
Criteria for New Biblical Theologies

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The relationship between theology and biblical studies has, on the whole, not been a happy one for some time. There have been repeated attempts by theologians to master biblical studies, at least as far as the New Testament is concerned, and to make use of the results of historical-critical exegesis for contemporary theological thinking, but there have been few attempts by biblical scholars to enter into a mutually critical dialogue with their theological colleagues. In many European and North American universities, faculties of theology continue to be the home for both species of researchers and teachers, but rarely does one find a critical and constructive cooperation between biblical scholars and theologians. And if one or the other tries to transcend the traditional boundaries, he or she is met on the other side at best with suspicion and at worst with ridicule.

The assumption held by a number of biblical scholars that biblical studies operated on a purely scientific (*wissenschaftlich*) level, whereas theology was prone to either mere philosophical speculation or ecclesiastical interests further cemented the continuation of the traditional divide and led here and there to the suggestion that theology ought to be rescued from the subjectivist or confessional brink back into the fold of proper academic disciplines. The methodology of historical-critical scholarship was, of course, to provide the life raft even for theologians.

In the meantime, there have been increasing signs that a new awakening is happening in biblical studies which may result in a rather different self-understanding of that discipline and of its relationship to other disciplines, including theological studies. Recent publications and conferences such as this one document a new openness on the side of biblical scholars.¹ Biblical scholars begin to rediscover theology, it seems.

But theology too is changing. First of all, it has become more hermeneutically conscious of late. That is to say it has developed its own interest

¹ See Francis Watson, ed., *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM Press, 1993), which offers the texts of lectures from a conference between biblical scholars and theologians held at the University of London in 1992.

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in methods of reading and in text theories and thus has become a potential dialogue partner for all disciplines concerned with text interpretation, including biblical studies. Second, theology is rediscovering the larger spectrum of theologies within the Bible.²

Thus we are faced with a much more interesting situation today: While theologians are rediscovering the larger theological spectrum of the Bible,³ biblical scholars begin to rediscover theologians as conversation partners. In this situation it may well be appropriate for both groups to reflect together once more on the possibilities of biblical theology.

However, as soon as the term "biblical theology" is mentioned, everybody seems to run for cover. First of all, for any critical-minded scholar biblical theology smells foul. It has been seen as an apologetic exercise promoted chiefly by those biblical scholars who since the Reformation have followed a clear faith agenda in their work and as a result could not be considered fully trustworthy in terms of academic rigor and critique. Second, biblical theology has become known as an ideological effort by Christian biblical scholars who aim at integrating and harmonizing the often very diverse theological orientations of the various biblical texts, at times even with a certain anti-Jewish bias. Hence, biblical theology smacks of monism. Third, biblical theology has often been considered an outpost of church interests in academic theological contexts. And related to this charge, biblical theology appears to some contemporary scholars as a particular speciality on the German academic menu, where it has been designed to offer future pastors some help for the proclamation of their biblical faith.

In view of these apprehensions against the project of biblical theology the reader may wonder why I would like to discuss at all the possibilities of biblical theologies. Let me therefore state my thesis first: Biblical theol-

² Protestant theologians have always had a keen interest in the biblical texts, though this interest often remained confined to the New Testament. The texts were used as historical and theological access routes to Jesus of Nazareth and his gospel. Since the middle of this century, more or less all Roman Catholic theologians began to share this interest. But what has happened lately is that some theologians have become less dogmatically motivated and instead have included in their thinking a phenomenological approach to the manifestations of God in the Bible, including the Hebrew Scriptures. This increased focus on God seems to replace the predominant attention to Jesus of Nazareth in the theologies of the 1960s and 1970s. Not that Jesus is no longer of interest in today's theology, but the framework for this interest has become larger as the recent rise in trinitarian theologies underlines very clearly.

³ See the pioneering work of the theologian Cristina Grenholm on aspects of a theological reading of biblical texts: *Romans Interpreted: A Comparative Analysis of the Commentaries of Barth, Nygren, Cranfield and Wilckens on Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Studia Doctrinae Christianae Upsaliensia 30 (Uppsala and Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990), and her forthcoming study, *The Old Testament, Christianity and Pluralism* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1996), in which she compares six Christian and Jewish approaches to the interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

ogy ought to be *one* among the many critical ways of approaching the biblical texts, because it deals with an important aspect of these texts' communication, namely, how some people experienced God, reflected on God's presence in the history of Israel and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and organized their lives accordingly. However, not every biblical theology is good theology, and not every biblical theology, as is well known, has been an appropriate reading of the Bible. In this situation it seems to me to be necessary to develop some criteria for what may count as an adequate form of biblical theology today. And the best place for the discussion of such criteria seems to me to be an interdisciplinary conversation of biblical scholars and theologians.

