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RICHARD S BRIGGS

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# The Role of the Bible in Formation and Transformation: A Hermeneutical and Theological Analysis

**This article, concerned with the part that the Bible plays in the formation of Christians, especially those called to leadership ministry, was first presented as a public lecture in Cranmer Hall, St John's College, Durham. Why should we stay with the Bible, how can we read it and have it form us, without bringing our own pre-formed agendas to the texts? He notes the many challenges in reading the Bible on its own terms, not least laying aside modern categories for enquiry. Transformation into the image of the Son of God requires that the Biblical text, including difficult and disturbing passages, sets the agenda for the interpretative task.**

What are we looking for when we approach scripture? And how should we handle what we find there? In particular: how should we approach the Bible in the context of ministerial formation? These questions must surely be at the heart of the concerns of teaching Biblical Studies and Hermeneutics in a theological college training people for the church's ministry. In this article I want to explore the extent to which the Bible can be appropriately harnessed to the tasks of formation, and of transformation, or perhaps better: what is at stake in harnessing scripture to these tasks?

It is an interesting time to be a biblical scholar. I do not intend to discuss whether we are entering into a 'postmodern' era of biblical interpretation or not, but it is certainly true that a great deal of what previously passed for 'consensus' in biblical studies is now contested. One benefit of this, for our present purposes, is that it is no longer necessary to apologise for engaging with biblical interpretation in an explicitly theological frame of reference. This need not presuppose any particular theological framework or tradition, and in fact to say that one will interpret 'theologically' should probably raise as many questions as it resolves, but in principle at least, the idea that biblical studies will have spiritual and theological dimensions may be accepted.

In the context of training for ministry, biblical studies finds itself pressed into service to have something to say on all manner of practical and pastoral issues,

and in one sense, rightly so. I have found myself, more times than I care to recall, midway through some elegant analysis of a standard ‘issue’ in a biblical lecture and looked up from, say, a discussion of the authorship of Ephesians or issues of chronology in the prophets, to be met by a class full of blank stares, and have found myself reflecting that on such matters, the class may have a surer grasp than the scholarly tradition concerning whether we need to be there at all. The need to move away from a narrow conception of biblical studies as the accumulation of knowledge about the Bible or specific biblical passages stands behind the rise of ‘hermeneutics’ as a subject deserving its own place in the theological curriculum. It is not so very many years ago that hermeneutics would have occurred, if it occurred at all, only in courses on preaching, where it was hoped that some practical and pastoral concern for the relevance of the biblical message would be present. But if we come to ask now how biblical studies and the concerns of ministerial formation and transformation may be held together, we find a conversation which seems to be still in its early stages. It is at least, at the present time, characterised by plenty of good intentions, which is an advance on some recent emphases. I remember once talking to a biblical studies lecturer at a theological training institution who said that he liked to get students started by exploring the appalling theology of the Deuteronomist, and such examples of a conspicuous lack of good intention could doubtless be multiplied.

In the course of this article, I want to set out what I take to be the central issue before us, which is the differing agendas of biblical studies as a discipline, as compared to the demands of training people for ministry in the church, and then offer a hermeneutical argument for why this is not easily resolved in terms of simply making biblical studies ‘more practical’. I shall then look at how concentrating on interpreting the Bible on its own terms, in so far as that is possible, is the surest way ahead for letting it do its formational and transformational work. This will involve brief reflection on the purpose of having a scripture at all, and then an attempt to explore one or two examples.

## I A Tale of Two Agendas

In 1970, James Smart wrote about *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*. He noted the discomfiting fact that increased attention to hermeneutics (the book was subtitled ‘A Study in Hermeneutics’) had actually gone hand in hand with a general decline in the church’s attention to scripture itself. In a closing ‘practical postscript’ he memorably described the ordinand’s transition as

‘He goes from a situation in which he has the support and encouragement of professors and fellow students, and, not least, of a well-stocked library, to a situation where, once his fellow ministers have installed him, he finds himself very much alone. When he attends the district governing body to which he belongs, its sessions are likely to be wholly occupied with church business and to have no time for discussion of such matters as Biblical interpretation or theological issues. ... It is not surprising that for many pastors the theological interest fails to survive, with serious consequences for the character of their ministry.’<sup>1</sup>

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1 Smart, 1970: 168

As just noted, approaches to biblical interpretation have changed in many ways in the intervening years, but has this scenario changed much with regard to the transition from study into ministry? If we might no longer speak of ‘the strange silence of the Bible in the Church’, it is perhaps troubling that Stephen Pattison’s widely cited *A Critique of Pastoral Care*, offers simply a more focused updating of the same problem:

The Bible is appealed to and consulted in all matters of Christian life. It is regarded as authoritative and indispensable. No one, then, could say that it is not important; but if they were relying on the contemporary literature of pastoral care, they might well draw the opposite conclusion. ... There is an almost absolute and embarrassing silence about the Bible in pastoral care theory.<sup>2</sup>

As it happens, Pattison’s own text is one of the primary triggers of doing something about this state of affairs, although the fact that this quote is taken from the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of his book, as recently as 2000, suggests that progress has been slow. Pattison offers a categorisation of 5 approaches to the Bible in pastoral care theory,<sup>3</sup> and the resulting discussion and development of these ideas has led to such projects as the current DLT ‘Using the Bible in Pastoral Practice Series’, of which 2 out of 3 vols have now appeared. (Ballard and Holmes 2005; Oliver 2006) These books indicate at the very least a serious attempt to remedy the problem identified by Pattison, although if a slightly critical word may be offered, it seems to me that what they do definitely achieve is the act of talking about biblical and pastoral issues at the same time, rather than in a particularly integrated manner.

For example, in the second book in the series, Gordon Oliver argues that the main question at the intersection of biblical and pastoral studies is whether we can be human and biblical at the same time? Put simply: ‘is being biblical likely to make people narrower as persons or bigger as persons’; does it serve to diminish us or to renew us?<sup>4</sup> Oliver envisages some kind of open-ended story-telling, of both biblical and contemporary stories, whereby the agendas of both scriptural text and pastoral reality can be brought into fruitful dialogue. There is much wisdom here, even if I find myself wondering why, when he gets around to articulating the issues at the interface of the two, he always manages to say that it is pastoral practice which asks hard questions of the Bible rather than the other way round.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the framework presupposed by a discussion such as this is that there are two agendas at work in the discussion: that of the Bible, and that of the pastoral minister.

Intriguingly, none of these recent books mention what I take to be the main contribution from the biblical studies side of the equation, a book now well over 30 years old, but which remains one of the closest things to a treatment of our subject to this date, Walter Wink’s explosive little 1973 tract, *The Bible in Human Transformation*. This, as any who read it will doubtless not forget in a hurry, opened up with the claim that historical criticism was bankrupt, not in the sense that it should now be proclaimed dead and buried, but in the sense that it had become

2 Pattison, 2000: 106

3 The fundamentalist, or biblicist approach; the tokenist approach, the imagist or suggestive approach, the informative

approach, the thematic approach. Pattison 2000: 115 ff

4 Oliver 2006: 134

5 Oliver 2006: 86, 156

‘incapable of achieving what most of its practitioners considered its purpose to be: so to interpret the Scriptures that the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation.’<sup>6</sup> Among the various ways forward Wink explores, most prominent is a psycho-analytic model for a dialectical (and communal, Socratic) approach of questioning the text to lay bare ‘the truth of our own personal and social being’, leading to a renewed emphasis on communion. Wink followed this with a practically orientated book *Transforming Bible Study*, which sought to draw out psychological insights for exegesis. There he stated ‘Our goal then is so to move among these mighty texts that we are transformed’.<sup>7</sup> (There is a problem with Wink’s specific argument which I shall indirectly address later, but in essence it is this: he sees transformation as attainable by switching from historical-critical categories to psychologically orientated ones, and this, in my judgment, does not get to the heart of the matter, for reasons to be explored.)

In recent years, and in keeping with the above-noted trend towards asking theological (and ecclesiological) questions in biblical interpretation, several biblical scholars have joined the call for a formational or transformational dimension to come to the fore. Here is just a selection:

- ‘the interpretation of Scripture is indeterminate and requires the moral formation and transformation of people’s lives because of the manifold ways in which people do not judge wisely. ... [it] requires an ongoing process of being formed and transformed by God’s grace in and through friendships and practices of Christian communities’<sup>8</sup>
- ‘Without facing the inalienably transformative and self-involving demands that these ecclesial writings place on a serious reader, it is impossible to make significant sense of them’<sup>9</sup>
- ‘Christian theists seek transforming engagement with the active word of God. To this end we not only seek to *listen* to the biblical text with openness and expectancy, but we also seek to understand at ever deeper levels what it is to *interpret* Scripture, to *reflect* both upon Scripture and on our own processes of engaging with it, and to be *transformed* by the *formative* impact of Scripture in thought, life and identity.’<sup>10</sup>

What we find then, is that there is much good will on both sides of the disciplinary divide, and the ‘fruitful dialogue’ of which Oliver speaks is much desired. It is not, however, quite so much practised (though I do not want to say that it is *not* practised) and there is, I suggest, a *hermeneutical* reason for this.

