

The Ontology of Scripture and the Ethics of Interpretation in the Theology of John Webster

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Abstract: This article outlines the ontology of Scripture and the ethics of interpretation in the theology of John Webster, covering how the doctrines of revelation, sanctification, inspiration and canonization condition the locus of interpretation. Particular focus is given to the way in which the triune God's presence and perfection determine Webster's explication of these topics. The article's conclusion is that Webster's work makes a major contribution with the basic approach that it takes, thinking about the Bible in relation to a wider field, though it does not entirely overcome the obstacle of the dualism between history and transcendence.

I

Of all the contributions to constructive Christian theology that John Webster made over the course of his career, it is arguable that the locus where his work offers the most insight is the doctrine of Scripture. This article explores an aspect of Webster's theology of the Bible and its interpretation by examining his ontology of Scripture and how this shapes his account of reading. The two topics are tightly connected: readers need to know what sort of text the Bible is in order to see how to interpret it. Its distinctive character as *this* text has far-reaching hermeneutical consequences. The proper point of departure for the issue of interpretation is textual ontology, and the way to understand the ontology of Scripture is not to focus in too tightly on the text itself, but to step back and see the text in relation to the realities that make it what it is. What should be most obvious in an account of the Bible, but very often slips from view, is

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that discussions of the text's origin, nature and function need to relate it to God. Thus, a theology of the Bible requires commitments in theology proper. The triune God reveals himself to human beings, and the Bible is the creaturely auxiliary that God takes up into this process, speaking through it and effecting his own self-disclosure by means of a text with a contingent origin and history. Two of the distinctive marks of Webster's theology of the Bible are, first, his insistence on starting with ontology and the wide-angle lens he employs to view the sort of text the Bible is, and, second, his attempt to hold together the text's current testimony to a transcendent God and the historical setting in which it originated, rather than seeing the past origin of the text as foreclosing the possibility that it might legitimately function now to open up a window to transcendence. Webster's work on the Bible makes a significant contribution to contemporary theology with its first point, yet this essay raises a question about the execution of his second task, concluding that it is true that the text should be read as what it is, but that more needs to be done in order to establish an organic connection between the Bible's contingent circumstances of origin and its testimony to the triune God.

II

As has just been suggested briefly, what frames Webster's account of the Bible and how it ought to be read is his insistence – evident in almost everything he wrote on the topic – that the biblical text must be understood as having a place in a wider field. That is, a theology of Scripture relates the sequence of words that constitutes the Bible to a doctrine of the triune God as well as to the community of interpreters who fittingly respond to the way the text discloses this God. More fully, and in Webster's own words,

To talk of the biblical writings as Holy Scripture is ultimately to refer to more (but not to less!) than those writings *per se*. It is, on the one hand, to depict these texts in the light of their origin, function, and end in divine self-communication, and, on the other hand, to make recommendations about the kinds of responses to these texts which are fitting in view of their origin, function, and end.¹

Given this, the cardinal error in conceiving of the Bible is to isolate the text itself from the nexus of other doctrines that together make for a *theology*

¹ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 5.

of Scripture. For instance, when a notion of the canon becomes abstracted from its theological setting, it becomes simply a matter of communal rule: 'its normative status becomes its own property'²; viewed in this narrow way, canon does not designate a set of texts to which the ecclesial community subordinates itself by virtue of recognizing the living voice of God addressing the community through it. It means, rather, a manual for regulating the life of a specific social association. What goes for a theology of the canon goes for the full scope of a theology of the Bible: it must be a 'consequential doctrine', one that is contingent upon 'logically prior teaching about the prevenience of God in God's dealing with creation'.³

In filling out his depiction of the Bible's setting, and especially when elaborating what he means by divine revelation and proper interpretation of Scripture, Webster gives special prominence to the twin themes of God's perfection and presence. These are the central topics of his as-yet-unpublished Kantzer lectures – the closest thing we have now to a synthesis of Webster's theology – and they become utterly determinative for understanding what he means when he claims that appropriate reading of the Bible is a function of what the text *is*. Grasping the nature of Scripture means situating it in the economy of salvation, and, in turn, understanding the economy is a matter of seeing it as the intervention in time of a God who is himself utterly perfect *in se*. A doctrine of the immanent Trinity is thus the deep background for a theology of the Bible. God himself is the plenitude of life and thereby comes into life-giving relations with his creatures; he does not in any way need to be completed by his relationship to the world, or by his interrelations with rational creatures.⁴ His interface with the world does not represent his evolution or the realization of his essential nature; it occurs, instead, as the overflow of his antecedent fullness. In this way, his presence is a function of his perfection, rather than what allows him to become perfect. This linking up of presence and perfection, in which the latter grounds the former, has a bearing on biblical interpretation, as follows. God discloses himself through the Bible, and the subjective appropriation of that communication, including human interpretive work upon the biblical text, is absorbed into a process superintended by God himself, rather than one for which responsibility devolves to quasi-independent interpretive agents. The interpretive effort that human agents apply to the text does not complete God's self-disclosure, but represents an obedient response to his

2 John Webster, 'The Dogmatic Location of the Canon', in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), pp. 28–9.

3 Webster, 'The Dogmatic Location of the Canon', p. 9.

4 John Webster, 'Perfection & Presence: God with Us, According to the Christian Confession', Kantzer Lectures in Revealed Theology, accessed 16 August 2017. <http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/kantzer-lectures-in-revealed-theology/past-lectures-publications/john-webster-perfection-presence/>, lecture 1.

self-manifestation. Exegetical endeavours constitute responses to God's having made himself known, not supplements to divine action that effects its appropriation. This point is developed in more detail as the essay unfolds.

