

## Responsible Hermeneutics: Philosophy, Theology and Biblical Interpretation

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### Introduction

One way I find it helpful to think about “responsible” hermeneutics is to think of “responsibility” as “response-ability,” namely as referring to humans as those creatures with a particular capacity to respond to God. So pervasive is God in his creation and handiwork, of which we are a part, that, in one sense, all of life is a response to God. However, there is a gulf between a willing, loving response and a disobedient one. We are made for God and in our fallen, broken world his written Word is given to us to remind us of the true story of the world and to help us find our way back, again and again, to the Father who sent his Son into the far country in order that we might return home. In this context Scripture is God’s Word to us which we are called to respond to in love and obedience. Such a response is comprehensive in that it includes the totality of our lives (cf. Rom 12:1-2), and *that includes our practices of biblical interpretation.*

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Many of us entered biblical studies because of our response to God, but I suspect that, if we are honest, with time we find it hard to practice biblical exegesis in this spirit. In this article I explore some of the reasons for this and the role of theology and philosophy in a “response-able” hermeneutic for today.

## 1. The contours and context of response-able biblical hermeneutics

As the Word of God, the primary context for the reception of the Bible is in the ecclesia, as God’s people gather around God to be addressed by him. Academic biblical study is, in my view, a secondary activity designed to deepen our reception of Scripture as God’s Word to us. I find the analogy of World War II helpful in this respect. The readers and preachers of Scripture in the ecclesia are like the soldiers on the front lines where the actual battles are taking place. Biblical scholars, by comparison, are like the group of academics gathered way away from the front lines at Bletchley Park working to break the Enigma code. Both activities are essential to the war effort but they are markedly different, although closely connected.

Both the reading and preaching of Scripture in the ecclesia and the most rigorous biblical study should, in my view, have the same telos in mind, namely to enable us to hear God’s address to us today. Both should operate out of a worldview shaped by the biblical metanarrative as the true story of the whole world. Both should begin—and continue—in prayer, and end in reception of the Word and adoration. Ideally, although sadly this is too often not the case, both should be in conscious and deep engagement with each other, serving each other, posing

critical questions to each other, and feeding off one another's efforts.

At the same time ecclesial proclamation and academic interpretation are very different activities. It takes years of study and mastery of many skills to become a biblical scholar. However, there is nothing intrinsic to academic study of the Bible that makes it alien to ecclesial reception. Indeed, prior to the rise of modernity, our best exegetes were invariably devout churchmen and women. However, modernity bequeathed to us historical criticism—or perhaps more accurately, historical criticisms—as the scientific method of biblical exegesis. This has brought many gains but carried with it the radical Enlightenment emphasis on the neutrality and autonomy of reason and science so that—so the argument goes—if we are really after truth we need to keep our religious views well away from our scholarship.

Amidst all the very real advances made, the impact of historical criticism/s on response-able interpretation has been very damaging. Churches are easily suspicious of or ignore academic biblical study and scholars often keep a wary distance from the church, at least when it comes to their scholarship. Indeed, it is not uncommon for an Evangelical biblical scholar to follow one set of interpretive rules in the academy and another set in church on Sunday, having conceded the epistemic grounds of his or her scholarship to the mainstream as demanded by post-Enlightenment academia. Within theology, broadly understood, the effect has also been damaging, with a wall appearing in the academy between systematic theology and biblical studies, so that a biblical scholar would often not imagine that rigorous training in systematic theology is essential to being a good biblical scholar, and vice versa.

On many accounts, the twentieth century was the most brutal in history, and by the end of the millennium much of the ideology of modernity was in tatters. It is not coincidental that

towards the end of this century we also witnessed the rise of postmodernism which savaged many of the foundational beliefs of modernity. Nor was it coincidental that around the same time we witnessed a renaissance of so-called theological interpretation which sought to redirect the energies of biblical interpretation towards doctrine and the church. The logical connections between these developments should be noted.

By the end of the twentieth century modernity was close to exhaustion after two World Wars, the rise and demise of communism, the nuclear threat, the environmental challenge, etc. In this context postmodernism emerged to challenge the ideologies of modernity. If the danger of postmodernism was nihilism and relativism, it was nevertheless “a valuable ‘problematic’”<sup>1)</sup> that alerted us to key questions about modernity.<sup>2)</sup> In biblical studies, the legacy of modernity is historical criticism/s and, not surprisingly, as postmodernism problematized the foundations of modernity it also called into question the dominant paradigm of historical criticism in biblical studies. Albeit often in unorthodox form, religion moved back onto academic agendas, an “effect” of which is the renaissance of theological interpretation in biblical studies, a move I welcome. In these ways, outlined far too briefly, our tumultuous times invite us to reflect deeply on the nature and direction of present day biblical studies, and offers the possibility of retrieving response-able biblical in-

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1) David Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Concepts in the Social Sciences. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 108.

