

A REFLECTION CONCERNING THE THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

Multiperspectival, polymorphous, and undetermined are some of the adjectives I would use to describe the emerging movement in biblical and theological studies known as “Theological Interpretation of Scripture.” In the pages that follow, I will simply consider the four resources that we read over the course of the semester: the *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of Scripture* edited by Kevin Vanhoozer, Daniel Treier, Craig Bartholomew, and N.T. Wright, and the two books derived from the dictionary, namely *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament* and *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament*; and finally, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* by Daniel Treier. After interacting with each book,¹ I will assess the overall project being advocated by these biblical scholars.

The Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of Scripture

In the introduction to the *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of Scripture (DTIS)* Kevin Vanhoozer sets out to define Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS). He starts by stating three things that TIS is not. It is not “an imposition of a theological system or confessional grid onto the biblical text;” it is not “an imposition of a general hermeneutic of theory of interpretation onto the biblical text;” and it is not “a form of *merely* historical, literary, or sociological criticism” aimed to get behind the text (19). Rather, he shows that TIS is a commitment to read the Bible in the way it was meant to be read—according to its genres and for

¹Due to their similarity in content and structure (i.e. a survey of the books of the Bible), I will treat *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament* and *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament* together.

the purpose of life transformation. He relates how biblical studies, theology, and spirituality were all at one time a “single enterprise, that of knowing God” (24), but in recent years this has been torn asunder by academic specificity. TIS aims to reunite these disciplines in order to know God better.

Thus, in answering the question, “What is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?” Vanhoozer insists that TIS is a “constructive engagement with Scripture” (21). Over against, critical scholars and fundamentalist dogmatism, TIS comes to the Bible to hear what the Scriptures says and for the reader, or community of readers, to be transformed. He lists three premises that undergird TIS and that help explain the movement (21-23).² First, TIS is a shared responsibility “of the whole people of God” (21). Whereas, in the past biblical studies tried to divorce itself from theological interpretation for the sake of critical objectivity, TIS is more realistic, admitting that biblical scholarship “needs” theology to help signify the importance of its biblical investigation (21). Second, TIS “is characterized by a governing interest in God” and those who come to the Scriptures as theological interpreters do so in order to be “transformed” by the word, more than to master its content (22). Vanhoozer describes this as “theological criticism” where the subject in question is not the text or the authors behind the text, but rather the reader himself. Third, TIS “embraces a number of academic approaches” and includes spiritually-minded scholars from a variety of ecclesial traditions (22-23). Vanhoozer enumerates three kinds of contributors to the *DTIS*, who presumably are models of or guides toward TIS scholarship. These three types of interpreters place emphasis on different areas of interpretation. Some like Vanhoozer “have an interest in divine authorship, in the God-world relationship ‘behind’ the text;” others whose interpretive commitments tend toward the Yale School “focus

²Theological Interpretation of Scripture really is and sees itself as a movement. Vanhoozer writes, “Because we [the editors] are only in the initial stages of recovering a distinctly theological interpretation of Scripture, it would be unwise to preempt discussion of how best to read the Bible in the church” (23).

on the final form of the text rather than on questions of human or divine authorship;” while still others like Stephen Fowl “identify the theologically significant moment with the reading and reception of the Bible in the believing community today” (23).³ In short, the apparent diversity within the TIS fraternity is not seen as a problem, but as a boon. Each particular emphasis helps round out the community rule of faith. Such doctrinal difference demonstrates that this movement depends less on theological agreement and more on an agreement to speak theologically about the Bible.

The dictionary itself includes four kinds of articles⁴ that give a broad understanding of the Bible. From articles on Leviticus to literary theory to Karl Barth, these articles show the breadth of the TIS discussion, and the wide-ranging selection of authors shows how variegated this movement is and is intended to be. Vanhoozer concludes his introduction saying, “No one denomination, school of interpretation, or hermeneutical approach has a monopoly on reading the Bible for the word of God.” Rather, “Insights from the whole body of Christ...are needed if Christians are to display the mind of Jesus Christ” (24). Unmistakably, theological conversation, denominational diversity, and spiritual enlightenment is the aim of TIS, the question is whether they achieve their desire and do so without ignoring some important matters of biblical studies and theology.

