Theology Update

CONTEMPORARY OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY: A CONTEXTUAL PROSPECTUS

By Walter Brueggemann

White folks call their experience "tradition";
they call our tradition "experience."
—Will Coleman

I wish to reflect upon recent developments in Old Testament theology in context at the end of the century, of course paying some attention to my own efforts at the project. Old Testament theology is, in principle, problematic because the text itself is not intentionally "theological" in any recognizable or conventional sense, and because those of us who work at it, characteristically Christian, are inevitably caught and pulled (either attracted or repelled) between the immense, undeniable diversity of the texts themselves, and the consolidating claims of theology that are habitual, or between the pulls of a history-of-religions approach and what has come to be called a "canonical" approach that reads by the "Rule of Faith." In my judgment, moreover, no more than a provisional settlement of these matters is ever possible, because these pulls and tensions are inherent in the task even as they are intrinsic to the material itself. Thus all our proposals might properly have a modesty about them because having finished, we must always begin again.

The 1970s: Unraveling the Previous Historical Synthesis

It is well known that Old Testament theology reached a more-or-less stable point in the mid-twentieth century with the great accomplishments of Walther Eichrodt in the 1930s and Gerhard von Rad in the 1950s, with G. Ernest Wright being the most dominant and influential interpretive voice in the critical context of the United States.[1] The gains of these more-or-less synthetic achievements are immense; they provide a base-line for all subsequent work, though the problematic character of their accomplishments becomes increasingly evident at a distance.

In retrospect it is now clear that the synthesis, which seemed so settled, had by 1970 already begin to unravel. Inside the field, we can notice the emergence of a "theology of blessing" by Claus Westermann, a recovery of wisdom as a theological datum by von Rad himself and H. H. Schmid, and a drastic recharacterization of the subtle relationship between the Bible and the Ancient Near East, especially by Frank Moore Cross.[2] All of these interpretive moves together made the single line of "God's Mighty Deeds in History"—focused as it was on Israel's historical-theological distinctiveness—less and less compelling as a reference point for theological interpretation.

These interpretive moves were matched, by the 1970s, by a larger changing interpretive context. Inside the interpretive community of Old Testament study, there was within the decade an explosion of a new pluralism of perspectives and methods, soon followed by quite distinct communities of interpretation reflective of new vested interests, new self-consciousness, and

[1]See my summary review, Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 15-38. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961, 1967); Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 volumes; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962, 1965); G. Ernest Wright, *The Challenge of Israel's Faith* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1944), *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* (SBT 2; London: SCM, 1950), *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (SBT 8; London: SCM, 1952).

[2]See my review of these developments, Walter Brueggemann, "The Loss and Recovery of Creation in Old Testament Theology," *Theology Today* 53 (July, 1996) 177-90.

Walter Brueggemann is a U.C.C. pastor and Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. He serves on the editorial councils of *Journal of Biblical Literature*, *Interpretation*, *Theology Today*, and others. He is author of widely read commentaries and books such as *Isaiah 40-46* (Westminster/John Knox, 1998) and *Theology of the Old Testament* (Fortress, 1997). This "Theology Update" is a revised version of his address on November 21, 1998 to the Augsburg/Fortress breakfast at the AAR/SBL Annual Meeting in Orlando, Florida.

new methods. The newness included, of course, feminist perspectives and a host of liberationist approaches that refused any longer to submit to the old dominant patterns of interpretation.

One outcome, it cannot be doubted, was the loss of a long-established coherence in the field, the loss of a pattern of hegemonic interpretation that trickled down from oracular centers of scholarly authority. New approaches have focused upon *contextualism*[2a] (especially social sciences and especially sociology) and *imaginative construal* (especially literary and rhetorical criticism), all of which exposed old claims of "objectivity" to be less than persuasive, that is, a general rejection of what had been taken as "the established givens" of the field. Within a decade it became unmistakably clear that what had passed for "objectivity" was mostly unchallenged, monolithic dominance that appealed to the "historical" as a basis of "proof."[3] The newer approaches are largely unimpressed by such "historical appeals," holding in various ways that "historical" is an interpretive construal driven by and filtered through an angle of vision.[4] Indeed, the newer perspectives will not accept that there is any angle of vision that is not in some way also an angle of interest.

