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*Some Thoughts on Theological
Exegesis of the Old Testament:
Toward a Viable Model**



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INTRODUCTION

A recent movement in biblical interpretation is referred to as theological exegesis, and is represented by such well-known biblical scholars as Christopher Seitz, Francis Watson, and Joel Green.¹ The driving motivation behind this movement is an attempt to reclaim biblical interpretation as a decidedly theological exercise, which is something with which I am in enthusiastic agreement. My comments here will be restricted to the Old Testament, and I would like to begin by offering a working definition of theological exegesis that may not gain full assent but, I trust, in the context of this journal, will be allowed for the sake of discussion. Theological exegesis of the Old Testament is a distinctively Christian reading that seeks *coherence* and *relevance*: *coherence*, meaning it seeks to understand the parts in relation to the whole; *relevance*, meaning it seeks to focus on the theological significance of such exegesis for the church. Defined in this way, theological exegesis may be seen as a corrective to other approaches to Old Testament interpretation where it seems coherence and relevance are either ignored or even vilified, namely, in much of the history of higher-critical, post-Enlightenment exegesis.



Theological exegesis defined in this way is something with which I have an immediate affinity. This is because I am an evangelical, Reformed reader of Scripture. I read conscious of how the whole fits together (coherence), and seeking to understand where and how the ancient and modern horizons meet (relevance). I would go so far as to say that it is a basic Christian instinct to do so—bordering, perhaps, on common sense, although that may be overstating a bit. Yet it seems valid to observe that theological exegesis represents somewhat of an attempt at a recovery of the church's hermeneutical instincts vis-à-vis modern developments.

The purpose of this essay is to flesh out this rough definition of theological exegesis by observing how traditional models of coherence and relevance were challenged in early historical-critical scholarship on the Old Testament and in the fundamentalist response to that challenge. Specifically, the perspective I will take is to observe how historical criticism and fundamentalism collided precisely because they offered *alternate and competing models of coherence and relevance*. Although these early battles are technically over, trajectories were set during this time that are still felt by evangelicals today. I also am a firm believer that a strong grasp of our past is important for any forward progress we might wish to make. I will conclude with some *very* brief thoughts on how our own canon provides guidance for how the church today can read the Old Testament with coherence and relevance.

HISTORICAL-CRITICAL
EXEGESIS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT:
AN ALTERNATE MODEL
OF COHERENCE AND RELEVANCE

I think it is important to state at the outset that the past three hundred years of Old Testament interpretation have not been all bad. Among the benefits have been not only advances in our understanding of the nature of the biblical text, so-called lower criticism, but in our understanding of the Bible itself. I am thinking here mainly of the increased historical consciousness that largely defines modern scholarship,

i.e., the issue of "Bible in context." It is the "quest for the historical" whatever—whether Jesus, Abraham, Moses, or David—that has helped us see something of the real-life, flesh and blood, incarnational dimension of Scripture—however erroneous some of the earlier quests may have been.

We need only think of how our understanding of the Bible and its world has been affected by such things as the discovery of ancient Near Eastern creation accounts, law codes, wisdom texts, various inscriptions—not to mention the Dead Sea Scrolls and, in their wake, the accompanying increased attention given to Second Temple Judaism in general. The effects of these and other discoveries during the one-hundred-year span from 1850 to 1950 have been felt by all serious students of the Bible, and no one dare argue that these discoveries have been of little consequence, or that they have not affected—in many cases deepened—our interpretation of portions of Scripture. (One need only turn to the notes on Genesis in the *NIV Study Bible* to make the point.) This is why theological exegesis, if it is to be successful, cannot stand at a safe distance from modern scholarship. Instead, it must be truly progressive, meaning it must be a project undertaken *in light of and in conversation with* the Bible in the modern world, while at the same time having a chastening and even correcting role over against modernist hegemony and over-confidence in its own conclusions. This is what I, at least, perceive to be one of the potential strengths of theological exegesis, that it be neither *fearful* of nor in *bondage* to modern interpretation of the Bible.

The well-rehearsed rise and development of higher-critical Old Testament scholarship does not need to be repeated here, but at least one aspect is relevant. Its inception was driven in part by a desire to liberate the study of the Bible from the control of both Roman Catholic and post-Reformation dogmatics. These dogmatic systems were, to say the least, highly successful in their respective interpretive communities. They claimed an ancient pedigree, and enjoyed official authority. And they employed Scripture in ways that were deemed highly coherent and relevant. They were coherent in

that they were *systematic*; and they were relevant in that they were to be *believed* by all the faithful. Spinoza's (1632–77) goal was to undermine such dogmatic systems, at least in part because of how he felt dogma was used to maintain political control over the people. Spinoza sought to deconstruct dogma (and therefore, as he saw it, political oppression) by reading Scripture afresh—by wresting it from the control of the clergy and putting it into the hands of the common man, guided only by the light of reason, not ecclesiastical authority. And, thus, in the minds of some, modern biblical criticism was born, or at least conceived. Some of what Spinoza set in motion was picked up by subsequent biblical scholars.

