A HERMENEUTIC OF WISDOM

Recovering the Formative Agency of Scripture

J. de Waal Dryden

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INITIATIVE

To my NT Ethics students of the last decade,
with sincere gratitude and deep affection.

“There is a river in the Bible that carries us away—
once we have entrusted our destiny to it—
away from ourselves to the sea.”

—Karl Barth

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This book has been stirring around in my head since my doctoral studies, and in some ways it is my attempt to take my work there on 1 Peter and expand it into a methodology that covers the rest of the NT. In those dozen or so years I have had numerous conversation partners that have helped me formulate into words what started as a set of tacit exegetical instincts. The first discernible stage of development was a seminar I did on biblical hermeneutics with some of my students at the English L'Abri. They were my first guinea pigs and we learned a lot together, especially that the Bible can be wild, scary, and beautiful. So, my first debt of thanks belongs to them. They convinced me to continue on my methodological and pedagogical sojourn.

Much of the material substance of this book was developed subsequently in several iterations of a class I taught at Covenant College on NT Ethics. These were my real guinea pigs. Again, we all learned much together, and my small attempt to repay the immeasurable debt I owe to these students can be found in the dedication to this volume. Together we learned how the NT functions as wisdom to shape our lives, and we did our best to open ourselves to that process. It was a deep pleasure and genuine privilege to see students embrace the Bible as a source of wisdom for shaping their humanity and agency.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David Noel Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ACCSNT	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ANRW	*Aufstieg und Niedergang der romischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*. Part 2, *Principat*. Edited by Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972–
BBR	*Bulletin for Biblical Research*
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BFCT	*Beitrage zur Forderung christlicher Theologie*
Bib	*Biblica*
BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation*
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CTJ	*Calvin Theological Journal*
CurBR	*Currents in Biblical Research*
DPL	*Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993
DSD	*Dead Sea Discoveries*
ETL	*Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*
FFNT	Foundations and Facets: New Testament
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JRH	*Journal of Religious History*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series

JSPL	*Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters*
JTC	*Journal for Theology and the Church*
JTI	*Journal for Theological Interpretation*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
NIB	*The New Interpreter's Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIDB	*New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006–2009
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
OTS	Old Testament Studies
PNTC	Pelican New Testament Commentaries
Presb	*Presbyterion*
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
STI	Studies in Theological Interpretation
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*
ZTK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

INTRODUCTION

Charles Taylor has aptly described our contemporary world as a "cross-pressured"[1] age, where the sacred and secular commingle and we often find ourselves defined by competing allegiances to antithetical (but strangely codependent) narratives. Faith is no longer understood in contradistinction to doubt but instead draws legitimacy from it. Only in its acceptance of doubt can faith be seen as authentic and distinguished from a naive faith that denies the resolute presence of doubt. At the same time, Taylor recognizes the deep longings for transcendence that mark the immanent secularism of our age. The secular is haunted by the chorus of the sacred, and the sacred is validated by its enmeshments with the secular.

My aim here is not to evaluate Taylor's description, although I do find it compelling. What interests me is how it translates into our habits for reading the Bible. Especially for those trained in biblical studies, whether biblical scholars or those with seminary training, there seems to be a cross-pressured tension between what could loosely be labeled "historical" readings of the Bible on the one hand and "theological" readings on the other. While some continue to argue for the strict compartmentalizing of these two modes of interpretation—and sometimes even argue against the validity or propriety of one or the other—I think just as many of us find ourselves in a cross-pressured space where we feel core allegiance to one side alongside the strong pull of the other. Some feel a core allegiance to the methods of historical and sociological research of the Bible but also a strong desire to see the Bible shape the lives of the communities we are a part of. Others come from a place of embracing the biblical text as God's self-revelation that effects communion with his people and fosters virtue in the believing community. At the same time, this group believes that historical and sociological research into the text is essential to ground the application of the text for the believing community.

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[1] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 594–617.

Whether our cross-pressured age is an improvement over the previous modern dichotomist one is up for debate, and what it will produce has yet to be seen. But I want to suggest it affords us an opportunity for a rapprochement between historical and theological modes of reading. That said, the realization of this opportunity is far from inevitable; our cross-pressured age is equally defined by forces of sociological alterity—of communities that exist in incommensurable fields of discourse that are moving farther apart. So if we are going to resist this movement we need a compelling theological counternarrative, and I believe that counternarrative is found in the Bible when it is embraced as both historical witness and the creative self-revelation of God.[2] The category I will use to access this approach, rooted in the ancient world as well as biblical and ecclesial traditions, is "wisdom."

The central thesis of this book is at once commonsensical and controversial: the Bible is a wisdom text. Written by many authors and editors over a long period of time in diverse social, religious, and political environments, all of which were markedly different from our own moment in history, this diverse collection of texts seeks to shape the people of God in particular ways—to cultivate certain devotions, beliefs, desires, and actions—to prize some things and to despise others. The question of whether the Bible as a whole represents a *coherent* account of devotions, beliefs, and practices, while debatable, is (at this point in my argument) immaterial. All I mean to argue for now is a formative agenda per se, not necessarily a singular formative agenda. Even though the biblical authors adopted different genres and different modes of literary discourse, and even though there are tensions in the content they present, there is a common intentionality of shaping devotions and moral agency at both the individual and corporate levels. In the ancient world the most common label given to this formative intentionality was that of "wisdom." In this sense, I mean to argue that the whole of the Bible is wisdom.[3]

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[2] Cf. John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, Current Issues in Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 21,

> Both naturalism and supernaturalism are trapped, however, in a competitive understanding of the transcendent and the historical. Either the naturalness of the text is safeguarded by extracting it from any role in God's self-communication, or the relation of the text to revelation is affirmed by removing the text from the historical conditions of its production. Pure naturalism and pure supernaturalism are mirror images of each other; and both are fatally flawed by the lack of a thoroughly theological ontology of the biblical texts. . . . This frankly dualistic framework can only be broken by replacing the monistic and monergistic idea of divine causality with an understanding of God's continuing free presence and relation to the creation through the risen Son in the Spirit's power. In this continuing relation, creaturely activities and products can be made to serve the saving self-presentation of God without forfeiting their creaturely substance, and without compromise to the eschatological freedom of God.

For many this will seem commonsensical, especially given that this has been the majority opinion of the church throughout its history and was uncontroversial in all ages prior to the modern era. Where this proves controversial is in the recognition that the majority of our current reading strategies and critical methodologies, while very good at historical reconstructions, ignore and usually deconstruct this wisdom intentionality. The tools of NT research are designed to answer a set of questions about the origins of early Christianity: the evolution of certain beliefs and practices and the social forces that drove that evolution. These tools are adept at getting *behind* the text to formulate historical reconstructions—using the text as a window into struggling Christian communities working to justify and sustain their existence. This book breaks new ground in its attempts to develop in detail some reading strategies for the NT based on a recognition of the formative agendas that shape NT literature.

Traditional methodologies use detailed textual observations to answer a set of theological-historical questions, but they, by definition, exclude the intentionality of the text, because they separate textual observation from adherence to and sympathy with that intentionality.[4] This does not mean that all (or even most) biblical scholars reject readings of biblical texts that are deeply sympathetic to textual intentionality. It does mean, however, that historical and theological readings are methodologically distinguished as two separate and incommensurable types of reading. Since Johann Philipp Gabler,[5] critical readings have been (ideally) seen as foundational for theological readings, but these theological readings just as often simply sidestep the critical process.[6] As we will see below, this whole methodological scheme is inherently tied to modernist epistemological and metaphysical assumptions.[7] (This is why these tensions simply did not exist before modern biblical criticism and also why premodern exegetical practices often seem foreign to us in their naive lack of "objectivity" in approaching the Bible.)

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[3] This more general sense of "wisdom" is obviously not the same as the restricted sense that biblical scholars typically apply to the "Wisdom literature" of the OT and other early Jewish texts. I have addressed this issue in an appendix on the category of "Wisdom literature" in the history of biblical criticism that situates my use of the category of wisdom within recent discussions within the discipline.

[4] Cf. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 8, "Any new approach to the discipline must extend and indeed develop the Enlightenment's discovery that the task of the responsible exegete is to hear each testament's own voice, and both to recognize and pursue the nature of the Bible's diversity. However, an important post-Enlightenment correction is needed which rejects the widespread historicist's assumption that this historical goal is only objectively realized when the interpreter distances himself from all theology."

[5] While he had his predecessors, most historians of biblical research would trace the formulation of this dichotomy back to the famous 1787 address of Gabler on "The Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology." See John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldridge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *SJT* 33 (1980): 133–58. Gabler defined the rules for the discipline of biblical studies in terms of a division between historical research and theological

Karl Barth put his finger on this tension in describing his fundamental hermeneutical conviction: "To understand an author means for me mainly to *stand with him*, to take each of his words in earnest, so long as it is not proven that he does not deserve this trust, to participate with him in the subject matter, in order to interpret him from the inside out." He contrasts his approach with what he labels the "dominant science of biblical exegesis," which he contends "does not stand with the prophets and the apostles; it does not side with them but rather with the modern reader and his prejudices; it does not take the prophets and apostles in earnest, instead, while it stands smiling sympathetically beside them or above them, it takes up a cool and indifferent distance from them; it critically and merrily examines the historical-psychological surface and misses its meaning."[8] Barth deftly describes the tension between historical and theological interpretations of the Bible.

While deeply sympathetic with Barth's formulations, my goal is actually to take a step beyond them and move past the modernist bifurcations of being/doing, meaning/significance, critical/confessional, fact/value, head/heart, indicative/imperative, and history/theology.[9] This means recognizing

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application. Technically he distinguished "biblical theology" from "dogmatics," where the latter was understood as the theological application of biblical truths to the contemporary needs of the church. Within "biblical theology" he also drew a distinction between "true" biblical theology (historical description) and "pure" biblical theology (universal truths implicit in the Bible). Gabler's influence may not be due to either his originality or inherent genius but more likely his ability to define the discipline in a concise way that was amenable to Enlightenment rationality. Given the metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions of modernism, Gabler's formulation was not so much ingenious as inevitable.

[6] This latter move is dependent on a construal of Barth's theological exegesis that fails to appreciate the central tensions that Barth struggled to resolve in recognizing the revelation of the Word of God in history.

[7] As Brevard Childs opines, "The paradox of much of Biblical Theology was its attempt to pursue a theological discipline within a framework of Enlightenment's assumptions which necessarily resulted in its frustration and dissolution" (*Biblical Theology*, 9).

[8] Quotation taken from Barth's second draft of his preface to the second edition of his *Römerbrief*. See Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 284.

