

The Interpreting Scripture

A narrativist perspective on the intratextual
operation of Scripture's metadiscourse

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Abstract

In this thesis I attempt to constructively retrieve an approach to Scripture that aims to shape the identity of the church in such a way as to sustain and enhance the mission of Christian communities in an increasingly complex and diverse society. The ‘fatal disease’ of modern theology, John Milbank argued, is the church’s surrender of theology’s claim to be metadiscourse.¹ That is, the church’s struggle to position, criticise, and qualify other social discourses by means of her distinctive theological sources has contributed to an ecclesial identity crisis that hinders the mission and evangelism of the church. Such a genealogy of the current state of the modern church is not foreign to churches across traditions in the United Kingdom, and if this diagnosis is broadly correct, the status of Scripture as a primary source for theology in the life of the church is of significant conceptual and pragmatic relevance.

It is for this reason that I argue for the metadiscoursal nature and function of Scripture for the theological and ethical formation of the church. I offer a narrativist perspective on the role of Scripture in the church for effective discipleship and argue that if churches are to flourish in mission and evangelism as distinctive communities of character, Scripture must govern the linguistic and cultural praxis of these communities. The core contention of narrativism, in brief, is that the Christian story narrated in Scripture ‘is the measure of all other stories’.²

In order to crystallise the potential of this approach, I consider the missional and formational deficiency of a canonical approach to Scripture as a critical dialogue partner. The formative force of Scripture, I suggest, is such that its impact stretches from the very quality of the reader’s experience to their personal and communal identity as both crucial for a coherent life of faith. If the deconstructionist trends of our aspiring

¹ See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 1–3.

² Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 161.

postmodern society, corrosive as they may be, continue reminding Christian communities that one's personal and communal identities are formed by inhabiting and contributing to social discourses, a narrativist theological approach can be beneficial for the church missional identity and evangelism precisely in this cultural moment. The church performs and narrates a particular story because that story, in turn, (per)forms and narrates us.

Who are you? people ask Jesus. Silence is his reply. Human beings cannot wait for the answer. They kill him. The logos cannot bear the presence of the counter Logos, because it knows that one of them must die.

Now our question has been turned around. The question we have put to the person of Christ, 'Who are you?' comes back at us: who are you, that you ask this question? Do you live in the truth, so you can ask it?

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Lectures on Christology')*

* Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Lectures on Christology (Student Notes)', in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best, vol. 12, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 305–6.

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Abbreviations

<i>BTONT</i>	Brevard S. Childs, <i>Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments</i>
<i>CD</i>	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i>
<i>IOTS</i>	Brevard S. Childs, <i>Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture</i>
<i>IJST</i>	<i>International. Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
<i>OTTCC</i>	Brevard S. Childs, <i>Old Testament Theology in Canonical Context</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JTI</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>SBL</i>	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Abbreviations of ancient sources conform to *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Biblical Studies and Related Disciplines*, 2nd edition (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

Introduction

The ‘fatal disease’ of modern theology, John Milbank argued, is the church’s surrender of theology’s claim to be metadiscourse.³ The diagnosis, if correct, stresses the significance of the *sources* of theology that perform such positioning, criticising, and qualifying of other societal discourses. This thesis is a consideration of that metadiscoursal operation of Scripture as the primary source of theology for the theological and ethical formation of the church beyond the possibilities of liberalism. It is a postliberal exercise in discerning the nature and function of the Bible in the church for genuine and effective discipleship and mission.

The character and history of postliberal theology are often underdetermined and elusive, hence my use of *ad hoc* nomenclatures for the purpose of clarity.⁴ Throughout this thesis I employ Gerard Loughlin’s neologism of ‘narrativism’ to combine various related emphasises of ‘postliberal intratextualism’ and ‘narrative theology’.⁵ On the one hand, intratextuality, as Lindbeck put it, ‘re-describes reality *within* the scriptural rather than translating Scripture into extra-scriptural categories’.⁶ Insofar as Scripture is the basic source of norms for life and thought, its intratextual framing pervades and governs the linguistic and cultural praxis of the community. The general class of narrative *theologies*, on the other hand, is no less elusive than its postliberal counterpart. Dan Stiver identifies three schools of narrative theology.⁷ The Yale School, represented by Hans Frei and George Lindbeck among others, focuses on the biblical story *per se*.⁸ The Chicago School, instead, represented by David Tracy and Paul Ricoeur among others, tends to centre on narrative as a cognitive cultural frame of

³ See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 1–3.

⁴ For the variegated and eclectic scene of postliberal theology, see John Webster, ‘Theology After Liberalism?’, in *Theology After Liberalism*, ed. Webster and Schner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 52–53.

⁵ Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story* (New York: CUP, 2010), xi, 60.

⁶ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville: WJK, 1984), 118.

⁷ Stiver, *Philosophy of Religious Language* (New Jersey: Blackwell, 1996), 135.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 139–40.

reference.⁹ And the California School, centred around the studies of James McClendon, focusing on the transformative effect the biblical story has on the reader's story, and the import of the reader's biographical story on her interpretation of Scripture.¹⁰ Stiver's categorization is a generalisation, of course. In fact, although the broad narrativist program I delineate is akin to that of the Yale School, both the narrative quality of human experience (Chicago) and the formative effect of the biblical story on the reader's personal and communal identities (California) are central to my comprehensive argument—not least to those of many Yale narrativist theologians.¹¹ The core contention of narrativism, in brief, is that the Christian story narrated in Scripture 'is the measure of all other stories'.¹²

The first chapter introduces a narrativist perspective on the nature of Scripture as intratextual metadiscourse in the theologies of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.¹³ Scripture, I argue, constitutes a *narrative symbolic universe* that absorbs the reader's extratextual universe, and the intratextual pervading and governing of one's construal of reality redescrines and forms the reader's identity. The second chapter considers the criticisms of this narrativist perspective voiced by proponents of canonical approach pioneered by Brevard Childs.¹⁴ I argue that these criticisms of narrativist hermeneutics stem from a developing canonical understanding of the

⁹ Ibid., 136–38.

¹⁰ Ibid., 154, 159–61.

¹¹ So Hauerwas, 'Introduction', in *Why Narrative?*, ed. Hauerwas and Jones (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 4–6.

¹² Loughlin, *Telling*, 161. I cannot discuss the place of narrative theology in doctrinal history. It suffices to say that theologians as diverse as Irenaeus of Lyons, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, Johann Georg Hamann, Karl Barth and Johann Baptist Metz can be counted among narrative theologians (see Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980], 1f; Loughlin, *Telling*, xii).

¹³ The notion of intratextual metadiscourse is adapted from Ken Hyland's linguistic conception of metadiscourse (see Hyland, *Metadiscourse: Exploring Interaction in Writing* [London: Continuum, 2005], 3–36). Language, Hyland argues, is not only a referential sign conveying propositional information about extratextual realities, it also acts 'to present this information through the organization of the text itself (on the autonomous plane) and engage readers as to *how* they should understand it (on the interactive plane)' (ibid., 8). The cohesion of the author's (meta)discourse organising the text's language, on the one hand, and of the reader, guiding her understanding of the text on the other, is an effective 'intratextual framing' (ibid., 9). This 'intratextual framing' I understand to be Scripture's ambition of positioning, criticising, and qualifying of other (meta)discourses.

¹⁴ For the differentiation of Childs's canonical 'approach' from James Sander's canonical 'criticism', see Thiselton, 'Canon, Community and Theological Construction', in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Grand Rapids: Paternoster, 2007), 4–5.

nature of biblical referentiality as a ‘vertical’ *witness*.¹⁵ I investigate the underlying theological rationale precipitating these criticisms and stress the deficiency of the proposed canonical resolutions in order to then retrospectively crystallise a narrativist perspective in the last chapter. In the third chapter I recast a narrativist perspective as one of intratextual referentiality in light of the canonical contentions considered. I conclude that narrativism is better suited to subsume the canonical model and to pervade and govern the reader’s construal of self, God and the world.

¹⁵ The language of ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ referentiality is taken from Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Trask, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University, 2013), 16–17.

1. Narrativism and Scripture as Intratextual Metadiscourse

Introduction

This chapter introduces a narrativist perspective on the nature of Scripture as intratextual metadiscourse. The first section introduces a family resemblance in the narrativist theologies of Yale scholars Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. Although the affinities of their theologies and their mutual appreciation situates their studies as components of a larger school, their subtle differences are nonetheless important. In this chapter, nevertheless, I neither highlight the idiosyncrasies of their theologies nor trace their distinctive developments. I focus, instead, on a shared theological kingship in their appreciation of Scripture's intratextual framing as part of the broader narrativist program. I argue that for these theologians, Christian theology maps out one's cognitive universe through the biblical story integrating a coherent conception 'of truth, of the universe, of human nature and destiny', thus governing the reader's construal of reality.¹⁶ Scripture, that is, absorbs the reader's extratextual world. In the second part, I sketch the implications of Scripture's intratextual framing for the concept of personal identity. I argue that such an intratextual pervading and governing of the reader's construal of reality redescribes and forms her identity. The reader's identity is shaped and moulded by being redescribed as a natural and direct concomitant of the biblical story's literal sense.

1.1. The Interpreted Reality

In *The Eclipse of Biblical Narratives* Hans Frei argued that before the modern period preachers and theologians envisioned reality as organised by the sequence told in the biblical

¹⁶ Frei, 'Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative', in *Theology and Narrative*, ed. Placher and Hunsinger (New York: OUP, 1993), 95–96.

story. The various narratives in Scripture are but temporal sequences of the cumulative story, and the reader is to “fit” herself into the storied world of Scripture.¹⁷ Biblical interpretation, Frei argued, is not the organising of biblical materials according to extrinsic criteria, but the subsumption of ‘extra-biblical thought, experience, and reality into the one real world detailed and made accessible by the biblical story’.¹⁸ Theology is intratextual rather than extratextual in that its meaning is not to be located outside the biblical semantic system (be it an individual’s experience or an ontological reality), it is constituted by it. As Barth, according to Frei, argued, ‘Christian theology must in the first place pay heed to the *language* of the Christian community from the Bible to modernity’.¹⁹

An intratextual approach does not simply interpret or describe the Christian faith from the perspective of the “insider”, it is reality as such that is interpreted by the church’s theological rule of Scripture’s story.²⁰ This is not to say that intratextuality is a quixotic, esoteric endeavour. On the contrary: ‘Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, [the biblical story] seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history’.²¹ The overarching story spanning from creation to consummation is such that everything that happens in the universe must be conceived and fitted as an ingredient in its sequence. This, for Frei, is the *realistic* nature of biblical narratives essential to an intratextual approach. Biblical interpretation, as Lindbeck later phrased it, is ‘a general method of comprehending reality’.²²

A decade later Lindbeck pursued the emerging intratextual agenda at Yale and advanced a ‘cultural-linguistic’ theory of religion emphasising the relation of the linguistic and

¹⁷ Frei, *Eclipse*, 1–2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹ Frei, ‘Eberhard Busch’s Biography of Karl Barth’, in *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University, 1994), 154.

²⁰ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 115.

²¹ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 15.

²² Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 16.

cultural dimensions of Christian theology.²³ In this ‘regulative’ model, the primary function of church doctrines is their use as ‘authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action’,²⁴ semiotics of communal construals of reality and their concomitant value systems.²⁵ A religion, for Lindbeck, is a ‘comprehensive interpretive scheme’ that structures human experience of self and reality.²⁶ Christianity, Lindbeck argued, can be conceived as such a cultural frame.²⁷ The Christian religion shapes the entirety of human life by ordering beliefs and behaviour, and only consequently generating and sustaining propositional beliefs concerning either ontological realities or existential attitudes and feelings.²⁸ The Christian story functions as a ‘symbolic universe’ in that it structures every dimension of existence.²⁹ To be a Christian is primarily to learn the story of Israel and Jesus and to interpret and experience oneself and one’s social reality in their terms.³⁰ For Lindbeck, ‘truth claims are often of the utmost importance’ but—on an epistemological rather than ontological level—they are derivative of the conceptual vocabulary and inner logic of the Christian story.³¹ The “sanctification” of the Christian is precisely her ability to discriminate, by virtue of cognitive and behavioural habituation, authentic from inauthentic doctrines: *adaequatio mentis ad rem* (cf. 1 Cor 2:16).³² The

²³ Ibid., 15. This model is one of three heuristic types: a ‘cognitivist’ and an ‘experiential-expressive’ (ibid. 16).

²⁴ Ibid., 18.

²⁵ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 19.

²⁶ Ibid., 32.

²⁷ For a broad definition of culture as a transmitted semiotic pattern of meanings and inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms that serve the communication, perpetuation and development of reality perception and attitudes to life, see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89f. For Geertz’s influence on Lindbeck’s thought, see Lindbeck, ‘Confession and Community’, in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. J. J. Buckley (London: SCM Press, 2002), 4.

²⁸ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 33.

²⁹ For the legitimating function of symbolic universes, see Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Penguin, 1991), 113–15. ‘The symbolic universe is conceived of as the matrix of *all* social objectivated and subjectively real meaning; the entire historic society and the entire biography of the individual are seen as events taking place *within* this universe’ (114; emphasis original).

³⁰ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 34; see also Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 194.

³¹ Lindbeck, 35.

³² Hence, in the cultural-linguistic approach neither is experience less important than in the experiential-expressive approach, nor is an external doctrinal and ethical guidance for the Christian life less needed than in a cognitivist approach.

comprehensive nature of Christian story is such that it shapes its criteria of adequacy from *within*.³³ Intratextuality is, in effect, radical theological method.³⁴

Frei's genealogical analysis in *Eclipse* suggested precisely that the loss of appreciation for the realistic nature of biblical narratives for interpretation came by a subversive hermeneutical reversal: instead of the biblical story interpreting the reader and her reality, the former needed to fit into the construed reality of the reader.³⁵ Hence, the story's *literal* sense came to be severed from the then *reimagined* historical referent behind—or the existential experience in front of—the text,³⁶ thus encompassing the biblical story into a larger explicative category.³⁷ Such a modernist explicative category could itself be considered “realistic” in that it involved a historical reconstruction itself governed by beliefs concerning an order of reality generated by a certain metadiscourse.³⁸ That is, the historiographical method reconstructing the (“true”) story behind the (literary) story is itself governed by a particular imaginative depiction of *a* reality ‘in order to invoke that discursive formation as a naturalized foundational premise that subsequently legitimates that [methodology’s] regulatory hegemony’.³⁹ The governing

³³ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 113.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

³⁵ Frei, *Eclipse*, 1980, 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11. The notion of the “literal sense” used throughout this thesis is to be distinguished from a literalist reading of texts (*literal-as-historical*), a diremption of the former. The literal sense (*literal-as-written*) of Scripture’s image of the ‘arm of God’, for instance, do not signify God’s physical limb—such is a literalist reading—but God’s power in action (see discussion in Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.1). See also Loughlin’s helpful distinction of the ‘*letteral* sense’ from an improper literal sense (Loughlin, ‘Following the Letter:’, *Lit. Theol.* 9, no. 4 [December 1995]: 372–73). This is not to say that the literal sense cannot be historical, but that history is only one part of it.

³⁷ Bultmann, for instance, identified *Historie* as the uninterpreted “bare facts” behind the meanings imposed on them by the authorial literary interpretation, that is, *Geschichte*. The literary dimension, for Bultmann, becomes a stratum to be peeled off in order to unearth the historical referent (cf. Bultmann, *Geschichte und Eschatologie* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1979], 1–27).

³⁸ The historiographical program of correlating archaeological sources inevitably require an assessing of probabilities, hypothesising and analogising that is governed by a secular hegemonic monopoly of reality construal (see Iain Provan, ‘Ideologies, Literary and Critical’, *JBL*, 114, no. 4 [1995]: 590–1). Realistic narration is at the core of historiographical reconstructions: historiography ‘non è una scienza *dello svolgimento*; non ci dice in che consista lo svolgimento: la storia *espone* ossia *racconta*’ (Benedetto Croce, ‘La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell’arte’, *Rivista di storia della storiografia moderna* 15, no. 3 [1993]: 256; emphasis original).

³⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3; see further William Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 31–37.

metanarrative, in the case of modern historiography, narrates reality as an undisrupted naturalistic nexus of physical, psychological, and social connections to bear on the biblical narrative ‘on the assumption that this is indeed the real world into which the world of the text could be ranged’.⁴⁰ Yet, for the narrativist, the realistic quality of the biblical story is such that if it does not function as the principle arbitrating the possibilities of meaning and certainty, it loses its foundational role. Scripture intratextual framing is omnivorous.⁴¹ In short, it is the reader that need standing *within the strange world of the Bible*.

1.2. The Interpreted Reader

As the reader’s reality is reconstrued through and by the biblical story, so is the reader’s personal identity as an element of that reality. The realistic narrative of Scripture requires the *conversion* of the reader’s extra-scriptural realities into types or antitypes of scriptural realities.⁴² The activity of the Spirit in one’s reading of Scripture is not a catalytic referencing of a reality beyond the story’s literal sense, but the effecting of a hermeneutical conversion of the reader and her contemporary realities by biblical language, concepts and categories. As Frei puts it,

Through the coincidence or even identity between a world being depicted and its reality being rendered to the reader (always under the form of depiction), the reader or hearer in turn becomes part that depicted reality and thus has to take a personal or life stance towards it.⁴³

⁴⁰ Frei, *Eclipse*, 221; emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Ibid., ‘Interpretation of Narrative’, 96f

⁴² Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 119.

⁴³ Frei, *Eclipse*, 24.

[the reader] becomes a cultural human being through the historical narrative for which he has a natural affinity because he is part of the world effectively rendered by it.⁴⁴

There is a pattern of natural coincidence between the text and the internal testimony of the Spirit.⁴⁵ As the activity of the Spirit sets forth the reality of God's dealings in and for the world by the cumulative pattern of the biblical story, the Spirit *renders* the reader as part of that same depicted reality effecting an identity transformation.⁴⁶ The ministry of the Spirit is neither a peripheral appendage to one's reading of the biblical story nor an explanatory theory that alone guarantees an extrinsic unity of the biblical story and the reader's personal stance.⁴⁷ Instead, it is 'the effective rendering of God and His [*sic.*] real world to the reader by way of the text's appropriate depiction of the intercourse of that God and the world, engaging the reader's mind, heart and activity: for He who moves the world in particular ways moves the heart also'.⁴⁸ The reader's identity is shaped and moulded by being redescribed as a natural and direct concomitant of the story's literal sense.⁴⁹

Undoubtedly, the reader's diverse contextual conditions are such that the experiential product of this formative hermeneutical process is characterised by an inevitable contextual particularity (as evident from the history of interpretation).⁵⁰ In fact, Kathryn Tanner argues that the 'plain sense' of Scripture enables a tradition that is both 'self-critical' and 'pluralistic and variable' across diverse cultural circumstances.⁵¹ The *plain* sense of Scripture, Tanner

⁴⁴ Frei, *Eclipse*, 205.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

⁴⁶ Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 2nd ed. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 54–55.

⁴⁷ Frei, *Eclipse*, 1980, 24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁹ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 34; so Barth *CD* I.1, 121–22.

⁵⁰ See *ibid.*, 84ff; so Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology* (London: SMC, 1981), 166.

⁵¹ Tanner, 'Theology and the Plain Sense', in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Green (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 60–61.

argues, is not a semantic property of the text (as per my use of Frei's *literal* sense),⁵² but a 'function of the communal use', the 'obvious and direct sense of the text according to a *usus loquendi* established by the community in question'.⁵³ Tanner recognises that if the plain sense is simply the product of a 'community of discourse', there remains no sense to appeal to against a hegemonic sociocultural captivity of the text.⁵⁴ To be sure, Tanner distinguishes text from interpretation, and the plain sense is precisely that tension of text and its reception in the life of the community that exercises a critical force on behalf of the 'invariable' text over interpretative practices.⁵⁵ But there remains a tension in Tanner's mediating proposal. On the one hand, Christian faithfulness involves a continual constructive process of reinitiating one's self-understanding by reposing one's life in the Christian story; on the other hand, the Christian story is revisionary rather than constitutive as it does not specify a form of life.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the dichotomy between the sufficiency of the text's immanent meaning, on the one hand, and of the church's determination of text's meaning on the other, is an unnecessary one.⁵⁷ For Frei, the *literal* sense is the paradigmatic form for the church's use of Scripture in reshaping extratextual reality, including personal and communal identities.⁵⁸ Frei's hope is that the

⁵² Tanner quotes Derrida: 'the literal sense [*propre*] does not exist' but is 'a function responding to [a] relative necessity' (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1998), 64 in Tanner, 'Plain Sense', 64.

⁵³ Tanner, *ibid.*, 62–63.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 68–69.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 74–75. The plain sense in "ecclesial readings" of Scripture is in danger of merely advancing interpretations on behalf of special-interest groups: *l'Église, c'est moi* (see Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic], 60). A similar problem arises in Stephen Fowl's overemphasis of the polyvalency of the plain sense of Scripture (see Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* [Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008], 34–40). The plain sense is subordinated to the authority of 'vigilant' or 'virtuous' interpreting communities (*ibid.*, 23–28), yet the normativity of the literal sense seems to exercise no coercion on the nature of these hermeneutical virtues. The Spirit functions as a renegade agent of 'ecclesial abolition and innovation' (Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 117 n.20), and her role in interpretation is caricatured to 'a taboo-toppling, new truth revealer' (Seitz, *Figured Out* [Louisville: WJK, 2001], 67; see further 67–69). For a helpful distinction of the literal sense from the plain sense as received *senses*, see Collett, *Figural Reading and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 42–43.

⁵⁷ For a criticism of the claim that this tension stems from Frei's theological development, see Jason Springs, *Toward a Generous Orthodoxy* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 41–62.

⁵⁸ Frei, 'The "Literal Reading" of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition', in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. McConnell (Oxford: OUP, 1986), 72.

exegetical inquiry can make sense of the literal sense in *its own right* so that one's theology is ultimately based on the biblical story.⁵⁹ Although the reader is inevitably affected by a variety of socio-political factors, she is interested in her faithful place in the ongoing engagement of Scripture's testimony to God's economy in Israel, Jesus and the church.⁶⁰ Scripture envisions a theological anthropology: the exegete's interpretation 'serves, is judged by, and is converted to the evangelical truth that inheres in Scripture', and the alternative to that is 'a hermeneutic of suspicion' and 'detachment', namely, *disobedience* to that very literal sense.⁶¹

It is ultimately one's identity, individual and communal, that needs reinterpretation not Scripture's.⁶² As the narrative identity of the Christian community depicted in Scripture *absorbs* the identity of the individual through the ministry of the Spirit, 'revelation becomes an experienced reality', and this experienced reality the Christian tradition names *conversion*.⁶³ It is as the story of Israel and Jesus are *subjectified* in the life of the believer in an act of 'acknowledgment, recognition and confession' that these have an 'overwhelming, history-shaking, world-shattering consequences for the believer and his or her personal identity'.⁶⁴

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Scripture's story shapes the entirety of human life by ordering beliefs and behaviour; it functions as a "metanarrative" in that it structures every dimension of one's existence. The realistic nature of the biblical story is such that it cannot simply to be interpreted by the reader, it *interprets* the reader. As Barth put it, 'It is not the right

⁵⁹ Frei, *Identity*, 16; *ibid.*, 'Interpretation of Narrative', 1993, 108.

