

Evangelical New Testament interpretation within the contemporary scene

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SUMMARY

How do we as evangelical believers interpret Scripture to discover what it is saying (and also what it is not saying) to us in our situation? Historical critical methods explore exegetical and historical questions as to what the text meant and whether it was reliable, but offer little to help us to move to what it is saying to us. A bunch of methods evaluate what the text says from various standpoints

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and judge it, but say little about how we find out what it is saying. Contemporary evangelicalism is largely tied to principlizing and applying the text, which is good as far as it goes. The redemptive-movement hermeneutic is defended as one method applicable especially to ethical and practical instruction. Can something similar to it be used to understand theological statements? I conclude that a variety of methods must be used.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Wie deuten wir Evangelikale die Schrift in dem Bemühen, herauszufinden, was sie uns in unserer Situation sagt (und auch was sie nicht sagt)? Methoden der historisch-kritischen Forschung gehen exegetischen und historischen Fragen nach und erforschen, was der Text einst meinte und ob er zuverlässig war. Allerdings helfen sie uns wenig dabei, eine Antwort auf die Frage zu finden, was er heute für uns bedeutet. Eine bunte Auswahl von Methoden bewertet, was der Text von unterschiedlichen Standpunkten betrachtet sagt, aber sie geben wenig

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Aufschluss darüber, wie wir herausfinden können, was er heute aussagt. Die gegenwärtige evangelikale Bewegung befasst sich hauptsächlich damit, Prinzipien aus dem Text zu extrahieren und sie anzuwenden, was so weit es möglich ist auch gut und schön ist. Die Hermeneutik der redemptive-movement [Erlösungs-Bewegung] vertritt einen Ansatz, der besonders bei ethischer und praktischer Unterweisung angewandt wird. Könnte man nicht etwas Ähnliches anwenden, wenn es um das Verständnis theologischer Aussagen geht? Ich komme zu der Schlussfolgerung, dass eine Vielfalt von Methoden anzuwenden ist.

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RÉSUMÉ

Comment procédons-nous, croyants évangéliques, pour interpréter l'Écriture et découvrir ce qu'elle nous dit (et ce qu'elle ne nous dit pas) dans notre situation concrète? Les méthodes de critique historique traitent de questions exégétiques et historiques pour déterminer ce que le texte signifiait et s'il était fiable, mais n'apportent que peu d'aide pour discerner ce qu'il nous dit à nous. Bien des méthodes servent à mettre en lumière, de divers points de vue, ce que le texte dit, et à en juger, mais elles

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ne permettent pas de dire grand-chose sur la façon de découvrir ce qu'il nous dit pour aujourd'hui. Les évangéliques se contentent souvent de nos jours de tirer des principes du texte et d'en dégager des applications, ce qui est une bonne approche dans les limites de ce qu'elle peut produire. L'herméneutique du mouvement de la rédemption est une méthode applicable spécialement à l'instruction éthique et pratique. Peut-on employer une méthode similaire pour la compréhension d'affirmations théologiques? Marshall conclut en encourageant la mise en œuvre d'une diversité de méthodes.

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How do we as evangelical believers interpret Scripture to discover what it is saying (and also what it is not saying) to us in our situation?¹ The historical-critical or grammatico-critical approach

was essentially concerned with establishing what Scripture was saying in its original situation and with evaluating it in terms of whether it was historically reliable. Conservative scholars tended to

assume that what the original writers intended to say was the message for us also, granted that there might be some differences in application. More recent approaches evaluate the text from different perspectives and tend to impose some outside authority as the criterion of its truth and validity.² But how do evangelicals, or how should evangelicals, who accept the authority of Scripture, find out what it is saying and what it is not saying to us today? What is the value of an authoritative revelation from God if we are not sure what it actually says?

Mainstream types of evangelical interpretation

A recent symposium edited by Gary Meadors and entitled *Moving beyond the Bible to Theology*, brings together for comparison four apparently different methods of interpreting Scripture, in each case motivated by the concern to get from what the biblical writers wrote to what is the message that comes from them to the church today.³

It is a pity that, although the symposium has the word 'theology' in its title and the term does get mentioned in the body of the discussion, in fact the focus is *almost entirely on ethics and practice rather than on theology*. For example, the path from the New Testament to Chalcedon and onwards is not trodden. Nevertheless, what is attempted in the book is important for dealing with the ethical material. The first three of the four contributors to the book tend to agree that their methods are not in competition – with one being right and the others wrong – but rather that they are *complementary*. Collectively they recognise some merit in the fourth approach (the redemptive-movement method) but they also voice strong opposition to it.

A principlizing approach

The first contributor, Walter Kaiser, advocates a '*principlizing*' approach, in which the interpreter works upwards from the specific teaching of a passage of Scripture to the principles at different levels on a ladder of abstraction and generality that may lie behind it, and then tries to move down again to the application or concretisation of these principles in the context of our own culture. There is thus a two-way movement from the passage to the underlying more abstract principles and then from these principles to their application in the interpreter's world.