Those who know Webster's scholarship on the theological ethics of Karl Barth will pick up unmistakable echoes of it at this point – and this in two respects. First, there are broad structural parallels here. Webster's major monograph *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* contends that, 'His [Barth's] answer to the question: what shall the Christian do? is rooted in an answer to a prior question: what is moral reality?'⁵ For Barth, what makes an action right is not simply that it is freely chosen by a responsible human agent, one operating outside of any constraining framework; consideration of proper action has to take its cue from cognizance of the agent's place before God. Likewise, what distinguishes an appropriate reading of the Bible from an inappropriate one is that it is a fitting response to the reader's 'hermeneutical situation',⁶ central to which is that the interpreter hears the voice of the living Christ addressing the interpreter through the text. Interpretation does not transcend this situation, but is shaped by it.

Second, there are more specific substantive parallels between Barth's ethics as read by Webster⁷ and Webster's own theology of biblical interpretation. As Webster reads Barth's explication of the prophetic office of Christ in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, there is a fundamental difference between Barth's position and much of the rest of contemporary theology: modern Christian thought often presupposes a disjunction between Jesus Christ and the world of the contemporary experience.⁸ Jesus is not conceived of as alive and actively present now but, rather, as locked in the past and therefore generally irrelevant to life today. For Barth, by contrast, Jesus himself closes this 'gap': the appropriation of divine communication is a function of the character of the communication itself and of the one who effects it. As the prophetic king, Jesus discloses himself and overcomes human resistance to the Lord's attempt to

⁵ John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 214.

⁶ John Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections', in *Word and Church*, pp. 58–65.

⁷ For probing critical questions about Webster's reading, see Bruce McCormack, review of *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, by John Webster, *Modern Theology* 13 (1997), pp. 273–6.

⁸ John Webster, "'Eloquent and Radiant": The Prophetic Office of Christ and the Mission of the Church', in *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 128.

make himself known.⁹ Christ's revelation of himself is complete 'in the sense of actually and not merely potentially achieving its end'.¹⁰ This is certainly a strong counter to the currents of modern theology, and, moreover, a point of major importance for Webster (and for Barth, as the former reads the latter).¹¹ It is the application to biblical hermeneutics of the overarching idea of 'inclusive perfection',¹² according to which Christ's work does not render superfluous the step of human acceptance and appropriation, but includes within itself its own subjective realization. An appropriation of this Christology decisively marks Webster's explication of the larger field in which Scripture is interpreted.

What follows in this section is a brief sketch of the doctrines that most directly impinge on a theology of Scripture, with a special focus on the themes that set up the account of how the Bible is to be read. This exposition does not intend to cover everything that Webster has to say about the Bible. Rather, the aim is to draw out the connections between what the Bible *is* and how it *ought* to be interpreted, and to display the influence of the themes of perfection and presence especially for the first and final topics under consideration. Accordingly, the five key topics that come into focus below are revelation, sanctification, inspiration, canonization and interpretation.

III

Of necessity, this exposition starts with revelation. As Webster himself says, 'A Christian theology of Holy Scripture begins far back, in the doctrine of God.'¹³ Why is this crucial? Because of who this God is, because he makes himself present via the text, interpretation cannot be conceived of properly without reference to this basic hermeneutical reality. The Christian God is 'outgoing, communicative, antecedently one who comes to and addresses creaturely

9 Webster, "Eloquent and Radiant", pp. 139–40.

10 Webster, "Eloquent and Radiant", p. 148.

11 I leave the question of whether Webster precisely and accurately aligns with Barth as a topic for Barth scholars to debate. My concern is to say only that there are similarities between Webster's constructive work and what he understands Barth to hold. It is clear even in the essay on the prophetic office that Webster has something of a constructive intention even in writing an expository piece. In describing his aim as countering trends in current theology, Webster says: 'I will make my proposal indirectly, by offering a close reading of a section of Barth's work, namely his treatment of the prophetic office of Christ in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.' See Webster, 'Eloquent and Radiant', p. 125.

12 Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, p. 128.

13 John Webster, 'ὑπὸ πνεύματος ἁγίου φερόμενοι ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι: On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture', in *Conception, Reception and the Spirit: Essays in Honour of Andrew T. Lincoln*, ed. J.G. McConville and Lloyd Pieteresen (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015), p. 238.

1 reality, making himself present as that which conditions and determines that
 2 reality in its entirety'.¹⁴ This God is by no means inert or silent, but he reveals
 3 himself to creatures with a view toward establishing fellowship with them.
 4 That is to say, returning to the two motifs that give texture to all of Webster's
 5 theology, his presence is a function of his perfection: 'Self-manifestation is
 6 ingredient to the being of God: as Father, Son, and Spirit, God is antecedently
 7 one who wills, effects and brings to fruition the knowledge of himself on the
 8 part of his creatures.'¹⁵ God's self-communication wells up from his anterior
 9 fullness and completeness. This is to distinguish two things that some contem-
 10 porary theology conflates. God's being is not equivalent to his work of
 11 self-communication, nor is his essence to be equated with his existence as one
 12 who discloses his very self; rather, what he does in manifesting himself is the
 13 unfurling of who he himself is in his own immanent life. The works he per-
 14 forms express his identity as the one he is.

