

## **SOLA SCRIPTURA?**

### **THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE IN PLURALISTIC ENVIRONMENTS**

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#### **I. The Problem with Sola Scriptura**

There is hardly a topic of theological dogmatics that has evoked such remarkable formulations and formulae as the topic "the Bible and the authority of scripture." The notion of a "scriptural principle," formulae such as sola scriptura, "scripture's self-interpretation," the "infallibility of scripture," the "external and internal clarity of scripture," as well as expressions such as "biblical theology" or "the Bible is true" belong to the singular defense arsenal that is supposed to ensure the authority of scripture. I shall call these expressions "authority formulae." These formulae and formulations are remarkable because on the one hand they appear short and clear, but on the other hand--at any rate unless they are accompanied by significant interpretation and qualification--they give rise to a wide variety of objections and false orientations. They rightly run repeatedly into opposition and protest.

When persons who possess a certain knowledge of the Bible encounter these authority formulae, they can not help but be put off. In the Bible they meet a multiplicity of traditions, which not only exist in tension with each other, but which also stand in multiple tensions with our contemporary world of life and experience. In view of all this, to say that scripture is infallible, or that scripture interprets itself, comes across as highly questionable.

Suppose one responds by intensifying one's study of scripture. One must then recognize--above and beyond the fact of tension-creating differences--that some of the biblical traditions present religious perspectives, moral viewpoints, and ways of regarding the world which not only are problematized by other biblical traditions, but which many people today, even with the best of intentions, can not share. In this situation, how can we speak of the "infallibility" of scripture, or say that scripture can not err, or that scripture "is true"?

Finally, suppose one points out that in reading the biblical traditions we must take note of the fact that they have developed over a period of more than a thousand years? In view of this

fact, to speak of the external and internal clarity of scripture, or to say that scripture interprets itself, can appear to be mockery. Readers find themselves referred to an army of specialists--in theology, biblical exegesis, and historical and cultural disciplines--whose help they need if they are to deal appropriately with sacred scripture. It seems that the self-interpretation of scripture and the principle "scripture alone" are now out of the question.

When we confront the overwhelming complexity of the biblical traditions, another approach to scripture presents itself with an attractiveness that is hard to resist. It starts with the assurance that the biblical details are not crucial. Persons interested in the Bible should concentrate on personal encounter with God or on Jesus Christ or on salvation history or on the covenant or on atonement or on some other thread that runs throughout the whole of scripture--whether in fact or only supposedly. But this imagined escape from the confusing complexity of the biblical traditions soon proves to be problematic. It merely introduces a religious, theological, or dogmatic principle--simply as an alternative to the authority of scripture--that is now supposed to guide perspectives on scripture. Perhaps happy finally to have found a clear thread to guide them, some people will gladly exchange the unbearably complicated authority of scripture for this authority. Others will note, however, that they have now been equipped with a more or less powerful filter which substantially reduces the richness of the biblical traditions and requires continual foreshortenings and abstractions, as well as continual hermeneutic constructions that remain external to scripture.

Once we have come this far, it is not hard to go still further in doubting and unmasking the authority of scripture. Do we not uncover in the Bible many traces of positions that we would be only too glad to leave behind us: nationalism, patriarchy, and the glorification of violence? In view of the conflicts and contradictions between the various biblical texts, what are we to make of those texts' claim to truth? If we want to strive for honesty and truthfulness--including in matters of faith--must we not at least admit alongside of scripture the validity of philosophies, general theories, worldviews, moralities, and historical and many other rationalities and sources of knowledge? Isn't the sola scriptura formula a wrong turn, or at least a one-sidedness in pressing need of correction?

When the aforementioned problems with the Bible and its authority are clearly articulated, all authority formulae find themselves in a precarious position. Indeed, they seem to be

untrustworthy and untrue. If "scriptural principle" is the summary formula underlying the aforementioned authority formulae such as *sola scriptura*, the "self-interpretation of scripture," the "infallibility of scripture," and the "external and internal clarity of scripture," must we not radically call into question the notion of a "scriptural principle"? However we might specify and give content to this principle, doesn't the notion of a "scriptural principle" suggest a clarity and consistency that is simply not to be found when we consider more closely the internal constitution of the Bible?

The biblical traditions' complexity and abundant tensions have naturally not escaped the notice of the theologians who articulated the aforementioned authority formulae. Our first reading of the various authority formulae has been consciously naïve in its critique. We allowed ourselves to be misled by talk of a "scripture principle"--a formulation that is indeed unhappy and readily misunderstood. Our first reading thus needs to be reexamined and corrected. If it is correct that scripture can not be brought under one heading or reduced to one principle, what are the authority formulae saying? In what follows I shall propose that we speak of the fourfold weight of scripture. First I should like to clarify the Reformation's *sola scriptura* by trying to describe the authority of scripture with regard to its fourfold weight. I shall continue by discussing the programmatic formula biblical theology, which has also been understood as an authority formula. Finally I shall attempt to show why the specific authority of scripture verifies itself precisely in pluralistic contexts that are critical of authority.