Writing in a book concerned with going '*Beyond the Bible*', Kaiser insists that this approach is not an exercise in *going beyond* Scripture but rather in *applying* it. He illustrates the method with the test-cases of euthanasia, women and the church, homosexuality, slavery and embryos. In each case Scripture provides ample principles to settle issues that were not necessarily in the authors' minds, so that there is no sense in which we have to go 'beyond' Scripture other than in widening the application of the timeless principles that it expresses.

This raises the question of what it means to 'go beyond Scripture'. Fresh applications are good and Kaiser's definition of 'going beyond' is carefully worded so as to avoid excluding them. He thus wants to say that Scripture itself answers our questions and the problems are those of making applications rather than creating fresh principles. There are no new principles about releasing slaves that go beyond Scripture.⁴

Kaiser may appear to be simply representing the evangelical consensus approach to exposition. His approach becomes more individual, however, when he develops two additional axioms. The first is that there is a *progressive* revelation in Scripture that is *perfect*, at least in seminal form, at every stage.⁵ The second is that the *authorial* meaning of a text remains constant and the same even when (for example) a New Testament author quotes an Old Testament passage. Kaiser thus rejects the concept of a *sensus plenior*.

His claim that at any stage in a progressive revelation of God the revelation is perfect needs unpacking to see if it is valid. I presume that he could be using the analogy of the growth of a baby which starts off by being a perfect example of what a newly born child should be, and develops into a perfect example of a young child, a teenager and eventually an adult. The difficulty is that whereas the one child develops from one stage to the next, we are dealing with separate episodes in a revelation which are, so to speak, 'frozen' in Scripture and therefore may appear incomplete and even misleading in certain respects when they are seen from a later vantage point. Taken on their own, statements about God visiting the sins of the parents upon the children are one-sided and misleading in the light of other statements, even if they contain partial truths.

When any problems arise, where Scripture appears to teach something that is unacceptable (whether because it is contradicted by other texts or because it goes counter to the interpreter's

beliefs), Kaiser solves them at the level of the *exegesis* of the texts: the author did not mean what he is commonly thought to mean, and Kaiser offers a *fresh exegesis* of what he said.

This sounds beautifully simple and it is a standard approach that I (and many evangelical theologians) have frequently expounded and commended. It is, however, not immune from criticism.

1. Kaiser achieves his answers in some cases by adopting rather *unusual interpretations* that are unacceptable to some of the other contributors to the book and doubtless to many other scholars as well. His claim that Paul actually teaches the abolition of slavery is strongly contested by the fourth contributor, W.J. Webb, who argues (correctly in my opinion) that Paul does not go so far.⁶ Elsewhere some of the argumentation seems a bit simplistic.

2. The new applications that are found and needed are often not different ways of dealing with the same problems that were faced in the Bible (like whether women may teach in church or how parents discipline children) but *ways of dealing with fundamentally different contemporary problems*; for example, we are not concerned to establish the ethics of relations between slave-owners and slaves but rather the ethics of relations between employers and employees, and, although these may be superficially similar, there are basic differences between the two situations. As a result Kaiser slides over the differences between the problems of how you treat your employees and of whether the biblical teaching permits (and merely regulates) slavery.

3. How do we decide *which applications of the biblical principles to specific problems are right and appropriate*? If the abolition of slavery is not advocated in the Bible, is abolition today a re-application of the biblical principles concerning slavery (and if so, which ones)? If so, is it a more legitimate and more binding application that takes precedence over the principles that govern the practice of slavery? Suppose that a slave-owner in some modern culture has slaves, what do we expect him to do when he gets converted? Do we say to him: 'keeping slaves is fine, so long as you treat them well; that's what the underlying principles of Paul's teaching say'? Or do we say, 'If you understood and applied biblical principles correctly, you would realise that you are wrong to continue owning slaves'? Alongside this question is the related one (which probably merges with it) of how one identifies which princi-

ples are appropriate for particular problems.

4. There needs to be some analysis of whether there are any rules for making progress up and down the ladder. *How do we move from applications to principles*?

5. How do we know which biblical principles to apply to *problems not tackled in Scripture* (e.g. medical research)?

6. Kaiser's illustrative examples are all concerned with ethics rather than doctrine, and so his essay does not get to grips with the problem indicated in the book's title of 'Moving... to *Theology*'. Is his approach not one that is by its nature limited to ethical principles? Maybe he is like J.I. Packer, who was prepared to change the time-bound applications of ethical principles but said nothing about the spiritual truths.⁷

Now admittedly the boundary between theology and ethical principles and applications is fuzzy and there is a considerable amount of merging. But there are real difficulties on the theological side that cannot be solved by minting ever more abstract principles.⁸ It would be a useful exercise to ask how the process can be freed from these methodological problems.

I do not think that the problems are such as to condemn the method: Searching for underlying principles of conduct and extending their application is a legitimate and necessary procedure. My main point is that it is mistaken to claim that nothing more is ever required or that it is always appropriate.