This deep change within the discipline is matched by a deeply changed interpretive world all around, to which the scholarly field itself is not immune. In the United States, the enduring conflicts over Civil Rights, Viet Nam, and Watergate—matched by the student revolts in Paris in 1968 and the Democratic convention in this country in Chicago—created a new climate of both rage and hope, a resolve not to settle for old answers or even old definitions of problems and surely not old offers of what is possible.[5]

It is my judgment that all of this collage of events and emergences has generated new interpretive options and possibilities that are irreversible; it matters very little in my judgment whether this is a gain or a loss. Whether it is gain or loss tends to be adjudged by whether the newness is a loss of old influence (in which case it is bad and lamentable), or if the newness is the coming of interpretive power and influence never held before (in which case it is good). Either way, it is where we are and where we are likely to be for the foreseeable future or, as I would say, where God has now put us, and where we are called to be faithful, responsible theological interpreters.

One Text for Both Jews and Christians

As we might anticipate, the shattering of hegemonic interpretive categories in the 1970s created a great deal of confusion and bewilderment in the field, well into the 1980s, through which time Old Testament studies were finding their way in quite fresh paths. One can only begin to see, in the 1990s, something of the new shape of the discipline. While we may speak more generally about Old Testament studies with the dislodging of the preeminence of the "historical paradigm," here I want to speak specifically about Old Testament theology, and it will be evident to you that I have no warrant as a disinterested observer.[6]

I should like to suggest that the most difficult and interesting issue in the new discussion is the relation between *Old Testament attestations for God*, i.e., "God talk" (*theos-logos* in the most simple and direct sense) and the more or less strong claims of the dominant *theological tradition*. Note well that in focusing upon *Bible* and *tradition* (by which I mean more or less settled and strong interpretive habits and categories), I am setting the issue as though it were a specifically Christian enterprise and, moreover, that the *Christian* enterprise is deeply linked to *classical* theological perspective. The twin notions that Old Testament theology has indeed focused on *Christian faith* in *classical formulation* constitute a truth that is also, at the same time, a key problem (as we shall see).

[2a]Here I refer primarily to the *context* of text. But one must also attend to the *context* of the reader. The study of *social location* is an indispensable matter; attentiveness to social location, by way of social scientific methods, greatly illuminates why we now have such widely variant readings of texts that eschew any claim of any hegemonic reading, either in the name of "critical objectivity" or in the name of "canon."

[3]See a critical reflection on the work of William F. Albright who championed such an approach by Burke O. Long, *Planting and Reading: Politics, Ideology, and Interpreting the Bible* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, 1997).

[4]In any mode beyond sheer positivism, it is clear that "historical" is a rhetorical mediation of what is remembered. See especially Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse & Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1987).

[5]It is telling that in what is one of the most important books for new perspectives in interpretation, Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979) freely acknowledges that it was the matrix of the free speech movement in Berkeley that was immediate context for his ground-breaking study. This contextualization is a powerful example of the new awareness of connections between textual work and context.

[6]See my review comments in *Theology of the Old Testament* 42-60.

I digress only long enough to acknowledge the double problematic. First it is, in my judgment, surely not possible to accept uncritically Old Testament theology as a Christian project to the exclusion of Jewish faith and Jewish interpretation, both because the book is deeply Jewish and because of the deep moral failure of this stance throughout the twentieth century.[7] This is a major test point for the work to be done in the field.

Second, insofar as Old Testament theology is Christian, it is still deeply problematic to assume uncritically that the text leads directly to or can be delivered innocently for the classical formulations of Chalcedon, i.e., trinitarian and incarnational claims. It may be that those linkages can be voiced afresh, but we must recognize that such linkages are not easy or obvious, and surely must be dealt with in an awareness of their contested quality.[8]

The Felt Crisis

Having acknowledged these problematics, I will now return to the relation of the Old Testament text as theological voice and the difficulty of Christian, classical formulation. I will identify what I think are now three major perspectives on this issue of text and interpretation. In each case, I shall suggest that it is the *felt crisis* of interpretation that shapes the perspective, a crisis in religious claims, but more deeply felt than thought. I suggest that it is in each case *felt* crisis, precisely because in each case the argument receives passion and polemical tone that are well beyond what we might expect in a reasoned dispute.