## **II. Sola Scriptura and the Fourfold Weight of Scripture**

"Scripture alone . . . shall be queen!" Scripture shall be queen among the oral and written testimonies to God and God's creative will! That is the unabridged version of Luther's *sola scriptura* formula.<sup>1</sup> Scripture is queen--but she is not God.<sup>2</sup> Scripture is not an authority that is automatically infallible in every word. Although Luther was a passionate defender of the *sola scriptura regnare*, he repeatedly warned against turning the Bible into a "paper pope."

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1 In a presentation at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, the North American Reformation historian David Steinmetz has called attention to the fact that the Reformers generally understood the *sola scriptura* as a *scriptura valde prima*.

2 See David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); Hans Heinrich Schmid and Joachim Mehlhausen, eds., *Sola Scriptura: Das reformatorische Schriftprinzip in der säkularen Welt* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 1991); Richard Ziegert, ed., *Die Zukunft des Schriftprinzips, Bibel im Gespräch 2* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994).

Scripture needs more than simply to be read in a raised voice. Scripture is testimony to God. It is God's word in human language and in human ways of seeing. More precisely, it is a multiperspectival testimony. Indeed it offers a "cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1), or better, an entire landscape of testimonies. It offers the best written collection of testimonies to God and God's will that Christianity possesses. Therefore scripture should be queen among all other testimonies.

How could Luther and the Reformers maintain this with such great specificity? Although it does not occupy the highest place, we must first recognize the great historical weight of the biblical traditions. Over a period of at least one thousand years, and in the judgment of some biblical scholars over a period of nearly fifteen hundred years, the biblical traditions were prepared, gathered, compared with one another, related to one another, attuned to one another, and checked against one another. Thus we can also say that they "grew" over the course of centuries. These texts record a search for the knowledge of God that extended over more than a millenium. They also record the corresponding the multiplicity of faith experiences of God. Scripture retains and documents a most impressive history of testimony.

By contrast, though, attention has repeatedly been called to--in Lessing's words--the "broad, ugly ditch" between our historical situation and the biblical traditions. The "long past world of the Bible" has repeatedly been written off along the lines of Hegel's aphorism: "In Swabia one says of that which happened long ago: It was so long ago that soon it will no longer be true. Thus Christ died for our sins so long ago that soon it will no longer be true."<sup>3</sup> However, such ironic statements fail to recognize that, in spite of all the undeniable distance and differences between the worldviews, rationalities, and moralities of the Bible and those of our time, in both cases it is human beings with their questions and their experiences of faith who are standing before God. Who are these human beings? They are deeply unsettled, afflicted, or despairing; they have experiences of good fortune, liberation, and uplift; they have bodily needs similar to ours; they must live with love and hate, hope and disappointment, sickness and death; they are exposed to the powers of nature and culture; they seek to direct and improve both their individual lives and shared human life, and in so doing repeatedly run up against their limits. To be sure, in many respects the color and contour of all these experiences in the biblical contexts differ from the color and contour of our experiences. Yet

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3 Johannes Hoffmeister, *Dokumente zu Hegels Entwicklung*, 2d ed. (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1974), 358.

again and again, in the midst of the distance and strangeness, an astonishing nearness emerges--not all the way down the line, but in relation to particular persons, situations, and constellations. Again and again the historical weight of scripture will make itself felt in a great existential richness.

With its great historical weight and its richness encompassing both individual and societal human existence, the Bible has developed a 2000-year history of effects. Nothing argues for this history soon coming to an end, even though at the end of the second millennium the Western industrial nations are experiencing manifestations of religious decadence, a decline in religious educational formation, and even religious illiteracy. At the same time we must see that even these religiously decadent societies are soaked through with the cultural substance of the Bible. This is true in these societies' educational formation, their customs, the ways they give rhythm to the year and to life, their art, and their ethos. Of course, by no means are this cultural substance and its influence an unqualified source of joy for everyone. For many they are a source of suffering. When we speak of the cultural weight of the Bible, we think of its open and implicit patriarchy, its ethnocentrism, its defense of worldviews that have been rendered scientifically problematic, and its functioning as a support both for ideologically authoritarian structures and for moralities that, at least from our perspective, are out of touch with the world.