15 The text of the Bible is subsidiary to revelation thus understood, but
 16 Scripture serves and participates in the process by which God reveals himself
 17 in its capacity as a sanctified text. By sanctification, Webster means, 'the act
 18 of God the Holy Spirit in hallowing creaturely processes, employing them in
 19 the service of the taking form of revelation within the history of the creation'.¹⁶
 20 The sense of this key term is delicately delineated so as to avoid a problem that
 21 often bedevils reflection on Scripture. The basic difficulty is a dualism of the
 22 transcendent and the historical.¹⁷ This dualism presupposes that there is a
 23 competitive, zero-sum relationship between that which is of God and the mun-
 24 dane or immanent. The text can come to seem as if it *either* bespeaks the divine
 25 *or* is a genuinely earthly, historical reality – but both cannot be true at once.
 26 This version of dualism can manifest itself in one of two ways, either in natu-
 27 ralistic denials that the text of the Bible is anything more than a written work
 28 coming to us from the past, in which it served as a vehicle of communication
 29 between human agents; or by overreactions to the influence of a naturalistic
 30 metaphysic, ones which craft a notion of inspiration that nearly extracts the
 31 text from the realm of creaturely contingency, so that it can speak of God un-
 32 encumbered.¹⁸ Both of these count as mistakes, and the solution lies in seeing
 33 the text of the Bible as a work that testifies to God, even though it did not drop
 34 straight from heaven. Holding together transcendent and historical is the work
 35 that the notion of sanctification is designed to do. God hallows the full range

36
 37 14 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 14.

38 15 Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 65. Webster expresses a preference here for
 39 the language of Word of God, not revelation, but his later work is more relaxed about this
 40 issue.

41 16 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 17–18.

42 17 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 21.

43 18 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 18–21.

of processes that led to the existence of the Bible in its current form – the formation of sources, the writing of the biblical books themselves, the subsequent editing of these texts, and their collection as canonical documents that govern the life of the ecclesial community – such that this text is one through which he speaks, revealing himself to human beings and establishing fellowship with them. The diachronic reach of the term sanctification is designed to overcome any suggestion present within alternative notions such as testimony – which can also bring the historical and transcendent together – to the effect that such unity is only a temporary occasion rather than something more enduring.¹⁹

As was just suggested in the discussion of sanctification, both inspiration and canonisation fall within its broad purview. Conceiving of inspiration within the context of sanctification aims both to integrate it into the doctrine of God, so that what is revealed through the text is God himself, rather than some arcane information related to him, and to guard against a subtle drift into ‘supernaturalism’, which afflicts some notions of inspiration. Inspiration refers to the authors of the biblical texts being moved to write so that readers of the text may learn of God.²⁰ It thus contains a reference backward in time to the Spirit’s work within the process of composition, as well as having pertinence to the present form of the text, the reading of which represents an engagement with the living voice of God. Stated more fully, the doctrine of inspiration has three constituent parts: the illumination of the biblical authors so that they have a measure of understanding on the basis of which they compose texts, the impulse to compose written works communicating this understanding, and the provision of both the *res* and the *verba* that constitute this writing.²¹ With this final element, Webster gets over Barth’s lingering worries that doctrines of verbal inspiration such as one finds in post-Reformation Protestant theology are motivated by an attempt to capture the sovereign God in textual form. Webster comes to see the verbal quality of inspiration as specifying the mode of divine presence in the biblical text, for God has freely chosen to speak through this particular textual medium.²²

The collection of these texts as the biblical canon was a historical process that extended over time. But unless one is committed to conceiving of this history from a naturalistic point of view, one that does not countenance the occurrences with reference to God, it is possible to see the process as one in which a set of texts recommended themselves to the church as the norm of the community’s

¹⁹ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 24.

²⁰ Webster, ‘ὕπο πνεύματος ἁγίου φερόμενοι ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι’, p. 242. In this essay, there is evidence of a tack toward the post-Reformation Protestants, something also evident in John Webster, ‘Holy Scripture’, in *Between the Lectern and the Pulpit: Essays in Honor of Victor A. Shepherd*, ed. Dennis Ngien and Rob Clements (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2014), pp. 173–81.

²¹ Webster, ‘ὕπο πνεύματος ἁγίου φερόμενοι ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι’, pp. 245–6.

²² Webster, ‘ὕπο πνεύματος ἁγίου φερόμενοι ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι’, p. 246.

ongoing life because they represented an exercise of Christ's lordship over the church in the power of the Holy Spirit.²³ In an early, exploratory use of the notion of sanctification that he was to go on and develop much more fully later, Webster says, 'To speak of canonicity as sanctification is to affirm both that these texts are natural human historical entities and that they occupy a distinctive place and perform a distinctive role in the economy of salvation.'²⁴ Their role is to rule the church, as the community subordinates itself to the voice of God who speaks through them. The church receives this list of texts as the written criterion that regulates its life, and thus does not so much constitute the canon by freely selecting the books that make it up, as the ecclesial community receives a specific form of life by assenting to the teaching these works provide. Revelation, sanctification, inspiration and canonization – these are the four elements of the wider web of doctrines that are needed to understand what Scripture is.

Two things can be said about reading on this basis. First, there are implications for what is happening, theologically speaking, when readers engage with the text. That is, they die to sin and receive new life in Christ, being both mortified and vivified.²⁵ This follows as a matter of course from the above commitments. How so? The human correlate of revelation is being reconciled with God. Revelation is a transitive process: it takes an object. God reveals himself to rational creatures, not leaving them unchanged, but bringing them into fellowship with himself. This means that he must, in so doing, overcome the barriers and impediments that stand in the way of divine–human reconciliation. These are, above all, ignorance and idolatry: as fallen creatures, human beings both resist knowing God and create idols that seek to usurp the place of a knowledge of God in one's mind. Revelation is the sovereign, effectual overcoming of this state and the establishment in its place of knowledge and a reconciled relationship. Reading the Bible takes place within the economy of salvation, whose key dynamics – the overcoming of human estrangement by God's initiative to make himself known – cut across and characterize the acts of reading which human beings undertake.²⁶ Webster at times moves beyond this relatively simple positive–negative pairing of mortification and vivification to discuss more specific spiritual means that are a necessary accompaniment of good reading, and that function within the overall process of readers

²³ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 58–67.