I am aware that in setting up the problem in this way, I am insisting that each perspective is deeply contextual, including those positions that seek "high ground" and assert a truth beyond context. I believe that our theological work always and everywhere is *situated* work, and we do an honest and useful thing if we ourselves know how context shapes our sense of the question.

Position One: Minimalizing History and Theology

The first position I shall cite in a broad sketch of Old Testament theology is sometimes called "minimalist" and is perhaps not even intended as an argument in Old Testament theology. I cite Robert Carroll, a distinguished scholar at the University of Glasgow, as a representative figure of this perspective.[9] Carroll stands with a group of scholars, some Scandinavian and many British, who regard the classical interpretation of Old Testament directly toward Christian theology as *an authoritarian imposition* upon the text that itself makes no such claims at all. Indeed, it is argued variously that the text makes no such theological claims, or if it does, those claims are ludicrous and defy any modern credulity. Thus the felt crisis is one of authoritarian domination and imposition that is to be resisted by the identification of ideology in the text that is imposed belief as a form of social control that is characteristically patriarchal.

The closer strategies of this perspective are two. First, *critique of ideology* is a major enterprise that tends toward a Marxian direction of "distortion for the sake of control."[10] On occasion "ideology" is treated, as would Clifford Geertz, as a synonym for "theology," i.e., any large claim of meaning; but most often in this perspective the notion of willful *distortion* is at hand.[11] The second strategy is to date all texts as late as possible on critical grounds, so that the argument becomes an historical one, showing that any historical reliability as trustworthy reportage on events is impossible.[12]

[7]See Jon D. Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 33-61.

[8]See the critical assessment of the classical tradition by R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

[9]Robert P. Carroll continues to produce an important corpus of scholarly material. What became his programmatic statement of the crisis of fideism is *Jeremiah* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986). His most frontal assertion of the issues is *Wolf in the Sheep Fold: The Bible as a Problem for Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1991).

[10]On the work of ideology critique, see David Penchansky, *The Betrayal of God: Ideological Conflict in Job* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990). With more subtlety, see Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997).

[11]Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 193-233. See Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (ed. by George H. Taylor; New York: Columbia University, 1986), and Michele Barrett, *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1991).

[12]See, for example John van Seters, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus-Numbers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), and Thomas L. Thompson, *The Bible and History* (forthcoming). Attention should be paid to the work of Philip Davies, Niels Pater Lemche, and Keith W. Whitelam.

In what I regard as a rather simplistic assumption, it is apparently thought to be the case that the undermining of historical reliability is a way of denying theological validity, a connection about which serous questions must be raised. (It has been recently suggested, moreover, that the historical minimalization of Old Testament tradition also has a consequence—intended or not?—of undermining the theological claims to the land that are central to the self-perception of modern Israeli Zionism.)

It is the practice of this perspective to "read against the grain of the text," which characteristically means to resist the assertion of Israel's normative faith tradition made in the text. Given a felt crisis of authoritarian imposition and a yearning for relief and freedom from that imposition, it is not difficult to see why such an argument is made; though it needs to be observed that "against *this* grain" requires a reading with some "*other* grain," here most often an uncritical modern Enlightenment rationalism in which familiar faith claims are in principle denied.

It is evident that this perception will not take us very far in Old Testament theology, nor does it intend to do so. It is nonetheless an important voice in the conversation, skeptical as it is, for it keeps cautioning against every easy fideism that is often simply an inherited reflex. It warns, moreover, against building hypothesis upon hypothesis that often are no more than repeated slogans. This view reflects the stringent honesty championed by the best of "modernism" and its appeals to the historical.[13] In the end, the *felt crisis* must be heard and honored, that the classical tradition has indeed been imposed in dishonest ways to the great hurt of those victimized by such hegemony. The hurt is a voice that belongs to the future conversation.

Position Two: The Canonical Reading

The second position I shall identity, of singular importance, is the "canonical," most often identified with Brevard Childs, who is surely the most important figure in the recovery and redefinition of Old Testament theology in the 1990s. Childs has offered a series of books in the last twenty-five years that stand in continuity with each other, but that keep advancing the argument in crucial ways.[14] His work is complex and erudite, and it is impossible to do justice to its importance here. I will focus briefly, first, on what I take to be his major critical position, and, second, on his major constructive proposal.