Just as one cannot deny that these traits are found in the biblical traditions or that the biblical texts have repeatedly been used ideologically and for the oppression of human beings, one can not truthfully embrace the clichés that highlight only those aspects. If we are to get a sense of the cultural weight of the biblical traditions as well as of their historical weight, we must emphasize their diversity, the diversity of their different "situations in life," and thereby scripture's diverse powers of influence and persuasion. Experiences of peace and of war, of liberation and of oppression, of joy and of distress accompany and mark the testimonies to God's presence and to God's distance, to God's saving and to God's judging action. We find testimonies from Israel's existence prior to nationhood, from Israel's existence as a nation, and from Israel's existence after the collapse of the nation: testimonies of normative stability, of normative torpidity, and of normative crises. We find the unexamined assumptions of an ancient slaveholding society, and we find important steps toward calling slavery into question and gradually doing away with it. We find many expressions of patriarchy and ethnocentrism, and we find powers and voices that propagate new, liberating forms of shared human life.

The biblical traditions critically engage a broad diversity of cultures, norms, and powers of their time. They call into question a great variety of political, social, and cultural contexts. They offer orientation and consolation in a great variety of situations of individual and communal development, formation, and crisis.

Yet the biblical traditions are not only a marvelously rich supply of faith testimonies that can and have mediated religious communications into a great variety of life situations. Over and above the historical and cultural weight of scripture, we must give attention to its canonical weight. The biblical traditions do not simply offer a diffuse abundance and "plurality" of testimonies to God and God's activity. They offer numerous contrasting and interlaced testimonies to God and God's activity. As new situations arise, these testimonies refer to each other, learn from each other, criticize each other, and strengthen each other. This internal consistency and coherence, which can and must not be reduced to only one principle, is what constitutes the canonical weight of scripture. This canonical consistency greatly helps to fortify the certainty of faith precisely by repeatedly subjecting that certainty to healthy questioning. The canonical consistency of scripture helps us to move from mere certainties to an increasingly comprehensive and profound knowledge of truth.<sup>4</sup>

The internal forces and dynamics that constitute a canon are still relatively obscure to us. In a lecture on the occasion of his receiving an honorary doctorate in theology in Münster, the Heidelberg Egyptologist Jan Assmann proposed a reconstruction of "five steps on the way to the canon."<sup>5</sup> Canonization is the preservation, in fixed collections of texts, of memories of broad and enduring scope and comprehensive, normative standards. According to Assmann, the need for canonization arises when human beings suffer radical collapse and disintegration. For Israel the loss of their land, the deportation, and the Exile was such a collapse and disintegration, an experience of radical historical discontinuity. For the New Testament the crucifixion of Jesus is such a collapse and disintegration.<sup>6</sup>

These experiences of radical discontinuity, collapse, and threatening chaos find expression in

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4 See M. Welker, "Theology in Public Discourse Outside Communities of Faith?," in Luis Lego, ed., *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-first Century*, intro. Max Stackhouse (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

5 Jan Assmann, *Fünf Stufen auf dem Wege zum Kanon: Tradition und Schriftkultur im frühen Judentum und in seiner Umwelt* (Münstersche Theologische Vorträge I; Münster: Lit Verlag, 1999) 11-35.

6 For the literary development of the New Testament, the fall of Jerusalem and the burning of Rome should not be underestimated.

potentially canonical texts. The noted radical continuity requires interpretation. It is important for the process of canonization that a certain multiplicity of interpretations, a limited multiplicity of exemplary possibilities be developed for explaining and bridging the catastrophe of discontinuity. Different views of the world, different views of history and of the future make possible a multiplicity of exemplary interpretations. Only when these interpretations are brought into mutual interconnection, only when a "pluralistic library"<sup>7</sup> of different perspectives on the crisis is present, only then does the substance of the canon come into being. This referential nexus can have several centers. But it also has limits. We still need to do better research inot the theological reasons for the limits of the canon. With some texts on the margins of the canonical traditions we could show why theologians and councils were rightly uncertain whether they should include or exclude the texts in question. Karl Barth said that the canon "imposed" itself on the church.<sup>8</sup>

Andreas Schüle has suggested an alternative view to those of Assmann and Barth.<sup>9</sup> Schule's position is that the post-exilic experience of a discontinuity now overcome made possible a pluralism of interpretations, many of which, possessing complementary potential for knowledge, could no longer be surrendered. As the church grew in multiple contexts, it, too, could not do without this pluralistic potential for theological knowledge. Thus scripture acquired its canonical weight, which in turn set its historical weight and made possible its full cultural weight.

