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Theology and Biblical Interpretation

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# Theology and Biblical Interpretation

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I

Is there at present a way to construe the Bible that is authentically theological and yet respects the integrity of critical biblical scholarship?

This, slightly reformulated, is the question that participants in this conference have been asked to address. I propose to address it by arguing for an affirmative answer. I shall develop my argument in three main parts, each devoted to clarifying a basic normative concept—specifically, the two generative concepts indicated by my title, “theology” and “biblical interpretation,” and the derivative concept, “theological interpretation of the Bible.” My contention is that to understand these concepts as an adequate theology now requires is to have all the reason one needs to answer the question affirmatively.

The question is genuine and even urgent, of course, because of a widespread perception that it should be answered negatively, or, in the case of some perceivers, perhaps, serious misgivings about answering it affirmatively. Given what is seen to be the growing estrangement over the last two centuries between theology, on the one hand, and biblical scholarship, on the other, many at present judge it to be difficult, if not impossible, to point to an interpretation of the Bible that is authentically theological and yet respects the integrity of critical biblical scholarship by also being critical, not in some different sense, but in the same sense in which biblical interpretation otherwise may be said to be so. I have considerable sympathy with this judgment and no intention whatever of simply rejecting it. In fact, I would be forced to make it myself if the traditional understanding of theology, and thus of what is authentically theological, were the only or the most adequate understanding presently available to us.

Nor do I have any illusions about the extent to which this traditional understanding continues to dominate the theory as well as the praxis of theology right up to today. I note, rather, that even in discussions of this very question that are self-consciously methodological and both informed

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and informing about the developments in biblical scholarship giving rise to it, theology continues to be understood in such a way as to make an answer to it that is at once affirmative and coherent impossible. Thus, in the in many ways helpful book written by Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford, 1988), the understanding of theology from which the authors argue leads them to represent as “a classic case” of “interpreting the Bible theologically” what is a patently a case of allegorical, and so clearly uncritical, interpretation—namely, that recorded in Acts 8:30–35, where Philip teaches the Ethiopian eunuch to read Isaiah through “the Christian master code.”<sup>1</sup>

Even so, being convinced, as I am, that this traditional understanding of theology no longer remains unchallenged, but is now relativized by another, theologically more adequate understanding, I see real prospects of overcoming the perceived estrangement between theology and biblical scholarship. My purpose here, however, is not to argue *for* this alternative way of understanding theology, but rather to argue *from* it—as well as from what I am prepared to defend as a comparably adequate understanding of biblical interpretation. Since I take both understandings to be properly theological, I acknowledge the need to validate their adequacy in the same way in which that of any other theological understanding would need to be validated. But I shall not attempt such validation here; rather, simply assuming their adequacy, I shall seek to show that the understanding of theological interpretation of the Bible derived from them is sufficient reason for giving an affirmative answer to our question.

Recognizing this limitation of my argument, you are certainly free to think of it as at best conditional or hypothetical, pending theological validation of the understandings it assumes but does not argue for. But I trust there is also no uncertainty that it is precisely theological validation that is logically required to validate them and that the understandings necessary to any other answer to the question would need to be validated at least philosophically, if not also theologically. I take it to be clear, in other words, that just because the question is properly methodological, in that it calls for a normative rather than a descriptive understanding of what it is to interpret the Bible theologically, only theology—more exactly, systematic theology—and philosophy are logically positioned to answer it. This is not to say, of course, that relevant discussion of the question is limited to specialists in systematic theology and philosophy. It is not only possible but likely that others, also, including specialists in biblical scholarship and in historical studies generally, will have thought about it sufficiently to be well qualified to discuss it. But if they are, it will not

<sup>1</sup> Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 274; cf. p. 296.

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be as and because they are specialists in such other fields or disciplines, but only because they also have a nonspecialized, or, in some cases, possibly, a specialized, competence as systematic theologians or philosophers.