2) Cf. also Lyon’s, *ibid.*, 90, statements that, “the question of postmodernity offers an opportunity to reappraise modernity, to read the signs of the times as indicators that modernity itself is unstable, unpredictable, and to forsake the foreclosed future that it once seemed to promise.” “The idea of postmodernity may yet turn out to be a figment of overheated academic imagination, popular hype, or disappointed radical hopes. But it is worth pursuing because it alerts us to a series of highly important questions. It raises our sensitivity and helps us see certain issues as problems to be explained.” (Lyon, 1999, 6)

terpretation in our day. It should go without saying that non-Western countries such as Korea, in which the church and biblical studies has grown in leaps and bounds, need to play a leading role in any such recovery and renewal.

I welcome the emergence of theological interpretation.<sup>3)</sup> However, what has emerged is a broad church in which a diversity of approaches gathers beneath this tent. For some, theological interpretation is simply another dish added to the smorgasbord of interpretive approaches available to the exegete. In my view, such an approach to theological interpretation is to be rejected. Theological interpretation should make the far stronger claim that, rightly understood, it is the correct hermeneutic for the Bible, insisting that ontologically the Bible is the Word of God and to read it otherwise is inevitably to distort its true meaning.

But, what would such a hermeneutic look like today? In my opinion, response-able interpretation should attend closely to this question. It is not a simple question and there are many elements in the ecology of such a hermeneutic. In this article I will focus on only two of those elements, namely systematic theology and philosophy. These are foundational elements of a response-able hermeneutic but readers should be aware of all the many elements I am excluding, including prayer, the role of the Spirit, the role of community, the role of tradition, rigorous linguistic study, biblical theology, etc.<sup>4)</sup>

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3) See Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas, eds., *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

4) Cf. Craig G. Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

## 2. Philosophy and theology and response-able interpretation

Theological issues impinge upon and shape biblical scholarship in all sorts of ways, but the integrality of the theological encyclopedia<sup>5)</sup> rarely receives attention within biblical studies as a result of the legacy of modernity in this field. Indeed, Tom Wright maintains that one of the legacies of modernity has been to keep history and theology far apart in biblical studies. Kevin Vanhoozer, Tom Wright and Francis Watson, as well as many others, have all done relevant and extremely stimulating work in their championing of a theological hermeneutic for biblical studies. But a question is whether such theological hermeneutics do justice to the role of philosophy in biblical interpretation.

We start to see why this question of philosophy matters when we explore the ambivalent legacy of historical criticism. The problem with historical criticism/s in biblical studies is not that it wishes to take the historical aspect of Scripture seriously. Iain Provan, John Barclay, Francis Watson with his notion of intratextual realism, Kevin Vanhoozer and Tom Wright all correctly insist that Scripture has an historical aspect which must be taken seriously in a biblical hermeneutic. Thiselton focuses this helpfully when he writes, “The issue is not whether historical criticism has a necessary place; but what that place should be.”<sup>6)</sup> The problem with historical criticism/s has been that the philosophy/ies of history it embodies is rooted in Enlightenment philosophies and worldviews which claimed neutrality and objectivity but are now demonstrated to be deeply ideological and often anti-Christian. Historical criticism has been, as it were,

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5) Cf. Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

6) Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 20-21.

the vehicle for Cartesian, Kantian and Hegelian epistemologies to govern the interpretation of Scripture. But, these epistemologies are now under question and thus so too is historical criticism.

It is thus true to say, as Scholder confirms, and contra James Barr,<sup>7)</sup> that the crisis in contemporary biblical hermeneutics is heavily related to the influence of philosophy (that of modernity) in biblical studies.<sup>8)</sup> Now what I hear Vanhoozer, Wright and Watson saying, is that the way out of this crisis is to develop a *theological* hermeneutic. However, how does this affect and relate to the role of philosophy (epistemology and ontology) in biblical interpretation? The crisis seems to have been more philosophically than theologically precipitated and to have been as much present in theology<sup>9)</sup> as in biblical studies. How does the development of a *theological* hermeneutic resolve this situation?