However, the historical, the cultural, and the canonical weight of scripture is grounded in its theological weight. The Bible is a highly complex testimony to God. More precisely, it is a complex nexus of testimonies, which together call attention to God's reality and God's activity in creation. Ultimately, the Bible's fourfold weight accrues to it on the basis of its object and its central content. On the basis of its content scripture guides our perception of God's activity among human beings,<sup>10</sup> as well as the living memory and the expectation of that activity. On the basis of its theological weight scripture guides historical, cultural, and ecclesial learning and growth in the knowledge of God. On the basis of its canonical composition and its theological weight scripture prevents the imposition of closure on these

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7 Heinz Schürmann, *Gottes Reich – Jesu Geschick* (Freiburg: Herder, 1983) 246.

8 See CD I/2, 473ff. and 597ff.

9 Andreas Schüle, *Israels Sohn – Jahwes Prophet: Zum Verhältnis von Religionsgeschichte und kanonischer Theologie anhand der Bileam-Perikope (Num 22-24)* (Münster: Lit, 2001).

10 R. Williams, "The Discipline of Scripture," in idem, *On Christian Theology, Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 44-59.

memories and anticipations, this learning and growth.<sup>11</sup> Precisely because the Bible in its multiperspectival "testimony" refers to God and to the divine action toward creation, the Bible itself becomes a living source. It is on the basis of this internal constitution that people can ascribe to scripture the authority formulae that are so unpersuasive when regarded in an isolated and superficial manner.<sup>12</sup> It is the biblical testimonies' reference to the living God, to the God of Israel and to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, which gives those testimonies their coherence, their weight, and their orienting power. The historical, the cultural, and the canonical weight of scripture are only a mirror and reflection of the theological weight bestowed upon scripture by its content and object, by the living God. The great historical, cultural, and canonical wealth that we have intimated is a reflection of the glory of the living God, to which scripture gives multiperspectival testimony.

For Christians, this glory of the living God is made manifest in the presence of the risen Christ.<sup>13</sup> The risen Christ is not simply the physically revived pre-Easter Jesus. Although a few resurrection testimonies seem to suggest a confusion between resurrection and physical revivification, the canonical material is compelling: What is at issue is a reality which on the one hand shows traits of that which is available to normal sense perception, while on the other hand having the character of an appearance. The texts report people falling on their knees in worship in light of a theophany, a revelation of God. At the same time, they report doubt. The Emmaus story is especially rich: The eyes of the disciples are kept shut so that they do not recognize the risen Christ. In the ritual of the bread their eyes are opened. But very next verse says: And he disappeared from their sight. Instead of now complaining about a ghost, the disciples remember a second experience of evidence that at first had not become a revelation to them: Did not our hearts burn within us as he spoke with us on the way and opened to us the meaning of the scriptures? (Luke 24:30ff). Witnesses recognize the risen Christ in personal address, in the breaking of bread, and in the opening of the scriptures, as well as in luminous appearances, which *eo ipso* oppose the confusion of resurrection with

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11 See B. Oberdorfer, "Biblisch-realistische Theologie: Methodologische Überlegungen zu einem dogmatischen Programm," in S. Brandt and B. Oberdorfer, eds., *Resonanzen: Theologische Beiträge* (Wuppertal: Foedus, 1997): 63-83; Gerhard Sauter, *Grundlagen der Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1998). See also James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (GBS; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

12 Only on the basis of this character of pluralistic testimony can we summarize in Luther's words, *scriptura "ipsa per sese certissima, facillima, apertissima, sui ipsius interpres, omnium omnia probans, iudicans et illuminans"* (WA 7, 97, 24-25).

13 For greater detail see M. Welker, "Resurrection and Eternal Life: The Canonic Memory of the Resurrected Christ, His Reality, and His Glory," in J. Polkinghorne and M. Welker, eds., *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Theology and Science on Eschatology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2000), 279-290.



physical revivification. It is important that a multiplicity of different experiences of evidence give rise to the certainty that Christ is and remains present among us in a bodily way. By contrast, the stories of the empty tomb emphasize that a single revelation, even if a spectacular one by means of heavenly messengers, does not yet evoke faith. Instead the result is fear, terror, and silence (Mark 16:5-8). Or there is the spread of belief in a grave robbery or of the corresponding propaganda (Joh 20:2, 13, 15; Matt 27:62-66; 28:11-15). Or the visions at the tomb are discounted as "idle women's tales" (Luke 24:11).