In his first summons to rethink biblical theology, in 1970, Childs raised the alarm against historical criticism as an inadequate lens through which to do theological interpretation. Since that time, Childs, as much as anyone, has kept raising this difficult question. On the one hand he observes, as anyone can see, that historical criticism of a certain kind is *fragmenting*, so that the text tends to dissolve into bits and pieces without any sustained, coherent claim.[15]

In response to such fragmentation, Childs insists that there is a theological coherence to the "final form of the text" that must be sustained and focused upon, without excessive preoccupation with the prehistory of the text. A more subtle argument he makes is the insistence that the text cannot finally be assessed by an appeal to "history" behind the text, as though the text must concur with history, even if that could be rightly reconstructed. Rather, the proper venue for adjudication and interpretation is the *larger context of the canon within the text* and not by any appeal outside the text to historical events. It is this issue that has put Childs most consistently at odds with his own great German mentors, all of whom were schooled in historical reference.

In Childs' hands, the text stands to itself and for itself and by itself, neither measured by nor subject to any external norm. This is what he means when he uses the telling definer "as scripture."[16] Childs thereby wants to

[13]In using the term "modernism" I do so only as a convenient reference point and way of making contrasts. I intend no special content and certainly no notion of the periodization of intellectual history. I take "modernism" to mean the kind of intellectual revolution linked to Descartes against the hegemonic authority of church interpretation.

[14]Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), *Exodus: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

[15]Childs has received powerful and compelling support from Jon D. Levenson, "The Eighth Principle of Judaism and the Literary Simultaneity of Scripture," *The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*, 62-81.

[16]Childs articulates a notion of scripture as a more-or-less contained entity to itself that is in general reflected in the "Yale School." That enterprise has received serious and subtle critique from Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

free the text from context, so that the text is not in any way context-determined.

The constructive move he has made more recently is that the Old Testament must be read according to the "Rule of Faith." By this he means, I take it, the doctrinal coherence of the early church already voiced by Irenaeus but formulated in the great trinitarian-incarnational articulations of the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon.[17] That is, Childs now proposes that the text should be a servant and echo of the normative, canonical, orthodox teaching of the church.

It appears to me that Childs has taken a move that is not unlike the Council of Trent in that it is the tradition that dictates what the text may and must mean. In his very great book, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, Childs' dictum is that the two testaments are "two witnesses" to Jesus Christ.[18] Thus the Bible, of course including the Old Testament, is now fully encompassed in the formulations of doctrine, so that in broad outline one knows beforehand the "plain sense" of the text.

It appears to me that Childs' felt crisis, in the end, is the *loss of the stability, fixity, coherence, and reliability of a tradition that witnesses to a single, reliable truth.* That is, Childs' "evangelical agenda" is that the Bible should show forth a gospel assurance of the truth claims of the faith. There is no doubt that he has seen that the fragmentation of historical criticism, along with the hermeneutical fragmentation of emerging communities of interpretation, have contributed to the fragmented meaning of the text, so that the text has no single, reliable, clear, sure theological focus. In part his resistance is to *historical criticism*, but his earlier polemics indicate that he also sees *pluralistic hermeneutics* as a threat, in one informal place terming it "neo-Gnostic." And therefore he proposes to retreat, to return to a time before the entire modern period of criticism (and, we may extrapolate, the post-modern movement of fragmented interpretation) to a "pre-modern" perspective. He appeals to the great claims of the Reformation and to the powerful patristic claims of the "Rule of Faith" as the keys to interpretation.[19]

My own sense of Childs' work, great as it is, is that it has not solved the problem that his program requires. He has made powerful appeal to the early, pre-modern theological interpretation of the church to good effect.[20] There are, however, two difficulties with this presentation.