As for my reformulation of the question, I have reasons for wanting to ask about construing or interpreting “the Bible” rather than “Scripture.” Although for most purposes the two terms may very well be used interchangeably, the second usually not only refers, like the first, to a specific collection of books or writings, but also suggests their status or function, severally as well as collectively, as uniquely authoritative. Indeed, in traditional theological usage, to speak of “Scripture” is to speak of the *norma normans, sed non normata*—that which is not merely substantially, but also formally, normative for all Christian witness and theology. In my view, however, one of the most important consequences of critical biblical scholarship over the last two hundred years is to have sharply posed the question whether this traditional understanding of the status or function of the biblical writings as formally normative can any longer be upheld. Therefore, I am concerned to recognize this important question for the genuinely disputed question it has now become and do not want it to be begged simply by the way in which the question before us here is formulated. It is arguable, I realize, that I do not, in fact, have this option, because the Bible’s status or function as scripture, or its lack thereof, is “hermeneutically relevant,” in that it bears in some way on how the Bible is to be interpreted.<sup>2</sup> But such arguments to this effect as I have examined have not convinced me, and so I shall proceed on the assumption that one can very well understand what it is to interpret the Bible theologically without first having to decide whether it is, or is not, rightly regarded as formally normative.

## II

It will have already become apparent that I am using the word “theology” in this discussion in the specific sense of “Christian theology.” In asking, then, as I shall now do, about the normative concept meant by this word, I shall be asking, in effect, how specifically Christian theology is to be normatively conceived. I propose to approach an answer to this question, however, by first considering what I distinguish as the generic sense of the word “theology.”

Not uncommonly, “theology” in this generic sense is taken to mean a secondary form of praxis and culture consisting in more or less critical reflection on a particular religion. Thus Michael Oakeshott, for example,

<sup>2</sup> See Charles M. Wood, *An Invitation to Theological Study* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994), pp. 55–70, esp. p. 57.

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observes that, “[l]ike anything else, a religion may evoke a reflective consideration of its postulates and a theology may emerge from this engagement; but, although a faith is an understanding, a theoretical understanding of a faith is not itself a faith.”<sup>3</sup> Oakeshott’s caution, in my view, is very much to the point. But his analysis of a theology as a reflective consideration of the postulates of a religion, while right in what it includes, is too narrow. Although the understanding, or, as I should say, *self*-understanding, that is a faith is indeed expressed explicitly through some religion and its postulates, it must also find expression, if only implicitly, through all of the other, so-called secular forms of praxis and culture. Recognizing this, I take it to be more accurate to say that “theology” in the generic sense means critical reflection on, or the proper theory of, the self-understanding and life-praxis explicitly mediated by a religion.

It follows that “theology” in the specific sense of “Christian theology” means critical reflection on the self-understanding and life-praxis explicitly mediated by the Christian religion. As such, it very definitely includes critical reflection on the Christian religion, insofar as religious praxis is among the several forms of praxis that the Christian religion mediates. But it also includes critical reflection on everything else that human beings may think, say, and do insofar as it, too, is explicitly mediated by the Christian religion. Considering, then, the traditional terms for self-understanding and life-praxis insofar as they are explicitly mediated by the Christian religion, one may also say, as I usually do, that “theology” in the specific sense in which we are using the word here means critical reflection on Christian faith and witness—or, since it is only through Christian witness that Christian faith is actually given for reflection, simply, critical reflection on Christian witness.

A possible objection to this analysis is that it fails to distinguish theology from other forms of critical reflection that may also have Christian witness as their object, such as religious studies or philosophy. This objection can be met by distinguishing between the object of a form of reflection and its *constitutive* object, meaning by the second, the object reflection on which is constitutive of the form of reflection as such. Given this distinction, there is little question that, while other forms of critical reflection may indeed reflect on Christian witness as their object, they do not have it as their constitutive object. On the other hand, theology is constituted as such, as the distinct form of critical reflection it is, by having the Christian witness as the object of its reflection.

Analysis confirms, however, that something else is involved in Christian

<sup>3</sup> Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 81.

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witness's being the constitutive object of theology as a form of critical reflection. As a general rule, a form of critical reflection is constituted as such not only or primarily by *what* it reflects on, but also and first of all by *how* it does so, in the sense of the question or questions it asks and seeks to answer just as and because it is that form of reflection. For this reason, a form of critical reflection is always constituted, in the first place, by some theoretical question or questions; and its constitutive object is never simply what it reflects on but always what it reflects on as asked about by its constitutive question or questions.

Theology, in my view, is no exception to this general rule, but an illustration of it. It, too, is constituted by a certain theoretical question; and while the constitutive object of its reflection is indeed Christian witness, it is Christian witness only as it appears within the horizon opened up by asking *this* theoretical question.