The certainty that Christ is risen does not mean that he is present now in the same way that the pre-Easter Jesus was present in a particular location in space and time. Instead the whole fullness of his person and his life becomes present "in the Spirit and in faith." This presence in the Spirit and in faith is not something that makes sense to a naturalistic and scientific way of thinking. Therefore such thinking gets stuck over and over in the pro and con of physical revivification. This reduces faith to a mere subjective opinion and the Spirit to a numinous entity. By contrast, the fullness of Christ's person and life comes to powerful expression in the canonic memory of the community of witnesses. By means of its canonical, cultural, and historical weight, scripture can fulfill its task of serving to make the risen Christ richly present in canonic memory. In this process the historical-critical reconstruction of past reality--as interminable as it remains--is just as important as the recognition that the risen Christ is attended by complex historical futures, into which our existences and life stories are embedded. The risen Christ is not without his witnesses, not without his post-Easter body. Therefore, along with the indispensable historical-critical access to the biblical texts, the "literary approach" in biblical interpretation--now being imported into Europe from North America--and the socio-historical interpretation of scripture are both important. They are important in their attempt to correspond to scripture's theological, cultural, and ethos-shaping weight in making the risen Christ present.

One can not say, though, that we have even come anywhere near exhausting the creative interconnections between the various ways of approaching the biblical traditions. Under the programmatic formula of "biblical theology," some of us have been trying for a number of years now--primarily in German- and English-speaking contexts--to draw attention to the significance of the interdisciplinary theological work that can and must bring us forward on this path.

### III. What Does the Expression "Biblical Theology" Mean?

The expression "biblical theology" has also been repeatedly employed as an authority formula. According to a formulation of Gerhard Ebeling that has been cited over and over in the specialized literature, "biblical theology" is theology in accordance with the Bible, theology in accordance with scripture, or the theology contained in the Bible.<sup>14</sup> For good reasons both exegetical and systematic theologians have received this concept with great reserve, indeed with strong criticism. If "biblical theology" is to be understood as "theology" in the sense of (1) a comprehensively ramified nexus of thought and persuasion, or even a specific system, which (2) has been extracted from, or ultimately could be extracted from the Bible, then biblical theology is impossible. Biblical theology in this sense would contradict the multiplicity and vitality that we have emphasized of the biblical testimonies and traditions. It would also contradict the vitality of God's revelation, to which the various biblical traditions give testimony from their specific perspectives. The complex structure of the canon and the vitality of the canonic memory would be obscured by such a concept of biblical theology, whether this theology were regarded as immanent in the Bible or as "accruing" to the Bible from outside, so to speak. Karl Barth was right to insist that it is misguided to "abstract from the Bible some concealed historical or conceptual system, an economy of salvation or a Christian view of things. There can be no biblical theology in this sense, either of the Old or New Testament, or of the Bible as a whole."<sup>15</sup>

However, we need not understand "theology" as talk of God in a comprehensively ramified nexus of thought. We can also, in all humility, understand "theology" as talk of God that is accompanied by certainty and directed toward truth, and that (1) has substantial content, (2) possesses public intelligibility and consistency, and (3) is capable of being substantively developed.<sup>16</sup> However unprepossessing and fragmentary this theology might be, it serves to strengthen the certainty of faith in the development of knowledge of God. This is the theology we mean when we say that every Christian is called to do theology. The Bible is undoubtedly full of such theology, indeed it is permeated by such theology. The most diverse

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14 G. Ebeling, "The Meaning of 'Biblical Theology,'" in *idem*, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 79-97. For more detail on the following discussion, cf. M. Welker, "The Tasks of Biblical Theology and the Authority of Scripture," in Wallace Alston, ed., *Theology in the Service of the Church: Festschrift for Thomas Gillespie* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 232-241.

15 CD I/2, §§19-21, 483.

16 See Welker, "Theology in Public Discourse" 110-22.

theological efforts and enterprises could claim to be "biblical theology" in this basic sense, if they are merely somehow related to the Bible.

But upon closer examination, this use of the expression "biblical theology" proves to be counterproductive. There is no orientation to be gained from speaking of a theology that merely somehow refers to the Bible, or from making the trivial observation that the biblical texts are filled and permeated by theology or theologies in this basic sense. To speak of "biblical theology" in this sense is merely pretentious. Since all Christian theology claims to relate to the Bible in some way and to correspond to scripture in some sense, to speak here of "biblical theology" seems to do nothing more than to place an exclamation point behind this simple recognition. The expression "biblical theology" thus seems to place us before an unhappy alternative. Either "biblical theology"--in accordance with Ebeling's definition--propagates a notion of system and unity that is theologically and intellectually problematic.<sup>17</sup> Or it lends inappropriate emphasis to the obvious points that the biblical texts speak of God in a qualified way and that scripture, one way or another, is a source for Christian theology.

