

# The Theological Interpretation of Scripture and the Question of History

The questions raised for theology by modern historical consciousness go to the very heart of Christian faith and its core tenets. For that reason they are of profound import for the doctrine of Scripture and the practice of reading Scripture theologically. Yet although the issue of history is often recognized in connection with the claims of historical criticism, these deeper questions rarely receive extensive or adequate theological investigation in recent literature on the theological interpretation of Scripture. The present chapter sets the scene for that conversation. I draw on Ernst Troeltsch's classic account of modern historiography and the challenges it poses for Christian theology to draw out the implied difficulties for the theology of Scripture. I then show how four prominent, contrasting proposals in this field, for all their other strengths, fail to adequately address these challenges, even where they acknowledge their pertinence. Brevard Childs, Sandra Schneiders, and Kevin Vanhoozer represent the most theologically developed accounts of Scripture in terms of a canonical approach to biblical theology, theological hermeneutics, and the self-communication of the triune God, respectively, which I take to be the three most prominent ways of pursuing the theology of Scripture at present. Finally, Murray Rae has offered one of the most developed responses to the challenges posed by Troeltsch for the theological interpretation of Scripture, incorporating the strengths of a wide range of theological resources. The limitations of these authors in respect of the problem posed by Troeltsch are both indicative of the need for further work and help clarify the nature of that task.

## HISTORICAL METHOD AND DOGMATIC THEOLOGY: ERNST TROELTSCH

Ernst Troeltsch offers a thoroughgoing analysis of modern historical consciousness and historical method and the profound challenges of enduring significance they pose to Christian theology, not least for theology and the interpretation of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> A brief examination of his account of these challenges will clarify the nature of the problems they pose for the theology of Scripture and its theological interpretation today.

On Troeltsch's account, the development of historical method is one of a number of shifts that have transformed the context for modern religious thought.<sup>2</sup> The critical historiography that has flourished since the Enlightenment has resulted in the full development of modern historical reflection.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, the history of humanity is thoroughly enmeshed with natural history—it “merges in the evolutionary history of the earth's surface”—and is inextricable from the impact of its physical contexts and its changing social life.<sup>4</sup> It forms “an unspeakably complex, yet altogether coherent, whole of immeasurable duration both in the past and in the future” in which we must discover ourselves and the origin and reason for our existence. When we see ourselves in this way as so thoroughly immersed in history, historical inquiry becomes a vital, existential concern.

As Troeltsch explains, modern historical inquiry evinces three interrelated methodological procedures that follow from the way of seeing history he has just articulated. The first of these is that of analogy. This procedure is based on the claim that we have a key to understanding, explaining, and reconstructing what might have happened in the past on the basis of the similarity that obtains between events we observe, both within and without

1. As Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundburg claim in their useful overview of his context and thought in *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 146–68. They point, for example, to Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, trans. R. Harrisville (London: SPCK, 1979). Edgar Krentz remarks that Troeltsch's essay “On Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology” (discussed below) “still haunts theology,” in his *The Historical-Critical Method* (London: SPCK, 1975), 55. Troeltsch is also given a prominent position in expositions of the problem of history in a number of more recent works, e.g.: C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narratives as History* (New York: Clarendon, 1996), 185ff.; Murray Rae, *History and Hermeneutics* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 16 and 154–55. See also Gregory Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Quest: The Challenge of History to Religious Authority* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 196.

2. “Historiography,” in *Contemporary Religious Thinkers: From Idealist Metaphysics to Existentialist Theologians*, ed. J. Macquarrie (London: SCM, 1968), 76–77.

3. “Historiography,” 80–81.

4. “Historiography,” 81.

ourselves. Elsewhere Troeltsch is careful to qualify this assumption. In an earlier article, “The Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology,” he explains that while allowing all possible room for difference, the principle presupposes “a common core of similarity that makes the differences comprehensible and empathy possible.”<sup>5</sup> It likewise presupposes that we are capable of understanding the nature and function of “apparently alien situations” because of definite points of correspondence between them and us.<sup>6</sup> The practice of analogy, then, does not entail the reduction of all events to a homogenous mass. Indeed, the fairly minimal condition of some similarity amid possibly great diversity allows for considerable growth in experience and understanding of the kind of things that can happen in history. As Van Harvey points out, analogical reasoning draws on a scientific worldview but also on much more than that, as historians make judgments about human motives, values, institutions, political trends, and events—and, we might add, an enormous variety of social and cultural phenomena.<sup>7</sup> It involves a wide variety of assumptions, employed as warrants for historical judgments.<sup>8</sup> It does not preclude but informs an imaginative entry into the mentalities and worldviews of past human beings.<sup>9</sup> Such a broad, flexible account of analogy also seems to allow for a great variety of historical methods and approaches and assumptions about historical phenomena, including the great expansion of approaches and use of theoretical instruments in historiography that have flourished since Troeltsch wrote.

That flexibility is important to note, for the principle of analogy provides the basis for the practice of criticism, which involves making judgments of probability about the testimony of the traditions concerning the past that we have inherited. On the one hand, “the illusions, distortions, deceptions, myths, and partisanship we see with our own eyes enable us to recognize similar features in the material of tradition.”<sup>10</sup> Our present experience tells us that at

5. “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology,” in *Religion in History*, ed. James Luther Adams (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 14.

6. *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, trans. D. Reid (London: SCM, 1972), 89.

7. Van Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (London: SCM, 1967), 78–84. So great is Harvey’s debt to Troeltsch that it is hard to see how Terrence Tilley can claim that Harvey renders “the Troeltschian problematic” untenable. See his *History, Theology and Faith: Dissolving the Modern Problematic* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 48.

8. Drawn, we might add, from more than the historian’s commonsense knowledge of the world, which Harvey emphasizes: sociological, anthropological, economic, psychological, psychoanalytic, linguistic, hermeneutical discoveries and theory all now inform historical judgments in various, often contested, and sometimes mutually exclusive ways.

9. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, 90–91.

10. “Historical and Dogmatic Method,” 13.

times testimony is not always entirely reliable and needs critical scrutiny, and that experience of scrutinizing and sifting others' reports informs our treatment of the traditions we have received.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, agreement with "normal, customary, or at least frequently attested happenings and conditions as we have experienced them is the criterion of probability for all the events historical criticism can recognize as having actually or possibly happened."<sup>12</sup> In other words, by basing judgments of probability on present experience, broadly conceived, the historian can make affirmations about the past on a reasonable basis, without claiming to define what kind of thing can happen or what did happen in the past.<sup>13</sup>

Both analogy and criticism are rooted in a further underlying idea about history, the principle of correlation. As we discern similar processes at work in the past and the present and see in both "the influence and intersection of various cycles of human life," Troeltsch writes, "we gain at length an idea of an integral continuity, balanced in its changes, never at rest, and ever moving towards incalculable issues."<sup>14</sup> This sense of a dynamic, ordered, ever-changing continuum involves an understanding of the complex causal interconnections that embrace all events. All phenomena come about through their causal interaction with other phenomena and in turn affect other events, he writes in the earlier article, "so that all historical happening is knit together in a permanent relationship of correlation, inevitably forming a current in which everything is interconnected and each single event is related to all others."<sup>15</sup> The causation in question, Troeltsch explains in "Historiography," is both natural and psychological; the investigation of human motive distinguishes historical

11. Troeltsch is therefore not skeptical about the value of testimony.

12. "Historical and Dogmatic Method," 13–14.

13. As Van Harvey argues, this principle involves what he calls historians' "radical autonomy" and logical candor in exhibiting the grounds for their historical judgments. The judgments involved are inferential on the basis of traces of evidence, and the arguments that justify them are, as he shows, quite diverse and involve a variety of warrants so that one cannot generalize about the presuppositions of historians. See *The Historian and the Believer*, 41–62. The diversity of approaches to historiography that have mushroomed in the last forty years only underlines his point.

14. Troeltsch, "Historiography," 82.

15. "Historical and Dogmatic Method," 14. Terrence Tilley claims that Troeltsch confuses assumptions with the defeasible presumptions that guide practice; see *History, Theology and Faith*, 40. However, Troeltsch's principles seem more fundamental than presumptions: it is difficult to see how historical research would be possible without them. Historical hypotheses, however, are defeasible, though many historians have other more fundamental ideological or theoretical commitments that are more difficult to defeat.

knowledge, but is not sufficient to explain historical events, for there are other forces involved than those in the soul.<sup>16</sup>

Wolfgang Pannenberg accuses Troeltsch of assuming the fundamental homogeneity or uniformity underlying all historical phenomena as the basis for an “omnipotence of analogy,” which constricts historical inquiry, whereas the historian who attends to the individuality, uniqueness, and contingency of events will see they are not homogenous, which cannot be comprehended entirely by the analogy.<sup>17</sup> This criticism seems unfair. It is certainly difficult to see how the historian, in Troeltsch’s view, could affirm the probability, or make sense, of the absolutely unique, in the sense of an event without any remotely plausible analogy with other events known to us: an event unrelated to the continuum of causally correlated occurrences.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Troeltsch does make the novel and the particular central to the method of historical knowing. The method of historical knowledge, he writes, “is determined by the object of selecting from the flux of phenomena that which is qualitatively and uniquely *individual*, whether on a larger or on a smaller scale, and of making this intelligible in its concrete and specific relations.”<sup>19</sup> History therefore, while drawing on abstract universal laws, has to operate with the notion of the individual case. The historian has to tailor his or her explanation to the particular phenomena, rather than subordinate them simply to a general law, for such laws fail to explain its “peculiar and concrete elements.”<sup>20</sup> Explanation attends to the individual case, therefore, which “because of their infinite complexity produce the unique.”<sup>21</sup>

What Troeltsch calls uniqueness here is a quality of individuality: a phenomenon that cannot be wholly or adequately explained as another instance of a universal principle, whose complexity bestows on it a configuration distinct from any other. Elsewhere Troeltsch argues that the reason for such individuality has to do with involvement of the higher, creative element in the perceptions, thoughts, and desires “that accompany man as a physical entity,” an autonomous element that may intervene and oppose those physically grounded tendencies, and is not reducible to universal causal principles (here Troeltsch’s

16. “Historiography,” 87. Here Troeltsch is correcting the unbalanced emphasis on psychology he finds in Wundt, Dilthey, Windelbrand, and Rickert.