In this contribution to the ongoing discussion on the potential of biblical theology I would like to proceed in four steps: In the first section I shall discuss some of the current objections to biblical theology. In the second section I would like to offer a hermeneutically based argument on behalf of new critical and self-critical biblical theologians. In the third section I wish to propose some criteria for such critical biblical theologies. And finally, I would like to offer some conclusions on the potential of a critical biblical theology. This article thus ought not to be understood as a comprehensive treatment of existing biblical theologies.⁴ Rather, I wish to make a modest proposal toward a constructive reconsideration of the opportunities which biblical theologies may entail at this point in time.

I. THE CASE AGAINST BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

As we have seen already, there is a lengthy list of arguments against biblical theology. In his book *Beyond New Testament Theology* (1990) and elsewhere, Heikki Räisänen has dealt with these arguments in some depth with regard to the New Testament.⁵ In his book he defends the following thesis:

"New Testament theology" may be a legitimate part of self-consciously *ecclesial* theology. By contrast, those of us who work in a broader *academic* context should abandon such an enterprise (and, *a fortiori*, any dreams of a "biblical theology" which would cover both Testaments). More precisely, "New Testament theology" ought to be replaced, in this context, with two different projects: first, the "history of early Christian thought" (or theology, if you like), evolving in the context of early Judaism, second, critical philosophical and/or theological "reflection on the

⁴ For a concise overview and discussion of the development of biblical theologies, see Henning Graf Reventlow, "Theology (Biblical), History of," trans. Frederick H. Cryer, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 483-505.

⁵ Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (London: SCM Press, 1990). All page numbers cited in the text refer to this book.

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New Testament," as well as on its influence on our history and its significance for contemporary life. (P. xviii)

Räisänen admits that the human mind does not seem to work in such a way that one engages in these two tasks in two steps. "Nonetheless," he adds, "the two tasks ought to be kept distinct (which is possible to a greater degree than some apologetic hermeneuticians claim), and it would be wise to set out the results of each at different stages in the presentation" (ibid.).

In his report on the history of New Testament theology Räisänen leaves no doubt as to where his sympathies lie: Had biblical scholarship followed Johann Philipp Gabler and William Wrede, this discipline would have developed well, because both scholars had called for a clear distinction between historical and theological readings of the biblical texts. Räisänen states, "The New Testament is a document, not of theology, but of religion" (p. 14). Following this line of Wrede's, Räisänen's overall concern is to defend the necessity of the historical-critical study of the Bible against any attempt to introduce ecclesial or dogmatic criteria into the academic reading of these texts. He opposes anything that may threaten to dilute the adherence to the most stringent principles of *Wissenschaft* without which some believe the study of religion would not survive in our contemporary academic institutions in the West. Räisänen's overall concern is to free the critical study of the Bible from any reading perspective other than the academic, that is, the historical.

In line with this concern Räisänen regrets Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*⁶ and indeed any effort of synthesizing the theological content of the New Testament in a unitary fashion: "The question of normativeness is, of course, closely connected with the question of unity" (p. 57). Räisänen's account of much of recent German New Testament scholarship reads like the exposition of one long line of betrayal of the academic standards necessary for proper biblical scholarship. Hence, the case against biblical theology as a confusion originating in Germany, though unfortunately no longer limited to its country of origin. According to Räisänen the only way out of this confusion remains to stick to the "ideal of clearly separating the historical task from the theological," but this ideal "has so far only been put forward in programmatic declarations—and even that has fairly seldom been the case" (p. 74). Among the attempts to come clean about this separation Räisänen lists very briefly the contributions by Krister Stendahl, James M. Robinson, Robert Morgan, and Klaus Berger. But at the end of his survey of biblical scholarship since the Enlightenment, Räisänen concludes that "our century has not

⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 7th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1977).

produced the history of early Christian religion and theology which was envisaged by Wrede as early as 1897" (p. 89).