To put it another way, what is/should be the relationship between theology and philosophy and how does this inter-relationship manifest itself in biblical interpretation? It is interesting to compare Watson's stress on the need for a theological hermeneutic with the work of Anthony Thiselton and Tom Wright on hermeneutics. Thiselton's extensive corpus on hermeneutics amounts to an impassioned plea for biblical scholars to take *philosophy* seriously. *The Two Horizons* opens with a section entitled "Why philosophical description?" which is a defense for taking philosophy seriously in biblical hermeneutics. Thiselton maintains that, "Philosophical concepts cannot be left

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7) James Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament: Biblical Studies at the End of a Millennium* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 26.

8) Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology: Origins and Problems of Biblical Criticism in the Seventeenth Century* (London: SCM, 1990).

9) Cf. Heinz Zahrnt, *The Question of God: Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century*, Translated by R. A. Wilson (London: Collins, 1969).

out of account when we are attempting to formulate the tasks and problems of New Testament hermeneutics.”<sup>10)</sup> Tom Wright’s *The New Testament and the People of God* is also more philosophical than theological in his attempt to redo the epistemological foundations of NT studies. Watson by contrast, while he acknowledges the importance of philosophical and general hermeneutical questions, deliberately marginalizes them in order to foreground *theological* questions.

The subtitle to Thiselton’s “The Two Horizons” is “New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description ...” What difference does it make to biblical studies if this is changed to “and theological description” or something of that nature? This is clearly a big issue and my aim in this article is to open up the debate by looking at the answers given by a Christian theologian, Kevin Vanhoozer, two NT scholars, Tom Wright and Francis Watson, and one Christian philosopher, Herman Dooyeweerd.

### 3. Kevin Vanhoozer

Kevin Vanhoozer has given explicit attention to the relationship between theology and philosophy in his 1991 article, “Christ and concept: doing theology and the ‘ministry’ of philosophy.”<sup>11)</sup> His “A Lamp in the Labyrinth: The Hermeneutics of ‘Aesthetic’ Theology”<sup>12)</sup> is wide-ranging in its

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10) Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 6.

11) Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Christ and Concept: Doing Theology and the ‘Ministry’ of Philosophy,” in J. D. Woodbridge and T. E. McComiskey, eds., *Doing Theology in Today’s World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 99-145.

12) Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “A Lamp in the Labyrinth: The Hermeneutics of ‘Aesthetic’ Theology,” *Trinity Journal* 8:1 (1987), 25-56.

philosophical discussion, and his doctorate is published as *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology*. Philosophy, theology and biblical hermeneutics feature centrally in Vanhoozer's writings.<sup>13)</sup>

In "Christ and Concept" Vanhoozer is cautious about defining philosophy but proceeds to do so as "the critical and systematic reflection on enduring problems that arise in language and life." Vanhoozer develops a typology of the philosophy-theology relationship but categorizes theology as "Christ" and philosophy as "Concept." Philosophy is thus theoretical and conceptual; however, it is apparently conceptual in a way that theology is not. From this it would appear that one of the ways in which philosophy is different from other disciplines and theology is that it is conceptual whereas theology, for example, is not. In my view this is not convincing. Systematic Theology, like any other academic discipline, makes use of concepts as it develops its argument.<sup>14)</sup>

Vanhoozer argues for a Chalcedonian understanding of the philosophy-theology relationship in which "Philosophy is thus necessary for doing theology" and in which, "the theologian may have to explore ... any number of philosophies, selecting those frameworks that appear to solve the enduring problem of how to bring the Word to bear on the world in the most rational and biblical manner."<sup>15)</sup> I take it that this is what Vanhoozer has done in his work on Ricoeur; a theological cri-

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13) Vanhoozer has published widely in this area. Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Meaning* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990); *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); etc.

14) Oliver O'Donovan, for example, in his political theology rightly makes the point that when it comes to (political) theology *sola narratione* will not do by itself; *concepts* are required. See Oliver O'Donovan, "Response to Respondents: Behold the Lamb," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 11:2 (1998), 91-110, 94.

15) Vanhoozer, "Christ and Concept," 141.

tique of Ricoeur's work on narrative in order to identify all that is helpful in Ricoeur to bring the Word to bear on the world in the most biblical manner. His research on Ricoeur includes a study of Ricoeur's understanding of the relationship between theology and philosophy.

From Vanhoozer's writings it would appear that theology is the queen of the sciences and the key to Christian scholarship. This is implied in his typology by equating "theology" with "Christ." Ricoeur and other philosophers may have very useful goods to offer theologians but these will require theological critique and evaluation. Vanhoozer concludes his "A Lamp in the Labyrinth" with an appeal to evangelical theologians to engage in interdisciplinary discussions about textual meaning and truth; the ultimate goal is a theology of language and literature: "A theory of language and literature is indeed the promised land for a theology which begins with biblical authority and interpretation".<sup>16)</sup> It is thus clear that Vanhoozer is after a theological hermeneutics for biblical interpretation. Such a hermeneutics requires philosophical insights but these must be vetted by theology.