The beginnings of modern Old Testament scholarship specifically are very clear. *The* question on which modern Old Testament scholarship was born, and, in my opinion, from which subsequent scholarship proceeded, was, "Who wrote the Pentateuch?" More specifically, "Who wrote Genesis?" since this is the portion of the Pentateuch to which neither Moses nor any other biblical author would have been an eyewitness. Specifically, beginning in the late seventeenth century, attention came to be focused on two issues. The first and most fundamental of these concerned the literary diversity of the Pentateuch, exemplified by use of the various Hebrew names for God, namely Elohim and Yahweh. (In English Bibles, the former is translated "God" and the latter "LORD.") These early investigations were the impetus for what eventually developed into the well-known Documentary Hypothesis (the four sources of the Pentateuch known as JEDP). The second issue was the post-Mosaica of the Pentateuch, those portions that seemed, on chronological and other grounds, to have originated later than the time of Moses.² Both of these issues were central to source criticism, the first Old Testament higher-critical methodology.

Then, in the nineteenth century, a third issue came into view, instigated by the explosion of extrabiblical data mentioned above. Now the question became, "What is the relationship between Genesis and the worldviews of Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbors?" The field of "comparative

religions" was born, which has dominated Old Testament scholarship in general since then. Indeed, it is the foundation of every Hebrew Bible doctoral program I know of, and to which evangelical professors are keen to send their best students. Although not always intended in this way, all three of these developments (literary diversity, post-Mosaica, ancient Near Eastern parallels) threatened—or were at least perceived to threaten—traditional, dogmatic notions of the Old Testament's coherence and relevance.

Whatever one might think about the strengths and weaknesses of source criticism, we must remember that source critics were not the first to address some of these Bible difficulties. Jewish and Christian interpreters had taken note, for example, of post-Mosaic elements for quite some time. For example, both Jerome and the twelfth-century rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra seemed concerned about the implications for Mosaic authorship of certain passages.³ What was introduced in *modern* scholarship, however, was the *radical redefinition of Israelite origins* in light of these kinds of data. The theory of sources to explain the use of divine names, along with the post-Mosaica, eventually led to a consensus, a "critical orthodoxy": Moses not only did not *write* the Pentateuch as we know it, but what had been the very core of the Mosaic contribution—the Sinaitic law—was considered fundamentally postexilic, one thousand years removed from the traditional date for Moses. The Pentateuch was not simply divided into sources. The placing of the law in the postexilic period formed the basis for *an entire reconstruction of Israel's history*.

Now, there have been many nuances and developments in source criticism, and it is perhaps not necessary to mention that, like any academic field, scholars who self-consciously espouse source-critical methodology have disagreed among themselves on many issues. Indeed, some literary trends in contemporary Old Testament scholarship question openly the validity of a source-critical analysis, and I am in agreement with such trends. But despite recent developments, the abiding effect of these early trajectories has been considerable: source criticism effectively challenged the traditional

understanding of the coherence of the Pentateuch. The reason for this is that heretofore the traditional model of coherence of the Pentateuch was *tied inextricably and fundamentally to a Mosaic core*. Once that Mosaic core was challenged—once the law was deemed a postexilic development, not a premonarchic foundation—well, to mix well-known metaphors—the dominoes began to unravel down the slippery slope. The Pentateuch came to be understood as a tendential, ideological, political, postexilic, priestly, power-mongering, pastiche of disparate sources, which not only cannot speak today, but ought not—at least not until its parts can be properly reassembled (the task of source criticism). In other words, not only were older notions of *coherence* challenged, but the *relevance* of the Pentateuch—based as it was on the older model of coherence—was dismissed as untenable and even naïve.

In my opinion, what inspired the well-documented visceral reactions from traditional Christian *and* Jewish thinkers alike was precisely this loss of a traditional model of coherence and relevance. People of faith can stomach Moses using older sources to write Genesis, as early source critics such as Simon, Semler, and Astruc argued;⁴ E. J. Young allowed for such a view as well.⁵ They can even stomach a post-Mosaic final formation of the Pentateuch; Jerome, mentioned earlier, alluded to the possibility of Ezra's role as editor, which is a commonly held position today. But people of faith cannot stomach a Pentateuch that, as it stands, is actually a hindrance to true knowledge of Israelite history and religion. Here the title to Wellhausen's 1883 source-critical masterpiece speaks volumes: *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*. One must first do a source-critical analysis—hence, *prolegomena*—before one can describe Israel's *history*, and therefore its faith. The simple folk religion reflected in the earliest sources (J and E) such as we see in the patriarchal narratives, with altars being built under every tree, is the oldest and therefore purest expression of Israelite religion. The law—represented in both D and P—is the latest development by over-zealous, legalistic priests who want worship centralized and legislated. To say the least, things were turned topsy-turvy.