In his own programmatic proposal Räsänen wishes to universalize the horizon of biblical scholarship: "The truly appropriate horizon today for biblical study (or any other discipline, for that matter) is humankind as a whole" (p. 96). And he continues:

Now Christian churches and their members are part of humankind; they thus very much belong to the potential users of the kind of research I have in mind. . . . My point is simply that the traditional interests of the churches, which are still often assumed in an authoritarian and aprioristic way, cannot provide the orientation for a synthesis. A non-ecclesial synthesis has to be comprehensible and to give clues to understanding to anybody, independently of faith and worldview. If traditional systematic theology and church leaders (or laymen) are reluctant to cope with such scholarship, recipients are to be sought elsewhere. (Pp. 96-97)

Hence, Räsänen fights against possible ecclesial infiltration in biblical interpretation. The perspectives which guide biblical interpretation have to come from scholarship alone and not from any church-related use of the biblical texts. And if these actual users do not like Räsänen's kind of scholarship, he is prepared to look for more appropriate potential users elsewhere.

Here lies one of the dilemmas of Räsänen's attempt at preserving the academic nature of biblical scholarship. On the one hand he wishes to liberate New Testament exegesis from ecclesial impositions; on the other hand he is prepared to ignore the needs of the largest group of biblical interpreters, namely, the members of the Christian churches and the Jewish communities. Instead of seeking a critical dialogue with these actual readers and with theologians who reflect on actual and possible uses of the Bible, Räsänen locks himself into an academic ivory tower position.

Few people would wish to disagree with him that biblical studies is in crisis today and needs a clearer sense of purpose and methodology. Other biblical scholars have also voiced concern over the future of the genre "biblical commentary" based purely on historical-critical foundations.⁷ However, Räsänen's recommendation that "much more attention could be paid to *non-canonical* literature, the *history of the influence* of the Bible, and perhaps—moving from historical to theological issues—problems of *actualizing*" (p. 98) seems to me not fully to solve the problem of how to define the function of biblical scholarship today.

Interest in biblical reading is certainly not confined to the churches. But neither is interest in the Bible as a historical document the only pos-

⁷ See Richard Coggins, "A Future for the Commentary?" in Watson, ed., pp. 163-75.

sible genre of approaching these texts with a critical mind. Räsänen may well be right to suggest that men and women today may need much more reliable information about the biblical and related texts of early Christianity, but they may also wish to know more about the possibilities of a theological reading of these texts without ecclesial (meaning here: authoritarian) strings attached to their questions and to possible answers. As is well known, renewal of the Christian churches has often come precisely because biblical interpreters have freed themselves from the ruling ecclesial interests of the day and attended to the texts with new questions. Thus, the crucial point here is not that the historical study of the Bible constitutes one legitimate and even necessary approach to the text, but whether it is the *only* legitimate approach and whether the only alternative to a purely historical-critical approach to the Bible must necessarily be a dogmatist reading. Therefore, we ought to question Räsänen whether his perspective is too limited by his so-called academic concerns in biblical interpretation. Ideologies of reading may be found not only in ecclesial contexts but even in academic ones, even in historical-critical readings.

In this regard it is interesting to note that Räsänen never enters the debates on the textuality of texts and on what that textuality demands from the development of adequate reading strategies. He never reflects on the process of reading. Instead he reserves the right of deciding who thinks properly about what in the biblical texts exclusively to the historical-critical exegete, for instance, when he claims that the "question of the unity or diversity in the New Testament belongs basically to actualizing theology, to the (possible) second stage of critical work, at which one ponders problems of present-day Christianity" (p. 103).

Räsänen concludes that "only when the biblical scholar gives up theological pretensions will sufficient space be left for considerations arising from other perspectives" (p. 108). Thus, according to him, biblical reading can only come into its own once it has freed itself from theological considerations. As we are going to see in a moment, the surgical removal of theological reading perspectives from the task of biblical interpretation may well endanger the appropriateness of the entire project of a critical biblical interpretation.

Räsänen wishes to free biblical interpretation from false theological impositions, such as an unreflective or simply authoritarian dogmatic straitjacket and some sort of faith requirement. Moreover, he wishes to protect the integrity of biblical texts for the reader from false conceptions of thematic unity. All theologians who work critically and self-critically would agree with him here. But my methodological agreement ends where Räsänen explains the ideal situation of biblical study as consisting of two sorts of interpretation: historical and actualizing (p. 108). Since

when is historical study possible without some form of actualizing? Should not the more urgent question rather be what constitutes a comprehensive and what constitutes a partial reading of the biblical texts? Both theological and historical readings are only partial readings, though both are necessary dimensions on the way to a more adequate and comprehensive reading of the biblical texts, which would also need to include many other reading perspectives, such as literary, political, aesthetic, feminist, emancipatory, and so on.