²⁴ Webster, 'The Dogmatic Location of the Canon', pp. 31–2.

²⁵ See especially John Webster, 'Reading Scripture Eschatologically (1)', in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology*, ed. David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 250–6. See also Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', pp. 78–81; Webster, 'The Dogmatic Location of the Canon', pp. 43–5; and John Webster, 'On the Clarity of Holy Scripture', in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 63–6.

²⁶ John Webster, 'Biblical Reasoning', in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), pp. 117–22.

having their sin put to death and receiving new life in Christ. These practices include prayer, a readiness to receive divine instruction and a willingness to live out the text's message.²⁷ But in Webster's overall corpus, these are a sideline, which developed later in his career, while the note that sounds more regularly and strongly is that of mortification and vivification.²⁸

The second implication has to do with interpretation's social location. This, once again, follows from the doctrines that were outlined earlier in this section, together with the characteristically Reformed definition of the church as the *creatura verbi*. If the sanctified and inspired text, in its full creaturely reality, mediates divine revelation to its readers, and if the church is constituted by those who listen and respond to the God who reveals himself through the text, then it follows that the community who reads the text thus conceived is the church. When Webster says, 'The *definitive* act of the church is faithful hearing of the gospel of salvation announced by the risen Christ in the Spirit's power through the service of Holy Scripture',²⁹ he means that what defines the church is precisely this act of obedient hearing of the Word of God via the Bible. Seen in this way, the church has the stability it does, not because it possesses a set of internal resources that make it a community that perdures through time, but because its stability is grounded externally, in the God who has promised to be with it even to the end of the age. Scripture works by breaking the church down and reconstituting it, mortifying and vivifying it, and thereby conforming it more and more to the image of Christ, who is its Lord, and who instructs it through the text of Scripture.³⁰ Whatever institutional form the church takes, it is the location in which the Word of God is heard as it issues forth from Scripture.³¹

IV

What should we make of all this? The great strength of what Webster has to say derives from his fundamental approach to interrelating the nature of the

27 John Webster, 'Illumination', in *The Domain of the Word*, p. 63.

28 A theological concept companionable to mortification and vivification is illumination, which features mainly in Webster, 'Illumination', pp. 50–64.

29 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 44. Emphasis added.

30 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 46–7.

31 There is now a comprehensive study of Webster's view of the ecclesial setting of interpretation in Brad East, 'The Church's Book: Theology of Scripture in Ecclesial Context in the Work of John Howard Yoder, Robert Jenson, and John Webster' (PhD diss., Yale University, 2017), ch. 2. For Roman Catholic critique of Webster's view, see Gavin D'Costa, 'Revelation, Scripture and Tradition: Some Comments on John Webster's Conception of "Holy Scripture"', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6 (2004), pp. 337–50; and Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 416.

Bible and its interpretation. Focusing on the whole web of theological doctrines in which the Bible is located represents an excellent way for a systematic theologian to contribute to the study of Scripture. If systematic theology refers both to focused exposition of the constituent elements of Christian belief, and also to the exploration of their logical connections with one another,³² asking how the entire body of beliefs coheres and interlocks, then Webster's attempt to offer a 'hermeneutical ontology'³³ counts as a paradigmatically systematic angle from which to offer a contribution. It allows him to do several things at once. The broad perspective offers a way to depict the Bible that is fuller, deeper and more satisfactory than what one finds in more limited and constricted treatments, such as 'theologies' of Scripture that, perhaps unwittingly, extract the text from the economy of salvation, and thereby explicate elements of the doctrine with scant reference to God. The center of gravity for Webster's approach is not at the level of how Scripture should be used by its readers, or of what sort of community takes this text as a word that constantly renews its life – these issues are important, not primary – but at the level of what sort of text readers are actually engaging with when they read the Bible. Focusing on ontology brings into focus the point that is most far reaching. In addition, this tack highlights the tie between 'is' and 'ought', which has a parallel in theological ethics, for there are indeed implications for reading that follow from the way Scripture is construed. Theology does make a substantial difference for reading. Finally, Webster's strategy for framing this topic offers a vantage point from which to give an illuminating counterproposal to troubling hermeneutical trends in current discussions, such as the influence of naturalism.³⁴

While putting the question of the nature of the Bible at the very center of discussion is the right place to start, it is worth raising a question about precisely how Webster characterizes the sort of text the Bible is. Does he have the details right? There is at least a whiff of a dualistic tendency evident in the way Webster describes Scripture in that there remains a risk that there is an either/or choice between the text being one through which God speaks, on the one hand, and it having historical features or emerging from a set of contingent circumstances, on the other. The point here is not that Webster has little to say about the latter, but that despite his awareness of the lurking risk, what he does say about the Bible's immanent qualities imagines them to exist in something of a disjunction from how they point to the divine.

A few lines of evidence serve to illustrate the dualistic pattern. First, consider what Webster says is required for a proper reading of the Bible. One finds robust, unguarded stipulations regarding the 'spiritual means' that are

³² David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), p. 28; and A.N. Williams, *The Architecture of Theology: Structure, System, and Ratio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 1–2.