⁶⁰ Stroup, *Promise*, 167; Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 69.

⁶¹ See Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 92ff.

⁶² Stroup, *Promise*, 168. For the significance of a symbolic universe's 'nomic function' for individual experience, see Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 116–19.

⁶³ Stroup, 170; so Barth, *CD* IV.1, 740–779.

⁶⁴ Stroup, 194. The *effect* of revelation, for Barth, does not originate in a *subjective* reality, on the contrary. It begins in the 'objective presupposition' of God's revelation in the incarnation as recorded in Scripture against 'arbitrary decisions' (*CD*, I.2, 207–8). This "subjectification" of revelation involves the transformation of its recipients by the Spirit (*CD*, I.2, 215–21).

thoughts about God that form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about man [*sic.*].⁶⁵ In 1979 a Yale theologian aptly captured the promise and potential of a narrativist approach. In a lecture at Perkins School of Theology, Brevard Childs commented that a narrative approach is, firstly, able to recover a ‘holistic reading’ of Scripture, correcting urgencies to go behind and beyond the text; secondly, through story ‘the reader is drawn into a world—Barth’s strange new world’; thirdly, the intrinsic corporate dimension of the story is germane to the communal identity of the church; fourthly, it unites the testaments; and lastly, it facilitates teaching of Scripture to the laity. Such a heralding of narrativism, nevertheless, faded. Childs and his theological heirs, have offered insightful criticisms of narrativism, highlighting potential problems for theology in general and Scripture in particular. It is to some of these criticisms that the second chapter turns.

⁶⁵ Barth, *Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Horton, 2nd ed. (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1978), 43.

2. The Canonical Problem of Biblical Referentiality

Introduction

In spite of the idiosyncratic appropriations of Childs's approach, one can refer to a family resemblance in the 'cottage industry evaluating the contribution of Brevard Childs'.⁶⁶ In speaking of a canonical approach, I refer to the theological kinship in the studies of Childs, and of Christopher Seitz and Don C. Collett.⁶⁷ The choice of Childs's approach as *the* critical voice is not arbitrary. Childs's nascent criticism of narrativism is from an "insider perspective".⁶⁸ In 1979 Childs hailed the emphasis on narrative at Yale as 'one of the most exciting areas in present biblical studies',⁶⁹ but by 1993 the euphoria faded and Child's tone became critical. Daniel Driver suggests that Childs's criticism of a narrativist hermeneutics concerns 'chiefly' the problem of biblical referentiality.⁷⁰ This chapter argues that the concerns voiced by canonical critics regarding the status of the Old Testament's testimony and the relation of text and reality, stem from a particular understanding of the nature of biblical referentiality. The aim of the chapter is to consider these concerns and investigate their underlying theological rationale in order to then recast a narrativist perspective on Scripture's referentiality. The first section argues that the canonical aversion to the unfolding narrative character of the biblical testimony is incited by a "mode" of referentiality as a series of punctiliar, 'vertical' *witnesses* to a divine ontology staged by the equi-instrumental testaments. The second section argues that the resultant incongruence of the 'vertical' signifying act, on the one hand, and the 'horizontal' narrative character of the signifier, on the other, creates a

⁶⁶ Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 32.

⁶⁷ An ex-student of Childs, Seitz speaks of Childs's 'ongoing impact on [his] thinking' (Seitz, *Figured Out* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001], xii). Collett is an ex-student of Seitz.

⁶⁸ Childs, *The New Testament as Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 541–43. Interestingly, Stiver counts Brevard Childs among Yale theologians (Stiver, *Religious Language*, 139).

⁶⁹ See Daniel Driver, *Brevard Childs* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 137f.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 141–42.

dichotomy of meaning and truth that undermines the integrity of the story's literal sense to fittingly render its reality, thus impairing literal readings of the story. The third section argues that it is the canonical insistence on the purported "shape" of the referent as an abstraction of the diachronic testimony that necessitates a mode of referentiality 'implying that its reference is something other than what is being said'.⁷¹

2.1. The Unfolding Story and Retrospective Discontinuity

Canonical critics rightly claim that the OT is the authoritative voice of God exerting a material coercion on Jesus's and the church identity and ministry.⁷² The material significance of the OT's testimony is such that a narrativist's emphasis on the unfolding of the biblical story is perceived as extending into an element of revelatory progression in danger of superseding the OT's *per se* voice.⁷³ If the NT 'is *novissimum*', to understand the OT 'in the light of Christ' is to understand it as the *old* testament.⁷⁴ Because the OT's *per se* voice provides a foundational grammar for the church's theology, as canonical critics rightly argue, the element of progression in the category of story becomes inevitably problematic.⁷⁵ That is, if the OT's Christological sense is identified exclusively by the NT's fulfilment, the OT's literal sense

⁷¹ Childs, 'Allegory and Typology', in *The Bible as Christian Scripture (op.cit.)*, 304; emphasis mine.

⁷² Childs, *The New Testament as Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 213. For Childs the substance of the OT's testimony governed the diverse exegetical techniques in early Judaism and the early church (Childs, *BTONT*, 226).

⁷³ Childs's criticism of a retrospective discontinuity is primarily directed at "apocalyptic" approaches to Pauline theology: see Childs, *BTONT*, 243–44; *ibid.*, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 103–8. See, e.g., Martyn, *Galatians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004): 'Moses, the mediator of the Sinaitic Law, did not speak for God' (358); see also de Boer, *Galatians* (Louisville: WJK, 2011), esp. 159–63; Campbell, *The Deliverance of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), esp. 530–86. See also Collett, 'Reading Forward: The Old Testament and Retrospective Stance', *Pro Ecclesia* 24, no. 2 (1 May 2015): 184–88.

For the notion of the 'OT's *per se* voice', see Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 115–36. For Seitz, the emphasis on a "plot line" is not the problem (cf. Stephen's speech in Acts 7), it is the reduction of the theological pressure of the OT to a retrospective account (Seitz, *The Elder Testament* [Waco: Baylor University, 2018], 58 n.8).

⁷⁴ Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1990), 120; emphasis original. For Louth, 'it is this newness that *allegory* grasps as it seeks to interpret the Scriptures' (*ibid.*, 121).

⁷⁵ Collett, *Figural Reading and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 1–3.

cannot be a testimony to Christ at a '*semantic* level', but must be correlated to the NT's testimony 'before it may be said to be Christian Scripture'.⁷⁶ The canonical preoccupation for the material significance of the OT is genuinely an important one, yet this section argues that the underlying issue concerns a purported mode of biblical referentiality. That is, because the biblical referent is signified by means of punctiliar 'vertical' *witnesses*, for the OT to be of equal revelatory significance to the NT it must do its referencing independently of the unfolding of the unitary story, thus disrupting the (linear) narrative bond of promise and fulfilment. The distinctive character of this canonical criticism may be crystallised by comparing it to a related concern for the OT's *per se* voice.

In a criticism of christological readings of the OT, James Barr insisted that although the God of the OT is 'the Father of our Lord', the OT remains promise and not fulfilment: the messiah is yet to come, and the church 'must learn to *wait*' and continue reading the story.⁷⁷ Barr proposes a Trinitarian reading of the OT, instead, one that sees the economic activity of the Father as the primary revelation in Israel's testimony, and the ministry of Jesus and the Spirit in the apostolic testimony.⁷⁸ Barr is genuinely concerned to honour the OT's literal sense, namely, as promise and not fulfilment.⁷⁹ Yet, this diachronic Trinitarian reading, Collett contests, displays a degree of revelatory progression that undermines the OT's *own* witness to the triune God, thus impairing, it is claimed, the possibility of figuration. According to Collett, each testament witnesses to the *same* referent by distinctive voices and contexts. The testaments, it is claimed, are 'equidistant and equi-instrumental' testimonies 'united by one reality' rather than by a 'one-after-another' logic: the NT 'is neither the reification of the Old

⁷⁶ Ibid., 'Reading Forward', 179.

⁷⁷ Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1982), 152; Barr's criticism is explicitly theological in nature.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 153.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 154.

nor simply its effect or aftermath' but a 'transformed Old Testament that receives its place alongside the Old on analogy'.⁸⁰

Collett is perfectly correct in considering the element of progression in the second covenant as 'a movement from Israel's election to gentile adoption—that is, as the *salvific progress* involved in expanding the scope of salvation's reach to gentiles', rather than a *noetic* progress.⁸¹ The second covenant, Collett aptly states, is an *expansion* of the first, not a replacement.⁸² The problem is that the 'one reality' uniting the testaments, by this approach, is reduced to their referencing to the same divine ontology. That is, the theological dimension of reality signified is severed from the sociohistorical dimension at unity in the textual narration of God's acts in history. Signifier and signified are at a semantic, rather than simply ontological, variance. Although true that the unity of the testaments does not arise only from the sociohistorical continuity of Israel and the church, in the story of God's creative and salvific economy in history narrated in the testaments the theological and the sociohistorical appear to be inseparable and constituent of each other.⁸³

The Irenaean rule of faith has been appealed to by theologians as capable of situating in closer proximity, if not coincidence, the theological and sociohistorical dimensions of the divine economy referenced by Scripture.⁸⁴ Paul Bowers, for instance, argues that the rule, in its various polemical renditions, reflects the dramatic character of the Christian story.⁸⁵ The

⁸⁰ Collett, *Figural*, 158; so Childs, *BTONT*, 14; see also, Seitz, 'Old Testament or Hebrew Bible?', *Pro Ecclesia* 5, no. 3 (1996): 292–303;

⁸¹ Collett, 'Reading Forward', 186.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 187.

⁸³ Janowski, 'The Contrastive Unity of Scripture', in *The Bible as Christian Scripture*, (*op. cit.*), 40–44. Could one even conceive of separating the theological and sociohistorical in the story of Jesus?

⁸⁴ See, e.g., Hays, 'Can Narrative Criticism Recover the Theological Unity of Scripture?', *JTI* 2, no. 2 (2008): 193–211. Hays positively assesses the claim that 'Scripture can be understood *in light of the church's rule of faith* as a complex but coherent dramatic narrative' (193; emphasis original).

⁸⁵ Bowers, 'The Regula Fidei and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith', *Pro Ecclesia* 6, no. 2 (1 May 1997): 200–201; for the Rule of Faith as a normative hermeneutical tool promoting the incipient (textual and theological) storied unity of Scripture, see Bokedal, 'The Early Rule-of-Faith Pattern as Emergent Biblical Theology', *Theofilos* 7, no. 1 (2015): 59–61.

rule, inseparable from Scripture itself, ‘served the primitive Christian hope of articulating and authenticating a world-encompassing story or metanarrative of creation, incarnation-redemption, and consummation’.⁸⁶ In response, Nathan MacDonald has argued that the rule is not a summary of the overarching biblical narrative, lest the role of the OT be restricted to the “initial chapters” of a story. Instead, and here MacDonald quotes Childs, ‘the OT also informs the content of belief about the Son and the Holy Spirit’.⁸⁷ The hypothesis of the rule, for MacDonald, as for Childs, is an *abstraction* of the divine characters represented in the ‘many diversified utterances’ of the biblical narratives.⁸⁸ Driver notes that, similarly, for Childs, the rule governs ‘human access to Scripture’s *framework* (θεωρία) and true *subject matter* (υπόθεσις)’, on the one hand, ‘as well as to testify to dispensations in the divine economy (οικονομία)’ or ‘*Heilsgeschichte*’, on the other.⁸⁹ That is, the testaments’ relation, for Childs, ‘goes far beyond asserting its relationship in terms of a historical sequence’.⁹⁰ Although Childs attempts to bridge the identity gap from testimony to reality through the rule, a relation of non-identity remains. Scripture must refer to a reality other than the divine economy it narrates. The second section goes on to consider the result of the incongruence of the vertical signifying act and the narrative character of the signifier as a dichotomy of meaning and truth undermining the story literal sense as a fitting depiction of its reality.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁸⁷ MacDonald, ‘Israel and the Old Testament Story in Irenaeus’s Presentation of the Rule of Faith’, *JTI*, 3, no. 2 (2009): 286; see Childs, *BTONT*, 226 quoted in MacDonald, ‘Israel’, 287.