Räisänen's program of a history of early Christian thought should as a matter of course be welcomed as *one* legitimate approach, among many others, to the early Christian texts. Especially, his qualification that "thought must not, however, be isolated as a word of its own" makes good sense (p. 121).⁸ "The connections of religious thought with the concrete historical and social experiences of individuals and groups are to be taken very seriously. The rise and development of early Christian thought has to be described as an interplay between tradition, experience and interpretation" (*ibid.*). In the present state of New Testament research Räisänen prefers a "thematic organization of the material" whereby "eschatology provides the most appropriate starting point" for him (*ibid.*). But the question of what kind of phenomenology Räisänen prefers remains unexplained in his book, though most recently he has emphasized the legitimacy of different approaches to the texts and warned against the absolutization of any particular approach.⁹

Räisänen's project of an early Christian religious history is, as has been stated before, a legitimate and interesting project. But is it a replacement for the equally necessary project of a fuller biblical interpretation which includes a theological reading of the texts in both Testaments?

II. THE NEED FOR NEW BIBLICAL THEOLOGIES

A. The Biblical Texts Call for Biblical Theologies

The discussion of hermeneutics, literary criticism, and text linguistics during the last few decades has enlarged the horizon of biblical text interpretation far beyond the narrow confines of a purely historical examination of texts. Of course, all the different approaches to the biblical texts are benefiting from the groundbreaking achievements of historical criticism in freeing biblical interpretation from any kind of external tutelage.

⁸ See also David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), pp. 24 ff., who also warns against a mere concept approach to the theology of the Bible.

⁹ Heikki Räisänen, "Nytestamentlig teologi," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 71 (1995): 58-65, here 61.

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However, precisely because of this newly won freedom the plurality of methods of approaching the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures and of the New Testament could be welcomed as potentially enriching. The thorough critique of any triumphalist or dogmatic reading of the biblical texts, to which Räsänen has contributed in no small measure, has cleared the air now for new and more comprehensive approaches to the biblical texts as texts. Moreover, in this regard it seems to me that a critical dialogue with actual readers of these texts is a necessary dimension of proper biblical scholarship.

As I have tried to show elsewhere in more detail, biblical texts might be first of all considered as texts, that means as dynamic communicative units that disclose their semantic potential to the reader only in the act of reading itself.¹⁰ Therefore, biblical interpretation must participate in the ongoing debate on reading in order to assess more adequately the possibilities and limitations of any particular approach to reading. The various contributions to theories of reading, such as literary criticism, reader-response criticism, theory of aesthetic effects, formalism, structuralism and poststructuralism, text hermeneutics, and so on, need to be studied by biblical scholars and theologians alike and evaluated in terms of their specific promises and limitations.

The concrete act of reading, however, is put in motion by the reader only with the help of certain genres of reading. These genres of reading can be considered adequate only if they allow the text to disclose its particular communicative perspective in the act of reading. That is to say, particular text genres call for particular reading genres. Of course, one may wish to approach a biblical text with all sorts of reading genres. Who is there to stop the reader from doing so? But the more intricate question seems to me to be the following one: Which reading genre allows a particular text to disclose as much as possible of its own communicative potential to the reader? Ultimately, biblical interpretation is a matter of response and responsibility to a biblical text's communicative challenge. Today this communicative challenge is directed at us, the potential readers, from whatever community of interpreters we may come and with however many reading traditions. The fact that we are still interested in reading the biblical texts is in itself an interesting phenomenon. Following David Tracy's terminology one may refer to this phenomenon by calling the biblical texts "classics."¹¹ That is to say, the history of their recep-

¹⁰ See Werner G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking*, trans. Thomas J. Wilson (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan; New York: Crossroad, 1988), and *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: SCM Press, 1994).

¹¹ See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), chap. 3.

tion is not yet concluded, rather it gives rise to further appropriations of these texts in new and still emerging contexts.