[9] On the whole Barth's project still accepts these fundamental bifurcations. His distinction came in his methodological allegiance to beginning from the side of theological application, based on the foundational revelation of the saving Word of God, not on what human reason can surmise about God.

and embracing the function of biblical text as primarily defined by wisdom formation—and also recognizing that historical research is the path to embracing these texts as wisdom texts—and reading in a way that is sympathetic to their formative agendas. So we will see that the NT texts are not neutral texts that we derive significance from but texts possessing their own material agency that we can choose to reject or to accept in their agendas of shaping and sustaining our deepest convictions, desires, and practices.[10]

Road Map

This is only possible if we first look at the modernist foundations of our reading methodologies and question them (along with their postmodern cousins).[11] So the first two chapters take up the issues of epistemology (chap. 1) and the metaphysical bifurcation of being and action (chap. 2). Chapter 1 will give an account of our modern and postmodern epistemological heritage with a special focus on what this means for biblical hermeneutics. The purpose there will be to describe the relationship between the knower and the known along the lines of a fiduciary formative encounter with the biblical text. At the end of the chapter, I will use John 3 as a test case to contrast a wisdom reading with modern and postmodern readings. Chapter 2 addresses the dichotomy between being and doing that is a foundational component in our Western intellectual furniture and shows how the biblical text resists this dichotomy. Traditional categories of indicative/imperative or theology/ethics that cut the crucial link between gospel faith and gospel obedience make the biblical text opaque to us at this point. The chapter concludes with a reading of Philippians 2 in an attempt to restore this link.

These chapters are ground-clearing exercises, clarifying foundational issues that have historically inhibited our access to the Bible as wisdom. In the same vein, chapter 3 addresses another fundamental dichotomy that impairs our appropriation of the Bible as wisdom: the traditional antithesis between law and gospel, which sets the promises of the gospel over against its demands. We will need to rehearse the history of this dichotomy and its roots in the Reformation teaching on justification. Our goal will be to understand the message of salvation in the gospel as both gift and call, not driving a wedge between faith and repentance (i.e., not jettisoning the necessity of obedience nor disconnecting that obedience from the free gift of salvation). The chapter concludes with a study of John 15 and a brief excursus on the New Perspective on Paul.

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[10] As Markus Bockmuehl argues, "Without facing the inalienably transformative and self-involving demands that these ecclesial writings place on a serious reader, it is impossible to make significant sense of them—or to understand why they were written or how they survived" (*Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*, STI [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006], 46).

[11] To my knowledge the only scholars who have done this with any consistency are Hans-Georg Gadamer, Sandra Schneiders, and Adolf Schlatter. So, for example, Schneiders's recognition of the need for hermeneutics to begin with a theological questioning of the foundation of Enlightenment metaphysics and epistemology: "In short, mainstream biblical criticism has been guided by its espousal of and fascination with a method, namely, historical criticism, rather than by a developed hermeneutical theory. It has not raised the ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions whose answers are integral to any such theory." Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 23.

After this ground-clearing activity of part 1, we move on to develop positive methodologies of how to read the NT as wisdom. Since different genres use different tools to implement wisdom agendas, we will need to examine separately the two primary genres of the NT: gospel and epistle. So part 2 will consist of two chapters on gospels (one theoretical and one exegetical) and two chapters on epistles (one theoretical and one exegetical). We will demonstrate that both of these genres were wisdom genres in the Greco-Roman world appropriated by the early church to realize the formation of young Christian churches in their devotions and practices. We will also develop some reading strategies particular to those genres that recognize their formative agendas. All this is followed by summary insights in a concluding chapter.

Actions, Reasons, and Motivations

To approach the Bible as wisdom presupposes that the redemption of human agency is constitutive of both the message of salvation and the teleology of the biblical text. Traditionally, at least since Aristotle, human agency has been understood through three coreferential lenses: action, reason, and motivation. We judge moral actions based on (1) the action itself, (2) our reason/justification for the action, and (3) our motivation for the action (i.e., what we desire to accomplish in performing it). So, good (or virtuous) actions are seen as an alignment of right actions with right reasons and right motivations. We commonly hear, "He did the right thing but for the wrong reason or with the wrong motivation." And when that happens, in most cases, we mean that what he did was actually not right, or possibly the right thing done poorly.

Right motivations and right reasons can be distinguished with reference to the traditional distinction between the faculties of reason and emotion. Right reason has to do with the question of what makes an action intelligible. How does this action correlate to my understanding of reality in relation to the good? Right motivation speaks to the desires bound up in the performance of an action. For example, how does my desire for relational significance motivate this action? Right motivation has to do with the energy behind the action, while right reason has to do with the context that legitimates that action.

Wisdom texts such as the Bible seek to inform and shape us in all three areas: actions, reasons, and motivations. While "ethics" in the Bible is often associated with commands and prohibitions (e.g., the Ten Commandments), the Bible also contextualizes commands in ways that make them intelligible and desirable. The Bible projects a "moral vision"[12] that renders injunctions to self-denial and love for God and neighbor both reasonable and attractive. When the Bible reorients our pictures of God, self, and world, it gives us a means to value what is truly worthy of our devotions and, conversely, shows what things are less worthy or altogether worthless. Augustine spoke about this in the language of "ordered loves."[13] In fostering wisdom, the Bible reveals the truth of who God is not merely to teach us "theology" but to inform our understanding and affections that we might orient ourselves toward him with a reverence that reflects both his glory and our dependence on that glory.

The idea of "ordered loves" presupposes the possibility of appropriate devotion to all kinds of things that call for our commitments and affections. Some objects of devotion are illegitimate recipients of our allegiance, which the Bible generally associates with idolatry in various forms. But if we remove these idols, we are still left with a vast array of goods worthy of our energies and devotion. The wisdom question is: Which ones should I esteem as most valuable? This is exactly the kind of question that Jesus is answering in his command to "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matt. 6:33). Jesus is prioritizing devotion to the rule of God over all other goods. This involves a relativizing, but not a negation, of other goods. "Seek *first*" does not mean "Seek *only*," but it does recognize that competing devotions can displace the kingdom of God as our primary orienting desire. So Jesus's command does challenge inordinate devotion to lesser goods and prioritizes allegiance to God and his kingdom over all other goods. When Jesus warns his disciples that only those prepared to sacrifice their familial ties are fit to be his disciples (Luke 14:26) does this mean that families are evil? No, but they are a competing devotion, and lesser goods sometimes need to be sacrificed for the sake of greater ones. A good becomes an idol when it receives inordinate devotion.

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[12] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation, A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

[13] Cf. David K. Naugle, *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives: Learning the Deep Meaning of Happiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

Understanding the biblical text in terms of shaping wisdom through a category such as “ordered loves” will help us to see that biblical texts are doing more than simply teaching theology or giving us ethical principles.[14] One helpful shorthand way of accessing this will be to use the simple rubric of right actions, right reasons, and right motivations (hereafter abbreviated as Right ARM[15]). We will see that this rubric is a helpful orienting tool in reading biblical texts in a way that reveals their intentionality to form readers in an integrated act of wisdom formation. The goal of this kind of formation is a life marked by coherent desires, convictions, and actions. The Right ARM rubric is a simple exegetical tool that will help us to see how the biblical text marries these elements in formative ways. We will also discover that these elements are not confined to the corners of the Bible that are concerned with “ethics” but actually describe the material aims of the biblical text across the canon.

Three Clarifications

This book crosses numerous disciplinary boundaries. Such interdisciplinary studies are always open to the liability of oversimplifications, and there will necessarily be some cursory treatments in the pages that follow. While the academy generally approves of interdisciplinary ventures, there are also some interdisciplinary lines that are historically sacred, and their infringement is verboten. In what follows I will incorporate into my study of the NT insights from philosophy, hermeneutics, ethics, literary theory, and linguistics. While these disciplines are often considered ancillary to NT studies, they are also accepted areas of interdisciplinary discussion. But I will also venture into areas of moral psychology, practical theology, and spiritual formation in an effort to move toward what Sandra Schneiders labels “integral interpretation.”[16] While these kinds of cross-disciplinary moves have typically been looked on as unsanctioned infiltrations of “edifying” interpretive agendas, I find that these interdisciplinary discussions are necessitated by the nature of the biblical text itself. Their exclusion is a historically conditioned employment of certain beliefs foundational to modernist understandings of anthropology and epistemology, for which I can salvage only a mild allegiance.

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[14] Many readers will recognize here that the fundamental principles of speech-act theory are assumed in my approach.

[15] I owe this abbreviation to my NT Ethics students Hannah Taylor and Morgan Crago.

[16] Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 3, “Integral transformative interpretation is an interaction between a self-aware reader open to the truth claims of the text and the text in its integrity, that is, an interaction that adequately takes into account the complex nature and multiple dimensions of the text and the reader. Traditional historical critical exegesis, because it deals with the text only as an historical document, is necessary but not sufficient for integral interpretation.”

Second, this book assumes that the redemption of human moral agency is an essential goal of the gospel proclamation as found in the NT. At the same time, I also assume that human moral agency cannot be circumscribed by what we have normally described as "ethics," especially when ethics is understood as moral casuistry within an idealist deontological (Kantian) framework, which is on the whole assumed in the discipline of NT studies when it ventures into ethics. In a way that is similar to virtue ethics (and its Aristotelian foundations), I understand ethics as describing not simply duties but the totality of moral agency entailed in the pursuit of true joy. So alongside moral responsibilities we will need to attend to the processes of moral formation. In a Christian context this also includes what today is loosely called spiritual formation—in that moral agency and moral formation only make sense in the context of how that agency is directed toward God as the giver of all things and whose glory is the proper τέλος of all human loves and actions. Consequently, this means that the categories of ethics, moral formation, and spiritual formation are all interdependent and not independent pursuits. These are all linked and overlapping, but each can still be properly distinguished. As we will see below, the traditions that sharply distinguish these spheres of life are founded on modernist assumptions.[17]

Finally, I owe an apology to every student of the Hebrew Bible: as they in particular will have noticed that I have, up to this point, spoken of the Bible and the NT interchangeably. This is not meant to imply that I believe they are synonymous. As a NT specialist the focus of this book will be on the primary genres of the NT—gospels and epistles—demonstrating how they function as wisdom genres. While my specialized knowledge ends there, my argument does not. I have outlined an argument, in an appendix, that *all* of the biblical genres of the OT and NT are best understood as wisdom genres, that is, as subgenres of wisdom. This conclusion is based on recent discussions about the inherent instability of the traditional constraints placed on certain examples of "Wisdom literature" in biblical and parabiblical texts. I leave it to specialists in the Hebrew Bible to continue the exploration of reading the genres of prophetic literature, psalms, and historical narratives as formative wisdom texts, but I point out in my appendix where that work has already begun.

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[17] So, for example, moral and spiritual formation are often treated as mutually exclusive activities because one deals with external moral action and the other deals with internal spiritual experiences. The explicitly Neo-Platonist spirituality of David G. Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self: The Sacred Journey of Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012), is a prime example. This bifurcation of moral and spiritual formation is dependent, in large measure, on the Cartesian chasm between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.

PART 1

TILLING THE SOIL

1

KNOWING AND READING

A hermeneutic of wisdom has to begin with the foundational questions that define hermeneutics itself. Hermeneutics refers to the self-reflective study of the various processes entailed in acts of communicative agency. As readers of the Bible we enter into a communicative process aimed at "understanding."[1] Hermeneutics attends to that process of understanding by observing it phenomenologically and by formulating guides to best practices and theories that undergird and serve those practices. It defines and promotes certain skills, dispositions, and contexts that foster the process of understanding.

