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"These Are the Days of Elijah": The Hermeneutical Move from "Applying the Text" to "Living in Its World"

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Abstract — This article offers a critique of—and an alternative to—the commonly held view that one of the goals of the interpreter is to "apply" the Bible to today. First, we will consider an exemplar of this sort of approach (Howard Marshall's *Beyond the Bible*), an account not atypical of common hermeneutical concerns. I then suggest that one key theological notion that does not sufficiently trouble this account is that of canon, in particular the two-testament structure of Christian Scripture. This has immediate implications for the resultant figural structuring of time, which maps OT into NT in ways that are theologically programmatic for how we understand "today" (as long as it is called today). More briefly, I also argue that the canon sets forth a "secondary world" or a realistic account of reality that again requires something other than a notion of moving from "then" to "now" (or from "there" to "here"). In conclusion, I wager that, if one pursues this kind of enriching or intensifying account of the relevance of Scripture to the present day, then the kinds of issues and questions that will end up emphasized and probed will be both theologically important and also of relevance to today's differently shaped issues and questions.

Key Words — canon, refiguration, time, space, enrichment, application

Theological interpretation wrestles with the implications of trying to hold together certain key theological and hermeneutical convictions, namely, first, that God has spoken in Scripture; second, that God speaks today; and third, in some resultant manner to be discerned, that God

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speaks today in and through Scripture. My interest here is in exploring this last claim, when it is understood as holding together the first two.

One remarkably common model for articulating this dynamic is that of "application"—a sense of going "beyond" the Bible, to "bridge" from *then* to *now*. Already, one sees a range of metaphors in play to try to describe the hermeneutical processes at work. There is a certain *prima facie* plausibility to the description, and one can certainly see why such a model holds considerable sway. Nevertheless, I shall argue that it is a problematic model, insufficiently attentive to the dynamics of the canon in particular. It is not claiming too much to say that the canon reconstructs our notions of time and space, and that it thereby resituates the reader with respect to the text in a relationship that is not adequately described by these metaphors of application, or of bridging from then to now.

If Karl Barth's famous question was "What is there within the Bible?"[1] one sometimes gets the impression that those who write on hermeneutics today have embarked on a rather exaggerated complementary quest, to discern "What is there *beyond* the Bible?" Surely, rather a lot, one might think at first glance. But that first glance is deceptive. It does not embody a manner of seeing that has been trained by long years of immersion in Scripture. In the end, I shall suggest, Scripture inverts the relationship. The real world—the world that really matters—is the one found within Scripture, the one to which Scripture witnesses. The world in which we live turns out to be best understood (best viewed, best appreciated, and so on) from the scriptural world first. To go "beyond the Bible," then, is to *go deeper* (that is, deeper into its subject matter), if it is to travel in any direction at all.

To approach this sort of claim in the midst of so much contested current reflection on Scripture, hermeneutics, and the theological task, however, is to risk essaying a theory of everything. The objective must therefore be more modest. It is better to explore one particularly clear advocacy of something such as the "application" model for how Scripture speaks to us today and then clarify some of the ways that the canon itself troubles this sort of account. This will permit some brief thoughts in conclusion about what we are really expecting Scripture to achieve among us (which of course must be shorthand for "what it makes sense to expect God to achieve among us in and through Scripture").

The candidate for the dubious honor of being considered in the initial focal role is Howard Marshall's little book *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*, a book whose clarity, brevity, and serious agenda one can only admire.[2] We shall proceed via (1) an anecdote, (2) an exemplar, (3) a

1. Karl Barth, "The Strange New World within the Bible," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), 28.

2. I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004).

counterproposal, (4) some of its key theological implications, and (5) a closing wager, which will represent something of a cluster of open questions.

"ONCE UPON A *TIME*"

Theologians who attend church will often have found themselves caught in two minds when singing hymns in a congregation of the faithful. There is the desire to join in the corporate act of worship. Then there is the critical impulse, nurtured by long years of theological reflection, which can barely refrain from analyzing the hymn or song being sung and wondering whether it is *true* (or, perhaps better, theologically constructive). One song that seems to raise these questions more than most, at least among those with whom I have worshiped, is "These Are the Days of Elijah":

> These are the days of Elijah
> Declaring the Word of the Lord
> And these are the days of Your servant, Moses
> Righteousness being restored.[3]

A second verse goes on to affirm that these are the days of Ezekiel and of David too, while the song overall blends together many further biblical images and affirmations, notably some messianic longings from the books of Daniel and Revelation.

