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# FROM CANON TO CONCEPT: 'SAME' AND 'OTHER' IN THE RELATION BETWEEN BIBLICAL AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

If a Protestant be allowed to have a Holy Grail, mine would be the answer to the question, 'What does it mean to be biblical?' I hope to repay the honour of your invitation to deliver this year's Finlayson lecture by pursuing this worthy question a bit further. You have heard in recent years about metaphors and about biblical authority; my theme tonight – from canon to concept – follows on from both these topics by contending that biblical authority is best served by attending to the literary forms of Scripture. I will argue that the gulf currently separating biblical from systematic theology can be bridged by better appreciating the contribution of the diverse biblical genres, and that a focus on literary genre could do much to relieve the ills currently plaguing both their houses.

Almost everyone agrees that the relation of biblical and systematic theology is a vital one. The number of compelling treatments of this subject, however, is in inverse proportion to its significance. I would like to stand on the shoulders of giants, but there are not many. Calvin did not explicitly address the question of the relation of biblical to systematic theology, but his *Institutes* provide an exemplary model of the *practice* which I will try theoretically to describe. By keeping such examples in mind I hope, if not to stand on, at least to peer over, the shoulders of giants.

My aim is to sketch, and it can only be a sketch, a method for relating biblical to systematic theology which might also respond to Bernard Ramm's call to Evangelicals to develop a

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<sup>1</sup> The Finlayson Memorial Lecture delivered at the annual conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society on Wednesday 13 April, 1994 at the Faith Mission Bible College, Edinburgh.

new paradigm for doing theology.<sup>2</sup> I therefore offer my remarks in the humble spirit of one who desires to continue, to cite the title of Professor Finlayson's last work, 'the story of theology'.

## **I. From Canon to Concept: The Problem**

### **1. Canon and Concept**

What is involved in the passage from biblical language and literature to theological concepts and doctrines? What governs the move from biblical to systematic theology? The question is more easily asked than answered. It is widely acknowledged that the Bible is the indispensable resource for Christian theology. But here the consensus ends. With some exceptions, biblical studies and theology have grown further and further apart since the Enlightenment. Although many authors believe that biblical theology is an essential bridge between exegesis and theology, there is a great degree of confusion over how biblical theology ought to be done and over its relation to systematic theology.

#### **i. The Crisis in Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology**

*The crisis in modernity.* Both biblical and systematic theology are today in crisis, as is modernity itself. 'Postmodernity' has provoked a crisis in biblical criticism just as the rise of the modern world had earlier precipitated a crisis in traditional biblical interpretation. So-called 'postmodern' thinkers have lost their faith in rationality. Reason, rather than giving us access to objective truth, has instead fallen prey to a hermeneutics of suspicion which disputes its claim to neutrality. Postmodernists regard reason as a form of rhetoric that masks the self-interest of those who use it. Worse, reason is a form of violence which suppresses the 'other'. The very etymology of the word 'concept' – 'to take to oneself' (Latin, *concipere*) – indicates the totalitarian nature of rational theories.

What is the alternative to reason? Postmodernists want all voices, especially those which have been marginalized, to tell their own stories rather than subsuming them in a

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<sup>2</sup> See Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco, 1983).

'metanarrative' – a grand story that purports to explain everything else. In the postmodern world, every voice shall be lifted up. Incidentally, this sentiment lies behind the furore over required reading lists – canons – in the national curriculum. The very idea of a canon means that some voices will *not* be heard. There is little room for authoritative canons in a world that celebrates particularity and pluralism.

***The crisis in biblical theology.*** Biblical theology is in crisis too.<sup>3</sup> The attempt to study the theology of the Bible historically and descriptively has led not to the development of biblical theology but to its demise. Biblical theology, by the end of the nineteenth century, had degenerated into mere histories of the 'religion' of Israel and the early church. The growing stress on the diversity between the varying strands of the biblical tradition led to scepticism about the possibility of producing a unified theology. Moreover, biblical theology failed to agree on what method should be used or on the focus of its task. Werner Jeanrond has recently expressed his worry about the lack of integration of biblical and theological studies in most faculties of theology. He asks: 'what is the discipline of biblical studies good for these days?'<sup>4</sup> and calls for a reform of the theological curriculum in order to facilitate greater integration. Brevard Childs agrees: 'Clearly if there is to be any future for biblical theology, the pressing need for the next generation is to build strong links between the disciplines of Bible and theology.'<sup>5</sup>

***The crisis in systematic theology.*** Finally, contemporary theology is in crisis, or better, methodological disarray. In place of a unifying perspective, theology today is characterized by multiple points of view, each representing

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3 See Brevard Childs' *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia, 1970).

4 Werner G. Jeanrond, 'After Hermeneutics: The Relationship between Theology and Biblical Studies', in F. Watson (ed.), *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies* (London, 1993), p. 85.

5 Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible* (London, 1992), p. xvi.

some particularity (e.g., feminist, gay, liberation, process – divisions cut not of denominational but of ideological cloth), each following its own agenda. The postmodern theologian is allergic to systems, which are identified with closed, oppressive and totalitarian forms of thought.

To the extent that biblical studies is a historical and critical discipline independent of doctrinal theology, it has become harder for theologians to be ‘biblical’. Biblical studies no longer ‘belongs’ to theology.<sup>6</sup> And theology, insofar as it has cut its ties with Scripture, has been effectively deregulated. It is a matter of great concern that, in trying to determine what we can say about and do in the name of God, contemporary theologians all too often have recourse only to makeshift criteria.

## ii. The Canon in Biblical Theology

How can biblical theology help? J.P. Gabler’s 1787 lecture marks the beginning of a separate career for biblical theology.<sup>7</sup> According to Gabler, biblical theology is a descriptive discipline. Minimally, it describes the thought of an author or a book or a particular theme in the context of its historical development. Maximally, biblical theology describes the relation of the belief system of Israel to that of the early church. ‘Biblical Theology occupies a position between Exegesis and Systematic Theology in the encyclopaedia of theological disciplines. It differs from Systematic Theology not in being more Biblical ... but in that its principle of organizing the Biblical material is historical rather than logical.’<sup>8</sup> Its descriptions are given in the authors’ own terms and categories. To use Krister Stendahl’s now classic distinction, biblical theology describes ‘what it meant’ and systematic theology prescribes ‘what it means’. But this way of putting the relationship between biblical theology and systematic theology only poses the problem: how does one

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6 So James Barr, ‘Does Biblical Study Still Belong to Theology?’, in *Explorations in Theology* 7 (London, 1980), pp. 18-29.

7 See John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, ‘J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980), pp. 133-58.

8 Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, 1948), p. 5.

move from 'what it meant' to 'what it means'? Is 'what it means' the same, other or similar to 'what it meant'?

With the rise of modern biblical scholarship, historical research revealed more sharply the 'otherness' of the biblical writers, that is, the differences between the various voices and the distance between biblical and dogmatic theology. The use of doctrinal categories to analyze and organize the texts temporarily provided bridges between the biblical canon and theological concepts, but 'by the end of the century these bridges were becoming insecure at both ends'.<sup>9</sup> Liberal theologians came to believe that the dogmatic categories were inadequate descriptions of Christian faith; biblical critics judged these categories inadequate descriptions of biblical religion. Biblical theology took on a new meaning: not 'the theology which accords with the Scriptures' but rather 'the theology contained in the Scriptures'. *Sacra doctrina* and *sacra pagina* were prised apart.

Brevard Childs has called for a new approach which would reinstate biblical theology as a bridge discipline between biblical studies and systematic theology by focussing on the Bible as canon. Ideally, biblical theology should be the integral element in a hermeneutical process which would relate the descriptive to the dogmatic in a 'fusion of horizons'. I agree with Childs that the proper object of biblical theology is the canon. The church did not canonize J, E, D or P but rather the final form of the biblical traditions. But I disagree with Childs about the significance of the canonical form. For most of church history, canon has been seen as a principle of authority rather than of meaning. The function of canon, that is, is to list the books that the believing community has recognized as authoritative, not to serve as a context of meaning.

### iii. Concept and Systematic Theology

For Thomas Aquinas, systematic theology is the rational exposition of divine revelation given in Scripture. He refers to *sacra doctrina* and *sacra pagina* interchangeably. But how large is a page, and what is on it? Is theology a science of the

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Morgan, 'Biblical Theology', in R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (eds), *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London, 1990), p. 88.

sentence or of the text? The practice of making key sentences into proof texts not only leads to bad exegesis but also betrays an inadequate view of the nature of language. Aquinas is well aware of the difficulty in moving from canon to concept: 'the truth of faith is contained in Holy Writ diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely, so that, in order to gather the truth of faith from Holy Writ, one needs long study and practice'.<sup>10</sup>

Systematic theology has not taken sufficient account of the Scripture's 'modes of expression' and the role they play in communicating content. Just as philosophers long considered metaphors and other figures of speech mere decorative packaging, so theologians have often underestimated the cognitive significance of larger literary forms. For many, the literary modes of expression are just so much wrapping paper to be torn off in one's haste to get the proposition inside the package. There are better ways to move from canon to concept.

Systematic theology is an inquiry into the basic concepts of the Christian faith. Paul Ricoeur has some (uncharacteristically) harsh things to say about theologians who proceed to concepts too quickly. They dilute the rich language and literature of the Bible to a diluted set of arid propositions, exchanging their birthright for a mess of pottage. Ricoeur is only echoing Gregory of Nyssa: 'Concepts create idols. Only wonder understands.'<sup>11</sup> Must we be so hard on concepts?

According to the 'names model' of language, every word names a thing and concepts mirror the essence of things or the relations between things. Since Wittgenstein, however, we have learned that not every word refers to a thing and not every sentence is used to mirror the world. Language can be used to do many things besides refer to the world. So can literature. And so can concepts. Some philosophers view concepts not as mental representations but as mental skills or capacities. One way to acquire these skills, I shall argue, is to let oneself be instructed on the way language is used in various language games or literary genres. I shall argue that the canon contains a number of such 'games' wherein we

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae i..9. ad. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, cited in Jürgen Moltmann in *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London, 1977), p. 73 n. 29.

learn to use concepts such as 'God', 'sin', and 'salvation' correctly.

#### iv. Form and Content

'From canon to concept'. This is about the relationship between form and content in our thinking about God. My thesis is straightforward: before we systematize what the Bible says about God we must first attend to how the content of the Bible is given in and through its literary forms.

In modern thought, until rather recently, linguistic and literary form was thought to be of little consequence. Reason was thought to have only one form – the theoretical, an autonomous sphere of discourse inhabited by a set of rationally founded abstract propositions. Myths and metaphors were thought to be of aesthetic, though not cognitive interest. Modernity, by and large, has accorded normative status to scientific thinking (*e.g.*, thinking in concepts) rather than to mythopoetic (*e.g.*, thinking in myths and images).

This tendency towards abstraction reached its culmination in Hegel's distinction between *Begriff* (concept) and *Vorstellung* (representation). For Hegel, the Christian narratives fall short of the clarity and certainty that philosophy requires. They have to be *aufgehoben* ('elevated') into more adequate conceptual forms. In principle, the concept retains the truth of the representation: 'Hegel's intent is to be loyal to the *content* of Christianity.'<sup>12</sup> In practice, the various representations of the Christ event are swallowed up into Hegel's omnivorous dialectic of Being, non-Being and Becoming.

#### 2. 'Same' and 'Other'

Among the most important conceptual skills is knowing how to draw distinctions and to make connections. In large part, we acquire these skills when we learn the meaning of 'same' and 'other'.

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<sup>12</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 22.



### i. Orthodoxy and Heresy

Edward Farley and Peter Hodgson argue that the Bible only became 'canon' because of pressure from 'heretical' opponents.<sup>13</sup> The 'heterodox' – the other to reason, the other to 'us' – is a threat. The 'Scripture principle', that is, the belief that the Bible is the final arbiter of theological statements, developed to cope with the increasing diversity in the Church. Doctrine responds to threats to Christian identity or sameness and functions as a means of 'social demarcation'.<sup>14</sup> Doctrine is an attempt to consolidate the 'Same' over against the 'Other'. Walter Bauer argued that what is now called 'heresy' in the New Testament was originally considered orthodox but was subsequently defeated by adherents to the Pauline tradition of Christianity.<sup>15</sup> James D. G. Dunn concurs: in early Christianity there was no such thing as orthodoxy – 'same' or 'right' opinion – but only 'different forms of Christianity competing for the loyalty of believers'.<sup>16</sup>

### ii. Unity and Diversity

*Biblical theology v. systematic theology.* The problem of how to relate unity and diversity is as ugly a ditch as was Lessing's ditch between history and faith. Indeed, the ditch between unity and diversity is doubly difficult. On the one hand, it refers to the diversity within the canon itself. Finding the unity behind the diversity of the Scriptures is one of biblical theology's most challenging tasks. On the other hand, it refers to the methodological ditch, the divide between different organizing principles (historical, logical) for the two disciplines.

For many theologians, however, the ditch is not very deep. The representatives of Protestant Orthodoxy did not let the

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13 'Scripture and Tradition', in Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (eds, 2nd ed.), *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks* (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 67-70.

14 Alister McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine* (Oxford, 1990).

15 Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1971).

16 James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London, 1977), p. 3.

Aristotelian form of their theologies deter them from claiming to be 'biblical'. Unfortunately, much systematic theology that passes as 'biblical' enjoys only a casual acquaintance with the biblical texts. The method of proving doctrines by adducing multiple proof-texts leaves much to be desired. One typically begins with a doctrinal confession and then sets off trawling through the Scriptures. One's exegetical 'catch' is then dumped indiscriminately into parentheses irrespective of where the parts were found. Biblical theology is hardly possible in such an atmosphere.

*Postmodernism v. systematic theology.* Walter Brueggemann speaks for many postmodern biblical scholars when he urges that the proper subject of biblical studies 'is the specific text, without any necessary relation to other texts or any coherent pattern read out of or into the text'.<sup>17</sup> This approach is congenial to postmoderns because it focuses on 'little' stories rather than the 'great story', or what I earlier called 'metanarrative'. Brueggemann says that we too often read the Bible with some systematic interpretive framework that causes us to judge one text by another and often to eliminate the 'lesser' text.

David Tracy thinks that modernity has become overly dependent on a single form of thought – the propositional – which it then forgot was a form. Nietzsche excelled in exposing and exploding alleged truths as fictions which thought too highly of themselves. The same urge lies behind deconstructionist philosophers who accuse systematic forms of thinking of violently repressing difference. On this view, the drive towards sameness – orthodoxy – is always fascist.

The doctrine of original sin, at once central and controversial, well illustrates the problem. Biblical scholars note that Genesis 3 has been assigned a disproportionate role in classical theology which the Old Testament does not reflect. Moreover, it pertains to a mystery which stretches conceptual understanding to the limit, namely, the origin of evil. Ricoeur complains in his article "'Original Sin": A Study in Meaning' (1960) that the doctrine suppresses essential dimensions of biblical language (especially biblical symbols and metaphors)

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Texts under Negotiation* (London, 1993), p. 58.

in a pseudo-rationality. Theology makes an interpretive error in moving from canonical images like 'fall' and 'error' to the concept of original sin. And to complicate matters further, the concept was born under the impulse of external threats: the 'others' of Gnosticism on the one hand and Pelagianism on the other.

'Captivity was an image, a parable; hereditary sin tries to be a concept.'<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur is quite clear that the concept of original sin is not a biblical one. Indeed, he accuses the concept of being 'false knowledge' which 'compresses into an inconsistent notion a juridical category of debt and a biological category of inheritance'.<sup>19</sup> Augustine's formulation is an inconsistent mix, like oil and water, of two universes of discourse, those of law and that of biology. What Ricoeur finds objectionable in the doctrine is its pretence to replace the need for interpretation. Concepts, unlike symbols and metaphors, do not create new meaning but wring the life out of language.<sup>20</sup>

Another French philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas, calls the history of Western thought 'Greek', and characterizes it as a style of language that is conceptual rather than metaphorical and a style of thinking which attempts to reduce the other to the same. Such a reading of 2,000 years of intellectual history is doubtless perfunctory, but Lévinas's charge is a sobering one. Does reason ultimately reduce all knowledge of others to knowledge of oneself? Are we only able to know what is already in 'our system'?

Must all interpretation be repressive? Must even translation be violent? Must otherness always be violated when one searches for a deeper sameness? The diversity with which I am here concerned is literary in nature. Is it possible to get

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18 Paul Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, IL, 1974), p. 269.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 270.

20 Ricoeur prefers to see the Fall as a 'rational symbol'. The distinction is cut rather finely, but Ricoeur means to say by it 'that concepts do not have their own consistency but refer back to expressions which are *analogous*, not because of a lack of rigor but because of an excess of meaning' (*Conflict of Interpretations*, p. 281). In other words, a rational symbol captures rather than resolves the tension which inheres in the canon.

theological sameness out of canonical otherness? We may well ask why there are so many different forms of biblical literature in the Bible in the first place. One of Ricoeur's remarks has caught my imagination: 'Not just any theology is associated with the narrative form.' For better or for worse, the Word and reality of God come mediated to us in a variety of literary forms. These differences need not imply disunity for, as Aristotle commented, Being may be said in many ways. There are, then, two errors to avoid in the attempt to build bridges between biblical and systematic theology: reductionism (the loss of 'otherness', of diverse forms) and relativism (the loss of 'sameness', the unifying substance).

### **3. Bridging Biblical and Systematic Theology: a Brief Typology of Approaches**

Some bridges ought to be avoided. It is possible to exaggerate either sameness or otherness. Traditional approaches tend to reduce poetic forms (e.g., metaphors, narratives) to concept. Contemporary approaches tend to revel in poetic forms and refuse to let them settle down in concept. It may be helpful, at this stage of our inquiry, to give a brief typology of the ways in which biblical and systematic theology may be related.

#### **i. 'Same'**

Under the heading of the 'Same', we may mention approaches that seek to 'translate' the Bible into theology. Some focus on sameness of biblical content, others on sameness of form.

*Content-oriented approaches.* I want first to consider two very different content-oriented approaches, represented by Charles Hodge and Rudolf Bultmann. Hodge represents what George Lindbeck calls 'propositional theology'. Lindbeck charges this view with being literalistic, insofar as it assumes that the truth of God can be read off of Scripture and restated definitively in propositional form. Lindbeck's charge of 'literalism' is inappropriate: such naive realism is neither a necessary consequence nor a condition of cognitive approaches to doctrine. The medieval Scholastics knew about analogical God-talk. And Calvin made good use of rhetorical analysis. As we have seen, non-literal forms of discourse such as metaphor have cognitive content too.

Nevertheless, Lindbeck has a point. The proof-texting method does tend to give authoritative status to the propositional form. Ramm states that 'The goal of Reformed theology was to systematize the revelation of God as one unitary corpus of revelation. It considered that there was one system of doctrine under the literary diversity and historical records.'<sup>21</sup> Hodge compares the Bible to a storehouse of data and theology to scientific induction. The basic problem with this method is that Hodge tends to treat all portions of Scripture as if they were cut from the same logical cloth. In treating all verses as though they were the same kind of fact, Hodge betrays a tendency to reduce the diverse parts of the canon to the same genre: didactic literature. Hodge, by failing to appreciate the different uses to which biblical language and literature are put, ultimately succumbs to a certain naiveté about what it means to be biblical in systematic theology. In the last resort, a false picture of language holds him captive.

Bultmann represents a second content-oriented approach to Scripture. He attends to the religious experience that lies behind the text and is expressed through it. Bultmann demythologizes the text in order to recover this experiential core. Demythologizing is really a procedure which literally 'de-forms' the text. The literary form is merely an irritating distraction that Bultmann must discard in order to obtain the existential core. Interestingly, Robert Morgan believes that Bultmann's New Testament theology 'has proved the century's clearest attempt to combine the two related meanings of biblical theology [theology that accords with the Bible and theology contained in the Bible]'.<sup>22</sup>

These first two approaches represent conservative and liberal theology respectively. However, they share something important in common. Bultmann recast the New Testament kerygma in the conceptual framework of existentialist, rather than Scottish common-sense philosophy, as did Hodge. With Charles Hodge, what counts is the propositional content. With Bultmann, what counts is the existential self-understanding. But in the final analysis, each considers the canonical material to be only a means to an end.

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21 Bernard Ramm, 'Unity of Doctrine' in his *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1966), p. 133.

22 Morgan, 'Biblical Theology', p. 89.

*Form-oriented approaches.* Today the situation is reversed. Form is the new darling of the intelligentsia; the medium is the message. Metaphor has become a kind of pop-star in theological circles. In large part this has been a protest movement against propositional theology. Sallie McFague argues that the problem with concepts is that they 'literalize' the metaphorical and thus 'idolize' one image or concept of God.<sup>23</sup> She encourages theologians to develop new metaphors which will do for our day what the biblical metaphors did for theirs, namely, image God's loving relationship to the world. According to McFague, the better way of speaking about God today would be to say that God is the 'lover' or 'friend' of the world.<sup>24</sup> She is well aware, however, that while these changes preserve the form of theological discourse, they represent, with regard to the content of theology, no less than a change from theism to pantheism.

A number of contemporary theologies claim to be 'narrative'. What David Tracy has described as the 'second coming' of Barth in theology is the result of the rediscovery of the centrality of narrative in his thought. Hans Frei argues persuasively that, while Barth begins the *Church Dogmatics* with the form of doctrine, it is the narrative form that takes over – so much so that in volume IV the first two parts are structured according to the parable of the Prodigal Son, the going of the Son in the far country and then the homecoming of the Son. Barth's preoccupation with narrative means that his primary question will be about God's identity, not God's nature. While one welcomes the renewed interest of theologians in the Bible, there is a danger that exclusive attention to metaphor or narrative in particular results in a 'canon within the canon' and thus to a theological method that is less than fully biblical.

Brevard Childs deserves special mention in this brief review of attempts to preserve sameness of form, not least because in his latest work he makes heroic efforts to relate biblical

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23 Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia, 1982), pp. 2, 38.

24 See the critique by David J. Bromwell, 'Sallie McFague's "Metaphorical Theology"' in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61 (1993), pp. 485-503.

theology and systematic theology. For Childs, the process of canonization is essentially the process by which the traditions of Israel and the early church were made fit for future theological service. The whole point of canonization according to Childs was to enable the Scriptures to function as theological, and not merely historical witnesses.<sup>25</sup>

Childs contends, rightly in my opinion, that the basic problem of biblical theology – the relation of the two Testaments – ‘can only be resolved by theological reflection which moves from the description of the biblical witnesses to the object toward which these witnesses point, that is, to their subject matter, substance, or *res*’.<sup>26</sup> For Childs, the goal of biblical theology is ‘to understand the various voices within the whole Christian Bible, New and Old Testament alike, as a witness to the one Lord Jesus Christ, the selfsame divine reality’.<sup>27</sup> To remain on the textual level, he says, is to miss the key which unites dissident voices into a harmonious whole. Of course, the contentious question is how we penetrate to the subject matter, to the thing itself. But when it comes to addressing explicitly the relation between biblical and systematic theology, Childs unfortunately offers little light: ‘at this juncture probably little more precision in theory is required other than to urge biblical scholars to be more systematic, and systematic theologians to be more biblical, and to get on with the task’.<sup>28</sup> But this advice, though sincerely meant, only throws us back to the beginning: what does it *mean* to be biblical?

## ii. ‘Other’

Of course, many theologians consider the attempt to say the ‘same’ thing as the Bible to be totally misguided. Deconstructionists argue that translation is always transmutation. Even verbatim quotations of Scripture fail to preserve the content because the new context in which it is

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25 ‘The material was shaped in order to provide means for its continuing appropriation by its subsequent hearers.... This shaping activity functioned much like a *regula fidei*’ (Childs, *Biblical Theology*, p. 71).

26 Childs, *Biblical Theology*, p. 80.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

uttered alters the original meaning. On this view, all interpretation is 'allegorizing', in the original sense of the term: 'speaking one thing and signifying something *other*'.<sup>29</sup>

Both of the above approaches overlook crucial hermeneutical issues. Theologians who believe that they can achieve sameness with the Bible risk hermeneutic pride. They err in thinking that interpretation is an *insignificant* problem. Language and literature are treated merely as something to be got through as quickly as possible. Theologians who believe the message of theology will always be other than Scripture, on the other hand, manifest hermeneutic sloth. They err in thinking that interpretation is an *insuperable* problem. On the contrary, interpretation – like theology – is rather a matter of work and prayer which approximates the text.

## II. From Canon to Concept: The Proposal

### 1. Biblical Theology and Poetic Rationality

I turn now to constructive suggestions, beginning with biblical theology.

#### i. Beyond Metaphor and Narrative

Metaphors are cognitive instruments for discovering the real.<sup>30</sup> They are imaginative creations – models – which allow us to perceive certain aspects of reality that would otherwise go unnoticed. Metaphors, and the models they engender, are thus 'reality-depicting'. The same is also true of narrative. Both metaphors and narratives have come to be appreciated for their irreducible cognitive functions.<sup>31</sup>

Attention to these forms of creative language has yielded important gains, *and* important losses. We have come to see,

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<sup>29</sup> So Heraclitus in the fifth century B.C. See Andrew Louth, 'Allegorical Interpretation', *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY, 1962); Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* (London, 1974); Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford, 1985).

<sup>31</sup> For an excellent compilation of recent work on narrative and its significance for theology, see Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (eds), *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1989).



for example, that narratives are able to 'tell time' in ways that other discourses cannot. They can relate the identity of persons as well as create a sense of communal identity. Never again will we say 'It's just a story'. But in the wake of the rehabilitation of narrative has come a loss: narrative has become for many a virtual canon within the canon. What is missing from metaphorical and narrative theology is an appreciation of *all* the literary forms in the canon.

## ii. Biblical Theology as Genre Analysis

The basic unit of meaning is an utterance or speech act. I am here interested in describing only how speech acts larger than the sentence cohere and communicate, in the diverse literary 'genres' or forms of discourse which constitute the canon.<sup>32</sup> 'Discourse' refers to language at the level of the communicative act. And I do want to say that in Scripture there are many different kinds of communicative acts: assertions, warnings, promises, questions, songs, proverbs, commands, and so forth. Remembering this will provide the needed correction to propositional and metaphorical theology alike: the Bible does not merely give us atomistic propositions about God, or free-floating metaphors, but ways of processing and organizing propositions and metaphors into meaningful wholes. The forms of biblical literature are the bridge between canon and concept we seek.<sup>33</sup>

Genre is much more than a way of classifying forms of literature. They are rather ways of viewing the world. A genre is a form of thinking embodied in a form of literature. Each

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32 See my 'The Semantics of Biblical Literature', in D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge (eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (Grand Rapids, 1986), pp. 53-104.

33 A similar proposal to mine on the role of biblical theology has recently been made by Mary Gerhart: 'With generic analysis, biblical theologians will understand themselves to mediate between genres' ('Generic Competence in Biblical Hermeneutics', *Semeia* 43 (1988), p. 60). Bernard Ramm also notes the importance of literary forms for a treatment of biblical revelation, but does not explore the matter at any great length: 'We can only speak suggestively and representatively here, for this subject requires nothing short of an independent treatise to do it justice' (*Special Revelation and the Word of God* [Grand Rapids, 1961], pp. 66-67).

genre represents a 'mode of cognition' and offers a distinct perspective for conceiving God, humanity and the world. In other words, every biblical genre has epistemological significance. Biblical theology should be the study of the rules and procedures that govern a particular biblical form. Unless we understand the form of the whole, we are doomed to misread, misunderstand and misuse the parts. Music provides a good analogy. Appreciating music is much more than being able to abstract the melody. Likewise, interpretation is much more than extracting the message.

What biblical theology should describe is the way in which biblical literary forms communicate content. This is similar to what literary critics term 'poetics': the study of the ways in which different kinds of literature make sense and represent reality. Poetics is the study of the rules and conventions 'embodied' in different kinds of discourse. Now in the one Bible we have many kinds of books. On my view biblical theology becomes a 'poetics' of revelation. To some extent, we engage in poetics already. We have to. Verbal meaning is always 'genre-bound'.<sup>34</sup> 'Every piece of writing is a kind of something.'<sup>35</sup> Reading is always *reading as*. One cannot simply read the Bible; one reads the Bible as history, as gospel, as apocalyptic, *etc.* What I am calling for is a systematic study of the poetics of biblical literature. This would be more than an exercise in classification.

How does one identify a genre? It is not enough to examine the formal structure only. Two buildings might both present a neo-classical facade, but one could be a hospital and the other a church. One needs to go inside to find out which. So it is with genre: one needs to examine both the shape and the substance. To use Aristotle's categories, we might say that genre is 'formed matter' or 'material [in this case verbal] form'. The point is that we never have unformed or immediate access to the matter.

We must therefore be on our guard against the 'substitution theory' of genre. It is a mistake to think that one could entirely replace a literary form with an equivalent descriptive

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<sup>34</sup> So E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, 1967), p. 76.

<sup>35</sup> John Gabel and Charles Wheeler, *The Bible as Literature* (Oxford, 1986), p. 16.

proposition. The most for which we can hope is a *similar* statement. Our interpretations will never supplant the original text. To think that they could be is to commit what literary critics term the 'heresy of paraphrase'.

In suggesting that biblical theology and systematic theology should attend more than they have to the Bible's literary genres, I am not advocating a merely literary approach to Scripture. Genres, like metaphors, can be reality-depicting. I am trying rather to avoid two extremes: 'Biblicism may fail to see the literary character of Scripture and treat Scripture like a code book of theological ordinances. Criticism may be so preoccupied with the literary aspects of Scripture that it fails to see the substance of which literature happens to be the vehicle.'<sup>36</sup> God's Word comes to us embedded in a variety of literary genres.

To repeat, genres are ways of seeing the world, verbalized habits of vision. For example, Hebrew narrative marks the beginning of historiography and of a concept of linear rather than cyclical time. Apocalyptic pertains to the end of history; wisdom literature sees the natural and social world as ordered, thus permitting organized knowledge of it. And Gospel narrates 'eucatastrophe' – historical events with cataclysmic beneficial effects.

The Bible continues to be the theologian's spectacles, but these spectacles are multi-focal, not bi-focal; we must pay attention not only to the two Testaments, but to the multiplicity of literary forms. The intelligibility of New Testament concepts, for example, depends not only on their being rooted in a particular form of life, as Wittgenstein maintains, but in a particular form of literature. Anthony Thiselton's study of biblical uses of the word 'true' is instructive in this regard. He finds that 'true' is used in various language games and not only in the language game of history that refers to past events.<sup>37</sup> In the Psalms, for example, 'true' means 'trustworthy' ('all the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth', Ps. 25:10). He thus cautions against speaking about 'the' biblical concept of truth. The task for biblical theology, then,

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<sup>36</sup> Ramm, *Special Revelation*, p. 68.

<sup>37</sup> Anthony Thiselton, 'Truth (*Aletheia*)' in C. Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology III* (Exeter, 1978), pp. 874-902.

is to describe the rules for the various language games found in Scripture.

Let us examine the apocalyptic 'game' in more detail. According to one definition, apocalyptic is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation, mediated by an other-worldly being to a human recipient, discloses by means of symbolism a transcendent reality which works eschatological salvation. Its particular function is to interpret present reality in the light of the future and thus to influence the behaviour and understanding of the reader today. Must we not say that apocalyptic literature makes an indispensable cognitive contribution to theology? Recall Ricoeur's adage that not just any theology can be wedded to the narrative form. The same may be said of apocalyptic. Indeed, without apocalyptic literature, the Christian faith would not be the same. Without apocalyptic, what could we hope? It is, of course, possible either to neglect this genre or to exaggerate it. Church history provides us with examples of both. Nineteenth-century liberals virtually lost apocalyptic altogether in their preoccupation with ethics; present-day dispensationalists, at the other extreme, make it a virtual canon within the canon, interpreting all other genres in light of apocalyptic. Wolfhart Pannenberg may be cited as a more balanced example of one who has taken the Apocalyptic Principle to the very heart of his systematics. His trademark emphasis on the resurrection as anticipating the end of universal history is the structuring principle of his conceptual framework, and it is inspired by biblical apocalyptic.<sup>38</sup>

## 2. Systematic Theology as Conceptual Mimesis

Biblical theology, to summarize, seeks to interpret the canonical forms on their own generic terms. Systematic theology is the attempt to catch up and preserve the meaning of the various canonical discourses in a conceptual framework that will be intelligible for people today. As such, systematic theology is a kind of conceptual 'mimesis'. 'Mimesis' is a literary critical term which means 'creative interpretation'. In his *Poetics* Aristotle defines poetry as a 'creative imitation' of

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<sup>38</sup> See Philip D. Clayton, 'Anticipation and Theological Method', in Carl Braaten and Philip D. Clayton (eds), *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Minneapolis, 1988), pp. 129-36.

human actions. The poem represents reality in a new medium. But this is precisely the task of systematic theology as well: to 're-present' the various kinds of sense and reference found in the canonical genres in a coherent conceptual framework.

*Mimesis* is a *creative* imitation of reality. 'Imitation' is not mere copying. Words do not simply mirror nature. Our interpretations must be creative because this is the only alternative to what McGrath calls 'a theology of repetition' which merely parrots what the Bible says. Merely to repeat the words of the Bible is an abdication of the theologian's responsibility, namely, to say what it means for today. The only serious alternative to a theology of repetition 'lay in transposing the scriptural narrative conceptually, generating new images and idioms by an attempt to recast this narrative in a different (yet not totally unrelated) mode of discourse'.<sup>39</sup> It is the positivist who believes that one can go directly from observation to truth, from biblical verse to doctrine, by ignoring interpretation and the critical use of models. The worry, of course, is that interpretation imports and imposes foreign concepts upon the Bible. But this is precisely why I have suggested that we attend first and foremost to the Bible's own literary genres as themselves providing the resources, and hints, of further conceptual development.

As creative interpretation, systematic theology neither translates nor transmutes the biblical message. Rather, systematic theology 'transmits' the biblical message by 'transferring' it to another register of discourse: the conceptual. Theology is creative – there is a transfer of meaning, a metaphorical moment; and it is 'imitative' – the aim and intent is to communicate the same, though we only have it under the 'similar'. We may therefore say of systematic theology what George Steiner says of good reading: it is to be a 'creative echo' of the text.

Calvin's *Institutes* are exemplary in this regard. Calvin saw theology as a means of entering into a profitable reading of Scripture. According to John Leith, 'Calvinist theology reduces itself (almost!) to a hermeneutic.'<sup>40</sup> Childs concurs: 'the purpose of his *Institutes* was not to offer a propositional

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39 McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine*, p. 64.

40 John Leith, 'John Calvin – Theologian of the Bible', *Interpretation* 25 (1971), p. 332.

summary of the Christian faith, but to instruct in the nature of scripture's proper scope precisely in order to be able to discern the true subject matter of scripture among its full range of notes'.<sup>41</sup>

### i. Interpretation the work of concepts

If the goal of systematic theology is conceptual mimesis, the means is textual interpretation. In Ricoeur's celebrated phrase, 'The symbol gives rise to thought.' But not only symbol: metaphor, narrative, indeed *every* biblical genre, gives rise to thought. Each genre refers and predicates. This opens up the possibility for conceptual thought to identify what is being referred to and to clarify its ontological status, that is, to say what kind of being it is or has. Insofar as we want not merely to know where images come from but what they *mean*, we must have recourse to concepts. Concepts clarify what is being signified (*i.e.*, referred to, predicated of) in discourse.<sup>42</sup>

My quest – to be biblical – has become a semantic safari, something like a lion hunt, or at least like the children's game of that name. As the hunters march, they encounter different obstacles, but the refrain is always the same: 'can't go round it, can't go over it, have to go *through* it'. Indeed, we are tied to these texts. The various genres are like different kinds of terrain. There are the rocky mountain heights of lyric poetry, the sloughs of existential wisdom, the great plains of narrative history, the thickets of Pauline argumentation, and so forth. Biblical theology is a kind of cartography; it draws up the detailed ordinance surveys. Systematic theology puts the various regional plans together in order to obtain a map of everything. The aim in both disciplines is to help the reader to negotiate the text and navigate the world.

Ricoeur's image of the role of concepts in interpretation is that of a universe of discourse in which the different forms are kept in motion in relation to each other by 'an interplay of

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<sup>41</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology*, pp. 725-6.

<sup>42</sup> Ricoeur insists on the distinction between poetic and philosophical discourse: 'the speculative fulfils the semantic exigencies put to it by the metaphorical only when it establishes a break marking the irreducible difference between the two modes of discourse' (*The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* [London, 1978], p. 296).

attractions and repulsions that ceaselessly promote the interaction and intersection of domains whose organizing nuclei are off-centred in relation to one another'.<sup>43</sup> There are various kinds of forces, weak and strong, as there are at the sub-atomic level in physics. Each genre exerts a centrifugal force, refusing to be pinned down in a closed and frozen system.

Conceptual discourse pulls biblical language towards clarity and univocity; biblical discourse pulls conceptual language towards complexity and plurivocity. Neither discourse should destroy the other. The task of systematic theology is to 'knit together' the various genres of the Bible into a tensile unity that would hold the genres together in a dynamic equilibrium. Interpretation is a mode of discourse 'that functions at the intersection of two domains, metaphorical and speculative'.<sup>44</sup> Speculative discourse acts as a 'vigilant watchman overseeing the ordered extensions of meaning'.<sup>45</sup> The project of a unified field theory of biblical literature, however, is still beyond us.

## ii. The Discourse of Theology: Canonical and Conceptual

Interpretation is midwife to textual understanding. The implicit understanding 'in' the text needs to be delivered to the reader. Interpretation is a question of transmitting, by means of conceptual elaboration, a richness of meaning that is already there in the text. Biblical theology focuses on the diverse kinds of imaginative presentation of Ideas (narrative, apocalyptic, lyric, *etc.*). Systematic theology uses concepts which attempt to catch the meaning generated by the dialogue between biblical forms. The narrative of the Fall and subsequent decline of humanity in Genesis 4-11, for example, must be read in light of the penitential Psalms of David, the prophetic prosecutors of the covenant and the explicit teaching of Paul about the universality of sin. When thought together, these literary forms generate the deep grammatical concept of original sin.

It is important to treat the biblical texts in a way that does justice to their genre, but it need not follow that systematic

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43 Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p. 302.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 303.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 261.

theology must use the same forms as it goes about its business of conceptual inquiry. Concepts are useful for asking questions both about the meaning of what is happening within one literary form and about the connection between literary forms. Concepts are our tools for drawing distinctions and for making connections. With regard to the narrative form, McGrath states that 'the narrative is assimilated to concepts, and the concepts are accommodated to narrative'.<sup>46</sup> He also notes that one does not 'deduce' from narrative, though one may 'infer'. Calvin's testimony on this point is unsurpassed. He argues that the church has used 'foreign' concepts like 'Trinity' in order to unmask false teaching. 'Thus men of old stirred up by various struggles over depraved dogmas, were compelled to set forth with consummate clarity what they felt, lest they leave any devious shift to the impious, who cloaked their errors in layers of verbiage.'<sup>47</sup> We should not therefore be squeamish about using concepts if they serve to clarify the subject.

When theologians work with concepts, the same rules which govern rational thinking in other disciplines apply (e.g., clarity, consistency, coherence, comprehensiveness, correlation with truth found elsewhere). The challenge is to balance the sameness and otherness of Scripture. No one genre should be allowed to preclude the others. The 'conversation' between the various forms should not be unduly stifled by elevating one form above another. Rather, systematic theology shows how the differing views of the world projected by the different parts of the canon fit together. Here theology is no longer queen, controlling the ranks and dominating the other pieces in the game of theological studies. To stay with the metaphor of the chessboard: theology is, on my view, more like the bishop who cuts diagonally and thinks laterally across the disciplinary and generic ranks.

### iii. The 'Similar'

If Being can be said in many ways, why not Christ? Is this not an implication of the 'four-part harmony' of the Gospels? As Childs puts it: 'The oneness of scripture's scope is not a rival to the multiple voices within the canon, but a constant

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<sup>46</sup> McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine*, p. 61.

<sup>47</sup> *Institutes* I:13:4.



pointed, much like a ship's compass, fixing on a single goal.<sup>48</sup> The task is to see the same in and through and within the different. But this is, as Aristotle knew well, to see the similar.<sup>49</sup> Systematic theology strives for this kind of sameness, the sameness of the 'similar', by making the rationality inherent in forms of literature (first approximated by biblical theology) more explicit. The relation between biblical theology and systematic theology is thus analogous to Calvin's conception of the relation between Old and New Testaments, in which the latter renders the former more explicit – and for that reason, more 'glorious'.

Theology never totally escapes from the tension between canon and concept. But this tension can be healthy and productive. Being finite and temporal is constitutive of the human condition; we know only in part. Interpretation is our common human lot: our privilege, and our responsibility. Theologians must resist eating fruit from the tree of absolute knowledge. We must avoid the lust of the mind. Absolute knowledge is forbidden us, at least at present. And it is just as well: if we knew absolutely, we would become proud and complacent. Between absolute knowledge and relativism, however, there lies the alternative of poetic and interpretive rationality. There is in Scripture a determinate and dynamic structure of meaning that both gives and calls for thought.

How then should we understand the relation of biblical theology and systematic theology? I have rejected the substitution-theory of literary genre, where concepts simply take the place of canon, as inadequate and unbiblical. When theological concepts are abstracted from the canonical context which generated them, they tend to lose their meaning. I have suggested that we view biblical theology as a poetics of biblical revelation whose task is to articulate the way in which each biblical genre makes sense and reference. Its speciality lies in understanding the respective rationalities of the various biblical genres. Biblical theology describes the respective 'grammars' of biblical literature. Systematic theology is a

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48 Childs, *Biblical Theology*, p. 725.

49 'If the *imaginatio* is the kingdom of "the similar", the *intellectio* is that of "the same". In the horizon opened up by the speculative, "same" grounds "similar" and not the inverse' (Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, p. 301).

'second-level' form of discourse, a 'depth grammar' which relates the canonical language games with one another on a deeper, conceptual, level. Systematic theology is logical discourse about the logics of biblical discourse. But that does not mean that it is only talk about talk. No, its goal is to clarify the sense and reference of the various parts of the canon, to coordinate these different perspectives on reality with one another and to bring them to bear on ourselves and our world.

Systematic theology and biblical theology must be allowed to put questions and respond to each other. The two kinds of discourse should not be confused, for each has its individual integrity and role. But they are more likely to talk to rather than past each other if they attend to the role which the literary forms of the Bible play in mediating the content. Biblical theology seeks the particular communicative rationality of a genre, that is, the rules which govern its language game and the kind of validity claims it makes. Systematic theology relates the various rationalities to one another in their quest to render the same reality. There are many ways of viewing God and the world imbedded in the forms of canonical literature; theology's task is to make them and their interrelations more explicit.<sup>50</sup> Systematic theology is the discourse that tries to perceive the 'same' in and through the 'other', without ever absorbing the 'other' into the 'same'.

Systematic theology should not become a substitute either for biblical theology or for the Bible itself. I think this was Ricoeur's worry about the doctrine of original sin, that as an explanation rather an expression of human evil, it exhausted the meaning of the text and made it unnecessary to return to the resources of the canon.

This is not the place to formulate a full-orbed doctrine of original sin. But I would like to indicate the way in which attention to literary genres contributes to our understanding of the phenomenon of sin in general. God's law allows us to recognize instances of sin. The narratives, especially the highly condensed account of early human history in Genesis

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50 'Conceptual inquiry is a critical reflection on the conceptual skills we command intuitively, with the purpose of tracing the systematic relations between them' (Vincent Brümmer, *Theology and Philosophical Inquiry: An Introduction* [London, 1981], p. 78).

4-11, show the rapid spread and universality of sin that spoils human relationships. The Psalms give us insight into the psychological dimensions of sin, for instance the sense of shame and the sense of guilt. They also remind us of the vertical dimension of sin: sin is ultimately against God. The prophets show that nations and peoples can be judged by God's Word as well as individuals, and that God is less interested in external conformity to the law than in heartfelt obedience. The wisdom literature shows sin as foolishness, for nothing is more fruitless than trying to deny the very created order which sustains one's being. Apocalyptic literature depicts sin as a supramundane power that will be ultimately defeated only by God. Lastly, the epistles expose sin as a power and corruption that has been defeated by Christ and which no longer has a hold over those who are in Christ. The canonical forms say more together than they do separately, and systematic theology ignores any one of them to its peril.

#### iv. Objections

*Is this not simply a 'literary' approach?* It would be if it ignored the question of extra-biblical reference and reality, but it does not. I have argued that genres are large-scale works of the imagination which are virtual world-views. And I emphasize *world*. Language can refer to reality in ways other than that of historical correspondence. Being may be said in *many* ways.

The books in the Bible may be more than works of literature, but they are certainly not less. My main emphasis, however, has not been on the Bible as literature so much as the Bible as made up of different genres, different forms of structured discourse. Many of the genres in the Bible are not 'literary' per se but rather represent the ordinary forms of discourse of their day (e.g., proverbs, epistles). Moreover, the concept of truth itself is a skill that pertains to how we render the world in words. To speak truly is to render some aspect of reality in some way. Truth is a matter of 'rendering' reality in thought, word and deed (see below).

*If each canonical genre is a separate language game with its own kind of rationality, and if no one language game is superior, how can systematic theology avoid (epistemological) relativism?*

Systematic theology must avoid both a relativism that fails to coordinate the biblical discourses and a reductionism that fails to preserve the forms of biblical discourses. One must neither eliminate nor exaggerate the significance of the literary form. Systematic theology must preserve a certain degree of sameness and otherness if it is to be biblical. It does so by initiating a dialogue between the various canonical forms and between canonical forms and contemporary forms of thought. The theologian must coordinate the various biblical genres and show how they intersect and interrelate, while resisting the temptation to ignore their generic differences and make them identical, as happened in the old proof-texting method.

George Steiner likens reading a text to meeting a stranger. The stranger is a guest to whom we owe hospitality and courtesy. And yet, even when we become intimate our knowledge will remain partial; and this is as it should be. For if we could fully assimilate the text, it would have nothing more to say to us. Our understanding will always only be approximate. And it is precisely this distance between canon and concept that guarantees the freedom, this 'otherness' of the text, and thus its ability to call us and our theology into question. There would be no need to keep reforming if we were fully informed!

*Is theology a science on this view?* The data with which theology works is not isolated proof texts. It is not simply a matter of inducting more of the same kind of facts. Theology guards the diverse forms of rationality inherent in the Bible's forms of speech and literary genres. Theology is a 'reconstructive science' whose aim is to render theoretically explicit the intuitive, pre-theoretical know-how underlying the diverse literary and linguistic competencies of Scripture.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> I am here following Jürgen Habermas's understanding of a 'reconstructive science', as found in his essay 'Philosophy as Stand-in or Interpreter', in Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy (eds), *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* (London, 1987), pp. 296-315.

### 3. Conclusion: 'Rendering' God

#### i. From Canon to Community

God's Word may be said in many ways. Our highest calling as theologians is to 'render' God. Our English word 'render' comes from the Latin *reddere* 'to give back'. Rendering – with its connotations of translating, giving back what is due, representing, causing to be – is a wonderfully suggestive metaphor for describing the task of theology. Theology's task is to 'render' conceptually the divine reality to which the biblical texts refer and about which they make predications. This task requires one to pay special attention to the ways in which the canonical forms 'render' reality. Theology too renders reality, namely, the reality of the Word of God, in word, thought and deed. To this point I have referred only to theology's theoretical rendering of the various forms of biblical literature, to 'concept'. But our 'imitation of Christ' has a practical aspect as well: canon gives rise to *community*.

I would be remiss not to mention some implications of the Bible's canonical diversity for practical theology. Scripture's literary genres generate not only ways of seeing but also ways of *being* in the world. Indeed, the way we live is perhaps the most important form of our biblical interpretation. For behaviour, as T. S. Eliot remarked, is also belief.

Not only ideas, but ways of human living are inscribed in the biblical texts. Theology must render these too. Theology is a science concerned with knowledge and a practice concerned with wisdom: both *scientia* and *sapientia*. A literary form generates a way of thought *and* life, a way of envisaging the world and existing in it. Indeed, is not the main purpose of having recourse to concepts to render reality clearer in order that we may fit in the world as we ought? Herein is wisdom: to live in the created order as we ought, and in our flourishing to glorify God. We need therefore to amend Ricoeur's formula: not just any *community* is associated with narrative, not to mention apocalyptic, gospel, law, and so forth. The life and thought of the Christian community is shaped and sustained by just those literary forms which comprise the biblical canon.

**ii. Reforming Theology**

In our continuing attempt to render God, and ourselves before God, we will from time to time need to reform our ways of speaking, thinking and living. My remarks on the task before systematic theology give a new sense to the adjective 'Reformed'. To render is to reform, and this in two ways. First, theoretically, by rendering the content embodied in the canonical forms of biblical literature in the conceptual forms of systematic theology. Second, practically, by rendering these forms of biblical witness in our lives. The Christian community renders the Word in the power of the Spirit. Our thoughts and our lives ought always to be re-formed by the visions generated by the various forms of the biblical witness. In the words of Auguste Lecerf: 'The canonical authority of Scripture is the condition of faith and liberty. A faith which does not based itself upon God is not faith; a liberty which does not find its charter in the Word of God is not more than an illusion of the mind.... 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Cor. 3:17) and there only.'<sup>52</sup>

The moral is clear: we must attend to the particular literary forms of the canon in order to do theology, and to live, according to the Scriptures. In so doing, we sharpen our concepts and shape our community. This is the way to render reality as revealed by God's Word. This is the way to 'sound' the canon to the glory of God.

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<sup>52</sup> Auguste Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Theology* (London, 1949), p. 369.