17. “Redemptive Event and History,” in Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 1 (London: SCM, 1970), 45–47.

18. See also Dawes, *Historical Jesus Quest*, 197–98.

19. “Historiography,” 88.

20. “Historiography,” 88.

21. “Historiography,” 88.

idealism is in evidence).<sup>22</sup> He stresses the interplay of natural causes and human freedom and personality.<sup>23</sup> It is the need to understand such phenomena that justifies historians' selectivity of the material for their inquiries.<sup>24</sup> Such "uniqueness," however, does not remove a phenomenon from the web of causal relations, nor is it inconsistent with some degree of similarity with other events: an event may be irreducibly individual without being wholly unlike any other, as Troeltsch argues in the earlier article.<sup>25</sup>

In order to make such phenomena intelligible, history works with concepts. The overarching category here is that of causality in the specific form of individual causality, but the subjects of historical inquiry are also conceptual unities: phenomena bundled under the unitive force of a concept, we might say, or "historical aggregates," as Troeltsch calls them, such as "a human life," "a nation," "the spirit of an age," "a legal constitution," "a state of affairs," or "an economic condition."<sup>26</sup> Included in those concepts is that of the development of such aggregates, the principle that organizes aggregates and the forces at work in them, focusing the causes toward the progressive realization of a result. Such development is capable of regress as well as progress and is subject to contingency: "the convergence of a series of mutually independent causes," including climate, atmosphere, fertility, geographical position, natural wealth, physiological events, and conditions and the distribution of individual qualities.<sup>27</sup>

Troeltsch's point here is significant in two ways. First, his enumeration of the concepts historians employ helpfully amplifies the sense of contingency, interconnectivity, and contextuality inherent in the vision of history he articulates. Second, he acknowledges that concepts play a constructive part in

22. *The Absoluteness*, 64. He links this explicitly to the topic of individuality and uniqueness on page 88. Here his idealism, his commitment to the priority of consciousness over other forms of reality, shines through. See further Dawes, *Historical Jesus Quest*, 171.

23. *The Absoluteness*, 74. On Troeltsch's concern to refute naturalism in this way, see Mark D. Chapman, *Ernst Troeltsch and Liberal Theology: Religion and Cultural Synthesis in Wilhelmine Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press), 75ff. and 111ff.

24. And as Van Harvey points out, you do not have to unravel the entire chain of causes to identify certain causal links accurately; different events have various characteristics relevant to different kinds of inquiry. See *The Historian and the Believer*, 210.

25. "Historical and Dogmatic Method," 14. This account of individuality in history and the interplay of natural causes and human freedom shows how unjustified is Tilley's claim that "[t]he Troeltschian axioms of correlation and analogy treat history as if it were a Galilean science or a subsidiary of the hard sciences." See *History, Theology and Faith*, 44.

26. "Historiography," 89.

27. "Historiography," 90–91.

producing knowledge of the past, and it seems entirely consistent with what he says to add that such concepts are themselves open to critical evaluation of the efficacy and appropriateness of their purchase on phenomena, of their explanatory power, and of their capacity to distort or obfuscate. Indeed, Troeltsch has a fine appreciation of the limitations and fallibility of the conceptual description of history, especially where historical aggregates are combined under the concept of humanity itself. Humanity can never be seen all together all at once, and so the conception of it can never be more than “an incomplete work of the imagination.”<sup>28</sup> Historical inquiry depends not only on the existence of a tradition to be examined—the past cannot be thought about independently of traditions—but also on the imaginative and synthetic powers of the historian, which are limited. Historians cannot recompose objects in their entirety or depict them in their simultaneous interaction, but must analyze. Therefore the historian’s work must ever be taken up afresh and be subject to revision. It is never complete, comprehensive, or definitive, but suffices nevertheless to enable human beings to understand themselves as far as possible or necessary, Troeltsch argues. Although historiography is now much more sophisticated and diverse in the range of approaches and theoretical commitments and tools employed, these features of Troeltsch’s account evince a nuanced evaluation of the role of “theory” and the provisional, exploratory, and imaginative character of historical inquiry characteristic of recent historical research.<sup>29</sup>

The strength of Troeltsch’s analysis of modern historiography, together with the explanatory power of that vision evident in modern historiography, is that it lends force to his examination of its consequences for Christian faith. Historical inquiry “once admitted at any point, necessarily draws everything into its train and weaves together all events into one great web of correlated effects and changes.”<sup>30</sup> Hence the adoption of historical method entailed the task of understanding ancient Israel’s history and religion, Judaism, and primitive Christianity in relation to the history of their context in the Ancient Near East. This extension of historical method to the origins of Jewish and Christian faith has several consequences for Christianity, as Troeltsch explains.

28. “Historiography,” 89.

29. For an excellent account of which, both consonant with Troeltsch, but more sophisticated in its treatment of the role of theory, representations, and concepts, and displaying careful, informed judgments about a variety of more recent historiography, see Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

30. “Historical and Dogmatic Method,” 15.

First, it brings a measure of uncertainty to the facts of history, because in a sense all facts about the past are always questionable. This degree of uncertainty means the connection between “original fact” and “present influence,” that is, between an event that has been taken traditionally as the origin of a religious tradition, becomes somewhat obscure.<sup>31</sup> It is no longer straightforward to trace Christianity back to its origins, both because the facts about those origins are subject to judgments of probability always open to revision and because the intervening causal links are likewise subject to the same kinds of judgment. The import of this shift is to loosen the connection between religious faith and any particular fact such that the former cannot any longer be based on the latter. One might reply that absolute certainty is not required for Christian faith, based as it is on a contingent event.<sup>32</sup> Troeltsch’s next point, however, is less contestable.

Second, historical inquiry correlates “original facts” and their links with religious faith with the much larger historical context out of which they arose and in relation to which they must be understood. This move does not deny the originality of any particular fact, for, as we have seen, historical method can admit a considerable degree of irreducible individuality in historical phenomena. It does mean, however, that the originality of any particular fact “is analogous to others emerging from the same common context and is neither more nor less mysterious than these.”<sup>33</sup> This conclusion has clear consequences for core Christian doctrines, which Troeltsch goes on to draw out next.

The thrust of the third consequence is the relativization of the origins of the Christian religion with respect to their historical context. Historical method makes historical events relative “in the sense that every historical structure and moment can be understood only in relation to others and ultimately to the total context, and that standards of values cannot be derived from isolated events but only from an overview of the historical totality.”<sup>34</sup> The events of Christian origins, or those of ancient Israel, cannot be isolated from a wider nexus of causality, nor can they be understood as absolute exceptions to wider patterns, nor, finally, can they provide a privileged basis for values.

Much more is at stake here than the plausibility of the miraculous. Troeltsch does indeed criticize what he calls naïve appeals to revelation and miracle, which rest on a claim to immediate divine causality, on the basis that these have been made impossible by the demonstration of the “thoroughgoing

31. “Historical and Dogmatic Method,” 17.

32. So Rae, *History and Hermeneutics*, 11–12.

33. “Historical and Dogmatic Method,” 7.

34. “Historical and Dogmatic Method,” 18.



continuity of the causal process.”<sup>35</sup> As Troeltsch argues in another essay, this enmeshment of Christianity in its religious and cultural context makes the notion of Christianity as the eternal absolute center of salvation for all humanity impossible or at least highly improbable.<sup>36</sup> Human beings have lived for hundreds of thousands of years on earth and may live for a similar period to come. Therefore it is “hard to imagine a single point of history along this line, and that the centre-point of our own religious history, as the sole centre of all humanity.”<sup>37</sup> Thus there is, for Troeltsch, no way from historical inquiry to anything like a traditional doctrine of the incarnation, nor even the reconstructed doctrine formulated by Schleiermacher. Any account of Jesus Christ that excepts him or elevates him above the kinds of contingent, interconnected historical causality that pertains to exceptional events elsewhere in history cannot be sustained on the basis of historical criticism.

Instead of revelation, Troeltsch seeks a way to establish normative value on the basis of historical study: values must be drawn from reflection on the whole of history.<sup>38</sup> Historical inquiry, Troeltsch implies, involves making ethical judgments about the past. It is thus a critical enterprise in this respect also, but problematically so, as Troeltsch’s discussion of the matter in his “Historiography” essay shows. For while the historian may intuit historical tendencies toward ethical ideals, a system of ethical ideals cannot be demonstrated from history.<sup>39</sup> Rather, we postulate the concept of ethical development, based on the actual occurrence of the aggregates of ethical life, and under this concept we see only partial developments, both progressive and regressive. There is no ideal available apart from history by which to judge, nor an overall progress by which to measure individual instances. Instead the ideal

35. Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness*, 53. The same point could also be made in terms of an issue of judgments of probability given present experience as well as of analogy with miracle stories in mythical literature, rather than *a priori* exclusion on metaphysical grounds, as Harvey also argues; see *The Historian and the Believer*, 86–88. One might object that some people *do* experience divine action and the miraculous today, warranting judgments of higher probability for miracles in the past and calling Troeltsch’s exclusion of God from the causal web into question. See, for example, C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, 197ff. Such warrants are not shared by everyone, but the deeper issue is how to relate divine action to the causal web examined by historians.

36. Troeltsch, “The Significance of the Historical Jesus for Faith,” in *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion*, ed. Robert Morgan and Michael Pye (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 189. See also his *The Absoluteness of Christianity*.

37. “The Significance of the Historical Jesus,” 189.

38. For a fuller account of Troeltsch’s constructive theology and ethics, see Chapman, *Ernst Troeltsch and Liberal Theology*.

