Revelation, Scripture and Church

Theological Hermeneutic Thought of James Barr, Paul Ricoeur and Hans Frei

RICHARD R. TOPPING
How does God’s involvement with the generation of Holy Scripture and its use in the life of the Christian church figure into the human work of Scripture interpretation? This is the central question that this book seeks to address. In critical conversation with the influential hermeneutic programs of James Barr, Paul Ricoeur and Hans Frei, Topping demonstrates how God’s agency has been marginalized in the task of Scripture interpretation. Divine involvement with the Bible is bracketed out (Barr), rendered in generic terms (Ricoeur) or left implicit (Frei) in these depictions of the hermeneutic field. The result is that each of these hermeneutic programs is less than a ‘realist’ interpretative proposal. Talk of God is eclipsed by the terminal consideration of human realities. Topping argues for the centrality of doctrinal description in a lively theological understanding of Scripture interpretation for the life of the church.
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Revelation, Scripture and Church
Theological Hermeneutic Thought of James Barr, Paul Ricoeur and Hans Frei

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The Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul,
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To Amy Susan, my wife
and Karl and Paul, my sons
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Theological interpretation of the Bible enjoys high profile at present for a number of reasons. In part it indicates the maturing of protest against the apparent theological impotence of critical ‘history of religions’ study of the biblical texts: rather than satisfying themselves with polemic, theologians and theologically-minded exegtes have begun to take responsibility for shifting the interpretation of the Bible to a more fruitful orientation. Further, the renewal of theological interpretation stems from a recovery of interest in classical, especially patristic, biblical exegesis—initially, at least, largely on the part of Roman Catholic theologians like Jean Daniélou and Henri de Lubac, but now much more widely shared across the Christian confessions. This recovery was, of course, itself stimulated by the centrality of ‘church’ in much theology in the second half of the twentieth century; the expansion of ecclesiology affected not only ecumenics and dogmatics but also hermeneutics, especially when allied with philosophical theories of the communal character of human interpretative activity.

This provocative study identifies a lacuna in these developments, namely the need to root what is said about the Bible and its interpretation in Christian teaching about God. Theories—sometimes complex theories—of communities of interpretation and their interpretative acts and ends are surely necessary to any adequate theological hermeneutics. But they do not prove sufficient, and require grounding in a theology of divine action. More specifically, they have to be located in the wider context of theological claims about God’s communicative and saving activity as revealer and reconciler. If this kind of grounding is necessary, it is in the end because only in that way can theology offer effective resistance to the instinctive naturalism of a good deal of modern hermeneutical theory and exegetical practice, which handles the Bible as an immanent field of human communicative acts. It matters little which acts are highlighted (authorial, redactive, canonical, interpretative): the result is a mislocation of thinking about the Bible as it is moved from its proper habitat in talk of God and God’s communicative presence. Whatever else the notion of Holy Scripture may mean, it means at least that the production and reception of the biblical writings has to be accounted for by appealing to God’s activity with a measure of directness. Hence the theological realism of the argument which follows: “properly to attend to the nature and function of the Bible and biblical interpretation, is to attend to the agency of God both in terms of the formation and use of ‘Holy’ Scripture.”

The argument gently but unremittingly detaches its readers from habitual naturalism by working through three doctrinal topics—revelation, Scripture and church—and their treatment by three magisterial figures in modern biblical interpretation: James Barr, Paul Ricoeur and Hans Frei. Each chapter is an exercise in critical theology, modestly and respectfully accomplished and yet reaching some penetrating theological judgements about the matter in hand. Yet the end of the exercise is constructive, namely, to suggest that theological hermeneutics has a good
deal to profit from appeal to divine action, and that it will remain disordered unless it makes this appeal both in its self-articulations and in its practice. This appeal means—to simplify the argument conducted here with considerable sophistication—that interpretation and interpretative communities are functions of the notion of Holy Scripture; that notion is in its turn a function of revelation, which is itself an extension of the doctrine of God. To have recovered that insight, which was second nature to much of the classical Christian tradition but from which modern theology has allowed itself to become estranged, is not the least of the virtues of this work, from which exegetes and dogmatics may learn a great deal.

