Qohelet's words and phrases themselves have already been "taken out of their 'original' context"—they exhibit a thoroughly

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Ecclesiastes, or (3) to vaguely refer to the presumed flesh-and-blood author of the book. In the reading that follows, "Qohelet" is used to refer to either the book itself or the narrative persona, but does not equate this literary persona with any certain historical figure that is accessible to us. In short, "Qohelet" may be a literary construct that is not identical to the book's author.

[94] Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 519.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid., 525-526. Also see Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, JSOTSup 81 (Sheffield: Almond, 1989); and *idem*, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). It must also be said that some suggestion of an "edited frame" was identified as early as Rashbam (c. 1080-1160). See Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Malden MA: Blackwell, 2007), 33.

[97] Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 523. Also see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 79, 88, *passim* and James Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 29, 132-140, *passim*.

dialogized relationship to the previous "utterances" of sapiential discourse, just as they simultaneously anticipate the responsive understanding and "utterance" of an other (as a dialogical view of language insists).

Historical-critical scholarship has also offered a general dating of the "original" text from 450-150 BCE.[98] Based upon the book's language and its sustained focus on economic matters, the fifth century BCE Persian period has been suggested for its authorship at the very earliest,[99] and the Hellenistic period has been proposed on comparative philosophical and conceptual grounds (i.e., the book's alleged Epicurean influence) as late as the first century BCE.[100] A number of historically-minded critics allege that the book would certainly not have been accepted as canonical and authoritative in its antiquity except for its implicit claim to Solomonic authorship, the son of David and king during Israel's "golden age" of the united monarchy, when Israel was purportedly at its height of influence, wealth, and prestige. Furthermore, Solomon was a legendary Israelite figure and ostensibly the wisest person who ever lived (cf. 1 Kings 3:12, 4:29-30, 10:23).[101] Gordis notes that the "efforts to preserve the book, it seems clear, would not have been undertaken, and, if undertaken would surely not have succeeded, without the prior assumption that an author of Solomon's stature could not have been guilty of

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[98] Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 519. Collins himself suggests a dating between the forth-fifth century BCE Persian period and the third-second century BCE Hellenistic period.

[99] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 21-36.

[100] For a summary of Hellenistic influence, see Thomas Krüger, *Qohelet: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 21-22.

[101] Salters, "Qohelet and Canon," 340-341. Also see Gordis, *Koheleth*, 39-42.

heterodoxy."[102] Such insight is able to justify possible reasons for Qohelet's inclusion in the biblical canon, while introducing a certain duality or tension inherent in a book ostensibly written by one central narrator within a relatively late historical time and place, but that is ascribed to another writer (implicitly King Solomon) within a much earlier historical time and place. In other words, there is a tension between a narrator who is pretending to speak as another narrator. This particular insight will play an essential role in the imaginative "reading" of Ecclesiastes offered below.

Nevertheless, the "historical context" of Ecclesiastes remains uncertain, and a suggested span of three centuries inspires little confidence that an alleged "critical" reading can necessarily pin down its contextual "meaning." Still, interpretation of the book that has focused on its putative "original" context and intent nevertheless tends to highlight Qohelet's "skeptical questioning of tradition,"[103] Qohelet's alleged "pessimism,"[104] and to emphasize the "vanity" (*hebel*) refrain throughout the book,"[105] while simultaneously noting that some of Qohelet's thoughts and claims about life are "not as negative as we might have expected" based upon the majority of Qohelet's discourse.[106] As discussed in chapters three and four of the present study, such a division between Qohelet's "optimism" (or alleged degree of positivity)

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[102] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 42.

[103] Ibid., 518.

[104] Ibid., 519.

[105] Ibid., 520-521.

[106] Ibid., 521.

remain in contrast with Qohelet's "pessimism" (or a nearly thorough-going negativity). The judgment offered in the present study is that such binary readings of Ecclesiastes (especially viewed in accordance with their corresponding "monologic" understanding of Qohelet's voice) actually inhibits the contemporary theological appropriation of Qohelet rather than encouraging an articulation of the book that is in the interest of nurturing "a certain sensibility toward God's presence."[107] This is discussed further below.

One should finally note that the contributions of historical criticism according to a dialogical understanding of "biblical theology" actually does appear to enable and encourage scholarly discussion and debate regarding the reconstruction of an "Israelite religion" and Qohelet's possible contribution to it. In this sense, at least, confessional faith commitments among scholars would not seem to unduly or necessarily influence such historical reconstruction. This would meet John Collins' fundamental commitment to an unbiased (to whatever extent that is possible) scholarly dialogue: "[biblical theology] must be able to accommodate the best insights of other branches of biblical scholarship and must be conceived broadly enough to provide a context for debate among different viewpoints."[108] Historical-criticism, as it seeks "meaning" within a presumed "historical" or "original context," may offer biblical theology some helpful insights and "utterances" with which to work from a multiplicity of viewpoints. But again: such offerings only minimally contribute to a "biblical theology" as suggested within the current study.

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[107] Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement,* 110.

[108] Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" 16.

The summary critique of Collins' approach to biblical theology is that he provides no explicit hermeneutic by which the texts might be theologically appropriated, or by which "biblical theology" can be distinguished from a mere history of Israelite religion or a history of Israelite religious thought. At first blush, God does not even "appear" in the book in any sustained way (although this issue will be addressed in some depth below). As such, there are only a few verses in the book that may be considered "speech about God," nor is there any immediately obvious or clear portrayal of the deity. As Collins has written, "[i]f biblical theology is to be based on critical methodology, then its task is the critical evaluation of speech about God . . . . It is the specialization [within the history of religion] that deals with the portrayal of God in one specific corpus of texts."[109] According to Collins' theological approach, the book of Ecclesiastes would seem all but irrelevant to any theological appropriation of the Bible. But a dialogical conception of biblical theology understands that Collins and like-minded historical critics do have some important insights to contribute (even if such work does not self-consciously recognize itself as a vital contribution to biblical theology)—but biblical theology can and must go much further.

A Brief Sketch of Qohelet and Its History of Interpretation and Reception: What Ecclesiastes "Has Been Meaning" Over the Course of History

The next step involved in reading Ecclesiastes as biblical theology (in accordance with a dialogical understanding of language and truth) requires some degree of

[109] Collins, *Encounters with Biblical Theology,* 18.

research into the history of interpretation and reception of the book. This is because any proposed "original" meaning must be treated as but one "utterance" in an ongoing dialogue and open-ended quest for the book's "meaning." A dialogical understanding avers that for a literary work like the Bible,

> …the work cannot live in future centuries without having absorbed past centuries as well. If it had belonged *entirely* to today (that is, were only a product of its own time) and not a continuation of the past or essentially related to the past, it could not live into the future. Everything that belongs only to the present dies along with the present.[110]

The task of biblical theology must therefore recognize that relations between past and present are essentially dialogical as well; that Ecclesiastes has gained new meanings and interpretations across the centuries that exhibit dialogical relationships to one another. To a large degree, Fishbane's notion that Jewish theology is essentially an ongoing commentary on previous traditions recognizes this. Work in the area of the history of interpretation is necessary to gain a sense of an interpretive dialogue as it unfolds, and as utterances interact, resist, modify, and mutually inter-illuminate one another. Ideally, such work might be exhaustive, as all interpretations of the book of Ecclesiastes (or even discourses similar to it) necessarily exhibit dialogical relationships with one another. Practical considerations need to be prioritized in the present chapter however, and so what follows will aim for brevity.

Gerhard von Rad once wrote that the book of Qohelet defines the "farthest frontier of Yahwism" that can be found in the Hebrew Bible—a unique voice at the

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[110] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 5. Author's emphasis.

outermost margins of mainstream Israelite religion.[111] This view was not new, and it is clear that many communities across time have similarly seen Ecclesiastes as a marginal or even troubling book within the Bible. Carol Newsom once remarked that "Ecclesiastes… makes people profoundly uncomfortable, a fact that renders its reception history particularly fascinating."[112] The truth, however, is that only those who have some sort of stake in the book as theologically meaningful (and have therefore sought to appropriate it) have really found it uncomfortable.

Indeed, considering the oft-cited and pervasive Deuteronomistic theology of retributive justice throughout the Hebrew Bible (where justice prevails and people get what they deserve from an eminently righteous deity),[113] biblical affirmations of the goodness of life, and the ongoing call of the prophets to ethical action, it is not surprising that readers throughout history would be "uncomfortable" with some of Qohelet's formulations, like the recurring refrain that "all [everything] is vanity, and a chasing after wind" (Eccl 1:1; 1:14; 2:11; 2:17; 2:26; 4:4; 12:17), or in 8:14, that "there is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity." Perhaps even more troubling is a passage like Eccl 4:2-3: "And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; but better

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[111] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; 2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962-65 [1957-60]), 458. Similarly, Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology,* regards Ecclesiastes as a counter-voice to the mainstream from "the far side of negativity" (393).

[112] Carol A. Newsom cited in Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries*, 18.

[113] Cf. Deut 8:7-18; 19:17-21.

than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun." Finally, yet more disturbing still is Eccl 9:1-3:

> All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know. Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

In light of the above verses and similarly difficult passages with which the history of the book's interpretation has struggled, the question of theological appropriation has been a conflicted one.

Also, and perhaps understandably in light of such passages in Ecclesiastes, there has been a long history of debate in regard to the book's "authoritative" or canonical status among religious communities, both Christian and Jewish. There have been certain tendencies in this regard with reference to both its interpretation and its "authoritative" status as a biblical text. A dialogical understanding means that a scholar cannot responsibly neglect or dismiss such interpretations as "non-scholarly" or "pre-critical" or so forth. They simply participate in a larger and ongoing theological and interpretive conversation, issuing from different times and places.

Citing a few examples of Qohelet's uneasy historical relationship to the wider canon and within reading communities is relatively easy, since numerous examples abound. The authority of the book was already disputed by the Hillel and Shammai rabbis in the first century CE, where the former defended the book against the latter

who had questioned its value. These debates, which continued well after the written record of their disagreement at Jamnia, were apparently due to (1) the book's apparent internal inconsistencies (*b. Shab.* 30a, b);[114] (2) the allegation that it contained human wisdom which was not divinely inspired (*Tos. Yad.* 2:14);[115] and (3) the fear that it might lead its reader (or addressee) into heresy (*Lev. Rab. 28:1; Qohelet Rab. 3:1*).[116] The Targum of Qohelet added a decidedly more orthodox recasting of some of its more unorthodox passages, while the third century CE Alexandrian exegetes allegorized them.[117] In the fourth century CE, Jerome would point out that the debate continued among some of his contemporaries regarding the book's canonical status, and he addressed those who apparently saw an incipient skepticism and heresy in the text.[118] Some medieval interpreters viewed the book as plain "dangerous," although others attempted to salvage it by identifying a supposed "support for asceticism and discipline" which rejected the present world in favor of the one to come.[119] Passages regarding its celebration of food, drink, and enjoyment were then taken to refer "to the joy associated with partaking of Christ's

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[114] See Gordis, *Koheleth,* 41.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid.

[117] R.B. Salters. "Qohelet and the Canon," *ExpTim* 86 (August 1975): 339-342, esp. 342.

[118] Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997); Gordis, *Koheleth*, 41; Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries,* 26-27.

[119] Robert K. Johnston, *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 179.

body and blood in the sacrament."[120] One should note that in all of these early examples, there has been a twofold tendency to either question the authority of the book from within a certain faith community throughout its history (and attempt to suppress it), or to somehow domesticate it by bringing it into alignment with that faith community's existing mainstream tenets and faith commitments. It appears that throughout history and in many instances, Qohelet has been either a bit of an embarrassment to certain religious perspectives, or has presented an opportunity to legitimate the ideological concerns of other perspectives. In either case, the attempt to "monologize" Qohelet's discourse appears to have continued throughout history in the same manner first suggested by historical-critical endeavors: Qohelet is either "positive" or "negative." Qohelet is either an "optimist" or a "pessimist." Qohelet either fits comfortably into tradition, or exhibits a radical and dangerous departure from it. As history unfolded, so did an incipient dialogue among interpreters and interpretations of Ecclesiastes, which can be fairly characterized as one of ongoing "disagreement."[121]

As is the nature of dialogical utterances, they all tend toward both mutual agreement and mutual correction.[122] Against efforts to downplay the theological

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[120] Ibid., 179. Cf. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries,* who cites a very early and "relentless tendency to relegate Qoheleth's reflections on the perceived truths of Christian liturgy and doctrine," (25).

[121] Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries*, writes "[i]t is perhaps due to the manageable size of Ecclesiastes and its relatively easily grasped themes that writers have characterized its entirety with such alarming frequency" (xiv). Indeed, the inclination toward monologization and to "characterize" the "entirety" of the book seems characteristic of the book's history of interpretation. Christianson's book on the history of interpretation of Ecclesiastes, one should note, is currently the most comprehensive one of its kind to date.

[122] Emerson and Holquist, glossary to *The Dialogical Imagination*, 426.

import or significance of the book of Ecclesiastes during the Reformation, Martin Luther held an extremely positive view of the book (and is responsible for English translations which title the book "The Preacher" from Luther's own title for it: *Der Prediger*). Luther's own sort of "monologization" of the book consisted of an emphasis upon pedagogy. Luther once remarked, "[t]o reiterate, the point and purpose of this book is to instruct us, so that with thanksgiving we may use the things that are present [around us] and the creatures of God that are generously given to us and conferred upon us by the blessing of God."[123] Luther's contribution was to again affirm Qohelet's positive value—although one should note that such an interpretation could hardly be described as the "original meaning" of the book itself. The book of Ecclesiastes continued to outgrow whatever it once was in its "epoch of creation" as it entered new times and places, as its language was ever-further dialogized, and as interpretations of the book (viewed as "utterances") entered into dialogical relations with all those past, and anticipated all those which would proceed from them.[124]

One might further appeal to the influence that the book of Ecclesiastes has had over great 20th century writers for contemporary evidence of its more "positive" aspects or inspirational potential. An esteemed list of writers could be provided that includes such names as Thomas Wolf, George Bernard Shaw, T.S. Eliot, John Updike,

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[123] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Words and Sacrament I* (eds. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown; 75 vols; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-present) 35:348.