³³ John Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture', in *The Domain of the Word*, p. 38.

³⁴ For instance, Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture', p. 39.

necessary.³⁵ For instance, readers have to pray that the Spirit of God would illuminate their minds, breaking down prejudices that stand in the way of a salutary reading; interpreters must also be willing to assent to the truths received from the word, not simply to be aware of them, but to appropriate them and see the world from the point of view that they provide; and readers need continually to press forward, seeking greater and better understanding at every turn, never resting complacently with the level of understanding they have already secured.³⁶ By contrast, what Webster says about “disciplinary” means, ‘the arts which reason deploys in making sense of textual signs’,³⁷ is more cautious and in the vein of a prolegomenon. One finds under this rubric, instead of a set of crisp directives, a general sense that disciplinary means might prove useful; this is filled out by stressing the spiritual sphere in which they operate and the theological goals they serve, together with worries about how to prevent discussions of techniques from being hijacked by a naturalistic agenda.³⁸ If the text of Scripture really is a set of signs, why not come out and say more straightforwardly that knowing something of the immanent aspects of these signs is genuinely useful within interpretation? Why not give to disciplinary means the sort of definite and direct discussion that was given to spiritual means, exploring how the mundane features of the text point to something well beyond themselves?

Second, there are times when Webster will say slightly more about the importance of attending to immanent features of the text, yet even in those instances a telling hesitancy is evident. For example, in an essay on the resurrection and Scripture which mainly stresses how the risen Christ speaks through the text, Webster says:

Because the text’s presentation of the risen Christ’s rule *quickens* reason and does not stultify it, interpretation is not an arcane process of intuition involving no exercise of exegetical practice, linguistic, literary or historical. In the same way that obeying the ethical command of God requires the exercise of moral powers, so following the text’s rule is deliberate, intelligent activity.³⁹

Notice two things here. To begin with, the statement in the first sentence is couched as a double negative: interpretation does *not* involve *no* application of linguistic, literary or historical learning. In addition, immediately following

35 Webster, ‘Illumination’, p. 63.

36 Webster, ‘Illumination’, p. 63.

37 Webster, ‘Illumination’, p. 62.

38 Webster, ‘Illumination’, p. 62.

39 Webster, ‘Resurrection and Scripture’, p. 47.

the above quotation, making the qualified affirmation that it does, there is another note of caution: a *but* is coming: 'But that activity is governed by the text as a bearer of authority, as attestation of the primary *auctor* of this communicative act, Jesus risen from the dead.'⁴⁰ Webster wants to insist in principle that, as a text that emerges from a set of past contingent circumstances yet is still not essentially a past act of communication (a case of person *x* saying message *y* to person or community *z*, where today's readers are not part of *z*, and therefore *y* is not directed to them), the text ought to be studied with respect to its language and history. But these statements come here, as is often the case, in hedged form after much stronger and better-developed statements about the spiritual context, which threatens to overwhelm discussion of the immanent features. There is very little indeed that explicitly links up *how* the immanent level of explication of the text makes a difference for what it says theologically. Why not make this connection more explicitly? Is there something actively preventing this from happening?

Third, similar questions hang over Webster's most direct statements about historical-critical reading of the Bible. Webster rightly observes that when it comes to reading the Bible, the interpreter's stance toward the text is crucial: the reader should not most fundamentally be seeking to think *about* the text, but rather to think *with* and *under* it.⁴¹ The text does not ask to be analyzed from a safe distance; it seeks to bring its readers within its scope, so that they use its categories and engage the world by means of them. Webster is also insightful when he says that whatever methods of reading that interpreters employ, the key question to ask of a reading strategy is how it relates to 'prior judgments about the ends of interpretation, the proper social and institutional location of interpretation, and the proper dispositions of interpreters'.⁴² Reading strategies should be considered means toward the end of reading.

Where does this leave historical-critical study? What positive value might it have? Webster says that 'critical methods have their place'⁴³ within the framework he has outlined, and that he is emphatically *not* calling for the 'wholesale abandonment of any appropriation of the tools of historical inquiry'.⁴⁴ But it does seem that at least existing forms of historical study are all but squeezed out of consideration, for it is unclear how they can foster the right sort of reading stance. They seem to undermine rather than foster a ready receptiveness to the text's message, the stance Webster calls readers to take with respect to the

⁴⁰ Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture', p. 47.

⁴¹ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 103.

⁴² Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 103.

⁴³ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 103.

⁴⁴ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 105.

Bible.⁴⁵ If they do not serve the purpose of interpretation, the standard techniques of historical criticism are held in suspicion, their broad acceptance within the biblical studies guild notwithstanding. This may strike members of the biblical studies guild, though it is remarkably pluralistic at the present moment,⁴⁶ as a blithe dismissal of what so many take for granted. But for the subject of this article, a slightly different concern is primary. If there is any inherent problem with the reading stance that is triggered by the typical versions of historical reading strategies, how does a knowledge of the history of the text serve theological reading? How, if at all, does a knowledge of the text's historical background factor into a construal of what the text is and how it ought to be read? Insofar as this question is left hanging, it reinforces the impression created by other aspects of Webster's theology of the Bible that there is something of a de facto disjunction between the text's theological function and analysis of its mundane or immanent features. The use of certain notions, such as sanctification and also signs, seems to promise an overall integration that is nevertheless lacking at key junctures, including in discussions of historical criticism.