It is undeniable that there are many kinds of theologically unfulfilling songs and hymns in frequent use in churches today, but intriguingly this song in particular seems to provoke considerable negative comment. The comment is often along the lines of "But these are clearly not the days of Elijah" (or on occasion: "what could that possibly mean?"). This sort of response offers food for thought to a Christian student of the OT. For this is a song based on a kind of figural or typological reading of time, whereby present human existence is mapped against the pre-Christ era, with "this" being "that" in similar sorts of ways to those mapped by F. F. Bruce in his little book, *This Is That*.[4] Although one might argue with regard to the particular typological connections deployed or adduced here and there (and certainly one might think that not all of the connections made in the song sit easily together, or are equally compelling), in principle this is a strikingly

3. Robin Mark, "These Are the Days of Elijah," lyrics © 1996, Daybreak Music, Ltd.

4. E. F. Bruce, *This Is That: The New Testament Development of Some Old Testament Themes* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1968). It is perhaps of interest to note that, as well as being a prominent biblical scholar, Bruce was a life-long member of the Brethren churches and that Robin Mark, the writer of the song in question, says in an interview on his Web site that his experience worshiping with Brethren churches partly influenced the song. Indeed, he uses language such as "typological" or "typical" to describe what he was trying to do, as per the analysis above. See Robin Mark, "The Story behind Days of Elijah," *RobinMark.com*. On-line: http://robinmark.com/the-story-behind-days-of-elijah/.

helpful way to think through present human existence in the light of Scripture and is a view with a long and honorable pedigree in the church.

Why might a Christian say that these are *not* the days of Elijah? Various possibilities come to mind. One theologically engaged objection may be that there is insufficient reason, or so it may be claimed, to see significant and substantive mutual illumination between what passed for human faithfulness and divine action in the time of Elijah and then today. This sort of argument will be evaluated differently across the theological spectrum, depending on one's views of the "miraculous" (remarkable divine action, let us say), or whether there is any perceived mileage in thinking that the faithful are arrayed before comparable hordes of those who worship the Baʿals of the ages: Jezebel ruling the world from Martha's Vineyard, or European Monetary Union being played out in Naboth's Vineyard, for example. But one need not commit oneself to one or another specific typological link in order to contend that the project of such a reading is theologically fruitful.

A more theologically problematic objection to the song seems to be predicated on a view of time as that which passes linearly before us, such that one age succeeds another, with no way back to an age that is gone. There is an obvious reason why a lot of people think like this: it is how mundane daily existence is experienced. But equally obviously, theologians have long suggested that this is not really an adequate account of time—either Christologically speaking or (as we shall pursue below) canonically speaking. Perhaps one could nuance this objection to remove some of its theological problems. The claim might be rather that time has linearly passed from one significant era of human history ("before Christ"), to a new and subsequent era, now in Christ, or "the years of our Lord" (A.D., *anno domini*, as it has been known). Thus the old has gone and the new has come in such a way that perhaps it no longer makes theological sense to say "These are the days of Elijah" because, it may be argued, those days stopped at Christ. My own view is that even as one articulates that last point, its limitations become clear. Would all of "B.C." be "the days of Elijah" in this view? Or is it just Elijah's own time? In which case, how different is this old/new view in practice from the flat view of linear time we started with? Or is it thought that all the OT era is no longer of direct relevance to those under the new covenant ("testament")? This last point will lead us in due course to suggest that it is how one evaluates the two-testament structure of the Christian canon that lies beneath one's evaluation of a song such as this.

It is time to set aside the specific question whether these are the days of Elijah and pursue the more general question this example is intended to raise, namely, how to relate the theological affirmations of Scripture to our present human existence.[5]

5. See Brevard S. Childs, "On Reading the Elijah Narratives," *Int* 34 (1980): 128–37, for a sample of a reading of Elijah that eschews historicizing frameworks for understanding

BEYOND THE BIBLE: ONE PROMINENT APPROACH

Marshall's book, *Beyond the Bible*, asks how the Christian of today might responsibly move from Scripture toward theological articulation, not just of practical and ethical matters but of theological and doctrinal concerns themselves. Its key concern is stated up front: "it is right to seek a principled way of moving from Scripture to its contemporary understanding and application, and . . . the way to do this is to explore how the principles can be established from Scripture itself"[6] In brief compass, Marshall succeeds in setting forth a clear version of what we may take to be one major sort of consensus regarding letting Scripture speak today.[7] We may make only a few salient observations about his account.

There is much that is illuminating. It is striking, for instance, that in his opening chapter Marshall writes, "We look for ways of interpreting the Bible that are themselves biblical" (p. 32), though whether this sits well with a search for "principles" of interpretation is less clear. Also noteworthy is his claim that general reflection on language and texts is "perhaps less immediately fruitful for the nitty-gritty of biblical interpretation," which in turn clears the way to focus instead on exegesis and application (p. 14). What is probably lost in such a move are specific questions about the Bible as a unique theological text, which will in due course make a difference to what sorts of interpretive fruit are allowed to flourish.