John B. Webster
University of Aberdeen
Preface

This book would never have come to completion without the help, encouragement and generosity of the Church of St Andrew and St Paul, whose Session and congregation gave me an extended leave of absence to finish it. By the initiative of the Clerk of Session, Dr Lawrence Hutchison, and the generosity of a most kind group of congregants, I was able to give my full attention to academic work free from ministerial duties. I am also grateful to J.S.S. Armour, Minister Emeritus of the congregation, for returning to work from which he had retired, much to my delight and that of the congregation.

The Reverend Professor John B. Webster was a constant source of encouragement. His kind and thorough attention over the duration of the project, his confidence that the topic was important for contemporary theological hermeneutic reflection and his cheerful friendship made the work a pleasure. Professors David Demson, John Vissers, Gordon Rixon and Joseph Mangina all offered helpful and insightful comments on the text, which has, no doubt, greatly improved the finished product. My friend James Dickie gave careful editorial attention to the manuscript and made incisive comments on it as did Philip Hillyer. I am grateful to Sarah Lloyd and Sarah Charters of Ashgate Publishing for their support and guidance throughout this project. Any infelicities that remain are my own.

I have no doubt that my interest in the interpretation of Holy Scripture for the life of the church is the result of the influence of my parents, Paul and Norma Topping. My wife Amy was so very supportive and patient over the too long a time that it took me to complete this work. I am grateful to God for her love and strength and friendship. My sons, Karl and Paul, showed no little interest in this project, but granted their father the quiet he needed. They did wonder when I would finish my homework. This completed homework is dedicated to them, my family, with gratitude and love.

Richard R. Topping
Ordinary Time 2007
Introduction

Argument

In contemporary biblical-theological hermeneutics there has been a proliferation of methods developed to depict the hermeneutic situation of the church and to discern the meaning of the Bible for the life of the church.¹ Three important methods operative within the contemporary interpretative landscape are historical-critical, hermeneutic-poetic and a retrieval of the classic figural and Christocentric reading of the Bible. These three strands of biblical interpretation, in the examples we examine, share a common deficit: each of them fails adequately to depict the hermeneutic situation of the church and the nature of the Bible in terms of their common implication within God’s communicative and salvific action. While each of them is attentive to texts, interpreters and communities as human and historical phenomenon, they fail in their interpretative proposals to offer an account of how these same factors acquire specific attributes in their relation to God, that is, each is insufficiently realist in its account of the nature, function and critical reading of Holy Scripture as it is implicated in God’s revelatory action.

Historical-critical interpretation of the Bible continues to be an important and dominant option within the academy. One important strand of this approach to biblical interpretation, represented by James Barr, encourages interpreters to bracket out theological constructs, like revelation and Holy Scripture, for the sake of critical interpretation in the life of the church. Interpreters who are truth-seeking work with freedom from theological belief and ecclesial context in order to let the text speak against received doctrine, which may be and often is an imposition upon the text. Concepts like revelation, inspiration and Holy Scripture are held up against the scrutiny of an empirical examination of the use of such terms within the Bible and of the human and historical reality of the people of God, including the socio-intentional world, which lies behind the texts of the Bible, and in effect generated their inscripturation. In the attempt to maintain some account of divine action in relation to human action, Barr tends to render divine action immanent within human performance in the inscripturation and formation of the Bible. Where theological doctrines of revelation, Holy Scripture or church operate in a fundamental fashion to provide a map of the interpretative terrain and of the nature of the Bible in its relation to the salvific work of God, such doctrines are regarded as obstacles to be overcome since they frustrate the freedom of the historical critic to follow research wherever it may lead.

The dominance of the historical-critical approach to interpretation, which consigns the primary locus of textual meaning to a world “behind the text,” has

been challenged, and in some instances modified, by “hermeneutic” models, which shift meaning away from sources and authorial intention and toward the reader or the interpreting community as the primary locus. Where biblical interpreters in the dominant traditions of Western Protestantism after the Enlightenment once began with historical “excavative” work, presently interpreters, like Paul Ricoeur, turn to heavily theorized accounts of texts and their interpreting subjects and communities. Hermeneutic theory is annexed to the church’s reading of Scripture as a kind of prolegomena. The result is that the integrity of explicitly theological language is subordinated to a natural poetic account of texts in their compositional generation and generic diversity and the interpretative subject in terms of imagination and conscience. Moreover, substantive readings of Holy Scripture, proposed by the community for whom these texts function, must be submitted to the scrutiny of the masters of suspicion (Marx, Nietzsche and Freud) to be purged of iconoclastic potential and thus gain critical integrity. Revelation, Holy Scripture and Church, in so far as these terms function to depict the interpretative situation and the nature of the realities implicated in the saving action of God, are muted then by means of a poetic detour (a deferral) and then by a hermeneutic/poetic transposition of their specificity into more general terms, and finally, an interrogation by an outside critique.

