Learning Theology

Tracking the Spirit of Christian Faith

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Contents

Introduction

What Is a Theologian?

The word *theology* comes from the Greek *theos*, meaning "God," and *logos*, denoting "a field, area, or topic of study": in compound for "the study of God." This might seem presumptuous for our puny human minds. Doesn't the Bible itself say, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8–9)? So how can God even be studied?

To answer that question, we begin by introducing three theologians: Macrina, the older sister of the Cappadocian brothers, as a lay theologian; Thomas Aquinas as the classic example of what we might call a professional theologian; and John Wesley as a practical theologian. There is more than one way to study God as a theologian, we shall see. If you are just starting out in theological studies, our goal in these introductory pages is to make it possible for you to imagine yourself as a theologian. For starters, we will define a theologian as someone who thinks about and considers God, and all things in relationship to God. What kind of theologian you end up becoming in the shorter or longer term, even after you have completed this initial course of study, is not only up to you but in many ways remains unpredictable, as we shall discover. But the key to the success you will experience by the grace of God is to be open to becoming a student of things divine, however young or more mature you might be!

Macrina as Lay Theologian

Saint Macrina is often indicated as "the Younger" (324–379) in order to differentiate her from her grandmother, Saint Macrina the Elder (ca. 270–ca. 340). The latter's son, Basil the Elder (d. 379), had nine or ten children, including Macrina the Younger (the firstborn) and her two brothers, Saint Basil of Caesarea (329/330–379) and Saint Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–ca. 395). These brothers, along with their friend, Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390), also known as Gregory the Theologian, are renowned collectively as the Cappadocian Fathers (Cappadocia being the region in modern-day Turkey where they resided, ministered, and worked). The fame of these Cappadocians sometimes leaves Macrina the Younger's legacy obscure, although it is also largely due to her brother Gregory that we know what we do about his eldest sibling.

Gregory's *Life of St. Macrina* (*Vita Sanctae Macrinæ*) was written not too long after his sister's death. In it, he recounts her spiritual journey based on conversations at her deathbed. When the young man to whom she was pledged died unexpectedly, Macrina resolved to remain faithful to that betrothal as if married. Following her father's passing shortly thereafter, she as oldest child committed herself to helping her siblings by serving as their tutor and by ordering her mother's affairs. Through this experience, as well as suffering the loss of her younger brother Naucratius to an inexplicable hunting accident, Macrina learned to harness her own fleshly passions and desires, and she encouraged her mother to do likewise. Rather than pursuing a classical education, Macrina saturated herself in the Scriptures and constantly recited the Psalms, which became her constant companion. Macrina devoted herself to an ascetic and monastic lifestyle, and soon a small convent gathered around her as others were drawn by her example. If Saint Antony the Great (251–356) was the model monk of the early church, enshrined as such by Saint Athanasius's life story of this desert ascetic, then Macrina is remembered as the archetypal nun.

By all conventional standards, Macrina would not have made history as a theologian: she was a nun (rather than monk), ran a monastery convent for women (rather than spending time studying or mastering the classical tradition), and did not write anything—or did she? While on her deathbed, her brother Gregory recorded what he presents as an extended conversation with his sister, which he then published as *On the Soul and Resurrection* (*De anima et resurrectione*). These dialogues seem to be fashioned after both philosophical and theological predecessors. With regard to the former, Gregory's questions are answered by Macrina as Plato's were by Socrates (in the *Phaedo*, a text focused also on the immortality of the soul, articulated at the

latter's deathbed). With regard to the latter theological tradition, however, an inversion occurs: Macrina is the virgin philosopher-theologian whose wisdom and sound teaching Gregory preserves, but this reverses the model presented in the (apocryphal) *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, about the virgin young woman who was commissioned to continue and extend the apostle Paul's ministry. Thus Gregory is distraught by his brother Basil's recent death and seeks comfort from his sister and teacher (as he calls her). He presents his doubts about the persistence of the soul upon the death of the body, is apprehensive about death, and worries about the impossibility, or improbability, of the resurrection of the body and the soul's postmortem fate. On each point, Macrina presents counterconsiderations, often buttressed and undergirded by Scripture. She explicates the nature of the soul, gives reasons for its endurance in Hades through bodily death, and anticipates the body's eventual resurrection (here contrary to the Platonic dialogues). The resurrection conjoins the body with the soul as in the original conception and in accordance with their primordial human union manifest in the Genesis narrative. All the while Macrina clarifies how the human soul is somehow divine but nevertheless creaturely and thereby unlike the Deity. Crucial in *On the Soul and Resurrection*, however, is that such deliberation about the destiny of the soul is not for the sake of speculation but for that of sanctification: to enable purification of human hearts from the carnality that can inhibit the resurrection to eternal life.

Macrina put theological reflection and teaching in service of Christian life.

Clearly, Macrina herself wrote nothing, like Jesus. Yet, even if her authorship of *On the Soul and the Resurrection* is unconfirmable, the teachings in this treatise attributed to her left a deep impression on her brother. At the least, they led him to depict her as teacher, in fact, as *the* teacher for the group that has come to be known as the Cappadocian theologians. Further, although not classically trained, Macrina is represented as a clear and analytical thinker. But Macrina is spiritually devout, even as she is remembered as a positive model of the ascetic life. Her philosophical and theological argumentation is put in service of scriptural faith and, more importantly, of the redemption of the souls and the quest for holiness. She did not set out to pursue the theological life of the mind, yet she will be remembered at least in part for her theological rigor and clarity of thought.