If we ask now what the constitutive question of theology is, the answer, I hold, is that it is the theoretical question that Christian witness itself, just as and because it is borne, makes not only possible but necessary—and, under certain conditions, urgent. I refer to the twofold question about the validity of the claims made or implied in bearing Christian witness, and hence about the meaning of this witness; and I speak of it as a theoretical question in order to distinguish it from the vital question—specifically, the existential question—to which bearing Christian witness itself is addressed.

In addressing this or any other vital question, one makes or implies certain claims to validity, thereby in effect promising one's companions to validate one's claims critically whenever it becomes necessary to do so in order to remain in communication with them. In this sense, to make or imply any claims to validity is to anticipate both the theoretical question whether they are, in fact, valid claims and the form of critical reflection constituted by this question. Generally, however, one can ask theoretically about the validity of what is said or done only if one first answers the other, equally theoretical question about its meaning. Consequently, in anticipating the theoretical question of validity, one generally anticipates the twofold theoretical question of validity *and* meaning—or, as we may better say so as to respect the logical priority just indicated, meaning and validity.

Here again, I maintain, theology is adequately understood only as a special case under general rules. Its constitutive question about the meaning of Christian witness and the validity of the claims made or implied in bearing it is simply the twofold theoretical question always already anticipated in bearing Christian witness itself. In this sense, one may say that bearing Christian witness anticipates doing theology as a form of critical

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reflection, even as doing theology presupposes bearing Christian witness as the constitutive object on which it reflects.

As for the claims to validity that bearing Christian witness makes or implies and that theology as such is constituted to validate critically, suffice it to say that there are two or three such claims, depending upon how closely one analyzes them. Corresponding to the systematic ambiguity of the word “witness,” which refers both to the *what* of witness, in the sense of its expression of its content, either explicitly or by implication, and to the *that* of witness, in the sense of the act of witnessing, the claims made or implied in bearing Christian witness are mainly two: that, as an explanation or implication of the content of witness, it is adequate to its content; and that, as an act of witnessing, it is fitting to its situation. Analyzed more closely, however, the first claim that witness is adequate to its content proves to comprise two further claims: that it is appropriate to Jesus Christ, or to Jesus as Christians experience him; and that it is credible to human existence as any woman or man experiences it.

Insofar, then, as theology is constituted as such, as a distinct form of critical reflection, by the theoretical question concerning the validity of the claims made or implied in bearing Christian witness, it is constituted to ask, first, about the meaning of Christian witness; second, about the adequacy of Christian witness to its content, and thus about both its appropriateness to Jesus Christ and its credibility to human existence; and third, about the fittingness of Christian witness to the situation in and for which it is borne. In this way, the constitution of theology as a single field of critical reflection is *eo ipso* the constitution of the three theological disciplines of historical, systematic, and practical theology respectively—the first being constituted by the theoretical question about the meaning of Christian witness; the second and third, by the theoretical question about its validity, the second asking about its adequacy, the third, about its fittingness. And here, too, the distinction made earlier between anticipating and presupposing is relevant. Just as, in general, one may say that critical interpretation anticipates critical validation, even as critical validation presupposes critical interpretation, so one may say that, in the special case of the theological disciplines, historical theology anticipates systematic and practical theology, even as they, for their part, each presuppose it.

Obviously, much more could be said to clarify the normative concept of “theology” as I understand it. But I must limit myself to drawing the implications of two distinctions that should already be clear from the foregoing analysis but that are of particular importance in delimiting my understanding from what I have called “the traditional understanding of theology.” I may add that, when I speak of “distinction” here, I intend to

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refer not only to difference but also to unity, since the terms of the distinction in each case, although definitely not identical, are nonetheless inseparable.

The first such distinction is that between Christian witness, on the one hand, and theology, on the other. The first, as we have seen, is the special case in which human life-praxis, like the self-understanding guiding it, is explicitly mediated by the Christian religion, while the second is the special case in which critical reflection is constituted by the theoretical question about the validity and, therefore, also the meaning of such life-praxis. Logically, then, doing theology is related to bearing Christian witness as a special case of means being related to end—as a secondary praxis of critical reflection that is intended to serve the primary praxis of leading one's life according to a certain self-understanding. But this implies, in turn, that theology's service to Christian witness, indispensable as it is, is always only the *indirect* service that critical reflection and proper theory are in a position to perform for self-understanding and life-praxis. Therefore, any attempt to make doing theology serve Christian witness directly, by subjecting it to controls that may be properly applied to bearing Christian witness but not to it, subverts its proper service and does away with it as critical reflection, by affirming only its essential unity with Christian witness, in effect denying their essential difference.