[124] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 5.

Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, and William Butler Yeats.[125] Likewise, one might cite films such as the Oscar-winning *Babette's Feast* (1987) that specifically quotes Qohelet and showcases many of the book's central concerns,[126] or other films that depict modern themes that purportedly run parallel to Qohelet's own.[127] Qohelet has been culturally meaningful, exerting influence in some of the most unexpected of places. Even the Byrds' 1965 Billboard-topping song "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything there is a Season)," originally written by Pete Seeger,[128] quoted the text of Eccl 3:1-8 and has had widespread cultural appeal—a song which featured prominently yet again in the 1994 Oscar-winning film *Forrest Gump*[129] and perhaps sealed its popular perception as happy and harmonious claim to a balance in all things and even an anti-war sentiment (the only added lyric to the biblical verses is "a time for peace, I swear it's not too late"). Again, the language of Eccl 3:1-8 in this case no longer "meant" something in its "original" or "historical" context; Pete Seeger re-accented this particular text to mean anew, or engaged its "potential to mean," which presently constitutes what the book "has been meaning" throughout history.

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[125] For this interesting discussion, see Daniel Pawley, "Ecclesiastes: Reaching Out to the 20th Century," *Bible Review* 6 (1990): 34-36.

[126] Gabriel Axel (screenwriter) and Karen Blixen, *Babettes Gæstebud*, Blu-ray, Directed by Gabriel Axel (Denmark: Det Danske Filminstitut, 1987).

[127] See Johnston, *Useless Beauty*, *passim*.

[128] Pete Seeger, *Turn! Turn! Turn (to Everything There is a Season),* performed by The Byrds, Hollywood, CA: Columbia Studios, Vinyl, September 1965.

[129] Eric Roth (screenwriter) and David Bifano (scoring coordinator), *Forrest Gump*, Blu-ray, Directed by Robert Zemeckis (Los Angeles: Paramount, 1994).

Even a cursory overview of the history of interpretation and reception of Ecclesiastes demonstrates that engagement with the book demonstrates a lively, ongoing exchange: a dialogue rife with conflict, affirmation, agreement, dissension, and extension of its "meaning" at particular times and places. While similar to Fishbane's emphasis upon ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation of previous tradition, a dialogical point-of-view recognizes that Ecclesiastes "has been meaning" many things throughout the centuries, often without regard to tradition—and sometimes far removed or in opposition to it. Dialogism is more far-reaching in scope than Fishbane's proposal for Jewish theology, as his is conceived through a particularistic religious tradition. Research into the history of interpretation for a book like Ecclesiastes in the interest of biblical theology need not necessarily limit itself to Jewish and Christian "tradition." A dialogic understanding recognizes that "utterances" issue from all manner of times and places. Nevertheless, attention to the history of a text's interpretation and reception for the sake of biblical theology does not engage in such research for the sake of itself.

The proposal here should therefore not be construed as a mere apologetic for the history of biblical interpretation and reception within biblical scholarship.[130] It

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[130] One might note that the history of biblical interpretation and reception is yet another "aspect" of a re-conceived biblical theology that, in theory, would also seem to lend itself to a (relatively) unbiased and neutral ground for scholarly dialogue. Regarding this single *aspect* or second step (after consideration of the historical-critical "meaning" of a text) within an overall approach to biblical theology, such scholarly activity might also reasonably meet the criterion that biblical theology "must be conceived broadly enough to provide a context for debate among different viewpoints" (John Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" 16). Confessional viewpoints might be more likely to examine historical interpretations from within their own confessional heritage, but there seems no reason why a Christian might not engage Rabbinic commentary, why a Jew might not engage the New Testament, or why a non-confessional perspective might not engage biblical interpretation in John Milton, for example. To explore various biblical "interpretations" throughout history neither requires any particular confessional commitment, nor does accounting

is an activity with a purpose. Beyond the Bible's own textual pluralism, the "use" and various interpretations of biblical books throughout history exhibit "many implicit quarrels" to be clarified, and a "biblical theologian's role" would be "to pick out the assumptions, experiences, entailments" that shape such historical perspectives, and "to trace the dotted line to a point at which [certain claims] intersects the claims of the other" when viewed as a vast historical dialogue, even when they extend far beyond the confines of particular religious or confessional traditions.[131]

The main point regarding the history of Ecclesiastes' interpretation and reception seen as ongoing and incomplete "dialogue" is effectively made clear: that the book has either been viewed as negative and dangerous, if not heretical, on the one hand, or positive and inspirational, if not instructive and somehow edifying, on the other. There has been an enduring stalemate regarding the interpretation of the book, its theological import, and its status throughout history. This is perhaps the inevitable result of a compulsion to "monologize" its voice.[132]

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for various interpretations across history. Beyond conceiving (1) historical criticism and (2) history of interpretation and reception as part of a larger dialogue, however, the activity of biblical theology (in terms of what the text "presently means" and "potentially means") becomes resolutely confessional in nature. This is discussed further below.

[131] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," 305. Newsom originally used these words to refer to a possible activity for a biblical theologian to interact with texts across the Bible from a dialogical perspective. Newsom's words (in Bakhtinian fashion) have been re-accented and redeployed in the present argument to refer to a possible activity of a biblical theologian to interact with interpretations and theological appropriations of texts themselves across time, also from a dialogical perspective. Again, it should be emphasized that despite the citation, what I am suggesting is not the equivalent of Newsom's recommendation.

[132] Cf. William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000). Brown writes that "[t]he temptation looms large among Christian interpreters to treat Qoheleth merely as a foil for the Gospel message, a deficient and dangerous perspective in dire need of rehabilitation" (121).

Qohelet in Contemporary Biblical Scholarship: What Ecclesiastes "Means"

During the past fifty years or so, biblical scholars have likewise perpetuated this historical paradigm of an impasse between those who would view the book as essentially positive or as overwhelmingly negative. Most fall into alignment with the conclusion that Qohelet is either a positive "preacher of joy" (Whybray)[133] or that Qohelet is a negative, thoroughgoing, and irredeemable skeptic (Crenshaw).[134] This is perhaps because modern scholarship has often, and mistakenly, heard only one of the book's two voices (discussed below), having no recourse to other conceptual ways in which the text might be read.

Chapters three and four of the present study have already detailed some of the contemporary interpretations of the book of Ecclesiastes, especially from the perspective of Walter Brueggemann and Michael Fishbane (Collins' treatment of the book, one recalls, emphasizes the book's alleged historical-contextual meaning over what the book now "means," so will not be reiterated here). A dialogical understanding of language and truth maintains that the contemporary readings and interpretations offered by Brueggemann and Fishbane are necessary, but must always be viewed as tentative and provisional. They participate in a larger whole of interpretation and theological commentary. A few brief comments on these

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[133] Roger N. Whybray, "Qohelet, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23 (July 1982): 87-98; cf. Eunny P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet's Theological Rhetoric* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004).

[134] James L. Crenshaw, "Odd Book In: Ecclesiastes," *BibRev* 6 (1990): 28-33, esp. 30; Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Historical Commentary of the Old Testament Series; Leuven: Peeters Bvba, 2013); Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 350, 396, 398; J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (*BZAW* 152; New York: de Gruyter, 1979), 32, 53, 69.

contemporary readings will be summarized here, as they suggest what Qohelet "means" from a contemporary point-of-view.

As chapter three has noted, Brueggemann's assessment of Qohelet unfortunately strikes one as perilously inadequate. Despite all care, he seems to fall victim to a degree of reductionism and monologization that is all too familiar within much contemporary scholarship.[135] This is also in alignment with the book's history of interpretation. According to Brueggemann's own hermeneutical process, Ecclesiastes is reduced to the realm of "sapiential countertestimony."[136] In much wisdom literature, according to Brueggemann's view, there is an "assertion that life in the real world is inscrutable and cannot be controlled or predicted; there is something deeply loose and volatile about life in the world. This is an insight much accented later by Ecclesiastes."[137] In a move not atypical of contemporary Ecclesiastes scholarship, the specter of wholesale reduction threatens at every turn, as one again revisits one of Brueggemann's claims discussed in chapter three:

> At the very edge of the Old Testament, culturally and epistemologically, the Book of Ecclesiastes gives us the residue and outcome of that shrill and incessant voicing of negativity . . . . By the time we arrive at the far edge of negativity in Ecclesiastes, we have the parallel impression of countertestimony: a hostile witness, going

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[135] As discussed in chapter three, the issue here is not reductionism itself, but the quality of those reductions in relation to a vast biblical corpus. Perhaps these might only be evaluated on an individual basis. Olson, "Provisional Monologization," writes: "The question [of reductionism] is rather a comparative one: is one admittedly provisional and partial biblical-theological reductionism more cogent and persuasive than another provisional and partial reductionism for a given local and specific context and community of interpretation?" (169). My argument here is that in the case of Ecclesiastes, Brueggemann's degree of reductionism is too great, and so ultimately unpersuasive in that it refuses to recognize the "positive" claims within the book itself, and the "positive" evaluations of the book across history.

[136] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 350.

[137] Ibid., 350

> through the paces but not really caring if anyone is persuaded by this utterance of guarded negativity.[138]

Even any remotely "positive" testimony within Ecclesiastes (cf. Eccl 9:7) is allegedly superficial: it merely "sounds pro forma" and "more than a little cynical."[139] As for God, "[t]here is only silence on Yahweh's part, perhaps to match the resignation and the cold concession of the witness."[140] Brueggemann ultimately offers the standard fare of "negative" scholarly assessments about the book of Qohelet: "Ecclesiastes has lost any passion or impetus to cry out to Yahweh."[141] Brueggemann's dialectical hermeneutics inevitably collapse some texts into reductionist categories and themes, and these perhaps allow him no recourse to alternative ways of reading the text. Dialogical understandings may prove more capable of handling certain biblical texts. Ecclesiastes, as argued here, is one of those texts, and is not so easily reduced to pure "negativity" despite the tendency of much biblical scholarship to routinely do just that.

Fishbane's calls to creativity and imagination fare no better than Brueggemann's dialectical hermeneutics, however. To Fishbane, Qohelet's voice likewise remains a negative one, and Fishbane himself monologizes the book accordingly. Qohelet, it is claimed, "throws down the gauntlet of futility. . . For things go round and round like the wind, listing here and blowing there, in a most

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[138] Ibid., 393.

[139] Ibid., 396.

[140] Ibid., 398.

[141] Ibid.

wearisome way; and habit leads to lassitude and a sense of futility."[142] Qohelet, it appears, can play little positive role in Fishbane's "covenant theology." Qohelet violates the supposed rules of Israelite wisdom by paying too much attention to personal observation, and not to the wisdom traditions that have preceded him.[143] Qohelet personally observes the world—without due attention to tradition—and rages against oppression, injustice, political corruption,[144] and so, to Fishbane, merely demonstrates the "natural self" as the antithesis of the "covenant self." The "covenant self," according to Fishbane's account, and despite all personal observation and experience, must finally fear God and obey the commandments (Eccl 12:13).[145] Fishbane's interpretation amounts to a near complete dismissal of the book of Ecclesiastes by implying that the main discourse of Qohelet is a mere literary foil for Eccl 12:13, which ostensibly affirms the "covenant self" once-for-all. One should note that the dichotomy between "natural self" versus the "covenantal self" again relegates the book into "negative" versus "positive" categories. The history of interpretation (and interpretive monologizations) persists, and it would appear that a more "imaginative" and "creative" reading of the book is actually nowhere to be found. As far as scholarly analysis goes, Fishbane's reading is just more of the same. A more creative theological reading of Qohelet might look to transcend the apparent stalemate between these persisting "positive" versus "negative" monologizations of the book that have persisted throughout history.

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[142] Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement,* 173.

[143] Ibid., 173-74.

[144] Ibid.

[145] Ibid., 174.

The Potential of the Potential To Mean:

Imagination and Creativity for the Future of Biblical Theology

Thus far, it has been suggested that a tentative synthesis of the work of Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane is possible insofar as "biblical theology" is conceived dialogically. The book of Ecclesiastes has been used for the purpose of illustration. The epistemological mode offered by dialogism can do justice to historical-critical endeavors (while relativizing any emphasis upon an "original meaning"), the history of interpretation and reception of biblical texts, and contemporary studies involving theological interpretation including comprehensive works of "biblical theology" in the manner of Brueggemann.[146] All of these activities offer "utterances" that may be viewed as "provisional monologizations"[147] within the incomplete and ongoing dialogical "whole" of the discourse of biblical theology whether involving Ecclesiastes in particular or other biblical texts in general.

It is argued here that a dialogical epistemology in the interest of biblical theology, however, finally places its emphasis and stress upon the future: the task of biblical theology (after accounting for historical-critical work, interpretive history, and contemporary interpretations) remains only partial until the "potential" of texts to mean into the future is explored. All utterances, one recalls, are dialogic, and so anticipate a future rejoinder. This forward-looking attempt to articulate the

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[146] As there remains no consensus regarding what constitutes "theological interpretation," engagement with these studies might ultimately depend upon an explicit acknowledgment that a given author is "doing" theological interpretation however this activity is understood by its practitioner.

[147] Olson, "Provisional Monologization," 175-180.

"potential of texts to mean" has a two-fold goal of (1) continuing to foster ways of thinking and living in accordance with an "ever-new attempt to speak of the reality of God and direct the self toward this truth"[148] and (2) enabling the contemporary appropriation of the biblical texts in an effort to make the Bible relevant, and so "available" to reading communities.

These reading communities who seek theological appropriation are faith communities. To speak of the "reality of God" and an attempt to foster the theological appropriation of the Bible finally does require prior personal commitments and certain faith-based (and metaphysical) assumptions on the part of the interpreter. The task of a future-oriented biblical theology as it is conceived here involves faith. Biblical theology involves confessional[149] commitments and productive biases.[150] Biblical theology involves an ontology of Scripture, as discussed in chapter four and as articulated by Fishbane. Fishbane writes, for example, the biblical texts "will not stand between man and God; they will rather bring us—the readers—beyond its literary formulations and to the nameless and

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[148] Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement*, 1.