This chapter aims to explore the connection between knowing and reading, or more precisely, epistemology and hermeneutics. Simply put, hermeneutics is a form of applied epistemology because it applies a theory of knowledge to a particular process of arriving at understanding.[2] Every theory of knowledge begins with a picture of the knower and the known—how a person engaged in knowing (the subject) is related to a field of study (the object).[3] In the same way, every hermeneutic assumes some picture of the relationship between the reader and the text. So in working toward a hermeneutic of wisdom our first foundational question will define the reader's stance or "comportment"[4] toward the text. To answer that question, though, we have to ask some basic questions about knowing.

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[1] See Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Gospels and the Reader," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 109, "Understanding, as both Ricoeur and Gadamer insisted, is not simply an epistemological process of arriving at new knowledge. Rather, in the ontological sense of the word understanding denotes the specifically human way of being-in-the-world. Understanding integrates us into reality. Consequently, to come to new understanding is to expand one's existential horizon (and thus to see not only more but also to see differently) and to deepen one's humanity. Gadamer talked about application and Ricoeur about appropriation, but essentially they both intended to designate the transformation of the subject that is effected by an enriched encounter with reality."

[2] Some would say that all of philosophy, including epistemology, is only hermeneutics, or at the very least hermeneutically determined. See, for example, Merold Westphal, *Overcoming*

Modern Knowing and Reading

The modern period gave us two pictures of knowing. The first is represented in Rodin's famous bronze *The Thinker*, in which all of reality is circumscribed in the individual's straining attempt to understand the meaning of human existence. This image is often associated with the philosophical movements of rationalism and subjectivism because it focuses on reason constituted in the subject as the path to understanding. The second modern picture, more prosaic and consequently not commemorated in bronze, is that of the scientist in the white lab coat. This image of empiricism embodies the

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Onto-theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

[3] Traditionally this has been explored in the language of metaphysics. So, we could also say that standing behind every epistemology is a metaphysic (a picture reality) that renders it intelligible. Sometimes the metaphysic is explicit; sometimes it is simply assumed. Modern epistemology had a strong tendency to assume a metaphysic, which was later made explicit, deconstructed, and reformed in postmodernism. As Schneiders says, "Whether or not the interpreter attends to the fact, all particular approaches to interpretation, including those which focus on the reader, imply a philosophically based hermeneutics or global theory of what it means to understand, how the human subject achieves understanding, and what understanding effects. In other words, there is some ontological-epistemological theory operative, at least implicitly, in all interpretive processes" ("Gospels and the Reader," 104).

[4] The basic concept of comportment is how one situates oneself toward or lives in relation to another person or thing. This usage of the word corresponds to that commonly found in English translations of the works of Heidegger (translating German *Verhältnis/verhalten*); see, for example, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 110–18 [117–26]). Cf. M. J. Inwood's observation that for Heidegger "*sich verhalten* suggests 'relating (oneself)' to someone or something." M. J. Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary*, The Blackwell Philosopher Dictionaries (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 135. Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Skillful Coping: Essays on the Phenomenology of Everyday Perception and Action*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 87, says, "For Heidegger 'comportment' denotes not merely acts of consciousness, but human activity in general." He then goes on to quote Heidegger: "Comportments have the structure of directing-oneself-toward, of being-directed-toward." Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 58.

virtues of objective observation and the submission of theories to evidentiary proofs. While these two images are hard to reconcile,[5] they share a similar stance toward reality—that of a subject that stands in a self-referential relationship to its object. The subject is in no way defined by its relation to the object; rather, the subject observes, interprets, and (from a distance) defines what of value is to be found in the object. As Mark Taylor describes it, the "sovereign subject relates only to what it constructs and is, therefore, unaffected by anything other than itself."[6] From this second picture arose a strong tendency in modern thought and practice for knowing to become an act of mastery and overcoming, which also gave rise to technologically driven hopes for social reform.

What has this meant for our reading of the Bible? Primarily, it has meant that the Bible is not something that determines our existence, but instead we as "sovereign subjects" determine the boundaries of its meaning and significance. The Bible is an object to be studied and subdued to fit within our understanding. Extreme, and therefore obvious, examples of this include Thomas Jefferson's cut-and-paste project of editing the Gospels[7] and the plebeian rationalism of Heinrich Paulus.[8] But we misunderstand modern interpretive practices if we only associate them with methods that "critically" question the content of the Bible. The real essence of modern comportment to the text is found in the act of objectifying it and determining what in it is valuable according to criteria congenial to modern prerogatives. The normative image for the modern exegete is the prospector, who sifts through the silt of the text for nuggets of gold. This prospecting stance equally describes "historical-critical" approaches as well as their (more conservative) "grammatical-historical" cousins. Whenever we read the Bible to extract nuggets, we are reading in a modern mode, relating to the text as "sovereign subjects." The three most common "prospecting" modes of reading are reading theologically, reading historically, and reading ethically.

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[5] Kant attempted to reconcile subjectivism and empiricism in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cf. James Van Cleve, "Kant, Immanuel," in *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 230–34.

[6] Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3. Here Taylor is talking specifically about Descartes in his role as the progenitor of the Enlightenment philosophical project. He adds, "In a move that remains decisive for all later thought, Descartes insists that the subject's relation to all otherness is mediated by and derived from its relationship to itself."

[7] Sometimes now referred to as the *Jefferson Bible*, Jefferson published it under the title *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*.

[8] H. E. G. Paulus is famous today for finding creative naturalistic explanations for the miracle accounts in the Gospel narratives. So, Jesus didn't calm a storm at sea; the boat just sailed into calm waters protected by a coastal mountain. Nor did Jesus feed five thousand, but luckily a wealthy family with lots of sandwiches just happened to be passing by. Cf. William Baird, *History of New Testament Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 1:201–8.

In reading theologically we come to a text looking to extract theological nuggets.[9] Our questions are: What is the theology here? What does this text teach me about God? What does this text teach concerning the doctrine of __________ (fill in the blank: Christology, ecclesiology, etc.)? Similarly, reading historically sifts biblical texts for historical data. What does this tell me about when, where, and why someone did something? Where did this theological doctrine come from? Does this text give me data to help me in understanding the development of early Christianity or ancient Israelite religion? Likewise, reading ethically means sifting texts for ethical principles. What is the ethical principle taught, commanded, or implied in this text? How does this text supply foundations for the construction of a Christian ethic?

In the history of NT criticism this resulted in approaching texts as instrumental for unlocking a historical-theological puzzle. The chief questions of this puzzle concentrate on the origins of early Christianity, the genealogical relationships between texts, and the social contexts from which they came. So again the fundamental questions are: What is the doctrine here? Where did it come from? What historical data can be extracted from this text? The most obvious methodology to associate with this project is form criticism, which characterizes small pieces of tradition in terms of their value for historical reconstruction.

To be careful, labeling these modes of reading as modern does not strip them of their value in fostering close observation of the text and yielding fruitful understanding. What is important for our study is recognizing that *our questions are embodiments and expressions of our comportment toward the text*. These questions constitute an act of objectifying the text, treating it as an inert object from which data can be extracted. Some would gladly endorse this approach, while others might resist its implications. In the end, though, regardless of what doctrine of Scripture we might bring to the Bible, when we objectify and propositionalize[10] the text we are taking the stance of a prospector; the text becomes objectified and does not infringe on our sovereign selfhood.

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[9] This differs significantly from the hermeneutical methods associated with the "theological interpretation of Scripture." For a good introduction see Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

[10] Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 266–78. Here he describes how his dramatic canonical-linguistic approach to doctrine moves beyond a "propositionalist" framework for doing theology. Vanhoozer is not criticizing propositions per se, but theological formulations that embody a pseudo-objective outlook in reducing all theological reflection to propositional facts. By contrast, Carl Raschke rejects propositional language *itself* as the essence

So if we wanted to *apply* the text, this would require an *additional* task in our reading of the text. It is in no way tied by necessity to a reading of the text, nor is it demanded by the nature of the text. In fact, if we are committed to a modern approach, application is a violation of a "neutral" methodology because it creates a disturbance in the relationship between the text, as an inert object, and the reader, as a disinterested observer.

So while these modes of reading (theologically, historically, ethically) can bear important fruit, they embody a modern comportment to the text (that incidentally would have been unintelligible to anyone living prior to the eighteenth century). These hermeneutical practices view the text as a repository of knowledge, but one that takes some work to sift through to yield its treasure. As we will see later, this is the reason why, historically, as modern exegetes we have been very poor readers of narratives such as the Gospels and have been happier reading propositional theological material such as the letters of Paul. In Paul there are more nuggets lying on the surface, so it is easier (though not easy) work. Again, all of this is only intelligible in a context dominated by a modern picture of the world, where the attributes that define serious human reflection are objectivity and a reliance on reason as the arbiter of truth. Of course, if those sureties were to shift, our reading practices would necessarily have to shift as well.

Postmodern Knowing and Reading

And, of course, both have shifted. The move from modernism to postmodernism begins with the realization that the subject is not a neutral suprahuman observer but what Kierkegaard called an "existing person,"[11] a finite human person with desires, intentions, perspectives, and prejudices that

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of logocentric theological method. "Language from the Creator's vantage point is not propositional at all. It is intersubjective." Carl A. Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 71.

[11] E.g., "Here it is not forgotten . . . that the subject is existing, and that existing is a becoming, and that truth as the identity of thought and being is therefore a chimera of abstraction and truly only a longing of creation, not because truth is not an identity, but because the knower is an *existing person*, and thus truth cannot be an identity for him as long as he exists." Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols., Kierkegaard's Writings 12 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 196, italics added. He continues, "Modern speculative thought has mustered everything to enable the individual to transcend himself objectively, but this cannot be done. Existence exercises its constraint" (197).

shape their understanding. In the act of knowing the knower introduces herself and all her history into a relationship with the object of knowledge. The modern conceptions of knowledge as something objective, indubitable, and universal now strike our postmodern sensibilities as hopelessly naive and maybe even arrogant. Postmodernism recognizes that all knowing is conditioned by, and to some degree determined by, our history, gender, race, and nationality.

This also means that "knowledge" is most often seen as a construal of reality that reveals more about the subject's vantage point in knowing than it does the object of knowledge, and, therefore, knowledge is only interpretation. In this context all systems of thought come under suspicion as ideological constructs that serve to advance personal and political power. Also, because knowledge is shaped by sociological factors (such as race or gender), it becomes particular to a social class, formative for its own self-identity. Each social group has its own interpretation of reality that reinforces that group's cohesion and furthers its agendas.[12]

What does all this mean for reading the Bible? First, the old idea of the *wissenschaftlich*[13] observer reading the text neutrally is already a distant memory.[14] In contrast, it means that the reader is an active agent who comes to the text with intentions and expectations of what the text will say. From this many have emphasized the "openness" of the text and the reader's role in creating meaning (e.g., reader-response criticism).[15] In terms of our comportment to the text, this means that we are not neutral observers but bring our whole selves into the circle of the text and that the movement toward understanding involves a dialectic engagement with the text.

Postmodernism also provides us with a different account of what the text itself is. In the modern mode of interpretation the text was an inert object, a repository of facts, to be mined for different types of information.[16] By contrast, in postmodern understanding the text is an active force that advances toward the reader with its own agendas. The biblical authors, in giving their interpretations of ideas and events, promote ideological structures that create a privileged space for the faithful. So the Bible itself projects interpretive schemes on reality that legitimate the social structures and political agendas of Israel and the NT church. So, in this context, the Bible's ideological construals need to be exposed (e.g., socio-rhetorical criticism)[17] and perhaps refashioned into something more palatable (e.g., feminist criticism).[18]

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[12] Cf. the classic study by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967).