But what has proved to be an even greater challenge to conventional notions of the Pentateuch were the various ancient Near Eastern texts and archaeological discoveries mentioned earlier. Source criticism is based entirely on creative ways of handling internal data, and so was susceptible to focused critique. Ancient Near Eastern literature, however, introduced an external framework against which portions of the Old Testament now demanded to be understood. In other words, this was concrete data that had to be dealt with. The earliest and most celebrated example is the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation story discovered in the mid-nineteenth century that bore noticeable similarities to Genesis 1.⁶

Scholarship eventually moved away from the pan-Babylonianism that characterized the early enthusiasm for these texts. It is now considered injudicious to view Genesis as in any way dependent specifically on this Babylonian account, and the creation stories from other ancient cultures, namely Egyptian, must also be brought into the picture.⁷ Nevertheless, the similarities between Genesis and *Enuma Elish* remain very real, and so require some sort of explanation. And in my view, not nearly enough evangelical work has been done in helping us work through the implications of such ancient Near Eastern texts. The importance of such a conversation is highlighted when we consider other well-known examples: the parallels to the flood story (e.g., Atrahasis and Gilgamesh epics); the Code of Hammurabi and its relationship to biblical law; the Sargon birth story and Moses' birth in Exodus 2; Egyptian wisdom and portions of Proverbs.

Locating the Old Testament in its ancient Near Eastern environment has proved challenging for evangelicals, but not all the news has presented problems. Many discoveries have supported notions of the basic historicity of Old Testament narratives.⁸ And we must always remember that *all* data are to be interpreted, which introduces the issue of one's presuppositions. Hence, academic debates continue about how best to understand the impact of some of these discoveries. The "assured results of criticism" have not always proved so certain. But when the dust settles from detailed points of debate,

the fact remains that the history of Old Testament historical criticism in general has posed real challenges for traditional understandings of coherence and relevance. These challenges have not gone away, and so have provided part of the motivation for such things as theological exegesis.

When one opens the Hebrew Pentateuch (not a translation) and reads it, knowledgeable of and in conversation with the internal and external data brought to bear through the modern study of the Old Testament, it has happened more than once that evangelical students of Scripture have come away saying, "I see the point." They may not have abandoned the faith, but they have certainly been affected by their studies. To make this observation is not a crass concession to liberalism but recognition of how our understanding of Scripture has been affected by its modern study, and how that can be challenging for evangelicals. The question we must ask is not how best to resist the modern study of the Bible but how best to proceed forward in light of it.

It is true to a certain point to say that modern scholarship on the Pentateuch has *disrupted* previous models of coherence and relevance. But we are mistaken if we think of this as merely a negative (i.e., "critical") exercise—simply an "attack" on the Bible. There is more to it. We must ask ourselves a question that I feel is too little asked in evangelical circles: Why did such a supposedly purely *disruptive, negative* approach become so widely accepted? Why was there a "critical orthodoxy" to begin with? There are *many* possible, valid, and complex dimensions to answering these kinds of questions, but surely there is much more to it than that they were all rebels against God, looking for ways to undermine Scripture. That may very well be true in some instances, but that hardly explains this phenomenon as a whole.

Rather, higher criticism caught on because it was found to be *persuasive*—not simply because it *destroyed* coherence and relevance, as if all modern scholars were looking for ways to rid themselves of traditional belief. It was persuasive because it offered an *alternate means of achieving coherence and relevance*—one that spoke to many modern readers. The lasting impact of

modern criticism on the Pentateuch—the reason why it was *persuasive* to so many, the reason why after three hundred years or so, although regularly adjusted and revised, it continues to set parameters in the academic study of Scripture, even now to a certain extent for evangelicals—is not because it *rejected* coherence but *because it achieved far too much of it*. It did not simply tear the Bible apart, but it put it back together again in ways that gained, perhaps not universal, but at least broad, scholarly consensus.

I do not want to be misunderstood. In being descriptive of modern biblical scholarship, I do not mean to imply that every modern development is ultimately correct. Moreover, I do not intend to suggest that the rise of modern criticism is anything other than a complex matrix of all sorts of underlying and competing issues, not to mention the never-to-be-neglected spiritual dimension. My only point is that modern biblical scholarship should rightly be understood as an *alternate model of coherence and relevance*, and one that has achieved significant success, and therefore cannot be taken lightly.

It should be noted that the *type of coherence* offered by source criticism could be achieved only by moving *beyond* the surface, so-called "plain" reading of the text toward a radical re-reading of the text in light of contemporary worldviews and expectations. But perhaps we should not fault source criticism too much for this. For what is true of modern criticism is generally true of *any* reading of the Old Testament—ancient or modern—that seeks to be coherent and relevant. Let me put it this way. Modern criticism is *more* than a *denial* of inerrancy or inspiration, as is sometimes asserted. And neither is it the crowning achievement of human thought, the climax of the human intellectual drama, as is sometimes asserted on the other side. Rather, as I have heard Jon Levenson say, modern criticism is modern midrash. Midrash is the ancient hermeneutical exercise of reading older texts in ways that speak to current situations—whether it be ancient Greco-Roman politics, the sectarianism of Qumran, medieval rabbinic concerns, and so forth. What is assumed in midrash is

that the texts *ought* to address the current situation—no matter how much effort and ingenuity it takes to do so.