The other distinction that is particularly important for an adequate understanding of theology is closely analogous—namely, the distinction between historical theology, on the one hand, and systematic and practical theology, on the other.<sup>4</sup> The first, we have learned, is the special case in which the critical interpretation presupposed by critical validation is constituted by the theoretical question about the meaning of Christian witness, while the second are the special cases in which the critical validation anticipated by critical interpretation is constituted respectively by the theoretical questions about the adequacy, and so the appropriateness and the credibility, of Christian witness, and by the theoretical question about its fittingness. Logically, then, doing historical theology is related to doing systematic and practical theology as yet another special case of means being related to end—as the secondary praxis of critical interpretation that is supposed to serve the other secondary praxis of critically validating certain claims to validity. But this further implies, then, that historical theology's service to systematic and practical theology, however indispensable, is also always only the *indirect* service that critical interpretation is positioned to perform for critical validation. Therefore, any attempt

<sup>4</sup> The analogy here is developed in my essay, "Prolegomena to Historical Theology," in *Revising the Past: Prospects in Historical Theology*, ed. Mary Potter Engel and Walter E. Wyman, Jr. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 13–31.



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to make doing historical theology serve its sister disciplines directly, by subjecting it to controls that may be properly applied to doing them but not to it, destroys its proper service and abolishes it as critical interpretation, by affirming only its essential unity with its sister disciplines, in effect denying its essential difference from them.

If we ask now, in concluding this first part of the argument, what conditions a way of construing the Bible would need to meet in order to be authentically theological, there would appear to be at least two such necessary conditions. First of all, since theology, although inseparable from Christian witness, is nonetheless distinct from it in being critical reflection on it, a way of construing the Bible could be authentically theological only by being a special case of such critical reflection, as distinct from the life-praxis of bearing Christian witness on which theology reflects. Then, secondly, since construing the Bible is presumably only verbally different from interpreting it, a way of construing it could be authentically theological only by being a special case of interpretation, which, being also theological, could only be critical interpretation, as distinct from the critical validation of Christian witness that theology is also constituted to perform. In other words, an authentically theological way of construing the Bible could only be a special case of historical theology, as distinct from both systematic and practical theology—namely, the special case in which the Christian witness whose meaning is to be critically interpreted is the Christian witness of the Bible.

### III

This brings us to the second main part of the argument in which my concern is to clarify the other normative concept expressed by my title, “biblical interpretation.” The ulterior purpose of this clarification, just as of the preceding clarification of “theology,” is to achieve a clear understanding of the third concept, “theological interpretation of the Bible.” Moreover, I have emphasized that the understanding of all three concepts that is required to answer our question is theological—more exactly, systematic theological—or, at least, philosophical. But our immediate purpose in this part of the argument is to achieve such an understanding, not of theological interpretation of the Bible specifically as such, but of biblical interpretation in general, and thus of the other more general concept from which “theological interpretation of the Bible” is also derived as a special case.

By the phrase, “biblical interpretation,” I mean simply what could just as well be called “interpretation of the Bible,” construing the second phrase as an objective genitive referring to the process of understanding and, possibly, also explicating what the Bible means. It is true, of course,

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that the phrase may also be construed as a subjective genitive, since the Bible, or, at any rate, the writings collected in it, are not only the objects of interpretation, but the subjects of interpretation as well. The New Testament writings, for example, are themselves all quite properly understood as interpretations—ways of understanding and explicating the meaning, proximately, of the earlier traditions of Christian witness, oral and/or written, that source and tradition criticism disclose as lying behind them; and remotely, of the event of decisive existential significance of which all of the earlier traditions themselves are already interpretations. In fact, it is precisely because the New Testament writings—and, I take it, the biblical writings generally—are in these or analogous ways subjects of interpretation in their own right that they have become, in turn, objects of interpretation in the sense in which I understand “biblical interpretation.”