[13] German adjective meaning something between "scientific" and "scholarly"; it carries a strong connotation of emphasizing objective scientific observation as the mark of scholarly activity.

[14] Its demise has been long coming. More than a century ago (in 1909) Adolf Schlatter argued that "a historical sketch can only take shape in the mind of a historian, and . . . in this process the historian himself, with all his intellectual furniture, is involved. If this fact is lost sight of, then it is no longer science (*Wissenschaft*) in which we are involved, but crazy illusions." Adolf Schlatter, "The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics," in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter*, ed. Robert Morgan, SBT (London: SCM, 1973), 125–26.

[15] See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Advances in Semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

In the end we are left with a much more complex picture of agency on the part of both the reader and the text itself, where the two meet with their own agendas and preunderstandings, and hermeneutical understanding arising from a dialectic movement directed by the reader from a standpoint of suspicion. While this picture of comportment differs strongly from the lab-coat image of the modern paradigm, it still shares with it the conviction that the reader is the reference point for the dialectic process. The principle of the "sovereign subject," although sometimes tempered with the notion of "reading communities,"[19] has proven resilient in surviving the shift from modernism to postmodernism.

Sapiential Knowing and Reading

How then would a hermeneutic of wisdom relate to the hermeneutical traditions of modernism and postmodernism? In attempting to formulate a stance of engagement with the text, a wisdom hermeneutic would agree with the postmodern critique of "neutral" modern accounts as idealistic and inadequate explanations of the role of the reader in understanding the biblical text. It would likewise affirm postmodern appreciation for the agency of the text in the process of understanding (i.e., that the text is not an inert, neutral object of study). So it would likewise critique previous hermeneutical approaches that sift texts for propositions as not only indebted to modernist epistemology but as highly disruptive textual raids, often insensitive to the integrity and intentionality of the text.[20] At the same time, while modern approaches have tended to atomize the text, it must be admitted that postmodern approaches have not always had the best track record in preserving the voice of the text and can just as easily make the text a cipher for a host of agendas amenable to postmodern concerns.

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[16] Cf. Schneiders, "Gospels and the Reader," 97, "Texts were [treated as] free-standing semantic containers in which a single, stable meaning was intentionally embedded by the author. The meaning in the biblical texts was presumed to be primarily information about history. Thus, the task of the biblical scholar was primarily if not exclusively to extract from the text what it had to say about history."

[17] Cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 51, "Kyriocentric language . . . constructs reality in a certain way and then mystifies its own constructions by naturalizing them. . . . Consequently, a hermeneutics of suspicion is best understood as a deconstructive practice of inquiry that denaturalizes and demystifies practices of domination."

[18] See Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 52. She argues for a methodology that "seeks to displace the kyriocentric dynamic of the biblical text in its literary and historical contexts by *recontextualizing* the text in a sociopolitical-religious model of reconstruction that aims at making the subordinated and marginalized 'others' visible again. . . . Such a hermeneutics of remembrance utilizes *constructive methods of revisioning* insofar as it seeks not only for historical retrieval but also for a religious reconstitution of the world." Italics added.

[19] E.g., Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

The point of departure for a hermeneutic of wisdom from both of these traditions is found in Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment's foundational "prejudice against prejudice."[21] The man in the white lab coat operates without prejudice, presuppositions, or preconceived notions shaped by either ideology or personal biography.[22] His knowledge is distinguished from mere opinion and belief by the ruthless exclusion of preconceptions and personal motivations. According to Gadamer, this comportment to reality defined the Enlightenment in all its pursuits, whether intellectual, artistic, religious, or political.[23]

What became clear in existentialist thinkers such as Heidegger is that knowledge without prejudice that is objective and indubitable is only possible for a supratemporal being who enjoys absolute knowledge (i.e., God). Human knowledge is historically conditioned. We each live in our own place and time with our own personal histories that shape our understanding. Postmodernism,

[20] Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 332, "Thus for the historian it is a basic principle that tradition is to be interpreted in a sense *different* than the texts, of themselves, call for. He will always go back behind them and the meaning they express to inquire in the reality they express *involuntarily*. . . . The historian's interpretation is concerned with something that is not expressed in the text itself and need have nothing to do with the intended meaning of the text." Italics added.

[21] He famously argued that "the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself." Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 273.

[22] No one has done a better job of exposing the positivist mythology of the scientific method than Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

[23] These ideas were especially compelling in the context of the Enlightenment's project to forge a new basis for European societies to coexist in the aftermath of religious wars (such as the Thirty Years' War). Knowledge, worthy to become a basis for new societal structures, must be objective and indubitable—true for everyone, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, French or German. Cf. John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1990).

as a child of existentialism, recognizes this reality and rightly concludes on this basis that there is no nonprejudicial knowledge, only our historically conditioned interpretations. What is curious at this point is that postmodernism did not question the definition of knowledge it inherited from modernism (i.e., knowing entails the absence of "prejudice" in the objective grasp of reality). In this respect postmodernism safeguarded its modern heritage. This is surprising, first, because of the disdain that postmodernism usually holds for anything smacking of modernist DNA. Second, it ignored the rich heritage in the Western tradition of definitions of knowledge that account for the finitude and historical embeddedness of human existence.

Believing and Reading

Alfred North Whitehead once quipped that all European philosophy is simply "a series of footnotes to Plato."[24] By this he didn't mean to belittle the work of subsequent philosophical reflections, including his own, but simply that Plato had laid out the chess board that all philosophers have played with since. In the area of epistemology the Western tradition inherited two models from Plato.[25] In *The Republic* Plato says that knowledge "is related to what is, and knows what is as it is."[26] Knowledge is the participatory apprehension of being. Plato argued that because true being is unchanging, so also true knowledge is unchanging and indubitable. From this he went on to distinguish knowledge from opinion (i.e., belief).[27] He defines opinion as something between ignorance and knowledge. Opinion is fallible; knowledge is unchanging and infallible. This definition of knowledge, and the corresponding contrast between belief and knowledge, became a staple for those after Plato and mother's milk for the Enlightenment definition of knowledge as an infallible, objective truth that is grasped indubitably.

But Plato gave a second, alternate picture of knowing that actually defines knowledge as a form of belief. In his *Theatetus* he describes knowledge as "true belief accompanied by a rational account [μετὰ λογού]."[28] Here, in contrast

[24] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Harper, 1960), 63.

[25] See the excellent discussion of these two Platonic epistemologies in Dewey J. Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 1–33.

[26] Plato, *The Republic* §477b, trans. Desmond Lee (New York: Penguin, 1974), 271.

[27] At §534 he describes belief (πίστις) as a form of opinion (δόξα).

[28] Plato, *Theatetus* §201c–d, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Penguin, 1987), 115. Cf. Plato's *Meno* §§97–98.

to his statements in *The Republic*, Plato defines knowledge not in *contrast* to belief but as a *type* of belief. Knowledge is a true belief that can account for that belief reasonably, in terms of the content of the belief and a justification for it. Plato still distinguishes knowledge from opinion, but according to different criteria—the conditions of (1) *true* belief and (2) a "rational account" that accompanies that true belief. Admittedly, this account of knowledge gives rise to a host of difficult questions such as, "How do I know when a belief is a *true* belief?" and "What qualifies as a reasonable account?" But these questions are no more irksome than the questions that arise from *The Republic* account, such as, "How do I know when I have known 'what is as it is'?" In fact, they are just different formulations of the same questions about how to justify claims to know.

Both of these Platonic accounts of knowing may sound strange to our ears, but through our Enlightenment heritage the first will sound more natural than the second. Enlightenment philosophers rarely embraced Plato's metaphysics and thus made very different connections between being and knowing,[29] but at the same time, as we have seen, the dichotomy of knowledge and belief is well ingrained in our historical consciousness coming from the Enlightenment.

But in recent years there has been a shift among philosophers toward Plato's second account of knowledge. In the last few decades it has become a commonplace for analytic philosophers to define knowledge, in language reminiscent of Plato, as "justified true belief."[30] These philosophers, recognizing human finitude, have attempted to give shape to an epistemological understanding that recognizes the necessary element of belief in all knowledge. While much of the discussion among these philosophers has been concerned with what "justifies" belief,[31] what is important for our project is that we have a philosophical tradition going back to Plato that defines knowledge not in contrast to belief but as a form of belief. Therefore, we need not see belief as an *impediment* to true understanding but as a (potential) catalyst for it. This creates new possibilities for understanding the relationship between the "knower and the known"[32] and between the reader and the text.

A good example of this is the work of the chemist and philosopher Michael Polanyi. In articulating an understanding of scientific knowledge, Polanyi rejects the traditional understanding of science as a strictly objective enterprise moving from observable data to theory. He demonstrates that scientific pursuits primarily entail the habituated skill of using tacit knowledge to judge the relevance of data in solving a question that first arose from a scientist's intuitive hypothesis. Polanyi describes scientific research as an act of "personal knowledge" in which the desires and convictions of the scientist (e.g., the beauty of order, and the desire to understand) play key roles in knowledge. He argues: "We must now recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an [intellectual] idiom and of cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework."[33] Polanyi rejects the "white-lab-coat" picture of epistemology by deconstructing the white lab coat itself and providing an alternate account of scientific knowledge as dependent on intuition and personal commitments. He argues that a "fiduciary framework" is both *necessary* and *fruitful* in furthering scientific discovery.

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[29] E.g., the *cogito ergo sum* of Descartes in significant ways inverts the metaphysics of Plato by deriving being from knowledge instead of understanding knowledge as a participation in being.

[30] See, for example, the classic work by Roderick M. Chisholm, *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957).

[31] E.g., William P. Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[32] See, for example, the monograph by that name, Marjorie G. Grene, *The Knower and the Known* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966).

From here it is not a huge leap to the ancient dictum of Augustine *credo ut intellegam* (I believe in order to understand).[34] For Augustine faith creates a fertile place for understanding to flourish. Augustine does not speak of belief as either a competitor with or component of knowledge.[35] Faith does not replace knowledge or fill in gaps in the field of knowledge. In his principle of *credo ut intellegam* Augustine is not chiefly concerned with giving belief a theoretical epistemological grounding, or even primacy, but rather in describing faith as a comportment to life that leads to deeper understanding. As James Peters puts it, faith for Augustine is "an act of trust enabling us slowly to gain in self-understanding and see through the veil of our limited comprehension."[36]

So in Plato, Augustine, and Polanyi we have examples, embedded in our intellectual tradition, of a fiduciary epistemology that acknowledges human finitude—where knowledge is defined as a species of belief and where belief can be a catalyst to understanding.[37] This is not an a priori argument for the legitimacy of belief per se, where belief necessarily leads to true knowledge, but rather an argument against the a priori exclusion of belief as a possible component in knowledge.

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[33] Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 266.

[34] A point that Polanyi himself acknowledges; see *Personal Knowledge*, 266.

[35] Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Practices of Belief: Selected Essays*, ed. Terence Cuneo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2:334–49.

[36] James R. Peters, *The Logic of the Heart: Augustine, Pascal, and the Rationality of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 64.