In spite of the problems I have named and in spite of the risk of being misunderstood as a pretentious assertion or as a theologically highly problematic authority formula, the expression "biblical theology" is emerging as an intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary concept of programmatic reform--especially in Germany and North America in the final third of the 20th century. Journals, academic publishing series, regular conferences, and interdisciplinary research projects use the phrase "biblical theology" as a label: *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (1971-); *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977-); *Biblich-Theologische Studien* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1977-); *Ex Auditu: An Annual of the Frederick Neumann Symposium on Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Princeton: 1985-); *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* (1986-); etc. What might this development signify?

As early as the 1920's and 30's, processes of differentiation were taking place within the exegetical disciplines, especially in the English-speaking world. Although many scholars gave absolute standing to the historical-critical work of the exegetical disciplines, others

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17 For critical perspectives, cf. J. D. Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," in idem, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 33-61; D. Ritschl, "'Wahre,' 'reine' oder 'neue' Biblische Theologie? Einige Anfragen zur neueren Diskussion um 'Biblische Theologie,'" *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 1 (1986): 135-150; B. Janowski, "The One God of the Two Testaments: Basic Questions of a Biblical Theology," *TT* 57 (2000) 297-324.

argued that "it divided the Bible into disjointed layers, it overemphasized the commonalities between the Bible and its cultural environment, it attached too much importance to the process of development, and it failed to meet the task of providing a truly theological interpretation of Holy Scripture."<sup>18</sup> This resistance and the effort to develop alternatives went under the heading of, among others, the programmatic reform formula "biblical theology." Beginning in the 1970's this programmatic reform concept was picked up by systematic theology. A variety of motives have contributed to this development. Certainly one of the motives has been the exemplary systematic-theological creativity of many exegetical contributions to the discussion. The waning influence of philosophy and the increasing emergence of an orientation in systematic theology shaped by cultural history and other cultural disciplines have also suggested an intensified process of taking orientation from the biblical traditions. Both the diminution of the binding power of confessional writings and the interest in theological bases for orientation that enjoy ecumenical breadth also need to be part of the calculation in making sense of this development. The same is true of the heightening suspicion that neo-Protestant and "postmodern" theologies, which systematically neglect a substantive connection with the biblical traditions and distort them under reductionistic forms of thought, provoke the self-secularization of churches in the Western industrial nations and contribute to the decline of religious educational formation.

Finally, the programmatic formula "biblical theology" is used to characterize nascent projects of interdisciplinary theological research and reflection. Here, however, one easily overlooks the fact that in the different theological disciplines this formula is connected with different governing conceptions and research intentions. At the same time, these different conceptions and intentions can certainly come to play complementary roles.

In the exegetical disciplines, "biblical theology" designates three enterprises in particular, namely:

- 1) to work against the disintegration of the discipline;
- 2) to reverse the tendencies toward self-secularization and transformation into research in the history of religions;
- 3) in the midst of the unmanageable abundance of detailed investigations of history generally

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18 J. Barr, "Biblische Theologie," *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon* (5 vols.; ed. Erwin Fahlbusch et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985-1997) I: 489.

and history of religions specifically, to pose the question of "the unity" and "the proprium" of the biblical traditions, even if this question is regarded as a regulative one that only admits of provisional answers.

In the disciplines of systematic and practical theology, the programmatic formula "biblical theology" is connected with the following three enterprises, among others:

- 1) to work toward theologically justifiable differentiations in critical engagement with reductionistic forms of theological reflection and with inadequate forms for thinking in a systematic-theological way;
- 2) to develop alternatives to specific systematic forms that primarily follow philosophical or other extra-theological rationalities and interests. This general category also includes attempts to develop alternatives to forms of religiosity that are marked by such extra-theological rationalities and interests;
- 3) to develop formulations for an ecumenical culture of difference that would enable us to understand the confessions as different ways of learning from scripture and would offer new possibilities for mutual ecumenical appreciation and enrichment.

This complementarity of exegetical and systematic orientations gives rise to important tasks of mutual correction and supplementation between the disciplines. Exegesis, with its historical-critical competence, must preserve systematics from moving too quickly to draw analogies or to participate in a "fusion of horizons." When the exegetes propose and employ concepts of "unity," proprium, and "center of scripture," systematic theology and church history have the task of testing these concepts to see whether they can carry the load required of them in the relevant contexts of contemporary thought and of the history of dogma. In recent decades we have gathered a number of experiences in critical engagement with themes of unity and integration, or with forms of thought designed to provide integration: the covenant, the mighty acts of God, atonement, Exodus and liberation--these were some of the proposals, the scope of whose validity had to be examined.