## II Operating Across the Agendas: A Hermeneutical Analysis

First, an example. I recall attending a seminar at a Christian leadership conference on the topic of delegation. The speaker wanted to begin with a biblical example, which he felt would be a matter of letting the Bible set some kind of agenda for the seminar. As it happened, he picked a fairly poor example (Jesus sending out the 70 in Luke 10, where v.1 turned out to represent the principle that you shouldn’t

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6 Wink 1973: 2

7 Wink 1990: 42

8 Fowl & Jones 1991: 31

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9 Bockmuehl 2006: 46

10 Thiselton 2005: 17

delegate anything you would be unwilling to do yourself). Arguably he could have picked Jethro counselling Moses that he would wear himself out if he didn't teach other people how to judge disputes (Ex 19:18), and perhaps that would have been a better example. But in either case, what substantive role could the biblical passage possibly have played, since the subject matter of the seminar was set from elsewhere, and involved principles of delegation well attested in all manner of leadership and management literature.

The principle at stake is this. Appeals to the Bible in any matter of pastoral practice run into the horns of a classic hermeneutical dilemma which occurs whenever two different disciplinary agendas meet.<sup>11</sup> How can the traditional modes of thought and practice from one discipline (in this case biblical studies) respond to the new situation of another (in this case the demands of pastoral ministry)? If it refuses to take on board the new framework, it becomes effectively irrelevant to it, if not indeed incomprehensible. It will answer questions which pastoral practice is not putting to it. Biblical studies has quite a track record in this. But if it does take on the new framework, and successfully explains how it can answer questions within the framework of pastoral practice, then it becomes hard to see why pastoral practice needs to go to the trouble of adapting to the separate discipline of biblical studies in the first place. Either way, biblical studies can no longer operate according to its own canons and criteria, and on its own agenda, and at the same time provide a satisfactory response to questions brought to it from a different agenda.

Thus far a theoretical, and perhaps overdrawn, presentation of the issue. Does it ring true in our experience? I think the answer to this is: yes and no. Take the pressing example of how we should think about and practice forgiveness. The biblical scholar will be well placed to offer an analysis of forgiveness in Matthew's gospel as a key to Matthew's idea of how Christian communities should understand membership in the community, while the pastor is trying to address a wide range of instances in which forgiveness is at issue. The prescriptions of Matthew 18 concerning how to try to win back a brother who sins against you, and how many times to forgive him, will address some of these situations, but by no means all. We are surely all familiar with the glum conclusion of the imagined discussion here: the Bible does not really address the issue about which the minister is asking. But what we have seen here is that in fact there is *some* overlap of the concerns of biblical studies and pastoral practice, and the task might be described as the need to discern how and when that overlap occurs.

Indeed, as one reflects on this argument about two different agendas, the suspicion grows that perhaps it is simply not true, for we seem to do fairly well with appropriating the Bible for all manner of practical ministerial concerns, so how in fact do we do this, if it is not supposed to be theoretically possible? This is worth probing a little, and there are some fairly straightforward examples with which one may do it. Consider a passage such as Romans 12, for example (though this is not as random a choice as it may appear, for reasons that will become clearer later). We might perhaps look at vv.9-21 with their discussion of genuine love, mutual

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<sup>11</sup> The most generalised form of this same argument is offered by MacIntyre 1969, and is neatly summarised by Stout 1981: 97.

affection, blessing those who persecute you, living peaceably with all, and overcoming evil with good. None of this appears to be conceptually difficult, and it is easy to imagine lifting it straight off the page and presenting it as practical wisdom for the Christian life to any member of one's congregation, if not to any person at all. Now if we are to imagine pastoral practice putting its agenda to the biblical scholar, ('how should I treat those who persecute me?'), then surely here is an example where the agendas overlap, and a meaningful response might be made from one discipline to another.

Perhaps you can tell from the way that I have set up this example that I do not think this is right. Why not? The problem lies with the habit, deeply ingrained across the theological spectrum, of reading off an agenda from the surface of the text which happens to fit very neatly into a system of values which are already believed. In this case, Romans 12 offers a powerful exhortation to love, and ties in with a view I have come across very often in churches of all types, that being a Christian is all about being loved by God, and learning to love God and neighbour in return. Love, in the terms of our own discussion, becomes the fundamental hermeneutical category within which the text is understood, assessed, and then, to a greater or lesser extent, implemented.