#### 4. Herman Dooyeweerd<sup>17)</sup>

Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977) was a Dutch Calvinist philosopher in the Kuyperian tradition whose initial training was in jurisprudence. With his brother in law Dirk Vollenhoven Dooyeweerd founded the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea

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16) Vanhoozer, "A Lamp," 55-56.

17) Note that I am not here asserting the need to follow Dooyeweerd at all points, indeed, I disagree with him on the role of theology, but am using his work as a foil for focusing the philosophical aspect of biblical hermeneutics.

or law idea. Dooyeweerd shared with Kuyper the emphasis on a Christian worldview which should shape all one's knowledge and understanding. His development of this insight was to see the necessity of a Christian philosophy for Christian scholarship and this insight receives detailed articulation in his four volumes *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*.<sup>18)</sup> In his *New Critique* Dooyeweerd sought to expose the dogma of the autonomy of theoretical thought. He argued that theory and scholarship were not religiously neutral. Every discipline is of necessity constituted by philosophical conceptions (ontological and epistemological) and behind these lie religious commitments, ultimately for or against the kingdom of Christ. This provided the basis for Dooyeweerd's advocacy of the necessity of *Christian* philosophy and scholarship as a vital part of the obedience and renewal demanded by the gospel.<sup>19)</sup>

The whole of Dooyeweerd's *New Critique* is aimed at dealing a mortal blow to the autonomy of theoretical thought. Theoretical thought, like every aspect of one's life, is rooted in and driven by the religious direction of the heart. The heart and therefore theoretical thought is thus either driven by the Word-revelation as the central principle of knowledge or by an apostate principle. Unpopular as it was in his day the essence of Dooyeweerd's view has received striking confirmation in contemporary philosophy with its shift away from positivism and

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18) *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 4 Volumes, Translated by David H. Freeman and William S. Young (Jordan Station, Ontario, Canada: Paideia Press, 1984).

19) The best contemporary statement of this Reformational - as it has come to be called - understanding of theoretical/scientific activity is that by Roy Clouser in his *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005). The implications for systematic theology of taking the Reformational perspective seriously for theology can inter alia be found in Gordon Spykman's *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

classical foundationalism.

For Dooyeweerd a correct understanding of the philosophy-theology relationship is central to the project of Christian scholarship.<sup>20)</sup> The context in which Dooyeweerd redefines the relationship between philosophy and theology is his thorough going attack on the pretended autonomy of philosophical thought.<sup>21)</sup> In his view, within the West, the autonomy of theoretical thought has become deeply entrenched through the false distinction between theology as the science of the Word-revelation compared with philosophy as the science of natural reason. When theology is regarded as grounded on revelation and philosophy on reason then the autonomy of philosophical thought is entrenched. Thus, a recovery of the religious rootedness of all theoretical thought, will inevitably involve teasing out the relationship between theology and philosophy and through showing that all theoretical thought, including philosophy, is religiously grounded.

For Dooyeweerd a vital deviation in the history of this relationship can be traced back to Augustine with his ambiguous use of “theology.” On the one hand he uses it to refer to the true knowledge of God and holy doctrine, on the other he uses it to refer to theoretical explanation of such doctrine. However, he does not keep these two categories separate but confuses them. This confusion Dooyeweerd regards as disastrous and detects the influence of pagan Greek philosophy at this point. Since as early as Parmenides, Greek philosophy consistently developed in a way in which theoretical thought was set against and above popular/pre-scientific thought so that the conviction grew that

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20) The main source for Dooyeweerd's view of this relationship is chapters V-VII of his *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Grand Rapids: Paideia Press, 2012).

21) See chapters I and II of Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, both of which are entitled “The pretended autonomy of theoretical thought” and for his far more scholarly treatment of this same theme see his *New Critique*.

“theology” could only be of a theoretical character and could not be founded on faith but on theoretical thought. In Augustine this (false) insight was incorporated into his understanding of theology with the result that theology became understood as sacred in a way that the others sciences could not be, and was consequently elevated to the position of *regina scientiarum*.