A redemptive-historical model

The next two essayists in the book may well seem not to go much further. David Doriani offers a '*redemptive-historical*' model. Like Kaiser he holds that Scripture in itself is sufficient to equip the believer for every good work, and thus we do not really go beyond it when we apply it. But, first, he wants to stress *the importance of narrative* alongside didactic, propositional material. Basically he wants to add a use of biblical narratives as commendations of types of conduct (or warnings): 'Where a series of acts by the faithful create a pattern, and God or the narrator approves the pattern, it directs believers, even if no law spells out the lesson.' Teaching may be drawn from narratives, especially where several narratives point in the same direction. This helps us 'to address issues that never attract the direct interest of Scripture'.⁹

The second part of his method is to set up a

framework of questions to ask about four aspects of the biblical data; these are concerned with what we can learn from a passage about duty, good character, worthy goals and gaining a biblical worldview.¹⁰ In this light he examines specific questions about gambling, architecture (i.e. safe roofs) and especially women and ministry, where he gives an exegesis of biblical passages to support male leadership and affirms 'that women may not preach or teach authoritatively among God's assembled people'.¹¹

I am puzzled by the way in which Doriani's interpretative conclusions regarding the specific passages and the theme that he discusses here appear to be based purely on his exegesis rather than on his use of questions about the four aspects from which one can approach the biblical data, and I feel that he has not done justice to his proposed method. Further, I am puzzled as to what 'redemptive-historical' means in the title of his essay.

As with Kaiser, we find for the most part the same limitation of attention to ethical issues of behaviour. It may also be worrying that by practising essentially the same methods Kaiser and Doriani arrive at different conclusions on the place of women in the church.¹² And neither of them attempts to examine the contemporary world (both Christian and non-Christian) to see what factors make people unhappy about the hierarchical position.

The drama of redemption

The approach of the third contributor, Kevin Vanhoozer, is close to that of Tom Wright in speaking of an ongoing *drama* of redemption in which we are shaped by what has gone on in the earlier scenes; we take our place on stage, not knowing how the play will end or reach its denouement, but resting on the direction that is set by what has gone before and the divine assurances and pre-pictures of what the future will be like. Interpretation means acting out the biblical teaching in life rather than simply in our minds. Vanhoozer is essentially concerned with this our involvement as actors in this drama, who are to show our understanding of Scripture by *doing* God's will and not just talking and arguing about it. An essential, indispensable part of evangelical biblical interpretation must be the working out of what the text is saying in our own personal lives, both individual and as members of various communities including the congregation to which we belong. Otherwise the intended effect of Scripture does not take place. Application is an essential

part of preaching. Preaching is meant to change the hearers or to encourage and re-emphasise the changes that should already be taking place. Performance of what Scripture says is a vital aspect of interpretation, without which we cannot really say that Scripture has been interpreted.

So, then, we need to interpret and to act, unlike those who ignore one or other of these tasks. The Bible story is

a series of events that, when taken together as a unified drama, serve as a lens or interpretative framework through which Christians think, make sense of their experience, and decide what to do and how to do it.¹³

As participants in a theodrama we must develop a 'canon sense' to find out what is fitting. Key questions to ask about any scene in the drama are: Who is speaking? Where are we in the drama? What is going on when seen from a divine perspective? This approach is then applied to consideration of two case studies (Mary; transsexuality).

At the end of Vanhoozer's exposition I am still baffled as to how I am to find out what I am expected to *do* in order to interpret difficult texts and live them out. It is all far too vague, a set of what are more like goals without any clear indication of how to attain them. Vanhoozer is certainly right that Scripture reading is meant to *lead to changed action and character* rather than just intellectual understanding, and his contribution is compatible with all the others, but it doesn't provide any guidance for dealing with obscure, ambiguous or culturally-shaped texts.

Certainly Vanhoozer has written more widely on the subject elsewhere. Here he makes it clearer that instead of looking for deculturalized principles (as he calls them) we would do better to follow 'canonical practices', and not so much doctrinal statements as rather 'patterns of judgment', but recognising that 'the same judgment can be rendered in a variety of conceptual terms'. His illustration is the way in which the council of Nicea has the same judgment about Christ as is expressed in Philipians 2 with its statement about Christ's 'equality with God'. Instead of systematising the concepts in Scripture (as by Packer) or extracting principles (Kaiser) we should discern and continue *the biblical patterns of judgment*, following 'canonical practices' as we 'make the same kind of judgments about God, the world, and ourselves as those embedded in Scripture'.¹⁴ As it stands, it is impossible to see what this means in practice.

A redemptive-movement approach

If the first three contributions hang together fairly closely, the fourth is rather different and demands closer attention. William Webb advocates a *redemptive-movement* hermeneutical method in which we discover what he calls the trajectories in understanding and practice that exist in Scripture itself and then allow ourselves to be carried along further by them. In this way we find new patterns of living that are in continuity with Scripture and are scripturally based but take us beyond what Scripture actually says, and may show up the inadequacies of the earlier stages in revelation.¹⁵ We can trace in Scripture a set of shifts to a more 'redemptive' style of behaviour compared not only with that of some of Israel's neighbours but also with earlier teaching in their Scriptures.