39. Troeltsch, “Historiography,” 95–97.

is partially realized in individual instances, which must be judged in terms of its approximation to the absolute, post-historical end they project, a transcendent force “that actuates our deepest strivings and is connected with the creative core of reality.”<sup>40</sup> The criteria for judgments about instances of ethical progress in historical phenomena, however, must emerge from historical research, and Troeltsch frankly acknowledges that their ultimate basis is a matter of subjective inner conviction.<sup>41</sup> It is not clear, therefore, how the ideals those phenomena project would have truly normative force for us, nor how stable they would be, given the openness to revision that is characteristic of historical judgments. It seems very difficult to generate normative concepts on the basis of the observations of historical inquiry so construed. Nevertheless, the recognition of the relativity of ethical ideals involved in historiography is significant.

Historical criticism and the vision of history it uncovers and instantiates have clear consequences for the Christian doctrine of Scripture and the Christian practice of scriptural interpretation. When the Scriptures are examined in light of the vision of history that Troeltsch describes and using the procedures of historical method, the effect on the theological use of the Bible is considerable. First, there is the bifurcation of the history portrayed in the Bible from reconstructions of the history of Israel’s religion and political life in the Ancient Near East. Next, since making absolute claims for particular events comes to seem inherently implausible to a modern historical sensibility, the theological witness of many biblical texts is put in tension with historical consciousness. It becomes impossible to reconcile the latter with a view of the world as governed by a God who intervenes in human affairs. Judged historically impossible or improbable by historical-critical criteria, the histories and theologies related in the Bible, one of Troeltsch’s predecessors famously argued, are best understood as products of the primitive imaginative mentalities of the communities in which they arose, even when the form of narrative is apparently historical.<sup>42</sup>

For the same reason, historical consciousness also challenges any attempt to talk of God acting through Scripture or in respect of the formation or interpretation of Scripture and any attempt to view the modern world through

40. See also *The Absoluteness*, 91ff., 100. In this way, Troeltsch clearly distinguishes himself from Hegel’s historical teleology. Troeltsch’s key formula here is the claim that in the relative “we will find an indication of the unconditional.” *Ibid.*, 106.

41. *The Absoluteness*, 97ff.

42. See D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, trans. George Eliot, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (London: SCM, 1973), Introduction. See especially §16. Strauss’s notion of history here is broadly similar to Troeltsch’s.

a scriptural lens. It will, moreover, be very difficult to ground normative concepts or values in the text, seen in its historical context, or in the events to which it bears witness. Indeed, the biblical text and the history to which it attests become subject to ethical evaluations based on revisable historical judgments about ethical developments across human history, with no privileged place for the history attested in the Bible.

At the bottom of all these problems, then, is the question posed to Christian theology by historical method: as Hans Frei put it, whether it is possible “to combine faith in an ultimate Creator and Redeemer, who limits space and time beyond all conceiving, with the ‘open-ended’ and in its way uniform historical universe which historical consciousness presents to us?”<sup>43</sup> Although other challenges have arisen besides historical consciousness, this question still seems as vital as ever, and as relevant in a culture still fascinated by the past and imbued with the basic pattern of thinking Troeltsch described and the historical relativism that often goes with it. It is this question as it impacts the theological interpretation of Scripture in the ways just described, that seems little discussed in recent literature in that field, as the following case studies indicate.

#### BREVARD CHILDS

The first of these is Brevard Childs’s “canonical approach” to biblical theology, conceived as a bridging discipline between biblical exegesis and dogmatic theology. Here my focus will be on Childs’s massive *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, a programmatic summary of his position and an enormously erudite primer for the kind of biblical theology he advocated.<sup>44</sup> Childs advocates the hermeneutical significance of attending to the canonical shaping of the final form of the biblical text and canon in the service of discovering the divine will attested in and disclosed through Scripture. Yet, although Childs has something to say about divine action in the world and in respect of Scripture, his proposals are not very clear on the relationship between the all-encompassing action of God attested in Scripture and the world presented by historical consciousness. While he insists that the biblical texts attest divine action in space and time, on the one hand, and upholds

43. Hans Frei, “Niebuhr’s Theological Background,” in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 24.

44. Paul Noble notes that this work implements Childs’s proposals to their fullest extent and that in it his work reaches a “natural completeness.” See Noble, *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs* (Leiden/New York/Köln: E. J. Brill, 1995), 2.

some critical historical reconstructions on the other, he leaves the relationship between them ambiguous, suspended in an apparently irresolvable tension between two diverse perspectives.

For Childs, the biblical witnesses of both Testaments attest in different ways the one divine reality of Jesus Christ and are thus vehicles of the Spirit's testimony and the revelation of God's will. Their voice thus speaks to us today.<sup>45</sup> The task of biblical theology, therefore, is to understand the various voices within the whole Christian Bible as witnesses to the one Lord Jesus Christ, "the selfsame divine reality."<sup>46</sup> The canonical shaping of those witnesses, both at the level of the redaction of textual traditions and the composition of the canon, provides guidelines for apprehending its normative force.<sup>47</sup> These are traditions and texts passed on in such a way as to facilitate their religious function.<sup>48</sup> Thus the norm of communities who treasure the canon lies in the literature itself rather than reconstructed stages of its development.<sup>49</sup> To understand it means following the witnesses to the reality they attest—a theological reading in the mode of faith seeking understanding of Christ in the Spirit. This begins with hearing each Testament in its integrity, to grasp their partial grasp of reality, in order to understand the witness of each in light of the other and both in light of Christ himself.<sup>50</sup>

45. Childs, *Biblical Theology*; see e.g. pp. 8–9 (where he speaks of the Bible as the vehicle of God's will); for other uses of witness in this sense, see e.g. 20, 64, 74, 77–78, 83, 85, 91–93, 97, 105, 185, 215, 317, 226, 262ff., 333–34, 336, 344–45, 379–80, 520–21, 536, 551, 580, 721. See also 671 and 714, where he expresses approval of Barth's notion that "the Bible functions as the unique vehicle by which we're brought face-to-face with the person of God and the revelation of his will," and 87 on the role of the Spirit in knowledge of God. On the texts as speaking today, see 215 and 671. On Christ as subject matter of biblical witness, see 85 and 721.

46. *Biblical Theology*, 85.

47. *Biblical Theology*, 714.

48. *Biblical Theology*, 70–71. Childs instances the redaction of the parables in the Synoptics, the placing of Deuteronomy at the end of the Pentateuch as commentary on the rest of the Law, and the joining of the two Testaments with the prophets moved to the end of the Old to function as witnesses to the coming Christ (*Biblical Theology*, 343 and 71; on the joining of the Testaments, see 74–78).

49. *Biblical Theology*, 71. This claim is a key one for Childs's whole approach, yet it is not at all evident how Childs's broadly conceived doctrine of Scripture authorizes the normative status of canonical shaping as opposed to other features of the texts, including earlier levels of the textual traditions. Cf. Noble, *The Canonical Approach*, 48, speaking of Childs's *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979): "it is far from clear why priority should still be accorded to the canonical form," especially when critical reconstruction uncovers the influence of factors like political infighting, poor historiographical method, misunderstandings of the material, or "sheer antiquarianism" in the formation of biblical traditions.

The subject of the biblical witnesses is, by and large, a history, but a history that evokes a responsive testimony in often nonhistoriographical terms. So Childs writes that it is compatible with the Old Testament's canonical structure to describe its witness to God's redemptive will in the context of the history of Israel, for Israel was the texts' original addressee and tradent. The witness of the Old Testament was made with constant reference to Israel's history, and a fundamental characteristic of that witness is the "once-for-all" quality of these historical events in chronological sequence, namely the revelatory events of creation, the call of Abraham, the exodus, the encounter with God at Sinai, the possession of the land, the monarchy, the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile and restoration.<sup>51</sup> Yet peculiar features of God's revelation in Israel's history resulted in a "far more complicated and intensified form of biblical response" in three respects.<sup>52</sup> First, the quality of happenings takes precedence over chronology; second, the beginning and end of human history are set within God's purposes; third, Israel's life is recorded also in terms of institutions, rules, and a cultic calendar. Furthermore, Israel's witness to these events was preserved in living traditions that were shaped and reshaped by subsequent generations of tradents, whereby some foundational happenings were reinterpreted with a view to the present or future and others consigned to unrepeatable occurrence in the past. Hence biblical theology must describe "the theological functions of the great revelatory events in Israel's history and their subsequent appropriation by the tradition."<sup>53</sup> In the same way, Childs asserts that it is compatible with canonical structure to describe the New Testament's witness as pointing to God's redemption through Jesus Christ in the context of the early church, specifically to Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection and the effect of this good news on the formation of the church.<sup>54</sup> This witness arose from a revolutionary encounter with the risen Lord. Hence the New Testament's witness is related to a particular history. It is "grounded in the historical concreteness of Jesus Christ at a particular time in Palestine."<sup>55</sup>

50. *Biblical Theology*, 75, compare 83 and 265. Childs comments that biblical language may "resonate in a new and creative fashion when read from the vantage point of a fuller understanding of Christian truth," provided the canonical restraints of the canonical shaping of the text and its historical voice are preserved (pp. 87, 334–36, and 379–80).

51. *Biblical Theology*, 91–92.

52. *Biblical Theology*, 92.

53. *Biblical Theology*, 92.

54. *Biblical Theology*, 93.

55. *Biblical Theology*, 93.

The Old Testament history that biblical theology examines, then, is Israel's "canonical history," its testimony to God's redemptive action.<sup>56</sup> This historical witness is distinguished by its perspective on historical reality, which is not a neutral, "objective" perspective, but a theological perspective, viewed from a confessional stance within a community of faith.<sup>57</sup> For Israel's history involves "both divine and human agency."<sup>58</sup> The Old Testament God "is continually described as an agent in history who speaks and acts, who directs and communicates his will."<sup>59</sup>

According to Childs, a "subtle relationship" obtains between this perspective and that of nonconfessional historiography of ancient Israel, with its impressive claims and sophisticated methodology. At times Israel's confessional witness overlaps fully with a common public testimony and a confirmation of events can be elicited from even foreign and hostile nations, for example, the destruction of Jerusalem in the sixth century. At other times, there is virtually no relation between Israel's witness and extrabiblical sources. The challenge for theology, he adds, is to exegete such passages without recourse to "the rationalistic assumption of a common reality behind all religious expression or the threat of super-naturalism which would deny in principle any relation between an outer and inner side of history."<sup>60</sup> It must also be recognized that the canonical history of Israel is aware of a genuine past, recognizes elements of historical contingency, and "has a clear grasp of growth and change in the history of one nature," but at the same time it oscillates between past, present, and future, introducing the writers and their audience into the history and aligning events typologically, or restructuring them by an eschatological perspective as manifestations of God's righteous rule.<sup>61</sup> Israel's canonical history is also selective in its treatment of material, not only in what it places in the foreground but also in what it omits, represses, or consigns to the margins or blurry background.