In this way the theoretical enterprise of theology became equated with the Word-revelation, which it was thought to monopolize. Other sciences would be either autonomous (with Aquinas) and at best be influenced by the Word revelation in a mediated way, namely through theology. “*The theological gnosis*, permeated by Greek philosophical ideas, was elevated above the simple belief of the congregation. The whole conception of the so-called sacred theology as the *regina scientiarum* was of Greek origin.”<sup>22)</sup>

Once it becomes apparent that all theoretical thought needs to be consciously grounded in and driven by a radically Christian ground motive, and that theology has no monopoly on the Word-revelation in this respect then the peculiar character of theology needs to be re-examined. What is the object of theology? What aspect of creation does it research? For Dooyeweerd this cannot be the revelation of God in his Word in the full sense. Dooyeweerd’s solution is to position theology as one among many special sciences and to make philosophy the foundational science or “discipline of the disciplines”.<sup>23)</sup> Theology is a special science and its object is the divine Word-revelation as it presents itself in the modal aspect of faith. As a special science theology cannot provide a theoretical total view any more than say biology can. And yet, because of the analogical structure of theology, at a foundational level it requires such a theoretical

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22) Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 115.

23) Danie F. M. Strauss, *Philosophy: Discipline of the Disciplines* (Grand Rapids: Paideia Press, 2009).

overview. “For it is philosophy alone which can provide us with a theoretical insight into the inner structure and internal coherence of the different ... modes of human experience.”<sup>24)</sup> Hence theologians need a philosophy; indeed, if they reject the possibility of a Christian philosophy, they will inevitably take their philosophy from autonomous philosophy. For Dooyeweerd philosophy may not enter the dogmatic and exegetical problems of philosophy except in so far as the philosophical and central religious fundamentals of theology as a theoretical science are at stake.

Dooyeweerd has, in my view, rendered us a major service through his attention to the foundations of academic work. Every discipline works with some epistemology - which I define as how to go about knowing something so you can trust the results of the knowing process - and some ontology - a view of reality, its interconnectedness, and a sense of which part of reality its discipline is studying. These elements are never religiously neutral and Dooyeweerd’s seminal insight into an inner-reformation of the sciences along Christian lines is that we need a Christian ontology and epistemology to undergird and shape of our academic work in all disciplines.

Although he precedes them in time, Dooyeweerd and his followers are not the only such resource to emerge out of Dutch Calvinism. Far better known, albeit in the analytical rather than - as was Dooyeweerd - the continental philosophical tradition, is the Reformed Epistemology of Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff and many others. In Wolterstorff’s *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*<sup>25)</sup> and Plantinga’s *Warranted Christian Belief*<sup>26)</sup> both make the case for a Reformed, Christian

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24) Dooyeweerd, *Twilight*, 152.

25) Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

26) Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (NY and Oxford: OUP, 2000).

epistemology. Both schools emerging out of twentieth century Dutch Calvinism develop the poignant and critical insight that it is through our view of reality and our epistemologies that the battle for Christian scholarship is won or lost.

In my view this is correct. Where I differ with Dooyeweerd is on the role of theology.<sup>27)</sup> Theology is, in my view, more foundational than Dooyeweerd realizes, and should work alongside philosophy as disciplines foundational to the academic enterprise. As a Christian scholar, for example, Dooyeweerd assumes trinitarianism but without consciously acknowledging his indebtedness to theology. Likewise, and this is where Dooyeweerd is correct, the more academic or theoretical theology becomes, the more indebted it becomes to its epistemology and ontology, i.e. to its philosophical foundations.

#### 4. N. T. Wright

Dooyeweerd's view implies that a biblical hermeneutic will always carry with it an ontology and an epistemology i.e. a philosophical framework. His philosophy implies a call for biblical scholars to be conscious of this and to ensure that this framework is integrally Christian. The problem with historical criticism is, as we have noted, that biblical scholars work on the biblical text with non-Christian epistemologies alien (often radically so) to the biblical text.

Although he is not specifically Dooyeweerdian, someone who takes philosophy seriously in biblical scholarship in a comparative way, is Tom Wright.<sup>28)</sup> Wright is keen that we develop

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27) See Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, esp. ch. 13.

28) See Wright's *New Testament and the People of God (NTPG)*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 1 (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991),

a biblical hermeneutic which will enable us to read the Bible within an acoustic which allows its full overtones to be heard. Such a biblical hermeneutic will, in his view, have to do justice to, and integrate, the literary, historical, and theological aspects of Scripture. To do this means to attend to epistemological issues in NT studies. “The inner rationale of this Part of the book is the sense that the problems which we encounter in the study of literature, history and theology all belong together. Each reflects, in the way appropriate to its own area, the basic shape of the problem of knowledge itself,”<sup>29)</sup> i.e. the problem of epistemology.

Thus for Wright the way out of the crisis in NT studies is to reconstruct the epistemological foundations of NT studies. I cannot here outline in detail Wright’s proposed foundation for NT studies. Many readers will be familiar with his thinking on worldview and story as the foundational way in which people interpret reality. Wright regards Christianity as a worldview i.e. as public truth, and argues for critical realism as the most appropriate epistemology for NT studies within such a Christian worldview. He endeavors to outline a critical realist account of literature, reading, history and theology in order to show how these aspects of the NT relate to each other.