Modernistic thinking, which looks for the one continuum and the one principle that synthesizes everything, could see nothing but lost battles in the propagation of these diverse proposals. By contrast, a biblical theology can recognize a treasure in these experiences of the limited capacity of themes of integration and formulae of unity. The different central

themes can expose, to a varying extent, the powers of connection in the pluralism of the canonical traditions. While it is certainly legitimate to strive for the greatest scope and extent possible, what is of greatest significance is precisely the specific and limited multiplicity of canonically broadly-supported thematic entrées into the biblical traditions. This multiplicity is of the utmost relevance in environments that are rightly termed "pluralistic."

#### **IV. The Authority of Scripture in Pluralistic Environments**

One of the greatest cultural problems of our times consists in the fact that pluralistic cultures and societies have no clear conception of their internal constitution. Pluralistic cultures and societies notoriously confuse the constitution of pluralism with a diffuse plurality of individuals, lifestyles, groups, and institutional arrangements. In view of this diffuse plurality, some people rightly fear relativism, the threat of chaos, or the collapse of commonality and social connectivity. Others concoct conceptions, mostly illusory, of the infinite abundance of possibilities offered by this plurality. Still others call for authoritarian countermeasures against this chaos. Or they put their hope in liberal forms of integration, as expressed in the statement: We need this or that minimum commonality in order to get out of this mess. All these viewpoints have one thing in common: They haven't understood a thing about pluralism. Pluralism does not simply bring with it disconnectedness, relativism, individualism, etc., although these phenomena do occur in pluralistic environments. Rather, pluralism creates and cultivates multi-systemic forms which, although they indeed develop great connective powers, do not develop the one socially and culturally unitary and unitive power. However, the various connective powers--those of the market, the media, education, politics, law, religion, etc.--are relevant to the entire society and the culture as a whole. A specific multiplicity of systemic forms, which can not be reduced to one single formula or one law, are necessary for the guidance and the welfare of "the whole."

In pluralistic contexts, a multiplicity of groups and associations attempt to influence this multi-systemic structure. We use the term "civil society" to denominate the numerous groups and associations that seek to influence, to stabilize or to destabilize, to connect more strongly or to separate more strongly the systemic forms of society such as law, education, and politics. Real pluralism brings a high degree of freedom and efficiency. But is also brings heavy burdens for persons who must live with increasing conflicts of interest, with tensions between

their normative connections, and with fissures in their identity. These situations do not call for simplistic solutions proposed from a supposed position of global overview. Instead they call for differentiated aids to orientation that are able to speak in ways materially appropriate to the diverse contexts. The family has expectations for orientation that differ from those of politics, education has different expectations than the market, law has different expectations than the media, and so on and so forth.

The multi-contextual and pluralistic constitution of the biblical canon enables it to respond in a differentiated way to diverse contexts, rationalities, and thematic clusters. At the same time the canonical webs of reference make it possible to establish subtle transitions and links between pluralistic contexts. Once a serious, specific, systematic connection is established--be it analogies in ways of posing questions or in pursuing an inquiry, or be it systematic contrasts or alternative visions between contemporary contexts and biblical ones--as a rule the results are extremely fruitful and instructive interdisciplinary constellations.<sup>19</sup> This method admittedly requires somewhat more loving care and effort than do attempts to find a religious formula which, by either authoritarian or liberal strategies of integration, is supposed to fit anything and everything. But to be precise, this method does not require more loving care and effort than we expect from the pastoral creativity which, whether in preaching or in pastoral care or in teaching, interprets specific canonical texts for a specific situation, or locates a specific situation in the analogous imaginative domain of a canonic context.

The great task for academic theology today is to elaborate in a serious way specific models and typical bridge locations that allow the establishment of fruitful relations between, on the

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19 Here I name only four of the interdisciplinary projects in which we have had very encouraging experiences in the last several years:

1) the dialogue between theology and natural science, including exegetes and specialists in cultural disciplines, especially at a series of consultations on eschatological themes at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton. See Polkinghorne and Welker, eds., *The End of the World and the Ends of God* (see n. 10); cf. M. Welker, "Springing Cultural Traps: What the Science-Theology Discourse on Eschatology Does for the Common Good," *TT* 58 (2001) 165-76;

2) the dialogue between theology and economics: a research project in Chicago and Heidelberg, under the general theme of "Property and Possession," which focused on the symbols and rationalities of acquiring, having, and losing in economic and religious contexts (note that a volume entitled *Property and Possession*, edited by William Schweiker, is forthcoming);

3) discussions involving theology, morality, and law: several events have occurred in connection with the Heidelberg graduate colloquium on "Religion and Normativity;" among the resulting publications is Jan Assmann, Bernd Janowski, and Michael Welker, eds., *Gerechtigkeit: Richten und Retten in der abendländischen Tradition und ihren altorientalischen Ursprüngen* (Munich: Fink, 1998).