I would like to stress that the question of biblical theology not only arises from external expectations brought to the biblical texts, but emerges first and foremost in the act of reading as a semantic necessity from within the biblical texts themselves. Most of these texts which come to us embedded in the editorial format of the biblical canon deal more or less explicitly with the possibilities and actualities of a complex set of interconnected relationships, namely, the relationships between different people, between people and God, between people and their cosmos, and between individuals and their own inner selves. Thus, whichever way one turns this thematic phenomenon, no reading perspective seems adequate which does not include some sort of a theological dimension. But this discovery of the theological dimension of the biblical texts must not be confused with the ongoing projects of a Christian reading of the biblical texts through a confessional, though ecumenically informed, theological perspective, as for instance, in the works of Peter Stuhlmacher and Brevard Childs.¹²

Moreover, every reader of biblical texts always approaches these texts already through some genre of reading mediated to him or her by the community or network of communities in which he or she encounters these texts. The more interesting question, therefore, is not whether or not people read the biblical texts theologically, but which inherited or otherwise suggested genres of reading promise to disclose the theological dimensions of the text's own communicative potential best at any given time. The necessity of coming to terms with these theological dimensions present in the biblical texts suggests the development of biblical theologies. I use the plural because previous readings of the biblical texts have suggested the great variety, plurality, and at times even conflictual potential of theological communications from these texts.

The first call for some sort of inventory of communications about divine self-manifestations in the different, though interlinked, relationships emerges then from the process of adequate biblical interpretation itself. To that extent the related call for some form of biblical theology is one of the consequences of adequate biblical interpretation. But there is also another call for biblical theology, and that comes from systematic theology that is interested in biblical interpretation.

¹² Peter Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik*, NTD Ergänzungsreihe 6, 2d ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986); *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, vol. 1, *Grundlegung: Von Jesus zu Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992); *Wie treibt man Biblische Theologie?* *Biblich-Theologische Studien* 24 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1995). Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theologies of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1992).

B. The Theological Need for Biblical Theologies

Theology is always more than textual science, but never less. All depends on the respective definition of theology. For Räsänen theology appears mostly in the form of a narrowly defined ecclesial helpmate. He does not seem to appreciate the existence of a nondogmatic and nonconfessional systematic theology that participates fully in the open-ended dialogue on God's self-manifestation in the different cultures of this world and in the global search for adequate methods of text interpretation. Yet it is precisely such a theology that shows a great interest in the possibility of biblical theologies today.

If, following David Tracy, one defines theology as a mutually critical correlation between interpretations of the Christian tradition and interpretations of the diverse experiences of contemporary women, men, and children in this world, one must have an urgent need to engage in the interpretation of the texts of the Christian traditions. But also, if, following Hans Frei and George A. Lindbeck, one defines theology as the inner-Christian reflection of God's self-manifestation in Christ, one must feel a strong commitment to engage in biblical interpretation. Thus, notwithstanding different methods of theology, there is a general agreement among theologians today that one has to engage in biblical interpretation if one wishes to do Christian theology. The theologians just mentioned, though, differ with regard to two questions: (a) in face of which forum does one wish to defend the results of their biblical interpretations, and (b) to which other interpretative moves ought one to relate these biblical readings?¹³

The widespread agreement on the theological necessity of engaging in biblical interpretation calls for a mutually critical and constructive cooperation between biblical scholars and systematic theologians, but cooperation is not to be confused with identification. Rather, exegete and theologian are both necessary on the way to appropriating the biblical texts critically and constructively today. Recently, the exegete Klaus Berger has proposed some criteria for this cooperation.¹⁴

Berger claims that exegesis is a theological discipline not because of its

¹³ See David Tracy, "On Reading the Scriptures Theologically," in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, ed. Bruce D. Marshall (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 35-68; and George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

¹⁴ Klaus Berger, "Exegesis and Systematic Theology—the Exegete's Perspective," in *Why Theology? Concilium* 1994/6, ed. Claude Geffré and Werner G. Jeanrond (London: SCM Press; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994), pp. 83-92. The page numbers cited in the text refer to this publication.

methods but because of "the audience to which it is addressed, namely the 'church'" (p. 84). Like Räsänen, Berger distinguishes clearly between two tasks of biblical interpretation, namely, exegesis and application. By exegesis he understands "a reconstruction of the view and purpose of a particular biblical author, and by application its 'relevance' for the present" (p. 84). But unlike Räsänen, Berger sees the process of biblical interpretation as completed only once both dimensions are included. Moreover, he emphasizes that both exegesis and theology ought to serve the church, without, however, accepting any dogmatic control of biblical interpretation by whatever ecclesial institution. Rather, the exegete ought to defend the biblical texts and their interpretation against any form of dogmatism, including the one that might originate in the exegete himself or herself (pp. 84-85). That means that the exegete must be prepared to engage in a critical reflection upon her or his reading perspectives.