Next, Marshall offers case studies of how one relates the claims of Scripture to, variously, ethics, or church worship, or "doctrine," though as noted in one of the responses to the book by Kevin Vanhoozer, "doctrine" is a word that can mean various things to various people.[8] The concern here is that one might well argue over specific points of ethical behavior (killing is one recurring example), but there remains a whole different level of discourse about "what we are to believe and how to express that *belief*" (p. 42) that deserves serious attention. This question of doctrinal

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the text but pursues canonical integrity and "direct address." I cannot comment on whether Childs would have liked the song, but for reasons that will become apparent, a rather significant positive reference to it may be found on the final page of Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 197. Seitz thinks the song "respects the judgments of Christian Scripture and its figural witness to God."

6. Marshall, *Beyond the Bible*, 9. Further references are cited in parentheses in the text.

7. It is in some ways a particularly evangelical consensus; Marshall's first chapter is entitled "Evangelicals and Hermeneutics" (ibid., 11–32).

8. It is a feature of the book that it contains a couple of "responses," though only Vanhoozer's, "Into the Great Beyond" (in I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* [Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004], 81–95), engages the substantive issues. There is a hint in this arrangement of a how a polyphonic text aspires to an overall unity, though none of the contributors is in a position to make this point—an interesting parallel with the Bible itself.

formulation beholden to Scripture is at the heart of the overall account (it is its "basic motivation" [p. 45]).

Finally, he offers "The Search for Biblical Principles" (pp. 55–79). This starts by looking at how the NT writers read the OT and develops from this the idea that there is progression through time. Marshall's map is not quite Old-then-New: Jesus' teaching occurs in a "liminal period" with the result that "it is legitimate to recognize this and to go beyond it in the directions indicated by the post-Easter revelation" (p. 68). Three principles result: the model afforded by a new covenant reading of the old, the recognition of the liminality of Jesus' teaching, and the apostolic teaching as a combination of word and Spirit-given insight, which we are to treat likewise in turn. The reader of the whole canon is equipped with "a mind nurtured on the gospel" (pp. 70), with which he or she may then move toward the kinds of evaluative hermeneutical judgments Marshall believes are required.

This final chapter, the capstone of the account, has two particular merits. First, in beginning with the NT use of the OT, Marshall fleshes out one key dimension of developing a biblical account of how to consider the Bible, in a manner perhaps more often associated with Richard Hays's work on Paul as reader of Scripture.[9] Second, and as a result of this, Marshall moves some way toward looking at how one key question in our handling of Scripture is "where are we in time?" or (more grammatically but not perhaps more clearly), "when are we?"[10] This is a good question, although I will answer it differently from Marshall, for reasons connected with just the kind of framing hermeneutical and theological maneuvers that I wondered whether he dispensed with too quickly earlier on.

In successfully offering such a short and focused discussion, Marshall doubtless lays himself open to critiques along the lines of suggesting that things are altogether more complex than he allowed, or that somewhere out there in the deluge of secondary literature lies this or that proposal that significantly overlaps with, nuances, or challenges his own considerations. One could, I am sure, write an entire book to take account of the nuancing and cross-referencing that such discussions bring; indeed, this book has been written: a multiauthor volume of dialogues entitled *Moving beyond the Bible to Theology*.[11] Here, one can read about, variously, "a principlizing

9. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

10. A version of the question also surfaces in N. T. Wright's major work on Jesus: *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 443, 467–72, with the question "What time is it?" becoming a key to exegetical endeavor; however, in Wright's case, this is kept within the bounds of reconstructing the original world view of Jesus, rather than with reference to today's reader.

11. Gary T. Meadors, ed., *Moving beyond the Bible to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009). I. Howard Marshall has in turn offered a review and response to this book, noting that

model" (Walter Kaiser),"a redemptive-historical model" (Daniel Doriani), "a drama-of-redemption model" (Kevin Vanhoozer), and "a redemptive-movement model" (William Webb). Irenic responses to these discussions are also included, from Mark Strauss, Al Wolters, and lastly from Christopher Wright, who makes the point that each of these models coopts elements of the others at their best, which probably accounts for how it seems possible for one reader to agree with all the various authors at different points. Interesting as that discussion is, it ends up losing one of the key appealing factors of Marshall's work, namely, that *Beyond the Bible* is clear, concise, and offers a certain kind of "big picture" to orient all the further refining and worrying away.

Characteristic of both Marshall's book and this subsequent discussion is the tendency to use the language of "applying the Bible" from *then* to *now*, across a stretch of time that moves from the distant past to the present, sometimes with the view that the gap to be bridged is also appropriately labeled a cultural gap.[12] Perhaps one reason for this is the concomitant gains in allowing one to pursue some sort of objective description of the biblical text and its meaning that works entirely within its "first horizon"—the "what it meant" of Krister Stendahl's famous dichotomy.[13] In sum, such models for the responsible handling of Scripture generally seek to honor the authority and sacred status of Scripture—to hear God speak in and through Scripture today—by "applying" the text to today with regard to a range of theological and ethical concerns.[14]

In what follows, I argue that this sort of account is insufficiently attentive to the nature and the function of the two-testament canon, in particular the way in which the canon constructs our understandings of time (and space). We shall thus focus on *theologically oriented* aspects of the problem of letting the voice of God be heard in and through Scripture today. There are also some well-established *hermeneutical* reasons why "application" is a problematic label. Gadamer certainly argued that application is not helpfully understood as a discrete component of the hermeneutical task.[15] But one must accept that there is more than one way for Christian theologians to evaluate Gadamer's contribution here, and in any case our own concern

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he is unpersuaded that it resolves the problem he was pursuing ("Evangelical New Testament Interpretation within the Contemporary Scene," *EuroJTh* 20 (2011): 4–14.