First, his own presentation is bifurcated, whereby he presents "the discrete witness of the Old Testament" (95-207) and then proceeds to "the discrete witness of the New Testament" (209-322), and finally to "Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible" (319-716). Clearly Childs is a powerful expositor. The problem he faces (and that we all face) is that we are given no clear clue about the interrelation of these parts to each other, so that they must sit there side by side. Childs finally defers to the "Rule of Faith," but does not tell us what happens to his powerful readings that fall alongside the Rule of Faith but are not comprehended in it. Of course there are responses to be made to this query, but none that I find adequate.

Second, while Childs allows that the entire modern period of critical interpretation was a negative turn, it is simply not possible, in my judgment, to write it off and to proceed as though the "critical period" has not decisively happened among us. Indeed, the critical period has offered immense and irreversible gains, to which Childs himself has contributed. But the real issue is that reading communities, including canonical reading communities, live in history and are not outside history with a flat, absolute reading of the text. As Childs himself had earlier insisted, each reading stands in the presence of previous readings and that includes modern, critical readings.[21] Whatever may come next in theological interpretation must take into account the entire

[17]Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 67 and *passim*. The point has been strenuously elaborated upon in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

[18]The thesis is pervasive in the book. See, for example, p. 91: "...the specific characteristic of the canonical shaping of the two testaments into one Christian Bible lay in the preservation of two distinct witnesses to a common subject matter who is Jesus Christ."

[19]On the use of the term "pre-modern," my comments on vocabulary in n.13 pertain.

[20]*Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 30-51.

[21]Especially, Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974). The entire matter of the relationship of theological interpretation to historical criticism is vexed and complex. Gerhard Ebeling, "The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Protestantism," *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) has considered the matter and urges a radical historicality in our undertakings:

> ...Christianity, I say, is for all that not a phenomenon that abides always identical and unchanged, but it exists in history, i.e., it is subject to the march of time. It can never simply remain precisely the same as it was at the start; for then it would not exist in history at all. (37)

Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 6-9, makes a critical response to Ebeling but seems, in my judgment, to withdraw from Ebeling's radical historicality, seeking to find standing ground that is not so vulnerable to the pressures of the historical. But then that is the very point at issue.

course of interpretation that includes the modern period. This is the crucial difference between postmodernism, which is a working through and a working out of modernity, and those approaches that attempt to deny modernity.[22]

While Childs is the most vigorous champion of an approach that reads the Old Testament directly toward the New Testament, toward Jesus, and toward classical Christian formulation, I wish also to mention two important books by Francis Watson, University of London.[23] In his earlier book (1994), Watson takes up the claims of context in terms of autonomous texts, postmodernity, and feminist critique. His assessment is fair-minded, even if much more conservative than I would make it. His conclusion is that the Bible must be read as speaking about *reality*, resisting what he sees as the soft tentativeness of post-modern reading, and making direct appeal to the theological truth of the text.

In his more recent book (1997), Watson takes up the hermeneutical projects of the nineteenth century, as well as Eichrodt, von Rad, and Childs, all of whom are found wanting. He concludes with a powerful theological exposition that he intends to be christological (not *christomonistic*).[24] It seems evident that Watson—like Childs, whom he finds too weak on these points—intends to resist autonomous, rationalistic exegesis and insist that proper reading asserts that "Christian faith, in a more or less definite form, actually has a right to exist."[25] While I fear the potential of reductionism in Watson, it is clear that he is an urbane and subtle reader who knows about these dangers and addresses them with theological sophistication. I suppose that with Watson it depends upon how stringently a "christological reading" is applied, whether room is given to the playful, elusive texture of the text in its God-speech. Watson, in my judgment, is more insistent than is Childs, but he has a much more sophisticated hermeneutical awareness that may protect from the very reductionism he seems to champion.

The outcome of what in Childs' hands is "pre-modern" is a Bible completely in the service of classical Christian formulation. It does yield *stability, coherence, and reliability*, but I find this a very one-sided proposal. At the same time, however, the *fragmentation* of the western world and the apparent collapse of reliable metanarrative do produce anxiety and a hunger for coherence. This sort of program seems fundamentally a yearning for the way it used to be. But it is a *felt crisis*, and therefore it is one that belongs properly to the discussion.