Why might this be? Here we recall the two themes of perfection and presence and their outworking in the way a theology of the resurrection of Jesus shapes the work that interpreters need to do on the Bible. What is the relevance of the resurrection for reading? For Webster, the resurrection does not simply constitute an episode in the career of the earthly life of Jesus; it is also the condition of our present knowledge of him. He was raised, remains risen now, and, crucially, *speaks*. Webster comments: 'The resurrection also points forward [in addition to being the overcoming of Jesus' death]. It is the continuation of Son's history with creation. Thus, the resurrection is not to be thought of as a terminus.'⁴⁷ Jesus' continued presence to rational creaturely agents includes his work of revealing himself: interpretation is thereby inflected with the notion of inclusive perfection. The risen Jesus' presence to human beings is not a simple co-presence; it is marked by an asymmetry in which the Lord brings himself to be with his people and to be understood by them. In this process, he 'is not constrained by contingencies of creaturely relation'.⁴⁸ Furthermore, he is 'beyond the negotiations and competitions that attend creaturely relation in time'.⁴⁹ His presence is infinite, free and spiritual.⁵⁰ In contemporary theology, hermeneutical theorists usually ask what sort of conceptual and interpretative work is

45 Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 105.

46 In the tone of lamenting that more does not hold the field together, see Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), p. 38.

47 Webster, 'Perfection & Presence', lecture 5.

48 Webster, 'Perfection & Presence', lecture 5.

49 Webster, 'Perfection & Presence', lecture 5.

50 Webster, 'Perfection & Presence', lecture 5.

1 required on the part of readerly agents, as if they need to do something to create
 2 a connection with the text.⁵¹ Webster counters: 'But the connection is already
 3 there, established by him. He is in himself exalted. His exaltation includes within
 4 itself a turning to creatures.'⁵² There is, furthermore, an ethics of interpretation
 5 the follows from this all of this. There is something that readers must do in rela-
 6 tion to the text, but what they should do is conditioned 'by the prevenient reali-
 7 ties of our being created in Christ and more deeply in the divine beforehand'.⁵³
 8 Interpreters should respond in faith and hope to the way God makes himself
 9 known to them.⁵⁴ That is the essence of their fundamental task.

10 This Christology does make it clear that readers should respond in faith to
 11 the way in which Jesus announces his presence through the text, but not how
 12 the text's contingent qualities participate in this process. In fact, the way in
 13 which Jesus' relation to the creaturely realm is described makes it seem as if
 14 the text's contingent qualities are of marginal pertinence at best to the way in
 15 which the text says something to its readers. To claim that Jesus is 'not con-
 16 strained by contingencies of creaturely relation' is right in one sense, for he is
 17 risen, but the statement at least needs some additional qualification, if what
 18 the risen one speaks through is indeed a text with a contingent origin. There is,
 19 to be sure, something worth countering in contemporary theologies that omit
 20 the presence of Jesus. Over against these hermeneutical frameworks, it is nec-
 21 essary to underscore that Jesus speaks to those who engage with the text now
 22 in the twenty-first century. Jesus does *speak*. But it should be said more strongly
 23 that Jesus speaks through *this* text, and that part of what makes the biblical
 24 text the text that it is are its linguistic and historical features. Coming to un-
 25 derstand what these are allows readers better to understand what the risen
 26 Jesus is saying through the Bible. There should not be a competitive relation-
 27 ship between Jesus speaking through the text and the historical and literary
 28 angles from which divine address can be studied. Responding in faith and
 29 hope is entirely proper for readers; that is their obligation. Yet the material
 30 content of that faith will be ascertained more precisely with background
 31 knowledge, both historical and literary, which readers ought to seek to obtain
 32 as well as possible. The text's nature as a sign pointing to the risen Christ thus
 33 needs to be stressed in two ways: both regarding what it indicates (the text
 34 should not ultimately be an object of interest in its own right) and regarding
 35 how it thus signifies (better interpretive judgements can be made by those who
 36 acquire an understanding of the way in which linguistic and historical features
 37 have communicative efficacy). Without more of this second element, the
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39 51 Webster, 'Perfection & Presence', lecture 5.
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41 52 Webster, 'Perfection & Presence', lecture 5.

42 53 Webster, 'Perfection & Presence', lecture 5.
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44 54 Webster, 'Perfection & Presence', lecture 5.

Christology as Webster articulates it in the Kantzer lectures is the ground of a sort of the 'reactive supernaturalism' he rightly seeks to avoid.⁵⁵

In addition to making some adjustments within Christology, another helpful step toward saying more about the role of the immanent features of the text, even in their role of pointing beyond themselves, would have been for Webster to develop a more positive conception of general hermeneutics. As it is, he is generally quite negative toward general hermeneutics. A case in point illustrates the broader trend here. In discussing the shift over time from a set of special hermeneutical theories to a unified general one in modern theology, Webster comments on the important of this transition:

Minimalizing the self-descriptions of Christian readers and their acts (including doctrinal self-descriptions) and the kind of claims made by or on behalf of specific texts, and maximalizing the commonalities between different locales of reading-acts or text-acts, hermeneutics presses modern theology to consider those activities which we call the church's reading of the Bible as an instance of a more general phenomenon, whose features are stable and discernible across widely divergent contexts.⁵⁶