Similarly, most first-year theology students today do not anticipate becoming professional theologians. Still, our commitment to the service of Christ, rather than being devoid of theological ideas, will actually be sustained and empowered by them. At the end of her life, Macrina's spiritual passions were transformed into theological ruminations about the destiny of human souls,

specifically about our hoped-for union with the Creator God. In a similar way, even if we never consider writing a theological treatise, our lives as followers of Jesus will leave a legacy and witness. Perhaps we will be remembered for our theological beliefs, even if we never aspired for theological recognition.

Thomas Aquinas as Classical (Professional) Theologian

Born to Landolph the count of Aquino in the 1220s, Thomas entered the Dominican Order in 1244 and was then sent to study with its foremost theologian and prominent Aristotelian scholar, Albert the Great (1205–80). Initially quiet, unassuming, and unimpressive to his peers, he was known among them as "the dumb ox." But his intellectual capacities were nonetheless noticed by his teacher. Ordained in 1251/1252, he began lecturing shortly thereafter. Over the next two decades Thomas was a prolific writer, authoring over one hundred texts. Near the end of his life, he was caught up in controversies within the church about the role of Aristotelian philosophy in ecclesial teachings, and some of Thomas's own propositions were condemned by one of the bishops. He was rehabilitated not long thereafter as the tide swung toward reception of Aristotle's philosophy as handmaiden to theology, due in no small part to Thomas's output. After his death in 1274, he was officially canonized as saint in 1323, renowned as the "Angelic Doctor" in the mid-fifteenth century, and proclaimed "Doctor of the Church" by Pope Pius V in 1567.

Thomas Aquinas's Summa theologiae *stands as one of the most expansive visions of Christian faith ever written.*

Thomas's great work, the *Summa theologiae*, was written in the last few years before his death and is still being read and studied today. The book is divided into three parts and organized according to over four hundred questions. Each of the questions, reflecting the method of disputation or academic debate prominent in the universities of the mid-thirteenth century, begins with a thesis on the topic at hand, enumerates objections to such, and identifies an additional contrary perspective. Thomas then presents his own constructive response and concludes with replies to remaining objections. More impressive than his approach, however, is the expansiveness of Thomas's theological vision. His work covers the full spectrum of theological questions: about God, creation, angels, divine providence and government, human nature, law and grace, faith-hope-love, the life of discipleship, the incarnation and Christ, the church and its sacraments, resurrection and the last things, and the like. Each of these themes more or less extensively engages in the theological academy of his time. Thomas inquires into historical positions

and explores logical and rational responses. Throughout, Thomas reconsiders Christian beliefs in light of the Aristotelian philosophy, although the former is not a slave to the latter in any naive sense. He regularly cites other authorities, especially the church fathers, but is not hesitant to point out when he believes the philosopher is either misguided or inadequate on any specific point. In sum, Thomas provides a foundational reconsideration of the church's teachings by using the Aristotelian ideas that were being explored in the medieval university of his day.

The *Summa theologiae* thus appears as a climactic restatement of Christian doctrine almost a millennium after the establishment of its creedal confessions in the early fourth century. It has shown itself also resilient as an authoritative summation of Christian teaching in the eight and a half centuries since. Particularly after being officially recommended as relevant for the modern world by Pope Leo XIII in his *Æterni Patris*, published in 1879, Thomas's work continues to be studied by Roman Catholic novitiates, ordinands, and scholars. Hence Catholic thinkers and theologians who might be attracted to alternative philosophical systems still cannot avoid dealing with the Thomistic tradition. Even non-Catholic theologians who do not revere Thomas in the same way also have to confront the Angelic Doctor's ideas if they want to engage the broad spectrum of Catholic theological scholarship.

Yet if Thomas was methodologically rigorous, theologically expansive, and dogmatically brilliant, our so-called dumb ox was also known, after attending midday Mass at one point in the last few months of his life, to famously acknowledge to his confidant: "All that I have written seems like straw to me!" This might have been symptomatic of Thomas's suffering from a mental breakdown after years of continuous labor, and it may also have reflected a kind of repudiation of his efforts. Yet Thomas was, not exceptional for his time, also a sort of mystic who in his theological writings regularly granted that human reason and language can only take us so far, and that faith and devotion have their roles to play even in the Christian life of the mind. In the latter perspective, we can appreciate Thomas's recognition that his life's achievements amounted to naught when measured against what may have been a vision into the divine mysteries facilitated by experience of the Eucharist that day.