It may sound odd to describe modern scholarship as midrash, but I suggest the description is helpful nonetheless. Both ancient midrash and modern criticism have to “do something” to the text in order to *bring it* into the contemporary context. Both assert, “What is our real focus of attention is what is *beneath*, what is *hidden* to the naked eye, what can be surfaced only through ‘proper’ interpretive techniques.” Both ask the question, whether implicitly or explicitly, “In light of who we are *now*, in light of what we now understand *our world* to be, what do these *ancient* texts mean?” As bold and simplistic as it might sound, I have just described in principle not only Wellhausen, but also the Qumran community—in fact, *any* interpretive paradigm.

As for the question of *relevance*, modern criticism may not be focused on personal, moral appropriation (although liberalism did attempt to address this issue through the social gospel movement). As I see it, the relevance achieved through modern criticism is largely a matter of intellectual compatibility rather than personal moral behavior. The Bible’s relevance in modern criticism is seen in how the recently re-constructed coherence now makes the Bible compatible with the modern worldview—this is a Bible “we can live with.” Again, and to tip my hand a bit, I have just described in principle the concern of *any* interpretive paradigm: how can we understand the *old* text in a *new* way, in a way that makes *sense to us* in light of the world *in which we live*? *How is our Scripture relevant*? This question is as old as the recorded history of interpretation of the Old Testament, and can be seen in the pages of the Old Testament itself (see below).

The current theological exegetical project, therefore, must be seen for what it is, not *new* in the sense that it is introducing or even recapturing coherence and relevance over against the purely deconstructive influence of modern approaches. Rather, like all exegetical paradigms, it too is offering an *alternate, rival* way of reading Scripture. Its success will be determined by how persuasive it is, which is to say, by how it offers

a scheme that is deemed *more* coherent and *more* relevant than that which it seeks to replace. The question before us is what such a persuasive model of coherence and relevance can look like. The total package of the modern paradigm, despite true advances, is ultimately not going to be acceptable for evangelicals. But did the original fundamentalist response address the matter persuasively?

FUNDAMENTALIST REACTION: MAINTAINING AN OLDER MODEL OF COHERENCE AND RELEVANCE

I want to be clear that I am using the term fundamentalism not pejoratively, but in a neutral, historically descriptive manner. So, historically understood, fundamentalism was born out of the controversies instigated by higher criticism. I would describe it as essentially a reaction to modern scholarship, insofar as it seemed driven by an urgency to *resist* higher criticism and to *maintain* pre-critical models of coherence and relevance. On one level, the urgency is understandable, in that higher criticism was seen as a threat to such notions as inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility.

And in this regard there are certain aspects of the fundamentalist reaction to higher criticism that are worthy of serious consideration, even if they have not always swayed the general academic population. I am thinking here primarily of the detailed and foundational arguments of nineteenth-century Princeton Old Testament professors Joseph Addison Alexander and William Henry Green,⁹ and the many others who are indebted to them. In fact, much of the history of Old Testament study in nineteenth-century Princeton was largely defined by a reaction to source criticism. Entire careers of brilliant men were dedicated to countering the influence of Wellhausen, and so a number of valid and important counterarguments were leveled. At the very least, these early conservative critics were very adept at pointing out how some of the Pentateuchal data had been exaggerated or made to serve possible but not necessary conclusions. And so attention was drawn to the bias of some higher critics, where the theory began to drive the analysis of the data. Some conservatives

were particularly effective in pointing out the highly subjective degree to which sources were precisely delineated and, more importantly, dated.

It's one thing, for example, to notice the differences between Genesis 1 and 2, or the repetition in the flood story, and to theorize some notion of sources, and to do so in a way that is still largely compatible with traditional views (as Jean Astruc did in the eighteenth century—Moses had access to two memoirs, one of which used Yahweh and the other Elohim, which Moses combined to write Genesis). But when one takes a theory that was designed to address these types of phenomena and applies that theory to texts that don't seem problematic, e.g., the highly coherent Joseph story, then exegetical problems are caused rather than solved. Fundamentalists were quick to point out the inconsistencies, exaggerations, and blind spots in modern Pentateuchal scholarship.

But why expend all that energy? It strikes me that the threat to fundamentalism was not simply in having a competing model of coherence running around. Rather, it was in how the alternate model of *coherence* affected the notion of Scripture's *relevance* for the church. Again, higher criticism was persuasive to many, so persuasive that it led brilliant men to lay down their entire careers in service to its defeat. The higher-critical model did not just say, "Watch how clever we can be in constructing a new model of Scripture's coherence—watch us play the game 'divide the Pentateuch.'" Rather, it said, "Now at last we know what the Pentateuch is *really* like, and it's not at all what you had thought. Now everything is up for grabs, and we're going to have to rethink some things."