This trajectory is particularly clearly seen in the laws and customs regarding *slavery* which make for a more humane practice as time goes by. But the trajectory does not stop there. Although the New Testament authors accept slavery as an institution and for the most part merely try to regulate it, there are latent tendencies in thinking and attitudes (particularly in Paul's appeal to Philemon to regard Onesimus as a brother, not only in the Lord, but also in the flesh) that point to the realisation, which was slow in coming, that slavery is incompatible with Christian theology and ethics. One might say that the principles that lead to the abolition of slavery are there in the canonical, final revelation, but the application of these principles to that issue has not yet taken place.

A second example concerns the use of *corporal punishment*. Here Webb shows how even those evangelical scholars and teachers who insist on retaining the biblical teaching regarding physical chastisement of children nevertheless quietly ameliorate it, apparently without realising that they are doing so. He argues that the trajectory found in Scripture has been and is being traversed further in Christian history, as in the abolition of slavery, on the basis of broader biblical teaching. Granted that the biblical revelation is final and definitive, it nevertheless contains the momentum to take its application further. The movement cannot cease with canonisation. Scripture must be read in the light of this momentum and acted upon.

One particular characteristic of this approach is that it is *canonical* in the sense that it is concerned with the search for material on particular topics throughout the Bible. It recognises that the canon

is the result of a progressive revelation, which means that the whole of Scripture must be taken into account as a possible source for material and that there is a fuller revelation from one stage to another. This applies to such periods as that from the creation to the calling of Abraham, from Abraham to Moses, from Moses through the Old Testament period, from the birth of Jesus Christ to his death and resurrection, and from the resurrection through the period of the early church. Although the coming of Christ is the centre of Scripture and revelation, the full significance of that event is not made clear until the period of the apostles who unpack what was latent earlier in terms of the work of the Spirit, the opening of the church to Gentiles and the superseding of the law of Moses by the law of Christ or the law of the Spirit. The revelation given in the life and teaching of Jesus is *not complete* but required the further revelation that the disciples were not ready to receive until after his resurrection and the beginning of the ongoing work of the Spirit in the church.

But the main point to emphasise is that this method deals with the Bible as canon and underlines that *individual texts may not be final*. For example, in the matter of wives Ephesians 5 is incomplete in that it says nothing about wives loving their husbands, and it must be complemented by Titus 2:4.

Webb is well aware that this approach might be misappropriated to generate trajectories that would be false developments from biblical teaching. In particular he rejects any attempt to 'move on' from the biblical teaching that condemns homosexual practices as sinful. He is therefore at pains to set up some procedures for *testing whether a proposed trajectory is valid or not*, and in this particular case he argues strongly that there are no grounds for seeing in the Bible any movement away from the negative stance on homosexual behaviour, but rather that the unanimity of the biblical teaching forbids such a move. The major part of his first book, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*, is concerned with the principles that may be invoked to test whether a proposed trajectory is actually there and to lay down limits that forbid the creation of trajectories that are not justified, still less demanded, by the biblical revelation.

Here, then, is a new approach that leads beyond the Bible, not only in the sense of fresh applications but also in the recognition of divine principles which were not fully patent and explicit to the New Testament writers but which are thoroughly

and deeply biblical and which lead to conduct that may be rather different from biblical practice.¹⁶ Like the other contributions to Meadors' symposium it deals with principles of conduct rather than doctrine, but it operates by laying bare theological truths that are expressed in Scripture or that must be postulated in order to account for what Scripture says on the surface and then using them to move beyond Scripture.

Consequently, this approach may on occasion propose conduct that would not have been allowed in biblical times. The main (and controversial) example here is the freedom given to women over against their husbands or the men in the church. It may also prohibit behaviour that was acceptable and permitted or even encouraged in some biblical texts, such as the beating of a recalcitrant child or slave and the ownership of slaves. In some cases there may be instances where the culturally conditioned application of a principle has become inappropriate in a different culture. (A holy kiss may send out the wrong messages in some cultures.)

Webb notes as an argument in favour of the validity of his approach that some of those who attack his method nevertheless actually follow it themselves when dealing with such matters as restricting the degree of physical punishment permitted in Scripture. Even if the Bible allows you to go to a particular degree of punishment, they forbid it. They are tacitly and perhaps unconsciously saying that we are not permitted to do what Scripture permits, not because of a cultural shift but because the Scriptural principle does not take us far enough. So Webb's proposal goes beyond a shift of application in changing culture.

It must be emphasised that this approach is not one to be applied to every bit of scriptural teaching and practice, as if everything were up for grabs. There are major areas of biblical teaching that remain unaffected by the process. It is appropriate for dealing with attitudes and conduct where Scripture already operates with setting limits to sinful oppression and we need to go further. Specific questions that should be investigated could be:

1. Does biblical teaching takes us beyond 'just war' to pacifism?
2. What should be the conventions accepted in situations of war? I am not thinking of the changes due to changing culture but of those due to the need to reformulate biblical principles in relation to new kinds of weaponry (including poison gas

and viruses; nuclear weapons; the use of torture), the indiscriminate slaughter of prisoners (genocide), the distinction between targeting armed forces and civilians, and so on.