[149] Cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "confessional" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). "Confessional" is here understood as "holding or according with a certain system of dogmas or beliefs" and "[o]f or pertaining to Confessions of Faith."

[150] Cf. Ochs, *The Return to Scripture.* The conceptualization of biblical theology as envisioned here shares many similarities with what has been termed "postcritical scriptural interpretation." Ochs writes that "'[p]ostcritical scriptural interpretation' refers to an emergent tendency among Jewish and Christian text scholars and theologians to give rabbinic and ecclesial traditions of interpretation both the benefit of the doubt and the benefit of doubt: the former, by assuming that there are dimensions of scriptural meaning which are only disclosed by way of the hermeneutical practices of believing communities and believing traditions of Jews and Christians; the latter, by assuming, in the spirit of post-Spinozistic criticism, that these dimensions may be clarified through the disciplined practice of philological, historical, and textual/rhetorical criticism" (3). Nevertheless, the sort of biblical theology proposed here again finds its emphasis upon the former hermeneutical and confessional practices, while remaining in a careful and tentative dialogue with the insights, practices, and interpretations of historical criticism.

Unconditioned One, the Lord of life and death."[151] One should note that in making such claims, the metaphysical reality of God is taken for granted, the function of the text to bring a reader into an encounter with the Divine is a foregone conclusion, and the relevance of the Bible for a specific community of faith is presumed. Biblical theology is confessional. Collins may object that "the problem is that we lack any acceptable yardstick by which to assess metaphysical truth" and that "[i]t is not within the competence of biblical theologians as such to adjudicate the relative adequacy of metaphysical systems."[152] But shared yardstick or not, it seems that Fishbane's faith commitments, for example, easily supply all the competence necessary to engage in such adjudication, which is finally in the interest of a constructive theology.

A dialogical epistemology appreciates the fact that the practice of biblical theology continues into the future, and is not yet complete. In this regard, the future-oriented aspect of biblical theology is finally and unapologetically "confessional" in that it is oriented toward faith communities—toward concrete, living persons who seek to appropriate the biblical materials. This aspect would seem to satisfy Dale Martin's calls for a proper theological training in the area of biblical studies, especially as it dethrones the reign of "original" meanings and opens up a place for discussing various hermeneutical strategies that have been employed throughout history and those employed into the present. Since such biblical

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[151] Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), xiii.

[152] Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" 14

theology is oriented toward futures and possibilities, it must be creative (as further discussed below). It must imagine. It never understands itself as "The Final Word."

Still, calls to imagination and creativity akin to Fishbane's recommendations seem relatively easy, while actualizing such values in scholarly discourse are apparently not. More suggestions are needed, although, womanist, post-colonial, sociological, African, African American, liberationist, reader-response, LBGT, literary, and postmodern hermeneutics in addition to all manner of interdisciplinary engagement might offer important contributions to the future of biblical theology as dialogically understood.[153] Still, these interpretive strategies only contribute to biblical theology as it is conceived in this chapter insofar as they are employed alongside faith commitments, that aim to speak of the "reality of God," and that are deployed in the interest of faith communities.[154] Moreover, there appears no good reason to ignore or exclude two millenia worth of religious tradition(s) with all

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[153] Here, the recommendation for existing "hermeneutical" approaches specifically refers to a variety of existing interpretive frameworks often labeled "advocacy" readings of the biblical texts, such as post-colonial, liberationist, feminist, and so forth. "Interdisciplinary" engagement refers to cross-disciplinary engagement within prevailing academic discourse including, but not limited to, psychology, literary studies, cognitive studies, philosophy, and many others disciplines. "Confessional" perspectives are here meant to refer to engagement with dogmatic theology, church doctrine, rabbinic commentary, and similar perspectives often considered "fideistic." Moreover, the use and interpretation within secular and non-secular contemporary culture might also prove valuable dialogue partners considering many important voices or "utterances" regarding biblical interpretation that hold potential to contribute to biblical theology as understood in this study.

[154] Cf. Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement*. Fishbane writes that "[n]o honest theology can ignore what we know and experience as moderns, or relegate this to some separate cognitive sphere" (13). He also claims that "authentic Jewish theology has always been marked by strategies of accommodation between the earlier and foundational strata of tradition (such as scripture) and the challenge of quite different moral attitudes or truth claims from the broader intellectual environment" (3). Various hermeneutical and so-called "advocacy" readings of the texts, interdisciplinary engagement, and self-consciously confessional interpretations of the text are precisely the route to "imaginative" engagement as envisioned here for the task of biblical theology. Admittedly, the value of all of these interpretive approaches may not be equal, and cannot be guaranteed in advance. They must be judged based upon their own merits on a case-by-case basis, and are always subject to evaluation and critique, just as all "utterances" are.

manner of "utterances"—from doctrinal and dogmatic theology to religious art and music[155]—in the interest of inspiring a lively theological imagination, and prompting an ongoing dialogue capable of mutual illumination, correction, agreement, disagreement, tension, and insight regarding the biblical texts.[156] These various hermeneutical, interdisciplinary, and confessional perspectives all draw upon an inspiration and interpretive framework of some sort; they participate in social heteroglossia, contributing important voices to the "language" of biblical theology within an ongoing dialogue. Many of these approaches, explicitly or not, concern themselves with the "potential" of texts to mean, especially when they de-

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[155] See Levinson, "Review: Sacred Attunement," Levinson wonders about the role of specifically secular aesthetic works in relation to theology, especially according to Fishbane's proposal for a Jewish theology. Levinson writes: "I would also ask, *What is the place of the secular within this theology?* Do painting, music, and poetry, treated earlier in [*Sacred Attunement*], remain confined to the realm of the 'aesthetic,' constituting 'prefigurations of theology,' or can they constitute equally valid revelations of the transcendent?" (299, author's emphasis). Here, Levinson seems to miss Fishbane's point in *Sacred Attunement*, where painting and poetry, secular or not, often work by "intentionally disrupting our normal habitude and common perceptions" by causing a "caesural moment" in daily life, and "*theology tries to transform this perception of elementariness into a sustained way of life and thought,*" (48, author's emphasis). Fishbane's point has nothing to do with whether "aesthetic" works are "valid revelations of the transcendent" (Levinson) or not.

[156] Olson, "Provisional Monologization," writes: "The crucial question becomes not primarily what the 'text itself' in isolation means, but what constellation of voices that we bring to the text may be most helpful, truthful, self-corrective and persuasive in a given local context. For a Christian context and community, an effective constellation of voices is likely to include Scripture as well as voices from the Christian doctrinal tradition of which the community is a part to provide fruitful prejudices interpreting Scripture" (179). Olson points out that scholars such as Brevard Childs have attempted to engage such a "constellation of voices" in the interest of biblical theology: "Childs engages in a quite wide-ranging dialogue with numerous diverse Christian and Jewish interpreters of the Bible; examples include Jewish midrash, Ignatius, Justin, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Niebuhr, Weber, Bultmann, Tillich, Pannenberg, Moltmann, Bonhoeffer, liberation and feminist theologians, and a number of modern Jewish scholars like Moore, Goodenough, Buber, and Levenson. He engages in constructive debate with these figures, both generously appreciating contributions and indicating what he perceives as deficiencies" (168). Cf. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

emphasize or altogether ignore the "original meaning" of the text.[157] Even Brueggemann's courtroom metaphor itself is an excellent example of imagination and creativity in the interest of biblical theology, even if it has now become part of contemporary discourse in biblical theology—it suggests what the texts now "mean," even if the imaginative courtroom metaphor only amounts to a "tract for the time." This is precisely because all of these various approaches, and as illustrated in chapter three with reference to Brueggemann's dialectical hermeneutics, might be said to employ a hermeneutical consciousness that embrace varying degrees of their own "outsidedness" to biblical texts and various traditions. This is precisely because they acknowledge a unique perspective enabled by a particular stance and a particular time and place. Bakhtin writes,

> *Creative understanding* does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are *others.*[158]

It is this degree of "outsidedness" that lends itself to a creative—or imaginative—understanding of texts and traditions from the unique viewpoint of individual perspectives. One emphasizes—and cannot overemphasize enough—that the scholarly merit of such creative understandings of the Bible (and their possible

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[157] A reading of the Bible from the perspective of solidarity with the poor and oppressed, for example, is here seen as an important, necessary, and indeed "imaginative" interpretation of the Bible with much potential for contributions to biblical theology. See, e.g., Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973).

[158] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 7 (author's emphases).

contributions to biblical theology) cannot be guaranteed in advance, however. Additionally, the paradox in suggesting any "new" concrete hermeneutical approach in the present study is that offering any definitive route to "creativity" is precisely what might inhibit creativity itself. Prescribing a specific hermeneutical approach is not the same as imagining new interpretive possibilities.

One recalls and reiterates again that dialogism itself offers not a hermeneutic but an epistemological understanding. Dialogism conceives the whole of "truth" as an ongoing dialogue among specific persons who possess their own unique viewpoints and understandings. Each individual stands "outside" the biblical texts, "outside" the Bible's historical contexts, "outside" historical and contemporary interpretations of those texts, and "outside" one another. Experimentation and interdisciplinary engagement and confessional lenses are possible routes to embrace one's own "outsidedness," and so to a creative understanding of the biblical texts—as long as such "outsidedness" understands itself dialogically. There are many unique perspectives from specific times and places that might remain in dialogue with the contributions of historical criticism, reception history (including those of various confessional traditions), and contemporary theological interpretation, as has been argued. Creativity and imagination, therefore, do operate within certain boundaries—the boundaries of a biblical text, the boundaries of a body of interpretation and tradition, the boundaries of modern scholarship and interpretation, and are ultimately subject to peer review within academic discourse. Future expressions of biblical theology, just as the whole of academic scholarship, are similarly subject to rigorous argumentation, research, and acuity to the extent

that creativity and "creative understanding" must not be equated with academic faddism, carelessness, or a sort of academic irresponsibility. Dialogism forbids these latter possibilities, as its aim is a "responsive understanding" within a particular dialogue. It is not an attempt to somehow begin a wholly new dialogue.

Fishbane himself appears to understand such boundaries, as he calls for "an imagination whose creativity is never entirely a new creation, but one founded upon older and authoritative words and images."[159] To this, one might add that such imagination still must direct itself toward the future, and the dialogic "potential to mean" as responses to previous utterances. Such creative understandings, always operating within certain academic and dialogic parameters, surely indicate that biblical theology too has the potential to be "serious."

Therefore, the would-be contemporary biblical theologian (perhaps until now a silent bystander who has listened to the overture and who has attempted to discern an orchestra of voices within an ongoing dialogue), having considered Qohelet's text and "probable meaning" or what the book "meant" within its ancient Near Eastern context, having observed the historical life and interpretive afterlife of Qohelet as illustrative of what the text "has been meaning" over the centuries, and having surveyed the always-provisional current articulations of Qohelet's "present meaning" according to the perspectives of contemporary biblical scholarship—can now enter into the conversation regarding Qohelet. The biblical theologian has assessed this dialogue. Viewed as "utterances" that issue from different times and perspectives, the biblical theologian is able to recognize the tensions and

[159] Fishbane, *Garments of Torah,* 3.

disagreements and similarities and tendencies within this dialogue, and then, as an "outsider" to this dialogue, may enter the fray in order to offer a new (but never entirely new) voice.[160] This takes imagination; a creative way to respond to the utterances that have both preceded it and simultaneously anticipated it. To enter that dialogue with the interest of fostering the appropriation of the text within various faith communities is to engage in biblical theology. Thus far, the historical dialogue surrounding Qohelet seems to suggest many possibilities for future responses. An imaginative reading of Ecclesiastes might seek to account for the book's "positivity" and "negativity"—but particularly to understand how and why these features operate and perhaps cannot help but operate at one and the same time.

So let us provisionally imagine a response to the ongoing whole of this particular theological and interpretive dialogue regarding Ecclesiastes. Let us imagine, for instance, that the book of Qohelet permits a degree of contemporary dissension against tradition rather than the affirmation of it. Let us imagine a biblically-sanctioned place within contemporary life to express our immense disappointment and outrage with the world, and even to register an audacious and bitter complaint before God—especially in light of the brutal reality of death. Let us imagine a colossal personal struggle to appropriate tradition in the midst of observing a terribly flawed creation and ostensibly silent God. And let us entertain

[160] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, writes: "The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousnesses around the given object of utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it—it does not approach the object from the sidelines" (276-77).

all of these possibilities especially before we, too, too quickly retreat into the comfort of faith and "received" tradition and its wisdom (cf. Eccl 12:13). Most importantly, let such an imaginative reading of Qohelet remain an "ever-new attempt to speak of the reality of God and direct the self toward this truth."[161] A dialogical understanding of language and a never-ending pursuit of the "whole of truth" assumes that Qohelet awaits such possible responses. Every utterance looks toward the future; every utterance anticipates a rejoinder. So, for the sake of the future of biblical theology, let us now imagine a specific rejoinder.

The Future of Qohelet: Imagining What Ecclesiastes "Potentially Means"

One possible understanding of imagination is that it entails "[t]he mind's creativity and resourcefulness in using and inventing images, analogies, etc." [162] It involves "[t]he power or capacity to form internal images or ideas… not actually present to the senses, including remembered objects and situations."[163] Such ideas are "constructed by mentally combining or projecting images of previously experienced qualities, objects, and situations.[164] Such an understanding of imagination further involves "[t]he mental consideration of future or potential actions or events."[165] If one concedes to such definitions (without forgetting that such a dictionary term is

[161] Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement*, 1-2.

[162] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "imagination" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[163] Ibid.

[164] Ibid.

[165] Ibid.

always a centripetal force within an essentially posited "unitary language," belonging to everyone, yet to nobody in particular)[166] "imagination" seems to include "creativity," involving aspects of memory and previous experience ("remembered objects and situations"), as well as something that is oriented toward the future (the "power" used in the interest of "inventing" what is "potential"). Pulling the word "imagination" in a centrifugal direction, this is what the present discussion means by "imagination"—this is my own particular "accent:"[167] imagination is rooted in the past, but orients itself toward a potential future. This conception of imagination—sharing many points of contact with dialogism itself—is the sort suggested here for future work of biblical theology.