In other words, higher criticism was perceived as threatening to take the Bible *away* from Christians. In fact, it was, and still is, often put more strongly: it threatened to destroy the *gospel* itself. The dots were quickly connected, and the falling dominoes cascading down the slippery slope centered on the doctrine of Scripture. "If the critics are right here in Genesis, then we can no longer trust Scripture as God's plain word *anywhere*. And then we are only a stone's throw from a denial of the virgin birth, the atonement, resurrection—*salvation itself*—

*the personal application of Scripture's story, the issue where the coherence of Scripture touches down in the very practical question of its eternal relevance."*¹⁰

I agree with the heart motivation to defend the gospel, to keep the Bible in the hands of Christians, so to speak, so they can read it and believe it with confidence as God's word. My comments here are actually directed to help that happen more and more. This is why I am concerned that an *inadequate* defense of the gospel, one that is more reaction than engagement, may have, for some, the exact opposite affect. Again, without wishing to minimize the legitimate observations of fundamentalism, there are elements of the fundamentalist critique that have made the argument as a whole less effective than it might have been. This, it seems to me, is because the arguments seemed geared to maintaining at all costs an older model of coherence and relevance, rather than offering some sort of synthesis, even of a very modified sort, between traditional views and newer data. In other words, what I wish had happened in the nineteenth century was an articulation of a high view of Scripture that was deliberately in dialogue with the impact of things like ancient Near Eastern data or post-Mosaica. But rather than offering a *persuasive alternative* to the modern paradigm, it focused mainly on salvaging an older one. And the reason for this, to me, is very important to understand. It is because *the survival of the gospel itself was seen to be dependent upon the success of the older model*.

This is illustrated in the famous diatribe of W. H. Green against the Anglican bishop and missionary Colenso.¹¹ Colenso was thoroughly convinced of source-critical arguments, but he was not an ivory tower academic. He took his message to the mission field. On one level, the sense of urgency one can see in Green's writings is understandable, but this urgency was often expressed by simply making counter-assertions and even *ad hominem* remarks. Such a critique could only go so far. Green could show how a source-critical methodology as a whole, when applied consistently, could become increasingly haphazard, chaotic, and subjective. He could thus deride source criticism as a whole by poking holes

in biased arguments here and there. But the biblical and extra-biblical data that raised the questions in the first place still needed to be addressed, and this is where the fundamentalist critique could come up short at points.

For one thing—and I very much wish to be corrected on this if I am in error—I have found no sustained discussion concerning the impact of extrabiblical texts in the writings of the nineteenth-century Princeton Old Testament scholars. I may recall an occasional reference, but not any attempt to work through the implications of even such a widely discussed text as *Enuma Elish*. Rather, the focus was, as I mentioned earlier, on source criticism. I am not entirely sure why this is the case, unless source criticism was simply seen as more of a threat because of its placement of the law in the post-exilic period (as mentioned above).

But thinking beyond nineteenth-century Princeton specifically, we can see certain rhetorical strategies surfacing here and there in the fundamentalist response. For example, I still often see appeals to what I like to call the “it’s possible” argument, or, similarly, the “be patient” argument. So, for example, the well-known reference to Moses’ humility in Numbers 12:3 (“Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” [TNIV]) is reconciled to something like Mosaic authorship by saying, “It’s possible for Moses to have written that if he were in fact the most humble man on the face of the earth.” Apparently, that is a sufficient defense to maintain the traditional model. A similar explanation is typically offered with respect to the record of Moses’ death in Deuteronomy 34:5 (“And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the LORD had said” [TNIV]): “We’re not sure how to reconcile this with Mosaic authorship. It’s possible it’s prophetic. In any event, we are sure that *patient exegesis* will provide the answer.” If one’s aim is to persuade—which is what I think was needed—rather than maintain, the “it’s possible” argument can come across as obscurantist, and the “be patient” argument can seem more like stalling for time—or perhaps worse, “don’t bother me with details.” There is also an awkward tension in the fundamentalist argument.

The higher-critical model was taken to task for handling data inconsistently and obscuring legitimate tensions in the model, but apparently the tensions within the fundamentalist model could be sufficiently addressed simply by showing that it remained possible, provided one exercised patience.

Now that cuts both ways. At points both the higher critics and the fundamentalists could be considered guilty of the *same* fallacy: assuming the ultimate validity in their own model, hence maximizing “friendly” data, while minimizing those that are less compliant. One could call this last polemical strategy the principle of “selective engagement.” For example, tensions, repetitions, and post-Mosaic elements in the Pentateuch *can* lend themselves to a source-critical framework, but that is not necessarily so. And for evangelicals, for example, the Tel Dan and Siloam Tunnel Inscriptions can be appealed to in order to lend nice support to the historicity of the monarchy (namely, the historical David and Hezekiah’s tunnel project, respectively). Likewise, evidence of Semitic presence in second-millennium Egypt meshes with the patriarchal and exodus narratives. But the Babylonian creation and flood stories, just to name the two most prominent examples, are likewise ancient Near Eastern data, but one is struck by how little these parallels have been addressed, not only in nineteenth-century Princeton, but in evangelical scholarship in general—at least in anything other than a defensive posture.