In this way, Childs seems to bring to the fore the kind of problems highlighted by reading Troeltsch and formulated by Frei: how faith in an ultimate Creator and Redeemer—the God attested as acting in history by Israel's traditions—may be combined with the world as historical consciousness presents it. Childs speaks of the "genuine dialectical tension" between the

56. *Biblical Theology*, 97.

57. *Biblical Theology*, 100.

58. *Biblical Theology*, 100.

59. *Biblical Theology*, 100.

60. *Biblical Theology*, 98.

61. *Biblical Theology*, 101.

two perspectives, although he also recognizes that the term “dialectical” is problematic, and may be a sign of the lack of a comprehensive philosophical or hermeneutical system to integrate the problems arising from the historical-critical method.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, it is not clear what kind of dialectic Childs finds between canonical history and the findings of historical-critical research on ancient Israel. It would be clearer simply to speak of a tension between them, one that Childs does not attempt to resolve. The tension is all the more strained because Childs relies on the findings of critical historical research on ancient Israel for a kind of investigation of the history of the textual traditions, the history that elucidates the decisions that produced the final form of the text, which Childs treats as hermeneutically significant. It is theologically illuminating, he holds, to understand why different groups responsible for the redaction of certain texts found earlier traditions normative and to grasp what was the effect of their preservation in later textual configurations. Such understanding is also hermeneutically important because to some extent the final form of the texts reflects qualities of earlier traditions in their original life.<sup>63</sup>

This tension between the history projected by the textual witness and the history of Israel as reconstructed through critical historiography is evident in Childs’s treatment of particular biblical books, for example between the testimony of the earliest stage of tradition in the book of Joshua, together with the evidence of archaeology, and the witness of the Deuteronomistic redaction of Joshua.<sup>64</sup> To say, as Childs does with Gerhard von Rad, that faith has mastered the material so that it is seen from within and the late picture is shaped and supported by a zeal for the glory of Yahweh seems to clarify little.<sup>65</sup> Later he remarks that the shaping of the Pentateuch “resulted in a conscious theological construal of the giving and receiving of the law which often ran roughshod over the actual historical sequence of this process.”<sup>66</sup>

Childs is unambiguous about his commitment to the historicity of certain elements of the biblical witness. He asserts that “[i]t is basic to Christian theology to reckon with an extra-biblical reality, namely with the resurrected Christ who evoked the New Testament witness.”<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere in the book he claims that in Jesus Christ, “God himself entered our concrete history as God-with-us.”<sup>68</sup> His position is to try to hold on to both the witness of the biblical

62. *Biblical Theology*, 101, 99.

63. *Biblical Theology*, 105.

64. See *Biblical Theology*, 143ff.

65. *Biblical Theology*, 146.

66. *Biblical Theology*, 535.

67. *Biblical Theology*, 20. He makes a similar point on 665.

texts to canonical history without denying plausible historical reconstructions, even when the two run counter to one another. Time and again he stresses the need to take the witnesses seriously as such by treating them theologically: they offer a different perspective that is lost when subjected to historical method. In the end, this stance only returns us to the problems raised by Troeltsch and to Frei's question.

The notion that the biblical witnesses offer a distinctive perspective needing theological analysis and evince a historical sensibility of their own suggests that they may have something to offer, even when at odds with historical reconstructions of the past, but Childs does not explore these possibilities (as Frei does).<sup>69</sup> In the end, Childs does not transcend the bifurcation of the history related by biblical texts and reconstructions of Israel's religious and political history in its Ancient Near Eastern context. Since he upholds both historical method and the scriptural witness to a sovereign God, he affirms both sides of the problem Frei summarizes, but without attempting to show how commitments to both might be combined—and the unresolved issue of the theological implications of historical consciousness must surely trouble his account of the text as the vehicle of divine revelation and its normativity for Christian communities.

#### SANDRA SCHNEIDERS

In *The Revelatory Text*, Sandra Schneiders writes from the Roman Catholic tradition, with a view to the liberation of women readers of the New Testament.<sup>70</sup> Like Childs, she wishes to transcend a purely historical-critical approach to Scripture in this interest; like him she focuses on the final form of the canonical text. She wishes to give an account of interpretation that recovers the spiritual function of Scripture for marginalized and oppressed readers, feminists especially, while fully acknowledging the need for ideological criticism of its contents. The result is a sophisticated account that acknowledges historical consciousness and implicitly recognizes the issues it raises yet fails adequately to address them. These problems first come to light in her treatment of the metaphor "Word of God."

68. *Biblical Theology*, 520.

69. On the Bible's recognition of features of historical existence and the social structures of human life, see *Biblical Theology*, 101, 575–80.

70. *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).



“Word of God,” Schneiders explains, is a root metaphor by which we refer to the reality of divine self-revelation, God’s accepted self-gift to human beings.<sup>71</sup> Personal revelation, she argues, is personal self-disclosure, inviting another into one’s interiority, with the goal of a shared life characterized by irrevocable commitment. It is “mutual self-gift expressive of and terminating in love.”<sup>72</sup> With human beings, this self-disclosure takes place through language, which, because it is symbolic, has the capacity to disclose being, even divine being. A symbol is a “mode of presence of something that cannot be encountered in any other way.”<sup>73</sup> It participates directly in the presence and power of the reality it symbolizes, thus embodying and so expressing a reality it can never fully articulate, like a pinpoint of starlight shining out of a vast blackness. It is therefore ambiguous, needing interpretation yet never exhausted in any one interpretation, but inviting further engagement with the real. She stresses the mutual dependence of symbol and interpretation, casting human beings as those through whose interpretation of the symbolic force of nature and history the meaning of being is realized.

This account of self-disclosure and symbols introduces and informs Schneiders’s account of divine revelation. God, she explains, is an infinitely meaningful reality, who is eternally self-expressive. In order to invite us into divine intimacy, God had to approach us symbolically. The metaphor “Word of God” embraces divine self-disclosure through symbol in nature, the life and history of Israel, and in Jesus Christ. All of human experience is meant to be revelatory in respect of God’s desire for self-gift, but that desire is frustrated by human nonreceptiveness. Only in Jesus Christ “did the boundless divine desire to give encounter the fully adequate human response.”<sup>74</sup> Hence, only in Jesus of Nazareth “do we see an entire human existence so fully actualized by the divine self-gift that we can affirm that he *is* Word of God (i.e., revelation) incarnate.”<sup>75</sup> Jesus in his person, work, and paschal mystery is thus the paradigmatic instance of divine revelation. He is “symbolic revelation fully achieved.”<sup>76</sup> The Scriptures belong to this economy of revelation; they bring to symbolic disclosure in written discourse “that which is primordially disclosed in Jesus Christ.”<sup>77</sup>

71. *The Revelatory Text*, 34.

72. *The Revelatory Text*, 34.

73. *The Revelatory Text*, 35.

74. *The Revelatory Text*, 53.

75. *The Revelatory Text*, 45.

76. *The Revelatory Text*, 53.

77. *The Revelatory Text*, 53.

We should note that Schneiders is working with a weaker notion of scriptural authority and its formative power than Childs, since for her revelation and Scripture as its symbolic attestation depend on human interpretation for their realization. “Symbolic revelation is characteristic of a God who offers and invites but does not compel response,” she claims.<sup>78</sup> Revelation has a disclosive, relative authority, like appeals of the beautiful to aesthetic response, of a suffering human being to compassion, of a parent to filial piety, of a loving rebuke from a true friend to a hearing, or even to a repentant response and conversion. Normativity, on this view, is “the ever-developing guiding influence on our thought and action of an ever-deepening familiarity with God in Jesus.”<sup>79</sup> The semantic meaning of the text symbolically discloses what Paul Ricoeur calls new possible ways of seeing and being in the world for the reader to actualize.<sup>80</sup>

The meaning of a text, distanced from the original writer, audience, and context by being written, is a function of the dialectic between its semantic sense and its reference or truth-claim (which may be manifold and complex). That dialectic in itself constitutes, she argues, the ideal meaning of the text, which must be realized in any act of interpretation and so supplies a criterion for valid interpretation. To establish this ideal meaning is the function of exegesis and criticism—historical, literary (especially structuralist), and ideological criticism all help here.<sup>81</sup> The ideal meaning of the text norms and is realized in an endless variety of possible interpretations, like the numerous performances of a musical score or dramatic script. Like them, the Bible “creates a world with its own dynamics,” into which the reader is drawn to find her identity.<sup>82</sup> Yet the text needs interpretation in order to find its voice in new circumstances. Interpretation is a dialectic between clarifying sense and reference and appropriating content as an expansion of one’s being. Schneiders describes this act of appropriation as an experience of conversion through participation in the possible world projected by the text, in which one accepts the new self, the new way of seeing the world and acting in it, which the text discloses.<sup>83</sup> Such appropriation, she adds, involves a passage through the critical scrutiny of the text’s relation to its subject matter, its structures, strategies, and relations

78. *The Revelatory Text*, 55.

79. *The Revelatory Text*, 58.

80. *The Revelatory Text*, 167–68. See also Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 87–88, 91–95.

81. *The Revelatory Text*, 143–47.

82. *The Revelatory Text*, 150.