According to Berger, the exegete works by necessity with a historical-critical method in order to offer reliable information, but also to provide instruments of peace in cases of dispute about the interpretation of biblical texts. Within the framework of theology, both exegetical and systematic theology are understood by Berger as "descriptive disciplines, i.e. they do not regard themselves either as revelation or prophecy" (p. 88). Instead, both describe and reflect on attempts to talk about God: "For a description is concerned to present a variety of biblical theologies as they are in their own right, initially leaving them just as they are, without immediately reflecting on their normativity" (p. 89). Thus Berger encourages systematic theologians in cooperation with exegetes to reflect on the many possible theologies to which the biblical texts give rise, and to dare to compare and discuss these divergent theologies. Unlike Räsänen, Berger considers the mutually critical cooperation between exegetes and systematic theologians necessary on the way toward a more adequate understanding of the biblical texts.

Berger has no illusions as to how difficult it may be to cope with the fact that there are many biblical theologies. But he reminds us of the early church's wisdom to compile the New Testament without producing a harmony of the gospels: "It in fact left different approaches to Jesus Christ side by side. And from the beginning the same thing was also expected of Christians in respect of Israel: this people was to be allowed to exist as God's first love. The history of Christian intolerance shows how much this is to ask. The reality of exegetical theologies shows that this task is not even beginning to be coped with" (p. 90).

Our discussion so far has shown that Christian theologians reflect on human experiences of God in the closely related religious traditions of Israel and the church. The consideration whether these traditions both

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are witnessing to one monotheistic movement, though with a great many different trajectories, does not yet betray an ideological attitude or ecclesial dogmatism, as long as this consideration remains open to critique and correction by biblical scholars from any background, but particularly by Jewish scholars.

In this respect the recent discussions among exegetes of the Hebrew Bible about the emergence of monotheism in Israel are of great interest to the project of a biblical theology.¹⁵ If Yahwism is not, as had been thought for a long time, a pre-exilic phenomenon, but the result of a gradual process which intensified during the Babylonian exile, then new developmental models of theological interpretation and, as a result, of biblical theologies suggest themselves. One would not necessarily have to follow Gerd Theissen's evolutionary paradigm.¹⁶ Rather, one could more generally speak of a monotheistic movement of development with different aspects and phases which are documented in and beyond the texts of the biblical canon.¹⁷ Theologians are naturally keen to reflect on this movement and to discuss the development and transformation as well as the spiritual initiatives, challenges, and implications arising from the manifestations of faith in Yahweh God.¹⁸

Two methods are discussed in this respect: a historical-genetic and a systematic-conceptual method. The advantage of the former lies in its more open and dynamic character, and the disadvantage of the latter lies in its unifying tendencies. However, as long as a particular systematizing effort continues to be open to corrections from other systematizing efforts and from historical-genetic efforts I cannot see why it ought not to be tried. Surely, we ought to welcome any critical and self-critical effort to come to terms with the variety of theological dimensions arising from readings of the biblical texts.

However, the larger genetic approach to the theologies of the Bible seems to me to be more attentive to the emerging theological initiatives within the biblical texts than the well-known conceptual categories, such

¹⁵ For a recent review essay on this topic, see Robert Gnuse, "New Directions in Biblical Theology: The Impact of Contemporary Scholarship in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1994): 893-918.

¹⁶ Gerd Theissen, *Biblischer Glaube in evolutionärer Sicht* (Munich: Kaiser, 1984).

¹⁷ Trygve N. D. Mettinger's analysis in *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names*, trans. Frederick H. Cryer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), points in the same direction. See p. 204: "The distinctive features of Israel's confession of faith around the time of the exile are, in fact, the result of a sculpting process which spans several centuries."

¹⁸ See, e.g., David Tracy, "The Paradox of the Many Faces of God in Monotheism," in *The Many Faces of the Divine: Concilium* 1995/2, ed. Hermann Häring and Johann Baptist Metz (London: SCM Press; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), pp. 30-38.

as call and response with its ensuing divine-human dialogue,¹⁹ promise and fulfillment, and also law and gospel. Even an exclusive attention to a theology of the Word may miss many important features of God's self-manifestation in the biblical texts.²⁰ All of these conceptual readings of the Bible are always already informed by some confessional or faith perspective and therefore not as open to the retrieval of other theological perspectives that the texts may disclose once they are read critically and interdisciplinarily. Peter Stuhlmacher's recent attempt to produce a biblical theology of the New Testament is an example of such a more narrowly defined Christian theological perspective.²¹