[37] There are many others who could be included in this tradition. See, for example, John Milbank, "Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (New York: Routledge, 1999), where Milbank discusses, among others, J. G. Hamann

So what does this mean for reading the Bible? If Augustine is right about belief being an instrumental agent in understanding, then it means that belief can play a positive role in reading well. Again, this is in contrast to modernism, which sees precommitments as something to be excluded, and postmodernism, which sees precommitments as wholly determinate in shaping understanding. But, as Gadamer argues, "If we want to do justice to man's finite, historical mode of being, it is necessary to fundamentally rehabilitate the concept of prejudice and acknowledge the fact that there are *legitimate* prejudices."[38] Gadamer's point is not that all prejudices are legitimate or beneficial. As we will see shortly, he recognizes that presuppositions can be deceptive and sabotage the process of understanding. At the same time, he recognizes that all our understanding as finite knowers is dependent on a web of preunderstandings and that sometimes these preunderstandings are "hermeneutically productive."[39]

Tradition and Difference

In referring to our "historical mode of being," Gadamer recognizes our lives and patterns of thought as conditioned by our environment and experiences. An important element in this is our historical connection to those that have shaped the environment of our intellectual landscape in the past (i.e., traditions). Our "prejudices" are deeply shaped by the traditions we participate in, whether we choose to consciously embrace those traditions or not. Gadamer sees tradition as an inescapable and (sometimes) fruitful catalyst to understanding. "Research in the human sciences cannot regard itself as in an absolute antithesis to the way in which we, as historical beings, relate to the past. At any rate, our usual relationship to the past is not characterized by distancing and freeing ourselves from tradition. Rather we are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process—i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. . . . To be situated within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but *makes it possible*."[40]

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and F. H. Jacobi and their critiques of Enlightenment epistemology from the perspective of an Augustinian tradition.

[38] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 278. Italics added.

[39] Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 284.

[40] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283, 354. Italics added. On the role of tradition in scientific research see Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 53–54, 160–71.

Tradition is a given in shaping our hermeneutical stance toward the text. The picture of the reader as a tabula rasa, standing in isolation from any reality that may condition interpretation, fails to reckon with our nature as historically constituted persons. As Gadamer says, "Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition."[41] All readings of texts take place within a space created by some tradition or set of traditions.[42]

Gadamer also recognizes that, when it comes to "traditionary" texts such as the Bible, the text itself is generative of tradition. The tradition is not identical with the text, but the tradition is informed by the "effects" the text has produced in previous generations.[43] A primary evidence of this is the set of questions with which we approach a text. The questions we bring to the text are an embodiment of an inherited stance to the text, a perfect example of "participating in an event of tradition."

At the same time, the true insight of Gadamer was to see that although we read from the standpoint of a tradition shaped by the text, real understanding only comes when we meet the text as a stranger, as something outside ourselves and our tradition. Recognizing that we read within a tradition does not mean that our reading *necessarily* becomes just a rehearsal of that tradition (although it can easily become that). Reading within a tradition simply means we recognize the historical conditionality of our knowledge and that traditions arise from a chain of historically conditioned communities. The text is not identical to this tradition but possesses its own voice, which has shaped the tradition but also continually questions it.[44] So true hermeneutical understanding comes as an exercise that moves *through* tradition to an encounter with the text as something other.[45] Gadamer argues that the "true locus of hermeneutics" is found "in the play between the traditionary text's strangeness and familiarity to us, between being a historically intended, distanced object and belonging to a tradition."[46] He gives a description of the process of understanding that this creative tension produces:

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[41] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291. Whole sentence originally italicized.

[42] Cf. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). MacIntyre argues, critiquing the doctrines of modern liberalism, that all rational inquiry is a "tradition-constituted" enterprise.

[43] See Gadamer's discussion of "*Wirkungsgeschichte*" in *Truth and Method*, 299–305, and the work of his student Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). On the whole, biblical studies has filtered Gadamer through Jauss and understood *Wirkungsgeschichte* as a synonym for reception history, which is certainly not what it meant for Gadamer. Gadamer's primary point is that the history of effects is something every interpreter is conditioned by *in the act of interpreting*. Therefore, for him, *Wirkungsgeschichte* cannot become another object for historical research, as though the biblical interpreter could stand outside the history of effects. Cf. Mark Knight, "*Wirkungsgescichte*, Reception History, Reception Theory," *JSNT* 33, no. 2 (2010): 137–46. Also see Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 159–61.

[44] The questioning of tradition from within the tradition is a sign of a tradition's continuing vitality. This is in contrast to a tradition that has become simply a repetition of the slogans of the past, which fails to recognize the historical conditionality of both the past and the present. It is

> A person trying to understand something will not resign himself from the start to relying on his own accidental fore-meanings, ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text. . . . [A] hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither "neutrality" with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own biases, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings.[47]

No one reads the Bible apart from some tradition, whether those traditions come from Augustine, Luther, Spinoza, or Durkheim. Real hermeneutical insight, as described by Gadamer, comes through a dispositional openness to the voice of the text and a willingness to be guided by it. Tradition can aid us in developing our sensitivities to the text. Naturally, it will help us to see things that easily resonate with itself. At the same time, the light of tradition can easily blind us from things that do not resonate with it. In our comportment to the text, while we come with a fiduciary outlook, we come expecting to be met by something other than our own self-consciousness constituted in tradition; we come expecting an encounter that redirects and challenges us.

Miroslav Volf describes an analogous comportment in talking about the process of reconciliation beginning with "open arms" toward the other: "Open arms are a sign that I have *created space* in myself for the other to come in and that I have made a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by the other."[48] Both reconciliation and sensitive readings require an act

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also in contrast to the Enlightenment's naive repudiation of all tradition, itself now a tradition well rooted in our consciousness.

[45] Cf. Schneiders, "Gospels and Reader," 110, "The text is not simply an object. The process of reading involves a co-construction of the text by the reader. But that construction is a response to an 'other' which places demands on the reader. In other words, the text is not a subject in the same sense that the reader is. The reader must come to terms with the reality of the text which is neither absolutely determined nor totally indeterminate."

[46] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295.

[47] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 271–72.

[48] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 141.

of making space for the other in the self, whether we define the “self” as the individual or the reading community. We do not meet the text as a complete self-sufficient whole with an impermeable boundary, but with a recognition and expectation that our identity will be reshaped in response to our encounter with the text. Fundamentally, this means that a wisdom comportment to the text recognizes it cannot predetermine the process of reorientation; one can create a space, but one cannot predetermine its shape.[49]

In this, again, we have to recognize the text as a material agency. In contrast to postmodern approaches, which still tend to embody the Enlightenment ideal of the “sovereign subject,” a wisdom comportment recognizes the authority of the text, as wisdom, to remold the reader in the dialectic exercise of reading. This is not a collapsing of the reader into the text, but the reader’s expectation of a life-giving voice from the text in what Gadamer calls “the ability to open ourselves to the superior claims the text makes.”[50] As Richard Burnett explains, this comportment was central to Barth’s hermeneutical approach:

> For Barth understanding the Bible or any other text has to do with bringing the right presuppositions to the task of interpretation, that is, presuppositions appropriate to the text’s subject matter. It is dependent on a “living context

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[49] Paul J. Griffiths connects this expectation to a comportment toward all of life that he labels “living datively”:

> Human existence, yours and mine and all of ours, is first lived datively, as people addressed, called, and gifted; and only secondarily nominatively, as subjects looking out over a world displayed for our delectation and consumption. . . . To live nominatively is to live as a grammatical and psychological subject, an “I” looking out at and manipulating the world. In this mode, the world is the field of your gaze: it assumes the status of something looked at, something spread passively before you for your delectation and manipulation. You, the looker, the gazing subject, as the active one, the one who initiates, undertakes, performs, and controls. By contrast, to live datively is to live confronted and addressed by a world that questions, forms, and challenges you, the one addressed. It is to live in a world prior to and independent of yourself, a given world, presented unasked, whose overwhelming presence presses you into a responsive mold whether you like it or not. (*Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009], 31–32)

He continues,

> Agency, on this model, belongs as much to the given world as to the perceiving subject responding to it. And this is a more adequate and accurate way of describing the relation between world and person than an exclusive emphasis on the nominative life. You are constantly confronted and addressed by a world not of your making and largely beyond your comprehension and control. The sensory arrays that appear before you, the fabric of time that enmeshes you, the manifold of language in which you have your *habitus*, the social order in which your roles are given to you, the sea of faces of human others, constantly addressing you, calling you into being—all these make of you an indirect object and give you a dative, which is to say a called and donated life. (32)

[50] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 310.

> which . . . is *given* in the subject matter and in which one must *be*." Far from any non-participatory distancing of oneself, interpretation requires the most intense form of participation and personal engagement. . . . As Barth later said, "Neutrality is really a decision of unbelief." This is what the dominant science of biblical exegesis had failed in his view to understand.[51]

This comportment to the givenness of the text through sympathetic prejudices, what Richard Hays describes elsewhere as a "hermeneutic of trust,"[52] is essential in recognizing the Bible as Scripture, as the canonical text that has governed the life of the church for centuries. When we recognize the Bible as the Word of God, then we come with an expectation of not simply reading a "traditionary" text but a text that God uses to realize the fruits of his goodness in his people. This conviction was embodied in the Reformation slogan "Christ rules His church through the teaching and preaching of the Word."[53] We meet the Bible as something other because of its historically conditioned nature but also because it is the saving self-revelation of God. So in recognizing the agency of the text we also recognize the superintending creative agency of God.

To read the Bible as Scripture, though, is not simply an approach that we chose to superimpose on a "neutral" text, as a self-generated element we add to it. Again that is to fall prey to the myth of the "sovereign subject" who from the self determines the significance of the text.[54] Historically, these texts became canon and Scripture because the church recognized their *inherent* claims to authority.[55] To read these texts well means attending to their own claims to speak with a voice that calls forth and produces faith.[56] A fiduciary transformational comportment to the text is rooted in recognizing and accepting the inherent "illocutionary force"[57] of the biblical text and seeking to be shaped by this force.[58]

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[51] Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 115–16. In his article "Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie," *BFCT* 9 (1905): 229–50, Schlatter makes the same point about the inherent unbelief embedded in the methodological "neutrality" of biblical studies. See Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: A Biography of Germany's Premier Biblical Theologian*, trans. Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 211–25. Cf. Stephen F. Dintaman, *Creative Grace: Faith and History in the Theology of Adolf Schlatter*, American University Studies Series VII: Theology and Religion 152 (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 75–104.

[52] Cf. Richard B. Hays, "A Hermeneutic of Trust," in *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 190–201.

[53] In the Reformation era the chief implication was that it was not the pope who ruled the church but Jesus himself, through the agency of the Spirit in and through the preaching of his Word.

[54] Cf. Heidegger, *Problems*, 64, "Because the usual separation between a subject with its imminent sphere and an object with its transcendent sphere—because, in general, the distinction between an inner and an outer is constructive and continually gives occasion for further constructions, we shall in the future no longer speak of a subject, of a subjective sphere, but shall understand the being to whom intentional comportments belong as *Dasein*, and indeed in such a way that it is precisely with the aid of *intentional comportment*, properly understood, that we attempt to characterize suitably the being Dasein." Here "Dasein" is understood as the human person immersed in the world. As George Steiner puts it, "Dasein is 'to be there' (*da-sein*), and 'there' is the world: the concrete, literal, actual, daily world. To be human is to

Reading and Seeking Wisdom

So a hermeneutic of wisdom begins with a certain stance toward the text that defines the relationship of the reader and the text in terms of a fiduciary engagement. But what sort of questions will a hermeneutic of wisdom ask of the text? We have seen how different approaches, embodying different epistemological outlooks, have asked different questions of the text. In a hermeneutic of wisdom we are seeking a certain kind of knowledge—one that fosters wisdom and leads us in a path of life. Wisdom is a practical knowledge lived out in concrete agency shaped by desire. Because wisdom seeks to shape human life, not just inform the intellect, the whole person is engaged in the hermeneutical process. When we enter the circle of the text looking for

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be immersed, implanted, rooted in the earth, in the quotidian matter-of-factness of the world." George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 83.

[55] Cf. Bruce Manning Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 282–88. Also see Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, trans. H. De Jongste, Biblical and Theological Studies (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1988), 49–76.

[56] Cf. Schlatter, "Theology of New Testament and Dogmatics," 122, "The word with which the New Testament confronts us intends to be believed, and so rules out once and for all any sort of neutral treatment. As soon as the historian sets aside or brackets the question of faith, he is making his concern with the New Testament and his presentation of it into a radical and total polemic against it."

[57] Illocutionary force refers to the intentionality encoded in the text as a performative communicative act. Vanhoozer deftly defines illocutionary force: "Words do not simply label; sentences do not merely state. Rather, in using language we do any number of things: question, command, warn, request, curse, bless and so forth. A speech act has two aspects: propositional content and illocutionary force, the 'matter' and 'energy' of communicative action. The key notion is that of illocution, which has to do not simply with locuting or uttering words but with what we do in uttering words." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 118.

[58] Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 37–57. See J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 8, "The word of God in Scripture is something that encounters us again and again; it surprises, confuses, and enlightens us because through Scripture we encounter the triune God himself."

wisdom we bring our whole person: beliefs, convictions, devotions, hopes, and fears. Reading entails a knowledge of self ordered to the reality of God, the creation, and other people, because the fulfillment of our most significant human desires is inextricably linked to life in community.

The questions of wisdom are the questions of human flourishing: What should I pursue to experience fulfillment, and how should I pursue it? What is worth giving my life to, and what will I get in return? What realities determine what I should value in life? In contrast to modern philosophy, which focused its energies on the questions of knowledge (epistemology), ancient philosophy concerned itself chiefly with these basic questions of life and human flourishing. Aristotle, for example, in attempting to understand what human life ought to be directed at, reasoned that the most fundamental human desire is for εὐδαιμονία (happiness/contentment/joy). We seek after other things (e.g., wealth, family, and vocation) in order to be happy, but we don't seek happiness in order to get something else. From this Aristotle concluded that happiness must be the *chief* good that we desire. Augustine followed Aristotle in saying that the desire for happiness is a universal characteristic for human beings and an element in being constituted as God's image bearers.[59] Both Aristotle and Augustine recognized that there are innumerable (potential) paths to happiness just as there are innumerable obstacles to it. This is why both of them took discernment/wisdom (φρόνησις) to be the central virtue in the pursuit of contentment, because wisdom is needed to discern the right path in a journey through innumerable incommensurable goods.

Again, what might this mean for reading the Bible? We have talked already about how a hermeneutic of wisdom comes to the text with a comportment that expects an encounter that will form our consciousness and agency. We can add to that an expectation that the text will work in some way to recalibrate my understanding and loves, how I look at myself, God, and the world, and what I seek after as most valuable in the pursuit of happiness, as defined by some retuned criteria. The Bible, as a wisdom book, is written to communicate a vision of the world that not only names and values particulars but that contextualizes concrete moral actions and sustains moral integrity. In reading we expect to find a vision that reorients our lives, in how we see the world and how we live in it, in what we believe and what we love. To read for wisdom is to be attentive to how the Bible, as a voice from outside our own idolatrous construals of reality, challenges and retunes our understanding and desires, and to consciously open ourselves to that process.[60] The goal of that process is a deeper understanding that is further developed in and through concrete moral actions. Reading well and doing good are mutually sustaining actions in spiritual formation.

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[59] See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, book 13. Cf. Luigi Gioia, *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's De Trinitate*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 41–43.

So hermeneutical understanding in the context of wisdom entails a holistic comportment, which brings the whole person, in all their historical conditionality, with all their conceptions, values, and affections, into the space created by the text. Wisdom eschews any claim to a self-sustaining field of reference but instead assumes a fiduciary transformational stance, expecting a reorientation of those same conceptions, values, and affections in a dialectic engagement with the text. This means that the whole person, in all their faculties, is involved in this dialectic movement toward understanding. The emotions, for example, as expressions of desire, play a hermeneutically productive role in their receptivity to the rhetorical dynamics of the text.[61] Likewise, they also enter into the process of reorientation by coming into direct contact with the world of the text and the desires that it endorses. Of course, desires, like other elements of preunderstanding, can hijack hermeneutical inquiry, but the answer to this problem is not to deny their necessary role in the hermeneutical process.[62] This would entail a flight from reality in failing to recognize all the elements that constitute our historical conditionality in approaching the text, because our desires are what bring us to the text in the first place. We come to the text in need of wisdom. We come seeking life.

A Test Case: Reading John 3

So what does all this look like in practice? It might be helpful at this point to turn to an example and see how different hermeneutical stances produce very different readings. We will take John 3 as a test case, giving in turn a modern reading of the text, followed by a postmodern reading, and then a wisdom reading. In this way we will see how these different reading modalities ask different questions and get different answers from the text, and we will also get something of the flavor of these three hermeneutical approaches.

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[60] This assumes an Augustinian anthropology in which the process of reform is continually necessary.

[61] I take emotions here, as distinct from feelings or moods, to be an unmediated human faculty operating in different modes (e.g., grief, joy, anger) to ascribe value to objects of possible devotion. Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 19–88, where she speaks of emotions as “judgments of value.” This means that emotions are primarily a moral faculty, instrumental in moral deliberation and the apprehension of the comparative value of competing goods. Therefore, the emotions are central to any project of moral and spiritual formation.

[62] Cf. Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer, Yale Studies in Hermeneutics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 117, “The point is not to exclude the anticipations of meaning implicit in our questions but to foreground them so that the texts that we are trying to understand can answer them all the more clearly.”

A Modern Reading

So what would a modern reading of John 3 look like? A modern comportment, again, seeks to sift texts for information that will aid in answering a set of questions regarding the historical origins of Christianity. Methodologically, this means that the text is treated as a repository of encrypted historical-theological data that must be deciphered and synthesized. The basic questions brought to the text focus on ideas and their genealogical relationships, and how the historical development of tradition became solidified in the form of the text.

So in John 3, where there are three distinct sections in the discourse (1–21, 22–30, and 31–36),[63] there is a long history of discussions about different traditions that stand behind the text and why these sections were stitched together in their present form. So, for example, Rudolf Bultmann argues that verses 31–36 originally came directly after verse 21 and that 22–30, which pertain to John the Baptist, were added later.[64] Similarly, Rudolf Schnackenburg argues that 31–36 belong to the kerygma of the evangelist and should follow the proper end of the Nicodemus dialogue in verse 12.[65]

The awkward intrusion of verses 22–30 has led most to consider this scene about John the Baptist as an independent piece of tradition introduced at this point to facilitate certain agendas of the evangelist.[66] Verse 22 has caused particular consternation because it portrays Jesus as having a ministry of baptism concurrent with John in Judea, which does not agree with the Synoptic portrayal of Jesus's ministry (sans baptism) beginning in Galilee *after* John's arrest (cf. Mark 1:14). The narrator's aside in 3:24 that these things happened *before* John's arrest likely underlines the Fourth Evangelist's awareness of this tension in the traditions. Naturally, many have brought into question the historical reliability of the Johannine witness at this point.

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[63] See John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 277–80. One could also take 16–21 as a separate discourse unit, since it is unclear how it relates to the previous verses. It is also common to include the end of chap. 2 (2:23–25) in this pericope (e.g., George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2nd ed., WBC 36 [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999], 45–46). It clearly functions as a transitional text between 2:13–22 and 3:1–15 and sets up the context from the Nicodemus discourse, but the transition of the introduction of a new character (Nicodemus) in 3:1 is enough to signal the opening of a new discourse unit. Cf. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 115.

[64] Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. George R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 131–32. See the rebuttal of the coherence of this reconstruction in C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 309.

[65] Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, trans. Cecily Hastings and Kevin Smyth (New York: Seabury, 1968–82), 1:380.

[66] Brown proposes that these verses are displaced from their original context in 1:19–34. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966–70), 1:154.

This skepticism is often paired with questions about the purpose of this passage in the context of its composition. Bultmann argues, "It ought not to be difficult to see that this scene . . . is a literary composition, reflecting the rivalry between the sects of the Baptist and Jesus, nor to see that the Baptist . . . is a figure from the Christian interpretation of history."[67] From this Bultmann concludes that this passage is a "*free composition* of the Evangelist"[68] with little, if any, historical tradition behind it. While there are some who would disagree with this assessment and argue for a more substantial element of historical tradition here,[69] what is important for our discussion is not who has made the best historical judgment (although this remains an important question). What we see here is different scholars giving different answers to the *same questions*. So while there are strong differences in answers that are given to questions such as these in John 3, all the exegetes share the questions and the methods of answering them, which are embodiments of a modern epistemological outlook. It does not then follow that these questions are bad or the information they produce is of little value. We are only trying to recognize that these are questions of a certain type that produce information of a certain kind.

Another chief concern of a modernist hermeneutic is tracing the genealogical origins of ideas. So, much talk is given to questions of the "new birth" ("born again" or "born from above"),[70] its place in early Christian thought, and the formative influences of various Hellenistic and Jewish ideas of rebirth or metamorphosis.[71] Bultmann, for example, sees John transposing gnostic notions of rebirth into Christian language.[72] By contrast, George Beasley-Murray sees an idea derived from Jewish eschatology.[73] Along with the theme of new birth is a well-rehearsed controversy on what new birth "of water and the Spirit" (v. 5) might mean. John has already introduced the concept of divine agency in regeneration in the prologue (1:13), so tying new birth to the Spirit is not surprising. The controversy focuses on the significance of the water. Is this a reference to baptism, and if so, what kind of baptism? Or is "water and the Spirit" a hendiadys, where water adds a symbolic adornment to a reference to the Spirit? Good arguments have been adduced for both approaches;[74] Schnackenburg (a Roman Catholic) sees a clear reference to Christian baptism,[75] while Andreas Köstenberger (an evangelical Protestant) sees none.[76]

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[67] Bultmann, *John*, 167.

[68] Bultmann, *John*, 167. Italics original.

[69] E.g., Beasley-Murray, *John*, 54, argues, "While at one time a number of scholars considered this a reflection back into the ministry of later rivalry between the Church and the followers of John, most now see this as a remnant of primitive tradition unknown to the synoptists." Cf. C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 279–87.