The basic claim here is that theology's role must contract as general hermeneutics expands, for general hermeneutics is necessarily a secularizing force, shearing off tradition-specific content as its territory grows. For Webster's program of thinking theologically about the text of the Bible and its readers, it is utterly crucial to counter the secularizing impulse that is indeed present in many (but not all!) forms of general hermeneutics. There are several passages in Webster's corpus that provide deeply discerning analyses of these dynamics within general hermeneutics, but what is missing – and curiously so – is discussion within Webster's constructive works of a notable exception to the rule that general means secular. The exception is Karl Barth. Barth has a place for general hermeneutics, though he does not allow the Bible to become forced into a pre-existing grid that explains what texts across all categories are like. Instead, he turns the tables, seeing all texts as like the Bible in needing to be read with respect to their subject matter.⁵⁷ If Webster had appropriated this aspect of Barth's discussion of how to read the Bible, which includes an insistence on historical and literary study of the text,⁵⁸ the effect of doing so would

55 Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture', p. 40. There is a sort of implicit critique of Webster along these lines in Derek Taylor's defense of Rowan Williams, which he offers in response to Webster's criticism of Williams. Derek W. Taylor, 'Crux Probat Omnia: Rowan Williams' Scriptural Hermeneutic', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 69 (2016), pp. 152–4.

56 Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', pp. 53–4.

57 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, §§ 19–21, Study edn (London: T&T Clark, 2010), p. 466.

58 Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2*, pp. 722–40.

1 have been to introduce a counterweight to the implications of bringing the
 2 prophetic office of Christ to bear on hermeneutics in the way that Webster
 3 does.

4 Another consideration that might have aided in Webster putting more
 5 weight on historical and literary analysis of biblical texts is integrating exege-
 6 sis more fully into his own constructive theological proposals. The reason that
 7 this would have been helpful is simple: more experience of exegesis would
 8 surely have made clearer the full scope of what is involved in doing that sort of
 9 work successfully. Webster's writing is a sterling example of making a call for
 10 theology to draw deeply from the biblical text,⁵⁹ and he did an enormous
 11 amount of scholarly work to demonstrate the debt other theologians owed to
 12 the Bible.⁶⁰ Yet his own work does not make exegesis as constitutive as his own
 13 principles call for as the ideal⁶¹ – this in spite of essays in which he peppers his
 14 exposition with biblical citations, some where citation and exposition become
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21 59 Webster, 'Biblical Reasoning', pp. 130–1; Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 107–35; and John
 22 Webster, 'Texts: Scripture, Reading, and the Rhetoric of Theology', *Stimulus* 6 (1998), pp.
 23 10–16.

24 60 See, for instance, John Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology* (Cambridge:
 25 Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 25–38; John Webster, 'Karl Barth', in *Reading Romans*
 26 *through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and
 27 Timothy Larsen (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), pp. 205–23; John Webster, 'The Resurrection of
 28 the Dead', in *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 67–90;
 29 John Webster, 'Witness to the Word: Karl Barth's Lectures on the Gospel of John', in *The*
 30 *Domain of the Word*, pp. 65–85; John Webster, '"A Relation beyond All Relations": God and
 31 *Creatures in Barth's Lectures on Ephesians, 1921–22', in The Epistle to the Ephesians*, ed. R.
 32 David Nelson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), pp. 31–49; John Webster, 'Reading the Bible: The
 33 *Example of Barth and Bonhoeffer', in Word and Church*, pp. 87–110; John Webster, 'Verbum
 34 *Mirificum: T.F. Torrance on Scripture and Hermeneutics', in The Domain of the Word*, pp. 86–
 35 *112; and John Webster, 'Rowan Williams on Scripture', in Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's*
 36 *Bible*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), pp. 96–117.

37 61 This has been noted by both theologians and biblical scholars: David F. Ford, *Christian*
 38 *Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007),
 39 p. 78 n15; R.W.L. Moberly, 'What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?', *Journal of*
 40 *Theological Interpretation* 3 (2009), pp. 169–70; and N.T. Wright, 'How Paul Invented Christian
 41 *Theology', Lanier Library Lecture, accessed 16 August 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkcjFHYIugY)*
 42 *watch?v=WkcjFHYIugY*, minute 47. That said, it is a bit odd that Moberly indicts Webster for
 43 *this while absolving Hans Frei, who is described in essentially the same terms, without giving*
 44 *any reason for making the differentiation between the two theologians. In the case of Wright,*
 45 *who surely has Webster in mind, the critique seems to assume that the Bible is history, which*
 46 *raises a question about how it can continue to speak in the present, something Wright would*
 47 *surely not want to deny.*

more prominent, and a few essays that treat a theological topic largely by means of sustained commentary on a New Testament text.⁶² If his work is judged to be biblical nevertheless – and a good case can be made that it should be – it is biblical indirectly: it draws upon biblical ideas that circulate within the Christian tradition, while not always doing the work to show their ultimate source. Though there are drawbacks to this, it is also true that extenuating circumstances should be registered. These include the pressure exerted by guild divisions to separate off theological and biblical study into two specialized areas;⁶³ these guild boundaries represent a standing challenge to any attempt at integrating systematic theology and biblical study from either direction.⁶⁴ And there is also, in Webster's case specifically, his untimely death, which occurred before he was able to complete his commentary on Ephesians. It was as he had already made significant headway on this commentary that he wrote these words: 'The most fruitful way of engaging in theological interpretation of Scripture is to do it.'⁶⁵ Webster continued by saying: 'We . . . need more exegesis'.⁶⁶ Had he been given more time, he himself surely would have been able to make good on this call, and that additional background in exegetical practice might well have brought with it theological changes, including fuller formal acknowledgement of the range of tasks that go into reading the Bible.