12. Again, perhaps these moves are characteristic of evangelical hermeneutics.

13. Cf. Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *IDB* 1:418–32.

14. For other examples, see William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (rev. ed.; Dallas: Word, 2004); J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (3rd ed.; Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2003).

15. See my discussion in *Reading the Bible Wisely: An Introduction to Taking Scripture Seriously* (rev. ed.; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 90–101; also, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and*

is to explore the *theological* groundings of these kinds of hermeneutical moves, specific to the tasks of reading Scripture rather than just any text. So it is to theological considerations that we turn.

Going Deeper: Living within the Canon

The goal of seeking responsible theological and doctrinal (and indeed moral and ethical) articulation is an excellent one, and the idea of moving "beyond the Bible" by articulating certain kinds of principles or hermeneutical conclusions does occasionally deliver the reader to the right place. But overall, a different kind of approach—a hermeneutical detour—is required. It is "required" not just in the sense that it will do a better job of showing how we arrive at theological and ethical insight, but it is required by the nature of the biblical text before us, and its function in the economy of divine revelation and, more broadly, divine action. The detour sets its sights more firmly on "going beyond" Scripture in the sense of going deeper *into* it, of "enriching" or "intensifying" the theological account of human existence before God that Scripture offers.[16] The aim is to discern the ways of God and the ways of the human heart that are already found within Scripture, so that revelatory light is shed on the ways of God and of the human heart today. We arrive back at our present and pressing concerns and, to borrow a phrase, we know them for the first time.[17]

We shall focus on three particular undergirding assumptions of the whole hermeneutical project we have been considering, assumptions that lie squarely in the lacuna where Marshall moves on quickly to matters of exegesis and application. Unpicking these assumptions will change the shape of the hermeneutical practices that result. Perhaps the key issue is the nature of the two-testament scriptural canon. Two further issues that grow out of this relate to time and the nature of the "reality" of the worlds of the Bible and of today, and these two concerns will be explored in the following section. But the main issue to consider here is the two-testament structure of Christian Scripture.

The grammar of Christian Scripture is irreducibly old-and-new. The two testaments are not just a formal organizing principle whereby books are sorted into two sequential categories, but they make a material differ-

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Method (2nd ed.; London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), e.g., p. 341: "Application does not mean first understanding a given universal in itself and then afterward applying it to a concrete case. It is the very understanding of the universal—the text—itself."

16. Vanhoozer's response to Marshall probes four different senses of "going beyond" that might pertain to his book's concerns ("Into the Great Beyond," 89–94). I am not sure that any of them is quite what I offer here, though there is some overlap.

17. Cf. T. S. Eliot's famous concluding section of *Little Gidding* (1942), which suggested that "the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time."

ence to the nature and function of each book within either testament. It is hard to think of many Christian theologians who would deny this, but equally much discussion of biblical hermeneutics ptoceeds as if it were not true.

Here one may wonder whether the kinds of claims that Marshall makes come more easily to those who work mainly with the *New* Testament. This would not be atypical of a familiar issue in biblical studies; the tendency of *Neutestamentlers* to express questions of *NT hermeneutics* as though these questions were entirely comparable to questions of ***biblical hermeneutics***. As a matter of observation, this seems to be less common among *Alttestamentlers*. What is at stake here is the key question, what difference to "biblical hermeneutics" does the OT make? To anticipate the answer: a considerable—and problematizing—difference.

Why is this not often noted? One reason may be that the trend in hermeneutical reflection through the 19th and 20th centuries was toward Schleiermacher's favored position that biblical hermeneutics is a subset of a discipline called "general hermeneutics," where questions about the nature and function of texts in general held a kind of underlying position—what one might describe as the role of exploring the Kantian conditions of possibility of understanding texts. Then, once held in clear enough perspective, such general observations could be run up against the nature and function of the Bible as one example (or set of examples). There are plenty of books on how to read the Bible that proceed this way. Giveaway markers of such convictions include statements such as "A text can only mean what its author could have intended"; or "The meanings of words are delimited by standard semantic questions about reference and discourse meaning"; or "It is the illocution that is key to the function of the text"; or—most germane to our present discussion—"Applying a text involves looking for the principles within it." These are giveaways because they would work for reading Jane Austen as much as Jeremiah or Acts, and would not in turn distinguish between Ecclesiastes and *Ulysses*.