⁸⁸ MacDonald, ‘Israel’, 289; cf. Irenaeus’s imagery of a mosaic in *Adv. Haer.* 1.8.1, 1.9.4; see also *Adv. Haer.* 2.28.3. MacDonald interpretation of Irenaeus’s use of *hypothesis* (υποθέσις) as an abstraction of the divine characters is far from a scholarly consensus. Richard Norris has argued that the best rendering of υποθέσις is that of “story-line” or “plot” as in dramatic usage (see Norris, ‘Theology and Language in Irenaeus of Lyon’, *Anglican Theological Review* 76, no. 3 [1994]: 289–92); see also Stephen Skyes on the creeds as ‘bare-bones’ of a story or a ‘brief sequential narrative’ (Sykes, ‘The Role of Story in Christian Religion’, *JLT* 1, no. 1 [1987]: 21).

⁸⁹ Driver, *Childs*, 254; emphasis original.

⁹⁰ Childs, ‘Does the Old Testament Witness to Jesus Christ?’, in *Evangelium Schriftauslegung Kirche*, ed. Ådna, et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 59–60.

2.2. The non-Identity of Signified and Signifier

The earlier Childs considered narrative theology as a move to ‘recovering a holistic reading of the Bible’, but from the time of *IOTS* to *BTONT* he became concerned that it could also propagate a ‘secular, non-theological reading of the Bible’.⁹¹ The refusal of narrativists to distinguish the biblical story from its referent, according to Childs, cripples the enterprise of biblical theology.⁹² If the testaments are united by their function as literary testimony, Childs insists, one neglects the primary reality that unites the dissenting voices into a harmonious totality. Biblical theology, for Childs, is a dialogical reflection on the ‘*fragmentary* reality found in both testaments’.⁹³ This section argues that the emphasis on the non-identity of signified and signifier, inevitably impairs the integrity of the story’s literal sense to fittingly render its reality, thus creating an incongruence of meaning and truth detrimental to its literal sense.

The testimony of Scripture, for Childs, invites a *Sachkritik* in order to distinguish reality from text so that the former norms one’s reading of the latter: if ‘Jesus Christ is not the norm’, Childs claims, the ‘result for Biblical Theology is an unmitigated disaster’.⁹⁴ In the case of Paul’s use of Israel’s Scripture, for instance, Childs is critical of the category of story not only because of a possible retrospective undermining of ‘Israel’s role as herald of the gospel’,⁹⁵ but because the category conceives of Paul’s (or the NT’s) use of Scripture as a ‘dead written document from the past’.⁹⁶ The issue, for Childs, is not simply the OT’s per se voice as a

⁹¹ Childs, *BTONT*, 87; Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, 546.

⁹² Childs, *BTONT*, 19–22; *New Testament as Canon*, 545.

⁹³ *BTONT*, 78; emphasis mine. To be sure, Childs’ primary concern is not to emphasise theological “contradictions” in Scripture (see *ibid.*, 85).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 721.

⁹⁵ Childs, *Church’s Guide*, 179. Childs’ criticism is directed particularly at Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News* (Boston: Brill, 2000); see esp. 13–32, 353–360. Wanger’s category of story is indebted to Hays, *Echoes*, 95–122. Hay’s narrative approach is considered by Lindbeck as characteristic of the Yale school (see Lindbeck, ‘Postcritical Canonical Interpretation’, in *Theological Exegesis*, ed. Seitz and Greene-McCreight [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 26–51).

⁹⁶ *Church’s Guide*, 180.

genuine testimony to the gospel, but a *mode* of Scripture’s revelatory communicative activity: ‘Israel’s witness is indeed written, which distinguishes it from *just* a story, it is always regarded as the *living* Word of God’.⁹⁷ The text, in effect, becomes a catalyst for God’s punctiliar personal address to the reader.⁹⁸ The canon, in this instance, serves ‘to sketch the range’ of authoritative literature and to establish the ‘parameters’ of the testimony ‘within which area there is freedom and flexibility’; it is but a ‘*vehicle*’ for Scripture’s ‘*actualization* through the Spirit’.⁹⁹ Human speech in the text can be regarded as God’s speech because of its ‘role as medium of God’s continuing communication’.¹⁰⁰ In fact, it is in a defence of a Protestant *Sachkritik* that Phil Ziegler invokes Childs’s contention that Scripture’s referent need not only be ‘specified’ but also ‘activated, that is, be put into motion as the living principle of the hearing and understanding of Scripture’.¹⁰¹ The canonical claim concerning the ontological extratextuality of Scripture’s referent and the non-identity of referent and text is appropriated to argue for a semantic ‘interval’ from text to reality that is ‘opened up by this difference—that is, by the non-identity of text and subject matter’.¹⁰² The *scopus* of Scripture, in effect, corresponds to the Spirit in the purported Pauline *disjunction* of letter and spirit (cf. 2 Cor. 3:6).¹⁰³ Child’s conception of the biblical canon genuinely attempts to place text and reality in closer proximity. The canon, for Childs, is not a late, extrinsic hermeneutical rule, foreign to

⁹⁷ Ibid., 181; emphasis mine; echoing Barth: God’s Word must say ‘something fresh’, something ‘never heard before from anyone’ (*CD I/1*, 139).

⁹⁸ As if the interpretative paradigm of story could *replace* the Bible’s message (so Collett, ‘A Tale of Two Testaments: Childs, Old Testament Torah, and *Heilsgeschichte*’, in *The Bible as Christian Scripture* (*op. cit.*), 189).

⁹⁹ Childs, *BTONT*, 724; emphasis mine; see also *ibid.*, *New Testament as Canon*, 544–5; *ibid.*, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 99–100; To be sure, Childs claims that “figuration” is ‘not held in isolation from its plain sense, but is an extension of the one story of God’s purpose in Jesus Christ’ (*BTONT*, 215). Yet, the governing force that this story exercises remains unclear.

¹⁰⁰ Childs, ‘Speech-Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation’, *SJT* 58, no. 4 (November 2005): 379.

¹⁰¹ Ziegler, ‘On the Present Possibility of Sola Scriptura’, *IJST*, Early View, (March 2022): 6. See Childs, *BTONT*, 66–67 cited in Ziegler, ‘Sola Scriptura’, 6, 17.

¹⁰² Ziegler, ‘Sola Scriptura’, 7.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 9–10; similarly Childs, *BTONT*, 215. To be sure, the *Sache*, for Childs, is defined by the testimony of both testaments (see *BTONT*, 85).

the biblical materials themselves, a ‘canon-consciousness’ lay deep in the formation of Scripture as an intrinsic impetus.¹⁰⁴ Elsewhere Childs does focus on Scripture *as* canon emphasising that ‘the biblical text and its theological function belong inextricably together’.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, a persistent (Barthian) occasionalism hinders the effort: Scripture ‘is God’s Word to the extent that God causes it to be His Word, to the extent that He speaks through it’.¹⁰⁶ So, for Childs, ‘scripture can be described’ as ‘becoming the Word of God’.¹⁰⁷ If for Childs, as for Barth, the shape of Scripture’s referent’s is the ‘free personal *presence* of Jesus’ requiring ‘*existentiality* in theological thinking’,¹⁰⁸ the *storied* textual record cannot but function as a revelatory catalyst to a reality other than itself.

2.3. The Shape of the Revealed and the Mode of Revelation

Childs’s ‘bidirectional hermeneutics’ of Scripture from text to reality and from reality to text has been described as moving from economic to immanent Trinity and vice versa.¹⁰⁹ An interpretative orbit from a story of one shape to a reality of another by means of a ‘vertical’ *other*-speaking “figuration” is required. In fact, a canonical approach, Seitz argues, resists the category of an overarching story precisely ‘in the name of balancing the economic and ontological dimensions’ at play in Scripture.¹¹⁰ According to Seitz, the final form of Scripture surprises and confuses, and its narration does not unfold as a story should.¹¹¹ Such an unusual and uneven presentation of the story, it is claimed, is a ‘provocation’ to think beyond the

¹⁰⁴ Childs, *IOTS*, 15; Childs, *BTONT*, 70.

¹⁰⁵ *BTONT*, 72.

¹⁰⁶ *CD I/1*, 107; cf. Childs’s comments on Barth in *BTONT*, 721.

¹⁰⁷ Childs, ‘Speech-Act’, 380.

¹⁰⁸ Barth, *CD I/1*, 19; emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁹ See Rowe, ‘The Doctrine of God is a Hermeneutic’, in *The Bible as Christian Scripture (op.cit.)*, 167–68.

¹¹⁰ Seitz, *The Elder Testament* (Waco: Baylor University, 2018), 72.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 75–76.

sociohistorical referent, as the text ultimately speaks ‘of God’s character’.¹¹² Interestingly, Seitz quotes Auerbach on biblical narratives for backing: ‘The greater the separateness and horizontal disconnection of the stories and groups of stories in relation to one another . . . the stronger is their general vertical connection’.¹¹³ The purported absence of seamless and engrossing narration, the gaps and disconnections in it, are ‘at the service of something above it’, a transcendent referent.¹¹⁴ It is at this point that the underlying issue of this canonical mode of biblical referentiality and the concomitant shape of the referent become evident: the text ‘exists by default as a “vertical connection”’, one that ‘speaks of God as God *is*’, of ‘God *in se*’.¹¹⁵ Seitz’s misappropriation of Auerbach’s point aside,¹¹⁶ it becomes clear that Childs’s later turn to allegory as serving a *witness*-mode of referentiality for relating text and reality is not only unsurprising, but necessary.

Allegory, for Childs, ‘is a figure of speech implying that its reference is something *other than what is being said*’.¹¹⁷ Origen, Childs claimed, rightly pressed ‘beyond the letter to the spiritual realities’.¹¹⁸ It is the ‘mysterious’ ministry of the Holy Spirit to transcend the text’s sociohistorical circumstances ‘to speak to its recipients a contemporary word of the presence of God’.¹¹⁹ ‘The *space between rule and letter*’, for Childs, ‘*establishes the space in which*

¹¹² Ibid., 79. This is almost a celebration of a Barth’s noetic occasionalism. Scripture’s referent, for Barth, can never be incorporated in the church’s sociohistorical testimony or their hermeneutical praxis if God is to remain ‘the free Lord of its existence’, lest he be conditioned and restricted and revelation be grasped by concrete forms of human understanding (*CD I/1*, 40). God’s self-revelation does not fit into a redemptive plan (*CD I/1*, 69, 89).

¹¹³ Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 17 in Seitz, *Elder Testament*, 80.

¹¹⁴ Seitz, *Elder Testament*, 82.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 83; emphasis original.

¹¹⁶ Auerbach’s quote is precisely in the context of his claim for ‘the Old Testament stories to represent universal history’ (*Mimesis*, 16). Auerbach argues that the composition of the OT is ‘less unified than the Homeric poems’ but the various components ‘belong to one concept of universal history and its interpretation’. It is precisely because ‘the reader is *at every moment aware of the universal religio-historical perspective*’—i.e., the biblical metanarrative—that the disparate individual stories of characters and events are given ‘their general meaning and purpose’ (*Mimesis*, 17; emphasis mine).

¹¹⁷ Childs, ‘Allegory and Typology’, 304; emphasis mine.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 306–7.