Position Three: Post-Modern Interpretations

The third perspective I wish to discuss is difficult for me to characterize specifically, partly because I identify with it and partly because it is much more diffuse in its articulation and less easily summarized. If not taken too narrowly, it can be termed "post-modern," by which I mean that the texts deliver no settled package of certitudes and assurances, but yield only traces and fragments and hints of an elusive kind that can be brought together in more than one credible coherence, but with no single credible coherence that is everywhere compelling.[26]

This perspective features interpretation "from below," admittedly contextual, and preoccupied with real questions of power, truth, control, and justice, factors that in any case always do impinge upon our reading. Socially and politically, this perspective would include liberationists of many kinds. Methodologically it pays attention to narrative, rhetoric, metaphor, and imagination, insisting that the readings are not *given* in the text so much as they are evoked and received by readers attentive to the text in concrete circumstance. The hermeneutical warrant for this perspective is a dialogical one in which texts arrive at ever new disclosures when they must meet, address, and respond to evocative and particular contexts.[27]

This means that there is no single reading but a multiplicity of readings that withstand every absolutizing and every imposition of dominant or hegemonic category. This does not mean, however, that such readings

[22]Ebeling, "The Significance of the Critical Historical Method," 59, concludes:

> Systematic theology must therefore be required not only to respect the results of critical historical research—even on that point there is still much to be desired—but also to take up fully and completely into its own approach the outlook of the critical historical method. (59)

Given Childs' approach, we are clearly not finished with these issues.

[23]Francis Watson, *Text Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

[24]Watson, *Text and Truth*, 14.

[25]Ibid., vii.

[26]I use the term "post-modern" with the same diffidence as my earlier uses of "pre-modern" and "modern"; see nn. 13, 19.

[27]Notice that the formidable final section of Watson, *Truth and Text*, 305-25, is headed, "Scripture in Dialogue: A Study in Early Christian Old Testament Interpretation."

need be "autonomous" or outside the scope of serious theological (even Christian) discourse. It means that the scope of such an interpretive community allows great freedom both because of the freedom-insisting requirement of the Subject and because of the work of the Spirit who reads with us in a spirit of freedom.

The felt need that can be identified in this perspective is that the text must be respected in all its *radical unfamiliarity*. It is Another in our midst who addresses us from outside our usual presuppositions. One can make a theological case for otherness by claiming that this text is inhabited by Another, unlike either our familiar creedal formulations or our rational modes of control. But if the appeal to the direct theological Agent is too much, one can argue that rhetorically and literarily this strange text speaks outside of our expectations—elusively and with polyvalence—yielding a Subject who is endlessly irascible.

This approach, then, yields fragments, hints, and traces of a dialogical kind, but it does not add up to a single claim. This claim of unfamiliarity that bespeaks Holy Otherness is illuminated in important ways, in my judgment, by Karl Barth's *Ganz Anders*, Buber's "Thou," and especially now with Emmanuel Levinas' *alterity*, whereby reducing text (or God) to Sameness is a killer strategy that denies holiness and eliminates human possibility.[28]

In this connection, I especially want to call attention to a remarkable book by Wesley Kort of Duke University,[29] which articulates a post-modern perspective on reading the Bible. Though put in a very different frame of reference, Kort's book provides an interesting and I think important challenge to the way of Childs and Watson. It is Kort's insistence that a canonical text is not only designed to lend support to settled, institutional conviction, but that it also "constrains, inhibits, creates fear, and sets limits."[30] That is, he is interested in the dynamic processes by which scripture constructs and defeats stable worlds of meaning for canonical communities.

He especially appeals to John Calvin, who forged new ways of reading from a combination of monastic practice, new learning from Paris, and the hermeneutics of Nicholas of Lyra. I wish to call attention to two accents Kort makes from Calvin. First, scripture reading always entails two moments: "the centripetal" (which Ricoeur might term "retrieval"), but also "the centrifugal" which "involves and requires above all divestment and dislocation."[31]

> A negative relation arises between the reader's world and self and the saving knowledge of God available only in and by reading Scripture, because the saving knowledge of God is not added to otherwise acquired knowledge of God but, rather, other knowledge of God now needs to be reconstituted in light of knowledge granted in and through centripetal reading. And this displacement and reconstitution is a part of reading Scripture every time it occurs. The act of reading centripetally is inseparable from a willingness to let go of everything else, including the self, and to count all that overwise might be thought of as good as a potential obstacle, substitute, or diversion.[32]