3. How do we deal with questions regarding adultery, divorce and treatment of divorced persons?

4. Is medical care (and other services) for all people something that a state should be required to provide?

Critiquing Webb

A critique of Webb's method needs to look in turn at the two stages in the process.¹⁷ The first is whether there are redemptive *trajectories through Scripture itself* and how they are to be recognised and tested. Webb finds them by comparison of different passages and external evidences. A trajectory may be spotted in a particular passage, but the exercise requires a synthetic treatment of the material. His book discusses in great detail the principles for identifying the presence or absence (or weakness) of proposed trajectories. He lists places where Scripture modifies an original cultural norm in a manner that can be seen as open to further future modification, or where Scripture contains a seed idea that encourages further movement, or where social norms in one part of Scripture are 'broken out of' in other texts, or where following a text literally no longer achieves the originally intended intent or purpose, or where the basis of a practice lies in the fall or the ensuing curse. He lists other less persuasive criteria as when a biblical practice is preferred to competing practices or scripture speaks out strongly against a practice, and he also lists other inconclusive criteria. Important is the question of customs that are contrary to present-day scientific evidence.¹⁸

The second area for questioning Webb's method is whether these trajectories set *paths that must be followed further beyond Scripture* to fuller redemption in the course of time. Are there new principles or is it just a matter of re-application of known principles? And are these developments in accordance with Scripture or do they render some of it obsolete? Do they lead to what might be regarded as contradictions of Scripture? Consider how following the trajectory on corporal punishment forbids doing what Scripture allows, so that it is no defence for a person who beats a child excessively to claim that Scripture permits it.

We all do go beyond Scripture in developing patterns of Christian behaviour (e.g. the care for

the environment that it is a bit of a struggle to get out of New Testament teaching), and the question would be whether this is simply a case of fresh applications or rather of redemptive movement that is more than mere application. What is going on seems to me to be partly the recognition of the relevance of principles that may not have been applied to a specific problem in Scripture rather than simply a revised application of the principles that were in mind. I would regard this as doing something fresh that may lead to applications that go beyond straight scriptural teaching and that may involve not doing what Scripture allows or commands and doing other things that Scripture may have prohibited. Redemptive movement is a fact of Christian living.

Another area might be where a Christian practice may have been based on the surface on principles that no longer apply but may still be justified on the basis of other principles that may be scriptural or in harmony with Scripture. The Old Testament prohibitions on eating certain foods because they were regarded as ritually unclean may no longer apply with the shift in covenants, but might be seen as still worth enforcing in hot countries with a danger of the food going off and becoming unsafe for human consumption. In modern times an analogous case might be the earlier intuitive belief that tobacco should not be used by believers for a variety of somewhat inarticulate reasons (waste of money; unpleasant atmosphere created for non-smokers; possibly some health reasons such as development of catarrh) but this prohibition is now set on absolutely firm, clear ground because use of tobacco causes lung cancer and death. A concern for the sanctity and preservation of life, both one's own and that of others, is surely biblical. Similarly, the Christian principle of concern for the welfare of other believers that led Paul to forbid eating food or drinking alcohol for fear of setting a bad example (and so encouraging idolatry and immorality) may well need to be taken up with regard to alcohol because of the horrendous health and social evils that accompany its widespread availability and use.

Beyond the Bible: theology

As developed by Webb, the redemptive-movement tool deals mainly with principles of conduct which are affected by thinking through the application of redemptive principles in Scripture, but inevitably this involves theological principles from which

the conduct is derived. Here various issues arise. I mention three but only the last of these can be discussed here.

a. The *systematisation* of theology. This includes the synthesising of biblical teaching with all the problems inherent in constructing a theology of the Bible or of its component testaments.

b. The search for a Christian theological understanding with reference to *problems that were as yet unknown to the Scriptural authors*. These include broader philosophical questions but also particular issues that raise questions of principle: Is a foetus a person or an entity to be treated as a person with rights? Are some forms of contraception unacceptable in that they are essentially abortions? Is the with-holding of life support in any sense murder? What is life?

c. The third problem is that of relating the teaching of particular passages to what appears to be the central or the fullest revelation of theological truths in Scripture. This is especially important when dealing with *passages that present prima facie difficulties in interpretation and application*. I return to one delicate topic that I have looked at elsewhere,¹⁹ the nature of divine judgment. There is what I regard as clear, mainline teaching in Scripture that God is the supreme judge, who acts in wrath against sinners, and who will condemn the unrighteous to eternal punishment. However, some biblical imagery apparently depicts God as acting like a human torturer or tormentor. The picture of God provided by some of the parables of Jesus is horrendous if it is taken literally or if it is applied metaphorically to say that God does spiritually whatever it is that corresponds to human torture (Matthew 18:35; 24:51; 25:41; Luke 12:46; 16:25, 28; 19:27). And of course this language is not confined to parables and analogies where we might more easily find ways of saying that what God does analogously may be different from what human rulers do literally. God is also described in Scripture as acting through horrific human disasters and through the cruelty of pagan rulers who torture his sinful people (Isaiah 10:5-7). God exercises whatever is the spiritual equivalent to torture on the devil and unrepentant sinners. On earth human rulers bear the sword on his behalf (Romans 13).