We may do well to call to mind at this point the warning offered by Samuel Taylor Coleridge: 'The main hindrance to the use of the scriptures ... lies in the notion that you are already acquainted with its contents'.<sup>12</sup> Admittedly, these days, I would rather say that this is one main hindrance, since there is another obvious hindrance to the use of the scriptures today, which is the staggering *lack* of acquaintance with its contents exhibited in so much Christian thinking, but be that as it may, Coleridge's point has never been clearer with respect to hermeneutical frameworks. If we rush to assume that we already know which categories are the right ones to bring to the biblical text in order to pursue the questions we already have, then we shall assuredly miss the ways in which the biblical witness to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, seeks to reshape our concerns around an agenda which we do not naturally possess (and are unlikely to learn from the culture in which we live).

In this particular case, love as basic hermeneutical category starts to look quite interesting around Romans 12:20. Verse 19 quotes Deut 32:35 to remind us that 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord', and v.20 takes up the point of this citation by quoting Proverbs 25:21-22a (LXX): 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads'. Some argue that what Paul has in mind here is the inflicting of 'such an inward sense of shame as will either lead him [the enemy] to real contrition and to being no more an enemy but a friend, or else, if he refuses to be reconciled, will remain with him as the pain of a bad conscience.'<sup>13</sup> Others suggest that 'heaping coals of fire' on someone's head must have had some kind of positive sense,<sup>14</sup> perhaps from an Egyptian repentance ritual (where carrying coals of fire (in a dish) on one's head symbolised repentance.<sup>15</sup> Often the two explanations are merged,<sup>16</sup> perhaps in the hope that at least one of them will turn out to work.

**12** Cited by Watson 1990: 125 as from Coleridge's *The Statesman's Manual*, 1816.

**13** Cranfield 1979: 649

**14** Dunn 1988: 750-51

**15** cf Klassen 1962-63

**16** Wright 2002: 714-15

What has happened here is that a hermeneutical impulse to pursue some less intuitive level of understanding has kicked in because on the surface these two verses seem to jar with a framework hitherto easily understood. But this is to fall foul of the ever-present protest regarding the role of hermeneutics in biblical interpretation, which is that it is in the end nothing more than a sophisticated form of self-legitimation for getting round the bits of scripture which we don't like. In this sense, Schleiermacher was right, hermeneutics is a general phenomenon relevant to the handling of all texts, and is not a form of interpretative cavalry riding to the rescue only when there is a problem.

The heart of the hermeneutical issue is that if we bring to the text our own understanding of the category of 'love', and use it as the basis for adopting this text for moral exhortation and encouragement, then we shall inevitably twist the passage to serve an agenda driven by our own understanding of love. What one needs to do is to learn what the category of 'love' is from the biblical witness if one wants to let this text operate with its own agenda.

It is on the level of hermeneutical categories that the problem of clashing agendas plays out. Perhaps the most startling argument put forward to this effect is by the Harvard Jewish scholar Jon Levenson, in his article 'Exodus and Liberation'.<sup>17</sup> To paraphrase and simplify only very slightly, his argument is this: the exodus from Egypt is not an instance of liberation as that term is generally understood, in, for example, liberation theology. Where liberation is a category predicated on release, perhaps from slavery or any other form of oppression, the categories with which the Exodus narratives operate are fundamentally different. According to Levenson, the chief concerns of the text are firstly the enthronement of Yhwh (in Israel's acclamation of his victory), secondly the way in which the Exodus serves as a basis for the covenant, and thirdly, the transfer of slave status within Israel from being the slaves of Pharaoh to being the slaves of Yhwh (e.g. Lev 25:55). 'The point of the exodus,' he adds, 'is not freedom in the sense of self-determination, but *service*, the service of the loving, redeeming, and delivering God of Israel, rather than the state and its proud king.'<sup>18</sup>

So far I have looked at two examples of the hermeneutical problem of operating with categories not drawn from (or at least driven by) the biblical text, and they have been deliberately chosen: love and liberation. Who would dispute the great value of cherishing the importance of love and liberation, and surely these are qualities to which a Christian above all should aspire? If our argument so far is right, the answer to this last question, which is more usually posed rhetorically, is 'almost, but not quite', for it makes a great deal of difference if we replace the biblical categories with similar looking ones which are at home in our own privatised and late-capitalist society. Ironically, what happens with a category like 'love' is that it is held to be self-evident as to what it is, and this self-evident concept is then used as a standard against which to judge those parts of scripture felt not to measure up to it. Those who, in Coleridge's terms, 'already know' that the Bible is all about liberation and love will duly find themselves creating a self-fulfilling canon within the canon, which does little more than reflect back out to the interpreter the very values he or she went in with, with now the added complication that all

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17 Levenson 1993: 126-59

18 Levenson 1993:144

sorts of passages have to be reinterpreted or simply dropped because they do not measure up. One does not have to spend long on this path before beginning to wonder whether it wouldn't be a whole lot easier to dispense with the troublesome work of interpreting scripture for moral formation and transformation, and simply jump straight to the categories offered by the many other resources to hand for this task. And this path is of course widely taken in practice, as witnessed in the considerable success, in Christian circles, of concepts such as 'the purpose driven life', or the considerable prevalence, in Christian sermons, of exhortations to do good, or to live the moral life of such as America's high-profile ecclesiological vegetables. (cf Work 2000!)