Second, this leads Kort to observe that Calvin knows all about the challenging deconstructive work of scripture and precisely concerning the authority claims of the church, (perhaps even the "Rule of Faith"). Calvin writes, as cited by Kort:

> But a most pernicious error widely prevails that Scripture has only so much weight as is conceded to it by the consent of the church. As if the eternal and inviolable truth of God depended upon the decision of men! For they mock the Holy Spirit when they ask: Who can convince us that these writings came from God? Who can assure us that Scripture has come down whole and intact even to our very day? Who can persuade us to receive one book in reverence but to exclude another, unless the church prescribe a sure rule for all these matters? What reverence is due Scripture and what books ought to be reckoned within its canon depend, they say, upon the determination of the church. Thus these sacrilegious men, wishing to impose an unbridled tyranny under the cover of the church, do not care with what absurdities they ensnare themselves and others, provided they can force this one idea upon the simple-minded: that the church has authority in all things.[33]

[28]In each case, one may move from the huge theological claim to a comment on the peculiar character of scripture. See Karl Barth, "The Strange New World Within the Bible," *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (translated by Douglas Horton; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957) 28-50; Martin Buber, "The Man of Today and the Jewish Bible," *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies* (ed. by Nahum N. Glatzer; New York: Schocken, 1968) 1-13. On these, see Walter Brueggemann, "Biblical Authority in the Post-Critical Period," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. 5, O-Sh* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1049-1056. In the magisterial study of Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), the linkage to the Bible is not as direct and explicit, except that the principle of *alterity* is completely defining and certainly includes the unfamiliarity of the founding texts of Judaism.

[29]Wesley A. Kort, *"Take, Read": Scripture, Textuality and Cultural Practice* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University, 1996).

[30]Ibid., 5.

[31]Ibid., 28.

[32]Ibid., 28-29.

[33]John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (The Library of Christian Classics XX; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) I VII 1, 75.

Kort focuses upon the "as if" (*sicut*) of Calvin:

> Hence the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, *as if* there the living words of God were heard.[34]

It is this "as if" that moves against every certitude and every settlement, insisting always upon divestment and dislocation. That is, the text reads, as is needed, against the certitudes of the church.[35]

After a sampling of the post-modern perspectives of Maurice Blanchot and Julia Kristeva, Kort draws a conclusion:

> But reading the Bible as scripture involves first of all movement away from self and world and toward their divestment and abjection. In centripetal reading the coherences and identities of the reader and the reader's situation are dissolved, and biblical coherences and identities, rather than being appropriated, are followed as indicators of an exit and then bypassed on the way to it. The reader accompanies biblical characters who leave the security of their homes and venture into forbidding uncertainties; the reader "walks," as Calvin liked to say, with the patriarchs away from cultural identities and locations or, like Job, past the theological certainties of culture's representatives in order to stand divested even of the questions that subvert the adequacy of biblical theologies. Biblical locations, plots, characters, and theological themes, when taken as directives toward this kind of reading, are invaluable and authoritative because they clarify the act of divestment and abjection, of departure and exit, and because they ask to be left behind. Centripetal reading is a process that leads to the divestment not only of one's world and sense of self but of biblical worlds and identities as well. It is a matter of accompanying and then going on alone.[36]

While I do not fully understand everything Kort has written, the primary point based on Calvin is that the Bible does not serve as an absolute "Rule of Faith." Rather, the Bible is itself still open beyond all settled assurances in Unfamiliarity, a deep, radical "Otherwise" who summons to live and toward death enroute.

Of course I do not intend, out of such an argument, to sanction or approve everything done in the name of what is called post-modern. But I think that Kort has seen in Calvin—against much of Calvinism—a genuinely emancipatory, demanding word in scripture that is indeed Holy Address, the outcomes of which are not fully known ahead of time.

There are huge problems with such a fragmented approach that lacks visible coherence. But the need for *the Unfamiliar* is a deeply *felt crisis*, because the familiar has come to be known in some circles as settled, closed, fixed, certain, and eventually oppressive. Attention to fragment in its irascible elusiveness is to some extent strategic as a protest and alternative. But it is also, I believe, a way of seeing in the text what the old Rabbinic, midrashic traditions had seen in any case. This is, then, a settling for "soft rhetoric" rather than "hard metaphysics";[37] but it is a move required, in my judgment, by too much hard metaphysics that tends to be control writ large and loud.