Admittedly, Wright does not call this reconstructive work philosophy, but theology. Indeed, he uses “theology” in somewhat different ways. At one-point theology embraces worldview in its totality; at another point theology refers to beliefs emerging out of a worldview; at another point theology refers to the god

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3-144. Although Wright is not specifically Dooyeweerdian, the methodological influence of Canadian Dutch Neo-Calvinism is clear from the footnotes in 3-144. This influence is strongest at the worldviewish level and much less so at the philosophical level. Wright’s critical realism takes the influence of religious presuppositions less seriously than does Dooyeweerd.

29) Wright, *NTPG*, 31.

aspect of a worldview. If there is some confusion here, Wright is very clear on what NT studies requires:

The overall point here is that a good deal of what is called “Christian theology” consists of discussions and details at the level of basic belief or consequent belief, not necessarily at the level of the Christian worldview itself. If theological study is to be fully aware of its own nature, however, it must include study of the whole range, from worldviews to every level of belief.<sup>30)</sup>

Another way to put this might be to say that biblical interpretation needs to investigate and to attend consciously and positively to its theological and philosophical shaping.

Thus, in terms of a theological hermeneutic, Wright, even though he uses different terminology, moves in a direction akin to that of Dooyeweerd, and of Wolterstorff and Plantinga.

## 5. Francis Watson

In his creative and stimulating *Text, Church and World. Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective*<sup>31)</sup> Francis Watson argued for *a theological hermeneutic* in biblical interpretation. He is quite clear on this:

The text in question is the biblical text; for the goal is a theological hermeneutic within which an exegesis oriented primarily towards theological issues can come into being. This is therefore not an exercise in general hermeneutics. ... the hermeneutic or interpretative paradigm towards which the

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30) Wright, *NTPG*, 131.

31) Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World. Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

following chapters move is a theological rather than a literary one, and the idea that a literary perspective is, as such, already 'theological' seems to me to be without foundation.<sup>32)</sup>

His entire text is directed towards formulating systematically the contours of a *theological hermeneutic* as a framework within which exegesis may take place.<sup>33)</sup>

And just what is theological hermeneutics? "Theological hermeneutics ... comprises that part of the theological task that reflects on the appropriate principles of textual interpretation in this field."<sup>34)</sup> In explaining what he understands by theology Watson refers approvingly to Christoph Schwöbel's understanding of systematic theology as the self-explication of Christian faith.<sup>35)</sup> Watson points out that, "The term 'theological' is of course contested, but implies in my own usage an ability and a willingness to operate within a determinate form of ecclesial discourse: the tradition of self-critical reflection generated by the claims to truth, validity and adequacy inherent in Christian faith, or, more traditionally expressed, *fides quarens intellectum*."<sup>36)</sup>

*Text, Church and World* seeks to outline the contours of such a theological hermeneutic for our time. Part of its attraction to a biblical scholar is that Watson regularly descends from highly theoretical issues to hands on exegesis of biblical texts as he endeavors to show the exegetical difference such a hermeneutic makes. This type of approach is rarely encountered but important. If biblical scholars are to be persuaded as to the relevance of theology and philosophy for their exegetical tasks then they must be shown the practical relevance of theology

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32) Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 1.

33) Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 221.

34) Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 241.

35) Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 296.

36) Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 79.

for exegesis. Here I must be content to outline the broad parameters of Watson's theological hermeneutic. There are some five or so main pillars to his hermeneutic.

Firstly, a theological hermeneutic means that our focus will be on the final form of the biblical text. This involves something of a paradigm shift from the historical critical approach. Literary and communal-usage reasons can be given for this but the most compelling is that the final form of the text is the most suitable for theological use.

Secondly, a theological hermeneutic will mean that exegesis is oriented towards specifically theological questions.

Thirdly, and more controversially, a theological hermeneutic will not deny the possibility of criticizing the biblical text. Watson focuses in particular and at length on feminist critique of the Bible and the patriarchal elements he finds in the Bible. For Watson it is of critical importance that we develop a theological hermeneutic which equips us to critique patriarchalism.

there has gradually come to light a new dimension of the oppressive law whose presence within these texts and the interpretive traditions they have generated is such a crucially important hermeneutical factor. The oppressive law is ... the law of patriarchy ... If 'holy scripture' does not also offer the theological basis for resisting the law of the Father, then this concept should be rejected as an irredeemable ideological construct, however propitious the current climate may otherwise seem for its rehabilitation.<sup>37)</sup>

Watson justifies this freedom to criticize Scripture in terms of his law/gospel distinction which he derives from Luther.