It would be a separate undertaking to explore why so much writing on hermeneutics by Christian thinkers has tended to follow this line of thought. If any attempt is made to demarcate the interpreting of the Bible from any other text, it is often done on the level of talking about the Bible's inspiration, authority, or some other doctrinal characteristic of it, which, rather significantly, does not draw a distinction between old and new. The resulting difference then basically inheres on the level of what we might call the *seriousness* of the undertaking. The Christian reader is enjoined to pursue word studies, discourse meaning, historical reference, and so forth, with all due seriousness, indeed with reverence and fear. There is nothing wrong with this. But in almost every other respect, it substantively remains the same pursuit as any other scholarly reading of any text at all.

One need intend neither to praise nor to bury such scholarship. All such hermeneutical endeavors are important tools in the interpreter's toolbox, even if pursuing this "general" path may not result in a full toolbox. But our particular concern here is that, as soon as the two-testament structure of Scripture comes into view, the nature of some of those other interpretive questions changes. More particularly, key questions regarding the role of various scriptural texts in God's economy are forced into a new focus. The core issue for Christian readers is that OT texts are *sprung into a canonical tension* by virtue of their being placed alongside the NT. Thus, in addition to ongoing important inquiries about Isaiah's time and traditions and intentions and references (and his Hebrew, his poetry, even his theology, in a sense), it becomes incumbent on the Christian interpreter to ask also after the function of the book of Isaiah as Christian Scripture, which then in turn can affect the kinds of answers one gives to questions about his language and theology. Isaiah is in one sense an easy example; canonical questions regarding its links with NT texts and understandings are handed to us by the NT itself. On another level, the difference this makes to the reading of Isaiah remains probingly difficult to conceptualize, as witnessed by Brevard Childs's two-step maneuver of writing a critical commentary on the book and following it with a study of *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*.[18] It is a sobering prospect to notice the gaps between the two volumes, and it is much to be lamented that Childs did not live to explore how the two might be brought more fruitfully together. Nevertheless, Childs himself, probably more than anyone else, did at least understand that these questions are key if one is to engage in what he called, felicitously, "the search for the Christian Bible."[19]

The best of Childs's work is indelibly imprinted with the problematic of the two-testament structure of the Christian Bible. His final book, on Paul, indicates how—once this problem has been grasped—it even affects many aspects of reading the NT.[20] But the clearest point that arises from Childs's corpus of writings is that the canon overlays key interpretive questions on all the others that can be asked about the individual texts in view, and in the process it also alters the shape of those other questions. Arguably, clearer examples of what is at stake can actually be found in the work of Christopher Seitz, who is persistently attentive to what he calls the "failure of one tradition history" to provide any simple continuity between

18. Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001); idem, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

19. An account of Childs' work that rightly emphasises this framework for reading him is Daniel Driver, *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian: For the Church's One Bible* (FAT 2/46; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

20. Brevard S. Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

the testaments: in his readings of Isaiah's "former and latter things" in connection with Jesus, or of the divine name in the OT and NT, or various other ways in which the OT and the NT are mutually illuminating of "the character of Christian Scripture."[21]

The recent patient recovery of typology and figural reading, to name just some significant hermeneutical frameworks, depends on the recognition of this canonical structuring.[22] Such approaches only begin to make sense when some sort of complex reciprocal relationship between the old and new is seen as relevant to the reading of Scripture today. The traditional practice of churches reading from both the OT and the NT in their worship services also presupposes just such a conviction, albeit not one always well understood or much utilized in many cases. Furthermore, the way in which this old/new figuring takes place immediately suggests that the reader is not so much trying to move "beyond the Bible" as learning to see their present reality in the light of this twofold witness to divine initiative and human response. The dialectic of the old and the new, which is already significantly pre-echoed in the dialectic of "the law and the prophets" is, to appropriate some words of Stephen Chapman with regard to the latter, a theological claim that constitutes "the fully mature witness of Israel to a dialectic that continues to be constitutive of the reality of God."[23] More simply, "then" and "now" are mapped into a mutually illuminating relationship.

Where general hermeneutical reflection continues to address matters such as authorial intentions and words' functions in their original context(s), a canonical approach modifies—and in some senses redefines altogether—hermeneutical concerns more in terms of a focus on the canonical text than the authors who wrote its constituent parts. In so doing, the reader of the canon is resituated in certain key ways, as we shall now explore.

MATTERS ARISING: TIME AND SPACE

We consider what is at stake in this discussion with reference to the ways in which the two-testament canon troubles matters of time and space, that is, the move from "then to now" and from "there to here."

21. See Seitz's essays on Isaiah and Jesus (*Figured Out*, 103–16), on the divine name (*Figured Out*, 131–44), and more recently his *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), of which the subtitle is key.

22. Among others one may point to the landmark work of Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and the probing collection of essays in Stanley D. Walters, ed., *Go Figure! Figuration in Biblical Interpretation* (PTMS 81; Eugene, OR: Pickwiek, 2008).

23. Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets* (FAT 27; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 292.

The Figural Structuring of Time

Scripture gives us strong reasons to suspect that the standard human experience of linear time is not the most significant way of thinking about time. Consider, as a first exhibit, Deut 5:2–3. Moses is rehearsing the giving of the law, speaking to the generation that has replaced the one that died off in the wilderness, as related in the book of Numbers. But as he reaches back to the subject matter of the earlier book of Exodus, what does he say? "The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today" (Deut 5:2–3). In other words, those gathered on the plains of Moab are to think to themselves something like "these are the days of the exodus" (or possibly Sinai). This understanding, as is well known, survives into the Passover liturgy: all Israelites are to think of themselves as having been those who came out of Egypt.[24] It is operative too in the famous rabbinic dictum, "There is no earlier and no later in the Torah" (*b. Pesahim* 6b).[25]

Once noted, this kind of deliberate blurring of chronological location may be recognized in various texts, so that one must either end up saying that the writers got their history wrong (a familiar enough conclusion from some), or better that there is something else at stake in the way the narrative works. So in Josh 24, the covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem, we hear the people say, "It is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt" (24:17). Or we hear the complaint of the officials in Ezra 9:1: "The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites." These seven nations, as all commentaries note, comprise a list that relates to a different time than that of Ezra. But in the process, the book of Ezra seems to be suggesting that the returnees from exile are very much in the days of Joshua, to borrow a phrase.

This way of thinking sees time as determined more fundamentally by relationship to God than by chronological succession. Although one cannot completely separate out the scriptural narrative from chronological succession—so that, for example, the NT does indeed succeed the Old

24. Cf m. *Pesahim* 10: "In every generation a man must so regard himself as if he came forth himself out of Egypt, for it is written [citing Exodus 13:8]."

25. For illuminating uses of this approach in biblical studies, see William Johnstone, *Chronicles and Exodus: An Analogy and its Application* (JSOTSup 275; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), e.g., p. 296, where he argues that in the work of the Chronicler we find ourselves in idealized eschatological time, being exhorted to obedience to all of Torah at once; cf. also Jon D. Levenson on "the literary simultaneity of Torah," in his *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 62–81.

chronologically speaking (and indeed this is why thinking linearly about time will sometimes look like it works perfectly well)—it is the more complex dialectical and relational understanding of time that should be the more determinative for readers trying to locate themselves with respect to the scriptural text.

In his account, Marshall does see the significance of time, but he couches it in terms of a chronological series of periods, with Jesus in the middle, in some attenuated dependence on Conzelmann's view of salvation history (p. 64 n. 13). But in the classic NT passage that develops our sense of situatedness in time, Heb 3:7–4:16, we find a recapitulation (to borrow a pregnant word) of the retelling of certain key pentateuchal narratives in Ps 95: "*Today*, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (3:7), which one might be able to call an "application" of the OT text, except that in v. 13 the hearers are to "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today." In what sense is a reader of Hebrews still on that same day, a day already narrated not just in Exodus and Numbers, but also in the Psalms? It is the sense in which one's relationship with God is characterized. 1 Corinthians 10 uses the same logic in figuring the Corinthians' spiritual state into an account of Israel in the wilderness. Again, someone might argue that what Paul is doing is *applying* the one passage to the other situation—except that Paul does not say "It is as if the rock for them were like Christ is for us." Rather famously, or infamously, he says "the rock was Christ."[26]

What all these examples illustrate is the "figural structuring of time." The NT mapping of OT reality points forward to the ways that Christian readers of the two-testament Scripture are then invited to understand their own time within the providential purview of the one God of Scripture. The ways of God *today* are not then to be characterized in a third manner after the "Old" and the "New" ways. Nor indeed are they simply the "New" ways continued after the "Old" were done. Rather, they are the ways that are fully and jointly illuminated by the "Old" and "New" together.

Again, the church at worship has always known this. We sing "Christ the Lord is risen today" at Easter, perhaps just like the Israelites enacted some sort of annual "enthronement liturgy" through the psalms of the ark's procession to Jerusalem. The historical details of such a possibility are notoriously contested,[27] but readers of the canon are positively invited to draw the links. Indeed the church has traditionally used Pss 24 and 47 on Ascension Day in its worshiping tradition: the ark has gone up/Christ has

26. On which, see my discussion in Richard S. Briggs, "'The Rock Was Christ': Paul's Reading of Numbers and the Significance of the Old Testament for Theological Hermeneutics," in *Horizons in Hermeneutics: A Festschrift in Honor of Anthony C. Thiselton* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Matthew R. Malcolm; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 90–116.

27. For one of the most robust defences of such a reading, see John Day, *Psalms* (OTG; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 67–87, on "the Autumn Festival."

gone up. Readers are to think of themselves as singing praise as they watch him go. The key here, and the challenge, is to work out more deeply what this means in the life we live today. *This* is the "going beyond" to which the canon invites us.

The Reality of Scripture's "Secondary World"

What has just been said about time can be extended to an account of space, or perhaps the nature of reality itself, although here we can only point briefly in the direction of such an account. Nevertheless, there is important mileage in recognizing that the scriptural narrative offers claims about reality that are not simply (or necessarily) intended as claims about what actually happened. Perhaps again this is slightly obscured if one works mainly with the NT, where the correlation between the narrative and the historical event (at least in the passages where narrative is operative) may well overlap to a far higher degree than is the case in the OT. But hermeneutically, the issues of how the texts work are not, in large part, helpfully described in terms of the degree of correlation, but in other ways that think about various different narrative functions of the text.

Although the best account of this remains that of Hans Frei, in his *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* and elsewhere,[28] one may concede that this is a complex and contested account. However, there is to hand a rather simpler, and less explored, way of describing the issues, one that is offered by J. R. R. Tolkien: the language of a text's "secondary world." Such a world is the result of an author's "subcreation": "Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter."[29] Armed with such a conceptuality, one can begin to sort out the categories of history, narrative, reference, truth, and so forth in ways that match the biblical texts more helpfully than by just bundling them together, which is what one tends to do when there is only one world in which everything has to refer historically.

Especially if one leans on Tolkien's way of discussing this issue, one is drawn strongly toward emphasizing the role of the imagination in handling the text's accounts of truth. This is not the place to enter into an analysis of the epistemological status of the imagination, or the history of its relative marginalization in academic discourse (and indeed in certain strands of

28. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974). See now usefully also his "Scripture as Realistic Narrative: Karl Barth as Critic of Historical Criticism," in *Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture* (ed. George Hunsinger; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 49–63.

29. J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *Tree and Leaf* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1947), 11–79 (quoting p. 54). I am indebted to Melody Briggs for this point and the specific Tolkien reference.

church discourse). Suffice it to say that the kinds of creative thinking that Scripture requires of us with regard to space (or reality) are very much comparable to those that Scripture requires of us with respect to time. It may even be the case, to push the Tolkien connection one further stage, that we might imagine the biblical text less as either a window or a mirror, as two familiar hermeneutical options have it, and more as a wardrobe, through which we enter the reality to which the biblical text points. We end up with a hermeneutic that requires of us "full imaginative seriousness."[30]

ENRICHMENT AND INTENSIFICATION

We have come back to our beginning (perhaps to know it for the first time?). What there is "beyond the Bible" is not known through our inhabiting a later, or more determinative reality for our hermeneutical endeavor. The sense of "beyond" that the canon urges, with respect to time and space, is rather a "going deeper." Is it significant that it is systematic theologians who sometimes seem happier with this way of articulating our dependence on Scripture than biblical scholars? Thus, for example, when Colin Gunton addresses "the development of doctrine," which we may recall was precisely Marshall's focus, he suggests that "development" is the wrong image, and that a less straightforward language of "enrichment" is called for: "we should seek to enrich the theological tradition as it passes through our hands."[31] Robert Jenson draws out Barth's language on the "strange new world" in very much comparable terms:

> We are socialized to suppose that the "real world" is a world outside faith's story of God with his people, outside the church doors, outside the covers of the Book, a world "out there." And we suppose that we—preachers and teachers and worshipers leaving the service—are supposed to carry good ideas from the biblical world "out" "into" this "real" world. . . . The thing is it cannot be done. The Bible is in fact ineffective and *irrelevant* in our so-called "real" world, because the Bible does not acknowledge that our "real" world deserves the adjective.[32]

To go "beyond the Bible", then, is a journey of deepening, or thickening, or intensifying, drawing us *back* to the canonical picture(s) of God's character and action, and the various modes of human response.

30. This is a phrase championed by Walter Moberly (*The Theology of the Book of Genesis* [Old Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 197 and passim).

31. Cf. Colin E. Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 46–49 (quoting p. 48), in an essay entitled "The Development of Doctrine: Karl Barth's Understanding of the Theological Task" (pp. 34–49).

32. Robert W. Jenson, "The Strange New World of the Bible," in *Sharper Than a Two-Edged Sword: Preaching, Teaching, and Living the Bible* (ed. Michael Root and James J. Buckley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 22–31 (quoting pp. 26–27).