As previously discussed, various hermeneutical, interdisciplinary, and confessional or dogmatic approaches might engage the imagination in the interest of biblical theology. Many possibilities are available. The following discussion of Ecclesiastes' "potential to mean," however, will opt for an interdisciplinary route and stick with dialogism as its conversation partner. In keeping with the present discussion of dialogism, the following commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes will employ a dialogic understanding of language itself as a provisional heuristic model in the interest of a creative understanding. The analysis relies heavily on the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin and some of the corollary logic of dialogism in terms of an "internally dialogized" monologue, "hybridity," "heteroglossia," and the

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[166] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 293-294.

[167] Cf. Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 220: An "accent" involves not what a word "means" according to a dictionary, but what a particular individual at a specific time and place "means" by deploying a word within any particular utterance.

"superaddressee." Again, it must be emphasized that I do not intend a "Bakhtinian biblical theology" (an issue which will be further addressed below). It is merely a deployment of a few aspects of dialogism in the interest of a theological appropriation of the book of Ecclesiastes. Other readings are legitimate and necessary according to an overall dialogical understanding of biblical theology, and the following offers just one reading or "utterance" among many.

So in light of such understanding, how is Ecclesiastes to be theologically appropriated into the future? It is certain that no attempt at any sort of "biblical theology" has been written that has taken the book of Qohelet as its starting point, or even one that has portrayed the book as somehow central to the theological thought of the Hebrew Bible to any degree whatsoever. Yet even if it is not theologically central,[168] the book's history of interpretation and reception demonstrates that one is hard pressed to make theological sense of the book even at the margins of Israel's discourse. Efforts to transcend the "positive" and "negative" assessments of the book have yet to inspire any degree of consensus, let alone any suggestions as to why such conflicting language appears in the text to begin with. Ecclesiastes remains controversial.

What seems most needed in the study of Ecclesiastes for the sake of its appropriation is a conceptual approach that can account for both the "negative" and "positive" aspects of the book, and even to suggest why this aspect of the book is perhaps inevitable. This seems a more productive route forward than simply dividing Qohelet's verses up into one "positive" category or another "negative"

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[168] von Rad, *Old Testament Theology,* 458.

category (then tallying the results to see which side tips the balance). Such an approach must therefore account for the book's inconsistencies and how the book might simultaneously be both "orthodox" and "heretical" as revealed throughout the book's history of interpretation. As such, any proposed biblical theology in relation to Ecclesiastes must remain in dialogue with the assessments of historical criticism, the history of the book's interpretation, and works of contemporary engagement with the book. One might ask if the "meaning" of Qohelet, expressed as an instance (or "utterance") of biblical theology, might be more sophisticated and creatively articulated than is often attempted, thus justifying its use as a theological resource for various faith communities today. A solution to the "preacher of joy" v. "irredeemable skeptic" problem might accommodate both viewpoints, while also explaining the inevitable disorganization and degree of inconsistency within Qohelet's discourse. The following exposition and attempt to imaginatively interpret Ecclesiastes is ultimately for the sake of the book's theological appropriation among faith communities.

Ecclesiastes and Moving Beyond the "Monologic Assumption"

It is striking to note how casual both historical and literary critics have been in assessing the narrative persona of Ecclesiastes, particularly since many insist on speaking of the book in terms of a certain (historical?) "Qohelet" who is either the flesh-and-blood author or narrator of the work (in the latter view, the frame narrative of Eccl 1:1, [7:27], 12:8-14 constitutes the secondary narrator in the book's macrostructure).[169] It is clear that the implicit referent in 1:1 ("The words of

[169] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 365.

Qohelet, the son of David, King in Jerusalem;" cf. Prov 1:1) is Solomon. Some scholarly analyses seem mostly to explain this vague referent as an appeal to authority, orthodoxy, and wisdom for the book—and move on from there without assessing its significance for the book as a whole.[170] Interestingly, the text makes no great effort to defend Solomonic authorship beyond Eccl 1:1,[171] nor is Solomon's name ever specifically mentioned, though the book's reliance upon the Solomonic tradition to some extent or another has never been called into question.[172] Instead of Solomon, there is only "Qohelet"—the self-appointed wise teacher who pretends to the identity of another, or more specifically, that of the legendary persona of King Solomon. This pretense has profound consequences when one further assesses the particular narration that is "Qohelet's."

As emphasized by historical-critical analyses of the book, the view that the 10th century BCE historical Solomon wrote the book cannot be sustained. The author is not Solomon, nor even likely a king, but one obviously engaging and co-opting the voice of another. This co-opted voice is legendary, kingly, traditional, and

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[170] E.g. Gordis, *Koheleth,* who writes, "What more effective device than to have this view of the vanity of life expressed by Solomon, who symbolized [wisdom and luxury as] goals of human striving?" (40).

[171] One might reasonably claim that Eccl 1:12-2:11 also defends the Solomonic persona, but nevertheless there is no vigorous effort to defend Solomonic authorship throughout the book. Cf. no. 193.

[172] For a good summary and analysis of some of the parallels between Ecclesiastes and the Solomonic tradition, see Frank Zimmerman, *The Inner World of Qohelet* (New York: KTAV Publishing, 1973), esp. 83-87; or George M. Schwab, "Woman as the Object of Qohelet's Search," *AUSS* 39 (2001): 73-84.

orthodox.[173] One might be tempted to call this the "authoritative" voice of Solomonic tradition. This is because an "authoritative" voice is always "sensed as something that is inherited and unquestionable, as a voice from a zone infinitely distant."[174] This "authoritative" Solomonic voice is deployed by the primary narration of Qohelet, who simultaneously attempts to make this voice "Qohelet's" own.[175] Thus in a way, a certain "hybridity" must be the inevitable result of any given utterance in the book, or even the entire work viewed as "utterance." Hybridity is further discussed further below, but one may preliminarily note here that it consists of "[t]he mixing, within a single concrete utterance, of two or more different linguistic consciousnesses, often widely separated within time and social space."[176] Previous scholarship on the book of Ecclesiastes, operating according to a monologic conception of the material, has not grasped the possibility that the material is "internally dialogized."

Imagining Ecclesiastes as an Internally Dialogized Monologue

A dialogical understanding of language maintains that even the utterance of a single individual can be "internally dialogized" or contain within it an incipient dialogue. Each instance of speech in Ecclesiastes, for example, will contain a synthesis of voices or "accents." This is the particular accent of an unknown flesh-and-blood

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[173] James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007). Kugel discusses how the book of Proverbs is best characterized as "orthodox wisdom," especially in relation to Ecclesiastes as "in some ways its opposite" (509-11).

[174] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 219.

[175] Cf. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 259-422. Cf. 294.

[176] Morson and Emerson, Glossary in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 429.

author, the accent of an imagined Solomonic persona, and the accent of the created narrator (or a literary construct) who speaks. The apparent "monologue" of Qohelet is hence pervasively dialogized, and must be construed as possessing an inherently heteroglossic quality to it. The language of the book is a composite of the flesh-and-blood author[177] and King Solomon as hypothetical postulate, projected onto the created character-narrator of "Qohelet."

Bakhtin's notion of "heteroglossia" is again useful for an understanding of what is at work here. One recalls that language is "heteroglossic" or pervasively diversified depending upon its user, its addressee, and its circumstance—there are many "languages" within any given "unitary language" language.[178] The phenomenon of heteroglossia indicates that there are certain socio-ideological factors or perspectives interwoven into any given utterance. One also recalls that historical-socio-cultural forces essentially *posit* a unitary (and somewhat abstract) dictionary-like language or the "national" language of everyone, which Bakhtin has called "centripetal forces."[179] These conservative forces within language struggle to preserve and unify a language in order to overcome social heteroglossia, and thus to preserve the ability for anyone to communicate at all.[180] This national language is always the language of both everyone and no one (that is, nobody in particular)—it

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[177] See Bakhtin, *Speech Genres,* 109. The relationship between actual historical author and character is of great interest to Bakhtin. He writes: "We find the author (perceive, understand, sense, and feel him) in any work of art….[characters are] all measured and defined by their relationship to the author as person…. One can speak of a *pure* author as distinct from a partially depicted, designated author who enters as part of the work" (109, author's emphasis).

[178] Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination,* 263.

[179] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 270.

[180] Ibid., 270-271.

is the language of other people, in other contexts, in other times and places.[181] Such a view then conceives language as "ideologically saturated… as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a *maximum* of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life," and "which develop[s] in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization."[182] This national language is the language of establishment and tradition—it is authoritative. With this understanding, within the book of Ecclesiastes there is the language of Solomonic and "orthodox" Yahwistic wisdom tradition (both oral or written), the language of royal authority and power (with its ideological saturation), the language of the reigning religious establishment, and the language of traditional Torah piety and its own sacred writings. These all serve a "centripetal" function.

Concurrently, the "centrifugal forces" in the life of a language destabilize and decentralize such unifying forces through sociolinguistic variants, different genres, generational speech differences, "professional" discourses and jargons, and so forth.[183] Such are the diversified "heteroglot" languages within the posited one. Bakhtin therefore claims that "[e]very concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear… [they] intersect in the utterance," or more suggestively: "[e]very utterance participates in the 'unitary language' (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal,

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[181] Ibid., 293.

[182] Ibid., 271 (author's emphasis).

[183] Ibid., 272.

stratifying forces)."[184] In Ecclesiastes, there are centrifugal forces (always simultaneously interacting with the centripetal forces) at work in its language: the idiosyncratic voice of a sage, struggling both with and against the broader wisdom tradition and entrenched theological and social discourse. For Bakhtin, an analysis of any particular utterance is possible, "once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language."[185]

Imagining Qohelet as Both Orthodox and Unorthodox

The "national" Israelite language (or "unified language" in Bakhtinian terms) is a traditional one exemplified by Solomonic proverbial wisdom discourse (with its assumption of Deuteronomic retributive justice), as perhaps best embodied in the book of Proverbs. Of course, Solomon did not write this book either, but it is rather a collection of what are usually cast as "orthodox" traditional Israelite wisdom sayings that likely grew by accretion over time.[186] In Proverbs, one finds the authoritative and "orthodox" wisdom of Israelite sages passed down through generations (one notes the way in which Prov 1-9, for example, is cast in terms of a father's address to a son according to Prov 1:1-8).[187] Traditional Israelite proverbial wisdom discourse, with Solomon as its legendary embodiment, is nothing if not authoritative for practical day-to-day life and instruction regarding how one is to live in the world from within the Yahwistic community of faith (see, e.g., Prov 3:1-2). Solomonic

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[184] Ibid., 272.

[185] Ibid., 272.

[186] Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now,* 509-11.

[187] Ibid. Kugel writes that "[t]he sage's job was thus to collect and transmit the received wisdom to those eager to study it" (509).

wisdom is therefore centripetal in character, a force that attempted to standardize and unify the national language of "wisdom" among the Israelites, reflecting a very specific value system, norm for living, and way of seeing the world. Indeed, many verses in Ecclesiastes would seem perfectly at home in the book of Proverbs. Ecclesiastes 4:9-11 declares that, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone?"; or 7:5, "It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools"; or 8:13, "but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear before God." Such verses offer day-to-day instruction regarding the need for companionship, the value of wisdom over foolishness, and the assured swift end that God will bring to the wicked. These are perhaps fairly characterized as common, "orthodox" Israelite wisdom sayings of a centripetal sort.[188]

Since "Qohelet" is a narrative persona cast in the voice of Solomonic authority, the voice of the book cannot help but participate in this national language of tradition and the speech of traditional sapiential discourse. But, as discussed above, the flesh-and-blood author of the book is not Solomon, and not living during Israel's golden age. Historical-critical work alleges that the book was composed after the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, after the collapse of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, after the Babylonian exile of the 6th century BCE, and

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[188] Cf. Ibid. Kugel writes that according to the "world" of "orthodox" wisdom, "certain things are simply inevitable. Thus, justice must always prevail in the end: the righteous must always be rewarded and the wicked must always be punished" (510).

after the rise of the Persian Empire under Cyrus into the Hellenistic era. In other words, the book was composed at a time of national disillusionment, at a time when the remaining Judahites were utterly powerless and living in the shadow of mighty world empires, experiencing great socioeconomic turmoil (perhaps an economic context not unlike that found in Neh 13:15-16 and 5:3-5), and struggling to come to terms with a national God who had apparently allowed such a series of catastrophes.[189] It was a time when there was a great fervor to recapture lost traditions, rebuild the great temple, and reconstitute a national identity during a time of immense pressure for cultural assimilation.

It is argued below that the narrative speech of Qohelet might try to speak the language of "traditional" or "orthodox" or "authoritative" Israelite Solomonic discourse, but is simultaneously subject to the historical conditions of a new time and place. Qohelet engages and often attempts to imitate Israel's authoritative "national" wisdom traditions (with its own particular values, its beliefs, and its own distinctive language) but pulls it in a centrifugal direction (while this is a natural phenomenon within any utterance for Bakhtin, it is particularly acute here). The narrative voice simultaneously and necessarily possessed a different value system and the unique orientation of a different time and place—a hallmark of dialogism. This unique time and place of Qohelet's narrative "utterance" was far removed from

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[189] Choon-Leong Seow, "Theology When Everything is Out of Control," *Int* 55 (2001): 237-49. Seow suggests that "Ecclesiastes reflects a lively economic environment" similar to that which occurred with the standardization of coinage during the Persian Period under Achmenid rule (241). He continues: "This vitality is attested, too, in the portrayal of fifth-century Jerusalem under the administration of Nehemiah (Neh 13:15-16). At the same time, however, the book of Nehemiah also conveys the volatility of the economy and the vulnerability of ordinary citizens caught in a world of taxes, mortgages, loans, and foreclosures (Neh 5:3-5)" (241).

the age of Solomon, and marked by a lack of power, socioeconomic turmoil, and a view "outside" the authoritative tradition. It is a voice that seeks to "participate" in sapiential Solomonic discourse, but is unable to quite manage it.[190] Qohelet's narration attempts to assimilate the language of a received Israelite wisdom tradition to some degree, and even to participate in its particular value system and speak its particular language—however imperfectly—in a new time and place. Therefore, the result is the heteroglossic and indeed hybridized speech of Qohelet, which is the product of the dialogic interaction of two different languages (authoritative Solomonic wisdom, and a type of second-order reflection on the received wisdom tradition "from the margins") from two different times and places, embattled, often conflictual, internally dialogized, and even self-contradictory.[191] A number of specific textual examples of these phenomena will be provided to support this particular construal of the language within Ecclesiastes, but a brief return to the notion of "hybrid" speech is first necessary.