¹¹⁹ Childs, ‘Allegory and Typology’, 309.

figuration can be tried'.¹²⁰ To be sure, the earlier Childs emphasised 'the priority of the rule of faith over figuration' as 'a counterpart to the foundational *sensus literalis*'.¹²¹ Yet Driver notes a key development in Childs's theology from *IOTS* to *BTONT*, namely, a move from a more inductive use of the rule to a more deductive one.¹²² For the earlier Childs the rule functioned "negatively" (à la Irenaeus), as an interpretative *boundary* for exegeting the biblical story.¹²³ For the later Childs, the function of the Rule shifted to a interpretative *key* (à la Origen) and allegory became more prominent.¹²⁴ Childs points out the nature of his disagreement with a narrativist perspective regarding the non-identity of text and reality already in 1969 saying,

That's where Hans [Frei] and I differ somewhat . . . One has to keep in mind that the early church, in the controversy with Judaism, took quite a different move. When the Jews were saying, read the text! read the text!, the Christians said, there's something behind the text. It's what the text points to, namely: Jesus Christ. And there was a dialectic between the reality and the text.¹²⁵

The same contention is reinforced in 2003 in relation to the difference of midrash and allegory.

While midrash works at discerning meaning through the interaction of two written texts, allegory . . . finds *meaning* by moving to another level *beyond the textual*. It seeks to discern *meaning* by relating it referentially to a *substance (res)*, a rule of faith, or a *hidden* eschatological event.¹²⁶

¹²⁰ Driver, *Childs*, 252; emphasis original.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 249; see Childs, 'The "Sensus Literalis" of Scripture', in *BAT*, ed. Smend et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1977), 93.

¹²² Driver, *Childs*, 253. Driver speaks of an 'increased specificity about the christological core' of the OT, a 'recovery of allegory' and 'later overtures to figural reading' (see Driver, 'Later Childs', *Princeton Theological Review* 14, no. 1 [2008]: 118, 122, 128).

¹²³ See Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 303.

¹²⁴ Driver, *Childs*, 254. Driver argues that Childs's later approach must be located in his earlier emphasis as pivotal ('Later Childs', 122). See Childs, 'The Nature of the Christian Bible', 124–25; Childs, *BTONT*, 370; see Childs' comment on his theological development since *OTTCC* in *BTONT*, 101 and *IOTS*, 15.

¹²⁵ From the 1969 Yale Colloquium on Karl Barth (cited in Driver, *Childs*, 142).

¹²⁶ Childs, 'Critique of Recent Intertextual Canonical Interpretation', *ZATW* 115, no. 2 (20 May 2003): 182; emphasis mine.

In view to these remarks, one might ask, does it make any difference that ‘what the text points to, namely: Jesus Christ’ has become part of that very text (four to be precise!)? That the ‘hidden eschatological event’ has been inaugurated and is no longer hidden? Or that the ‘substance’ of the story ‘behind the text’ is the very climax of the textual story? Childs insists that the focus of midrash is intertextual (text-text), but Christian exegesis must remain *allegorical* (text-reality).¹²⁷ Childs cannot unsee this false dichotomy and, ultimately, his commitment to a particular mode of referentiality and shape of the referent means that he has to embrace the ever-present tension of meaning and truth. Childs, at last, abdicates: ‘call it allegory[!]’.¹²⁸

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the canonical mode of referentiality as a conglomerate of punctiliar, vertical *witnesses* to a divine ontology by equi-instrumental testaments contravenes the testaments unitary story of promise and fulfilment. The incongruence of the vertical signifying act and the narrative character of the signifier (casting the referential act as ‘implying something other than what is being said’) creates a dichotomy of meaning and truth that impairs a literal reading of the story, and the viability of that story to fittingly render its reality. Furthermore, it has argued that the identification of the ‘one reality’ uniting the testaments as a divine ontology referred to by means of occasional, vertical referencing not only severs the theological and sociohistorical dimensions of Scripture’s referent (*God’s acts in history*), but also neglects the very sociohistorical character of Scripture’s referent, namely, God’s people. It is at this point that one is able to appreciate Frei’s language of the biblical text as a ‘linguistic

¹²⁷ Driver, *Childs*, 156.

¹²⁸ Childs, ‘Allegory and Typology’, 300.

sacrament', that is, the embodiment of self-referential truth in meaning.¹²⁹ Frei rightly insisted that the congruence ("fittingness") of text and reality is an intralinguistic congruence. That is, the story serves adequately to depict God, reader and reality, and needs no extralinguistic reality to determine its meaning.¹³⁰ The relation of letter and Spirit 'is not equivalent to that of manifest and latent senses'.¹³¹ The Spirit's ministry is central to one's reading of Scripture, yet it is not the *text* that need "be made alive" to figure an other-ontology, but the *reader* through her being refigured by Scripture's other-story. The third chapter recasts a narrativist contentions on the nature and scope referentiality not only in light of the canonical criticisms considered and of the deficiency of the of resolutions offered.

¹²⁹ Frei, 'Literal Reading', 63. The biblical story of God's economy is 'a literary equivalent of the Christian dogma of Jesus Christ as incarnate Son of God' (ibid., 65).

¹³⁰ Frei, 'Interpretation of Narrative', 103.

¹³¹ Ibid., 108.

3. The Signifying God and the Signified Reader

Introduction

The first section of this chapter argues that the problem in the canonical criticism of a narrativist reading of Scripture is the vertical eclipsing of *spiritual* over *textual* (reality over text). This eclipsing, it contends, occurs by discerning the meaning of the text through a referential relation to an extratextual ontological reality other than the narrative literal sense. It also argues that a vertical mode of referentiality undermines the sociohistorical ('horizontal') dimension of Scripture's referent. Hence, it proposes a narrativist perspective on *how* Scripture refers and *what* it refers to holding its theological and sociohistorical dimensions at unity and reinforcing the formative exercise of Scripture's figuring act. The second section argues that this canonical conception referentiality is deficient for the biblical ethical vision to be both coherently conceived and effective. It argues that for God's command to be cogent for and applicable by the reader, she must inhabit the symbolic universe *projected* by the biblical narratives. The last section attempts to ease the tension between a conception of Scripture as witness and as narrative symbolic universe by relocating and redescribing the biblical testimony *to* God under the intratextual ministry *of* God.

3.1. The Figuring Story

The canonical criticism of a retrospective discontinuity in narrative readings of Scripture is an important one. The undermining of the OT material significance in apocalyptic approaches to Christian theology is often educed by various conceptions of the unfolding of God's discontinuous revelatory economy.¹³² The problem, nevertheless, is not the category of

¹³² See, e.g., Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics* (London: SPCK, 2020), 72–92.

story per se but the type of story narrated. This section firstly argues that it is not an appreciation of the testaments as equ-instrumental catalysts of occasional punctiliar witnesses to a divine ontology that honours Scripture's testimony and theological operation, but the adequacy of the testaments' linguistic narration of the story as fittingly rendering the reality depicted. A narrativist approach, it argues, overcomes the false dichotomy of theological (text-referent) and literary-sociohistorical (text-text or text-history) types referentiality. Secondly, it argues that this canonical conception of referentiality as 'vertical theological other-speaking', as opposed to a 'horizontal form of historical other-speaking',¹³³ neglects God's people as a constituent dimension of Scripture's referent, and suggests that Paul Ricoeur's account of figuration may be more suitable to explicate a mode of referentiality and the shape of the referent that is able to hold the vertical and horizontal dimension of texts at unity, and in which the *projected* (referred) reader is formed by the very textual act of representation.

3.1.1. *The Revealed Story and The Storied Revelation*

Frei acknowledged the importance of the OT literal sense apart from Christian interpretations. Even if 'brutalized', Frei argued, one needs the OT as Israel's Scripture, for promise to genuinely remain promise.¹³⁴ Frei's distinction of different modes of figural referentiality in the Christian tradition is helpful to understand the nature of the problem in question. One mode, Frei notes, understands the OT as mere letter, a "carnal" reality standing in contrast to the NT "spiritual" reality. The other mode understands the OT as promise, that is, 'as pointing to a state of affairs *literally* meant but only incompletely or not yet actualized at the time' (e.g., the covenant promises in Jer. 31:31ff).¹³⁵ Although a narrative approach may appear to retrospectively supersede the OT literal sense as per the first mode of figural

¹³³ Collett, *Figural*, 48 n72.

¹³⁴ Frei, 'Literal Reading', 40.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 42

referentiality, the contrary is in fact true. The canonical mode of referentiality, in effect, conceives of a semantic divorce of letter and spirit that has the potential of eclipsing not only the OT, but the entire story's literal sense. And it is by this mode of referentiality that a canonical approach is in constant danger of operating. That is, the underlying problem is not one of linear retrospection, of *new over old* (text over text), but a vertical eclipsing of *spiritual* over *textual* (reality over text). It is yet another eclipse of biblical narrative.

In a criticism of Childs's discussion on biblical referentiality, Barr aptly notes that 'the normal use of literal is referential in scope', namely, 'To understand the text *literally* is to suppose that the referents are as is stated in the text'.¹³⁶ In a non-literal mode of referentiality, instead, 'the referent is other than that suggested by the direct sense of the language'.¹³⁷ Referentiality, that is, is not in question in either modes. The question is rather as to *what this referent looks like* and *how the reader apprehends that*. The danger of superseding the OT literary testimony lies not in its being eclipsed by the NT, particularly as in the interpretative bidirectionality of a narrativist approach the NT literal sense is governed by the OT. Rather the danger is in the spiritual eclipsing the literal as one discerns the meaning of the text by a referential relation to an extratextual reality other than the literal sense. In attempting to honour the OT per se voice by granting the testaments an equal share of punctiliar *witnesses* to a divine ontology other than their literal sense, text and reality are severed at a semantic level, and the one story narrated by the testaments cannot fittingly depict the reality it renders. By arguing that figuration 'says one thing but means another; that is to say, in the course of doing its sense-making, it points to something other than itself', the integrity of the story's literal sense is

¹³⁶ Barr, 'Word and Meaning, Letter and Spirit', in *The Bible in the Modern World*, (London: SCM Press, 2012), 171.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 172

lost.¹³⁸ In a narrativist approach it is the linguistic account, the story itself, that renders the reality.

Scripture's reality is available 'only under [Scripture's] depiction', and its narrative universe is as such the real universe figured and 'not a linguistic launching pad to a language-transcending reality'.¹³⁹ It is the literal sense of the two testaments' one story to accurately depict the reality. To give epistemological priority to an ecclesial synchronic construal neglects the fact that these are ultimately rooted and governed by the biblical diachronic depiction—if they are to be legitimate. Even if the content of ecclesial rules, such as the Irenaeus rule, is to be conceived as synchronic in nature, the *incarnate* Son and the *outpoured* Spirit confessed by them are unprecedented, climactic realities in the unfolding story of God's action in history: ὅτε δὲ ἦλθεν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου (Gal. 4:4).¹⁴⁰ The third clause of most creedal formulas concerns, at least in part, the sociohistorical reality of the church that originates in the *diachronic* redemptive economy: the inaugurated (NT) fulfilment of God's redemptive (OT) promise.¹⁴¹ Conversely, as MacDonald points out, the various uses of the rule as an interpretative *key* for reading the biblical overarching story leave the inadmissible lacuna of Israel's story: 'in [the biblical] metanarrative', MacDonald claims, 'the story of Israel has an honored place'.¹⁴² It is precisely for this reason that the interpretative function of the rule is best employed as a *boundary*. Any trinitarian dogma is not a descriptive, first order proposition,

¹³⁸ Collett, 'Review of Dan Driver's *Brevard Childs*', 104.

¹³⁹ Frei, 'Interpretation of Narrative', 103–4.