A Wager: On Changing the Subject

I offer in conclusion some reflections that may help to round out this analysis. First, Marshall is quite specific that the kind of examples he has in mind are not to do with ethics or even practice, but with regard to doctrine (p. 45). It is not entirely obvious that the hermeneutical dynamics pertaining to one are all that different from those pertaining to the other, but let us work with Marshall's focus on doctrine. Of course, the first thing to note is that a good number of classic Christian doctrines have "gone beyond" the Bible, such as the Chalcedonian formula concerning Christ (as noted by Marshall himself [p. 42]). The "going beyond" in view here has always best been understood precisely in terms of the deepening or enriching account we have offered: the doctrine of the trinity offers a "grammar" of the workings of Scripture, expressing the "judgments" of Scripture, although not necessarily the concepts used in Scripture itself—to borrow David Yeago's articulation of what he called "the logic of theological exegesis."[33]

Second, Marshall's sample list of doctrinal issues for today (open theism, penal substitution, infant baptism, and so on [pp. 43–44]) covers, as he notes, exactly the kinds of issues over which Christians divide.[34] Does our account offer any resolutions of these matters? The headline answer here is "no," but this is because no hermeneutical account can in fact offer resolutions of such issues that would be either definitive or likely to command widespread assent. It is perhaps of theological significance that faithful Christians in the church can hold a range of views on even relatively core theological topics such as who is an appropriate candidate for baptism, or the nature of hell, or what is precisely the way to understand the atonement. Most likely, the kinds of question on which Christians manage to hold coherent but disparate beliefs are in general not resolvable as a matter of biblical interpretation, if indeed they are resolvable at all.[35] Most biblical texts can be read in more than one way—there are better and worse ways of reading (concerned with matters such as attention to detail, coherence with other readings, fittingness for producing the fruit of the Spirit, and so on)—and usually what is at stake is a matter of offering faithful and coherent construals of the text as part of a larger theological project. That many core issues are irreducibly complex, both theologically and morally, has not tended to be well received in some (though obviously not all) Christian tra-

33. David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (ed. Stephen E. Fowl; Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 87–100 (cf. p. 93).

34. Including, as Marshall notes from his own perspective, evangelicals dividing among themselves.

35. Cf. Frei, "Scripture as Realistic Narrative," 50, on issues such as "the relationship between law and gospel, or again the relationship between justification and sanctification . . . where there really is no right or wrong and no final adjudication (but which are themselves, as Barth would have said, 'beautiful problems')."

ditions, where complexity, if it is admitted at all, is of a temporary nature to be circumvented by thinking hard enough. Work in biblical interpretation (again more in some traditions than others) can often evince a similar tone. Perhaps one of the great contributions of "theological interpretation" may yet prove to be that it models how texts can be read in various ways that are theologically constructive without necessarily all being compatible.[36]

Finally, we are confronted with a kind of wager that the subject matter of Scripture is in fact what we should be spending our theological time and energy on. We should take that wager. The kinds of issues and questions that will end up emphasized and probed will be both theologically important and also of relevance to today's differently shaped issues and questions. In fact, one of the distorting factors in much discussion of Scripture may well be the tendency to let today's agenda predetermine what would count as constructive engagement with Scripture on a theological or ethical level. As Anthony Thiselton has urged, Scripture does not consist of a series of free-standing "problems" for which readers are supposed to be able to harness the resources to come up with a context-independent answer.[37] Does this passage teach that one can lose one's salvation? Is that one indicating that leaders cannot be called priests? And so forth. Rather, we are invited to reckon with saying that Scripture, in its wonderful irrelevance, is frequently in the business of changing the subject. Thus, rather than seeking principled solutions to *our* questions, we might learn instead a different set of questions.

As one example of what this might mean in practice, it is interesting to note how much discussion of "mission" there is in connection with Gen 12:1–3. But a willingness to follow where this text leads will actually lead us to think more about blessing—what is blessing? when is it appropriate? who should bless whom?—rather than wondering whether or how the text fits into some other category ("mission"). This kind of attention to the role of the text in shaping and delimiting our theological discussion is one of the key issues in making it possible to hear the voice of God in and through Scripture today.

36. This is a well-known emphasis of the work of Stephen Fowl. For a good example, see his "The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of Scripture: The Example of Thomas Aquinas," in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (by A. K. M. Adam et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 35–50.

37. See, e.g., the opening chapter of Anthony C. Thiselton's *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 3–18, entitled "From Free-Floating 'Problems' to Hermeneutical Questions from Life." Elsewhere he cites Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 376: "The concept of the problem is clearly an abstraction, namely the detachment of the content of the question from the question that in fact first reveals it. Such a 'problem' has fallen out of the motivated context of questioning, from which it receives the clarity of its sense. Hence it is insoluble" (Anthony C. Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: The Collected Works and New Essays of Anthony Thiselton* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006], 38).

One might suggest that many important issues will *not* get discussed if we follow this path. Perhaps such issues are not then as important as was thought. That might be one implication of taking the canon as somehow determinative of the scope of our theological work.

Beyond the Bible, in the sense in which we have explored it, takes us deeper, thicker, richer, *into*, rather than away from, Karl Barth's strange new world of Scripture with which we started. We find beyond the Bible just what Barth found in it: God, and witness to God's nature, God's ways, and human responses. Immersion in Scripture will refine our sight, deepen our discernment, and enrich our reading, so that—with regard to all manner of doctrinal, ethical, and practical matters—we may be better situated to hear God's voice today. For as long as it is called today. Or, arguably, for as long as these are the days of Elijah.