Others have noted that the contemporary interpretative climate is conducive to the recovery of the classic mode of biblical interpretation. In the hermeneutic work of Hans Frei, an attempt is made to rehabilitate figural Christocentric reading of the Bible as Scripture, which he believes represents the dominant mode of Bible reading in the history of the Christian church. The Bible is held together as a single story through typology and figuration focused in the ascriptively literal meaning of the stories about Jesus. Through the deployment of literary and social-scientific convention, Frei makes the case that the Bible ought to be read this way: it is required either by the kind of literature that the Bible is (realistic narrative) or, later, by reading conventions embedded in the community for which the Bible functions religiously. Critical reading of Holy Scripture, both in terms of its explicative and applicative sense, is reading in keeping with the conventions most appropriate to the Bible as Scripture of the church. Within such an account, theological language that relates the meaning of the Bible as Holy Scripture of the church to the revelatory action of God almost always remains tacit. The heavy lifting in this proposal is performed by either specification of a literary type, or by means of a construal of the Bible that locates it within a semiotic system, that is, within Christianity as a social construct. Revelation, Holy Scripture and church as this language functions to relate Scripture, its ecclesial setting and reading conventions, meaning and truth, to the action of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is not consistently rendered visible.

It is not the purpose of this essay to divorce itself from the substantive contributions to biblical interpretation made by historical-critical, hermeneutic/poetic or literary and social scientific approaches. Moreover, it is not the intention of this work to argue that the only mode of Bible reading that is licit is theological or that information

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3 Wayne Meeks notes that more than one kind of interpretative tyranny can be at work in hermeneutics. Many interpretative aims are possible and thus what the Bible means will to
garnered from other interpretative approaches is irrelevant to theological reading of Scripture for the life of God’s people. Meir Sternberg, while he notes that modes of biblical interpretation tend to be oriented toward either sources or discourse, maintains that it is not possible to speak

as if there were one Bible for the historian, another for the theologian, and another for the linguist, another for the geneticist, and still another for the literary critic . . . There are not enough Bibles to go around, and even Solomon’s wisdom cannot divide the only one we do possess among the various claimants. Its discourse remains indivisible for all, and so does its source.4

There is no doubt that the multiplicity of modes of biblical interpretation render substantial assistance to the church in its task of Scripture interpretation. The modern concentration on the Bible as a human and historical document has helped the church to avoid the temptation toward a naïve docetism and, what is more, enabled a certain theological clarity about the Bible’s character and role as a human witness to the Word of God rather than Word of God in se. Moreover, the role of the church, in its various socio-cultural embodiments, in giving shape to the Bible through various stages of its inscription, formation and canonization, is important to the ongoing use of the Bible. For example, in so far as precanonical forms of biblical literature have been rendered visible through redaction criticism, interpreters have been able to observe the theological pressures under which the canon was formed and so to follow the trajectories of meaning that shaped the final form of the text in their own exegetical work. So much more could be said on this front: historical-critical investigations so often serve to clarify unfamiliar customs and practices, and poetic attention to semantics and genre have helped to correct the heresy of paraphrase and interpretative anch Normanism.5

However, because the overall thrust of this work is to draw attention to the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, that is, the attempt to offer a partial picture of reality for the whole of it, the positive contributions of the panoply of interpretative approaches is not the primary focus of critical inquiry. In the hermeneutic strategies we investigate, the argument is that the hermeneutic field and the nature and character of critical biblical interpretation are over-determined by their preponderant relation to human actions implicated in the production, interpretation and ecclesial use of the Bible. Such a deflationary account of reality, one that marginalizes (brackets out, defers and transposes or leaves tacit) the origin and nature of the Bible in its relation to

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God’s action and use of Holy Scripture in his work of salvation, is not theologically satisfactory. While it often proves fruitful to restrict the range of interpretative scope and conceptuality for specific hermeneutic interests, for example, to investigate the use of the vocative by Paul, the liability of such approaches is that “thick” theological description can come to be viewed as rhetorical extravagance, as “in others words” description or simply special pleading. The argument here is theologically realist; that is, properly to attend to the nature and function of the Bible and biblical interpretation, is to attend to the agency of God both in terms of the formation and use of “Holy” Scripture. In effect an ontology of Scripture, a true description of the realities implied by the existence of the Bible and the task of Scripture interpretation, requires a substantive doctrinal ordering and account of the church’s interpretative task; of the Bible in its relation to the prevenient, generative and sustaining action of God, which elicits and illumines the Bible as Holy Scripture; and of the critical character that accrues to Holy Scripture over and in the life of the church because of God’s gracious use of it. The Bible as it is ingredient in and to the revelatory/salvific action of God in Jesus Christ is Holy Scripture.