Briefly, there is much scholastic productivity and biblical-theological research that is coming from this movement and will surely continue in the years to come. In this sense, there is much to appreciate with the movement. However, even as the movement stresses reading wisely, it will be imperative that those who listen to the voices within TIS know who is speaking

³Daniel Treier, in his book on TIS, takes much time to demonstrate how each of these approaches contribute and find common ground in the polymorphous TIS movement.

⁴Vanhoozer defines these article types on pages 23-24. They include articles on books of the Bible, aspects of hermeneutics, historical interpreters or interpretive communities, and biblical doctrines and themes.

and what commits are being affirmed or denied. For if the strength of the movement is a fusion of Bible and theology, the weakness is in its non-descript breadth. As Vanhoozer delineates, there are many kinds of interpreters within the guild, and they do not all mean the same thing by terms like Bible, faith, redemption, et cetera. This I believe will ultimately splinter the irenic movement because of its inability to concur on certain fundamental, epistemic commitments.⁵ More will be said about this below.

Theological Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments

Contained in the *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of Scripture* and extracted for more accessibility are the two books, *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament* and *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament*. Each book contains articles from scholars of all stripes detailing the biblical and theological outlines of every book of the Bible. In principle, it appears that each chapter should be outlined with a history of interpretation, a list of textual observations and some critical matters, a reflection on the most important theological contributions in the respective book, and how the book fits into the biblical canon.

As with any multi-author anthology, each selection in these two books varies in quality, depth, and consistency with the other writers. On the whole, the books do well to represent the breadth of biblical-theological commitments contained within the TIS movement. It would be interesting to know how many of the contributors would consider themselves apart of that movement. The most helpful element of each chapter is clearly the interaction with interpretive history. This highlights for the pastor or scholar the hermeneutical challenges to be faced in the book and how respective scholars have approached them in the past. While a helpful resource to the scholar, the vacillation in approaches by various authors makes it an unlikely

⁵For more on the threat latent within TIS, see Rob Plummer's [*Forty Questions About Interpreting the Bible*](#) [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010], 313-20) on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture.

resource to help the average laymen, because it may introduce them to critical problems without giving them legitimate answers and arguments for reading the Bible as God's word.

Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture

Daniel Treier writes his book *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* in order to describe the emerging movement self-designated as the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS).⁶ In the first section, chapters 1-3, he lays out three “common themes and catalysts.”

Generally speaking, chapters 1-3 draw from two sources in the history of interpretation—the church fathers and the postliberals. In short, Treier gleans the best aspects of each interpretive model and synthesizes them in the TIS approach. So in chapter 1, Treier follows the trends expressed most abundantly in emergent circles, namely a “recovery of ancient Christian practices,” a return to a “pre-critical exegesis” (39-41, 57). Primarily, this includes a Christocentric, figural reading of the Scripture that looks for the spiritual sense of the text through typology and even allegory (45-55), reading the Bible for the sake of piety and not simply objective analysis.

Chapter 2 also derives its historic origins from the church fathers. “Reading within the rules,” Treier argues that TIS returns to the classic *regula fidei*, which helps the community of faith interpret the Bible. In this way, biblical interpreters are reading the Bible theologically, in relation to a consensus view of Christian doctrine. He cites Irenaeus as the classic apologist for the Rule of Faith (58-59), and goes on to show how postliberals like Francis Watson, David Yeago, R.R. Reno are developing this theological interpretation (64-70).

⁶By way of personal conversation, it was intimated that Treier intended his book to be descriptive, not prescriptive. However, one can hardly believe that such affirmative description of a subject does not entail prescription, if only implicit. More will be said below.