To speak simply of “biblical interpretation” in the singular, however, is evidently to speak at a high level of abstraction. This is confirmed by reflecting on what is right and what is wrong in the familiar statement, frequently made by theologians as well as other biblical interpreters, that the biblical writings should be interpreted in the same way in which we interpret any other writings. What is usually meant by this statement, presumably, is that such status or function as the biblical writings may have as Christian scripture is of no relevance to interpreting their meaning correctly; and with this, as I have said, I, at least, have no reason to argue. But the fact remains that the statement is at best misleading insofar as there is not one way of interpreting writings, including the biblical writings, but only many ways.

One reason for this is that not only different writings, but even the same writing, may be addressed to different questions and, therefore, require to be interpreted in different ways oriented by these different questions if they are to be interpreted in accordance with their own intentions as indicated by their grammatical meaning. But another no less important reason is that interpreters of writings, for their part, may be interested in asking any of a number of different questions that may very well orient their interpretations, whatever the questions to which the writings themselves are addressed. What is thus true of interpreting writings generally, however, is equally true of interpreting the biblical writings. Consequently, all that can possibly be meant by “biblical interpretation” is not any single way of interpreting the biblical writings, but only a plurality of such ways, only some of which either are or need to be oriented by the question or questions to which the biblical writings themselves intend to give answer.

Thus, for example, the New Testament writings, being themselves interpretations (of interpretations) of a particular historical event, may be

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quite properly interpreted as sources for reconstructing this event and other events connected with it. And this is so, even though the prospects of such an interpretation may not be particularly bright because the empirical-historical question orienting it is very different from the existential-historical question to which these writings themselves are addressed in bearing witness to the event. Or again, the interest, and hence the question, orienting an interpretation of the New Testament writings, along with other writings of the early Christian movement, may be those orienting one or the other of the modern social sciences—sociology, say, or anthropology, or even such “critical social sciences” as psychoanalysis and critique of ideology.<sup>5</sup> Here, too, the results of such an interpretation may be more or less limited by the fact that the writings themselves are quite innocent of any such interest and are addressed to a very different question. But the interpretation is still a proper way of interpreting the New Testament writings, even though it is no more the only such way than any number of others, all also proper interpretations.

The same is true, needless to say, of any interpretation of the New Testament writings oriented by the same vital question that they themselves directly address. Being writings that, like the other biblical writings, are rightly taken to be properly religious, they are explicitly addressed to the most vital of our vital questions, which I speak of, following Rudolf Bultmann and others, as “the existential question.” By this I mean the question that we human beings seem universally interested in somehow asking and answering, about the meaning of our own existence in its ultimate setting as part of the encompassing whole. Because the New Testament writings, like religious writings generally, are interested, above all, in explicitly answering this existential question, they are quite properly made the objects of existentialist interpretation, which is to say, the way of interpreting writings that is oriented by this same existential question and, therefore, asks about the possibility of self-understanding, or the understanding of existence, that the writings make explicit as our authentic possibility.<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, such an existentialist interpretation of the New Testament writings may well be said to be the most appropriate way of interpreting them precisely because it is thus oriented by the same existential question that they themselves intend to answer.

But if the first thing to be said about the concept, “biblical interpreta-

<sup>5</sup> See Karl-Otto Apel, “Types of Social Science in the Light of Human Cognitive Interests,” in *Philosophical Disputes in the Social Sciences*, ed. S. C. Brown (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979), pp. 3–50.

<sup>6</sup> On the distinction between “the *existential* question” (as well as “existential [self-] understanding”) and “*existentialist* interpretation,” see Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 69–93, esp. p. 91, n. 4, and pp. 105–10.

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tion,” is that it is, in effect, an abstract variable that has or can have a number of different values, the second thing to be said about it is comparably important. Many and different as they are, interpretations of the biblical writings, as of writings generally, may be conceived as taking place on either or both of the levels of living understandingly that I have already had occasion to distinguish—namely, the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis; and the secondary level of critical reflection and proper theory.