Imagining Qohelet's Discourse as Hybrid Speech

At times, it even seems that the two distinct "voices" of the Solomonic persona and the sage far-removed from Solomon's era are almost perfectly merged into a single syntactic unit of Qohelet as speaker, an imperfect blend of two very separate

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[190] Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 23. "Traditional sages sought advantage in life through rational thought and virtuous deeds. Qohelet declares such effort futile."

[191] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 141: "what constitutes these different languages is itself something that is extralinguistic: a specific way of conceptualizing, understanding, and evaluating the world."

viewpoints, two different "languages." The book of Ecclesiastes, it is suggested here, exhibits a double-voicing, or what Bakhtin specifically calls "hybrid construction."

> What we are calling a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactical) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two "languages," two semantic and axiological belief systems. We repeat, there is not formal—compositional and syntactic—boundary between these utterances, styles, languages, belief systems; the division of voices and languages takes place within a single, syntactic whole, often within the limits of a simple sentence.[192]

The most thorough treatment of this concept is found in Bakhtin's discussion of Dostoevsky's *Notes From the Underground*.[193] Ecclesiastes is clearly different because Dostoevsky seemed to consciously employ hybridity as a specific element of his narrative art. Nonetheless, Bakhtin notes that despite the fact that the speech of the underground man is presented as a monologue (like Ecclesiastes), it contains within it the incipient seeds of an emerging dialogue—doubly-voiced and hybrid throughout. He writes:

> let us imagine two rejoinders of the most intense dialogue—a discourse and a counter-discourse—which, instead of following one after the other and being uttered by two different mouths, are superimposed one on the other and merge into a *single* utterance issuing from a *single* mouth. These two rejoinders move in opposite directions and clash with one another; therefore their overlapping and merging into a single utterance results in a most intense mutual interruption. This collision of two rejoinders…is now transformed, in the new utterance resulting in their fusion, into the most acute interruption of voices, contradictory in every detail, in every atom of the utterance.[194]

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[192] Ibid., 304-305.

[193] Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 227-37.

[194] Ibid., 209 (author's emphasis); cf. 204-36.

While the degree to which such a phenomenon occurs in the book of Ecclesiastes does not match that of Dostoevsky's underground man, it does seem a helpful way to understand Qohelet's contradictions, his stilted speech, the lack of any clear organization or progression to the text's presentation, the rapid changes in both subject and tone, and the tension between differing values found in specific passages of the book.

Further Textual Evidence:
Examples of Ecclesiastes as an Internally Dialogized Monologue

The interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes offered here draws its inspiration from the notion of dialogism, and some of dialogism's corresponding concepts and implications. The concepts of an "internally dialogized monologue" and "hybrid construction" may be used as a lens through which one might read the book of Ecclesiastes. This particular imaginative construal of the text can be bolstered and supported through an appeal to further textual evidence. Examples of the internally dialogized aspect of Qohelet's speech are not difficult to come by.

First, the very name "Qohelet" suggests hybrid construction. The book of Ecclesiastes makes only a tepid effort at substantiating the Solomonic attribution, especially in comparison with Prov 1:1, by the conspicuous absence of the name Solomon in Ecclesiastes (contrast "Solomon" in Prov 1:1 and Song 1:1). The identity of the speaker "Qohelet" is not clear in Eccl 1:1, though *ben-dāwīd melek bîrûšālāim* implies King Solomon, the wisest person who ever lived (1 Kgs 3:12, 4:29-30,

10:23).[195] Even if Eccl 1:1 is seen as the addition of a "frame narrator" (in addition to Eccl 12:9-14), though, the Solomonic persona is still implied by the first person speaker of 2:4-9 as the royal figure who made "great works" which included building houses, planting vineyards and royal gardens, acquiring servants, and amassing great wealth, and so forth beyond all his predecessors in Jerusalem.[196] The explicit persona named instead is *qōhelet*[197] in Eccl 1:1—there is no scholarly consensus regarding the meaning or significance of this name. It is from the verb קהל thus meaning something like "one who gathers, assembles."[198] While this may refer to the assembling and organizing of proverbial sayings (mentioned explicitly in Eccl 12:9, cf. Solomon in 1 Kgs 5:12), Krüger helpfully notes that the Hebrew *qōhelet* seems to indicate, "(1) a function that is defined in some way that is over against and in relation to a popular assembly…or (2) a representation of this popular assembly or its participants themselves (and the two possibilities do not have to be mutually exclusive)."[199] Unfortunately, Krüger makes no further claims in regard to the significance of these possibilities.

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[195] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, states that in the course of reading, it becomes progressively more clear that Qoheleth's claim to kingship constitutes a "fictive travesty" (40).

[196] While many scholars argue that the Solomonic persona crumbles over the course of the book, exposing it as a fiction, others have done work that shows at least the imprint of Solomonic tradition throughout the book. For a good summary and analysis of some of the parallels between Ecclesiastes and the life of Solomon (or a Solomonic tradition), see Zimmerman, *The Inner World of Qohelet*, 83-87 or Schwab, "Woman as the Object of Qohelet's Search," 73-84.

[197] Traditional English renderings such as "The Teacher" (NIV, NRSV) or "The Preacher" (RSV, NAB) are suggestive and have their own aesthetic merit, though ultimately these translations are unable to capture the semantic pregnancy of the Hebrew.

[198] קהל *niph:* to gather or assemble together, or *hiph:* to gather or assemble someone or something. *Qal* or *piel* forms are not attested.

[199] Krüger, *Qohelet*, 41.

In the first option, *qōhelet* would indicate a person that speaks to a gathering of people from outside of their ranks, but in the second option, *qōhelet* would indicate a voice that issues from one who stands among the people themselves.[200] Thus the very name "Qohelet" seems to foreshadow a certain double-sense[201] which will carry through the work, perhaps flagging and alerting the reader to this characteristic from the outset—Qohelet is at once an "insider" and "outsider," one who speaks both from the center and the margins.

The voice cast in the language of the "Solomonic king" shows a remarkable concern for injustice among the oppressed (Eccl 3:16-17, 4:1). Therefore, it may be surprising that Qohelet insists that the ones responsible for oppression, injustice, and error are often political leaders (like kings) themselves (Eccl 4:8, 10:5-7). At the same time, Qohelet proclaims that the king's command should not be questioned (Eccl 8:2-4), nor should one curse the king (10:20). One wonders whose side Qohelet is on—the political elite or the marginal? Helpfully, Seow notes:

> it is clear from a number of passages that the author looks at kingship from a distance and not as an insider of the royal court (4:13-16); he gives advice on how to behave before the king, rather than how to be king (8:1-6; 10:16-20). It is also unlikely…that a king would point to injustice in the land…. The author seems to speak more as an observer and a critic of society than a ruler.[202]

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[200] Ibid., 41.

[201] Cf. Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel,* 325: "Double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized… A potential dialogue is embedded in them, one as yet unfolded, a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages."

[202] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 37.

Here, one might note how previous biblical scholarship sometimes seems to grasp the ideological "slippage" at work in Ecclesiastes (perhaps without the categories to quite articulate it) as the text is caught in a struggle between at least two different voices, value sets, concerns, and goals.[203]

Then there are the two curious passages about a king and a "poor person" (Eccl 4:13-16; 9:13-16)—the first of which alludes to a time when an unspecified poor person came from prison and ascended the throne, the second of which tells the story of a poor man who could have rescued an unspecified city against an invading king. Both stories, nevertheless, are vague. While some scholars have attempted to identify the specific historical context and referent of such remarks, they remain as enigmatic as ever. Yet such efforts might be misguided—Qohelet may not be after a didactic tidbit from the pages of history but something more akin to wisdom "parable." Read as such, these parables further confirm a dialogic portrayal.

In Eccl 9:14, for example, there is a contrast between a little city with few residents, and a "great king" who besieged it. In Eccl 9:15 the reader learns that within the city was a "poor wise man" who might have delivered it,[204] if only the

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[203] Here, "slippage" indicates how Qohelet's language seems to weave in and out between two different ideological viewpoints: one who speaks as a king or who suggests a king should not be "questioned" and never "cursed." At other times, Qohelet slips into an opposing ideological perspective, speaking as somebody who is decidedly not a king and who is quite critical of political leadership.

[204] Following Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* 310, and taking the clause as an unmarked hypothetical, expressed via the perfect, as is attested in Biblical Hebrew and (more frequently) Mishnaic Hebrew. The translation depends on how one interprets *zākar* in the verse: is it that nobody "remembered" the one who saved the city, or that nobody paid attention to (literally: "brought to mind") the one who *could have* saved the city? I take it to be the latter, since it is the poor man's words which are *ignored* in v. 16.

people paid attention to this sage. But, he was ignored, and presumably the city was overtaken. Qohelet highlights the fact that the wisdom of the "poor man" is usually "thought poorly of" or even "despised" and hence goes unheard (Eccl 9:16b). In these verses, the double-voicing is acute. Two distinct entities are actually affirmed here simultaneously—the first is the nearly irresistible power of the king, and the second is the wisdom of the poor wise man. One needs to remember that it is Qohelet as the Solomonic voice (i.e., the king) and exemplar of wisdom who highlights the value of wisdom[205] in these statements (since it is wisdom that could have allegedly saved the little city). Thus, Qohelet covertly affirms himself, his own authority, and the centripetal orthodoxy of his own language and voice since he is (in part) the Solomonic speaker, the epitome of wisdom. It thus carries an implicit ideological force, and reinforces the authority with which Qohelet's Solomonic persona speaks. More obviously, though, it is the "poor" or neglected person who is simultaneously affirmed—the marginal character whose ignored and silenced voice could have brought salvation to the besieged city. It is this voice that villainizes the "great king" as the agent of the problem to begin with,[206] and the invaluable resistance that the "little" city could have offered against such kingly oppression.

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[205] Of course, wisdom's value is always a relative one (Eccl 2:15), and it too is also subject to the "vanity" pronouncement.

[206] Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*. Also interesting is Seow's discussion of *môšēl bakkĕsîlîm* ("ruler among fools/idiots") in v. 17. It could either have the sense of the one who "rules over idiots," or refer to the top (Seow: the "chief") idiot among other idiots. Hybrid construction is perhaps at work here, too. At the exact time, and in the space of a single phrase, a ruler over idiots affirmed (when voiced as the perspective of a king), simultaneously indicating the biggest idiot among idiots (when voiced as an outsider who is *not* a king).

In telling the brief parable, Qohelet has doubly-inscribed the value of wisdom (its traditional authority and its own "kingly" narrative voice, while paradoxically also affirming the ignored, despised, marginal poor person and the voice of their own marginal wisdom that could save a city from a king) and—in so doing—has actually "given voice" to that previously silenced and ignored poor man in Eccl 9:15b-16. The "poor wise man" who was "thought poorly of" is now redeemed and upheld by the Solomonic voice who (inadvertently) affirms and upholds this marginalized voice in the very telling of the tale. Such are the centrifugal forces at work in the words themselves, immediately destabilizing whatever is put forth as fixed, both affirming and subverting centralized authority, dwelling halfway in the mouth of Solomonic tradition and halfway in the mouth of Qohelet the outsider and pretender.[207]

One might also briefly consider the recurring passages about food, drink, and work. Qohelet sought to discover what was good (*ṭôb*) for humanity (2:3), but discovered there is nothing good (*ʾên -ṭôb*) except eating, drinking and finding enjoyment in toil (cf. Eccl 2:24-25, 3:12-13, 5:11-12, 17, 5:18, 8:15). From the perspective of an authoritative speaker, this voice has the ring of concession or even disappointment over the nothing (*ʾên*) that was found beyond such simple

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[207] Cf. Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel*, 293. One might note that if this assessment is correct, one cannot help wonder if the flesh-and-blood author might be thinking of him or her self here. What better way for a marginalized voice to be heard than pretend to Solomonic authority and ensure that a voice at the margins *is* heard and preserved—not resented, forgotten, or silenced? Of course, the simultaneous result of such an endeavor is to likewise affirm and solidify the authority of the "wisdom of Solomon" too. This is the nature of hybrid speech. One might then conclude that the narrative strategy of Ecclesiastes in general seems to be "conventionally subversive" in that it both affirms traditional power structures while attempting to pull them apart, and this often occurs within the space of a single word or phrase.

physiological pleasures. Yet voiced from the perspective of the marginal or oppressed (i.e., someone who lies far beyond the realm of the king or court, especially those people with whom Qohelet is concerned in Eccl 3:16-17; 4:1; 4:8; 10:5-7), the recommendation to eat, drink, and find enjoyment (ex. Eccl 2:24, 25; 3:13; 5:18; 8:15, 9:17) is not a concession but a profoundly egalitarian affirmation. Everyone, in principle, has the capacity to eat and drink and work, and so everyone—whether king or oppressed, those with authority or without—can enjoy. Eating and drinking and working cannot be the exclusive property of the king. So even the value of eating, drinking, and enjoyment in work may either seem promising and comforting on the one hand, or terribly insufficient on the other—perhaps even depending upon the day or moment, and always according to a certain perspective. Apparently, one's interpretations might depend on whether one predominantly hears the voice of Qohelet as issuing from the center of power and orthodoxy (which are always the authoritative and centripetal forces within language), or a voice from the margins in solidarity with the heterodox, the marginal, and the oppressed (which always constitute the centrifugal forces within language).