83. *The Revelatory Text*, 167–68.

to power agendas, to protect the reader from premature appropriation of its harmful ideologies, to a “second naïveté,” an aesthetic surrender to the world disclosed by the text beyond its ideological truth-claims.<sup>84</sup>

This account of interpretation seems to recognize the historicity of readers in allowing for multiple possible realizations of the text’s ideal meaning. Yet the Christocentric character of Schneiders’s account of revelation invites criticism in light of Troeltsch’s account of historical consciousness and method. By making divine action here coextensive with human experience, Schneiders avoids the problems of reconciling a more interventionist account of divine action with historical consciousness. Nevertheless, she does not discuss how such an account of divine action might be consistent with a historical view of human beings. Furthermore, it is difficult to reconcile the exceptional status granted Jesus here in virtue of his unique receptivity to divine self-disclosure with the principles of historical method as articulated by Troeltsch. It seems unlikely that Jesus’ unique capacity is really consistent with his historicity, his location in the same kind of causal web as the rest of us.<sup>85</sup>

Such a problem would have immediate consequences for a Christocentric theology of Scripture such as Schneiders has set forth. Her account of the symbolic character of Jesus’ revelatory function seems to side-step such issues, moreover, in a problematic way. If Jesus is the full instantiation of symbolic revelation and if symbols work to disclose a greater depth *beyond* themselves, then Jesus’ humanity will be merely a sign gesturing to something beyond itself, to which his historical particularity will be quite secondary.<sup>86</sup> This conclusion seems to be borne out by Schneiders’s approach to the interpretation of the Gospels. She is able to acknowledge the historical origins of the Gospels, their relation to a particular time, context, and to certain cultural influences, and the historical character of much of their content, by which she means “that which takes place in space and time according to laws of cause and effect and is, at least in principle, publicly available.”<sup>87</sup> The content of the Gospels, however,

84. *The Revelatory Text*, 169–77.

85. Troeltsch was concerned to rule out just this move: to grant Christianity or Jesus Christ a unique status in a suprahistorical way. See e.g. his “The Significance of the Existence of the Historical Jesus for Faith.”

86. This implication seems to follow all the more clearly if Schneiders’s account of symbol is read in light of that of Paul Ricoeur, on whose *Interpretation Theory* she draws for her account of meaning (as she acknowledges in *The Revelatory Text*, 15). For Ricoeur argues there that the symbol works in a similar way to metaphor: the literal level becomes the means of access to a deeper level, through our perception that the significance of the symbol is incongruous with identifying its meaning with its literal content (*Interpretation Theory*, 54–57).

87. *The Revelatory Text*, 101.

renders historical categories inadequate to their meaning. They express the early church's paschal imagination, which combines the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the transhistorical Jesus, the Christ, in tensive relation to one another.<sup>88</sup> These elements are inseparable so that the Gospels do not permit a purely historical analysis that would uncover the actual, earthly Jesus.<sup>89</sup> Rather, the historical character portrayed in the Gospels is only the medium for the disclosure of the actual Jesus, the symbolic self-disclosure of God. In fact, metaphor becomes more significant than historical writing as a vehicle for revelation. Metaphorical language, Schneiders explains, uses likeness and dissimilarity to "tease the mind into newness of thought . . . challenging the mind to exceed the bounds of the expressed and conceive what cannot be grasped in clear and distinct ideas."<sup>90</sup> By opening up toward the unsaid, language reveals to us more than we can know; it "bridges the gap between the infinite mystery of God and the finite human capacity for mystery."<sup>91</sup> Not only does this seem to claim too much for language if God is truly transcendent; the primacy given here to symbol and metaphor make the historical world rendered by the text of no intrinsic interest for theological interpretation.

The problem of reconciling exceptional human responsiveness to revelation with the historical situatedness of human beings recurs in Schneiders's account of the inspiration of Scripture. The claim that Scripture is inspired, she claims, is simply the acknowledgment that it discloses God in a unique way so as to ground a claim to special divine influence upon it.<sup>92</sup> Talk of special divine influence seems again to involve a claim to the kind of divine intervention Troeltsch finds implausible, but Schneiders is careful to distinguish this divine self-disclosure from the empirical phenomena through which it takes place: these can be adequately explained without reference to revelation; Scripture's disclosive power is not of that order. The mode of inspiration "refers to the way symbolic revelation occurs in and through human interaction with a text under the influence of the Spirit of God," in both the production and reception of the text.<sup>93</sup> What Schneiders seems to be suggesting is a realm of divine-human interaction discrete from the empirical world of historical causation, but this would seem to involve withdrawing human beings from full

88. *The Revelatory Text*, 101–2, 105.

89. *The Revelatory Text*, 105.

90. *The Revelatory Text*, 139. The metaphors Jesus uses for the reign of God are paramount examples here.

91. *The Revelatory Text*, 140.

92. *The Revelatory Text*, 50.

93. *The Revelatory Text*, 53.

immersion in history in a way that Troeltsch finds inconsistent with historical consciousness. She seems to reduce the problem by clarifying that the question of inspiration is not a question of divine operations but of “a phenomenology of the human experience of divine revelation mediated by the revelatory text of scripture.”<sup>94</sup> Inspiration is about the human reception of divine influence, ascribed to the Holy Spirit, whose special degree is presumably related to an unusual human receptivity.<sup>95</sup> Yet it is still not clear how such divine influence here, and the unusual human receptivity for it, can be reconciled with a historical understanding of human psychology, where any human achievement, however exceptional, is intelligible in light of some degree of analogy with other actions and events.

In all these ways, then, Schneiders’s position invites questioning from Troeltsch’s account without appearing to offer any answers. She does, however, address issues of historical consciousness explicitly in her treatment of church tradition, which she formulates to flesh out her claim that the most adequate context for the emergence of the Bible’s full meaning is the church.<sup>96</sup> The radical change in our understanding of history since the nineteenth century, she says, must affect our understanding of tradition. “We are never ‘outside’ history but always participating in it . . . as ever-changing historical entities.”<sup>97</sup> This statement articulates something apparently very close to the historical consciousness Troeltsch articulated. On Schneiders’s account, this immersion in history lends a historical, dynamic character to our engagement with the past. The experience we have of realizing that something first experienced as a tragedy was in fact a great grace supports the claim, she argues, that the past alters with its changing relationship to us and to “the wider historical macrosystem.”<sup>98</sup> This apparently odd claim—that the past alters with our altering relationship to it—becomes more intelligible in light of Schneiders’s claim that the past only exists insofar as it constitutes the present, that is, it exists only in its effects on us.<sup>99</sup>

94. *The Revelatory Text*, 53.

95. In a similar way, she claims that “only one whose spiritual sensibility has been formed and educated by life in the Christian community, whose intelligence has been enlightened by the faith of that community, whose affectivity is enlivened by the experience of God’s love in Christ can hear integrally what the text *as scripture* is saying.” *The Revelatory Text*, 60–61.

96. *The Revelatory Text*, 64.

97. *The Revelatory Text*, 65.

98. *The Revelatory Text*, 67–68.

99. For example, on the individual level, it is effective unconsciously, in memory, in healed or unhealed trauma, in habit, learned or acquired characteristics or knowledge, etc.

Tradition is one way in which the past is made actual and effective through a process of selection, whether conscious choice or spontaneous and episodic development, by which what is felt to be of value for present and future generations is passed on. Traditions are consciously appropriated, stabilized in form and meaning, so that they can be actualized again in the future, for example in the transmission of narratives or ritual. In this way, she claims, tradition is the primary form of historical consciousness, and so viewed may be reappropriated after a critical distancing from its products. In tradition, therefore, the effects of the past, like symbolic revelation, are contingent on present actualization, which can incorporate a critical moment.

While this account of the activity of transmitting traditions clearly assumes a sense of human beings immersed in their historical contexts like that which Troeltsch describes, the claim that tradition just is the “primary form of historical consciousness” seems to risk reducing the sensibility Troeltsch describes, which is contingent on particular modern developments, to something less critically aware of the causal interconnectedness of persons and events. It is perhaps that ambiguity that allows Schneiders to claim that tradition is “the Spirit of Jesus, that is, his active presence embodied in the Church.”<sup>100</sup> For she notes that the shape and form of the Spirit’s indwelling of disciples in John 14 and 16 is described in “specifically historical terms: the Spirit will ensure that the disciples *remember* all that Jesus has said to them (John 14:26) and will *lead* them into that fullness of truth that the first disciples were not yet able to bear (John 16:12-13).”<sup>101</sup> She concludes: the Spirit is “the ever-actual presence of Jesus bringing forward the past to enlighten and be enlightened by and present in terms of the future.”<sup>102</sup> The content of the church’s historical consciousness is thus “constituted by the interaction between the Spirit-animated Church and the existential situations in which the Church lives.”<sup>103</sup>

It seems unlikely, however, that the historical consciousness Schneiders describes could be easily reconciled with that which Troeltsch describes. The past for Schneiders is something that exists in its present meaningfulness for those who appropriate it. Following Hans-Georg Gadamer, she sees understanding as a historical condition, in which we are shaped by the language, culture, and informal and formal education through which the effects of history are transmitted to us.<sup>104</sup> Such an account assumes the location of

100. *The Revelatory Text*, 73.

101. *The Revelatory Text*, 73.

102. *The Revelatory Text*, 73.

103. *The Revelatory Text*, 74.

104. *The Revelatory Text*, 159.

individuals in historical contexts, yet it avoids the full theological implications of Troeltsch's vision of the complex, contingent causal interactions of facts that throw up irreducibly individual realities in comparable ways.

Nevertheless, in one respect at least Schneiders does offer a way of responding to Troeltsch. One feature of Troeltsch's vision is the critical and ethical reevaluation of the past to which historical consciousness leads. It is just this critical evaluation that leads to the situation Schneiders wishes to address. Schneiders's way of meeting this situation allows for critical scrutiny of biblical testimony in a way that takes account of the historical character of both the text's composition and its interpretation.