Then in chapter 3, Treier advocates “reading [the Bible] with others,” showing the importance of letting Scripture shape community practice. He insists that reading the Bible is a social activity that develops our individual character (88-89). In this, he is building off of the work of postliberals like George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas who unite the Bible with the ecclesial community (80-85). However, Treier’s examples of ecumenism and community go too far, and in some instances override biblical truth. Stephen Fowl’s interpretation of Acts 15, for example, as a ‘proof text’ for assimilating homosexuals in the church (90-91), clearly trespasses the boundaries of Scripture. It pushes cultural fashion over and above the biblical revelation. Allowing for this kind of interpretation within the parameters of TIS shows how inclusive Treier’s “Rule of Faith” is, and it evidences to me the instability of this proposal, for light and dark cannot coexist (2 Cor. 6:14ff).

Moving from his proposal to more specific problems, the next three chapters delve into the rise of biblical theology (chapter 4), applying general hermeneutics to the study of Scripture (chapter 5), and giving an ear to the global church (chapter 6). Without going into each particular area, it will suffice to say that TIS feeds on interchange and synthesis. Instead of advocating a confessional commitment, it is more concerned with unqualified spirituality, theological readings (emphasis on the plurality), and communal practice. In this way, it seeks to integrate and incorporate various theologians and theologies for a more complete reading of Scripture. For instance, in chapters 4-6, Treier’s appeal to biblical theology arises from its bridge-like relationship between dogmatics and biblical exegesis (118); instead of separating disciplines TIS aims to combine them all. Likewise, Treier’s explanation of and advocacy for general hermeneutics shows a concern for integrating text, author, and reader in a way that allows all three to converse with one another (137, 151). Further, Treier’s emphasis on global

interaction clearly articulates a concern for ecumenical dialogue and perspectival theologies. In the postmodern, community-oriented culture that we inhabit, these commitments are very attractive, but in the end I think they are pernicious to the Christian faith—doctrinally, ecclesially, and personally.

Evaluation

In *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* there are many troubling omissions and assertions that if left unattended pose a threat to the faith once for all delivered to the saints. First, Treier's affinity for the Patristics overlooks the contributions of the Reformers, the Puritans, and the modern stalwarts of biblical orthodoxy, to only name a few. While his de-emphasis on these groups, his theological selectivity unmistakably corresponds with his openness to a mere Christianity that blurs the lines between Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants. This ecumenism is becoming to many, but not to those who love justification by faith, the sending of the Spirit by the Father and the Son, and absolute sufficiency and truthfulness of Scripture, to name only a few distinguishing doctrines.

Second, the truth question is nowhere expressed in Treier's book. Theology, spirituality, interpretations, and community practice are all highlighted, but the matter of discerning truth is left aside. More important to Treier seems to be the fruit of the person's life rather than the doctrinal postulates that they believe. If people disagree about theology, but express love, humility, and wisdom, nothing seems to be lost in his view concerning divergent, or even aberrant beliefs. Yet, this undercuts and denigrates the authoritative and eternal word of God. At one level it may be true that fruit is what matters, but ultimately fruit is born by the Spirit of Truth who regenerates, sanctifies, and illumines with the Word of Truth, which points to

the incarnate Truth, Jesus Christ.⁷ Treier's proposal is lacking because of its absence of truth. Like Jannes and Jambres, there is much theological discussion in TIS, but little truth-telling decisiveness (cf. 2 Tim. 3:7-9).

Third, the inattention to truth should not come as a shock when in the list of contributors are many who disavow inerrancy and a firm belief in Scripture's final authority and veracity. Added to the last point of contention is the fact that there is no solidified definition of Scripture. As denoted in Vanhoozer's article, the TIS movement includes three kinds of contributors, each of whom have a different understanding of God and the world, and accordingly divergent views on Scripture. In short, this disunity will ultimately result in a fractured movement. History and the Bible both show that those who cannot agree on authority cannot stand together. As Jesus said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." As evidenced in Treier's book, there is no substantial doctrine of Scripture. This is seen both in its glaring absence in its pages and his willingness to receive interpretations that require a cultural or ecclesial refiguring of the text. In the case of these latter interpreters, the ecclesial community or the ambient culture becomes authoritative, or if not authoritative at least suggestive, of how to re-interpret the Bible. However, it is clearly the intention of Scripture to interpret and redetermine all those who read and submit to it.