Likewise, there is hybridity in the "vanity" pronouncements. In the mouth of Qohelet-as-Solomonic persona, the pronouncement that all is "vanity" is certainly negative, even desperate (one hears in Eccl 1:8a that "all things are wearisome," and in 2:17, "so I hated life")—it is the voice of a king who has said it all (cf. Eccl 1:8), seen it all (Eccl 1:14, 7:15), and done it all (Eccl 2:9) in light of an end that will remain unchanged regardless of that "all-ness." The words seem to come easily to

the Solomonic voice, who has both the singular authority and vast experience (Eccl 2:9) to make such a claim—that all is truly "vanity."[208] But to the ears of the outsider, the powerless, the oppressed, those far beyond the authority of the king and court (cf. 3:16-17; 4:1; 4:8; 10:5-7) the centripetal words may have the ring of a certain pretension and melodrama—did the king actually think his end would be any different than theirs? Perhaps to the marginalized, this is a voice of solidarity and comfort, like a knowing glance at one's toiling neighbor—a neighbor who toils in solidarity along "with you" (cf. Eccl 4:9-12). Perhaps a failure to recognize that all is "vanity" can only mean that one is bound to its dictates: a solitary senseless striving, accumulation of wealth, competition, and so forth (one might note, for example, all of the alleged accomplishments of Qohelet in the "Solomonic fiction" of Eccl 2:1-10). To recognize that all is "vanity" in a sense indicates a profound freedom over it: the capacity to pause and wonder at the silliness of it all, to find comfort and contentment despite lacking the wealth, power, and status of a king (e.g. Eccl 5:12). This is the precisely the voice of those "outsiders" who are already foreshadowed within the hybridized name *qōhelet*. At this moment, this it is not a voice "over against and in relation to a popular assembly," but "a representation of this popular assembly or its participants themselves."[209] This is the collective, communal, "popular" voice with the capacity to decry the pretentious superiority of

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[208] Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory* (ed. David L. Barr; Analecta Biblica; Boston: Brill, 1998) suggests juxtaposing the "vanity" statements with the joy statements in the book, opening up a degree of gapping within the narrative for the reader to fill in (15). However, he then seems to imply that the "vanity" pronouncements can only be read one way—that is, as irredeemably negative.

[209] Krüger, *Qohelet*, 41.

the wealthy and the elite: vanity of vanities! The race is not always to the swift, nor battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise after all (Eccl 9:11).

The book does contain phrases and notions that sound more in alignment with Solomonic proverbial tradition in some places, or more in alignment with a marginal, non-powerful, "popular" voice far removed from the king and Solomonic proverbial tradition in others.[210] This constitutes an internally dialogized monologue. Most helpful, though, is the recognition that within the discourse, these polarities are simultaneously operative even within the boundaries of a single word (like the name "Qohelet"). Therefore, such a discourse must be self-contradictory, as if in dialogue and disagreement with itself. Bakhtin himself maintained that one's consciousness, too, may be a "tension-filled environment of centripetal and centrifugal forces.[211] Consciousness may struggle; it may be messy, unsystematized, tense, and full of contradictions.

The Inevitability of Qohelet's Contradictions And The Inevitable Attempt to Finalize

Some scholars have tried to resolve Qohelet's contradictions, and a few scholars now agree that they are a vital part of the overall "message" of the book.[212] Still, the tendency is to polarize such contradictions, and offer the usual "monologizations" of

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[210] See Kugel, *How to Read the Bible,* 509-11. As previously noted, "Solomonic proverbial tradition" is understood here as the equivalent of "orthodox wisdom" in the manner described by Kugel and exemplified by the book of Proverbs. Kugel states that Ecclesiastes is "in some ways [orthodox wisdom's] opposite."

[211] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 145.

[212] See esp. Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, *passim*.

"positive" or "negative." Eunny Lee, for example, emphasizes an overall positivity within the book, and writes, "Qohelet observes the world in all its contrariness in order to overturn all notions of human certainty and underscore the inscrutability of God," which is the apparent result of Qohelet's certainty of the uncertain, or Qohelet's assured wisdom that wisdom is assuredly unattainable (Eccl 7:23).[213] Scholars might resolve Qohelet's contradictions, but offer little in the way of explanation as to why and how these contradictions exist in the first place, and why they are perhaps inevitable in a discourse that is internally dialogized and hybridized. And contradictions certainly abound within the book: wisdom is belittled (Eccl 1:17-18, 2:15-16) then affirmed (Eccl 2:13, 7:11, 9:16-18), the value of pleasure is questioned (Eccl 2:2-3, 10-11) and elsewhere recommended (Eccl 2:24-26, 5:18-20), Qohelet claims to hate life (Eccl 2:17) but also affirms it (Eccl 9:4-6, 11:7), and so on. The result is a voice that is simultaneously authoritative while it undoes its own authority at every turn, one that seeks unity while destabilizing itself in a constant struggle.

The result of an internally dialogized discourse like that of Ecclesiastes is one that sounds *both* positive and negative, optimistic *and* pessimistic—indeed, pulling in many directions all at once. Scholars seem to err when they commit a "monologic assumption" when assessing Qohelet's voice, which constrains them to make a choice whether Qohelet is essentially an optimist or pessimist—to hear only one of the book's multiplicity of internal voices. The narration is internally dialogized, not purely monologic. Without recourse to interdisciplinary insight or perhaps a

[213] Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment,* 929.

willingness to creatively and imaginatively engage the material at hand, biblical scholarship will simply lack conceptual tools that otherwise might explain Qohelet and expand its own scholarly imagination.

Bakhtin writes that authoritative, monologic discourse, "demands that we acknowledge [its authority], that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally;"[214] while Morson and Emerson maintain that such authoritative discourse "is sensed as something that is inherited and unquestionable, as a voice from a zone infinitely distant."[215] If anything, the history of the book of Ecclesiastes' reception teaches us that Qohelet's hybrid and internally dialogized voice is certainly questionable, and binds us to nothing—it is not monologic. It is a voice that is itself filled with both assent and dispute regarding tradition and what counts as authoritative, binding, and allegedly unquestionable. It is irreducibly dialogical.

It is possible to understand Eccl 12:13 as the re-entry of such an "authoritative" voice into the book of Ecclesiastes as a whole, issuing from the frame narrator: a voice that is ostensibly "inherited and unquestionable"[216] and attempts to "bind" Qohelet's narration "quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally."[217] Eccl 12:13 states: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone." This might strike one as a transparent attempt at finalization and closure

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[214] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 342.

[215] Morson & Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 219.

[216] Ibid.

[217] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 342.

that rings empty in light of the foregoing analysis (perhaps as an audacious claim that might provoke a swift “responsive understanding”—how can this abrupt intrusion and attempt at closure somehow be the “*end* of the matter?”). Is it possible to say that the book’s “conclusion” in 12:13 is the verse that sounds the most “pro forma” (to borrow Brueggemann’s phrase)? But the attempt to close off and silence Qohelet’s “utterance” as part of a larger and ongoing dialogical whole cannot succeed. The struggle to engage and appropriate tradition in new times and places necessarily continues, and it must be so. Yet it is no easy process, if Ecclesiastes is any indication.

The Superaddressee within Ecclesiastes

The preceding discussion has construed Ecclesiastes as an embattled, contradictory, internally dialogized text that might superficially be seen as resistant to theological appropriation, since even its own attempt to appropriate received tradition is a conflicted one. But the suggestion offered here, rather, is that any faith tradition or interpreting community who treats the text as “Holy Scripture” (and so who aim to derive some degree of living guidance for both faith and life from it) might certainly appropriate the text, and appreciate it as an important contribution to biblical theology.

Again, Bahtin is helpful here too. For Bakhtin, any given utterance not only involves a speaker who responds to previous utterances, and an addressee whose responsive understanding is anticipated, but also includes an invisible third

presence. This is what Bakhtin calls the "superaddressee."[218] Since the possibility of misunderstanding any given "utterance" is always a very real one among actual persons, every "utterance" contains within it the hope of an ideal (or "real") but ever-invisible presence who possesses a perfect degree of responsive understanding in relation to a given speaker.[219] When one speaks, one hopes to be perfectly understood, and this involves an unconscious recognition or projection of some presence capable of such understanding. The utterance, in other words, unconsciously acknowledges one who is absolutely incapable of misunderstanding in the way an actual addressee might.[220] One might say that the "hope" to be perfectly understood is always inscribed within any utterance. For Bakhtin, this superaddressee is a "constitutive aspect of the whole utterance, who, under deeper analysis, can be revealed in it."[221] Perhaps the best way to grasp Qohelet in the interest of biblical theology and to enable book's theological appropriation, then, is to posit God as the presumed superaddressee throughout Ecclesiastes in order to further explore the book's "potential to mean."

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[218] Ibid., 135.

[219] Ibid.

[220] Ibid. Psalm 139:2-4 might reasonably support such a view, though one must be rightly wary of attempting to offer a "proof text" for any notion of God's "perfect understanding:" "You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely" (NRSV) Cf. Ps 139:23.

[221] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres,* 126-27.

In Ecclesiastes, the "silence" of God is sometimes noted.[222] God never makes an appearance in the text in the manner of the book of Job, for example. God does not speak. According to Qohelet, God gives wisdom to whom God will (Eccl 2:26) and God grants wealth to whom God will (Eccl 5:19). Qoheleth may claim to know what is "good" (Eccl 5:18; 7:18) or what is "from the hand of God," (Eccl 2:24; 9:1), but God never makes any appearance in the text, nor does God confirm any such affirmations. This aspect of God's silence is especially pertinent to the book considering the proclamation of Eccl 5:2, "Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few." The same sentiment may be felt elsewhere, as if references to God (as some supreme authority) are merely implicit. For example, Eccl 8:2-3, "Keep the king's command because of your sacred oath. Do not be terrified; go from his presence, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever he pleases."[223] Qohelet never directly addresses the deity, and God never addresses Qohelet. The apparent silence of God, however, and Qohelet's singular concern only with life "under the sun" does not mean that God is somehow absent. God may be construed as present everywhere in the book, and this presence is always felt in God's silence as the Superaddressee. This notion, however, will require further explanation.

The fact is that many of Qohelet's experiential reflections and observatory

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[222] See Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, who, for example, writes that "[t]here is only *silence* on Yahweh's part, perhaps to match the resignation and the cold concession of the witness" (394, emphasis mine).

[223] For a possible connection between God and king in Eccl 8:2-3, see Scott C. Jones, "Qohelet's Courtly Wisdom: Ecclesiastes 8:1-9," *CBQ* 68 (2006): 211-28; esp. 222.

reveries (e.g. *rāʾîtî* or "I saw" in Eccl 2:24; 3:10; 3:16; 3:22; 4:1; 4:4; 4:7; 4:15; 5:12; 5:17; 6:1; 7:15; 8:9; 8:17; 9:11) seem to address nobody in particular, except maybe himself (e.g. Eccl 1:16: *dibbartî ʾănî ʿim-libbî* often translated "I said in my heart" or "I said to myself," and Eccl 2:1; 2:15; 3:18: *ʾāmartî ʾănî*, translated as "I said" but seemingly to nobody in particular). These observations only address the reader-addressee—the secondary party to Qohelet's narration—and only in an oblique manner at best. Yet one might creatively understand such speech as always spoken in the presence of the superaddressee; of an invisible third-party. By the very nature of the utterance (as articulated by Bakhtin), Qohelet always speaks and hopes to be perfectly understood—a concrete utterance is always spoken to someone else, but always in the presence of this third-party. Qohelet may therefore be construed as everywhere speaking out (often in indignant complaint) in the presence of the superaddressee. Such complaints are evident in verses such as Eccl 4:1, "Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them;" or 6:2, "[there are] those to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that they lack nothing of all that they desire, yet God does not enable them to enjoy these things, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous ill;" or Eccl 8:14 "there is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I saw that this also is vanity." Further complaints occur in Eccl 1:8, where everything is wearisome; 2:15, where wisdom seems pointless and futile; 2:23,

where human lives are full of suffering; 3:19, where humans are ostensibly no better than animals; 4:4, where all human work proceeds from envy of another; 6:7, where humans can never be satisfied; and so forth. In light of these instances of complaint which take place before the superaddressee (an ever-present and constitutive aspect of the utterance according to Bakhtin) one must disagree with Brueggemann's claim that Qohelet has somehow "has lost any passion or impetus to cry out to Yahweh."[224] It is premature, if not wrong-headed, to claim that Qohelet is a mere "hostile witness, going through the paces but not really caring if anyone is persuaded by this utterance of guarded negativity."[225] Qohelet, quite to the contrary, by the very virtue of his "utterance," seems to care deeply about injustice and unfairness and envy and dissatisfaction. Qohelet may himself advise that one's "words be few" (Eccl 5:2) amidst a weary world where God is silent and all is *hebel*, yet Qohelet seemingly cannot himself manage to take his own advice and remain silent. Qohelet keeps on talking and complaining and observing and "uttering." The whole of Qohelet's narration, viewed as dialogical utterance, cannot help but hope to be perfectly understood, and to anticipate some form of rejoinder. Viewed in this way, throughout the book, there is everywhere an embedded appeal—even plea—to a superaddressee whose presence is always felt precisely in this superaddressee's (perhaps disturbing) textual silence.[226]

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[224] Ibid., 398.

[225] Ibid., 394.

[226] Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, for instance points toward a recognition of God's presence throughout the book despite God's silence, often through Qohelet's affirmations of simple enjoyments and the comforts to be found in day-to-day life: "Ecclesiastes recounts the journey of an ancient sage

Qohelet voices outrage, complacency, despondence, and confusion while simultaneously seeing joy, enjoyment, friendship, and goodness from God in the world. Any utterance of complaint and defiance, along with expressions of goodness and acceptance, whether consciously or unconsciously, may be seen as directed toward God, the Superaddressee. Again, this notion does not somehow constitute a "correct" reading, or the only reading, of Qohelet's discourse: it is an imaginative construal of the text in light of an interdisciplinary heuristic framework that is geared toward biblical theology. Qohelet's internally-dialogized monologue speaks two conflicting languages of goodness and complaint; of authority and powerlessness; ultimately confirming the difficulty of appropriating the "language of tradition" within a new time and place. Some form of affirmation of tradition may finally come in Ecclesiastes (cf. Eccl 12:13), but it may prove a terribly authoritative and "monologic" rejoinder of a "voice from a zone infinitely distant."[227] Appropriation, according to Ecclesiastes, is an arduous process, rife with struggle, and is never completely finalized.