For her, the possibility of critically recovering revelatory meaning from ancient texts lies in the way texts are free from authorial intentions, original audiences, and ostensive reference through inscription.<sup>105</sup> What remains is the texts' ideal meaning, the product of the dialectic of propositional meaning and its claim to say it about something (sense and reference).<sup>106</sup> In the case of the Gospels, their ideal meaning seems to be different versions of the primitive church's image of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ.<sup>107</sup> The reader's engagement with ideal meaning enables a new event of meaning that reactualizes the original experience of meaning that produced the text: the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>108</sup> The text, through its disclosure of the mystery of Christ, opens up to the reader "a world of possibility, a way of being, that the reader must assess and either accept or reject."<sup>109</sup>

The text is thus like a musical score or dramatic script, allowing for many different performances of its meaning, in which the performers discover their identity. This act of understanding is shaped by our involvement in the flow of history, by our historical consciousness in the sense we saw above: the shaping of the mind by the language and culture we participate in and the education we receive. In this way, the past is reconstituted through its own effective history, its impact upon our formation. Such understanding involves a renewed immediacy to the text, after the critical distancing of exegesis: a surrender to the world the text creates so as to encounter its existential truth-claims. It also makes possible critical questioning of the text's meaning, shaped by the reader's historical location, and realizations of it that transcend its limitations, so that,

105. *The Revelatory Text*, 143–44, following Paul Ricoeur's account in *Interpretation Theory*. Ostensive reference names "the capacity of language to refer directly to its subject matter as present."

106. *The Revelatory Text*, 15, 145–46.

107. *The Revelatory Text*, 105–7.

108. *The Revelatory Text*, 137.

109. *The Revelatory Text*, 148–49.

for example, modern readers may fulfill the liberatory agenda of Paul's writings beyond his affirmation of slavery and male domination.<sup>110</sup>

This attractive account complicates our assessment of Schneiders. The kind of reading she advocates is clearly capable of informing and transforming life in history.<sup>111</sup> She thus offers one way of accommodating the ethical criticism to which historical consciousness gives rise, on Troeltsch's account, and in such a way as to uphold a certain kind of textual authority on the part of Scripture. Yet it is not clear how such appropriations relate to the concrete, historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth. Nor does this account otherwise mitigate the challenge posed by the historical vision Troeltsch articulates to Schneiders's core theological claims: about divine revelation in Jesus Christ, and through the medium of biblical texts, the inspiration of the biblical texts and the Spirit's animating of the historical process of tradition. This challenge places in question the theological terms in which Schneiders articulates the authority of Scripture, its capacity to transform readers, or those in which Scripture affirms the full status of women before God.

#### KEVIN J. VANHOOZER

Kevin Vanhoozer's theology of Scripture offers a more promising way forward. His theology of divine authorship and divine communicative action furnishes a more developed account of divine action in respect of Scripture and history. Even so, Vanhoozer's account fails to do justice to the complex interrelationships that constitute historical existence. To examine that account I will focus primarily on Vanhoozer's *Remythologizing Theology*, for it is here that he spells out the doctrine of God implied by his treatment of Scripture and doctrine.<sup>112</sup> I will also draw on his *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* and *The Drama of Doctrine* to amplify his doctrine of Scripture where necessary.<sup>113</sup>

One of the chief merits of Vanhoozer's recent work, over the other two proposals we have considered so far, is that it takes seriously the need to flesh out an adequate account of divine agency that does justice to the agency of human creatures. His claim is that the best way to do so is to think of the

110. *The Revelatory Text*, 175–47.

111. Her own reading of John 4:1–42 further bears this out in chapter 7 of *The Revelatory Text*.

112. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

113. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998); Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).



God of Israel and Jesus Christ as an author or communicative agent, one “who speaks and acts.”<sup>114</sup> Seeing God in this way immediately foregrounds history as “the medium through which God relates to his people” through his communicative actions, attested in Scripture, which together constitute the drama of redemption.<sup>115</sup> In making such a claim, Vanhoozer invites scrutiny as to the adequacy of his account of divine action in history.

Vanhoozer’s notion of history is focused on dialogical interaction between God and human beings, conceived as personal communicative agents. God is the paradigmatic communicative agent, as his acts reveal: the Father who communicates himself in the activity of the Son and Spirit.<sup>116</sup> The dialogical interaction between Father and Son in the gospel narrative reveals that this agency is personal. Like God, human beings are analogously personal communicative agents; unlike God they are not self-authored or unconstrained nor the creator of all things.<sup>117</sup> The world is a stage set for the dialogical interaction of persons. For Vanhoozer, therefore, dialogic communicative agency, rather than the impersonal causal laws to which events are ascribed, is the primary category for thinking about causality in the history of salvation.<sup>118</sup> Yet history, seen from the perspective of historical method as Troeltsch articulates it, is much more complex than the dialogical interaction of persons. For those personal interactions, in virtue of the embodiment and insertion of human persons in society and cultures and particular geographies, are shaped, informed, interrupted, and stimulated by a variety of other forces interacting with them and one another. The problem of accounting for history so understood will return to challenge Vanhoozer’s construal of divine action and providence.

Vanhoozer rightly grounds the whole of history in the communicative action of God, so making history *as a whole* properly contingent on divine action. This is an important step toward meeting the challenges Troeltsch identifies, for it makes it possible to begin thinking about the whole historical continuum as upheld by God rather than as a system closed to divine interference. Equally important, he in turn grounds God’s communicative action in the inner life of God, thus securing its freedom, gratuity, and

114. *Remythologizing*, 182.

115. *Remythologizing*, 182. This “theo-dramatic” construal of salvation history is worked out in *The Drama of Doctrine*, 38–44.

116. Vanhoozer follows Barth’s maxim that God is who God is in God’s acts.

117. *Remythologizing*, 226–27. Other creatures merely communicate what they are by their normal operations; see 224–27.

118. *Remythologizing*, 227–28, 234, 239. Vanhoozer makes a similar claim in *The Drama of Doctrine*, 49.

difference from creaturely agency: key conditions for being able to talk about divine agency in a way that does not depict it as being in competition with creaturely agency and so as the kind of supernatural agency of which historical explanation has no need. God's communicative life is eternal, characterized at once by succession and simultaneity, and it is a willed enjoyment of communion: a life of love, "the eternal delight of the dialogical dance of call, response, acknowledgement, and affirmation."<sup>119</sup> The gospel is the temporal execution of God's decision to communicate that life to others and with it the capacity to communicate, to share one's being, with others. Jesus Christ is central as the embodiment of the Father's utterance. His speech and actions "communicate God's intra-trinitarian self-communication."<sup>120</sup> Through the Holy Spirit, God communicates a share in his life to those who participate in Christ's history, eventually even to our risen bodies.<sup>121</sup>

The historical medium of this communicative action raises the question of "how God acts in a world of nature and human freedom."<sup>122</sup> Vanhoozer is close here to recognizing the problems Troeltsch identified, but again lacks a sense of the thorough interconnectedness of human agency and psychology with other kinds of causation and events that historical research assumes. His answer to the problem as he conceives it rests on explicating the claim that "God's relation to the world is a function of his triune authorial action, the self-communicating of God the Father through the Word in the Spirit."<sup>123</sup> To do so, he draws upon Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the outsideness of the author: "the asymmetrical, nonreciprocal boundary that distinguishes author and hero" (someone about whom a story could be told), whereby the former authors the whole of the hero's life and relates to that life as a whole, but the hero does neither for herself.<sup>124</sup> Because the author is "outside" the hero in this way and sees the whole of the hero's existence, authors can confer wholeness and so meaning on the lives of their heroes.<sup>125</sup> This concept provides a powerful analogy for the transcendence without distance that characterizes divine action in the biblical witness, but must be taken further for, Vanhoozer notes, God confers wholeness upon the whole of history.<sup>126</sup> This consummating

119. *Remythologizing*, 258–59.

120. *Remythologizing*, 260–61.

121. *Remythologizing*, 279, 282, 289, 267–68.

122. *Remythologizing*, 300.

123. *Remythologizing*, 302.

124. *Remythologizing*, 324–25.

125. *Remythologizing*, 325–26.

126. *Remythologizing*, 327.

communicative action is what eschatology describes, whereby human lives are consummated as our stories are taken up into the perfect life of Jesus Christ, the participation described above.<sup>127</sup>

Vanhoozer seeks to secure the freedom of heroes in relation to divine action by drawing on Bakhtin's analysis of voices in Dostoevsky's novels. Here, each voice is an embodied point of view with its own spatiotemporal location; the production of voices is the authoring of free characters who incarnate unfinished authorial ideas in dialogical relation to other embodied consciousnesses with alternative perspectives and locations.<sup>128</sup> These voices and perspectives cannot be abstracted from the persons who give them voice. What matters here is the hero's response to their situation, "his or her self-consciousness."<sup>129</sup>

This notion provides an apt analogy for reconciling the sovereignty of God with creaturely responsibility: "God authors/elects creatures to be dialogical agents in covenantal relation through whom his Word sounds."<sup>130</sup> The divine author engages his creatures as subjects of address, and puts them into specific situations in order that they might freely actualize the voice-idea for which they were created. The author is thus "an *involved* outsider, an interlocutor in a world that he himself has created."<sup>131</sup>

This actualizing of voice-ideas takes place through dialogue, as heroes answer in their speech and action the questions posed by various life situations, gradually disclosing a pattern, the "particular shape of answerability" that each of their lives represent.<sup>132</sup> The divine author discerns and names this pattern, so consummating each life—and the world at large.<sup>133</sup> God thus engages human beings "according to their rational, volitional, and emotional natures," by provoking, questioning, objecting, answering them, so drawing out the responses to situations that enact their selves.<sup>134</sup> As characters' voices are so created as to develop according to their own inner logic, distinct from the author's own voice, so we have self-determination in and through our dialogue with the divine Author who calls us into being and consummates our lives with meaning.<sup>135</sup>

127. *Remythologizing*, 328–29.

128. *Remythologizing*, 330.

129. *Remythologizing*, 330.

130. *Remythologizing*, 331.

131. *Remythologizing*, 332.

132. *Remythologizing*, 332.

133. *Remythologizing*, 332–33.

134. *Remythologizing*, 333.