Any interpretation of the biblical writings on the primary level is already constituted simply by the same vital question that orients it—in the way, for instance, in which existentialist interpretation of the writings on that level is already constituted as well as oriented by the existential question about the meaning of our existence. By contrast, any interpretation of the biblical writings on the secondary level, although also oriented by some vital question, is constituted only by what I have previously referred to as the theoretical question about their meaning—not simply as such, of course, but in one or the other of the many different ways of asking it, depending upon the different vital interests and questions that may move us to do so. Thus, to stay with the same example, existentialist interpretation of the biblical writings on the secondary level, although oriented by the same existential question orienting it on the primary level, is constituted only by the theoretical question about the existential meaning of the writings. It is constituted, in other words, by asking what the biblical writings *really* mean existentially, as distinct from what they may be *said* to mean existentially on the primary level of interpreting them.

Our main interest here, obviously, is in biblical interpretation on the secondary level, since it alone is properly critical and, therefore, may be presumed to be appropriate to critical biblical scholarship. Our task narrows, then, to asking about the normative concept of “*critical* biblical interpretation,” keeping in mind that it, too, can only be an abstract variable, having as its values, not one, but many ways of interpreting the biblical writings critically.

Beyond what has already been said, I want to make two points by way of answering this question. The first is that any critical interpretation of the biblical writings, whatever its way of asking theoretically about their meaning, is like every other in having to follow essentially the same methods of historical- and literary-critical research in determining what the writings say. Regardless of the question that a biblical writing itself addresses, or that different interpreters, for their part, may be interested in putting to it, it is given as such, as a writing, only as something that, in different respects, is both historical and literary. Consequently, what it really means, however one asks about its meaning, cannot be critically determined at all until one first determines critically what it really says

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by following the appropriate historical- and literary-critical methods for determining this. My first point, then, is substantially Bultmann's, when he insists that among the things that any "scientific," or properly critical, exegesis of the biblical writings necessarily presupposes is not only "a particular way of asking questions" arising out of the interpreter's life-relation to, and preunderstanding of, their subject matter, but also "the method of historical-critical research," or what he elsewhere speaks of as "the old hermeneutical rules of grammatical interpretation, formal analysis [*sc.* of structure and style], and explanation in terms of contemporary conditions."<sup>7</sup>

The second point can be made by recalling my earlier statement that any way of interpreting the biblical writings critically is constituted as such only by some way of asking the theoretical question about their meaning. The point of this statement in context was to insist that a critical way of interpreting the biblical writings, although oriented by some vital question, is not constituted by it, but only by some way of asking the *theoretical* question of meaning. But the statement may also be read, with only a slight change of emphasis, as making the other no less important point that it is some way of asking the theoretical question of *meaning*, and of meaning alone, that constitutes a way of interpreting the biblical writings as properly critical. In other words, what is ruled out on this reading of the statement is that some way of interpreting the biblical writings critically could possibly require answering on some level the closely related but logically distinct question about their *validity*, in the sense of the validity of the claims that they make or imply in addressing the question that they themselves intend to answer.

This insistence that no way of interpreting the biblical writings can be critical without abstracting completely from validating their own claims to validity means that its results must be free from control by anything and anyone other than what is said and meant by the writings themselves. Thus any interpretation of the meaning of a biblical writing whose results are controlled externally by what the interpreter or someone else either believes to be valid or critically validates as being so, cannot be a critical interpretation. Bultmann puts this by saying that, while no exegesis is possible without presuppositions, the one thing that no "scientific," or properly critical, exegesis can presuppose is its results—in the way in which it belongs to an allegorical interpretation, for example, to do.<sup>8</sup> And I could say substantially the same thing in terms previously employed here by saying that, as much as a critical interpretation of the biblical writings may indeed anticipate the theoretical *question* about their validity,

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 146–53, 86; cf. also pp. 70–71.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145–46; cf. pp. 106, 138.

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it cannot anticipate and it may not presuppose any *answer* to this question, any more than it may allow its results to be controlled by what anyone believes to be true or right.

Considering, then, all that has been said to clarify the normative concept of biblical interpretation, we may conclude this second part of the argument, also, by recalling the terms of our question and asking, What conditions would a way of construing the Bible have to meet in order to respect the integrity of critical biblical scholarship? Assuming that what it would mean for a way of interpreting the biblical writings to show such respect would be for it to be critical, not in some different sense, but in the same sense, in which biblical interpretations otherwise are properly said to be so, we need no longer be in doubt about the answer. The necessary conditions of any interpretation's being critical in this sense are simply the conditions that we have now seen to be implied by the normative concept of critical biblical interpretation.