Ecclesiastes: Construing the Book as Biblical Theology

Admittedly, and as previously discussed, this "interdisciplinary textual commentary" constitutes an imaginative re-reading of Ecclesiastes: a search for the potential embedded in its language, and so a study of Qohelet's "potential to mean"

who returns not only empty-handed in his ambitious quest to figure out life but also open-handed to the God of the simple gifts" (137).

[227] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 219.

into the future. This activity has been conducted in light of what the book "meant," "has been meaning," and "means" as a part of this ongoing dialogue. Since this is the case, one must again reiterate that this is not "imagination" without limit: it remains in dialogue with historical criticism (Collins), interpretations and commentaries throughout history (Fishbane), and contemporary analyses of the book (Brueggemann). Still, biblical theology ultimately and always continues to look forward. It imagines.

Thus, it is through a broad (albeit partial and incomplete) understanding of the cultural context of Ecclesiastes, its afterlife throughout history (which attests to its contested value amongst various faith communities, and its tendency to be reduced "positive" or "negative" monologic categories), and contemporary scholarly analyses that perpetuate an "optimistic" or "pessimistic" paradigm along with claims of its disorganized and self-contradictory nature among scholars (with little account of why such a narration is inevitable) that enables the biblical theologian to see some of the contours and tensions reflected in a two-millennia long dialogue regarding Qohelet. In the attempt to enter into this dialogue, the biblical theologian looks to offer a further rejoinder, employing imagination and a "creative understanding"[228] to offer yet another provisional utterance in the interest of sustaining that dialogue into the future. The "provisional monologization" or rejoinder which biblical theology might offer finds its inspiration in any number of existing hermeneutical approaches, or through all manner of interdisciplinary or

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[228] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 7

confessional lenses in the attempt to voice a new utterance that is, nevertheless, never entirely new.

The imaginative approach offered above sees that the text of Ecclesiastes itself as profoundly dialogized, reflecting an intense internal battle at the "center" and "margins" to appropriate a received authoritative tradition in a new time and place. The result is a conflicted, stilted, and contradictory text that essentially depicts the process of engaging the centripetal and authoritative word (or Word) rather than its finished or finalized product. Such a future-oriented and imaginative reading of Ecclesiastes is "biblical theology" insofar as it is geared toward two specific ends. First, it attempts to sustain such communities through an "ever-new attempt to speak of the reality of God and direct the self toward this truth."[229] Second, it aims to creatively exposit the biblical text in such a way that enables a text's continued appropriation among confessional communities into the future.

Qohelet, the Reality of God, and Death

Biblical theology as conceived in the present discussion aims to speak of the reality of God, and to foster a sustained awareness of God's presence throughout the course of one's life. According to this view, biblical theology is unapologetically and unavoidably confessional in nature—but only when it presses *beyond* historical criticism and reception history, the latter two activities of which still remain integral to the overall task as conceived dialogically. But one should also remember that biblical theology also looks toward the future, as it constitutes "an ongoing centering

[229] Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement*, 1-2.

within life—in preparation for death."[230] Biblical theology looks toward the definitive future in this sense too. Qohelet, in light of an imaginative exploration regarding its "potential to mean," can certainly contribute to the goals of speaking of God, of fostering and sustaining an awareness of God throughout life, and doing all of this in light of the reality—and in preparation for—death.

First, as previously discussed, the suggestion that God is the "superaddressee" of the entirety of Qohelet's narration implies that God is listening, especially when outcries over injustice and oppression are concerned (cf. Exod 2:23-25).[231] This occurs despite all appearances to the contrary according to the very nature of the utterance—the invisible third presence always listens. To speak of the reality of God in Ecclesiastes is to maintain that outcries over injustice and oppression along with the articulation of futility are perhaps always heard, no matter how far-off or silent God seems to be. It is difficult to dismiss such an assertion in light of Exod 2:23-25, where the oppressed Israelites merely cried out with the hope for help and understanding (v. 23), but their cry was apparently directed toward no one in particular. Their cry "rose up" to a God whom they did not yet know (v. 23, cf. Exod 3:14) and who had not yet been revealed to them. God heard (Exod 2:24). God remembered (v. 24). God took notice (v. 25).

Qohelet too speaks to a similar experience of an allegedly silent or far-off or not fully-known God (note that the personal name, "YHWH," never appears in the

[230] Ibid., 206.

[231] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics.* The superaddressee, by the very nature of the utterance, is always construed as a third presence who "listens" (135).

text). Qohelet affirms the experience of futility that likely accompanies this sense of silence or distance in the midst of oppression and injustice and futility.[232] In his own idiosyncratic way, Qohelet too "cries out"—but from a very different perspective, in a very different way, and places his own particular accent on such an experience. To "speak of the reality of God" according to Ecclesiastes is to acknowledge that maintaining a sustained "awareness of God as the heart and breath of all existence" can falter. This, one might claim, comes with the territory of living a concrete life.

In this fashion, and because biblical theology is finally confessional, it seems reasonable to place Qohelet in dialogue with the broader biblical canon with texts like Exod 2:23-25, however the "canon" is construed among various traditions. William Brown, for example, makes some very astute connections by placing Ecclesiastes in conversation with the broader biblical canon from a Christian standpoint, and observes how the New Testament intersects with the various themes and "voices" of Qohelet (esp. Matt 5:45; Luke 13:1-5; Jas 4:14, 16; 1 Cor 15:12, 22; John 12:24; Rom 8:19-20; etc.).[233] If the biblical theologian is able to identify certain elements across various texts "which shape each perspective" and "trace the dotted line to a point at which [each] intersects the claims of the other" in order to "go beyond what the texts themselves explicitly say to draw out the implications of their ideas as they can be revealed in dialogue with other

[232] Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, notes that beyond "vapor" or "breath" or "futility," *hebel* can also "sometimes indicate a thing of baffling unfairness or injustice" (511).

[233] Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 121-37.

perspectives,"[234] then biblical theology might certainly explore the ways in which a text's "potential to mean" interacts with other biblical texts. The purpose of the present discussion is not to explore this cross-canonical aspect of dialogism in any detail, but one may nevertheless claim that such activity holds much potential for biblical theology.[235]

But also according to the purpose of biblical theology as proposed above, the task also aims for "an ongoing centering within life—in preparation for death."[236] Qohelet certainly has a lot to say about death.[237] Qohelet dares claim that death is better than birth in Eccl 7:1. Qohelet is deeply concerned with what profit or surplus (*yitrôn* in Eccl 1:3; cf. 2:11; 2:13; 3:9; 5:15; 10:11) humans have from all their toil (*āmēl*), but concludes that there is no such profit—it is merely a toiling for "wind" (Eccl 2:11; 5:15) in light of a death that no one escapes (Eccl 2:14-17; 3:20; 5:15; *passim*). Qohelet is everywhere concerned with the end of life. He claims that he hated (*śānēʾtî*) his toil since all must be left to the one who comes after him—that is, after his death (Eccl 2:18)—since it will be their own (and possibly undeserved according to Eccl 2:19) "portion" (*ḥeleq*, Eccl 2:21). Everyone dies, and there will be no remembrance of those of the past, or those who will die in the future (Eccl 1:11). Whether wise or foolish, none will be remembered (Eccl 2:16).

[234] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," 305.

[235] Ibid., 305.

[236] Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement*, 206.

[237] See Brown, *Ecclesiastes,* 122-24.

In light of these claims, Qoheleth seems to be portrayed as an elderly sage, reflecting upon the once vibrant past of his youth: the momentous "Solomonic" achievements in the royal fiction of Eccl 1:12-2:11 and his own broad life experience in the remainder of the book with the recommendation that one enjoy life while one can (Eccl 12:1). William Brown points out that according to Rabbinic tradition, "the Song of Songs was written by Solomon in his youth, Proverbs in his prime, and Ecclesiastes in his old age."[238] Many scholars suggest that the poem of old age and death in Eccl 12:1-8, with its evocation of bodily failing, decay, and the loss of all sexual desire possibly point to the narrator's old age and approaching death.[239] Part of Qohelet's sense of futility might issue from the very perspective of an elderly sage, no longer relevant to the sphere of reproduction—which is to say, no longer relevant to future life, and where he will not be remembered. Old sages are perhaps only left with their "wisdom"—a wisdom that, Qoheleth admits, often eludes him anyway (Eccl 7:23-24). In short, Qohelet's contemplations seem to come as the narrator is finally approaching the undeniable reality of his own death.

To reiterate Qohelet's thoroughgoing concern with death throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, death is the inevitable end of both the wise and foolish (Eccl 1:14-15), the human and the animal (Eccl 3:20), the righteous and the wicked (Eccl 9:2), the pious and impious (Eccl 9:2) and so of all people (Eccl 6:6). Death has an impartial, unbiased, egalitarian nature according to Qohelet's portrayal. So death,

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[238] Ibid., 11.

[239] James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (*The Old Testament Library*; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 187, allows that 12:5 may might indicate that "sexual desire fades" as one approaches death; such sexual desire concerns itself with new life, and its loss leaves one only to face the reality of death (187). Cf. NRSV, "desire fails," and NIV, "desire is no longer stirs."

according to a dialogic understanding, is somewhat hybridized as both a positive and negative affair—simultaneously dwelling within a language that voices the "bitter end" and in a language that affirms it as a "great equalizer" among all people.[240]

Reading Qohelet as biblical theology, the book affirms the feelings of futility and bewilderment when facing the inevitable end from which no one will escape. It perhaps legitimates these feelings. An articulation of the book in such a manner—a frank, brazenly candid, and brutally honest confrontation with the end of life in preparation for death—is a vital aspect of biblical theology because Fishbane claims that theology, in part, prepares one to face death. All must face death, and all must finally do their own dying. In other words, every human being must face their final moments, whether peacefully or frightfully, and too—even if considered metaphorically—must bow their head, surrender, and utter the only words that are left to say: "It is finished."[241]

But, the good news is that, viewed dialogically, all is only provisionally "finished." This is because the "Final" Word has not yet been spoken. For the time being, the future will offer a rejoinder. The Word is always revived, resurrected, and remains alive and living. The Word lives into the future in an ongoing and yet-to-be finalized dialogue.

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[240] Daniel J. Harrington, *Jesus Ben Sira of Jerusalem: A Biblical Guide to Living Wisely* (ed. Barbara Green; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005). Harrington is one of many scholars who note that Qohelet recognizes that death is the "great equalizer" (18, 19, 37).

[241] John 19:30.

The Theological Appropriation of Ecclesiastes

Imaginative re-readings of the Bible also constitute biblical theology whenever they seek assimilation: when they enable "theological appropriation" by accenting (or rather re-accenting) the biblical materials and its subsequent interpretive traditions in such a way that the texts remain contemporarily relevant and so "available" to various faith communities. Morson and Emerson write that, "[a]ssimiliation involves 'reaccenting the word' [or 'utterance'], giving it a new aura, developing potential meanings in it."[242] As biblical theology seeks an as-of-yet-not-realized appropriation, it is oriented toward the future. Said differently, biblical theology aims to nurture a confessional tradition's dialogic interaction with the biblical materials and its interpretive traditions.

It is therefore fascinating that both Jewish and Christian traditions have ultimately endorsed Qohelet's own voice by "canonizing" it in the Hebrew Bible. In doing so, both traditions have subsequently destined themselves to do with Qohelet just as Qohelet once had to do: to wrestle with their own tradition (including its particular languages and values and perspectives) in a struggle for appropriation. Now that Qohelet's dialogized and conflicted voice is itself part of the "tradition" within the biblical canon, confessional perspectives are therefore required to articulate in what the sense Qohelet still constitutes a part of Judeo-Christian tradition. Many interpretive approaches in the interest of biblical theology—whether of Collins, Brueggemann, or Fishbane, will eventually confront Qohelet. And Qohelet notoriously resists all domestication.

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[242] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 220.

Among other possibilities, the foregoing reading of Ecclesiastes (viewed as utterance), for instance, allows for a contemporary existential connection to the work for modern readers. Modern day Jews and Christians might sympathize with Qohelet's struggle with a seemingly silent God in a seemingly unjust world. Contemporary communities might identify with the attempt to appropriate the authoritative Word of tradition. Whenever tradition is construed as an "authoritative discourse," it "demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own . . . quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally."[243] It could be said that Qohelet bravely squares off with authoritative tradition, attempts to appropriate it, and ultimately succeeds in a sense, if only by stamping the tradition with his own odd "accent" in the difficult and always dialogical process of assimilation.

It is precisely our own contemporary situation of "outsidedness"[244] to the text of Ecclesiastes and the whole of its culture that nevertheless enables us to realize its "potential to mean." This is in light of a superficially "silent" or even absent God in our own time—the latter value of which is both foreign to the biblical text, yet somehow still "potentially" embedded within it. Ecclesiastes is perhaps one of the few biblical books which legitimates and permits one to challenge wisdom, tradition, and traditional theological authority in the manner of Qohelet, to similarly cry out in bitter complaint over injustice, and to simultaneously affirm the necessary

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[243] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 342.

[244] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 7. Cf. no. 67; 75.

struggle involved in attempting to make the Word one's own; of that Word finally becoming "internally persuasive."[245] As Bakhtin insists:

> The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, with his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but it rather exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own…. Language is not a neutral medium that passes easily and freely into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.[246]

According to this understanding, texts like Ecclesiastes are "saturated" with the various meanings and intents and accents of those who have received, copied, altered, transmitted, read, repeated, and disseminated them far beyond an "original" author and "original" meaning. The biblical texts are the property and product of an infinite intent. The foregoing imaginative construal of the "biblical theology" of Ecclesiastes has thus attempted to re-accent the book in such a way as to encourage the appropriation of the "utterance" of Qohelet with the hope of enabling others to

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[245] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, writes that "[i]nternally persuasive discourse—as opposed to one that is externally authoritative—is, as it is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with 'one's own word.' In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition. It is not so much interpreted by us as it is further, that is, freely, developed, applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts…. The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is *not finite*, it is *open*; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer *ways to mean"* (346, author's emphases).