1. A redemptive trajectory through Scripture and beyond would forbid the *human* use of torture as inhuman, granted that there may be a fuzzy line between doing something

unpleasant to criminals to dissuade them from repetition of the offence and doing something that is too cruel.²⁰ But if cruelty is forbidden to human beings, must it not all the more be forbidden to God by his just and righteous nature, to say nothing of his mercy? Can we have a religion in which God is permitted to do what would be regarded as evil if a human being did it? The point may be made all the more emphatically by reflecting that no evangelical preacher today is likely to say in an evangelistic sermon: 'Think of the most appalling ways that Hitler or Saddam Hussein treated their enemies: I assure you that the fate that will befall sinners at the hand of God will be infinitely worse than their acts of torture.'

2. Human beings are forbidden to take vengeance at all. This command is linked to the allotment of this role to God alone. Private vengeance is forbidden, though state action is authorised. The implication is that God will act in a way that avoids the injustices that easily attach to the human action (Romans 12:19). We are not told how God does so, perhaps in case we should try imperfectly to imitate it. But, so far as the final judgment is concerned, it would seem likely that the human aspects that are forbidden would include torture, and it is hard to think of a divine equivalent action that would somehow be acceptable where human torture is not.
3. A more difficult point to decide might be whether the suffering of intense and lasting pain is necessary to wipe out the guilt (or whatever we may call it) of the suffering and pain that the offender may have caused to somebody else. If an offender murders my infant son, is the offence somehow cancelled out by executing him or killing his son? We face the difficult question of the relation between restitution as a way of undoing an evil action and its effects and retribution in the sense of inflicting pain upon the offender. This is an area that needs further investigation, the result of which might well be to ask whether my suffering of pain can somehow cancel out my evil action in causing pain to somebody else.
4. We might also raise the question: how does the principle of an 'eye for an eye' do me as the bereaved father any good? Do I get some

sort of satisfaction out of it? Do I know that justice has been done and feel satisfied as a result? And how in any case can one measure the offence and the punishment in relation to one another?

Can we find an alternative way of taking full account of the biblical insistence on God's justice, his wrath and judgment, and his action at the last judgment that does not involve something akin to torture? The way to solve the problem may be to note that the outcome of divine judgment is the exclusion of sinners from the future kingdom of God so that they will not destroy the peace and love that reign there (Matthew 7:23; 8:12; Luke 13:27-28); this would be a combination of restraint from further evil activity and deprivation of the blessings of the kingdom, in other words a fitting punishment.

5. This exclusion consists in spiritual death rather than the ongoing torment of seeing the bliss of the kingdom from outside and knowing that you will never experience it. The alternative to eternal life is eternal death or destruction, not eternal life in torment.²¹
6. Alongside this imagery of eternal death as exclusion from the kingdom of God there is a second type of imagery: ongoing conscious torment inflicted by God. It would seem right to regard the former as the controlling image, and the second as the use of human imagery intended to bring home to sinners how dire are the consequences of sin: it uses the analogy of human despotic behaviour with the limited aim of showing that the consequences of sin are dreadful but without seeing them as a divine version of torture.

This discussion is part of the wider issue of the nature of the final judgment, whether it is (simply) exclusion from the kingdom of God or the new Jerusalem, which is tantamount to spiritual death, or is a never-ending punishment (analogous to being in a fire that goes on and on destroying something but never actually completing the process). To adopt either position involves making a choice not to accept biblical teaching that appears to favour the rejected option. Presumably some of those who take a different line from me would want to argue that the eternal torment passages spell out more fully what the eternal death passages say, whereas the latter are a simplification of the former, and any harmonisation will do better

justice to all the evidence if the former are taken as normative: eternal death is to be understood as living, never-ending torment. It could be argued on the other side that the real point of the eternal torment passages is to indicate that the judgment on sin is so severe that it is a worse fate than that described in terms of infinite suffering.

Thus, and this is vital, in this particular case we have tried to find a solution to our problem *by means of exegesis*: the exegesis sees two types of imagery that are in tension, and I have tried to find a solution to the tension by regarding one type as primary over the other. The exegesis also recognises the danger of drawing more out of an analogy than is justified (God's intense opposition to and wrath against sin, but not his torturing of sinners).

What is happening here is one specific attempt to discern how to interpret Scripture on the basis of a Christian mind that is nourished by Scripture. If I do not believe that God tortures and torments, it is because of the biblical teaching as a whole that condemns torture and that extols the justice and the mercy of God. This directs me not to take more out of the application of human imagery to God than is permitted, e.g. by understanding his wrath in an anthropomorphic way.

This particular example is more concerned with dealing with texts that may be misunderstood to imply that God practises torture. But at the same time there is a movement towards making clear that the biblical message emphasises in the strongest possible manner the importance of human beings taking morality and religion seriously since the consequences of not doing so are indeed dire. The texts thus call hearers urgently to seek reconciliation with God and to respond to the gospel before it is too late. And this is a message for today that the world needs to hear.