4) a number of interdisciplinary gatherings on the thematic complex of anthropology, person, and dignity: see e.g. my introduction to *EvT* 60 (2000) 4-8; N. H. Gregersen, W. B. Drees, and U. Görman, eds., *The Human Person in Science and Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000) 95-114.

one hand, the pluralistic canonical traditions and and, on the other hand, the orientation profiles and the typical needs for orientation in societal and cultural pluralism. In recent years we have had encouraging experiences in various contexts. We have also run up against devastating generalistic tendencies which refuse to engage in this work and which--for example in the curricula of religious instruction in German schools--even contribute to the systematic distortion of what the biblical traditions have to say.<sup>20</sup> But what is a serious, specific, systematic relationship between canonical traditions and contexts of contemporary life?

To answer this question, we urgently need a cultural reorientation and a reorientation in educational politics. We need a new orientation that dispenses with fear of difference and of polycontextual and multi-systemic constellations. We need a new orientation that does not regard the search for the master switch or the "one size fits all" formula as the ideal solution to our quests for orientation. Instead we must learn to relate systemic differences to systemic differences. What does this mean?

The mere observation of thematic analogies, similar questions, and presumably similar figures of thought in canonical, historical, and contemporary contexts by no means suffices to meet theology's task. If we wish to go beyond a naive biblicism that tolerates a high degree of arbitrary associations, we must reconstruct analogous or contrary systemic differences in canonical, historical, and contemporary contexts. This means that a theme, a unit of content, a figure of thought, or a theoretical or practical problem is perceived in at least two different canonical contexts, or historical contexts that stand in relation to the canon. Why is it treated differently in context A than in context B? How do we evaluate this difference? What do we learn from it? We then relate this difference to an analogous difference in at least two contemporary contexts. In this way we can draw relations between presumed processes of development or decline that are instructive for each other. The challenge is to think not a simple continuity, but a threefold discontinuity. For example, it is senseless to want to "decide" a difference in the history of dogma or a contemporary theological question by appealing to one particular content of the biblical traditions. Different people center and select differently, and arrive at different results. The outcome is an indifferent juxtaposition of the various results. By contrast, if we can use at least two interfaces to mark differences

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20 See Heinz Schmidt and Hartmut Rupp, eds., *Lebensorientierung oder Verharmlosung? Die Lehrplanentwicklung des Religionsunterrichts in theologischer Kritik* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 2000).



and developments, the contexts begin to "talk" with each other and to set limits to the arbitrary drawing of relationships.

In concentrations of this kind--concentrations that are multi-systemic and sensitive to difference--the biblical traditions with their great historical, cultural, canonical, and theological weight can have an orienting effect. The finely-meshed interweaving of such concentrations prevents the process of making connections with the tremendous wealth of canonical traditions from becoming diffuse, disintegrated, and trivial. A theological endeavor that pays attention to themes, contexts, and rationalities must be focused by concentrations that are multi-systemic and sensitive to difference as it continually returns to the biblical traditions with new questions about the specific historical and cultural thematic possibilities for making connections between the biblical traditions and pluralistic contexts of both yesterday and today. The theological endeavor must learn to distinguish processes of convergence and processes of differentiation both historically and systematically. Rationally and thematically finely-meshed accounts, on the one hand, and challenges to counteract reductionistic developments, on the other hand, must be distinguished from each other, and must be justified with regard to their object and to the problem at issue.

In this development we must rediscover the great significance of faith's knowledge and of spiritual and theological formation. We must also learn to attach new value to the power and dignity of testimony or witness. Witnesses's individual search for certainty and their communal search for truth are believable and trustworthy precisely because they can regard the perspectival and fragmentary nature of their knowledge and their contribution with untroubled respect.<sup>21</sup> They can live with the consciousness: This is my contribution, this is our contribution to the search for knowledge of God and of truth. They can do so because they place themselves in canonical and ecumenical contexts that invite, encourage, and challenge them to respect the pluralistic constitution of these contexts, while remaining steadfast in opposition to relativism. The goal and the standard is not the search for final certainty, but the examination, growing completeness, development, justification, and--as need be--correction of certainty in the search for truth.<sup>22</sup>

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21 For a recent attempt to do Old Testament Theology under the guiding rubric of "witness," see Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

22 I thank John Hoffmeyer for translating this essay.

Author's note: Since 1988, I have had the joy of being in dialogue with Patrick D. Miller on many topics and questions regarding the interface between systematic and biblical theology. His insights have had major shaping effects on my theological thinking (see, e.g., my book *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 125-26, n. 23) and on the work of several of my doctoral students. I have enjoyed out cooperation in various international and interdisciplinary research projects and have greatly appreciated his invitations to enter into interdisciplinary dialogue with young scholars in his doctoral seminars.