Procedure

The work is divided into three subsequent main chapters: Revelation and Biblical Interpretation; The Bible as Holy Scripture; and The Church and the Bible Critically Read. In each chapter, an exposition of Barr, Ricoeur and Frei is undertaken in order to demonstrate how doctrines of revelation, Scripture and church are implicated within the hermeneutic procedure they prescribe. The ordering of the chapters is reflective of a hermeneutic field that is construed in relation to dogmatic thinking about the place of Scripture within the saving purposes of God in Jesus Christ. God’s disclosure and salvific initiative is generative of inscripturated witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which by the illuminative work of the Holy Spirit constitutes and sustains the church.

In the first major section, Revelation and Biblical Interpretation, the relation of the Bible to revelation is investigated in the work of Barr, Ricoeur and Frei. In the expository section, classical Christian construals of the doctrine of revelation are first rendered problematic by each author. By means of historical-critical, hermeneutic-poetic and literary/social-scientific analysis, the implication of the doctrine of revelation within a specific construal of the hermeneutic field is offered. Traditional dogmatic notions of revelation within which the Bible evoked human testimony to the saving action of God in Jesus Christ, made effective for faith in the power of the Holy Spirit, are prescinded from (Barr), deferred for the sake of a reconfigured hermeneutic-poetic field only to be admitted in transposed form (Ricoeur), or left tacit in a terminal consideration of mediate realities, genre and semiotic system, implicated in revelation (Frei). The result of these interpretative moves is that Scripture’s primary nature in relation to the God by whose action it is evoked and made effective for faith is left out of hermeneutic account. God’s action is conflated to human action (Barr), textual dynamics (Ricoeur) or reading conventions required by genre type or communal “thick” description (Frei). The
basic criticism, in keeping with the work, is that in a theologically realist account of biblical interpretation, interpreters must take into account those features that accrue to Holy Scripture as it is implicated within the revelatory action of God.

In Chapter 2, attention is turned to the Bible as Holy Scripture. The particular features of the Bible as Scripture that receive attention are its unity and authority. Again, we follow the treatment of each author as they render problematic classical construals and offer their rearticulations of the Bible in its unity and authority. While each author presents a positive account of these features of Holy Scripture and articulates them in such a way as to render them serviceable to theological and church use, once again their positive proposals derive their constructive potential in relative independence from a consideration of the use of the Bible vis-à-vis the action of God. Both the unity and authority of the Bible are configured and articulated in relation to the intentional world of text production (Barr), the nature of texts as a world instanced in writing (Ricoeur), or reading conventions appropriate to genre or the community for whom these texts function religiously (Frei). Each account fails to feature a doctrinal account of the Bible as “Holy” Scripture, that is, an account in which the unity and authority of the Bible are derivative from the relationship of the Bible to God or its service to the Gospel, which is the content of the Bible.

Finally, in Chapter 3, a consideration of the church’s reading of the Bible as critical reading is undertaken. In each case an exposition of the respective thinker is undertaken with a view to exposing the nature of critical reading as they articulate it, and how such reading modulates the hearing and reading of the Bible for the life of the church. All of the authors considered propose critical reading as essential to the edification of the Christian community—none of them espouse a form of reading which terminates in skepticism or rules out listening to Holy Scripture in a believing mode. However, each author is, in effect, making a case for the ordered reading of Holy Scripture, that is, for how various modes of reading ought to be related for the sake of truthful, authentic or faithful reading within the church. While evidentiary considerations (Barr), iconoclastic insights (Ricoeur) and reading conventions (Frei) are all integral to non-obscursantist Bible reading, the force of the term “critical” is derived apart from a consideration of its meaning in relation to God’s communicative action by means of the Bible. What is missing is a thick theological account of the fundamental nature of the term “critical” in relation to God’s use of the Bible to create, accost and sustain the people of God.