### IV

Given the preceding clarifications of the concepts, "theology" and "biblical interpretation," the task of this third and final part of my argument is to clarify the derivative concept, "theological interpretation of the Bible." I speak of this concept as derivative because it is derived logically as a special case from the other two concepts, in that to understand both of them is also to understand it. But this means that the understanding of this concept that I shall now set forth on the assumption that it, also, is theologically adequate is likewise derivative, insofar as it is derived from the understandings already developed of the two more general concepts that together generate it.

Whatever, exactly, may be meant by the phrase, "theological interpretation of the Bible," also construed as an objective genitive, it evidently refers to a way of understanding and, presumably, also explicating the meaning of the biblical writings that is, in the terms of our question, "authentically theological." If we recall, then, the conclusion reached at the end of the first part of the argument, we may say that theological interpretation of the Bible is a special case of interpreting the biblical writings that at the same time is also a special case not only of theology in general, in the sense of critical reflection on Christian witness, but also of historical theology in particular, understood as critical interpretation of the meaning of Christian witness, as distinct from the critical validation of its claims to validity that is the proper business, in their different ways, of systematic and practical theology. Specifically, it is the case of such critical interpretation in which the *interpretanda*, the meaning of whose Christian witness is

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to be understood and explained, are the biblical writings. But just what does it mean to say this?

It means, first of all, that theological interpretation of the biblical writings is a way of understanding and explicating their meaning that is oriented by the same existential question to which they themselves intend to give answer. I said earlier that theology is constituted both as a single field of critical reflection and in its three disciplines by the theological question about the meaning and validity of Christian witness. But while theology is indeed constituted by this theoretical question, it is so only by the particular way of asking the question that depends, in turn, upon the vital question by which it, like the constitutive object of its reflection, is oriented—namely, the existential question. Because this is the question to which Christian witness itself intends, above all, to give answer, theology as critical reflection on its claims to validity and, therefore, also on its meaning must be oriented by the same question and is constituted only by the way of asking about its validity and meaning that this question moves one to ask. But this means, then, that theological interpretation of the biblical writings can only be existentialist interpretation of them—more exactly, the existentialist interpretation of them constituted respectively by the constitutive questions of theology as a field and of historical theology as the first of its three disciplines.

Because, however, the constitutive questions of theology and of historical theology are not merely vital questions but theoretical questions, theological interpretation of the biblical writings is existentialist interpretation of them, not just on the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis, but on the secondary level of critical reflection and proper theory. In other words, it is *critical* existentialist interpretation of them—more exactly, the critical existentialist interpretation of them constituted by the constitutive questions of theology and of historical theology respectively. This means that, while it, too, is oriented by the same existential question that the biblical writings themselves primarily intend to answer, it is constituted by the theoretical question about what they *really* mean existentially, as distinct from what they may be *said* to mean existentially on the primary level of understanding and explicating their meaning.

Obviously, I can hardly expect my statement that theological interpretation of the biblical writings is such critical existentialist interpretation of them to go unchallenged. But I can try to forestall irrelevant objections, especially any that may arise from too narrow an understanding of what is properly meant by “the existential question,” and hence by “existentialist interpretation.”

As I explained earlier, I understand the existential question to be the question we all ask as human beings about the meaning of our own exis-

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tence in its ultimate setting. As such, it has two distinct but inseparable aspects: a metaphysical aspect, in which it asks about the reality of our existence as part of the encompassing whole; and a moral aspect, in which it asks about how we are to understand ourselves realistically, in accordance with this reality, and, in this sense, authentically. Therefore, while the existential question is neither the properly metaphysical question nor the properly moral question, it is nevertheless logically related to both questions, and any answer to it implies certain answers to them, even as, conversely, any answer to either of them also implies some answer to it. This means, among other things, that any existentialist interpretation of the biblical writings, oriented, as it must be, by the existential question, not only must allow for but even requires both properly metaphysical and properly moral ways of interpreting them.

