

The Place of History and Exegesis in Theology

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As we are all gathered in one place, we come from Europe, Scandinavia, North and South America, Australia, Asia, and the Middle East. We are Jews and Christians, Conservative, Reform, Messianic; we are Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Evangelical. We are agnostics and we are atheists. We were born into our religious communities and we are converts.

We identify with the political left, the centre and the right. We side with Palestinians in their struggles and we side with Israel in theirs. We are scholars of the New Testament, the Hebrew Bible, Jewish Studies, Church History, Comparative Religion and Inter-Religious Studies, Ecclesiology, Systematic Theology, and Ethics. We work at State Universities, Private Universities, and Divinity Schools.

How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language, community, and political space this same insistent voice,¹ calling into question centuries of powerful theological constructs, which have supported religious identities based on triumphalism, antagonism, and fear?

We have all gathered here in one place, in this society, in order to listen, more than anything else. To listen to what others have to say, to seek theological wisdom as we endeavour to reach beyond, indeed to cut through the layers of inherited tradition that have prevented those on whose shoulders we stand to fully grasp the consequences of their interpretive choices. Choices which, as we now see, have skewed our perspective on the ancient texts, misrepresented the other, and isolated us from those with whom we share responsibility for the wellbeing of creation. Choices, indeed, which have, for more than a millennium and a half, caused suffering on a scale that defies comprehension, culminating less than a century ago in Europe, in the core of what was considered the pinnacle of academic learning.

As with prophets, the ability of theologies to unlock for people the enigmatic dimensions of life we call truth will be determined by the fruits they produce.²

The biblical texts, in all their complexities and embodied potential for projecting light or darkness, demand of us that we, condemned as we are to be free,³ choose; life above death, blessing above curse.⁴ And there is no choice without responsibility.

A theology of responsibility cannot but respect denominational boundaries, but only beyond the abstract idea of boundary itself, as the absolute escapes the probing mind just as much as it instils humility.

What is, then, the place of the biblical texts in theology, if theology relates to life as life relates to responsibility? What is the location of exegesis in the quest for a post-supersessionist theology? For most exegetes, the aim of their task has been and remains to translate into modern academic idiom ancient textualised sense-making projects, each of which represents, for the believer, a piece of reality in which is glimpsed the ultimate meaning of all reality.⁵

¹ Acts 2 (footnotes indicate intended echoes, or quotes).

² Matt 7:15–20.

³ Sartre.

⁴ Deut 30:19.

⁵ Tillich.

The undertaking of retrieving ancient meanings is in and of itself an interdisciplinary enterprise; an inter-subjective conversation. Exegesis is thus dependent on a set of common and hermeneutically refined game rules, rules which are applicable across religious, political, or ideologically divides, without subverting the discursive spaces in which such identities are formed and maintained. This means that while each contemporary theological construct emerges from within a specific denominational setting, it would be methodologically inappropriate to restrain the historical within a terminology to which it is foreign.

Thus, contemporary post-supersessionist theologies may share universal convictions, which may or may not surface in identical ways locally. The historical, however, can never be claimed for contemporary meaning-making projects without a process which risks colonizing the ancients, asking them to perform to tunes to them unknown.

There can never be, then, a Catholic, Lutheran, or Evangelical post-supersessionist reading of an ancient text, *if* history is what is aimed for. The historical resides *outside* the denominational. Theologians from diverse communities may and should tap into the past, but they should do so acutely aware that ownership is beyond reach. This, indeed, is precisely why the historical can offer a level playing field, evoking voices that speak, dialogically, across contemporary boundaries.

An exegetical contribution to post-supersessionist theology therefore lies on a different level, as participants in historical conversations may or may not have any denominational affiliations, and indeed, the very idea of the methodological relevance of such affiliations undermines the historical project as such.

History and historical readings of authoritative texts find their relevance in relation to contemporary theological discussions rather through offering the reconstructed sound of voices *not* our own, echoing in acoustic environments now lost, but within which they once made religious and political sense. Understanding these voices in their own contexts is but one step, although an ethically responsible one, in the task of seeking new ways of understanding the contemporary world through a theological prism.

For what John P. Meier writes about the historical Jesus is true also for the New Testament texts: “The more we appreciate what Jesus meant in his own time and place, the more ‘alien’ he will seem to us.”⁶ As Elna Mouton argues, the theological authority of the texts “lies in their referential power, in their ability to point beyond themselves, to an ultimate reality which they could only describe in limited and provisional ways.”⁷

Such an approach to the authority of the biblical texts indeed resonates with what the texts themselves project, as the divine is sought and revealed, according to these narratives, both within and beyond the written word.⁸ An exclusive focus on text would, thus, inevitably lead astray. Do we then overthrow the exegetical project and its place in the theological endeavour by such a claim? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold it.⁹

As exegesis may restore to us key aspects of the past, and so help us unlock meaning that transcends the texts themselves, international scholarship unbound by denominational constraints is in the process—and has been for some time—of uncovering the ineradicable Jewish nature of the texts incorporated in the New Testament. Indeed, we are soon at a point where a focus on the inception history of the New Testament texts will lead us to think of them not as Christian, but as Jewish texts, taken over and used by the emerging (non-Jewish) church

⁶ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Vol. 1: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 200.

⁷ Elna Mouton, *The Pathos of New Testament Studies: Of What Use are We to the Church?* (Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch, 2005) 17.

⁸ In history; in text; in personal revelation; in tradition; in other religious traditions. Revelatory diversity canonised.

⁹ Rom 3:31.

in a way reflecting the appropriation in the church of other authoritative texts from Israel's scriptures, such as Isaiah or Jeremiah.

While reception is not to be confused with inception, even if they necessarily overlap, reception is in no way devoid of the potential for truth, but shares with the meaning-making processes on which they build the responsibility that comes with interpretive choice. It seems, indeed, as if the New Testament texts constitute, if allowed to speak their own language, a special link between Jews and non-Jews, as the later churches through their adoption of this collection of writings are inevitably, as wild olive shoots, grafted into the cultivated olive tree, sharing and ultimately receiving their support from its rich root.¹⁰

To disregard the theological potential of such historical and literary dynamics would be inconsistent with any confession that the God inspiring these texts is also the God of history and, consequently, of the here and now. Indeed, against the background of recent political developments and the rise of anti-Semitism, racism, and fascism not only in Europe but also in North America and elsewhere, to choose not to act on such historical stimulus emerges not only as counter-intuitive in light of the nature and message of the New Testament texts, but also as theologically irresponsible.

With such action, however, comes danger. The vision of the Society, as it is described in its mission statement, is asking no less of its members and friends than for us to have "the courage to decentre ourselves and our hierarchies, renegotiating our position as the ultimate defenders of the faith in favor of a willingness to share responsibility for truth with those who are not like us. Just as the canon does."¹¹

The success of the Society will depend, I'm convinced, not only on its theological brilliance as it works to achieve its goals through genuine interdisciplinary dialogue, but most of all on how well we respond to the diversity within which our unity is embodied.

That, to be sure, has been the challenge all along, since the earliest Jesus movement emerged in Galilee and Jerusalem. The stakes are still as high as they were then; we cannot afford to fail, not primarily for our own sake, but for the sake of those with whom we share the responsibility for the present and the future.

¹⁰ Rom 11:18.

¹¹ Anders Runesson, *Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew: The Narrative World of the First Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), xxvi.