**Persons**

The choice of the three interpreters whose hermeneutic proposals are the substantive material for examination within this essay is motivated by two particular considerations. In the first instance each of them proposes an interpretative program that impinges upon the normative interpretative practice of the Christian church in its use of the Bible. Their respective construals of the hermeneutic field and of biblical interpretation and use are offered as preliminary to and normative for the constitutive use of the Bible in the community for which it functions religiously. Indeed, in each case their hermeneutic musings are offered, where they intersect with
the ecclesial task of Scripture interpretation, as essential to the integrity of the biblical interpretation. Moreover, while they each construe the interpretative implications of belonging to the church in different terms, their common motivation and interest in biblical interpretation arises on the basis of personal Christian conviction. The importance of their common espousal of a hermeneutic program that is normative for, or preliminary to, church interpretative practice is crucial for this work. For the thrust of the argument is not imperiously to declare without qualification that theological interpretation has hegemony over other interpretative strategies, but rather that when the hermeneutic aim is to interpret the Bible for the life of the people of God, the range of interpretative strategies ought to include, indeed, be ordered within and by a theological account of the interpretative field and the nature and character of Bible in its relation to God’s revelatory/salific activity. The argument of the work with the interpretative proposals of Barr, Ricoeur and Frei is thus contentious precisely at the point they wish to maintain—that each respective proposal is normative for or preliminary to the churchly task of Scripture interpretation.

A second reason for the choice of the three interpreters selected is that they stretch across a range and are thus representative of serious hermeneutical options and the preponderant loci of textual meaning in the current interpretative marketplace. Any interpretation of the Bible requires the coordination of at least three loci of meaning—the world “behind” the text, the world “in front of” the text and the world “within” the text.6 James Barr’s interpretative program coordinates these three loci with particular attention to the first of these. The preponderant weight in interpretation is toward the socio-intentional world of text production. The limits of textual meaning are sought primarily, though not exclusively, with respect to circumstances that generate a text. While Barr is by no means inattentive to the Bible’s “factual” reality, its applicative sense before the text or in the Bible construed as a whole in its unity, all of these are ordered in terms of their relationship to the world behind the text, that is, to the intentional/productive world of the author. Limits are set on explicative and applicative senses of the Bible by their rootedness and relatedness to the human and historical world that in effect generated a specific text.

The interpretative drive within the hermeneutic program of Paul Ricoeur is oriented to the world “in front of” the text. While Ricoeur is critical of the rush to existential signification that he observes in Bultmann7 and is attentive to the objectivity of the text in its generic variety, the overall emphasis of his hermeneutic enterprise is on the “possible world” that a text proposes to a reader. Ricoeur is less interested in texts as historical artifacts and more invested in the itineraries of meaning, the possible worlds that propose themselves to the imagination of a reader, through frictive genric interaction, in front of the text. Intentional worlds and original audiences are not so determinative of meaning as the instanciated text that acquires a life of its own through writing. Potential readings arise as imaginative variations brokered by conscience prove themselves, not by being traced to the intentional

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world of the author or proved by what the textual ensemble will bear, but in their reception by an audience, in “the transfer from text to life.”

Finally, Hans Frei’s normative hermeneutic proposal is weighted toward the world “within” the text. The whole of the Bible in its generic diversity is shaped into a coherent story through typology and figuration centered in the ascriptively literal narratives about Jesus Christ, that is, what the Gospels ascribe to Jesus they predicate of him and not everyone in general or no one in particular. The explicative sense of the Bible as Holy Scripture in all its parts is determined by the hermeneutic procedure by which the New Testament appropriates the Old—that is, by a Christocentric logic. Indeed, where the “literal” reading of any part of the Bible is in potential conflict with the ascriptively literal sense of the stories about Jesus, it is read typologically, and even allegorically, such that it conforms with the identity of Jesus narratively rendered. Moreover, the applicative sense of the Bible is rendered by the same means as the scriptural reading of the Bible; through typology and figuration the scriptural story is extended to encompass or “absorb” extratextual reality in relation to the ascriptively literal story of Jesus.

The point here is not to provide a complete overview of the options considered, a more thorough-going exposition is undertaken in the body of the work. This brief description is only to make the point that the range of interpretative proposals under consideration here is representative of options weighted to various hermeneutic loci operative in contemporary biblical/theological hermeneutics.

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