In staying at the appealing end of the moral spectrum (i.e. by focusing on categories such as love and liberation, or peace and loving-kindness, or indeed formation and transformation) I hope to help us realise that the hermeneutical question in interpreting the Bible is not how to negotiate between the inspiring and the problematic bits, but is rather to force us to come up with a more profound reason for persevering with scripture than the simple fact that it does have plenty of inspiring bits. The inspiration which it affords, in other words, is a by-product of scripture's own agenda, which lies elsewhere, and which sees scripture as something other than an end in itself.

### **III Scripture on its own terms: In theory. Thoughts from a Crowd of Witnesses**

What is scripture's own agenda? I will forsake entering at this point into another theoretical analysis, and instead take the soundings of a crowd of (quite significant) witnesses concerning this topic.

Karl Barth once asked 'what is there within the Bible?' in his extraordinary article 'the strange new world within scripture'.<sup>19</sup> The answer, he claimed, was God, or more precisely, God's trinitarian self-revelation. The Bible is not primarily concerned with truth, history, morality or religion, although all of these are in there, but the Bible, at some point or other, proves embarrassing to all these agendas if they are pursued as keys to understanding. This argument takes him all of 20 short pages, but working it out in detail proved to be more than the work of a lifetime, even one as prolific as his. It is interesting, though, that his initial statement of the issue took place in the context of finding that his theological education had not left him with anything to say in the weekly task of being a pastor in a small church in Switzerland. It was 1916. Faced with the realities of pastoral ministry in a time of crisis, we might suggest, he was forced to find a deeper theological rationale for persevering with scripture than its upbeat and inspiring passages offered, or all his learning *about* scripture had afforded him. One is reminded of von Rad's wonderful quote to a preaching class:

'I give you about ten to twenty beginners' sermons, in which you will repeat what you have learned. Then you will have preached yourselves out. Then if you do not make the discovery that every text wants to speak for itself, you are lost.'<sup>20</sup>

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19 Barth 1928

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20 Von Rad 1977: 18

Likewise, we may consider the startling confession of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, made in the latter part of his life, after, significantly, he had had the experience of running the seminary at Finkenwalde for the confessing church, where matters of personal formation and transformation impressed themselves upon him with a very great urgency. In a letter written in 1936, Bonhoeffer had this to say:

I want to confess quite simply that I believe the Bible alone is the answer to all our questions, and that we only need to ask persistently and with some humility in order to receive an answer from it.<sup>21</sup>

Now perhaps this is written with a certain hyperbole, and some do suggest that Bonhoeffer is endlessly quotable because one can to an extent turn his words to support a rather wide range of theological positions. After all, surely not *all* our questions are answered by the Bible, not even all our serious questions, nor even all our theological questions. But in his emphasis on persistence and humility, Bonhoeffer perhaps suggests that in our own serious engagement with scripture, we shall come to ask better, more probing, and more profound questions, which, he goes on to say, will penetrate to the God who lies beneath the surface of the text, (1986: 44) and which will indeed turn out to be answered by scripture. This is a claim, then, that we should be learning to ask the questions which are put to us by scripture, to read it, as literary critics like to say, ‘with the grain’ rather than ‘against the grain’, and that by so doing we shall find ourselves in a better, or wiser, or more spiritually and theologically enriching, place.

Bonhoeffer’s claim is, I would suggest, neither particularly straightforward nor self-evident. It is not claiming that we only need the Bible, and neither is it simply picking up on the obvious way in which scripture either is or should be read. But I wonder if it is not so very different from the view of scripture articulated in the 6<sup>th</sup> of the 39 articles of the Church of England (1571):

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

An adequate interpretation of this article is in itself a demanding hermeneutical challenge, and one which requires the same ability to balance matters of original context and present confession as are familiar to interpreters of scripture. It is certainly true that there is one obvious and quite misleading way to take these words, which would be to suggest that the function of Scripture is something like the establishing of a core minimum of belief to enable one to ‘be saved’. The very manner in which this 6<sup>th</sup> article goes on to describe the Apocrypha appears to exclude this line of thought: regarding these ‘other books’, these ‘the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners, but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine’. It hardly seems possible to imagine that ‘the example of life and instruction of manners’ only comes into play when doctrine is off the map – it is surely assumed that it is a part of ‘what is necessary to salvation’, which therefore must mean something like ‘pertaining to the life of faith’, or in Oliver O’Donovan’s words, ‘pertinent to the gospel of Jesus Christ, which demands of us, for the salvation of our souls, our total faith and obedience’.<sup>22</sup>