[70] Various solutions have been given to the question of whether ἄνωθεν should be read as "again" (because Nicodemus takes it this way) or "from above" (because Jesus takes it this way). Most see the double meaning of the word in play in the typically Johannine misunderstanding on the part of Nicodemus, but there is still variation on which sense is "primary" and what historical tradition might stand behind it, especially since the wordplay is only operative in Greek. See Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:367–68.

Again, the differences, though significant, are outweighed by the consensus on the methods of inquiry. What is of concern here is the explication of ideas present in the text and their genealogical connections to traditions both inside and outside the early church. The force that this text is meant to have on the faithful reader (or reading community) is not within the horizon of discovery. It is not a question on the table for modernist historical-theological inquiry. Such questions are out of the bounds of justifiable scholarly investigation, regardless of one's theological predilections, because they violate the "lab-coat" comportment to the text that is encoded in modern hermeneutical practices.

A Postmodern Reading

John's Gospel is commonly referred to as a "two-level drama."[77] On the first level the narrative is understood with primary reference to Jesus and the characters he has interactions with, and the drama of Jesus's confrontation with

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[71] For an excellent précis, see Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:539–44.

[72] Bultmann, *John*, 135–36n4.

[73] Beasley-Murray, *John*, 47–48.

[74] Keener, *John*, 1:546–52, gives an excellent overview of the issue.

[75] Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:369–71. See the (unsurprisingly) simpatico Brown, *John*, 1:141–44.

[76] Köstenberger, *John*, 123–24. Cf. the good discussion in D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 191–96. Also see Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 127–28, for a (Reformed) Protestant with real sympathies for a sacramental reading.

[77] The phrase is most often associated with the groundbreaking work of J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed., NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

Israel and his glorification in crucifixion. On the second level the narrative is understood with primary reference to the "Johannine community" and/or the Christian church at the time of the Gospel's composition. At this level Jesus's confrontation with "the Jews" becomes a narrative that projects a place for the church as a distinct persecuted community separate from Israel. This formulation of John operating at two levels has been an important presupposition for postmodern interpretation of this Gospel, which has tended to focus its energies on the second level of meaning. Postmodern readings tend to focus on how texts function to further the sociopolitical agendas of their authors/authorial communities. Texts serve to legitimate certain practices that define one community while delegitimizing the worldview and practices of competing communities.

In this context Jesus and Nicodemus emerge as actors playing out a drama scripted by the nascent Christian church to solidify its status in the face of conflicts with local synagogues and to embolden those who still reside in the indeterminate crossover territory between these two groups. The scene is transposed from interpersonal dialogue to intercommunal boundary definition. So when Jesus confounds Nicodemus when he speaks of being "born again/from above," according to Richard Rohrbaugh, this is not a simple example of Johannine misunderstanding or irony[78] but actually insider language meant to include Johannine Christians and exclude everyone else, whether they come from the synagogue or a rival Christian faction.[79] Social-scientific critics refer to this as a use of insider "antilanguage." The function of insider antilanguage is to define the boundaries between groups, clarifying who is in and who is out. Nicodemus, then, as an outsider, *should be* baffled by Jesus's mode of expression. He represents those who are deliberately alienated by the use of in-group language. At the same time, this language serves to unify those "in the know," because the antilanguage centers on key terminology of their shared worldview and privileges them as insiders who know the truth that those outside cannot understand.[80]

[78] "While misunderstanding is in fact involved . . . to treat Johannine language as fundamentally ironic is . . . to obscure what is actually happening in the Nicodemus episode." Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *The New Testament in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Matrix: The Bible in Mediterranean Context (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2007), 176.

[79] See Rohrbaugh, *Cross-Cultural Perspective*, 179, "The creativity and originality of the Gospel's language maintained boundaries not only between the Johannine anti-society and the dominant Judean world, but also between John's group and competing Christian groups."

[80] Cf. Rohrbaugh, *Cross-Cultural Perspective*, 179, "Language is . . . what members of the Johannine group used to signal an identity and thereby gain solidarity and reassurance from each other." In addition, "This kind of antilanguage draws boundaries between an antisociety and the larger society from which it is alienated. So also does contrastive language about some people

The Nicodemus episode, following on from the cleansing of the temple in the previous chapter, gives a personal entry point into what will become Jesus's highly adversarial dealings with "the Jews," leading to his crucifixion. This polemic has been the focus of considerable scrutiny for its strong anti-Jewish outlook.[81] Again, if the Gospel is understood as chiefly speaking of the Johannine church's struggle with Judaism, experienced through the face of the local synagogues, then Jesus's polemic is simply a cipher for the anti-Jewish voice of the church, which demonizes Jews in order to draw stark boundary lines between the church and Judaism.[82] Understood sociologically, this is a characteristic move for a persecuted minority group that needs to justify and preserve its existence over against a persecuting majority.

In addition to its polemics with Judaism, John's Gospel also betrays conflicts with rival Christian communities, especially those with allegiances to John the Baptist.[83] (It may be that there is also some overlap of Christians who still are members of the local synagogue and also hold John the Baptist in reverence.) So it is interesting that John 3 also includes a passage focused on John the Baptist, which includes a polemic discussion about baptism (a social boundary ritual) and John confessing his inferiority to Jesus. Again, read at the second level of meaning, this passage validates the baptismal ministry of Jesus (i.e., the church[84]) vis-à-vis the baptismal ministry of John. It then goes on with John the Baptist himself responding to the concerns of his followers that Jesus is gaining a significant following at his expense. John allays their fears by reminding them that he is not the bridegroom but his attendant. If aimed at those who hold allegiance to John the Baptist alongside or over Jesus, it would be hard to construct a more powerful deconstruction of that allegiance than the confession of John that *"he must increase, but I must decrease"* (3:30).

So a postmodern stance to the text is sensitive to how the agendas of the Johannine community are bolstered and furthered by the narrative of John 3.

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being exposed to the light in order to reveal their evil deeds while others love light, obviously because they do the truth. Boundary language drawn in such stark contrast (light-dark, good-evil) suggests sharp division and strong social conflict" (Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998], 86).

[81] For an overview see James D. G. Dunn, "The Embarrassment of History: Reflections on the Problem of 'Anti-Judaism' in the Fourth Gospel," in *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*, ed. R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt, and F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 41–60.

[82] But see Dunn, "Embarrassment of History." Dunn gives more weight to the first level of reference to the life of Jesus and consequently sees this as an expression of intra-Jewish conflict: criticism from within, not without.

[83] See Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 153–57.

[84] See 4:2, where the evangelist clarifies that it was the disciples and not Jesus who baptized.

The Nicodemus discourse betrays the careful use of in-group antilanguage that fosters the internal cohesiveness of the group but also legitimates its rejection by the local synagogue. The passage also serves to strengthen the place of the community over rival Christian communities with "deficient" christological understandings, especially adherents of John the Baptist.

These readings presuppose that the primary force that produced John's Gospel was communal self-preservation (i.e., that the text was born out of and exemplifies social conflict). This conflict then becomes the hermeneutical key to understanding the dynamics of the text. A postmodern reading, then, prizes attentiveness to the ideological moves of the text in projecting worlds that legitimate the life of the community over against competing institutions. Again, we have a methodology that asks certain questions of the text and reveals dynamics in the text in response to those questions. Here a postmodern approach exposes and objectifies the ideological moves of the text that derive their intelligibility from the social conflicts that shaped the Johannine community. In trying to understand those social dynamics, this methodology is useful. But in moving toward a wisdom reading of the text, it will play a limited role. Because it places the reader over the text and uses the text as a means to gain access to the social world behind it, this method still embodies a comportment of the sovereign subject and does not move us toward a fiduciary engagement with the text.

A Wisdom Reading

A wisdom reading begins by taking seriously John's own confession of his purpose as fostering faith in Jesus as the Christ (20:31). While there may be, and likely are, many subsidiary agendas encoded in this Gospel, its chief goal is to encourage growth in an active trusting comportment toward the person of Jesus. How John does this is complex, and a wisdom reading will look for narrative strategies employed by the author to promote faith in Jesus, but it will not simply be a process of communicating christological doctrines. Since faith is a complex phenomenon that touches the whole person and their deepest devotions, the ways faith is defined and promoted in John will be equally complex.[85]

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[85] Cf. Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 16–17, "What the stories do is to draw the hearer or reader into imaginative empathy with each character encountering Jesus in his or her particular circumstances. The stories surely do draw hearers or readers into their own encounter with Jesus, but the idea that the hearer or reader must run through a range of characters and responses until finding one that fits for him or her is much too schematic and artificial. The characters are not

From the beginning John is a narrative defined by conflict (1:5). It is only in the midst of this conflict, where many reject Jesus and even seek to kill him, that some believe in him and have life in believing. This means that faith is not an automatic response to Jesus and that for those who do believe it is a dangerous commitment. So John is promoting a sober trust in Jesus. The idea that faith needs to be fostered assumes (1) a process of maturing faith, and (2) a process that is not automatic because there are many impediments to mature faith. So it is common in John's Gospel to meet characters who are examples of faith but all at different stages of faith or mixtures of faith and unbelief.[86] John, like the other Gospel writers, recognizes that faith is always partial and found in varying degrees, but is also characterized by teleological movement.

All of this is in play when we come to read John 3. Nicodemus comes to Jesus as a highly ambiguous character. The narrator deliberately gives us many ambiguous clues as to his motivations for coming to see Jesus.[87] Why does he come alone, and at night? He comes as a spokesman for some other group ("*we* know that you are a teacher come from God"). But who is this group, and why was *he* chosen to come? He honors Jesus by calling him a "Rabbi" who has "come from God." But is he just buttering Jesus up, or is this an expression of some kind of faith? Any sensitive reader of John's Gospel up to this point will recognize that calling Jesus a "teacher who comes from God" is close to the truth but also a deficient understanding. Jesus has "come from God," but Nicodemus probably simply means to say that Jesus is somehow approved by God, not that he shares in the Father's identity.[88] Nicodemus seems to show some genuine interest in Jesus, but he also understands him within categories that are comfortable to him and that would do little to shake up Nicodemus's understanding of himself, Israel, and God.

John provides us an interpretive key for this passage in his conclusion in 3:31–36,[89] often sidelined by reconstructions of the text's possible prehistory.

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models of faith so much as illustrations of the wide variety of ways in which different people in different circumstances may encounter Jesus." This process serves to "encourage hearers or readers to expect Jesus to meet them and direct them in the particularity of their individual lives and circumstances."

[86] See Colleen M. Conway, "Speaking through Ambiguity: Minor Characters in the Fourth Gospel," *BibInt* 10 (2002): 324–41.

[87] See Raimo Hakola, "The Burden of Ambiguity: Nicodemus and the Social Identity of the Johannine Christians," *NTS* 55 (2009): 438–55.

[88] On Jesus's sharing in the divine identity see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 1–59.

[89] Cf. Dodd, *Interpretation*, 311, "It seems best therefore to regard iii. 31–6 as an explanatory appendix to the dialogue with Nicodemus and the discourse which grows out of it."