[246] Ibid., 293-294.

subsequently make that "utterance" their own into the future. It aims for "theological appropriation."[247]

This exploration of Qohelet's "potential to mean" has attempted to do justice to the book when viewed as "utterance" (considered within its possible historical context), and to many of the "utterances" concerning the book that have succeeded it throughout history. It has attempted to treat all such utterances as "provisional monologizations" within an ongoing dialogue. It has construed the activity of biblical theology as part of this larger dialogical whole. It does not seek to "finalize" or close off any discussion of Ecclesiastes or biblical theology in general, but humbly aims to contribute to a much larger, ongoing, and as-yet incomplete dialogue. Nevertheless, the preceding discussion insists that imagination is a fundamental value for all future rejoinders to this particular dialogue regarding biblical theology. The attempt to explore the "potential of biblical texts to mean" requires one to glance back at history, embrace the present, and finally muster the courage to offer a modest, provisional, yet constructive rejoinder—not regarding what already is, but to imagine what could be. Imagination is necessary for the sake of future theological appropriation.

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[247] One might reasonably object that some biblical texts should *not* be appropriated, whether one finds them misogynistic, oppressive, or construes them as potentially legitimating dangerous ideologies (and so forth) according to contemporary ethical standards, viewpoints, and discernment. Carolyn Sharp (in Brueggemann and Sharp, *Living Countertestimony*), 73, points toward such possible texts that exhibit "xenophobia, misogyny, war-mongering [and] jihadist mentality, and so on." The reading of Ecclesiastes offered above recognizes that any given "tradition" might only be partially appropriated, particularly in light of one's experience, and perhaps a complete "appropriation" of a tradition—textual or otherwise—is impossible, and filled with struggle at best. Jon Levenson, "The Perils of Engaged Scholarship: A Rejoinder to Jorge Pixley," in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (eds. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), writes that "Biblical theologians need not, in my view, accept all that they find in the text, but they are obligated to listen patiently to it and to acknowledge the existence of what they cannot accept and its relationship with the remainder" (275).

Biblical Theology or a "Bakhtinian" Biblical Theology?"

Suggesting a conceptualization of biblical theology according to a dialogic epistemology reasonably raises the question: is the entire foregoing account of biblical theology (along with its illustration through the book of Ecclesiastes) properly considered a "biblical theology," or does it ultimately constitute a mere "Bakhtinian biblical theology" narrowly construed? Does the entirety of the present discussion finally just (1) comprise another "approach" to biblical theology, requiring a wholesale subscription to Bakhtin's account of language and meaning, or does it (2) recommend a constructive and comprehensive reconceptualization for the future of academic biblical theology writ large?

As a selective and tentative synthesis of the work of John Collins, Walter Brueggemann, and Michael Fishbane, the present argument maintains only that Bakhtin provides a helpful overall heuristic framework through the notion of dialogism. It suggests that some of Bakhtin's thought might further be employed for "imaginative" readings of biblical texts (among other potentially limitless possible opportunities for hermeneutical, interdisciplinary, and confessional engagement). But biblical theology as presently conceived, it is argued, constitutes something that is "biblical theology" proper, and does not necessarily *require* any recourse to Bakhtin.

In other words, Bakhtin's notion of dialogism suggests a clearly articulated way of "picking up the pieces" of various activities and practices that already exist within biblical scholarship, though which have not yet been combined in order to conceive a clear path forward for biblical theology. The historical-critical emphasis

of John Collins, and over two-hundred years of modern biblical scholarship have already established the prominence and importance of historical study (philological, archaeological, text criticism, redaction criticism, and so forth) within the field. The necessity of historical study for the task of biblical theology remains ever important, as suggested already in J.P. Gabler's famous address in 1787, even if his claim that "pure notions" somehow inhere in the biblical texts is suspect (as discussed in chapter one).[248] Presently, one will find no call for an abandonment of the historical-critical enterprise. One therefore already finds value in historical criticism without any particular recourse to Bakhtin.

Furthermore, and in addition to the "biblical theology" of John Collins, a relatively recent emphasis upon the history of biblical interpretation and reception should be noted within the field of academic biblical studies.[249] This scholarly activity seems in general alignment with much of Michael Fishbane's attention to the significance of biblical interpretation and reinterpretation and further exegetical commentary over the course of history in the interest of a "Jewish theology." Scholarly interest in the history of interpretation and reception of biblical study is similar to—although not identical with—the assertion that a religious tradition like Judaism "characteristically understands itself by commenting on its own earlier traditions."[250] The history of interpretation and reception similarly attempts to

[248] J. Sandys-Wunsch and L. Eldridge, "J.P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of his Originality," *SJT* 33 (1980): 135-58.

[249] See esp. Dale C. Allison, Jr., Christine Helmer, Choon-Leong Seow et. al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (30 vols.; Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2009-).

[250] Fishbane, *Judaism*, 12.

recover, articulate, and comment upon earlier interpretive traditions. This activity, too, requires no recourse to Bakhtin.

Further still, contemporary works of biblical theology in the manner of Walter Brueggemann, whether they attempt to capture an understanding of the whole of the Bible (as in the courtroom metaphor), or whether they offer piecemeal "theological interpretations,"[251] often overtly recognize themselves as interpretive activities that "preclude certitude,"[252] that perhaps offer only one of "many readings of particular texts,"[253] all of which may modestly constitute only a "tract for the time[s]."[254] As Olson writes, many contemporary "tomes of biblical theology" remain self-conscious "provisional monologizations."[255] So whether explicitly stated or not, such interpretive activity understands itself as but one utterance among many. Brueggemann and Childs, for example, "are humble and realistic enough to be aware of the inherent inadequacy and provisionality of such large summational and integrative endeavors."[256] The recognition that one merely participates in a larger and ongoing discussion regarding "biblical theology" also requires no particular recourse to Bakhtin.

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[251] See esp. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Joel B. Green, "Introducing the Journal of Theological Interpretation," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1 (2007).

[252] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament,* 110.

[253] Ibid.

[254] Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust*, 125.

[255] Olson, "Provisional Monologization," 179.

[256] Ibid.

The present argument insists that biblical theology within academia finally becomes "biblical theology" proper when it ultimately gathers up the ostensible "original" meanings of texts, historical interpretation, and contemporary engagement with the texts in order to perceive the yet-incomplete whole of biblical theology and interpretation, and to offer a rejoinder. It glances over the course of history into the present, but ultimately looks toward the future. It imagines. It concerns itself with the "potential to mean." Fishbane, one must reiterate, has already advocated for the values of imagination and creativity within the act of interpretation by recommending "creative readings of [Scripture's] inherent, *God-given possibilities*."[257] Fishbane too looks toward the future. His own emphasis upon creativity, potential meaning, and imagination never mentions, nor apparently requires, any particular recourse to Bakhtin.

Suggesting an integration of historical criticism, the history of biblical interpretation and reception, and contemporary works of "biblical theology" and theological interpretation, it appears, can be done without Bakhtin. It is merely that Bakhtin and dialogism offer an extremely helpful lens through which "picking up the pieces" of biblical scholarship in the interest of biblical theology can be seen. Bakhtin and the notion of dialogism are useful in reconceiving the task and purpose of a constructive biblical theology, but neither is absolutely mandatory, and thus the suggestions here do not equate to a mere "Bakhtinian biblical theology." What is ultimately aimed at here is rather an integrated approach to a constructive biblical theology, not a mere "Bakhtinian approach" to biblical theology.

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[257] Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination*, emphasis mine.

A Provisional Conclusion

The preceding chapters of the current study have primarily attempted to offer a broad overview of the work of John Collins, Walter Brueggemann, and Michael Fishbane as their respective works grew and evolved over time to offer certain perspectives on the tasks of "theology" and a proper "biblical theology." An engagement with many of the major works of these important and formidable scholars has provided specific perspectives on the relationship between the Bible and theology, and offered three different interpretive and hermeneutical perspectives. The previous chapters have been an attempt to condense these perspectives from a vast body of literature produced over the course of their lengthy careers, to account for their interpretive and hermeneutical strategies, and to provide some degree of critique of their work. There has been no claim here that the whole of the current state of biblical theology within the entire discipline of biblical studies has been surveyed. Nevertheless, the works of Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane have provided small windows through which the current state of biblical theology might be glimpsed, however partial and incomplete such a view has necessarily been.

This final chapter has admittedly been broad in scope and somewhat ambitious in nature. It has attempted to achieve four main goals. The first goal has been to argue that biblical theology remains a vital pursuit within academic biblical studies. This is partly because many biblical scholars are ultimately responsible for training professional theologians, as stressed by Dale Martin. As law schools train professional lawyers, and medical schools train professional doctors, seminaries

and divinity schools are charged with training professional theologians. A bias within academic biblical scholarship toward historical criticism has perhaps led many students and colleagues within other disciplines to feel that historical criticism inadvertently emphasizes an "original meaning," that is therefore a "correct" interpretation of the Bible. Martin has insisted that this bias impedes any attempt to foster a robust and sophisticated theological imagination. Moreover, institutions that are not charged with training theological professionals may still fail to sufficiently expose students to hermeneutics, similarly contributing to the notion that historical criticism retains the arbiter of "correct" biblical interpretation. Worse, an emphasis upon historical-critical approaches may finally (even if unintentionally) imply that it alone constitutes the only "serious" mode of biblical study versus other approaches to the text, which are implicitly "unserious" or something less than serious.

Second, the present chapter has suggested a tentative synthesis of the work of Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane through a dialogic epistemology as articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin. In brief, this epistemology conceives of "truth" and the whole of theological meaning as an ongoing and unfinished dialogue. The "whole" of meaning is not a sort of system captured by the utterance of any particular person, but exists in between individual consciousnesses in specific times and places through their dialogic interaction. Such a view suggests that (1) the historical-critical work of John Collins, (2) Fishbane's understanding of an ongoing process of exegetical commentary over the course of two millenia, and (3) Brueggemann's attempt to provisionally articulate a holistic framework in which to

view the biblical texts, might—all three—be combined. If their works are construed as "utterances" within an unfolding dialogue across time, a biblical theology might be conceived in light of what the texts likely or may have "meant" in an original historical setting (in a manner similar to Collins), what they "have been meaning" across time (in the manner of Fishbane), and what the texts provisionally "mean" for a contemporary audience (in the manner of Brueggemann) and finally what they "potentially mean." This latter task seeks to move beyond Collins, Brueggemann, and Fishbane, insisting on the biblical theologian's foremost responsibility: to imaginatively look toward the future with due consideration of the entire "dialogue" that has preceded it. It has been noted that a "relatively unbiased" collaboration between all scholars is perhaps possible in regard to historical criticism and the history of interpretation and reception, but current works of "biblical theology" and the quest for the "potential of the texts to mean" in the interest of faith communities are finally confessional in nature. These latter faith commitments may provide productive biases within the chorus of scholarly conversation, but not necessarily any certain degree of consensus or agreement. Still, all of these activities viewed as "utterances" are part of a larger, ongoing dialogue that requires and appreciates a rich diversity of voices, all of which issue from the unique standpoints of a particular time and place.

Third, the present chapter has attempted to illustrate what such a reconceptualized biblical theology might look like through a study of the book of Ecclesiastes. If historical criticism has emphasized the "original" meaning of a text within its putative historical context, then biblical theology as conceived here moves

in the opposite direction. It is oriented toward the future, and seeks to imaginatively engage the biblical texts regarding their "potential to mean." While such imagination might find inspiration through various modern hermeneutics, all manner of interdisciplinary engagement, or various sorts of dogmatic and confessional lenses, the preceding discussion has chosen Bakhtin himself as an interdisciplinary conversation partner in order to offer an illustration of how such a reconceived biblical theology might look. This has involved an in-depth examination of the book of Ecclesiastes, which has paid due attention to historical-critical insight, the history of the book's interpretation and reception from many quarters (both confessional and secular), and current interpretations of the book. Viewed as "utterances" across time within an ongoing dialogue, this chapter has sought to contribute a new, constructive, and imaginative "utterance" in response to this dialogue that both (1) seeks to ever again speak of God and sustain a sense of God as the source and center of all life until (and in preparation for) death; and, (2) encourage and enable the theological appropriation of the biblical texts into the future and into a new time and place for particular communities. Altogether, this amounts to the activity of "biblical theology" that Bakhtin's work may help us to conceptualize and see clearly, although his thought is not *necessary* to invoke in order to practice the constructive biblical theology proposed here. The strands of various scholarly activities within biblical studies already exist in order for one to envision such biblical theology. They merely need to be tied together. Bakhtin has provided one possible rope in the present study.

Fourth and finally, the present chapter has concerned itself with "imagination" everywhere throughout the discussion. The most—or perhaps the only—controversial argument proposed in this final chapter is the suggestion that imagination is a necessary value for the sake of the future of biblical theology. Insofar as biblical theology is oriented toward the future, and ultimately explores the biblical texts' "potential to mean" as argued above, the value of imagination and a creative understanding are virtually non-negotiable. By extension, imagination must be viewed as a "serious" virtue within the broader discipline of biblical studies. Many biblical scholars are charged with the obligation to training theologians. Many others, in some way or another, will be responsible to account for all of the interpretive "imaginations" that have once engaged the Bible throughout history—treating them as voices, always issuing from unique times and places, that have contributed to a broad, ongoing theological dialogue.

As is the case with any dialogue, there is still much to be said. Yet Qohelet reminds us that "of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh" (Eccl 12:12b). The present study in contemporary theological hermeneutics and biblical theology (viewed as both Bakhtinian "utterance" and an imaginative rejoinder within a broader and never-ending dialogue) must then reach a provisional closure at one point or another—and so that point is reached here. But this is not necessarily to conclude, finalize, and finish off the discussion. It is rather to cede the floor to the responsive understanding of another speaker; always anticipating the utterance of another individual who might bring another unique perspective, at another time, and in another place.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AUSS	*Andrews University Seminary Studies*
BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation*
BRev	*Bible Review*
BZAW	Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
ExpTim	*Expository Times*
*HB*T	*Horizons in Biblical Theology*
*HT*R	*Harvard Theological Review*
*In*t	*Interpretation*
*JAA*R	*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
*JB*L	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
JTI	*Journal of Theological Interpretation*
*J*R	*Journal of Religion*
JRS	*Journal of Religion and Society*
Mod. Theol.	*Modern Theology*
Semeia	*Semeia*
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements