

# The Place of Theology in OT Interpretation

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## 1. Introduction

On January 3 2013, Peter Enns wrote a blog post entitled “Can Evangelical Colleges and Seminaries Be Truly Academic Institutions?” Enns answered his own question in the negative. He wrote, “Another way of putting it is whether evangelical institutions can maintain a credible academic reputation when they officially promulgate positions that are only held within those institutions of similar ideology and not the academic discipline of biblical scholarship in general.” Enns lists well-known issues which are often defended by evangelicals along traditional lines but which in his view have been “largely settled” in very different ways in academic contexts. He includes the following issues: “Adam as the first man; the essential historical reliability (rather than mythic content) of the creation stories, the Patriarchs, the exodus and the conquest; the fundamentally early authorship of the Pentateuch, Isaiah and Daniel.” Enns argues that it is time for evangelical institutions that still hold to traditional views on such issues to “publicly acknowledge that they are centres of theological apologetics and therefore not places of academic training.”<sup>1</sup>

This article will not discuss the particular questions that Enns mentions. However, his blog post raises more general questions: To what extent *do we read* the Bible from within our traditions? Or perhaps more cogently, since we acknowledge the impossibility of coming to the Bible with our minds a blank slate: To what extent *should we self-consciously read* the Bible from within our traditions? For an overtly Reformed school like the RTC, how do we bring together the doctrines of a Reformed outlook and the reading of Scripture? Should we in fact, as Enns suggests, promote ourselves as a “centre for theological apologetics” rather than an academic institution? Even if we hold a commitment to Scripture itself as central, to what extent is our subjection to the formative and persuasive role of Scripture colored and shaped by the formative and persuasive role of a confessional commitment?

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Enns, *Can Evangelical Colleges and Seminaries Be Truly Academic Institutions?* (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/peterenns/2013/01/can-evangelical-colleges-and-seminaries-be-truly-academic-institutions/> 2013 [cited January 3 2013]).

Does Scripture itself guide us towards an overtly theological (even Reformed-theological) reading of Scripture or are we guilty of reading our theology into the Bible, such that theology “rules” over our interpretation of Scripture?

This essay will approach some of these questions by examining Lane Tipton’s “theological” reasoning about the nature of Old Testament. Tipton’s argument is taken as an example in order to illustrate how one typically “Reformed” methodology approaches a theological assessment of the OT. In this way only a very thin “slice” of the whole question of the place of theology in OT interpretation can be addressed, but it is hoped that some of the larger issues can thus be illustrated.

## **2. The relationship between biblical studies and theology**

A more basic question arises immediately: Is it possible to even begin to understand the meaning of Scripture without making theological assumptions? Can biblical studies proceed at all without theological endeavor?

Of course at the most basic level no one can speak about God without doing “theology”. “Theology” means a word (*logos*) about God (*theos*). But more widely still, theological questions are at the heart of any discussion. Christian confession begins with God as the Creator and Ruler of the Universe. Whether people are aware of it or not, every conversation about anything in this world that God has made and that he rules has “theological” implications. It is certainly impossible to engage in any study, let alone biblical studies, without being involved a profound array of theological presuppositions and consequences. But can this relationship be teased out in a more systematic manner?

N.T. Wright has suggested that a symbiotic relationship must exist between theology and biblical studies if both are to flourish. His suggestion depends on a particular definition of “theology”, which in turn hinges on a more basic category of “worldview.”

Wright suggests that worldviews do four things.<sup>2</sup> They provide the *stories* through which we view reality. From these stories we discover how to

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<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 123.

answer the basic *questions* that determine human existence. The stories and the answers they provide are expressed in cultural *symbols* (e.g. in Australia, ANZAC Day celebrations; in ancient Israel, all that was involved in celebrating the Passover). Fourth, world views involve a *praxis*, a way of being in the world. Worldviews are the basic stuff of human existence. They provide the lens through which the world is seen, the blueprint for how one should live in it, and the sense of identity and place we need to be human.<sup>3</sup>

In turn, “theology” turns the spotlight on certain dimensions of a worldview, of any worldview. “It suggests certain ways of telling the story, explores certain ways of answering the questions, offers particular interpretation of the symbols, and suggests and critiques certain forms of praxis.”<sup>4</sup> In particular, *Christian* theology performs those functions in ways that relate to the *Bible*. 1. It tells a story – the metanarrative of the Bible. 2. The story, as the articulation of a worldview, answers four worldview questions: Who are we? Where are we? What is wrong? What is the solution? 3. This worldview has been given expression in a wide variety of socio-cultural symbols, both artifacts and cultural events. 4. The Christian worldview gives rise to a particular type of praxis, of being in the world. Humans are part of the Creator’s means of looking after the world, and Christians in particular are part of his means of bringing healing to the world. Christian theology claims to be telling a story about the Creator and his world. It tells the story of how the Creator has acted climactically and not merely paradigmatically in Jesus of Nazareth. The Creator has “implemented” that climactic act in the gift of his own Spirit to his people, and he will complete his work in the final renewal of all things.<sup>5</sup>

This understanding of Christian theology implies that neither biblical studies nor theology can proceed without the other. Wright notes three aspects of a symbiotic relationship that must exist between the two:

1. Historical exegesis needs the tools of theological analysis to get at what the characters in biblical history were thinking, planning and aiming to do. Wright notes that one cannot study Paul seriously without inquiring as to his worldview, mindset, basic and consequent beliefs, and practical aims and intentions. In the same way, it is impossible to study the religion of ancient Israel, even from a

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, *People of God*, 123-124.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *People of God*, 126.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *People of God*, 132-136.

“purely” historical point of view, apart from a detailed analysis of theological questions central to the worldview giving rise to that religion.

2. Wright also suggests that biblical studies need theology because only with the help of a fully theological analysis of modern culture can those who read the Bible be aware of their own questions, presuppositions, aims and intentions. All reading of the Bible occurs within a worldview, and serious interpreters of the OT must be self-conscious of the particular questions, aims and intentions that frame their investigation. Self-critical understanding of one’s own theological concerns will fight against “theology” becoming a complete scheme of ready-made answers that short-circuits the process of serious historical and critical exegesis.
3. Theology needs biblical studies, because the claims of any theology must come into contact (or conflict) with the stories contained in the Bible. If a Christian theology is to be sustained in a robust way it must be able to meet the challenge posed by its rivals. To be truly Christian theology, it must show that it is consistent with the story that the Bible tells, not just finding proof texts and proof themes in a biblicist approach to the Bible.<sup>6</sup>

Wright suggests that in the second half of the twentieth century many biblical scholars felt a pressure to do their work within a post-Enlightenment modernistic perspective, bracketing Christian commitments as private opinions that did not engage the public world of scholarship. The perceived pressure was to engage in historical scholarship whilst leaving theology behind. History and theology were seen to be at odds, and serious biblical scholarship had to focus on history, not theology.

Stephen Motyer has written that the pressure to engage in historical scholarship at the expense of theology was exacerbated by a tension between history and theology that arises because of the *historical particularity* of the different writings that make up the Bible.<sup>7</sup> From the nineteenth century up to

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<sup>6</sup> Wright, *People of God*, 137-138.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Motyer, "Two Testaments, One Biblical Theology," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies & Systematic Theology* (eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 143.

about the 1940s,<sup>8</sup> a post-Enlightenment, critical, historical study of what lay “behind the text” prevailed in the Academy. This particular approach increasingly isolated the professional Academy from the Church and from scholars committed to confessionally-engaged approaches to exegesis. The more recent movement towards a so-called “Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS)” has been typified by a concern to bridge the gap between biblical studies and theology. D.A. Carson has provided a measured appreciation and critique of this movement. He cites one of its defining characteristics as follows: “TIS is an attempt to transcend the barren exegesis generated by historical-critical methods, and especially those readings of Scripture that are ‘historical’ in the sense that they are frankly anti-supernatural interpretations determined by post-Enlightenment assumptions about the nature of history.”<sup>9</sup>

The particular approach of “purely” historical-critical exegesis has been subject to decisive critique in more recent times, none more devastating than that of Vern Poythress.

### **3. Vern Poythress and the critique of autonomous reason**

Grammatical-historical interpretation was (is?) regarded by many scholars as “an objective procedure for determining the meaning intended by the human author through an examination of the language of the text and its historical circumstances.”<sup>10</sup> But Vern Poythress rightly questions virtually every word of that definition, particularly as it involves the elimination of the divine author as a methodological assumption. He argues his case in an utterly devastating critique of interpretation in which the meaning of the text belongs to the human author alone, such that the divine author can be left out of consideration until after the analysis is complete. Among other things, Poythress demonstrates that:

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<sup>8</sup> Joel B. Green and Max Turner, “New Testament Commentary and Systematic Theology: Strangers or Friends?,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies & Systematic Theology* (eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 4.

<sup>9</sup> D. A. Carson, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But...” in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives* (ed. R. Michael Allen; London: T&T Clark, 2011), 188.

<sup>10</sup> Vern S. Poythress, “The Presence of God Qualifying Our Notions of Grammatical-Historical Interpretation: Genesis 3:15 as a Test Case,” *JETS* 50, no. 1 (2007): 87.

- Trying to eliminate the divine means trying to eliminate the only source through which genuine objectivity and genuine consensus could actually arise
- Reason is a gift from God, and becomes a false goddess when abstracted from the Giver
- The pragmatic convenience of eliminating God does not actually eliminate his authorship or his presence in the biblical text
- Affirming the presence of God implies not the end of meaningful historical appreciation but its genuine beginning
- Focusing on the human author alone violates the essential character of the biblical text
- Eliminating God from interpretation imposes limits on understanding the human authors of Scripture beyond those implied by the passing of time
- Taking God out of the equation for pragmatic reasons results in a very thin understanding of history that does not take account of the richer meaning of the plan of God
- Focusing only on human authors imposes unnecessary limitations on grammatical and linguistic understanding
- Such an approach to interpretation also imposes unnecessary limits on understanding how readers interact with the biblical text and the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing understanding.<sup>11</sup>

If Poythress's arguments are cogent they undermine both the "grammatical" and the "historical" aspects of purportedly objective "grammatical-historical" interpretation. Specifically, it is impossible to support the idea that Scripture can be read and understood without making any theological assumptions about the text, the authors and the readers. Even mounting an argument about this involves making theological statements, and refuting any such argument would involve further theological reasoning. To say anything about reading and understanding Scripture involves theology.

So far the point is clear enough. More substantially, we need in this article to consider what contribution a theological approach to hermeneutics from within a Reformed tradition can make to our reading of Scripture. Even more specifically, given my brief for this article, how should we face these kinds of issues when reading and interpreting the Old Testament? How normative is theology to be for a Christian interpretation of the OT? Even this basic question implies that there is such a thing as a "Christian" and a "non-

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<sup>11</sup> Poythress, "Presence of God," 88-101.

Christian” reading of the OT, both of which imply vast expanses of “theological” debate. We do not have the space in this article to address these issues. We limit ourselves to one question: How can a hermeneutical approach from within a Reformed perspective contribute to our understanding of the Old Testament?

Even this delimiting of the question does not achieve much in terms of defining a clear perimeter for the discussion, because there is no one “Reformed perspective” on a hermeneutical approach to the OT. In what follows I will outline just one approach, an approach that clearly sits within the Reformed “camp.” My aim will be to illustrate the strong connections between biblical interpretation and theology that inevitably surface in any discussion of hermeneutical approaches to the OT. I will consider how the shaping function of a Reformed approach to the OT can lead to a fruitful interpretation, and seek to reflect on the benefits and limitations of such an approach.

#### **4. The approach of Lane Tipton as an example of a “Reformed hermeneutical approach” to a theological interpretation of the Old Testament**

Dr Lane G. Tipton is the Charles W. Krahe Chair Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia). Tipton’s argument can be seen as a particular development of many of the concerns Poythress has raised. Tipton argues that “the gospel of Jesus Christ contains within itself a distinctive hermeneutic and theology of redemptive history.”<sup>12</sup> By this introductory statement he means that the gospel *necessarily* implies a particular conception of redemption in history, and that this conception of redemption *necessarily* has a normative influence on biblical hermeneutics. Tipton’s argument is substantial and consistent with a classically Reformed approach to hermeneutics, and is a good example to examine for the purpose of this discussion. (Page references to Tipton’s article are included in the text of the paragraphs that deal with his argument.)

In a way that is similar to Poythress’s case, Tipton’s approach hinges on the necessity of rejecting a notion of grammatical-historical interpretation that

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<sup>12</sup> Lane G. Tipton, “The Gospel and Redemptive-Historical Hermeneutics,” in *Confident of Better Things: Essays Commemorating Seventy-Five Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (eds. John R. Muether and Danny E. Olinger; Willow Grove, Penn.: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2011), 185.

includes only the human and historical context of the Old Testament. To be consistent with the gospel, a hermeneutic must integrate the “*redemptive-historical dimension of revelation*” (186, *emphasis in the original*) into a reading of the OT. In other words, to read the OT simply as human literature (*even as only a “first reading”* of the OT) is inconsistent with the notion of redemption in history that is necessarily implied by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Tipton’s major claim is that the essential features of the gospel imply that the OT must be read as a revelation of that gospel before the coming of Jesus Christ. Even more strongly, Tipton argues that the OT “foresignifies and supernaturally presents Christ *to the faith of Old Testament saints*, thereby requiring a typological presentation of the gospel as an inherent feature of Old Testament redemptive revelation” (186, *emphasis added*).

Tipton’s argument proceeds in a number of stages. He begins with an exegesis of three NT texts which he sees as key texts locating the gospel of Jesus Christ in the OT: Romans 1:1-4; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 and Luke 24:44-47.

From Romans 1:1-4, Tipton draws three major conclusions:

- Paul explicates the gospel already promised beforehand in the OT (Romans 1:2); which implies, according to Tipton, that Paul’s gospel does not arise with the historical advent of Jesus Christ, but already “exists” in some way in the OT (187).
- The gospel concerns God’s Son (Romans 1:3), from which Tipton concludes that the “substantial concern of OT redemptive revelation is the gospel of God’s Son” (187), such that the history of the OT is first and foremost a “*history of special revelation* that has Jesus Christ as its central redemptive concern” (187, *emphasis in original*). The paramount concerns of the OT are not Israel, the Land, covenant, worship or the events recorded. While crucially important, they all serve a more basic “salvation-historical concern located in the gospel of Jesus Christ” (188).
- The gospel focusses on the death and resurrection of the Son of God (Romans 1:3-4). The gospel is not most basically about any benefit we receive, but a declaration about the Son of God, crucified and risen (189). This is the message with which redemptive revelation of the OT is centrally concerned.

Tipton then turns to 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 in which the death and resurrection of Christ are presented as the gospel “in accordance with the Scriptures” of the OT. He argues that the force of the language here means that “Jesus’ death and resurrection are both *demanded by* and *conform to* the prophetic scripture of the Old Testament. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ occur in congruity with the *per se requirements* of the Old Testament Scriptures” (190, *emphasis added*). Tipton then gets to the heart of the argument of his article by concluding that the Old Testament Scriptures are “*christomorphic*.” By introducing this word Tipton wants to distance himself from a “*christotelic*” reading of the OT. In fact it becomes plain that Tipton is both “*christotelic*” and “*christomorphic*” in his approach, but he argues that to be *merely* “*christotelic*” is insufficient to account for the biblical data, which requires that interpreters take the additional step towards seeing the OT as “*christomorphic*”.

What does Tipton mean by this distinction? To be “*merely*” *christotelic* (without taking the further step to *christomorphism*) is to agree that Christ’s death and resurrection fulfil the OT Scriptures, but that the certainty of its fulfilment in Jesus Christ only becomes a reality after the events of his death and resurrection. Indeed, the witness of the OT is a *potential* reality that *in principle* could have been fulfilled in a diverse number of ways, even though *in fact* it was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. To take the further step and to regard the OT Scriptures as *christomorphic* is, in Tipton’s analysis, to reject the idea that the OT is potentially “*polymorphic*,” that is, in principle capable of a diverse range of fulfilments, and to hold that the OT *necessarily demands*, on its own terms, that Christ alone fulfil them. It appears that for Tipton, taking the step to regarding the OT as *christomorphic* is the only way to guard the idea that Jesus died and rose again according to the “*per se revelatory requirements* of the Old Testament Scriptures” (191, *emphasis added*).

Tipton regards Paul’s teaching in Romans 1:1-4 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 as “nothing more than an elaboration of Jesus’ own teaching in Luke 24:44-47” (192). Jesus declares that the OT Scriptures “must be fulfilled” by him, and he describes the disciples as being “slow of heart” to believe the gospel (Luke 24:25), from which Tipton concludes that Jesus took the gospel concerning himself to “be present objectively” (193) in the OT. In other words, the gospel of Jesus Christ is “*transtestamental*” (193) and the fundamental concern of the whole Bible, OT and NT.

Tipton then comes to a crucial “*move*” in his argument in terms of theological analysis, which is to outline, from the Westminster Confession of

Faith (WCF), what he sees as “the hermeneutical assumptions and implications underlying the transtestamental gospel of Jesus Christ” (193). He focusses on sections 7.5 and 8.6 of WCF (along with section 20.1) to conclude with the WCF that not only is the gospel of Jesus Christ *revealed* in the OT, it is also *applied* to the OT saints in such a way that the benefits of Jesus’ death and resurrection are available to the OT saints “thousands of years *before* his earthly ministry” (195, *emphasis in original*). They are available to the OT elect in the promises, types and sacrifices of the OT. The difference that the coming of Christ makes is that “there is *greater noetic access* in the New Testament to the *same redemptive reality* promised and applied in the Old Testament” (196-197, *emphases in original*).

For an example of biblical evidence that the gospel was applied to the OT saints Tipton points to Galatians 3:6-9. God “preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham” (vs 8) and Abraham the believer was “blessed” by that gospel just as those who are “of faith” are blessed with him (vs 9). Tipton provides no further biblical evidence that the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection were available to the OT saints through the promises, sacrifices and types of the OT.

## 5. Paul’s argument in Galatians 3:6-14

Because Tipton’s case, when it comes to including the WCF in his consideration, rests so heavily on the theological connection that he draws between the relevant WCF sections and Galatians 3, it is worthwhile reflecting briefly on what Paul is teaching in Galatians 3. The overall problem in Galatians as a letter is Paul’s argument with the Judaizers who are urging the Galatian believers that it is necessary to embrace (at least parts of) the Mosaic Law for salvation. In Galatians 3:6-14 Paul quotes from six OT passages to make his case against the Judaizers. The passages and the implied argument are briefly summarised in the following table.

<b>Passage</b>	<b>Argument</b>
Genesis 15:6 Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gal 3:6)	Since Abraham was justified by faith, only those who are themselves justified by faith are his true children (vs 7).
Genesis 12:3 All nations will be blessed in you (vs 8).	The blessing for the nations God promised to Abraham was justification by faith. This is the

Passage	Argument
	gospel, and it was announced in advance to Abraham. So by faith you will be justified (vss 7-9).
Deuteronomy 27:26 Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them (vs 10).	If you try to keep the law for even a part of your salvation, you are cursed, for you must keep it all perfectly (vs 10).
Habakkuk 2:4 The righteous man shall live by faith (vs 11).	No one is justified by keeping the law (vs 11).
Leviticus 18:5 He who practices the statutes and rules shall live by them (vs 12).	The law is not based on faith, it is based on action. It is relevant to holy living, not to justification (vs 12).
Deuteronomy 21:23 Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree (vs 13).	So Christ was cursed, yes it is true. But he became a curse <i>for us</i> , to free us from the curse of the law (vss 13-14).

*The following comments involve “theological reasoning” on the basis of Paul’s argument. The intention of these comments is to demonstrate how a theologically-informed explanation of Paul’s argument might elucidate how Paul argues “theologically” on the basis of his understanding of the six OT passages he chooses in Galatians 3:6-14.*

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In Galatians 3:6, Paul’s reference to Genesis 15:6 takes us back to God’s promise to Abraham of a son and a future posterity. Abraham was an old man and childless, his wife Sarah was old and barren. But God takes Abraham outside and tells him to look up at the sky and count the stars. “So shall you descendants be.” Abraham believed God’s promise, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Abraham was justified, he was regarded as righteous by God. The sense of Paul’s argument is that Abraham was justified not because he had been circumcised and had kept the Law of Moses. Circumcision had not yet been required by God, and the Law of Moses was still 450 years in the future. Abraham was justified because he believed God’s promise about a son, and about many descendants, and ultimately about **the Son**, the Son of God, who

would be crucified. Abraham did not know the details, but he believed the promise. Indeed, Paul is implying that all the faithful in the Old Testament were justified in the same way – justified by faith in Christ crucified. They did not know the details but they believed God’s promise. How much more should the Galatians, who know the details, be justified by faith in Christ alone.

The Judaizers who were troubling the Galatians were probably telling them that to be true children of Abraham they would have to be circumcised like he was. Paul counters by telling the Galatians they are **already** children of Abraham because they **already share** in his faith.

Paul goes on in his argument. Genesis 12:3 takes us even further back. In this passage God speaks to Abram in Haran as he calls Abram to leave his country, his people and his father’s household and to travel on to an as yet undisclosed destination – “to the land I will show you”. Abram responds with faith and obedience and the Lord promises to bless all the nations through him and his descendants.

What was the blessing God was promising Abram? From vs 8, which says that “Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith”, it is plain that the blessing God promised would come to all nations through Abram was justification by faith. Paul goes on to say in vs 8 that this promise to Abram was an announcement of the gospel. And the conclusion? Vs 9 “So those who have faith are justified along with Abram, the man of faith.”

The rhetorical power of this argument is plain. Paul is writing to Gentiles in Galatia. He is writing to Gentile Christians who are being urged by Jewish Christians to adopt (at least parts of) the Law of Moses in order to be saved. Paul shows, with a couple of devastatingly simple arguments from the Old Testament, that even those Jewish Christians who are harassing the Gentiles in Galatia must not think they can be justified by keeping the Law of Moses. If they were truly sons of their father Abraham they would realise that they can be justified only as he was, by faith in Jesus Christ, in whom he believed when he believed the promise. Since the Jewish Christians can only be justified by faith in Christ, how much more the Gentile Christians, about whom God spoke right at the beginning when he called Abraham from Haran. How tragic it would be for the Gentile Christians to be seduced into a system that is useless even for Jewish Christians!

In the next four quotations from the Old Testament, Paul takes on this matter of observance of the law. Paul's background rhetorical question is: What do the Scriptures (the Old Testament) teach about observance of the law? Does the Old Testament teach that you can be justified by observing the law?

Again, Paul's argument is devastatingly simple and clear. Deuteronomy 27:26 says, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law". Everyone is cursed, because no one can continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law. No one can do it perfectly. No one can be justified by keeping the law.

Paul goes on to argue God does make it plain how people can be right with God, how they can live before him, how they can be justified. Habakkuk 2:4 tells us. "The righteous will live by faith." And the law is "not based on faith" (Gal 3:12 NIV), the law is not another equally valid interpretation of how to be right with God. Rather, the law is about doing things, it's about action, it's not about faith. For as Leviticus 18:5 says, "The man who does these things will live by them".

Paul quotes from Leviticus 18:5 to make the point that the law is about action, not about believing. He is not holding out some alternative way of justification; that is not the point in Leviticus 18. The point is rather that by keeping the law the people of Israel, who have already been redeemed, already been justified, can live faithfully before God in the land they are about to enter. Theologically, Paul's point is that Leviticus 18 has to do with sanctification and holy living, not justification.

In vss 10-12 then, Paul provides a crushing refutation to anyone who wants to add any kind of law-keeping to Christ for justification. If people wish to go that way, not only are they obligating themselves to obey a law they cannot possibly fulfil, thus falling under its curse, but they are also following a way that cannot possibly lead to salvation and will, instead, lead them away from it. To reinstate the law for justification is to abolish the gospel.

The final quotation from Deuteronomy 21:23 demonstrates the radical change that came about in Paul's understanding as a result of his conversion to Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:3 Paul writes, "Therefore, no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is cursed". We know that Paul was present at the death of Stephen, we know that Stephen preached in Jerusalem in the Greek-speaking Jewish synagogues, we know that Paul attended those synagogues. It is highly likely that as Stephen was preaching, Paul heard him

preach, and when Stephen preached about the crucified Christ, we can imagine Paul shouting out with the other Jews, “Jesus is cursed!” For Jesus had hung on a tree, and as Deuteronomy 21:23 tells us, “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree”. “Jesus is cursed!” A proper Jewish reaction to the preached gospel. That’s why the cross is a stumbling block to Jews. Who can believe in a crucified Messiah?

But now, for Paul, that is the essence of the gospel. It’s what he preaches – Christ crucified! Why? Because now he understands that when God cursed Christ as he hung on that cross, he cursed Christ in our place, so that we might be set free from that curse (vs 13-14).

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*The explanation of Paul’s theological argument found in the notes above is itself heavily theologically-driven; one can almost imagine a sermonic application along the following lines: “Get your thinking about salvation in the Old Testament straight. Realise that the gospel message about justification by faith was first announced in the Old Testament. Don’t think that since Christ a new way of salvation has appeared. Don’t imagine that God’s purpose in Christ was to do away with the law as a defective way of salvation, a way that didn’t quite work out as God had planned it. The law was never a way of salvation. Paul’s dispute with the Judaizers is a dispute with a **legalistic interpretation** of the law, not with the law itself. Indeed, he uses the Old Testament’s **own teaching about the law** to refute the Judaizers.”*

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Does Tipton’s quotation of Gal 3:8-9 bear the weight of his argument that the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection were available to the OT saints through the promises, sacrifices and types of the OT? While he derives his argument from the wording of the WCF, he holds (by confessional commitment) that Scripture is the primary authority for theological reasoning, and so he seeks to provide Scriptural support for his position. When Paul’s argument in Galatians 3 is considered in its wider context, Paul’s great concern is to demonstrate that according to Old Testament witness justification is by faith alone, such that any attempt to smuggle conformity to the Law of Moses into the equation is illegitimate according to

the OT. So Paul's intention in this part of Galatians is to demonstrate that the saints of the OT were justified by faith alone, and furthermore that the faith that these OT saints exercised was trust in God's promise regarding the future. From an NT vantage point, it has become plain that God's OT promises regarding the future have found their Yes and Amen in Christ. This is enough for Tipton to conclude that what the OT saints were trusting in when they were justified by faith was the gospel of Jesus Christ. He then takes the further step of arguing that therefore the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection were already present, redemptively so, through the promises, sacrifices and types of the OT, *by means of which* the OT saints were justified by faith.

Before we assess Tipton's case, it will be helpful to follow one more step in his "theological" reasoning.

## **6. Tipton's further "theological" exploration of his thesis**

Besides finding theological support in the WCF, Tipton goes on to show how Geerhardus Vos's idea of "redemptive organism" and Meredith Kline's concept of "intrusion" both help to support the idea of the gospel of Jesus Christ as a transtestamental phenomenon. Vos suggested that the gospel develops through the Bible as from a seed to the full flower, and that the reality of the gospel was already present, although in seed form. The implication is that OT symbolic forms of the gospel (promises, sacrifices and types) communicate "saving truth". "While knowledge of redemption (epistemic access) progresses and increases, the redemptive reality offered to those redeemed, namely Christ, remains substantially the same" (198).

Tipton regards Meredith Kline's notion of "intrusion" as further supporting his thesis. Kline argued that earthly symbols and types contained a "permanent core...an actual projection of the heavenly reality" (199). Typology, promises and sacrifices, while temporary and earthly forms, contain within them the "redemptive presence" of what in the future will be "redemptive realities" (199), and in this way are "sufficient to communicate redemptive truth" (200) to OT saints.

Finally in his article Tipton unveils the purpose of his analysis, which is to interact with Dan McCartney and others (including Peter Enns, see fn. 22) as to their approach to grammatical-historical method in reading the OT. As Tipton puts it, that approach involves a "first reading" using the grammatical-

historical method which seeks to understand the OT by focusing on its original human and historical context, followed by a second “christotelic” reading which involves “reading the OT from the vantage point of its fulfillment in Christ” (200). One outcome of this approach is that the meaning of typology is “driven strictly by fulfillment in Christ” (201); it “is not a function of grammatical-historical meaning” (200). Tipton wishes to challenge both these formulations.

McCartney argues that the gospel can only be understood from the vantage point of the work of Christ. A “pure grammatical-historical” reading of the OT does not give us the gospel; only a “second reading” of the OT from the standpoint of knowing Christ’s work shows us what God was doing all along (201). As a result, the import of OT typology cannot be found in the historical meaning itself, but only becomes plain from its fulfillment in Christ (202). Tipton’s problem with McCartney’s approach is similar to Poythress’ concern that it is fundamentally contrary to the nature of the OT to focus only on the human and historical elements. A “first reading” that brackets out the divine author is fundamentally an illegitimate reading. Tipton expresses this concern by saying that “God’s being and revelation provides the ‘original context’ that situates the Old Testament. The human and historical are therefore subordinate to the Trinitarian self-disclosure of God” (203). “It is therefore not possible to reduce the historical concern of the Old Testament to mere human features” (204). In Tipton’s view, McCartney has uncritically accepted an Enlightenment view of “bare history” as a legitimate hermeneutical category and failed to understand the gospel as a transtestamental reality communicated to the OT saints through promises, types and shadows (WCF 7.5, 8.6) (205).

In Tipton’s view, McCartney’s approach to interpreting the OT text leads to a confused understanding of the nature of typology. McCartney argues that typology is driven by its fulfillment in Christ, not by its historical meaning in itself. McCartney agrees that God, as the author of the OT, knew the end of the story. He also agrees that, as Jesus said in Luke 24, the OT was about Jesus, his death and resurrection, and the offer of the gospel to the nations. But McCartney argues that we can only see it from a post-resurrection perspective, from a “second” Christotelic reading of the OT, not from a “first” grammatical-historical reading (207).

Tipton argues that typology derives its power not just from its fulfillment in Christ, but both from its historical meaning and its fulfillment in Christ, and this is because Christ was truly present, albeit in shadow form, to the OT

saints. Tipton points to the example of Jesus' language about Abraham in John 8:56: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad." Tipton writes that Jesus understood the OT as presenting Christ to believers in such a way that they saw his day and were decisively impacted by it. For Tipton then, the biblical symbolism of the OT "both communicates the saving truth of Christ's person and work and that truth runs organically through to its fulfillment in Christ's death and resurrection" (213).

## **7. Assessment: Some reflections on Tipton's theological reasoning about the Old Testament**

Tipton's conclusion that "the Old Testament, on its own terms, prior to Jesus' advent in redemptive history, is Christian Scripture – Scripture that mediates the gospel of Jesus Christ and all his benefits to the faith of Old Testament saints through earthly promises, types and sacrifices" (211) can be regarded as his programmatic statement. It summarises his theological reasoning on the nature of the OT. How can this final statement and his argument as a whole be assessed?

Tipton argues that the gospel is intrinsic to the OT and does not depend on the NT for its vital presence and redemptive power in the OT. Indeed, in Tipton's argument, the gospel is the main message of the OT; all other aspects of the message of the OT "subserve a more basic salvation-historical concern located in the gospel of Jesus Christ" (187-188). But he cannot argue his case simply from the OT. Crucial to Tipton's case is an exegesis of NT texts. The truth about how we should read the OT even on the question of justification by faith depends on the revelation of the NT and is not clearly revealed in the OT when read by itself. Tipton (correctly) demonstrates this fact by his use of NT texts to make his point. Even if we were to take Tipton's formula, and read the OT as more than simply human and historical, reading it with the divine author present, as a revelation of the One True God as its primary context for interpretation, still we would not definitively arrive at the basic truth of the gospel Tipton is concerned with (justification by faith) *in a noetic sense*. Before his conversion, this is how Paul read the OT as a "persecutor of the church", a "blameless" Pharisee (Php 3:6); he did not arrive at the gospel until he experienced the revelation of Jesus Christ as risen Lord. Thus far Tipton would agree, but would hold that even if access to the *knowledge* that the gospel is found in the OT was shadowy, now that we have seen what the NT reveals about the gospel in the OT, *now* we know that it was actually the main message of the OT.

But this leads to a problem with Tipton's formulation that can be further sharpened by considering his final programmatic statement about the OT. He states that the OT "on its own terms, prior to Jesus' advent in redemptive history, is Christian Scripture – Scripture that mediates the gospel of Jesus Christ and all his benefits to the faith of Old Testament saints through earthly promises, types and sacrifices." In spite of this being Tipton's concluding and programmatic statement about the OT, it is awkward to say the least, and its "awkwardness" is more than simply a matter of expression. Rather, it goes to the problem at the heart of his analysis.

There is certainly a diachronic problem with this statement. We do not live *now* in the period "prior to Jesus' advent in redemptive history," and so it is impossible to say something about what the Old Testament *is now* in the way Tipton states it. Perhaps he means to say that the OT *was* Christian Scripture in the sense that it mediated the gospel of Jesus Christ before his advent in redemptive history, but it seems incongruous to speak of something being "Christian" before the advent of Christ, and in any case, Tipton is seeking to affirm something current about the OT.

Probably more to the point of Tipton's case is that his theological approach to the OT presumes that the gospel of Jesus Christ entails a particular hermeneutical stance towards the OT such that readers today, *with the gospel of Jesus Christ firmly embedded in their NT-shaped consciousness*, should read the OT as not merely Christocentric or Christotelic, but as Christomorphic in the sense that the logic inherent in the OT "requires" Jesus Christ as its fulfillment. But that understanding needs the gospel-shaped consciousness that only NT revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit can give, the kind of consciousness of biblical truth that Paul experienced after his radical encounter with the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Tipton is arguing that people today should read the OT like Paul did. But it is plain even from Paul himself that people can only do that if they share in the radical shaping work of an experience of the power of the gospel (1Co 2:6-14; 2Co 3:14-4:6). To read the OT Christomorphically requires an experience of the work of the gospel.

Ironically, Tipton is in danger of a kind of "emptying" of the OT in a way opposite to that of which he sees McCartney as being susceptible to. McCartney's problem according to Tipton is that he treats the OT as being amenable to a "bare" grammatical-historical reading which can yield significant insight and which then can be supplemented with insight from the

NT that shows that what is found in the OT was preparing for Christ all along. Tipton's problem with this approach is it can significantly "empty" the OT of its intrinsic "Christomorphic" meaning, giving validity to a reading of the OT that does not have the gospel of Jesus Christ at its centre. But Tipton's approach is in danger of "emptying" the OT of *any meaning* apart from its Christomorphic meaning, such that OT becomes an empty container that only attains some meaning when Jesus Christ is "poured in". Tipton's Christomorphic meaning is only available to gospel-shaped hearts and minds, as Tipton himself illustrates so well in his use of NT texts as crucial to his argument. Even if the gospel was "intrinsic" to the OT in the way that Tipton claims, this characteristic of the OT is only available to people who have heard and, by the Spirit's work, believed NT revelation.

Insisting that a perception of the OT as Christomorphic now depends on a prior work of the gospel in one's heart and mind is not the same thing as claiming that OT believers could not be saved and did not have the redemptive power of God (the gospel) available to them. Obviously they did not experience an NT-shaped understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But as Tipton points out in his brief reference to Galatians 3:6-9, the NT affirms that OT saints had the gospel preached to them beforehand through promise and covenant. They were saved through trusting in what God had promised for the future, even though the details of that future were unclear to them (1 Peter 1:9-12). Their justification was by faith, as we saw above from our analysis of Paul's use of OT passages in Galatians 3. The heart of the problem in Tipton's analysis is that he takes this truth about the availability of the gospel in the OT and argues that the OT is inherently gospel-oriented apart from its fulfillment in the NT, such that "the Old Testament does not depend on the New Testament for its revelation of the gospel...it is itself sufficient to communicate redemptive truth... which carries through to its fulfillment in Christ in the New Testament" (200). Thus Tipton illegitimately separates his characterization of the OT from its foundation in the NT, *which is the very basis upon which he makes his argument* about the character of the OT. This illegitimate separation is the source of his diachronically-challenged final programmatic statement about the theological nature of the OT. An understanding of the presence of the gospel in the OT is not "on its own terms" but is irrevocably tied to an NT-shaped, gospel-shaped, Spirit-worked consciousness of God's redemptive work in the OT.

In making theological statements about the nature of the OT, it is illegitimate to artificially separate the character of the OT from its fulfillment in the NT. McCartney's approach (and much of modern scholarship's approach) of

initially reading the OT “grammatically-historically” and then adding various degrees of “Christotelic” understanding is ruled out because it runs counter to the very nature of the OT as redemptive revelation from the divine author (besides its character as Scripture written by people). Tipton’s arguments along those lines are helpful and well-received. But Tipton’s approach, while ostensibly connecting the two testaments “organically”, runs into the danger of separating the Christomorphic nature of the OT from its NT moorings by insisting that the OT is Christomorphic apart from its fulfillment in the NT, and using the NT to make that case.

The way ahead is to read the OT in a way that takes the worldview of the whole Bible into account. That means to approach the OT with a firmly gospel-centred mind and heart, which, in reliance on the Holy Spirit, reads the OT as an historical document, with both human and divine authors, in which the One True God deals with his people and with the world in preparing them for the eschatological future he has in mind, which is oriented towards, centred and fulfilled in the work of Jesus Christ. There is no need to insist that the OT is Christomorphic *apart* from its fulfillment in the NT, for it is Christomorphic *because* of its fulfillment in the NT, *because* of its fulfillment in the climactic and the ongoing redemptive work of God in Christ. An understanding *now* of that truth is only available to those who have had their hearts and minds transformed by the work of the Spirit through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## 8. Conclusion

Is it necessary to engage in theological reflection in order to understand the Old Testament? This essay has taken a case study, from within the Reformed world, of one particular approach to characterizing the OT theologically. It has engaged with some of the strengths and shortcomings of this one particular approach to but a narrow slice of the question. But in doing so, it has demonstrated that one’s approach to Old Testament study is utterly dependent upon theological presuppositions about the nature of God’s revelation within the Old Testament Scriptures, and also theological presuppositions about how that revelation has come to a climax in the work of Christ. The truth of Wright’s statement that neither biblical studies nor theology can proceed without the other has been amply illustrated in the very nature of the argument engaged in here.

Characteristic of a Reformed approach to the nature of the OT is a strong desire that Scripture itself be the final authority in theological analysis. In practice this means that the reasoning engaged in during the course of theological analysis, not least the reasoning in this essay, is to be regarded as fallible and potentially deeply flawed, and in need of correction and shaping through an engagement in the hermeneutical spiral that exists between theology and Scripture. But it is also clear that while theological analysis must remain subservient to Scripture, it provides a crucial resource in even the preliminary questions about the nature of Scripture. These questions must be engaged in order to even embark upon a study of Scripture.

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