Young theologians today can find encouragement from Thomas's example along at least three lines. First, we might get off to a relatively slow start, but the work of a theologian gains traction when, as with Thomas, our curiosity compels us, and our inquisitive temperament is acted upon. Even if we may have flunked our first college course, our "dumb ox" friend shows that we can bloom later in life, theologically too, especially if we keep asking questions. Second, for those aspiring to the professional theological vocation, we might want to study further Thomas's life, his work, and his scholarship. We

do not have to be Roman Catholics to appreciate how Thomas shows the way forward for those desiring to serve the church and engage the university or the pressing questions of our era. Last but not least, Thomas's admission at the end of his life that his theological reflections were "like straw" ought to be received by ambitious theologians as an admonition toward humility. None of us, no matter how accomplished, can hope to be exhaustively and entirely knowledgeable in things theological. Thomas's assessment puts all of us on the same plane. As prolific (or not) or distinguished (or not), our theological articulations pale when compared with the glories of God that each one of us has experienced. This does not mean that we cannot or should not try to say something, even if "now we see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12a).

John Wesley as Pastoral and Practical Theologian

John (1703–91) was the fifteenth of nineteen children born to Samuel (1662–1735) and Susanna (1669–1742) Wesley, and he and his younger brother Charles (1707–88) were instrumental in launching what came to be known as the Methodist movement in eighteenth-century England. Both were ordained as clerics in the Church of England and, as college instructors or teachers at Oxford University, founded a "Holy Club" in order to pursue and practice a devout Christian life amid what they considered to be the lackadaisical spiritual climate of their colleges and associated parishes. Still, over the course of the 1730s, through a season of missionary and evangelistic work in Georgia of the Americas that did not end on a high note, and after being introduced to Moravian pietists there and then again upon his return to London, John fell into depression and yearned for renewal in his spirit. On May 24, 1738, at a meeting with fellow Moravian believers on Aldersgate Street, he had his notorious "heart strangely warmed" experience, which revitalized his personal life and reignited his ministry.

Over the rest of his life, it is estimated that Wesley preached over 40,000 sermons and traveled, on horseback usually, over 250,000 miles across England. Although not neglecting to invite sinners to repentance, his message was motivated by his desire, widely acclaimed, "to spread scriptural holiness over the land." Wesley perceived that the dominant Calvinist theology in the Church of England during this time emphasized salvation as a matter of divine election and preservation, thus minimizing human response and perseverance. His adapting then the emphasis on human cooperation (promoted by other theologians) did not lead to abandonment of the theme of God's enablement. Instead, for Wesley, God's prevenient grace elicited human reply, meaning that the Holy Spirit precedes, goes before us, and makes possible our responses. In that sense, divine salvation works itself out

in the sanctification of human hearts, the transformation of human lives, and the perfection in love of human actions and behaviors.

Needless to say, Wesley was not a systematic thinker or writer like Thomas Aquinas. However, he wrote out many of his sermons and produced notes and commentary on the entire Bible. As such, he regularly reiterated that he was a "man of one book," the Bible. In addition, he authored hundreds of occasional pieces, oftentimes adapting and editing the works of others in and for his various publications. Having attracted a large following because of his preaching activities, he felt constrained to address certain theological disputes of his day. He often polemicized against Calvinist teachings even though he was famous for designating his own position to be "within a hair's breadth from Calvinism." One of Wesley's most important works, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, clarified misunderstandings that had arisen. The basic contours of his views about sanctification were that Jesus' disciples were called to be holy as the Father in heaven was holy, that they were incapable of attaining such holiness apart from the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit's eradication of the sinful nature would root out the desire to sin and their associated sins of commission. Wesley did recognize that human finitude and frailty would involve us in ongoing sins of omission (unintended acts with consequences that fall short of the ideally purified life). Later generations of Methodist and Wesleyan theologians would debate over whether his account of Christian perfection involved a second divine gift of grace, after regeneration, that produced a work of entire sanctification in human hearts and lives.

Wesley embodies theology's call to respond to the needs of everyday life.

In the end, Wesley was a practical theologian whose writings were motivated by the need to bring clarity to laypersons in the church. His was a religiosity of the heart, confirmed in and through his Aldersgate experience, and expected as normative for all who embraced the biblical message and promises. Yet Wesley's experientialism, unfolding as it did during an era when the Church of England was suspicious about all forms of what was considered enthusiastic or subjective fanaticism, was tempered with his own form of apologetic argument. Wesley was concerned not just about the feelings of the heart but also about the justifications of the mind. In this, his experiential—or experimental, as it was said on occasion at that time—religion was also consistent with his empirical bent. His *Compendium of Natural Philosophy*, also titled *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation*, reflects Wesley the empiricist at work, in the wake of the growing scientific methods emergent from the seventeenth century, although in ways adapted for pastoral purposes. Last but not least, as a preacher and pastoral theologian Wesley was

first and foremost a biblicist, although one steeped in both Latin (Western) and Eastern theological traditions of the church.

In short, Wesley the practical and pastoral theologian was rooted in Scripture, oriented by tradition, guided by reason, and empowered by experience, with the Bible being the foundation and capstone. Wesleyan scholars in more recent times have dubbed this fourfold theological orientation around Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as the *Wesleyan quadrilateral*. This was itself an expansion on the *Anglican triad* of Scripture-tradition-reason that became prominent conceptually in the later nineteenth century. As a faithful member of his church, it might be argued that Wesley the pastor and preacher imbibed the Anglican triad of his day, even before it had been labeled as such. He did add an experiential and empirical direction, but in ways consistent with Anglican sensibilities.

Before commenting further on the Wesleyan quadrilateral and its contribution to the structure of this book, let us take stock of how Wesley might encourage us as young and aspiring theologians. Most of us probably never envisioned serving God as a theologian (I did not in my early days in college) but have yearned to give our lives for the sake of the church and its ministry to and mission for the world. For us, Wesley is a stark reminder that such faithful service for the reign of God is deeply theological, even if we now see this in sermons, Bible studies, and occasional pieces that address contemporary questions rather than in scholarly treatises. As important, even if he was not a professional theologian like Thomas Aquinas, Wesley's life and ministry show us that rationality, pietism, and service—the head, heart, and hands—all belong together and that theology is too important to be avoided. We cannot hope to serve God with all our hearts and hands if we neglect our minds. As Jesus himself urges, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

You and I as Those Who Love God and Want to Know and Serve God

There are any number of figures and names in the history of Christianity that we could have considered in order to inspire our imaginative capacities as those new to theology. Perhaps later, when we look at context and location, we will see that ethnicity, sexuality, and gender matter in ways beyond that portrayed in the preceding profiles. Or we might see that tradition, reason, and experience are abstract concepts masking concrete historical and social realities that inevitably impact our theological paths. As such, our very brief presentations of Macrina, Thomas, and Wesley are merely prompts to

jump-start our theological work. There is much more that has been and can be said about each one, even as others in the Christian tradition will inspire our expectations differently as well. Consider the rest of this book an elaboration of theological possibilities implicit in our three prototypes.

Our biographical treks also brought to the fore the Wesleyan quadrilateral that highlights four sources of theological reflection. We have already noted that this was derived from the addition of experience to the Anglican triad of Scripture, tradition, and reason. As with any concept, the quadrilateral is presented merely as a helpful construct. It is neither that other constructs are nonexistent nor that they are unhelpful. But even if there are all kinds of ways to talk about the sources of theology, I think taking up the issues with the help of the quadrilateral provides greater latitude than other alternatives without endlessly multiplying our possibilities. Further, and this is of crucial note, each side (metaphorically speaking) of the quadrilateral is connected to others, and as will be clear in the following, all are interrelated. As a Pentecostal, I am a descendent of the Wesleyan Holiness movement in nineteenth-century America. From this perspective, I will suggest how we can give Scripture high priority even while acknowledging that our reading of Scripture is informed by tradition, reason, and experience.

The first part of this book will therefore proceed according to this quadrilateral frame. Its four chapters (1–4) will move from Scripture to tradition to reason to experience, in each case noting the interdependence of these four sources of theology. Also, in each case we shall show how Christian theologians draw upon these sources in, through, and by the Holy Spirit. This is a bit different from deciphering what theologians have said or might say about the Holy Spirit. Macrina did not say much explicitly about the Spirit; Thomas and Wesley said relatively much more. Yet we shall observe that scriptural interpretation occurs as led by the Spirit in some sense, and that theological traditions can be understood and received as conversation carried by the Spirit. Religious and spiritual encounter, not to mention experience in general, are facilitated by the animation and breath of the Spirit. As such, we shall argue that all theological work is enabled by the Spirit because it is the Spirit that empowers us to draw from Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience for theologically reflective purposes. Understanding the sources of theology is a huge first step for young theologians.

Yet as we also saw above, theological efforts emerge in particular times and places, to address specific purposes. Macrina's theological musings were forged out of conversation with her brother, amid the anxious circumstances of confrontation with death. Thomas's systematically laid out ruminations were also surely incited by questions generated from Aristotelian philosophy, not to mention other developments like the Crusades and the encounter

of the medieval church with Islam. And Wesley's sermons and occasional pieces were stimulated by his pastoral practice and concerns. In other words, theology arises not in a vacuum but amid the hustle and bustle of historical life, including its demands and opportunities.

Theology is part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian.

Part II of this book shifts from the sources of theology to the practices of theologizing. We will look at three contexts: the personal (how theology is related to our individual lives); the ecclesial (how theology is situated within and informs our communal lives, activities, and realities, especially in the community known as *church*); and the educational (how to write and do theology within the context of a class that might have assigned you this book as a text, for instance). The discussion in these three chapters (5–7) will reflect how our theological efforts in each of these contexts are, or can also be, expressions of our life in the Spirit. We will conclude this book with a more extended and substantive discussion of what it means to be theological practitioners in the Spirit and how that suggests that Christian theologians might also be nothing less than Trinitarian theologians (chap. 8).

This book focuses on the work of the Spirit in theology precisely in order to invite readers to think about doing theology as part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian, which is to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus in order to love God and neighbor. Becoming a theologian initially, and then becoming a better and better theologian from then on for the rest of our lives, is interwoven with our Christian discipleship in the Spirit. The study of theology does not ever need to cease, whether we do so formally through theological education or merely wish, as fully as possible, to engage with life as people of Christian faith seeking deeper understanding. Even in the latter case, how we live as believers will involve theological consideration. This book invites followers of Jesus to embrace their theological identity and vocation in order to love God more and better. Welcome to such life in the Spirit that empowers rather than marginalizes the life of the mind.

Discussion Questions

1. What do your tradition and experience tell you about women as theological role models? Who are the women from your family or church who might serve as such examples for young theologians?
2. Although you might not have been called a "dumb ox" before, what are some weaknesses of which you are aware about your own life? How do

you think God might be able to turn these perceived weaknesses into strengths for your theological pilgrimage?

3. Do you relate to Wesley, who was a doer rather than a bookish "nerd"? Can you anticipate how your practicality can nevertheless be part and parcel of a theological vocation?
4. Can you think of other sources of theology beyond Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience? Or what about other contexts of theological reflection beyond the personal and the ecclesial, or after you are finished with this class?

For Further Reading

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PART I

The Sources of Theology

1

Scripture

The Word and Breath of God

The Bible is indisputably central to Christian life and faith. If you were raised in church, you certainly have heard many sermons or homilies from the Bible, and if you were introduced to Christianity later in life, you have come also to realize how important this book is to Christians. In this chapter, we will see how the Bible is not only the most important resource for theology but also suggest how it can or should be used in theological reflection.

Our discussion will revolve around three sets of interpretive methods usually brought to reading the Bible. The first looks at the world *behind* the text (historical and critical approaches). The second focuses on the world *of* the text (literary and narrative approaches). The third connects to the world *in front of* the text (pragmatic and performative approaches). We shall see that as each moment is interwoven with the others, theological interpretation presumes their togetherness. We will then conclude by considering, in a very preliminary way, how we can and should listen to the Holy Spirit speaking through these scriptural moments to the church (and its members) to empower Christian practice and belief (theology) in every age and every situation.

Remember that our use of the Wesleyan quadrilateral construct means that we see Scripture to be interlinked with tradition, reason, and experience, all as theological resources. This means that our discussion of Scripture in this chapter anticipates and, in many respects, presumes what is said in the rest of part I of this book. While in the abstract we might be able to discuss Scripture apart from how it is encountered and engaged in real life, given our

own commitments to its authoritative character for Christian life and faith, we will attempt to revere Scripture on its own terms as much as possible. But we will signal ahead, as needed, to indicate that our approach is perhaps more circular than linear across the four chapters of this first part of the book.

1.1. Behind the Text

What is the world behind the text, and why is it important? This has to do partly with how to understand the references of the biblical message. The Bible tells stories—of Israel, its leaders, or the apostles and others—and these stories contribute to one overarching story of God's relationship with the world. The word "Christian" derives from the person of Jesus Christ, who is presented in the Gospels as the Logos or Word of God, who "became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14a). The good news rests on this historical person: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1). In short, while skeptics might think that these stories are made up, Christian faith rests on their having happened in some respect as accounted for in the pages of the Bible. This is not to say that every biblical story happened exactly as it is written in the text. It is to say that study of the world behind the text is important, both because of the historicity of Christian faith and in order to understand the nature of what happened in relationship to how such stories are told across the Scriptures.

There are at least three kinds of "tools" or methodologies, each overlapping in some way, that we can deploy when attempting to grasp this world behind the text. The first, *the historical method*, attempts to understand the text in relationship to what happened. Here confirming evidences are sought for what is presented in the biblical narratives from nonbiblical sources. Part of the goal here is to determine, according to more-or-less established historical methods, what happened. Much of this relies on some form of what is called analogical thinking, which is the equivalence, more or less, between what we read and our own experience. Thus we might be more inclined to believe a text's account of what happened if we ourselves have experienced something like what the text describes. Or we might be disinclined to accept such claims if they seem too far removed from our own sense of reality. Yet the challenge of the biblical narratives is that they often involve more or less fantastic events and developments. Jesus' resurrection from the dead is a prime example. Hence historical methods can never provide absolute assurance. At some level, we approach the Bible in faith, and it might be that a dynamic personal encounter with God (to be explored in chap. 5) makes it

possible for us to accept, tentatively at least, what the Bible appears to say despite its less-than-easy believability.

A second and related approach is *historical and grammatical analysis*. This is focused on how to understand what authors are communicating through their texts against the background of their historical contexts. Texts are produced by an author, or a group of authors, in certain historical periods of time, perhaps slightly or even quite removed from the time of the events that are being described. For instance, the book of Joel seems to be about a plague of locusts that may have happened as early as the late ninth century BCE. But the prophecy may have been written a few hundred years later, even after the exile to Babylon in the sixth century. Alternatively, we might not know exactly when Joel was written, but perhaps certain grammatical clues are suggestive. The style of writing might also help us discern whether it was written closer to or much later than the events purported therein. If authors of texts can be determined with greater rather than lesser certainty, we know who these persons were, what their historical context was like, how their language was used in that time, and why they may have chosen to produce the text that bears their name. Such knowledge can enable further our comprehension of what they have written. In many cases, however, we may not know who the authors are, so we have to decipher from the text what might have motivated its writing. Further, internal textual or grammatical cues combined with external witnesses (e.g., other texts that provide confirming accounts) may enable us to determine approximately when a text may have been written, and this gives us some perspective so we can better understand its historical context. From a Christian perspective, however, we might say that all texts, regardless of who they are from and when they were produced, are divinely authorized by the Spirit of God. This is "because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:21). "Prophecy" here is a more generic reference to the Scriptures of the Old Testament and hence applicable to the Bible more broadly.

Historical context—what we can know about human life and the events that shaped it—is central to understanding the world behind the text.

This leads us to *canonical criticism*, the method of considering Scripture as one book or canon. Historically, then, the world behind the text involves (1) the world described by the text, (2) the world of the author/s that produced such texts, and (3) the world of developments that led to the collection of such texts into certain configurations that eventually resulted in what we call the Bible. This last aspect of the world behind the text is important for

at least two reasons. First, if we can comprehend why a text was eventually included in the scriptural canon, we can better realize how it was viewed as authoritative for others and hence also for ourselves (in contrast to other texts that may not have been canonized). Second, if we can appreciate how these texts were understood in relationship to each other, for instance in their ordered sequence rather than other possible arrangements, we can better follow how others have seen the progression of the big story of God's relationship with the world amid the many little stories that contribute to that narrative. In short, a canonical perspective helps us both to grasp how Jewish and Christian reading communities came to accept texts as divinely communicative and to connect the dots across the two sections of Scripture.

1.2. The World of the Text

Considerations of Scripture as canon lead us into the text of the Bible itself. Here, canonicity foregrounds one of the Bible's major interpretive principles: that we interpret Scripture in part by Scripture. Earlier parts of Scripture (e.g., in the Old Testament) may be understood afresh in light of later portions (e.g., in the New Testament), even as readings of the latter are also in part shaped by our understandings of the former. Or one Gospel account could be supplemented by the others, although the integrity of each writer and text ought to be respected, and apparent discrepancies ought not to be too quickly harmonized just in order to eliminate our uncomfortable dissonance.

Intertextuality = how scriptural writers directly quote or more indirectly allude to other biblical texts.

Some scholars discuss canonical interpretation in terms of intertextuality. This refers not just to reading one part of the Bible in relationship to the other parts but to how scriptural writers directly quote or more indirectly allude to other biblical texts. The author of the Hebrews, for instance, quotes one of the psalms (95:7–11), the group of which are elsewhere in the New Testament understood to be of Davidic authorship. But in this case, Hebrews describes such as being words of the Holy Spirit (Heb. 3:7–11). Such an ascription invites a consideration of this segment of the Letter to the Hebrews in dialogue with this psalmic passage in particular, and with the traditions of Israel's wilderness wandering in prior portions of the Old Testament that have fed this psalmic text. There are intertextual echoes all over the canon. Earlier Old Testament texts appear in later Old Testament (also known as the Hebrew Bible) writings. In the New Testament, there are intertextual connections between various portions of the Christian writings as well.

Intertextual criticism leads in one direction toward literary criticism. The key here is attending to the various genres across the Bible and observing how each one functions in accordance with how such genres were meant to communicate in ancient times. The creation narratives operate less as a modern historical treatise and more like a mythic account of the world in relationship to God. In contrast to other ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies (creation myths or stories), however, the world in Genesis is dependent on a personal God rather than emanating from impersonal divine forces. Similarly, the historical books of the Old Testament are sometimes inconsistent from the perspective of those wanting to know what exactly happened. Did Yahweh (the Hebrew name for God) incite David to take the census (2 Sam. 24:1–2) or did Satan ("an adversary," 1 Chr. 21:1 NET)? There are different time periods and circumstances behind these narratives. Samuel is a kind of prophetic and historical book, while Chronicles is a scribal tradition that seeks a new understanding of Israel's fortunes in light of the Babylonian exile. Attention here to the world behind the text can therefore be suggestive of why these so-called accounts are different from modern histories that seek only to record what exactly happened. Instead, they are of a more theological type that understands historical events, in all their complexity, in relationship to transcendent (good or not too good, in this case) realities.

The point is that the Bible is constituted by different types of literature from the ancient world: (1) historical accounts that have theological dimensions (which modern histories do not have), (2) poetry, (3) prophecies, (4) lamentations, (5) letters (epistles), (6) gospels (unique in the ancient world), and so forth. Each must be understood against its historical setting but also following the interpretive guidelines relative to such literary forms. Poetic texts must be respected as affective and evocative in ways less relevant to more didactic epistolary segments of the canon, for instance. Prophetic texts, in contrast, presume an interactivity between God and the world. If not granted, that will inhibit any real engagement with these writings.

The basic teachings of Scripture exist, not as abstract propositions, but within stories that are enveloped by the story.

Yet in the main, the various genres exist within and are located across the overarching narrative of the scriptural canon that for Jews persists from Genesis through Malachi and for Christians extends through Revelation, or the Apocalypse. As such, there is a kind of biblical metanarrative, or overarching story, that is all-embracing of the various textual genres and other literary elements. In the twenty-first century, there is suspicion in some quarters of metanarratives as being presumptuous since human beings only have finite

perspective. Yet it is also undeniable that some kind of big picture precedes and informs all understanding. It is therefore important to acknowledge that our overall assumptions are constantly changing and shifting in response to our experience. As such, Scripture is best approached narratively: as one dramatic chronicle of God as Creator and Redeemer. Yet this one account is punctuated by many different, not always cohesive, stories (or "histories," keeping in mind the differences between ancient and modern notions of this term), whether that of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, the apostles, and the like.

In any case, the basic teachings of Scripture exist not as abstract propositions but as situated within stories that are enveloped by *the* story. It is not that the Bible contains no theological or doctrinal teachings, but that such claims and statements are best received within the historical and canonical contexts within which they have been communicated. "Absolute truths" that are presented as fairly straightforward philosophical or metaphysical propositions are relatively absent within the scriptural narrative. This does not mean that a biblically informed theology cannot eventually make so-called universal claims. It is to say that any such assertions *arise* from Scripture, but are not the content of Scripture itself: the Bible is primarily telling stories rather than uttering theological or philosophical propositions.

To be sure, stories have affective and emotive potency, and this means that they ought to be critically assessed so that we don't just twist these narratives to say what any of us might want them to say. In a sense, the whole first part of this book is intended to provide a range of tools to enable such sober analysis and reception. However, criticism here is in the service of faith, a kind of faith-in-the-biblical-God-seeking-understanding, as it were. For the moment, however, we have already begun to see that literary and narrative interpretations exist not by themselves, but as approaches also related to and informed by historical, grammatical, and canonical hermeneutics.

1.3. In Front of the Text

Thus far we have looked at how the world *behind the text* refers to the historical circumstances that are related in the text and led to the generation of the text and its canonization. We have also seen how the world *of the text* concerns its genres and cohesiveness. Now we turn to examine how the world *in front of the text* has to do with its *reception history*, its *history of effects*, and related developments. Strictly understood, reception history concerns how a text has been received, how it was understood, interpreted, and debated by later readers. History of effects, or effective history, on the other hand, includes additionally how a text may have had real-life impact, for instance, in informing the practices of readers or shaping ecclesial or extra-ecclesial

policies and interactions for good or ill. For instance, both slaveholders and abolitionists used the Bible to justify their position in the nineteenth century. To be sure, historical causation never depends on just one variable, even one so important as its scriptural warrants, so the history of effects of sacred texts, the Bible included, involves many factors.

Nevertheless, observe that the history of scriptural interpretation, part of its reception and effective history, continues to affect the way later generations read and engage with the Bible. Even if readers in general and young theologians more particularly are not aware of such historical developments, each of us approaches the Bible informed by our own histories, which to greater or lesser degrees include listening to sermons, participating in Bible studies, or being privy to this or that conversation about the Bible. And preachers, Bible study leaders, or laypeople at large have also been influenced by the Bible's reception and effective history, whether because they have attended seminaries, had other formal theological or educational training, or simply heard sermons or participated in Bible studies going back years, even decades. Thus the world in front of the text, in this case the reception and effective histories of the Scriptures, shape how every generation of readers and thinkers interacts with the Bible.

The "world in front of the text" = what Scripture has meant to its readers.

If some might worry that these histories are impositions on the way in which the Bible ought to be read, notice that Scripture itself invites readers to experience its claims. "O taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps. 34:8a), the psalmist bids. On the other hand, late in the apostolic period, the author of the Letter to Timothy describes the purpose of Scripture in this way: "From childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:15–17). Scripture instructs to save, and within this overarching frame, it teaches, reproves, corrects, and purifies. In short, the Bible enables and inspires proficiency in good works.

There is then a sense, adhering to the canonical and intertextual principles, that this Timothean text summons all Christians to be taught, admonished, and finally saved and sanctified in and through interaction with the Bible. From this perspective, other scriptural cues become clear. For instance, the author of the Fourth Gospel concludes by putting plainly the purpose for his writing: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may

come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30–31). We might read the Gospel of John for many different reasons and even learn many other things. But whether we accept it or not, we cannot and should not deny that he wrote in order that we might believe in Jesus and receive the eternal life (mentioned repeatedly in John) that comes through him. Hence, especially because it is difficult to determine what it means to believe in Jesus and experience eternal life in him, the reception history, including testimonies of contemporaries, to that effect ought to both inform our understanding of this Gospel and shape our own experience of it.

To say that interpreting the Bible needs to include its reception and effective history and that this involves the history of experiences of the text might be a bit worrisome. Yet if we might be rightly uneasy that individual experience could just as much distort as elucidate the Scriptures, let us not forget the role of the Holy Spirit in this process. The Bible itself tutors as such, as in the letters to the seven churches addressed in the book of Revelation: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev. 2:7a; also 2:11a, 17a, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Hence to listen (or read, in our case) and then to live in light of what we have heard (or read) cannot or should not be dissociated from the Holy Spirit. To be sure, it is sometimes difficult to discern between our being led by the Spirit and our claiming as such. Yet this challenge ought not to lead to a complete dismissal of the Spirit's leading role in effectuating in our lives the realities testified to by Scripture.

Now, those concerned only with the world behind the text might want to limit application of this instruction only to members of the seven churches of Revelation who received the original missive of visions. There is a sense in which we should be careful about collapsing the distances between the world behind and the world in front of the text so that we do not presume that if Judas went and hanged himself (Matt. 27:5; Acts 1:16–18), so also should we! That is why it is important to develop tools to discern how to maintain the respective domains of the worlds behind, within, and in front of the Bible. The rest of the chapters in part I of this book will bring further clarification to these important matters.

1.4. The Spirit of the Text

We have already seen that the Holy Spirit can be understood to have inspired the text to begin with, and in that sense the Spirit links the world behind the text (§1.1) with the world of the text (§1.2). We now realize that the Spirit works also in the world in front of the text (§1.3). Historically, this has been

where the role of the Spirit has been most pronounced. The Spirit illuminates the meaning of the text to readers and then applies the text in and through their lives. Some might insist on the distinction between meaning (in the original context) and application (in the readers' context) and this would in effect suggest that the Spirit works in the worlds *of the text* (the meaning as grammatically, literarily, and narratively understood) and *in front of the text* (the application of such meaning). Yet such delineation would be too hard and fast. Rather, bringing them together, it might be said that the Spirit brings the text to life for later readers, communities, and generations. As Paul himself intimated in discussing the old covenant and the written law, "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6b). I emphasize the role of the Spirit in all three moments: prior to the text, generating the text; in the text's canonization; and in its effective capacity.

Putting it this way reflects pietist and pragmatist sensibilities regarding the Bible. Pietists are among those who insist that the Bible is first and foremost a book that is *for* believers. The Bible builds them up in the faith and in that sense is applicable to their lives of discipleship. Pietists would contend, "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). Some pietists have been what in earlier times were called primitivists and restorationists. These were heirs of the Renaissance (and then Reformation) retrieval of ancient texts who focused on a recovery of the apostolic way of life as recorded in the pages of the New Testament. Contemporary pietists are far from the only Christians who embrace the active role of the Bible in their lives. Most theological or confessional interpreters of Scripture today would be likely to accept that Scripture invites inhabitation and participation. The difference is that pietists have been more likely historically and still also in the present to invoke the Spirit devotionally and thereby experience Scripture's power and reality.

Pragmatists might refer to a philosophical movement, but the context of this discussion involves also the views of those who claim that the meaning of any text includes its effects. For instance, how we might understand God's nature and character is less a propositional matter and more related to the qualities manifest in the lives of those committed to that Deity. So, what it means to say that "God is love" is clarified by the love manifest in the lives of those making this claim. Therefore the effects of any text, whether intentionally enacted by readers because they believe such to be textually demanded or unintentionally performed, tell us about that text's meaning and significance. (Meaning and significance are technically distinct in the broader hermeneutical literature, but not for pragmatists.) So if no one who

says "God is love" shows love, then it is difficult to comprehend what this claim is asserting. In short, the worlds behind, within, and in front of the text are interconnected. In this sense, the meaning and significance of a text in its original context are related to pragmatic applications in their contexts, and vice versa.

One scriptural example might be helpful to see how pietism and pragmatism are intertwined in the effects of Scripture. On the Day of Pentecost, Luke, the author of the book of Acts, records Peter preaching from the prophet Joel to explain the developments to the crowd concerning the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:14–21; cf. Joel 2:28–32). There are many worlds *behind* the text in this case that are not quite clear-cut:

1. Joel's *world* behind Joel's *text* (historically murky as indicated in §1.1 above), because the book of Joel was probably written some considerable period of time after the prophet's life)
2. Joel's text *behind Peter's preaching*
3. Joel's text in Peter's preaching *behind Luke's text*
4. Joel's text in Peter's preaching as recorded in Luke's text *behind the reception of Luke's text* (which history is ongoing!)
5. and so on

There are similarly multiple textual worlds here: of Joel's and of Luke's, most clearly. And there are also many worlds *in front of the text*: the world in front of Joel's text, and that in front of Luke's. As we can see, how Luke is understood depends on how Peter read Joel and how Joel ought to be comprehended on his own terms and in relationship to the prophetic literature with which it is associated (the Book of the Twelve). Yet something further is just as important for our pragmatist inclinations: how Joel is understood is now influenced by Peter's reception and by Luke's account and the latter's reception and effective history. We understand better if we also have received the Holy Spirit as the text seems to describe than if we had no such experiences. To summarize: the meaning of any text is neither fully determined nor complete: its sense is subject to its ongoing application in human hearts (the pietist emphasis) and lives (the pragmatist focus).

From a Christian perspective, I suggest that this can be understood *pentecostally*, in relationship to the giving of the Holy Spirit at what the Bible describes as the Pentecost event (Acts 2). As a contemporary pentecostal Christian, I suggest that all Christian reading and understanding of the Bible is *after* Pentecost, meaning enabled by the Holy Spirit. In this connection, not only does the Spirit bring about intellectual cognition of the

words of the Bible: it also enables the realization of these words in relation to the salvation and sanctification that God intends for us. Ours is thereby a growing understanding of Scripture, facilitated by the Holy Spirit, who actualizes the message of the Bible afresh in our lives and in the new circumstances of our world. How this happens will be further unveiled in the rest of this book.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the world *behind the text* important for our reading the Bible? In what ways does understanding of that world help to provide guidelines for how we might interpret the message of Scripture?
2. Can you provide in a few sentences the overarching dramatic narrative of the Bible? Might you be able to indicate how some of its various texts contribute to that account?
3. What are some reasons the Bible and its various texts give for their being written? How effective have these been or how have these been actualized or realized by individuals or the church more generally since Bible times?
4. Can you summarize what the Bible teaches with regard to the role of the Holy Spirit *before*, *within*, and *in front of* the Scriptures? How, if at all, is the Holy Spirit present in your own interaction with the Bible?

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