Nor are these the only ways of interpreting the biblical writings that an existentialist interpretation of them allows for or requires. I have myself sought to show elsewhere that it not only requires a properly moral interpretation of them, but also allows for a specifically political interpretation, notwithstanding that the biblical writings themselves have little, if anything, to say that is directly and explicitly "political" in the sense in which we use the word today.<sup>9</sup> There is also the consideration that Bultmann characteristically stresses, that, while "genuine interpretation" of the biblical writings is an existentialist interpretation of them oriented by the same existential question to which they themselves are addressed, "other ways of asking questions . . . have a legitimate place in the service of genuine understanding." This is true, for example, of the historical, or, perhaps better, historicist, interpretation of the biblical writings as "sources" for reconstructing a picture of their own age; "[f]or any interpretation necessarily moves in a circle: on the one hand, the individual phenomenon is understandable [only] in terms of its time and place; on the other hand, it itself first makes its time and place understandable." But Bultmann says much the same also for literary ways of interpreting the biblical writings, such as "formal analysis . . . undertaken from the aesthetic standpoint": although "to carry out such analysis is not to achieve real understanding," still "it can be prepared for by such analysis."<sup>10</sup>

By these and other considerations, it can be shown, I believe, that both the existential question and existentialist interpretation can and should be understood rather differently from the way in which they are frequently understood. In any event, if they are understood as I understand

<sup>9</sup> See my books, *The Point of Christology*, 2d ed. (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), pp. 95–96, 148–68, and *On Theology*, 2d ed. (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), pp. 134–50.

<sup>10</sup> Bultmann, pp. 78–80.



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them, I am prepared to stand by my statement that theological interpretation of the biblical writings is the critical existentialist interpretation of them constituted, remotely, by the constitutive question of theology and, proximately, by the constitutive question of historical theology.

The crucial point, however, is that this one difference, that theological interpretation of the biblical writings is constituted by the theoretical questions of theology and of historical theology respectively, is its *only* difference from any other critical existentialist interpretation of the biblical writings, however otherwise constituted. In other words, it is in every respect critical existentialist interpretation, not in some different sense of "critical," but in identically the same sense in which any other interpretation of the biblical writings, existentialist or otherwise, is properly said to be so.

Because theology and historical theology are both in their respective ways critical in precisely this sense, since otherwise they neither would nor could be theology at all, as distinct from the Christian witness on which they are the reflection, the existentialist interpretation of the biblical writings that they respectively constitute could not fail to meet the necessary conditions of any interpretation's being properly critical. Thus not only must it be constituted by a properly theoretical, as distinct from a merely vital, question, but it must also rely on the same historical- and literary-critical methods that any other critical interpretation has to rely on in determining what the biblical writings say. But most importantly, it, too, must abstract completely from validating the claims to validity that the biblical writings make or imply in bearing their Christian witness; and this means that the only control on its results, also, must be what is said and meant by these writings themselves when they are interpreted as answering their own existential question.

Indeed, it is clear that, if the critical existentialist interpretation of the biblical writings that is constituted respectively by theology and historical theology were not to meet these conditions, it could no more be said to be "authentically theological" than it could be said to be "critical" in the relevant sense of the word. Only because it is critical in the same sense in which any other critical interpretation may be said to be so can it perform its proper service as theological interpretation: to understand and explicate correctly the existential meaning of the biblical writings, as the means necessary to the end both of theologically validating their own claims to validity and of making the right use of them in theologically validating the claims of all other Christian witness.

Consequently, I see reason enough to conclude that, if theological interpretation of the biblical writings is adequately understood to be just such a critical existentialist interpretation of them, then the only correct answer to our question is affirmative. Because there is at present this way

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of understanding the normative meaning of “theological interpretation of the Bible,” there is also at present a way of construing the Bible that is authentically theological and yet respects the integrity of critical biblical scholarship.

It remains to be determined, of course, whether the understandings of the other concepts from which this understanding has been derived can be critically validated as adequate, theologically as well as philosophically. But if they can, as I, for one, am convinced they can, then the affirmative answer to our question can be not merely conditional or hypothetical but categorical. In any event, there can be no doubt about the import of the answer, for praxis as well as for theory. Although the answer as such must in the nature of the case be theoretical, it nonetheless has everything to do with praxis: not only the secondary praxis of doing theology and interpreting the Bible theologically, but also the primary praxis that this secondary praxis is intended to serve—namely, bearing Christian witness and interpreting the Bible in bearing it, through the indirect witness of Christian teaching as well as the direct witness of Christian proclamation.