John 3:31, "He who comes from above is above all," describes who Jesus is revealed to be in this passage. He is the one sent by the Father to be his agent of judgment and salvation. He speaks as the voice of the Father, sharing in his identity and speaking with his authority (3:32–35).[90] He is revealed as a ruler and as a bringer of life, procured through self-sacrifice and offered through faith (3:14–16). Commentators who understand Jesus here as simply a "revealer of a mystery" or as "embodied Wisdom" fail to reckon with the absolute exaltation that Jesus assumes for himself in this passage.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Jesus's response to Nicodemus in 3:3 is a forceful rebuff that not only breaks with the standards of polite conversation but adopts the language of prophetic judgment.[91] Many commentators have tried to mollify the intensity of Jesus's response by speaking of the "implied question" of Nicodemus that Jesus "responds" to.[92] But Jesus refuses to be construed in any way that will fit into Nicodemus's understanding. Instead, he brings a message that threatens Nicodemus's whole understanding of God and Israel.[93] Jesus gives the conditions for participation in God's kingdom, and they do not include the categories of covenantal obedience that would have been central to Nicodemus's assumptions. Instead, participation in the kingdom is predicated on the free regenerating work of God, without regard to either ethnic heritage or works of righteousness. This is the meaning of Jesus's play on the double meaning of πνεύμα, which can mean "spirit" or "wind," in verse 8; just as the wind "blows where it wishes," so also the Spirit, as the agent of new birth, operates in ways determined solely by divine prerogatives. This echoes the pronouncement in the prologue that the children of God are born "not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (1:13). As Schnackenburg says, "Prior to all human effort to attain the kingdom of God, God himself must create the basis of a new being in man, which will also make a new way of life possible."[94]

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[90] Cf. Dunn, "Embarrassment of History," 48, "Probably the most consistent feature of John's Gospel is the emphasis on Jesus as the bearer of divine revelation. What he says has the stamp of divine authority, because as Son of God, sent by the Father, he speaks what he has seen and heard from the Father; as the Son of Man, he speaks with the authority of one who has descended from heaven; as one who is from above, his message outweighs in kind and quality anything said by one who is from below."

[91] Cf. Hakola, "Ambiguity," 449–50. Hakola characterizes Jesus's response as "cruel" and "harsh."

[92] E.g., Köstenberger, *John*, 121, "Nicodemus tacitly inquires as to what new doctrine Jesus is propagating." Cf. Bultmann, *John*, 134.

[93] Cf. Ridderbos, *John*, 126, "Although in vs. 5 Jesus will explain his meaning further, his primary intent is obviously not to refute or correct Nicodemus's theological certainties by means of scribal terms or arguments, but to impress him at a much deeper level, where his entire existence before God is at stake."

Wisdom begins not in a self-sufficient act of the will but in reception of the eschatological new birth. Jesus's words point to the necessity of that new birth (because one cannot see or enter the kingdom apart from it) and indicate that the impetus for the new birth comes completely from the creative, fatherly act of God. Any synergistic formula is completely excluded. There can be no thought of a human catalyst in the regenerative act of God. This is the starting point of wisdom that seeks to shape life in Christian discipleship. It cannot begin with what I bring to God, but in what God has made of me and called me to be. It begins with humility and thanksgiving, and it moves into action forged in a heart of gratitude. The first act is faith in the one God has sent as his instrument of salvation, the one who is above all and reveals the will of God. This faith directed toward the Son as revealer, savior, king, and judge becomes the means of participating in eternal life[95] (John's term corresponding to the Synoptic "kingdom of God/heaven").[96]

One's comportment toward the Son is the determining factor in how one stands before God. "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (3:18). The coming of the Son brings salvation and condemnation, because in this story of conflict there are some who reject the Son. This rejection is an act that comes from and reveals the desires and character of the unbelieving. "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed" (3:19–20). Guilt and shame for wicked deeds dominate the consciousness of those who fear the light and cling to the darkness. Because of this, they reject the Son, who reveals their deeds. By contrast, "whoever does what is true comes to the light" (3:21). Those of a good character, shaped by gratitude and faith instead of shame and guilt (although both are guilty of sin) do what is right through faith in the Son and a clean conscience.[97] This good character is not a selfreforming morality but a characteristic of the new birth, as John concludes, "so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God" (3:21).[98] God's children recognize the Son for who he is and come under his rule in faith, trusting him for life and obeying his commands. So it is natural in 3:36 for *faith* in the Son to be equated to *obedience* to the Son. "Whoever *believes* in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not *obey* the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."

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[94] Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:368. Cf. Bultmann, *John*, 142.

[95] "Eternal" is very likely here to be taken as another example of John's onto-ethical mode of expression. So it has less to do with duration in time than it does participation in what is pure, good, eternal, light, life, etc. In other words, this adjective has a chiefly moral content, pointing to a life that communicates the moral freedom and righteousness of the eschatological rule of God.

[96] See Bultmann, *John*, 152n2.

[97] Cf. Keener, *John*, 1:574, "In John, people demonstrate their character, either as part of the world or as those born anew from above, by their 'works.'"

Nicodemus's response will become paradigmatic for Israel's rejection of Jesus, described by John as a worldly rejection of God himself (see John 19:15). John the Baptist, however, is a contrasting exemplar of faith, which is why this scene with John the Baptist is placed here in juxtaposition with the Nicodemus dialogue.[99] In John 3:26 John's followers bring a reasonable concern that too many people are leaving him to follow Jesus instead. John, embodying the virtue of gratitude, recognizes that his calling, ministry, and notoriety are all gifts, not things to be hoarded. "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven" (3:27). Again wisdom begins with gratitude that embraces the gift of God as sufficient and moves in faithful action. John recognizes Jesus as the messianic bridegroom of Israel, the one who will bring about the consummation of God's kingdom. Recognizing Jesus's identity and orienting himself to it gives John the space to rejoice as the "best man" to the bridegroom. It also gives him the freedom to reverence and exalt the Christ above himself and to see himself as his servant who "must decrease" (3:30). John's actions embody countercultural values deriving from a faithful comportment to Jesus as the Son of God.[100]

The contrast between John the Baptist and Nicodemus, as embodied exemplars of the "two ways"[101] of true faith versus an ambivalent faith that is equivalent to unbelief,[102] can be understood as two different understandings of the locus of control in their lives. John recognizes Jesus as the one "above all" and giver of life. John denies the premise of his disciples that his ministry belongs to him as a possession that is being stolen by Jesus because he understands his ministry as the gift of Jesus and his calling as the glorification of Jesus. So he can rejoice over his declining ministry because he has the joy of best man for the bridegroom. This faithful comportment of gratitude, joy, and service is in stark contrast to Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus from above and not from below. His position and status among the people of God are his possession, and Jesus may not displace those realities. The locus of control in his life is found within himself, not in the free gift of God but in the claim that he possesses God's promise. It is at this point that Jesus confronts him with the truth that the Spirit "blows where it wishes" and therefore Nicodemus can do nothing to facilitate or control the work of the Spirit. It is precisely at this point that John the Baptist finds joy and freedom in the wild and free gift of God, wherever it takes him. This life-giving comportment toward Jesus is what John promotes as the virtue of faith, which John the Baptist beautifully embodies.

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[98] Cf. Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John*, BNTC (London: Continuum, 2005), 156, "The trial constituted by Jesus' mission exposes whether one's deeds are in conformity to its true judgment, and thus those who do the truth are revealed to be on the side of God rather than the world, which is opposed to the divine verdict."

[99] Cf. Malina and Rohrbaugh, *John*, 90, "Nicodemus, the eminent Pharisee teacher, is thus contrasted with John, the prophet who baptized."

[100] For a contextualization that reveals the audacity of John the Baptist's statement see Jerome H. Neyrey and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "'He Must Increase, I Must Decrease' (John 3:30): A Cultural and Social Interpretation," *CBQ* 63 (2001): 464–83.

[101] Wisdom literature often speaks of the "two ways," two paths that lead to two opposite ends—on one side happiness and fulfillment, on the other bitterness and desolation. John is fond of antithetical language (light/dark, above/below, flesh/spirit, etc.), and it is common for this language to be interpreted as evidence of "Johannine dualism." But it is important to see that John is speaking of ethical antithesis, not metaphysical dualisms. The Gospel nowhere betrays any kind of belief that ultimate reality is defined by the tension between two mutually subsisting opposing forces. Cf. Miroslav Volf, "Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism," in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser

Here we can see what is typical of Wisdom literature: a focus on fostering certain desires and dispositions. While this passage is theologically and narratively dense, that density creates a complex engagement with the reader in a process of identification and interrogation of their devotions. Here we meet Jesus as the king over all and the source of salvation. The impetus for salvation comes from his free gift and entails a life-giving submission to his person and will as the one who communicates the righteous presence and gracious will of God. And so faith in Jesus is synonymous with obedience to

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(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 22–25. Also see Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 125–36, where Bauckham dismantles the oft-made identification of Johannine and Qumranic dualisms. John does not believe that human experience is normally defined by an absolute duality of good and evil, but more consistently in a state of moral ambivalence and confusion. Because devotional ambivalence is fundamental to human experience and decision making, two-ways language functions to clarify devotions by tying them to ultimate ends and desires (i.e., giving them a teleological grounding and motivation).

102. While Nicodemus has his own individual narrative of where this dialogue with Jesus will take him (and he will later show signs of faith in 7:50–52 and 19:38–40), at this point in the narrative he comes as a representative of the Jewish religious leadership and those who will come to be labeled as simply "the Jews." While this group often shows faith in Jesus, especially on the basis of signs, this initial faith results in unbelief, crystallized in their renunciation and condemnation of Jesus in the Passion Narrative. John wants to show that a certain kind of ambivalent faith can be dangerous because it can just as easily lead to unbelief, because it has the seed of unbelief—a deficient comportment to Jesus—at its core.

Jesus. This is a retraining of the affections that strikes at the heart of sinful self-reliance and finds the offer of life in obedient, reverent faith in Jesus as "the one above all."

Conclusion

From all this we can see that every hermeneutic strategy embodies a comportment to the text. For all the vast differences between modern and postmodern hermeneutics, both begin with the same comportment to the text as sovereign subjects that stand outside and above the text. Meaning and application are derived from the subject, sometimes imposed on the text and sometimes prompted by the text, but always filtered through the disposition of the subject as an arbiter of the appropriateness of application.

By contrast, a hermeneutic of wisdom seeks to position itself within and under the text. This entails an attentive engagement with the text, expecting both the text's familiarity and otherness, and through both a hermeneutic of wisdom opens itself to authoritative textual agency (as a superintending work of the Spirit). This is not a formula for the annihilation of the self, but the self's determination to attend to what Gadamer labeled "the superior claims of the text" on us in a fiduciary stance of epistemological humility.[103] This humility also extends to metaphysics and morality in readers' recognition of the limitations of their creatureliness and perpetual need of repentance and renewal. All of these acts of humility serve to free the self from delusions and enslaving fantasies that obscure the voice of the text and insulate us from its intentionality for us—to establish our communion with God in Christ and enable us to love.

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[103] As Schneiders has argued, this does not exclude critical engagement with the text, simply critical *distance from* the text. As she says, "The challenge today is to integrate appropriate critical strategies into an engagement of reader and text in such a way that the transformative participation of the reader is fostered while a relapse into a precritical naivety is forestalled" ("Gospels and the Reader," 103). Cf. Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 19–25.