I have used an extremely sensitive and controversial example of this type of interpretation. On the one side, it may be very difficult for believers who seek to be fully sanctified in love, truth and righteousness to accept some apparent biblical teaching. But, on the other hand, to put it bluntly, if the idea that God does something akin to torture does not worry us, is there maybe something lacking from our sanctification?

To be sure, my exegesis still leaves other questions unanswered. We shall still have to see the hand of God in the actions of flawed human beings carrying out judgment with violence and injustice on earth. Somehow God is constrained

in his actions within this imperfect world, where violence is endemic.²² And it is only in Christ that we see perfection.

Space forbids discussion of these matters, but we cannot close our minds to such questions, and we dare not proclaim a God who is immoral, when he is the high and holy one who cannot stand iniquity.

What I hope to have done here is to demonstrate briefly how placing the difficult passages about torment in the wider context of Scripture and its teaching about how God's people must live provides a context within which we may see that the biblical language should not be interpreted to teach things about God which are inconsistent with his nature and his name. There is no simple 'method' for doing this. It is more like an art than a science. But basically the stages are:

1. *Identifying* difficult passages, where the difficulty arises from the passage or doctrine in relation to our basic understanding of God.
2. Interpreting the biblical texts by the *ordinary methods of exegesis* to see whether they point to a trajectory.
3. *Comparing* Scripture with Scripture.
4. Ascertaining whether the difficult material may be otherwise interpreted *without treating it unfairly* (e.g. by exegesis that does not stand up to criticism).
5. Seeking out the *essential point* that the difficult passage is making and expressing it clearly.²³
6. Finding a *rationale* for why the difficult passage is expressed in a difficult manner rather than in one that is free from objection.

Thus this aspect of our interpretive task has two sides. Positively, there is the desire to set Scripture free to speak significantly and meaningfully to ourselves and our world. We need to unleash the lion to roar meaningfully and bring fresh challenges to us. But also negatively, there are many occasions when people dismiss some teaching of Scripture. Sometimes this may be due to their wilful or ignorant denial of biblical teaching (e.g. denial that adultery is sinful). Sometimes it may be due to a mistaken idea of what Scripture actually does teach (e.g. that divorce is permissible only in cases of adultery²⁴). And sometimes it may be Christians with minds nurtured on Scripture who find some point unacceptable or inadequate in the light of what they see as biblical teaching and biblical theology.²⁵

I would describe the Christian mind nurtured

on the Gospel as one that tries to understand everything in the light of the revelation of God's character as essentially holy love or loving holiness, which expresses itself over against the fallen creation in wrath and grace. Where images appear to conflict, we shall have to ask which makes better sense in the light of the divine character. Ultimately holiness and love may be the same quality, but we seem to need both words together to avoid falling into inadequate ideas of God.

Conclusion

Within the broad area of biblical interpretation this article has focussed on the problems of how we ascertain what Scripture is saying to us and what it is not saying to us. We saw that various methods must be used side by side as appropriate. The grammatico-historical method establishes by exegesis what Scripture was saying when it was originally written, and very often the message to be expounded and applied to us is essentially the same. More recent approaches examine Scripture from different viewpoints (e.g. a concern for the oppressed) and this may reveal new facets of its message, although some writers tend to judge Scripture and find it wanting and subordinate it to a secular authority. Evangelical theologians generally recognise that the precise application of Biblical teaching may need to be adapted to different social and cultural situations. There is a general acceptance of the process of principlizing, whereby the underlying principles in particular biblical passages are laid bare and then form the basis for fresh applications; this applies to narrative material as well as to teaching material. An important stress is being laid on the realisation that interpretation of Scripture must go beyond an intellectual apprehension of its teaching and commands to a transformation of life that embodies and expresses Scripture in practical ways. The recognition that there are trajectories in the redeeming and transforming of various aspects of scriptural teaching within Scripture itself, especially in the movement from the old to the new covenant but also throughout both periods, and that these tendencies continue in the life and teaching of the church alerts us to consider the parameters by which we recognise their presence and also by which we reject false moves beyond what Scripture teaches. What has been pioneered with reference to biblical ethics also needs to be applied to the interpretation of biblical doctrine so as to avoid false understand-

ing of it as well as to recognise where Scripture calls us to fuller understanding of its teaching.