Both sides of the debate can be faulted, but their mistakes need not be repeated. My very practical concern is how the “it’s possible,” “be patient,” and “selective engagement” arguments have had some deleterious effects for evangelicals. First, we probably all know evangelicals over the years who have left the faith because they have been *persuaded* by critical advances—and not just in seminary or graduate schools, but in high school and college “Bible as literature” classes; by watching PBS or the History Channel; by flipping through *Time* or *Newsweek*; or by reading popular novels. I would suggest that at least one reason for this is that these individuals have not had at their disposal a workable, alternate theological model

for incorporating the data of modern scholarship. The issue is not "They denied the Bible" and that's that, but "why?" The path from conservatism to liberalism is well worn—and often with great pain—but far, far less frequently has the journey been taken in reverse, and this should tell us something.

Now, that journey need not take place, in any case. The scholarly work regularly produced by faculty at recognized evangelical colleges and seminaries shows a degree of comfort and familiarity with studying the Old Testament in its ancient Near Eastern environment, and even arriving at conclusions—although perhaps somewhat modified—that at one point would have been deemed wholly unacceptable to fundamentalism. But a very important scholarly and spiritual question for me is whether evangelicals today can move beyond a piecemeal and uneasy relationship with modern scholarship, and offer theological paradigms that interact seriously with relevant data, but without getting caught up in the entire worldview package offered by modernity—which at times has certainly been characterized by such things as autonomy, rebellion, and arrogance. Perhaps a chastened modernity, one that reflects the concerns of theological exegesis, can offer the option that many are looking for today.

A second negative effect of the fundamentalist response is that simple resistance encouraged hostility to modern scholarship *in general*, i.e., the notion that acceptance of *any* higher critical insights was "caving in to liberalism." It seems to me that contemporary, evangelical biblical scholarship has more or less moved beyond that. Third, it has encouraged a bifurcation of scholarship and faith among evangelicals. What many of us here have observed among critical scholars—a public life of scholarship that rarely if ever intersects with their private life of faith—strikes me as not unattested among evangelicals. There are very gifted evangelical scholars who are experts in various fields whose work, if time were taken to connect the dots, would have some impact on how they view their Bible. But too often, in my view, their two worlds of scholarly work and doctrinal formulations are kept separate.

It seems to me that we evangelicals are at a bit of an

impasse. Is there room for growth, where we—*together, without suspicion*—can hammer out a viable theological model of coherence and relevance—*helping each other* be cognizant of both promises and pitfalls—where our exegesis is able to make *proper* use of the state of modern scholarship (again, without accepting every conclusion or assumption)—and to bring that exegesis to bear on the church, and the lives of God's people, in a way that is theologically meaningful, indeed, affirming, life-changing, and powerful—an exegesis that honors Christ?

Toward that end, there is one more important point to make, although we need to be brief here, for it is an entire topic unto itself. The conversation that we Protestant evangelicals *must* have is not *simply* with modern biblical scholarship. We must also acknowledge the vital role that the theological traditions of the church have played in providing coherent and relevant readings of Scripture, i.e., systematic theology. Of course, systematic theology means different things to different people, but I mean it to refer specifically to post-Reformation dogmatic formulations of whatever theological tradition you might represent. It is largely through systematic theology, although not necessarily in the full-blown sense of the phrase, that Christian doctrine has been communicated to the church. Hopefully, such theology is *grounded* in exegesis (without devolving into superficial proof-texting), but the fact remains that most Christians come to the Bible with a theological grid already in place, regardless of how inchoate or developed that grid may be. This must be understood and respected lest we follow in Spinoza's footsteps.

In a sense, systematic theologies are the culminating statements of both coherence and relevance. But perhaps the greatest source of tension for evangelical *biblical* scholars is that the trajectories set in many of Protestant evangelicalism's theological formulations—be they full-blown systematic theologies, or confessions of faith, or perhaps more brief ten-point doctrinal statements—have largely been set *before* the rise of the modern focus on "Bible in context" (or, sadly, in complete isolation of modern developments). Hence, they are

expressed in terms that are not in conversation with the kinds of issues that modern readers of the Bible need to address.

Do we just go our separate ways? I say no. Good systematic theology is never a pure abstraction but dependent upon biblical exegesis. But here is the tension put another way: with the advent of modern biblical scholarship—the notion of “Bible in context”—the question now is rightly raised, “What exactly *is* exegesis?” Is it simply paying close attention to Hebrew grammar (maybe giving a nod to text-critical issues)? Or has exegesis developed into a historically conscious discipline, which seeks as the first order of business to understand the Bible in its grammatical and *historical* contexts? Is this not the commonly assumed exegetical starting point among evangelicals? So, should such exegesis now be the model upon which older systematic theologies should be *evaluated*, and newer ones *based*? Here is the question that many evangelical biblical scholars struggle with: *How can modern exegesis be in conversation with theological formulations that have pre-modern roots?* To ask questions such as these is not to answer them. But whatever efforts are expended by biblical interpreters to address matters of coherence and relevance must be in serious conversation with our own systematic-theological heritage. But it is hoped that such a conversation would truly be a two-way street.