The duality in Christian experience represented by the law/gospel distinction becomes hermeneutically significant

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37) Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 156.

when interpreted as a twofold relation to the biblical text: for the twofold relation to God as the harsh judge to be feared and as the merciful redeemer to be loved is textually mediated. It is holy scripture that both repels and attracts, and a simple, undivided affirmation of its entire content is therefore a sign that one is deceiving oneself.<sup>38)</sup>

Fourthly, a theological hermeneutic will not be unhappy to draw on secular insights. Because the church operates in the world, even though a theological hermeneutic will be ecclesial, “It follows that any correct apprehension of Christian truth or the praxis that must accompany it will occur only through the mediation of a discourse that is not in itself distinctively Christian.”<sup>39)</sup> Watson justifies this drinking at the secular well through the doctrine of the Spirit at work in the world as outlined by John Owen.

The sphere of creation-redemption encompasses the whole world, and the indwelling creator Spirit may also act as the redeemer Spirit, redemptively present in all goodness, justice and truth. To permit disclosures of goodness, justice and truth originating outside the community to impinge upon the interpretation of the sacred texts is not to contaminate them.<sup>40)</sup>

Fifthly, a theological position can itself function as a hermeneutic. Watson shows how bringing to biblical texts such presuppositions as a non-logocentric understanding of the divine Word, a Christology according to which Christ transforms the whole of creation, the fundamental importance of love of one’s neighbor can illumine the texts in helpful ways. In this respect the relation between exegesis and theology is a manifestation

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38) Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 232.

39) Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 9.

40) Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 240.

of the hermeneutic spiral: exegesis of individual biblical texts presupposes some sense of the whole (an interpretation of the basic content of Christian faith). Yet this sense of the whole is not imposed from the outside but itself arises at least partially from prior exegesis. “Hermeneutics, theology and exegesis flow into and out of each other with no fixed dividing-lines; on occasion they may be practiced simultaneously.”<sup>41)</sup>

Finally, such a theological hermeneutic will be practiced in community.

Watson’s work is always stimulating and there is much to welcome in his advocacy for a theological hermeneutic for exegesis, and not least his situating of it within ecclesial practice. Watson’s recognition of the fecundity of bringing theological presuppositions to the text is a further, vital insight. We often think of the direction within the theological encyclopedia as from Scripture - to doctrine - to systematic theology, and there is, of course truth in this. However, no less an exegete than John Calvin wrote his *Institutes* in order to help believers better read and understand Scripture. Doctrine and systematic theology attempt to analyze and articulate systematically the beliefs central to Christian faith and thus to the Bible. Bringing a sense of the shape of Christian faith and belief to exegesis thus has the potential to be profoundly illuminating.<sup>42)</sup> Watson is thus absolutely right that hermeneutics, theology and exegesis flow into and out of each other. I will, however, not spend time here elaborating on all the areas of agreement I have with Watson, but will instead focus on the areas I perceive as more problematic.

Firstly, it seems to me unhelpful to define theological interpretation as oriented towards theological issues. In my view

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41) Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 241.

42) In different ways biblical theology and studies of a Christian worldview do similar things.

Scripture is kerygmatically focused and addressed as the Word of God to all God's people, of whom academic theologians are a small minority. What is required is a hermeneutic that will strengthen and clear the path for this proclamation to take place. Theological interpretation ought to be oriented towards helping us listen to God's address through Scripture, and thus is more helpfully defined as directed towards the kerygma of the text for today, with theological exploration following on from that.

Secondly, while Watson is candid about his Lutheran law/gospel dialectic,<sup>43)</sup> this leads him in a very different direction to that of Vanhoozer, Wright, and Dooyeweerd. It leads him to argue for a regional (theological) hermeneutic for theological interpretation as opposed to Vanhoozer's plea for a general theological hermeneutic. While I do think that there are distinctive aspects to a biblical hermeneutic since Scripture alone among written texts is God's fully trustworthy Word, Watson's law/gospel dialectic leaves him vulnerable to Dooyeweerd's trenchant critique of the autonomy of theoretical thought. Watson's appeal to the work of the Spirit as justifying appropriating secular insights is surely right but what is missing is any evaluation of the epistemologies involved in obtaining such insights. A law/gospel dialectic would lead us to think that other disciplines operate neutrally and that we can appropriate their resources relatively uncritically. However, it is this neutrality that post-modernism and - from a Christian perspective - Dooyeweerd, Plantinga and Wolterstorff - have problematized, so that if one is not careful Watson's approach to secular insights is in danger of becoming Trojan horse which unwittingly welcomes alien ideologies into the fields of theological interpretation. In my view his law/gospel dialectic also allows him to move too

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43) See Craig G. Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction* (Downers grove, ILL: IVP Academic, 2017) for a critique of this view of the relationship between nature and grace.

quickly to affirming a hermeneutic of suspicion, as opposed to one of trust, towards Scripture.