Christian confessional readings also show quite often a certain bias with regard to the Hebrew Bible. Rudolf Bultmann's view that the Old Testament could only indirectly be understood as the Word of God, whereas the New Testament could be understood directly, is an example of how a confessionally inspired biblical theology is in danger of missing other theologies within the Bible.²² In order to avoid such a reductionist reading of the biblical texts, both theologians and exegetes ought to have an interest in opening their reading perspectives as widely as possible to facilitate more and more adequate readings of the biblical texts. An intertextual reading may be of particular help in this process of widening the interpreter's horizon.²³

By now it ought to be clear that theological interpretation as one aspect of any fuller approach to biblical texts is not dependent on the reader's religious view of either the Bible as Scripture or biblical faith. Therefore I consider Peter Stuhlmacher's "hermeneutics of agreement" with the message of the biblical texts²⁴ not an appropriate starting point for the kind of critical biblical theology that I would like to propose. Of course, as Robert Morgan has put it, anyone who does use the Bible as Scripture from a perspective of faith in God will as a matter of course want to en-

¹⁹ See Timo Veyola, "Finns det en gammaltestamentlig teologi?" *Svensk exegetisk årsbok* 48 (1983): 10-30, at 15, sees in the reflection upon this dialogue the only possibility for a theology of the Old Testament.

²⁰ See the critique of a pure Word of God approach to biblical reading in Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 139-58.

²¹ See his *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, and most recently his *Wie treibt man biblische Theologie?*

²² See Rudolf Bultmann, "Die Bedeutung des Alten Testaments für den christlichen Glauben," in Rudolf Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen*, vol. 1, 8th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1980), pp. 313-36, here pp. 335-36.

²³ For an example of such a reading, see Seán Freyne, "Reading Hebrews and Revelation Intertextually," in *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings: Essays in Honour of Bas van Iersel*, ed. Sipke Draisma (Kampen: KOK, 1989), pp. 83-93.

²⁴ Compare Stuhlmacher, *Wie treibt man biblische Theologie?* (n. 12 above), pp. 7-8.

gage in the theological interpretation of these texts.²⁵ But against Stuhlmacher, I would wish to defend the legitimacy and potential of a theological interpretation of the Bible even outside of an established faith context.

Morgan has called for the critical foundation of theological interpretation of the Bible in a theory of religion and a theory of history.²⁶ Yet surprisingly he does not call for a theory of text interpretation in this respect. It is my contention that such a theory with its attention to the great variety of textual dimensions would open biblical interpretation also to a reconsideration of the theological dimensions of these texts and thus allow exegetes to play a fuller role within the larger project of a critical theology beyond a mere concentration on the purely historical or literary features of the texts.²⁷ Thus, both biblical scholars and systematic theologians could in critical cooperation review the texts' potential for proposing alternative modes of divine-human relationship. This cooperation could then lead at best to the proposal of "candidates" for future normative status, but it must not be confused with the actual process of normative considerations which take place within particular religious communities.

III. CRITERIA FOR NEW BIBLICAL THEOLOGIES

In the light of the preceding discussion I would like to propose for discussion the following minimalist set of criteria for any critical attempt to develop biblical theologies today:

1. Biblical theology is a multidisciplinary theological exercise that aims at retrieving the theological dimensions of the biblical texts as part of the larger project of interpreting the communicative potential of these texts.

2. Biblical theology is not necessarily an ecclesial exercise controlled by any particular church or religious community/institution or inspired by any particular doctrine or faith. Rather, in the first instance, it is provoked by aspects of the communicative potential of the biblical texts themselves in the act of reading.

3. Biblical theology is interested in discovering the diversity of theo-

²⁵ I agree with Robert Morgan's view "that anyone who uses the Bible as scripture engages (whether knowingly or not) in theological interpretation." Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 274. But the inverse does not need to be true: not everyone who engages in theological interpretation of the Bible needs to consider it as Scripture (see p. 197).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

²⁷ See the nonconfessional reading of the Bible as literature in Stephen Prickett and Robert Barnes, *The Bible, Landmarks of World Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 43, where God is introduced as "in many ways the leading character of the Bible."

gies operative within the biblical texts. Hence it includes intertextual investigations.

4. Biblical theology is a challenge to all systematic theologies insofar as it calls for an always new test of any preconceived or traditionally assumed concept of the God to whose revelation the texts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament witness in various ways.