BIBLICAL MODELS OF COHERENCE AND RELEVANCE

The New Testament’s use of the Old is a difficult and widely commented on topic. And for the purposes of theological exegesis, I feel it is an absolutely vital one.¹² My own views on how the church today can read its Bible with coherence and relevance have been deeply influenced by what I see the New Testament writers themselves doing. The New Testament’s use of the Old, understood in the context of Second Temple interpretive practices—understood, in other words, as an *historical* phenomenon—should play an important role as we work out hermeneutical practices today.

We cannot dwell here in any detail on the very important issue of the Second Temple context of New Testament

hermeneutics. This is a huge, and perhaps somewhat controversial, topic in and of itself—although it is here to stay. I will only remark that a working knowledge of even the basic contours of Second Temple hermeneutics has shed considerable light on explaining the interpretive practices of Jesus and Paul. We are dealing yet again with “Bible in context.” Second Temple literature has had a similar effect as that of ancient Near Eastern parallels. Whereas the *Enuma Elish* has influenced how we understand Genesis, the Dead Sea Scrolls (or Targums, Jubilees, and so on) have influenced how we understand how *Paul* understood Genesis. So, my hope is that theological exegesis will address this issue with great enthusiasm.

Apart from the Second Temple context, my focus here, in view of our specific topic, is a bit more restricted. As C. H. Dodd noted many years ago, the Old Testament is truly the substructure of New Testament theology.¹³ The Old Testament is cited, alluded to, and thanks to the work of Richard Hays, we now understand it to be echoed in, the New Testament.¹⁴ It’s as if the New Testament authors cannot say *anything* without bringing the Old Testament into it. In a manner of speaking, the New Testament can rightly be described as a reading of the Old that seeks coherence and relevance *centered around the eschatological fulfillment of Israel’s story, the death and resurrection of Christ, and the formation of the church, the new people of God*. In other words, we have again a reading of the ancient texts in light of present realities. And such a hermeneutical attitude—reading the past in view of the present—is presaged in our *own* canon long before we get to the New Testament.

How else can we explain, for example, the Chronicler’s history of Israel? Why does a *second* history of the monarchy exist side-by-side with Samuel and Kings? Is it simply the case that these are the “things left over” from Samuel/Kings (this is reflected in the Greek title of Chronicles, as seen in the Septuagint, *paraleipomenon*)? But Chronicles isn’t side-by-side with Samuel-Kings. This is a false impression created by the Septuagint, from which is derived our English canonical order. In the Jewish canon, Chronicles is last. Chronicles was not written as a *supplement* to Samuel-Kings, something to skip over in

morning devotions because "I just read that." Although certainly interacting with Samuel-Kings, it is nevertheless intended to stand on its own and be read on its own terms. It tells an *alternate* summation of Israel's history, one that differs from Samuel-Kings not because it is filling in some gaps but because it is told from *a different perspective and for different reasons*—namely from the perspective of those who had returned from captivity in Babylon.

Or better—it is an alternate reading of Israel's history that seeks to communicate the coherence and relevance of the past for the benefit of the present audience. The author is not interested in merely *recounting* past events for the sake of it. Rather he is *recasting* all of Israel's history in the light of post-exilic realities—for the benefit of God's people who had returned from exile. We cannot overstate the impact of the exile on Israel's self-identity. Second Samuel 7 makes the emphatic point that a descendent of David will *never* cease sitting on the throne in Jerusalem. Yet Israel went into exile, which meant: no king, no temple, no sacrifice, and no land—to the naked eye, the end of God's promises.

And this is where the Chronicler's distinct theology comes into play. He is reminding the people that, despite their difficult present circumstances, they have nevertheless a heritage that is long and honored. The returning exiles were asking whether they were still the people of God, whether his promises to them were still true. How can they still be God's people if all these promises have been dashed? The Chronicler's answer to this question begins with the very first name in the genealogies—the very first word in 1 Chronicles—Adam. Chronicles is an expression of *grand coherence*. The postexilic Israelites are to understand themselves as the people of God, despite appearances, whose pedigree goes back to the very beginning. Moreover, Chronicles presents Israel's history so as to make the lessons of the past *relevant*. We need only mention here, for example, how the Chronicler retells Israel's history so as to emphasize the notion of immediate retribution for the postexilic community: God will deal with *them* according to what *they* do, not previous generations. We

also have the well-known issue of David's portrayal as virtually sinless, which reflects the Chronicler's messianic hope for an ideal Davidic ruler.