21 Bonhoeffer 1986: 43, from a letter dated 8 April 1936.

22 O’Donovan 1986: 52

The Bible on its own terms, then, is in the business of pointing us somewhere else. As Martin Luther once put it, 'The one who does not understand the realities cannot draw the meaning out of the words'.<sup>23</sup> This could be true on several levels. Historically, for example, one could say that an inability to grasp the historical reality envisaged by the text makes it difficult (if not impossible) to draw the historical meaning out of the words. And since all theological realities in the text come to us clothed in historical dress, we must at a minimum retain the analytical tools of historical criticism if we are to have any hope of taking scripture on its own terms. But the primary sense in which Luther meant it was the divine reality which lay behind the text. This is a kind of map and territory distinction, which has recurred down through the ages whenever a vision of the God behind the Bible has gripped the exegete. Thus Barth's famous quote about Calvin:

'how energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become transparent'.<sup>24</sup>

And in turn Barth's own *Romans* commentary has been characterised thus: 'Barth thinks he has understood Paul this well only because he thinks he has caught sight of the object of which Paul was the witness.'<sup>25</sup>

It is not my intention here to argue that one must follow Barth, not least because it has sometimes been argued that Barth himself does not follow Barth on this matter.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, not every experience of scripture reading can necessarily be trusted just because one seeks to find God in it.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, in theory at least, to read scripture on its own terms is to let God set a theocentric agenda for the best part of all our thinking, questioning and acting. But what does this mean in practice? What does it mean for questions of formation and transformation? How does the Bible in practice play a role in formation? And how could it be the experience of an ordained minister today that the Bible answers 'all' of their questions?

#### IV Scripture on its own terms: In practice. Some Examples

In this final section there is space to explore briefly two kinds of example. Firstly, does scripture present itself as formative or transformative, and is this understood, in line with our argument above, as a hermeneutical category appropriate to reading scripture on its own terms? Secondly, what about the seemingly obvious difficulty that much of scripture is morally and ethically problematic, to say the least. Some brief thoughts with regard to these two areas.

Firstly, there are many places in scripture where the agenda seems to be explicitly concerned with matters of transformation. Most obviously, Romans 12:2

<sup>23</sup> 'Qui non intelligit res non potest sensum ex verbis elicere', cited by Martin 2006: xiv, 230. The source is *WA* 5, p 26, n 5246.

<sup>24</sup> Barth 1933: 7

<sup>25</sup> McCormack 1991: 328

<sup>26</sup> Thus Ford 1979, presenting the findings of Ford 1981, and arguing, to the disappointment of all those who would raid Barth rather than read him, that the way he uses scripture in the *Church Dogmatics* is not

the same as the way he says he is going to use it (in vol 1).

<sup>27</sup> So Jeanrond 1988: 95, who asks Barth the following: 'are all the disclosures of revelation really what they pretend to be and are all resulting transformations of the interpreter's life good? In other words, is every transformative experience of the Word of God really an experience of God's Word?'

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

This verse lay behind the earlier choice of Romans 12 as a putatively self-evident passage about love. The other line of argument one could have raised against that view was the unforgettable presence of a ‘therefore’ in v.1. Presumably, in Paul’s logic, all this talk of love is consequent to some preceding argument, which here in v.2 appears to play the role of transforming us by the renewing of our minds. This is bad news for those who wish to cut straight to the practical pay-off.

This verse also suggests that it would be a mistake to draw some kind of distinction between ‘formation’ and ‘transformation’ in terms of spiritual growth developed inwardly, as it were, and growth brought about from ‘outside’. What does the ‘trans’ in transformation signify here, in the same Greek word from which we get ‘metamorphosis’? It is re-shaping (or re-schematising, as the parallel word *suschēmatisesthe* – conformed – might have it) driven by the renewal of the mind, which, presumably, is achieved by way of engaging with what has been argued in chapters 1-11 leading up to the ‘therefore’. This mystery of the revelation of God (16:25-26), this disclosure of a righteousness of/from God ‘apart from law’ (3:21), revealed ‘from faith to faith’ (1:17) and declared with power in the resurrection (1:4) – it is wrestling with this revelation which will renew the mind and bring about transformation. The crowd of witnesses who have done this (with Romans) is an impressive list indeed, and on a much smaller, more personal note, it is probably struggling with Romans which has brought about my own most profound transformation in terms of engaging with who God is. Now of course there is the hermeneutical question, the move to suspicion, the dispassionate willingness to follow Paul for 11 (or even 16) chapters and then step back and say ‘Well, is this argument (of Paul’s) any good?’ But ‘good’ according to which criteria, or whose tradition? Whose concept of love, or liberation, or justice, will trump Paul’s, as he wends his way from the gospel promised beforehand in the holy scriptures (1:2) to the first female apostle (16:7)? There are of course candidates, but are they transformative ones?