## Conclusion

The legacy of historical criticism is ambivalent for biblical scholars who want to work as Christian academics. Postmodernity has deeply problematized modernity and thus historical criticism, and this has given us the opportunity to reflect again upon the foundations of biblical studies. Vanhoozer, Wright, Watson and Thiselton all make proposals for a different hermeneutic that will enable biblical scholars to work constructively with the Bible as Scripture. In the process Vanhoozer, Wright and Watson propose a theological hermeneutic; with Wright and Thiselton far more attentive to the philosophical dimensions of such a hermeneutic.

As I make clear in my *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, there are many interrelated dimensions to the ecology of biblical interpretation. What I have sought to show in this article is that theology and philosophy are indispensable elements in such an ecology, and that some of our best thinkers differ fundamentally in this regard. If we are to move beyond the impasse that historical criticism has led us into and appropriate the opportunity presented by theological interpretation, without losing the many, many insights of historical criticism, then Bible, Theology ... *and Philosophy* will have to be firmly on the agenda. Watson demonstrates how rich the rewards can be of bringing theological insights to the task of exegesis. Wright has shown us what creative results can follow from attending closely to the philosophical foundations of NT studies. Where Dooyeweerd is helpful is in reminding us that such philosophy cannot simply be eclectic but needs to be integrally Christian.

In moving this debate forward, we will need to attend closely to the following sorts of questions:

Just what is theology and how does it relate to biblical studies and other disciplines?

How does and how should philosophy shape biblical interpretation?

What is the relationship between a general Christian hermeneutic and a theological hermeneutic for biblical interpretation?

How do the literary, historical and kerygmatic aspects of Scripture interrelate?<sup>44)</sup>

What is the telos of biblical interpretation?

What are appropriate methods for historical analysis of the biblical text?

There is work to be done! Theoretical precision in a way that will bear fruit in a biblical hermeneutic appropriate to the study of Scripture and fruitful for theology will require hard, Christian, communal work in theology, philosophy, and biblical exegesis. It is interaction between theologians, philosophers, biblical scholars and scholars from other disciplines, all of whom share the concern for a genuinely theological hermeneutic for Scripture, that I foresee as providing a way beyond the present impasse in biblical studies towards fields of rich, thick theological interpretation. Only thus will we recover and advance a truly response-able biblical hermeneutic.

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44) Note the superb work by Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1985), in this area.

<주요어>

responsible hermeneutic, philosophy, theology, Vanhoozer,  
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<Key words>

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<Abstract>

## **Responsible Hermeneutics: Philosophy, Theology and Biblical Interpretation**

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This article argues that the time is ripe for us to develop a biblical hermeneutic that takes our God-given capacity to respond to God seriously, what I call a response-able hermeneutic. In the context of the damaging effects of historical criticism on such a hermeneutic and the new possibilities opened up by the renaissance of theological interpretation, this article focuses in particular on the role of theology and philosophy in such a responsible hermeneutic through an engagement with the works of Kevin Vanhoozer, N. T. Wright, Francis Watson and Herman Dooyeweerd. It is argued that insights from rigorous Christian work in philosophy, theology and exegesis will be required for a responsible hermeneutic for today.

<초록>

## 책임지는 성경해석학

-철학, 신학, 그리고 성경해석-

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이 글은 이제 우리가 하나님께 응답할 수 있는 능력을 우리에게 주셨다는 성경해석학을 발전시킬 수 있는 때가 무르익었음을 논증하고자 한다. 그리고 이것을 ‘책임질 수 있는(response-able) 해석학’으로 부르하고자 한다. 역사를 되돌아 볼 때, 역사비평학은 이와 같은 해석학에 손상을 입혔으므로, 이제 ‘책임질 수 있는 해석학’으로 신학적인 해석의 르네상스를 다시 열 수 있는 새로운 가능성을 생각하게 한다. 특히 이 글은 신학과 철학의 역할에 대하여 특히 초점을 가지고 Kevin Vanhoozer, N. T. Wright, Francis Watson, 그리고 Herman Dooyeweerd의 사상과 씨름하면서, ‘책임질 수 있는 해석학’을 제안한다.