Summary, Synthesis, and the Live Word

I understand that this "Theology Update" is brief and schematic. So, let me propose some sense of the whole:

- *Modernist perspectives* (as in Carroll) have an experience of the text as *oppressive ideology of social control*, and therefore dismiss with aggressive skepticism the social control present in the dominant interpretive tradition. It is a *felt need* for exposure of abuse.
- *Pre-modern perspectives* (as in Childs) know an experience of *fragmentation and incoherence*, and therefore set about to conform the text to a Rule of Faith that has constituted the dominant reading that meets a *felt need* for grounded assurance.
- *Post-modern perspectives* (as in Kort) have an experience of the text under the aegis of the church as reduced to *sameness* that lacks power, and therefore a felt need for a text that is *unfamiliar* in its sheer, dread holiness.

I suspect it is possible to work out a series of provisional alliances in this triangle:

[34]Ibid., 74.

[35]Kort, *"Take, Read,"* considers the strange, deconstructive voice of scripture under two modern rubrics: (1) chapter 2, "Modernity: Reading Other Texts as though They, and Not the Bible, Were Scripture" (Locke, Bacon, Paine "on nature"); (2) chapter 3: "Postmodernity: Not Reading Anything at All as though It Were Scripture" (Nietzsche, Fish).

[36]Kort, *"Take, Read,"* 128. What Kort says here of the Bible is surely true of all great literature. It is surely the case of the Bible *as scripture*.

[37]Thomas Bridges, *The Culture of Citizenship: Inventing Postmodern Civic Culture* (Albany: SUNY, 1994) 121 and *passim*, suggests that even such a convinced modernist as John Rawls has found it necessary and compelling to move from "a hard metaphysical 'is'" to a "soft metaphorical 'is'," perhaps a move not so remote from the *sicut* of John Calvin.

- *Modern and pre-modern* together insist upon the high claims against post-modernism. They part company because modernism knows the oppression of hegemony, whereas pre-modernism knows the claims to be true. They together have little patience for the elusiveness of the post-modern.
- *Modern and Post-modern* together are agreed that pre-modern hegemony has been imposed and social control must be resisted, so that both are impatient with reductionist certitude. They part company, however, as modernism declines the claims completely, whereas post-modern entertains the claims but refuses to bootleg with them the high institutional assurances that come with them.
- *Pre-modern and post-modern* together agree that this text is profoundly revelatory of God's holiness, against the emptying skepticism of modernism. They part company, however, over the character of that revelation, hegemonic or fragmentary and elusive.

Now if these alliances will hold momentarily and can be provisionally identified, they may make fresh, common work possible. The fact that they are *provisional* alliances, easily to be noticed, suggests a softening of the abrasive dismissal of alternatives, because each alternative may have something to teach the next.

If each of these perspectives goes its own way, as the current shrill cacophony may now suggest, then we will have only deep, irreversible division in which each talks only among its own. But what I propose as an alternative is that a contextual (pastoral?) approach to *felt crisis* needs to be honored and taken seriously in each case as the heart of the matter. The felt crisis, in each case, receives intellectual articulation. Without, however, reducing interpretive questions to therapeutic or power questions, each advocate is propelled by a hunch or a hurt or a fear that is deep and felt before it is thought. My urging is that a new conversation might be mutually productive if each advocacy is honored in its felt crisis:

- The felt crisis of *oppressive hegemony* is real; there is enough evidence.
- The felt crisis of *fragmentation and loss of coherence* is real; there is enough evidence.
- The felt crisis of *familiarity* is real; there is enough evidence.

The yearning in turn for emancipation, coherence, and unfamiliarity are not mutually exclusive. They are, when given, Holy Gifts beyond the largess of any interpretive sect. Kort says, "*Take, Read.*" He might add, "Listen." Listen to the reading of the others. Listening is not first approving or resisting or defeating. The live word offered is given in, with, under, and against the listening church. There is common work for us.