This same concept of transformation turns up in 2 Cor 3:18. It is a self-involving concept of experiencing the glory of God, rather like Moses experienced, such that ‘one cannot see such glory and come away unchanged: to experience God’s glory in Jesus Christ is to undergo a transformation “into the same image”.’<sup>28</sup> And although the word is different,<sup>29</sup> the idea reoccurs in Philippians 3:10, where Paul talks of ‘becoming like’ Christ (NRSV), or being ‘conformed’ to Christ, by way of ‘knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings’.

If this is true, then transformation, in New Testament terms, is what happens when we know God, in Christ. The experience of the revelation of God is transformative, in that it is a self-involving concept which reconstitutes the recipient. It is particularly interesting that this notion of transformation is specifically focused

28 Barclay 2003: 1360

29 It is in fact *symmorphizō*, a word which combines the prefixes and roots of the two terms used in Rom 12:2. I owe this observation to Wright 2002: 705 n.489.

on a person's removal from one sphere of influence (variously described, but basically the power of sin), and relocation into another sphere of influence – the power of Christ and his resurrection. The goal is growth toward a goal – conformity (that word again, *symmorphous*) to the image of God's Son. (Rom 8:29)

What is interesting is that we have come across more or less this argument about relocation already, in Levenson's claim that the Exodus is not rightly understood as liberation, but as the transfer of allegiance from Pharaoh to Yhwh. The hermeneutical implication is clear: the categories of formation and transformation as they exercise us in training people for ministry in the church are to be understood in terms of a concept which is equally controlled in the New Testament by the idea of 'conformation' – into the image of God's Son, and that this is achieved through the experience of the revelation of God. Since, in these last days, God has spoken to us by a Son, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it (1:2), it is not intended by these observations to suggest that some such principle as 'scripture alone' is the conclusion of our argument. The experience of Jesus today is crucially mediated by texts, but not by texts alone.<sup>30</sup> But what is surely evident is that in the context of using scripture in ministerial formation, the goal is to operate within the categories of God's self-revelation in order that the text may do its transforming work.

Two brief corollaries. Firstly, one hermeneutical category which we have not considered is 'newness'. Depressingly, this is often held up in discussions of our topic as one of the key areas (if not *the* key area) of life-giving transformative potential for the Christian reading Scripture. As one example, in an article significantly (part-)titled 'New Testament Theology and Practical Theology', we find this:

'the new has come' and has relativized the old, suggesting that we, as modern readers, might relativize the position of Christian Scripture by reference to experience just as Paul relativized the Old Testament in the light of his Christian experience of the Spirit.<sup>31</sup>

This 'suggestion' seems to me to rely entirely on construing 'new' in terms alien to the interestingly named 'New' Testament, which is not in any sense suggesting that we are in the business of learning how to add new testaments to our canon, of which this just happens to be the first. The pastoral implications are huge, and I do not need to spell them out. The hermeneutical argument, however, does not seem to me to require great sophistication.

Secondly, given the measure of continuity between how God has spoken 'in these last days' and how he spoke 'long ago ... to our ancestors, in many and various ways by the prophets' (Heb 1:1), we might expect to find that incidents of reading scripture that are recorded in scripture itself offer hints that the reading of scripture effects transformation. I think this is so, though space precludes analysis of this point. Obvious cases for consideration include the impact of the reading of the book of the law in the time of Josiah, or its reading in the time of Ezra and

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**30** This issue lies beyond our grasp. Note a bracing account by Watson 1994: 223-31, whose agenda lies however in combating views of textual 'construction' of Jesus rather than mediation.

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**31** Rowland and Bennett 2006: 195

Nehemiah upon the return to Jerusalem, or Daniel's study of the book of Jeremiah.<sup>32</sup> We may for now note the simple confidence of Psalm 1: meditation upon the Torah day and night will, like the tree planted by streams of water, produce fruit in season. This is an image of transformation which envisages the interpreter being changed by persistent encounter with God's self-revelation in the Torah.