¹⁴⁰ For the unprecedented dimension of the Spirit's ministry in the church cf., e.g., Jer. 31:33–34; Acts 2:33; Gal. 3:14. To say that the incarnation is an unprecedented redemptive, rather than revelatory, reality is perhaps misleading (Collett, 'Reading Forward', 189–90). Collett goes as far as to question: 'if Christ is the Passover lamb and sacrifice proclaimed by the OT . . . then *how* is it that the Incarnation *per se* puts the NT on superior "revelatory" or Christological ground?' (ibid., 191). Is Collett suggesting that a OT *shadowy* imagery has the same revelatory relevance of the incarnation? Collett claims that God *providentially* 'fits or adapts' the OT's testimony to Christ to a language appropriate for 'Israel's persons, places, events, and institutions' so that animal sacrifices are the genuine OT's testimony to Christ's redemption before the incarnation (ibid., 194 n.39). Independently of the accuracy of such a bold theological claim, for members of the second covenant the OT's sacrificial system remains deficient *because* it is not the *incarnate* Son to be "sacrificed" (cf. Heb. 10:1–14). Furthermore, is not such a reading of the OT a *re-reading* made possible only by knowing the *end* of the story of Jesus anyway?

¹⁴¹ Blowers, 'Regula Fidei', 206; see Hays, *Echoes*, 94.

¹⁴² MacDonald, 'Israel', 295.

‘there is no need to assume that its main function must be to provide a picture of the divine’, a glimpse in God’s immanent life.¹⁴³ If rules are indeed for *ruling* one’s reading of the biblical story, and for speaking correctly about its characters, the ugly semantic ditch of text and referent disappears,¹⁴⁴ and the meaning of the story can be understood as embedded in its sequence of occurrences and teleological pattern.¹⁴⁵ The transformation of the biblical narratives into conceptual schemes ‘was not only inevitable but even welcome’, Frei claims, but descriptive schemes ‘cannot provide explanatory theories for the narrative’s claims and for the various patterns of meaning inherent in it’ because they are inherent in it ‘in such a manner that meaning cannot be detached from the narrative form’.¹⁴⁶

3.1.2. *Beholding Oneself in Scripture’s World*

By stressing ‘the vertical nature of theological other-speaking’ as opposed to a ‘horizontal form of historical other-speaking’,¹⁴⁷ and in addressing the unity of the testaments by their theological referent as distinct from the inherent intertextual-sociohistorical dimension, canonical critics conceive of a false dichotomy. To argue that Scripture’s act of referentiality is a ‘vertical linkage’ to ‘the triune LORD’,¹⁴⁸ neglects the constituent sociohistorical dimension of Scripture’s referent, namely, God’s people (and the reader!). Such a neglect divests Scripture of its formative effects on the reader. This sub-section briefly considers Paul Ricoeur’s account of figuration as better suited to explicate in narrativist terms *how* Scripture refers and *what* it refers to. The textual world figured, for Ricoeur, becomes a means of redemptively refiguring the reader and her reality without severing the theological and sociohistorical textual dimension.

¹⁴³ Karen Kilby, ‘Perichoresis and Projection’, *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 956 (2000): 443.

¹⁴⁴ Kilby, 444.

¹⁴⁵ Frei, *Eclipse*, 35.

¹⁴⁶ Frei, *Identity*, 127–28.

¹⁴⁷ Collett, *Figural*, 48 n72.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

Only the reader that is *projected* (“referenced”) by the textual depiction can be formed by that very textual act of representation. Ricoeur’s account of figuration conceives of hermeneutics as reconstructing a set of ‘operations’ given by authors to readers in order to ‘change their acting’.¹⁴⁹ Figuration, for Ricoeur, is *mimesis*, and *mimesis* is *poesis*. Ricoeur divides figuration in three stages: *mimesis*₁, *mimesis*₂, *mimesis*₃. (I briefly introduce *mimesis*₁ and *mimesis*₂ to then consider *mimesis*₃ as the pivotal stage to my recasting of biblical figuration and referentiality in response to that of the canonical approach.) The communicability of a narrative plot, Ricoeur notes, is grounded in a pre-understanding of a grammar of action: *prefiguration* (*mimesis*₁). To identify an agent is to be able to identify the agent’s action. Put simply, to *know* God the creator, is to be able to understand the *act* of creation. The reader’s apprehension is, nevertheless, ‘discursive’ in that she *learns* the meaning of the action through the narration. The syntagmatic order—‘the irreducibly diachronic character of every narrated story’—does not prevent a re-reading of the narrative through the “norm” of a synchronic identity, yet the latter can neither overrule nor precede the narrative’s ‘fundamental diachrony’.¹⁵⁰ This is crucial if understanding is not to be a mere tautology of a presupposed ‘paradigmatic order’ (i.e., reading as introspection) and for the construal of the synchronic identity to be governed by the story’s diachronic order.¹⁵¹ It is also crucial for the very operation of *mimesis*₃, whereby the text’s world *refigures* the reader’s world, which in turn becomes the prefiguring grammar of the reader (*mimesis*₁). It is evident that a degree of circularity between *mimesis*₁ and *mimesis*₃ is inevitable. But this can be a healthy rather than vicious cycle if the reader’s prefiguration is grounded in the symbolic universe that forms the very ‘texture’ of the narrative.¹⁵² It is the *configurating* act of *mimesis*₂, in fact, that mediates the relation of *mimesis*₁

¹⁴⁹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. McLaughlin and Pellauer, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 53.

¹⁵⁰ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 55–6.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 72. The cycle is a virtuous formative process in that the poietic act of the text depicts virtuous characters thus ‘evaluating’ the reader’s character (*mimesis*₃) and impacting her pre-understanding (*mimesis*₁) (*Ibid.*, 58–9).

to *mimesis*₃. In a sense, *mimesis*₂ governs the type of circularity between *mimesis*₁ and *mimesis*₃ by the narrative's textual semantic stability (*viz.*, my use Frei's literal sense).¹⁵³

For Ricoeur, *mimesis*₃ 'marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader'; it is the world of the reader 'wherein real action occurs' (always already configured by a narrative symbolic universe) that the biblical narrative world *refigures* by means of God's narrative universe.¹⁵⁴ On the one hand, the 'schematization' of *mimesis*₂, the received textual paradigm, structures the reader's expectations, thus furnishing guidelines for the encounter of text and reader. On the other hand, 'it is the act of reading that accompanies the narrative's configuration and actualizes its capacity': to understand (*verstehen*) a story is to actualise it, namely, the 'refiguring of the world of action under the sign of the plot'.¹⁵⁵ In more transparent theological terms, it is only as the story of Scripture becomes the prism that refracts and reconstruct communal and individual construal of self and reality, that revelation is complete.¹⁵⁶ One lands, at this point on, perhaps, the most significant misconception of narrativism by its critics, namely, that it lacks referentiality. Far from it, the communicated reality, the narrative world, is beyond the sense of the literary story: it is a horizon. It is only as the story of the text and of the reader intersect that figuration (*mimesis*₃) is completed. 'Language', Ricoeur notes, 'does not constitute a world for itself. It is not even a world'.¹⁵⁷ 'Far from producing only weakened images of reality-shadows', the biblical story depicts the reader's reality 'by augmenting it'.¹⁵⁸ It is not the text that refers to an abstract ontology, it is God referring to the reader as a character in the biblical story: Scripture refers *to God's world from within which* the reader can *witness* herself and God from God's perspective.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 65–8; cf. 1.2.

¹⁵⁴ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 71.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 76–7.

¹⁵⁶ Stroup, *Promise*, 133; similarly, Barth's on the *objective* and *subjective* reality of revelation (*CD I/2*, 205).

¹⁵⁷ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 78.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 80.

Alistair MacIntyre notes that medieval Augustinianism established a twofold relationship between texts and their readers as a paradoxical recognition of this intratextual framing of the text being interpreted. The reader interprets the text but also ‘discover[s], in and through his or her reading of those texts, that they in turn interpret the reader’. ‘What the reader, as thus interpreted by the texts, has to learn about him or herself is that it is only the self as transformed through and by the reading of the texts which will be capable of reading the texts aright’.¹⁵⁹ A paradox is encountered at the outset: the reader must be taught certain dispositions and attitudes before she can recognise and understand virtues or, indeed, read (*viz.* the circularity of *mimesis*₃ and *mimesis*₁). As a result of human corruption, reason and desires, for Augustine, are not caught in a natural movement towards God and true knowledge but need redemptive redirection. In learning, one moves *towards* and not from first principles.¹⁶⁰ For this reason, the literal sense of Scripture is primary for the Augustinian tradition, not simply because the other senses are dependent on it, but because in its diverse literary genres, the literal sense is understood as an utterance by someone to an audience ‘which shares with the utterer a stock of fundamental beliefs, a stock of linguistic meaning, articulated in terms of a shared view of the universe’.¹⁶¹ Readings foregrounded in the “allegorical” sense, instead, are liable to importing as many symbolic universes as the number of readers and their identities.¹⁶²

The biblical story *refers to* a reconstructed—or better, redeemed—reality, reality as it should be and must become.¹⁶³ Such a hermeneutics ‘aims less at restoring the author’s intention behind the text than at making explicit the movement by which the text unfolds, as it were, a world in front of itself’.¹⁶⁴ As Ricoeur later stated, a text is,

¹⁵⁹ MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), 82.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 83–84.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 91–2.

¹⁶³ Hence, the fictitious dichotomy of fiction and history or of *Historie* and *Geschichte*.

¹⁶⁴ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 81; emphasis mine.

a mediation between man [sic.] and the world, between man and man, between man and himself; the mediation between man and the world is what we call referentiality; the mediation between men, communicability, the mediation between man and himself, self-understanding. A literary work contains these three dimensions: referentiality, communicability and self- understanding.¹⁶⁵

To be sure, if the text in question is the biblical text, then referentiality is revelation, communicability proclamation, self-understanding sanctification (*theosis*), and God is the mediator by the means of the story depicted in Scripture. Furthermore, the degree of refiguration depends on the authoritative status accredited to the text. In the case of Scripture, the story cautions against the “oversignification” of the reader’s universe and names it as “sin”. As Ricoeur puts it, the horizon of Scripture and the horizon of reader ‘confront one another’.¹⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Ricoeur aptly lays out the—explicit or implicit—reality *absorbing* exercise of any text, not least the biblical text. This account of figuration is able to hold together the effecting theological dimension figured—the story of *God’s acts* in and for God’s people—and the effected sociohistorical dimension figured—the story of God’s acts *in and for God’s people*.¹⁶⁷ The ambition of this act of referentiality, its archetype, is Jesus Christ, truly man and truly God, and it is after the image of this One that the biblical story intends to form the reader. The ‘primary focus’ of the ‘canonical narrative’, as Lindbeck puts it,

¹⁶⁵ Ricoeur, ‘Life in Quest of a Narrative’, in *On Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Wood (New York: Routledge, 1991), 27.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 26; emphasis mine.

¹⁶⁷ Frei’s distancing from the Anglo-American “New Criticism” cannot be discussed in detail. It suffices to say that later in his scholarly career Frei does not position the Bible in relation to a putative narrative tradition in literary theories but focuses on a ‘traditional consensus among Christians in the West on the primacy of the literal reading of the Bible’ as a unified narrative (Frei, ‘Literal Reading’, 36–37). Frei’s later *interest* in the history of interpretation emphasises the church’s practice of figuration as a means of reading the stories of people and nations into the biblical story (Frei, ‘Conflicts in Interpretation’, in *Theology and Narrative*, 120; so already in Frei, *Eclipse*, 3). The ‘irony of New Criticism’, Frei states, ‘is to have taken this specific case and rule and to have turned them instead into a general theory of meaning, literature, and even culture, in their own right’ (Frei, ‘Literal Reading’, 66).