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Notes

- 1 This is the edited version of a paper given at the conference of FEET, the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians, in Berlin, August 2010.
- 2 P. Gooder, *Searching for Meaning: An introduction to interpreting the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 2008).
- 3 G.T. Meadors (ed.), *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009). It is a pity that the book deals only with evangelical approaches and scarcely mentions other contemporary approaches and what we can learn from them. Richard Hays briefly appears on stage (171-173) but that is about all! See further my review in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 28:2 (2010), 241-44.
- 4 W.C. Kaiser, Jr., 'A principlizing model' in Meadors (ed.), *Four Views*, 19-50.
- 5 Kaiser, 'Principlizing model', 47-48.
- 6 W.J. Webb, 'A redemptive-movement model', in Meadors (ed.), *Four Views*, 215-248.
- 7 For Packer, 'Biblical passages must be taken to mean what their human authors were consciously expressing.' This can then be 'synthesized to yield universal and abiding truths about the will, work and ways of God... [and] universal and abiding principles of loyalty and devotion to the holy, gracious Creator.' The latter need to be detached from their original situations and cultural frames and subjected to 'rational application'. See J.I. Packer, *Honouring the Written Word of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999) 153, 157.
- 8 My problem is that I don't belong to your average evangelical congregation which doesn't ask questions about these things because that would be to question and perhaps reject Scripture. Instead I am a member of a more mixed one where some people have eyes to see the really awkward bits of the Bible and keep me from being content with turning a blind eye to them or not trying to find an acceptable theodicy. As a preacher I have to help those in the congregation who have these problems and are worried by them. We shall return to these later, but for the moment I shall register the point that Kaiser's method simply does not provide any way of doing so.
- 9 David M Doriani, 'A redemptive-historical model' in Meadors (ed.), *Four Views*, 75-120, here 89.

- 10 Doriani, 'Redemptive-historical model', 103.
- 11 Doriani, 'Redemptive-historical model', 117.
- 12 I find it hard to see any significant difference here from Kaiser's approach that merits calling this a different approach. Kaiser's criticisms are therefore a mix of puzzled approval of the method and critique of the application of it that produces what he sees as wrong results.
- 13 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'A drama-of-redemption model' in Meadors (ed.), *Four Views*, 151-199, here 155, cf. 169.
- 14 K.J. Vanhoozer. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005). I had hoped to find examples of how to do this in this fuller treatment, but was disappointed.
- 15 See W.J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001); *Corporal Punishment Texts That Trouble The Soul: A Biblical Journey Beyond The Rod, The Whip and The Meat Cleaver* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010); *Brutal, Bloody and Barbaric: War Texts That Trouble the Soul* (Downers Grove, IVP, forthcoming). Also 'The Limits of a Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: A Focused Response to T. R. Schreiner', *Evangelical Quarterly* 75 (2003) 327-342; 'A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: Encouraging Dialogue among Four Evangelical Views', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48:2 (June 2005) 331-349.
- 16 The Old Testament permits oaths but insists that they must be kept, whereas Jesus argues for a practice of speech that does not need oaths because it always aims at truthfulness. Likewise the OT prescribes a procedure for divorce, but Jesus argues for avoidance of the adultery that was the basis for initiating a divorce. The OT is realistic about curbing the bad effects of sin, whereas Jesus attacks the sin itself, while presumably recognising the need to fall back on the OT when sin continues.
- 17 I pass over the criticisms made of him by the other contributors to Meadors (ed.), *Four Views*. See also W. Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An analysis of 118 disputed questions* (Leicester: Apollos, 2005) 600-645, who regards the approach as thoroughly unevangelical, replacing the moral authority of Scripture with that of Webb's own 'better ethic'. Grudem attacks Webb for not realising that many of his examples are related to the shift between the old and new covenants, which is divinely attested in Scripture, whereas Webb thinks that he has the authority to find other trajectories that are not divinely authorised in Scripture. This attack ignores the fact that Grudem has to use his own human authority to decide where biblical applications of principles still apply or must be replaced. He also wrongly assumes that the authority for Webb's new code of behaviour is Webb's set of 18 tests, failing to note that these tests help us to recognise biblical principles that contain their own authority and do not confer authority on them; cf. how the authority of the biblical books is recognised by their canonisation and not conferred on them by that process.
- 18 This list is difficult to understand and to summarise in the confines of this article. It is important for what it forbids as well as what it encourages. In particular, it demonstrates that the biblical negative attitude to homosexual practices and adultery is unchanging.
- 19 I.H. Marshall (with K.J. Vanhoozer and S.E. Porter), *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic / Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004) 22-23.
- 20 There is surely a line between hitting a person's hand with or without a weapon and amputating the hand. Christian teaching would certainly forbid the latter, regardless of whether it is prohibited in Scripture.
- 21 For a different type of solution that sees the ongoing state of the lost to be that of a remorse that is in agreement with God's judgment on sin, see H. Blocher, 'Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil', in N.M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster / Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 283-312.
- 22 See H. Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).
- 23 For example, the teaching about submission of a wife to her husband is not to be rejected, but seen in a context of redemption and accepted as part of the biblical teaching about mutual submission to one another, i.e. of husbands to wives (e.g. over the best way to prepare dinner) as well as of wives to husbands (e.g. over how to understand the mind of a rebellious teenage son).
- 24 It has been sufficiently demonstrated that marital cruelty would have been taken for granted as a justification for divorce by readers of the Gospels; see the various treatments by D. Instone-Brewer, e.g. *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).
- 25 It is therefore a piece of valuable Christian apologetic if we can show, for example, that what Scripture teaches about divine judgment is not that God will act like a human torturer but rather that God will not accept into his kingdom those who reject his rule in righteousness and love and do not repent of their sinful deeds and dispositions.