This notion of divine authorship of human “voices” seems to picture divine agency in terms both transcendent of historical causality and yet most deeply involved with human beings in their individuality. We may wonder whether human lives manifest so clear a pattern as to constitute, for their subjects, a divine address calling for a lived response—or whether call and response could here be so neatly distinguished. Moreover, while this account relies upon divine authorial shaping of personal circumstances, the concept of voices does not lend itself well to illuminating the manner of that shaping. Instead, that focus on the interaction of subjectivities and the ideas they express seems to make their interaction with their environment and circumstances become a means for the divine evocation of and medium for their self-realization and self-expression, rather than deeply constitutive of their identities. The risk is that history becomes merely the veil through which authorial and heroic consciousnesses engage one another.

Further problems attend Vanhoozer’s account of divine and human agency in salvation. The human need for salvation is clear, for the freedom to reorient one’s life toward God is one for which we must be liberated. To this end God’s own voice took flesh, the Author emplotting himself in his own drama and in particular into the long history of God’s covenantal discourse with Israel.<sup>136</sup> The notion of divine self-employment is not nearly so immediately intelligible as Bakhtin’s notion of authorial “outsideness,” for although it is quite easy to conceive of an author writing him or herself as a character into a story, it is much more difficult to think of that character as retaining authorial “outsideness.” It appears to stretch the authorial analogy beyond its elasticity and to introduce a historical agent who is not subject to the constraints of history, an exception to the historical order established by the Author and to the sense of continuous interconnection presupposed by historical method, according to Troeltsch.

This challenge extends to Vanhoozer’s account of the place of Scripture in God’s providential governance of the world. Providence, for Vanhoozer, is primarily rhetorically enacted. God “convincingly persuades some of the [human chess] pieces freely to play of their own accord in a way that so corresponds to God’s will that we can speak (albeit hesitantly) in terms of dual agency.”<sup>137</sup> This authoring may happen as God elicits someone’s realization of themselves in the withholding of his Spirit (as in the case of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in the book of Exodus). Alternatively, God may act “*within*

135. *Remythologizing*, 334.

136. *Remythologizing*, 357–59.

137. *Remythologizing*, 367.

and *through* [persons] in such a way that . . . God brings them to their senses and makes them the creatures they were always meant to be.”<sup>138</sup> This is God’s effectual call: the Spirit’s enabling of the hearer to understand the full force of what has been said so as to respond freely with faith, restoring and reorienting spiritual and cognitive capacities so as to apprehend and embrace the beautiful, good, and true gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>139</sup>

Providence is the extension of this kind of action: an effectual prompt, whereby God directs the church in the drama of redemption.<sup>140</sup> Scripture is instrumental in this prompting. The Father rules “by speaking Christ through the Spirit into the minds and hearts of the faithful.”<sup>141</sup> Here “Christ” denotes “what the law, prophets and other biblical writings say about the new thing God is doing in Christ.”<sup>142</sup> As in the story of the word of the Lord in the book of Acts, so today, “God continues to act in the world by acting in his people, and God acts in his people through the Spirit’s ministry of the written word.”<sup>143</sup> In fact, God does through Scripture “as many things as there are speech genres in it.”<sup>144</sup> This account gestures to two further ideas that Vanhoozer has explored in earlier works.

The first is that there is a sense in which God authors Scripture: that “Scripture is taken up in complex ways into God’s triune self-communicative action,” as God uses its human words to promise, exhort, command, warn, comfort, predict, lament, and plead.<sup>145</sup> Here Vanhoozer draws on speech-act theory to articulate an account of both human and divine textual communication.<sup>146</sup> At the human level, as written texts, scriptural writings embody the illocutionary enactments of the communicative intentions of their human authors through the use of linguistic conventions.<sup>147</sup> Any well-intentioned reader, following the rules of language and literature, can discover the illocutions of the biblical authors, especially if they embody interpretive

138. *Remythologizing*, 370. In presenting these two complementary alternative ways in which God elicits human responses that realize them, I am harmonizing Vanhoozer’s account of Pharaoh with his predominate tendency to speak of divine action and providence in terms of conversion.

139. *Remythologizing*, 374–75.

140. *Remythologizing*, 376.

141. *Remythologizing*, 376.

142. *Remythologizing*, 376.

143. *Remythologizing*, 376–77.

144. *Remythologizing*, 377.

145. *The Drama of Doctrine*, 46–47.

146. Vanhoozer is not alone in using speech-act theory to explore the idea that God speaks through Scripture. See, for example, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

virtues: dispositions toward understanding enacted authorial intentions, to welcome the text as an extension of the communicative agent, which virtues literature cultivates in readers.<sup>148</sup>

Since authorial intention accounts for the unity of a written text, it is important to take account of conventions of genre as media for illocutionary enactment of authorial intention. Genres are historically contextual literary forms that embody complex patterns of communicative action according to certain conventions; their relative stability facilitates literary communicative action.<sup>149</sup> Each literary genre does something distinctive: each enables a distinct way of engaging reality and interacting with others.<sup>150</sup> Genre is especially important for literary texts intended for future, unknown contexts and readers, by providing in shared understanding of form a substitute for a shared communicative situation and additional rules for making and interpreting meaning, and signals the kind of thought the text expresses and the kind of life situation it belongs to.<sup>151</sup> Thinking about illocutionary action at the level of genre conventions raises the question of the illocutionary force of literary genres, like narrative. Narratives enable authors to display worlds and take up a stance toward it and invite the reader to see things the same way.<sup>152</sup> To learn from texts therefore requires indwelling them, to inhabit the perspective on the world that they embody.<sup>153</sup>

The diverse biblical writings, enacting diverse illocutions, are caught up in the agency of the triune God. God appropriates these human illocutions, especially at the level of whole texts in their use of genre codes (God still

147. Where intentions are not to be confused with motives for writing; see *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 239. Vanhoozer talks of texts as embodied intentions on 253. Vanhoozer argues, plausibly, that written texts are only intelligible as discourse when ascribed to communicative agents, as the products of their communicative intentions. Authorial intention is “the originating and unifying power that puts a linguistic system . . . into motion in order to do something with words that the system alone cannot do” (249).

148. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 315–16, 376–78, and 397–98. Such virtues include respect for those intentions, faith, hope, love, honesty with respect to one’s commitments, and preunderstandings, openness, attention, and obedience.

149. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 337–39.

150. “From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts,” in Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL/Nottingham, UK: IVP Academic/Apollos, 2002), 191.

151. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 339–40.

152. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 227, 341. This kind of illocutionary force seems of a different order to the kind of illocutions Vanhoozer (with biblical warrant) usually ascribes to God in respect of the divine authorship of Scripture—promising, exhorting, comforting, warning, etc. (see e.g. *The Drama of Doctrine*, 47).

153. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 349.

uses the book of Jonah to satirize religious ethnocentrism, for example), but draws them into a larger, more complex order, the canon.<sup>154</sup> In virtue of this gathering, God may do new things with Jonah and other biblical texts, namely the canonical illocutions of testifying to Christ, instructing the church, making covenant. Indeed, for Vanhoozer, the biblical canon seems to be the preeminent expression of divine authorial intention.<sup>155</sup> The diverse genres of the Bible are thus divinely appropriated for a larger communicative purpose: one “of witness to . . . the revelatory and redemptive acts of God in the history of Israel, and, above all, in the history of Jesus Christ.”<sup>156</sup> Scripture thus projects the voice and extends the action of Jesus Christ, God’s Word.<sup>157</sup> It is in these ways that the Bible is “the Word of God,” and Vanhoozer goes so far as to identify it as a divine act, or more properly, a result of God’s work, which shares in the perfections and authority of that work without being divine.<sup>158</sup>

Second, Scripture has a particular function in salvation that Vanhoozer depicts in theo-dramatic terms. On this account, God here is playwright and principal actor, whose words and actions impel the drama.<sup>159</sup> Scripture is the divinely authored script for the Spirit-enabled faithful performance of the church on the world stage.<sup>160</sup> Through Scripture, expounded in the church, God summons and informs our participation in the theo-drama. Scripture is thus “the locus of God’s ongoing communicative action in the church and in the world.”<sup>161</sup> Genre is key here again, for different genres envisage specific kinds of social situation and demand a certain kind of social response; they provide fitting direction for participation in those situations.<sup>162</sup>

To understand the script most fully is to participate in the action it envisages: Scripture is to be performed under the direction of the Spirit and with dramaturgical guidance of right doctrine.<sup>163</sup> Faithful performance here is a matter of continuing the action fittingly, corresponding to the central performance of Jesus Christ as rendered by the canon, and allows for a variety of

154. Vanhoozer, “From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts,” 194.

155. “From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts,” 194; *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 264.

156. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 313, 349. Elsewhere Vanhoozer makes the related category of promise the overarching canonical illocution. See his “God’s Mighty Speech Acts: The Doctrine of Scripture Today,” in *First Theology*, 154.

157. *The Drama of Doctrine*, 48.

158. *The Drama of Doctrine*, 48, 63, 65.

159. *The Drama of Doctrine*, 64–65.

160. *The Drama of Doctrine*, 22, 31–32.

161. *The Drama of Doctrine*, 71. Here Vanhoozer tends to speak of Scripture as a divinely commissioned agent, on analogy with Son and Spirit. But a text is not an agent.