Our argument is at an end. But a coda is required by our academic and social context, which must at this stage remain exploratory and unsatisfactory. The model of Psalm 1, and indeed our appeal to Paul, are all operations of what Richard Hays has called 'a hermeneutic of trust'.<sup>33</sup> But isn't it all too idealistic, simply refusing to engage with the many and various difficulties of accepting what we find in scripture? Have we learned nothing from the Ricoeurian rigours of a hermeneutic of suspicion, filtered down as it so often is through ideological, critical and sometimes deconstructive anger with the text? What is so terrible about addressing the text with our own categories? To put it most simply, what about the problem passages? Is scripture not sometimes guilty of contributing to nothing less than moral and spiritual deformation, rather than transformation?

Two points. Firstly, yes there is an issue. It is futile to suggest that the Bible does not contain, in Phyllis Trible's memorable phrase, 'Texts of Terror'.<sup>34</sup> However, it seems to me that people often appeal to this phrase without grasping the hermeneutical point of Trible's book, which was 'to wrestle demons in the night', such that 'If the blessing comes -and we dare not claim assurance- it does not come on our terms.' Well indeed. We read *in memoriam*, cautious, she says, about moving too fast to the resurrection, which should not just make everything all right. But this is an extremely significant framing statement, underlying the purpose of the book: the resurrection does not provide any kind of 'happy ending', but these 'sad stories' (as she calls them) are read with the knowledge that the tradition will continue, and will even live again to find life beyond the striking gravestones with which she illustrates the book. Refusing to remember, in other words, would not be a transformative hermeneutical move. It is only the slightly odd view that a biblical story necessarily requires some form of imitation that would find this strange.

Secondly, we have argued that hermeneutical categories such as love, liberation and newness are not available for us from today's world to import into scripture where we can then expect to find the revelation of God operating in our own terms. How much more is this the case in terms of problematic categories. (Interestingly, one might pursue this very question with the category of 'suspicion' – the only biblical story I am aware of which offers 'suspicion' as its primary hermeneutical category is the notorious *sotah* text of Numbers 5, where suspicion leads to abuse and even, arguably, abortion. This text does not seem to be a particularly high recommendation of the value of suspicion.<sup>35</sup>) One example must suffice. It appears to be becoming common to describe Israel's entry into the promised land as a form of 'genocide' or even 'ethnic cleansing'. I'm not sure if this claim is made by those who have experienced ethnic cleansing, and nor am I convinced that those who make this claim are always willing to back it up with exegesis. The categories

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32 Venema 2004

33 Hays 2005

34 Trible 1984: 2-5

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35 See my 'Reading the sotah Text (Numbers 5:11-31): Holiness and a Hermeneutic fit for Suspicion', forthcoming.

scripture uses to describe the divine initiatives tied to entering the land have little to do with the modern category of 'ethnicity', and a lot to do with appropriate worship, detestable practices, and purity. It is perhaps not so surprising that these categories carry little weight in some discussions. But ironically, the sole achievement of using inappropriate hermeneutical categories such as 'ethnic cleansing' is actually to make it much harder to get at the real issues raised by texts such as Deuteronomy 7 or Joshua 10-11, which concern the terrible weight of trying to square the circle mapped out by holiness, justice and divine vengeance. How do Jewish scholars deal with this? Diana Lipton has suggested that 'the Hebrew Bible itself offers a model for addressing, if not solving, the problem of unpalatable sacred texts',<sup>36</sup> and in one case study argues that 'the very text that seems to us unacceptable for its violent hostility towards outsiders may in fact have been intended to address precisely this form of violent hostility in an earlier text.'<sup>37</sup> Critique of outsiders, in other words, is often very fiercely aimed back at Israel itself: in the words of Amos, 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities'. (Amos 3:2) This line of thought deserves serious theological attention in the midst of the profound difficulties of wrestling with precisely who the God is behind these texts, and unless we have the right categories, ironically, we will not get there. My wager is that were we to engage with this issue properly, it would be transformative indeed. In the meantime, I find myself deeply challenged by the words of Miroslav Volf, a theologian himself scarred by the warfare in his native Balkans, 'that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die. And as one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.'<sup>38</sup>

Our job is not to create, out of the biblical materials, a God we find acceptable, by fitting God into the categories which we hold to be self-evidently appropriate for a deity. It is not God who is to be transformed by our hermeneutical endeavour. Rather we are to be transformed, in fact conformed, into the image of the Son of God, the God who is revealed in the whole canon, and not just in those sections which inspire us (nor even, for that matter, just those sections which trouble us). As with so many virtues in life, such as happiness, joy, and peace, we do not arrive at transformation by aiming for it. In our biblical study, in the context of training for ministry, we seek the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God revealed in these last days in Jesus Christ, and in thus pursuing the biblical agenda, we too shall, though neither in a flash nor the twinkling of an eye, be changed.

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<sup>36</sup> Lipton 2003: 139

<sup>37</sup> Lipton 2003: 152

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<sup>38</sup> Volf 1996: 304

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