To bring up Chronicles is not tangential to our topic. *Chronicles is a biblically sanctioned example of theological exegesis*—and one that is put into even starker relief when we turn to the New Testament itself. The apostolic use of the Old Testament likewise constitutes a re-reading of Israel's sacred Scripture in light of *the* climactic, redemptive event, the event *from* which and *within* which we, standing at the end of the ages, are now to understand Israel's story. Just as we cannot overstate the impact of the exile for Chronicles, we certainly cannot overstate the impact of the cross and resurrection on the apostles. Christ has died and was raised, and so in light of this climactic event, the New Testament authors provide us with a *new*, grand coherence, which is: *Israel's story is realized in Christ himself*. The Scriptures speak of *him*. And with that coherence we have a *new*, grand relevance, which is: *Israel's story is realized in us*, the in-Christ people of God, the church.

Although these terms may not be very familiar, let me put it this way: the Scripture's *coherence* is *christotelic*, and its *relevance* is *ecclesiotelic*. Christ is the end (Greek, *telos*) of Israel's story and so gives the *entire* story its unifying, coherent structure—much as the climax of a well-crafted story puts the pieces of the novel together in wonderful and exciting ways. And that christotelic coherence is properly embodied only in the *church*, the body of Christ. The proper *application* of Israel's story—its true *relevance*—is in God's newly reconstituted people whose identities are found entirely in their union with Christ and his saving work.

The last thing I want to do—especially at the tail end of an essay—is to come off sounding either simplistic or abstract. This is not a magic key but a hermeneutical paradigm, the church's hermeneutical starting point and its goal. The Scripture's christotelic coherence is not flat, as if we are trying to "find Jesus" in every corner of the Old Testament. And its ecclesiotelic relevance is likewise not flat—it touches on every single aspect of our lives, even the most hidden parts, but it is

beyond simple, moralistic appropriation. An articulation of Christian coherence and relevance is not simple but hard, collective work.

CONCLUSION

I have argued here that it is good to have a clear grasp of where we've been so that we might know better where we are going. Theological exegesis is to be understood in the most recent context of the uneasy relationship between modern study of the Bible and the fundamentalist and evangelical response. But we must also keep before us the broadest of contexts, that within which any Christian exegesis must operate. The present and future of Christian theological exegesis, as it seeks to articulate a model of coherence and relevance, should proceed in self-conscious conversation with the grand hermeneutical trajectories set for us in Scripture itself. To do so is to acknowledge that, however contemporary theological exegesis may be, it is ultimately not so much a *new* project but an attempt to be faithful in carrying forward an old one.

Author

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Notes

1. A recent summary of theological exegesis may be found in S. A. Cummings, "The Theological Exegesis of Scripture: Recent Contributions by Stephen E. Fowl, Christopher R. Seitz and Francis Watson," *CBR* 2.2 (2004): 179–96. Joel B. Green and Max Turner have edited a volume focusing on NT studies, which also contains valuable bibliographical information (*Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003]). An important and recent volume on the topic is Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). Eerdmans is also planning to publish a commentary series (Two Horizons) that focuses on theological exegesis of the Bible.
2. Some commonly cited examples include Deut. 1:1; 34:5–8; Num. 12:8; Gen. 12:6; 36:31.
3. Concerning Jerome's comments on Deuteronomy 34, see John N. Hritzu, trans., *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works* (vol. 53 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*; ed. R. J. Deferrari; [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1965]), 19. Concerning Abraham ibn Ezra's comment on Gen. 12:6, see *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis (Bereshit)*, trans. H. N. Strickman and A. R. Silver (New York: Menorah, 2005), 151.
4. A very helpful source of information concerning these early source critics can be found in Edward McQueen Gray, *Old Testament Criticism: Its Rise and Progress* (New York/London: Harper & Brothers, 1923). Gray cites extensively from the works of these three scholars and a number of others.
5. E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 153.
6. This text was discovered and gradually translated beginning in 1848. For some comments on the impact of this and other discoveries on our understanding of the Old Testament, see Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 23–29; 48–56.
7. See John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).
8. On this see, for example, Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Iain Provan, V. Phillips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2003).
9. A very helpful summary of the teachings of these and other Princeton Old Testament professors may be found in Marion Ann Taylor, *The Old Testament in the Old Princeton School [1812–1929]* (San Francisco: Mellen University Press, 1992).
10. Parenthetically, the parallels between this issue and the current, visceral debates over the New Perspective (on Paul) are telling. Once again, things can be tolerated such as a Second Temple background to the New

Testament. But if one is perceived as attacking salvation—in this case, justification by faith—the gloves come off very quickly. The perceived threat of the NP is not in how Second Temple Judaism might generally affect our broad picture of the New Testament but in how it is perceived to affect its *relevance*, i.e., its personal application.

11. See Peter Enns, "William Henry Green and the Authorship of the Pentateuch: Some Historical Considerations," *JETS* 45/3 (September 2002): 385–403.
12. I address in more detail the thoughts expressed below in: "Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving beyond the Modernist Impasse," *WTJ* 65 (2003): 263–87; "The 'Moveable Well' in 1 Cor 10:4: An Extra-Biblical Tradition in an Apostolic Text," *BBR* 6 (1996): 23–38; *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 113–65; *Exodus* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 19–32.
13. C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (London: Fontana, 1965).
14. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).