162. *The Drama of Doctrine*, 215–16.

proper responses in new cultural situations.<sup>164</sup> The key is dramatic consistency: the embodiment of communicative actions that recapitulate the pattern of Jesus Christ's communicative action, of which the canon is the norm.<sup>165</sup> Grasping the divine illocutions of Scripture so as to follow their promptings is conditional on the illumination of the Holy Spirit.<sup>166</sup> By responding to the illocutions of Scripture that testify to Christ, we become covenantally related to Him, by the ministry of the Spirit, and empowered to bear witness to Him.<sup>167</sup>

There are problems inherent to both these rich ideas. First, it is far from self-evident *how* the canon should be read as a whole, even if one specifies it is to be read Christocentrically; and yet invoking the Spirit's illumination, by itself, does not give a thick enough description of canonical illocutions sufficient to inform theological exegesis.<sup>168</sup> Vanhoozer needs to specify further the way in which God may appropriate human illocutions in his own illocutionary action so that it is a distinct, intelligible illocution recognizable and followable by human interpreters in their respective contexts by the aid of the Spirit.<sup>169</sup> Second, this account does not clarify the divine illocutionary appropriation of scriptural illocutions, canonical or otherwise. Nor, third, is it easy to reconcile

163. *The Drama of Doctrine*, 102. As he acknowledges, Vanhoozer is not the first to argue that scriptural interpretation is a matter of performing the text. See for example, Nicholas Lash, "Performing the Scriptures," in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), 37–46; Frances Young, *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990); N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 140–43; Stephen Barton, "New Testament Interpretation as Performance," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52, no. 2 (1999), 179–208. Vanhoozer's reprisal of this theme is arguably distinctive in his attempt to combine it with an emphasis on authorial authority articulated by way of speech-act theory. For his fruitful notion of the theologian as dramaturge, see *Drama of Doctrine*, 244ff.

164. *The Drama of Doctrine*, 104–6, 255f.

165. *The Drama of Doctrine*, 106–10, 145–46. The emphasis on embodying Scripture and the virtues and practices needed to do so wisely is a significant theme in Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 1991) and Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). Again, Vanhoozer's emphasis on authorial intention and authority is in marked contrast to Fowl's.

166. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 316, 413, 421–22. At times Vanhoozer likens the Spirit to the perlocutionary effect of the speech act (for example, engendering faith might be the perlocutionary effect of making a promise), e.g. *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 410ff.; "God's Mighty Speech Acts," 155. It might be better to speak of the Spirit as the agent of the perlocutionary efficacy of divine illocutions in Scripture.

167. *The Drama of Doctrine*, 68, 72–73.

168. Vanhoozer provides a little more clarity in *The Drama of Doctrine*: one kind of canonical reading practice is to read the Old Testament figurally in light of Christ and following his example, as the early church did in Acts; see 119–20, 194–95, 220–23.



the description of Scripture as a means by which God plays his part onstage with the analogy of a script, though that analogy has other strengths.<sup>170</sup>

Above all, it is not clear how God's speech-agency through Scripture in the theo-drama can be reconciled with the complex interactions of the historical world in which Scripture is read. Scripture too is a strand in the densely interwoven historical world, yet here is called to play an instrumental role far in excess of the instrumentality Vanhoozer attributes to other historical media of God's authorship, a role that seems to pick it out of the historical continuum in a way that they are not. Just as, therefore, the authorial analogy does not seem to account for the exceptional status, historically speaking, of Jesus Christ that Vanhoozer accords him, so it must also struggle to account for Scripture in Vanhoozer's account, since Scripture is conceived of as almost an extension of God's embodied self-communication in Jesus Christ.

Nor is the ecclesiocentrism of his account of Scripture and providence tenable in light of an awareness of the scope and complexity of history. Even if we concede a considerable influence to church communities and their members on human society, culture, and institutions in an ever-widening variety of historical contexts through time, the extent of this influence even at its widest does not seem sufficient to account for the governance of the whole world, even the whole human world. For, on the one hand, there are places where that influence remains relatively slight and, more importantly, that influence is historically conditioned by a whole host of other factors and dynamics and agencies. Finally, it is not clear how far Vanhoozer's account of scriptural authority would allow him to entertain moral evaluations of the biblical text, since it is so unequivocally invested with divine authority.

#### MURRAY RAE

Rae offers a more direct and sustained engagement with the problem of history as it bears on the theology and theological interpretation of Scripture. He recognizes explicitly that Troeltsch poses a challenge to this project. On his

169. It does not suffice to argue that God *can* do so, just as God can become human in Christ (*Drama of Doctrine*, 47–48). Even in the case of God using Jonah to satirize religious ethnocentrism, such a divine illocution seems distinct from the book's own context-specific illocutionary act: How does this work, how do we recognize it when God uses it in respect of other contexts? For one answer to this difficulty, see Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, chapters 11–13.

170. In particular, it illumines the claim that right understanding involves right action and allows for flexibility and freedom in the way the text is received in different contexts—for improvisation. The notion of the Spirit as prompt also provides an alternative to dictation theories of inspiration.

account, Troeltsch excluded God's involvement from the closed causal nexus of history.<sup>171</sup> The problem with Troeltsch, he claims, is a faulty view of history that supposes that history cannot be the medium of divine self-disclosure.<sup>172</sup> That characterization, however, does not do justice to Troeltsch's appeal to the historical sensibility enshrined in the way historians actually work, or the specific force of his case with respect to the immersion of historical phenomena in complex, contingent causal interconnections. Rae's constructive response to this challenge has much to offer in terms of theological method, but fails to get to grips adequately with the full force of that challenge.

Rae's first move, taking clues from Martin Kähler, Karl Barth, and Hans Frei, is to prioritize revelation in our understanding of what history is. "We cannot presume that we know what history is in advance of the Lord of history disclosing its true nature to us."<sup>173</sup> This revelation is Christocentric and comes, he implies, by way of the biblical narratives, which tell "a story of history as the space and time in and through which God encounters his people and brings about his purpose."<sup>174</sup> The biblical narratives "demand a reconsideration of how reality is constituted and thus also of how history itself is to be construed."<sup>175</sup> Rae's explication of this reconsideration in relation to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and the teleological character of history under God's direction does not go far enough, however.

Creation *ex nihilo* means that matter is created for a purpose and thus has a *telos*. History "is to be understood as the space and time opened up for the world to become what it is intended to be."<sup>176</sup> It also means that everything in history happens under God's will and purpose, has coherence in his care, is contingent (because not necessary to God), and has meaning in its own right. Within this context, human actions have significance: God "entrusts to the precarious stewardship of human beings a measure of responsibility for the way that history takes shape."<sup>177</sup> God elicits human participation in the working out of his purpose. The calling of Abraham in Genesis 12 shows that through particulars, "God invests the whole of history with its meaning and purpose."<sup>178</sup>

171. *History and Hermeneutics* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 16.

172. *History and Hermeneutics*, 21.

173. *History and Hermeneutics*, 33.

174. *History and Hermeneutics*, 35.

175. *History and Hermeneutics*, 42.

176. *History and Hermeneutics*, 51.

177. *History and Hermeneutics*, 53.

178. *History and Hermeneutics*, 57.

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of human participation in history and of God's use of human particulars—his election of them.

What happened to and through Jesus requires a transformation of what we suppose is possible in the world, so that the old paradigms of historical and scientific enquiry will be inadequate for the task of apprehending this reality (because history has been misconceived there as a causal series from which God is necessarily excluded).<sup>179</sup> In the first place, "historical" means "that which has taken place within the created order," which belongs to God and is in process of being redeemed and perfected by God.<sup>180</sup> Furthermore, the central place of Christ's whole career and his resurrection in God's redemptive work means that the resurrection is an eschatological event, whereby the eschatological reality of the created order is made present in history. This means that the resurrection bursts the bounds of the present order and of its historiography, so that it "cannot any longer be thought to exclude the transforming presence of God."<sup>181</sup> The creator is at work with the open-textured tapestry of space and time, weaving in the threads of new life.

Discerning this event requires Christ's self-disclosure, beyond the limits of historical-critical tools, on the occasion of the biblical witnesses.<sup>182</sup> This role of the texts in attesting this reality constitutes its meaning, which unfolds with the unfolding significance of that reality in God's economy, beyond the intentions of authors or redactors. Participation in that reality, as God addresses and justifies us, enables us to understand the subject matter of Scripture.<sup>183</sup> Hence the church has a certain privilege as an interpretive community in relation to these texts.<sup>184</sup> The church continues to use critical tools, but now incorporating theological categories and reshaping critical principles in light of the revelation of God in Christ, placing the burden of proof on skeptics of claims to divine action in history, making the Christ-likeness of witnesses a key criterion for assessing their competence, including divine action in the complex of correlated causes, and testing claims to divine action on analogy with what we learn of God's dealings with the world from elsewhere.<sup>185</sup>

Recasting our understanding of history in light of the reshaping of history in Jesus Christ is a move of significant promise, as we shall see when we turn to

179. *History and Hermeneutics*, 68.

180. *History and Hermeneutics*, 72.

181. *History and Hermeneutics*, 73.

182. *History and Hermeneutics*, 87, 93, 100–103.

183. *History and Hermeneutics*, 149–50.

184. *History and Hermeneutics*, 144.

185. *History and Hermeneutics*, 154–55.

Hans Frei. Such a move will also make adequate understanding of the character of history dependent on a kind of knowledge besides historical investigation. As C. Stephen Evans and Alvin Plantinga have argued in relation to this issue, the appeal involved to God's self-revealing action as the direct grounds for beliefs is epistemologically defensible.<sup>186</sup> It also makes sense to then rethink the witness of Scripture, its role in God's saving activity, where and how it is read in light of this rethinking of history, and to examine how the principles of historiography might be transformed accordingly. Such moves, however, are by themselves not sufficient to meet the challenge identified by Troeltsch. Although Rae rightly asserts that God acts in Christ in history so as to shape its very character, and draws us to participate in this action, the challenge Troeltsch leaves us with is how to reconcile divine action, even when so comprehensive in scope, with the immanent interrelated web of historical phenomena disclosed by historical research.

To that end we turn to Gregory of Nazianzus and Hans Frei, the former for a more detailed, premodern model of thinking about divine action shaping history and human lives through Jesus Christ and through Holy Scripture; the latter for an account of how Scripture discloses such an ordering of history in a way that transforms modern historical consciousness and informs discerning discipleship in the midst of history. Together they point us to the shape of an answer to the challenge of history for the theology and theological interpretation of Holy Scripture.

186. See Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, and Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *Behind the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. C. Bartholomew, C. S. Evans, M. Healy, and M. Rae (Carlisle/Grand Rapids: Paternoster/Zondervan, 2003), 19–57.