Finally, Treier's entire proposal denudes doctrine of fine distinctions and precise definitions. It builds unity by minimizing historic decisions in the church for particular doctrines (i.e. the Protestant Reformation, the Synod of Dort, and the Modernist Controversy with its battle for the Bible). Resultantly, theological cohesion is gained at the loss of theological meaning and precision. In the end, TIS can only exist at the level of an interfaith academy, not in local

⁷For proof of this postulate, that sound doctrine produces good deeds, simply read through the book of Titus. The repeated emphasis is that the salubrious word of God brings about life-giving fruit in the life of believers, believers in the truth!

churches or denominations. TIS may serve as an academic agreement, an agreed upon way of speaking that allows all parties a voice in biblical interpretive reading. However, in the light of the *gravitas* of the Bible, in light of heaven and hell, life and death, truth and falsehood, the Spirit of light and demonic liars who masquerade as angels of light, such theological gamesmanship is deplorable and damning in the local church. Therefore, I believe that the TIS movement is ultimately a deceiving and dangerous movement that fuels interpretive uncertainty and blunted doctrine. The result is a fuzzy and ill-defined picture of God in the smudged face of Jesus Christ.

Post Script

Finally, I have two personal concerns with the TIS movement. First, I am concerned with students on the campus of Southern Seminary who are attracted to this movement, who are accepting that passages of Scripture have multiple meanings and that allegorical interpretation is sometimes legitimate in the hermeneutic process. Following the likes of Christopher Seitz, they want to blur the line between typology and allegory and read the Bible “figurally.” Accompanied with that is the desire to nuance inerrancy along the lines of genre and form study, so that different speech-acts in the Bible have greater or lesser freight in regards to truth. Perhaps, I am naïve at this point, but I want to be on the side that argues for the Bible’s absolute truthfulness in light of its own self-attestation, not questioning its veracity based on general hermeneutical principles.

Second, I am concerned for those who buy and sell TIS because of what it will do to people like Zack. Zack was a college friend who emailed me last week to share the good news that since college he has been “born-again.” Ironically, Zack was a gifted leader of a “Christian group” on campus, but one whose thinking about the Bible, truth, and matters of doctrine were

distorted by our liberal arts college so that in the end, as a Christian he neither believed nor lived as one of God's elect. Thankfully, since graduating he has realized what saving faith is, how he was wrong in college, and how he needed to repent and be born again.

I say all that to say that if Zack had come to accept the tenets proposed by Daniel Treier, or if someone who held to TIS were witnessing to him, I am doubtful that they would have pressed against his views of the Bible. More likely, they would have accepted his views as just one more type of theological interpretation and encouraged him to read the Bible according to the liberal arts *ethos* that he had in college. The result would have been eternal and damning. So my concern with TIS is that as much as it offers "transformation," only a Christian faith that presses for Truth can call others to repentance and transformation of the mind. As Graeme Goldsworthy reminds us, every interpreter and every living soul needs "hermeneutical sanctification...a quantum shift from unbelief and rejection of God's word to faith and trust in that word, *and submission to it.*"⁸

In Zack's case, without someone confronting his false understanding of faith and incorrect theological interpretation, his soul would be eternally condemned. My ultimate concern with TIS is at this point. With its synthetic and inclusive stance towards all kinds of interpreters, even those who stand outside the church, I do not believe it preserves a category for truth and error, which means that it does not reserve a place for heaven and hell, which means ultimately that in all its attempts to be theological, it may be in jeopardy of missing the main purpose of Scripture—to make us wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:14-17). Unless TIS recovers a soteriological reading of Scripture, its ultimate fruit will be theologically self-justified interpreters who are storing up greater wrath for themselves as they read the Scriptures. I pray this would not be the case.

⁸Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 18.

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