‘is not on God’s being in itself, for that is not what the text is about, but on how life is to be lived and reality construed in light of God’s character as an agent as this is depicted in the stories of Israel and of Jesus’.¹⁶⁸

The Christian life is not the beholding of God’s immanent life by textual witnesses. The Christian life is a *life*. The biblical depiction of God’s acts in history is for the purpose of the church’s transfiguration (μεταμορφώω) into the image of Jesus (cf. 2 Cor 3:18).¹⁶⁹ The next section considers the necessity of Scripture’s intratextual framing for the unity of the faithful reader’s ethical life.

3.2. Living and Acting in God’s World

Scripture’s act of referentiality is not a mere noetic transaction. It is a (trans)formative ethical program. Both narrativist and canonical approaches agree that Scripture is an instrument for Christian living. But for the former, the reader’s life is shaped by inhabiting Scripture’s narrative symbolic universe. For the latter, Scripture’s moral guidance is afforded by its vertical witness.¹⁷⁰ This section argues that a witness mode of referentiality is inappropriate for the biblical ethical vision to be both coherently conceived and effective. It considers the concept of the divine ethical mandate and argues that for God’s command to be cogent for and applicable by the reader, she must inhabit the symbolic universe *projected* by the biblical narratives. It contends that the ‘absorbing’ intratextual framing of Scripture provides what Alister MacIntyre refers to as ‘a unity of life’ necessary for the reader’s acting upon the extratextual universe as refigured by Scripture.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 121.

¹⁶⁹ e.g., Richard Burridge, *Imitating Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 33–346; see also David Alexander, *Augustine’s Early Theology of the Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 218ff.

¹⁷⁰ Driver, *Childs*, 157.

¹⁷¹ At this stage in the argument, one may be surprised by the cliché, yet persistent, canonical charge that the biblical testimony ‘is not obviously narratival’ and contains a ‘variety of genre’ (Seitz, *Elder Testament*, 74). At the risk of stating the obvious, in its canonical unity, amid the diverse genres (poetic, prophetic, legal, liturgical,

In speaking of ‘the moral authority’ of Scripture, O’Donovan recognises that, although readers need to discern the meaning of a text, their ultimate aim is to discern ‘ourselves and our position as agents in relation to the text’.¹⁷² In a criticism of Barth’s notion of Scripture’s ‘concrete’ command (see *CD II/2*), O’Donovan points to the need for the *framing* operation of Scripture’s overarching story—an intertextual framing, that is—for one’s ethical thinking and living. God’s divine command in Scripture, according to Barth, is focused on the immediate situation it is given in. It comes directly “from above”.¹⁷³ Yet, a command, O’Donovan rightly notes, is an event that occurs as part of an ongoing relationship: ‘Implicit obedience needs a frame of reference’.¹⁷⁴ The inability to correctly relate oneself to the biblical command is a failure to read a command in its larger context, an exercise of practical (redeemed) reason that the narrative fosters.¹⁷⁵ O’Donovan recognises the tension of an identity-in-distance between God’s people in Scripture and the modern church (i.e., the same people in different dispensations). Yet, O’Donovan rightly insists, it is neither an occasional divine address nor a punctiliar witness to the divine to bridge such a distance between two apparently different worlds, but the encompassing story of the one world of Scripture.¹⁷⁶ O’Donovan aptly summarises the intratextual nature of Scripture’s ethical vision: ‘it is not the commands that

sapiential, mythical, legendary, and historical) and the differing perspectives (e.g., 1-2 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles, Paul and James, the four Gospels, or even Gen 1:1–2:3 and Gen 2:4–2:25), Scripture is embraced by an overarching story, a realistic narrative (Stroup, *Promise*, 136). By the same token, Paul’s letters do not narrate a story, of course, yet the Pauline kerygma is constituted by a ‘sacred story’ that ‘provides the foundational substructure’ for Paul’s thought. Independently of its explicit reference, the story has influenced Paul’s discourse to an extent that one’s inhabiting of the story is necessary for the faithful hearing of the apostle’s instructions (James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 16–17; Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 5–10). The premise of this section is that an appreciation of the overarching story that these diverse materials ‘are slotted into’ is a prerequisite for a genuine faithful reading and living (see Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology* [London: SCM, 2003], 356ff). For a more detailed discussion on Scripture as depicting a unified metanarrative, see Richard Bauckham, ‘Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story’, in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Davis and Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 38–44.

¹⁷² O’Donovan, ‘The Moral Authority of Scripture’, in *Scripture’s Doctrine and Theology’s Bible*, ed. Bockmuehl and Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 168.

¹⁷³ *CD II/2*, 672–73.

¹⁷⁴ O’Donovan, ‘Moral Authority’, 170.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁷⁶ So possibly Barth; see Kevin Vanhoozer, ‘Discourse on Matter: Hermeneutics and the “Miracle” of Understanding’, in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, ed. James K. A. Smith et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 10.

the Bible contains that we obey; rather, it is the purposes of God that those commands, set in their context, reveal to us'.¹⁷⁷

The act of locating oneself at a later stage in the overarching story of Scripture in order to discern God's framing purposes triggers the canonical concern that the moral guidance of the first covenant is relativised or superseded.¹⁷⁸ But, although one's inhabiting of the biblical story may lead to a perspectival posture towards the divine command, antecedent narratives are not eclipsed, instead promises are fulfilled! The reader, that is, finds herself *down the line* of the same story. A similar concern for the biblical testimony immediate relevance for the reader's contemporary situations is expressed by Christopher Rowland in a symposium on O'Donovan's social and ethical theology. Rowland contrasts different approaches to reading the book of Revelation as a test case for the relation of ethics and biblical interpretation. One approach is an intertextual tracing of eschatological events in history; the other is an intratextual—yet existential—application of the eschatological images to the contemporary situation of the reader.¹⁷⁹ Rowland prefers the first approach as it appreciates the book of Revelation as 'an apocalypse, a prophecy—not a narrative or an epistle'; it enables the book to directly inform the reader's situation for the sake of 'practical discipleship'.¹⁸⁰ In response, O'Donovan affirms the imaginative ethical dimension of the first approach, but aptly questions the very setting up of a false dichotomy: does one need to decide between focusing on the narration of the symbolic universe (the story) or be assessed by it (the existential address)?¹⁸¹ Intertextuality (text-text) and intratextuality (text-reader and/or God) do not preclude one another. The interest in the progress of the eschaton, O'Donovan notes, did not arise out of sheer historical speculation, but out of the church's tracing the origins of their very moment of

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 174.

¹⁷⁸ See 3.1.1 above.

¹⁷⁹ Rowland, 'The Apocalypse and Political Theology', in *A Royal Priesthood?*, ed. Bartholomew et al., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 247–49.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 251–52.

¹⁸¹ O'Donovan, 'Response to Christopher Rowland', in *A Royal Priesthood? (op. cit.)*, 255.

contemporary crisis which the present reader continues to inhabit. The book of Revelation presents a particular ‘canonical Christian reading of [universal] history’ that is able to (re)locate the reader at an existential level.¹⁸² The Christian can resource to biblical texts of any genre in moments of cultural crisis precisely because she inhabits their substructural narrative that counters the stories embedding the contemporary society. The intertextual tracing of the story does not prioritise the past over the contemporary situation, but the particularity of the biblical overarching story embracing past, present and future over generic and repeated images provided by an *unlocatable* existential (vertical) communication.¹⁸³ Intertextuality delineates the story *within which* the moral identity of the reader can be adequately addressed for the present moment. The concept of identity, and a genuine evaluation of that lived identity, can only reside in the narrative unity of one’s life.¹⁸⁴ Human actions, be conversations or behaviour, are enacted narratives.¹⁸⁵ As MacIntyre puts it, ‘I can only answer the question “What am I to do?” if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”’.¹⁸⁶ A story is not merely a sequence of actions, but ‘the concept of an action is that of a moment in an actual or possible history abstracted for some purpose from that history’, and a character in a story is not an assembly of actions and personality traits, but ‘the concept of a person is that of a character abstracted from a history’.¹⁸⁷ A categorical command, such as an instruction in a recipe book, is intelligible, firstly, only as element-in-a-sequence. If Jamie Oliver instructs us to “add 100ml of cream to the eggs” the action cannot be considered intelligible. Secondly, even as an element-in-a-sequence, it requires a context to be evaluated. Only as the context of the instruction is revealed to be a recipe for Carbonara can the action of adding cream be considered abhorrent. A satisfactory understanding of the life and thought of a community,

¹⁸² Ibid., 257.

¹⁸³ O’Donovan, ‘Response’, 256.

¹⁸⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2007), 205–207.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 212–15.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 213.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 216–17.

such as the church, can only be gained by an appreciation of the story that the community inhabit and the traditions that narrate it.

The struggle of early church communities over “orthodoxy” in the ante-Nicene period is, in fact, a struggle over their moral discipline accountable to, and identity formation in, the ethical story of the Hebrew scriptures and the emerging gospel traditions.¹⁸⁸ The priority of the ‘canonical narrative tradition’ in the early church was ‘less the communication of principles’ than the ‘dramatic relation’ of the hearer and story’s referent, offering her a self-definition determined by her stance towards the story’s referent, ‘offering a place *within* the story itself’. The early church missionaries created among their proselytes a sense of a ‘common world’, not by emphasising ‘an identifiable individual core experience of inner enlightenment’ but belonging to communities of a distinctive pattern of life.¹⁸⁹ The early church understood Scripture’s witness to God as an event occurring within the storied world of Scripture: the ‘transforming encounter with the risen Christ is renewed and deepened in the repeated hearing of the story, in words and in ritual enactment’.¹⁹⁰

3.3. Discovering Ourselves and God in God’s Universe

Thus far, the chapter has contended for a narrativist perspective that is able to overcome the dichotomy of *how* Scripture refers and *what* it refers to. It has argued that the story of God’s salvific action in and for humanity is the reality the story refers to and that it is only by means of the narrated story that this reality can be apprehended. Intratextuality, it has also argued, is soteriological in nature as it (trans)forms the extratextual reader as she is represented as part of the very reality *projected* by the text. Through the Spirit, the reader conforms to God’s action depicted in Scripture of which she is the recipient and the reenactor. Yet, one significant tension

¹⁸⁸ Williams, ‘Does It Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?’, in *The Making of Orthodoxy*, ed. Williams (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 8.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

remains. By this account, God is the one effectively signifying the divine reality the reader inhabits and is formed through—God’s story of us. At the same time, God is a character in the reality signified—the story of God for us. Can God be both signified and the one signifying? This last section endeavours to ease this tension by relocating and redescribing the biblical testimony *to* God under the intratextual ministry *of* God. Thinking God’s thoughts after God.

The tension in question is inherent to the very notion of God in doctrinal history, namely, the notion of God having an identity, the person ‘being revealed’ in Scripture, and the notion of God as the ‘revealer’, the one performing the salvific act of revealing to a lost humanity their true identity and purpose.¹⁹¹ Both these conceptions are indispensable, and the viability of one theological model depends on its ability to subsume the other. Collett, for instance, is also concerned to speak of the ontological reality of God as a *framework*, an organizing principle, not least for interpreting Scripture. Collett argues that one should conceive of confessional and scientific frameworks as ‘contrasting rules of faith’ for relating Scripture’s literal sense to the theological reality it points to. That is, one should speak of a ‘Nicene reason’.¹⁹² Collett is right to note that a *wissenschaftlich* reason simply transposes the theological epistemological paradigm into a different framework, thus simply operating by an alternative theology.¹⁹³ The problem of Collett’s ‘Nicene reason’, however, is that this construal of Scripture’s literal sense is far from congruous with the reality it points to and is, in turn, meant to be normed by. Signified and signifier are not harmonious, and one must resource to a vertical mode of *other*-referencing to arrive to an *other*-shaped referent. In a narrativist intratextual approach, instead, the events and characters in the realistic biblical narrative do not have a ‘free-floating meaning pattern’ that can be detached from them; their

¹⁹¹ See the language of ‘revealer, revelation and being revealed’ in Barth, *CD I/1*, 363. See also the Frei’s appreciation of this tension in Frei, ‘Interpretation of Narrative’, 101.

¹⁹² Collett, *Figural Reading*, 161.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 162–3.

meaning is inherent and intrinsic to the unfolding matrix of relations of characters, events and settings.¹⁹⁴ The *identity* of God depicted in the biblical narratives is not a ‘distinguishable factor’ over and above the describable characteristics of an agent as ‘a-ghost-in-the-machine’.¹⁹⁵ The ontological truth of the Christian story and its demands on reality are intrinsic to the story itself. The story forces a ‘repositioning of the self vis-à-vis reality’ in such a way that it is impossible to think or speak of the text’s referent in terms other than the story’s.¹⁹⁶ It is out of question that the Christian story assumes certain propositions about God to be true, and that the ontological-cognitional claims of this story are imposed on practitioners rather than “created” by them. The point in case is rather that any theological-ontological claim cannot be isolated from the story and construed separately by Neoplatonic metaphysical speculation of the church in the fourth and fifth centuries.¹⁹⁷ The very possibility of this tension only arises in the modern period due to related disjunctions: ‘of the literal from the historical, and of both from the figural; of history-likeness from history; of narrative from reality; and of meaning from truth’.¹⁹⁸

In a later essay in honour of Childs, Lindbeck offers an insightful typification of theological models in the postcritical tradition grouped by the neologism of “classic hermeneutics”. Lindbeck underlines the common theological commitment of Childs and Frei to recovering a premodern canonical interpretation, yet also notes a sharp difference: ‘what each chiefly interprets Scripture for’, namely, its operation. Childs interprets Scripture for its *witness*. Frei, and Lindbeck includes himself and other Yale scholars, for its *narrative symbolic universe*.¹⁹⁹ Their chief point of disagreement, Lindbeck suggests, is the narrativist claim that ‘application’ for early Christians is a matter of absorbing reality into the biblical text and living

¹⁹⁴ Frei, *Eclipse*, 1980, 29.

¹⁹⁵ Frei, *Identity*, 55–56.

¹⁹⁶ Hauerwas, ‘Why the Truth Demands Truthfulness’, *JAAR* 52, no. 1 (1984): 142.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁹⁸ Loughlin, ‘Following’, 374.

¹⁹⁹ Lindbeck, ‘Postcritical Canonical Interpretation’, 26–27.

imaginatively in the symbolic universe projected by the biblical narratives.²⁰⁰ If the biblical text depicts a narrative universe, it cannot, canonical critics reason, simultaneously *witness to* God. The tension in canonical and narrativist perspectives on the nature of biblical referentiality may be conceived as a tension incipient in Barth's conception of Scripture. Barth claimed that 'dogmatics does not ask what the apostles and prophets said but what we must say on the basis of the apostles and prophets',²⁰¹ but also recognised that dogmatics must investigate the meaning of the text by 'exegetical theology'.²⁰² One may perceive Childs's canonical approach as devoted to the second task, namely, a 'dialectical' understanding of Scripture as witness,²⁰³ and the linguistic-intratextual 'analogical' approach as a postliberal 'neo-Barthian' appropriation of the first.²⁰⁴ On the one hand, Scripture for Barth is to be construed as canonical testimonies (even though that might not be their literary genre), human yet reliable in their canonical unity.²⁰⁵ On the other hand, Scripture for Barth can also be conceived as a symbolic universe that the reader inhabits, placing herself 'in the strange new world within the Bible'.²⁰⁶ Yet, Lindbeck asks, does Scripture's intratextual operation of construing a narrative universe derogate the notion of witness? The subsuming of the notion of witness to that of symbolic universe, Lindbeck suggests, is able to retain the latter by relocating and redescribing it.

'Searching the Bible to find the God to whom it testifies', Lindbeck suggests, 'may be the motivation without being the mode of interpreting Scripture'.²⁰⁷ That is—in practice not theory—one interprets Scripture for the symbolic universe it projects and not for its witnesses.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 30.

²⁰¹ *CD I/1.15*.

²⁰² *CD I/1.16*.

²⁰³ See, e.g., Murray Rae, 'Biblical Theology and the Communicative Presence of God', in *The Bible as Christian Scripture (op. cit.)*, 138.

²⁰⁴ See McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 123–25.

²⁰⁵ see Childs, *BTONT*, 84–99 above.

²⁰⁶ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), 237–38.

²⁰⁷ Lindbeck, 'Postcritical Canonical Interpretation', 34.

Discerning the content of Scripture's witnesses to God is of profound material significance for interpretation, but it is its *result*, rather than its *presupposition*. That is, it is *methodologically* secondary. The intratextual program of interpreting Scripture as a projected world does not oppose an emphasis on the objective reality of God as if one were merely interested in the symbolic universe of an ancient religious sect. On the contrary, everything depends on what or *who* one finds once entered into that universe; on whether God's world one has entered holds the ultimate criteria of morality and reality.²⁰⁸ The contemporary Christian, Lindbeck argues, does not read Scripture to find an appropriate witness that speak a word about the current issues reported in the daily news: she 'places the news within the framework of the biblical world to the degree that they participate in it'.²⁰⁹ Canonical critics and narrativist would agree that the question is not what the news have to say about Scripture, yet while the canonical critic asks what Scripture's witness has to say about the news, the narrativist asks what the reader has to say about the news as she stands in the God's world as a faithful covenant member. The problem of the former approach is that it is either constantly at risks of a dialectical synthesis between Scripture and news or that it is not able to speak into the content of the news altogether.

The underlying problem in prioritising a notion of Scripture as a compilation of witnesses over that of a narrative symbolic universe pertains to the reader's capability of apprehending the reality witnessed to, which in turn establishes a "canon". If the narrative symbolic universe of Scripture is not the pilgrimage path guiding the reader to encounter God, readers cannot but begin building yet another Tower of Babel. The meaning of punctiliar witnesses—and at this point one might ask of canonical critics what sort of unit precisely constitutes a witness (a book, a narrative, a sentence or even a single word?)—is undetermined and their meanings innumerable unless determined by the storied symbolic universe (rendered

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 35.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 36.

by the canonical narration and signalled by individual texts) providing a genuine material rule, a rule that the totality of occasional witnesses is not able to provide.²¹⁰ Not only the totality of sporadic witnesses risks of becoming a “grab-bag” to choose from according to extrabiblical principles, but any construed theological reality standing as a synthesis of these sporadic witnesses risks of becoming a mere legitimising introspection. This has become obvious as even those agreeing on dogmatic principles disagree on the interpretation of biblical texts paramount for the formation of the church’s identity. The much-lamented theological impasse of the many historical-critical lives of Jesus and histories of Israel has not been resolved by canonical critics: God has a wax nose, and so does the inevitably pliant identity of the reader.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that in a narrativist perspective it is the linguistic account, the story itself, that fittingly renders Scripture’s reality. It has argued that the story does not simply figure an abstract ontology, it is God that figures the reader as a character in the narrative universe of Scripture. Scriptural figuration, it has contended, is God’s depiction of God’s world from within which the reader can redemptively witness herself and her reality. Figuration is Scripture’s referential act to a redeemed reality that forms the reader inhabiting it. It has argued that the intratextual framing (or ‘absorbing’) of Scripture’s story is necessary for the reader’s coherent apprehension of Scripture’s moral guidance and her effective formation for living in extratextual universe as refigured by Scripture. The intertextual (text-text) emphasis in a narrativist reading, it has noted, is neither a neglect of the text’s extratextual figuration (text-reality) nor a superseding of antecedent testimonies by later ones (retrospective discontinuity),

²¹⁰ Lindbeck, ‘Postcritical Canonical Interpretation’, 37.

but the delineation of the overarching story figuring God's redeemed reality forming the reader's moral identity. Lastly, it has considered the central disagreement between canonical and narrativist perspectives, namely, 'what each chiefly interprets Scripture for'. It has concluded that a narrativist approach is better suited to subsume the theological model of Scripture as *witness* under its intratextual operation of *projecting* a world. It is as the reader stands within the strange world of the Bible that she beholds the king of that world and genuinely and coherently live life under the king's domain.

Epilogue

In this thesis I sketched a narrativist perspective on the intratextual operation of Scripture's metadiscourse in critical dialogue with Brevard Childs's canonical approach. The first part introduced a narrativist perspective on Scripture's intratextual operation as projecting a narrative symbolic universe. I have argued that Christian theology maps out one's cognitive universe through the biblical story and governing the reader's construal of reality.²¹¹ Scripture's world absorbs the reader's extratextual world. Such an intratextual pervading and governing of the reader's construal of reality, I have argued, shapes and moulds the reader's identity by redescribing it as a natural and direct concomitant of the biblical story's literal sense. The second part introduced selected criticisms of narrativism by proponents of Brevard Child's canonical approach. It has argued that the canonical conception of Scripture as a catalyst of vertical witnesses to a divine ontology by equi-instrumental testaments generates an incongruence of the vertical signifying act and the narrative character of the signifier. This incongruence, I have argued, casts the referential act as 'implying something other than what is being said', thus creating a dichotomy of meaning and truth that impairs both literal readings of the story and the story's integrity to fittingly render its reality. Furthermore, I have argued that the vertical referential act to a divine ontology uniting the testaments neglects the ecclesial sociohistorical dimension of Scripture's referent, thus undermining the ethical dimension of Scripture's operation. The third part has recast a narrativist perspective on the nature biblical referentiality in light of the canonical criticisms and the identified deficiency of the resolutions offered. I have argued that Scripture's referent is available only under the depiction of its storied universe, and that the sociohistorical reality of God's people is integral to it. The biblical story, I have argued, does not simply figure an abstract ontology: it is God figuring the

²¹¹ See Frei, 'Interpretation of Narrative', 95–96.

reader as a character in the narrative symbolic universe of Scripture. I have contended that biblical intertextuality is, in fact, referential. Scripture is God's referential projection of God's redeemed world from within which the reader can formatively witness herself and her reality. The absorbing operation of Scripture's narrative world is necessary for the reader's coherent apprehension of Scripture's moral guidance and her effective formation. I have thus concluded that a narrativist approach is better suited to subsume the theological model of Scripture as *witness* under its intratextual operation of *projecting* a world. Narrativism, I have argued, is more viable option than any dialectical form of theology to comprehensively interrelate the meaning and purpose of revelation to the church's perception of who she is and who God is.

In 1997 George Stroup commented that the malady of the church's 'fatal disease', of the sort diagnosed by Milbank, is the curious status of Scripture in the church's life, and its symptoms may be evident in the church's seeming incapability to make sense of her identity by means of her theological sources.²¹² Narrativism is not the cure; God's redeeming activity is, and Scripture is the divine drama mapping that redemptive pilgrimage. Narrativism is a claim on *what* Scripture does and *how* it does it in her role as creaturely servant. 'Who are you?'—people attempt to interpret God. But the reader cannot interpret God in Scripture. The question is turned around: 'who are you, that you ask this question? Do you live in the truth, so you can ask it?' God interprets the reader through Scripture. '[O]ne of them must die'. The deconstructionist trends of our bunglingly aspiring "postmodern" societies, corrosive and faddish as they may be, continue reminding us that one's personal and communal identity, as much as one's notion of the divine, are formed by inhabiting and contributing to social discourses. Precisely in the face of this cultural moment, a narrativist perspective insists not that the church should concede to the fictionality of reality but confess the reality fictioned.

²¹² Stroup, *Promise*, 24–25.

The church narrates and performs the story of Scripture because that story, in turn, narrates and (per)forms us.

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