5. Biblical theology operates on the basis of a hermeneutical consciousness. That means biblical theology respects the textuality of the biblical texts and the requirements and implications of text interpretation.

6. Biblical theology as one among many theological activities is fully accountable according to the usual academic standards, that is, it yields results that are subject to intersubjective perception and critique.

7. Biblical theology encourages all nondogmatic models and paradigms of describing continuities and discontinuities in the complex development and religious challenge of biblical monotheism. It calls for an ongoing ideology critique of any systematizing attempt.

8. By definition, biblical theology begins its work by interpreting the canonical texts of the Bible, but its concern is not limited to these texts (against Childs).²⁸ Rather the continuities and discontinuities of the monotheistic movement may be grasped more sharply through additional intertextual comparisons with texts documenting other religious movements of experience of and reflection on the divine.

9. Biblical theology encourages not only the critique of hidden or open ideologies in the act of interpretation, but also the critique of ideologies in the biblical texts themselves. It welcomes especially the feminist critique of ideologies in the composition and reception of biblical texts.²⁹

10. Biblical theology wishes to serve all readers interested in the diverse theological potential of the biblical texts. It seeks the mutually critical dialogue with all users of the Bible, including those Jews and Christians who use the Bible as Scripture within their respective religious communities and faith traditions.

11. As a cooperative project biblical theology seeks the contributions and critical challenges of all critical theories within the academy, for example, literary criticism, historical criticism, cultural criticism, and social criticism.

Biblical theology thus could become an example for a critical and open-ended cooperation between different branches of knowledge from within theological faculties and beyond.

²⁸ Compare Childs (n. 12 above).

²⁹ Compare Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

IV. THE POTENTIAL OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Biblical theology as envisaged here is only a part, though a very important one, of the larger Christian theological project.³⁰ Theology as a second-order activity serves all those who have an interest in the critical reflection on God's self-disclosure in human history. Biblical theology offers such a reflection with regard to the development of monotheism within the social, literary, and religious context of Israel, the prophetic critique of certain forms of theology, the liturgical, historical, liberationist, sapiential, and providential reflection on God in the texts of the Hebrew Bible, and the diverse reflections on the experience of God in the ministry, passion, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and of his followers in the texts of the New Testament.

As such, biblical theology serves the larger project of reflecting on human experiences of God's presence and absence in this universe. Benefiting from the rich hermeneutical tradition, from feminist, philosophical, political, liberationist, ecological, and cosmological critiques of Jewish and Christian traditions, it seems to many theologians today a promising risk to raise again the question of God. Although thoroughly conscious of the ideological baggage that this question carries, we may nevertheless be able to discuss the traces of God in our universe, and as part of this task attend anew to the reflection on God by our biblical, nonbiblical, and postbiblical fellow humans, past and present. Instead of violating the texts of the Bible once more by imposing on them well-known or new theological ideologies, we may be able to reread these texts within the larger framework of an interdisciplinary scholarly community. Instead of looking for proofs to suggest that our confessional ideologies and preferred social or moral concerns were always right, we may look again for the manifestations of God beyond these ideological obsessions. The fact that so many of the existing biblical theologies are unsatisfactory must not be used as an excuse from attending to the challenge of cultivating a new sense for the development, continuities, and discontinuities of the various strands of biblical reflection on God. Even the "misuse" of hermeneutics by theologians in the past does not offer sufficient reason to discourage biblical and theological interpreters of the Bible from developing common research projects on the question which seems to matter to most people, namely, the question of God.³¹

³⁰ In this section I make use of some thoughts previously published in my article "After Hermeneutics: The Relationship between Theology and Biblical Studies," in Francis Watson, ed. (n. 1 above), pp. 85-102.

³¹ See, e.g., my critique of the so-called New Hermeneutic in my *Theological Hermeneutics* (n. 10 above), pp. 148-58.

Thirty centuries of patriarchal, confessional, colonial, authoritarian, and other ideological distortions of references to God point to a very discouraging legacy. But then there are the prophets old and new; there are the women and men who, like Jesus, have resisted religious tyranny and ideology and have searched for God's mysterious presence beyond the control of religious, theistic, and atheistic systems. I am therefore convinced that new, open, interdisciplinary, critical, and self-critical reflections on this mystery will find much encouragement and challenge from an equally open, interdisciplinary, critical, and self-critical theological reading of the Bible.

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