62 Many of Webster's constructive essays are peppered with citations of the Bible. See, for instance, John Webster, 'The Domain of the Word', in *The Domain of the Word*, pp. 3–31. Direct engagement with the Bible becomes more central in other essays, especially more recent ones such as Webster, 'ὑπὸ πνεύματος ἁγίου φερόμενοι ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι', pp. 236–50. Essays in which he stays closest to the biblical ground throughout are John Webster, 'One Who Is Son: Theological Reflections on the Exordium to the Epistle to the Hebrews', in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham *et al.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 69–94; and John Webster, '“Where Christ Is”: Christology and Ethics', in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, vol. II: *Virtue and Intellect* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), pp. 5–27.

63 Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany: From F.C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch, Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 295.

64 There is, of course, also an upside to specialization, which is granular, in-depth analysis of a delimited area.

65 Webster, 'The Domain of the Word', p. 30.

66 Webster, 'The Domain of the Word', p. 30.

V

Yet this is not the end of the story. The appreciative critique given so far has left out one important element: the work that Webster was doing on the doctrine of creation at what turned out to be, sadly, the very end of his life. Though he did not fully work out the implications that this would have for Scripture and its interpretation, there were some changes afoot in his thinking that have an indisputable bearing on the issues already discussed. In several seminal essays,⁶⁷ Webster offers what can be described, in the briefest possible terms, as a more positive view of creation than the one he had operated with previously. Here he says more about the shape that the work of grace within creatures takes,⁶⁸ and he thinks of creation itself as something more than just the external basis for the covenant of grace. What this means is that alterations in some of his deepest commitments were occurring such that emendations to his theology of Scripture might have come, and indeed did begin to emerge, from his revised views. This shows that giving due weight to the Bible's historical background, literary shaping and so on would not have had to mean surrendering a theological perspective and adopting a naturalistic metaphysic instead, for the mundane qualities of the Bible that are pertinent to ascertaining its meaning have an important place within a theological framework that Webster came to see as an improvement on the system in which he had become comfortable prior to his work on Aquinas and creation.

In some of his final writing, there were already indications of the difference that this engagement had begun to have. An important change is that Webster regularly speaks of Scripture as a set of signs in his collection *Domain of the Word*. Though he does not consider the category of signs in *Holy Scripture* as he sizes up options for relating divine revelation and a text with a contingent origin,⁶⁹ it becomes a lead category as Webster is working on the doctrine of creation. Here is how he glosses what it means for Scripture to be a sign: 'Its human words, formed and preserved by God, who moves their creaturely movement without violence to the integrity of its created nature, attest the divine Word, and give a share in God's knowledge of himself and of all things.'⁷⁰ Is it too much to wonder whether filling out how the text, precisely in its capacity as a creaturely object, can attest the divine Word might have opened up an avenue for thinking about how the fullness of the text could

⁶⁷ See especially the three major essays collected in part II ('God's Outer Works') of John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Vol. I: God and the Works of God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), pp. 83–126.

⁶⁸ This is sketched out in a helpful way by Michael Allen, 'Toward Theological Theology: Tracing the Methodological Principles of John Webster', *Themelios* 41 (2016), pp. 231–6.

⁶⁹ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 22–6.

⁷⁰ Webster, *The Domain of the Word*, p. vii.

participate in the process by which God makes himself known? There is something in the notion of creaturely nature being precious to God that might well have set the groundwork for stepping more decisively out of dualism. 'God loves creaturely nature', Webster writes, 'and capacities and desires their full use, and so reveals himself in ways which are fitting to that nature and give occasion for the exercise of those capacities. Accordingly, revelation takes place through creaturely signs of which the chief is the text of Holy Scripture.'⁷¹ Qua signs, Scripture is not 'a sort of linguistic wager, perilously reaching towards divine speech'.⁷² The Bible is 'the actual occasion and mode of its utterance'.⁷³ Though we shall never know precisely how Webster himself would have expanded all of this out, there are at least hints here of extending the anti-dualism impulse that motivated the framing of the concept of sanctification, initial steps to bring this inclination to bear more fully in the realm of interpretation so as to address the problem described in the previous section.⁷⁴

VI

Webster's corpus offers the strongest statement in contemporary theology of the very valuable point that both understanding Scripture and reading it rightly require situating the text of the Bible in relation to a whole set of interconnected theological commitments. The notions of revelation, sanctification, inspiration and canonization come together to yield entailments both for what is happening theologically during the interpretation of the Bible, and for reading's social locale. Webster is alert to the challenge that dualism poses, and if his work on the Bible has a shortcoming, it is that he does not entirely surmount this difficulty, tending to give short shrift to the importance of the text's historical origin for the task of ascertaining its sense. That said, the overriding lesson of Webster's writing on the Bible comes not from the precise disposition of the details regarding the relationship between Christology and the mundane, immanent features of the Bible, but from his confidence that theological doctrine is a potent form of discourse – something that can tell

⁷¹ Webster, 'Illumination', p. 59.

⁷² Webster, 'The Domain of the Word', p. 10.

⁷³ Webster, 'The Domain of the Word', p. 10.

⁷⁴ Fergus Kerr correctly observes that Webster could not have become Roman Catholic, as he never makes any significant moves toward accepting Catholic ecclesiology, despite his appropriation of Thomas Aquinas's thinking on other topics. See Fergus Kerr, 'John Webster and Catholic Theology', *New Blackfriars* 98 (2017), pp. 457–81. It is also worth noting that, though Webster warms to Aquinas's notion of creation, and this influences how he discusses the Bible in some of his last works on the topic, Webster does not engage in any noteworthy way with Aquinas's exegesis or style of reading the Bible. This is another way in which he held key distinctively Roman Catholic ideas at a distance.

1 us what the Bible is and how it ought to be interpreted, not an impediment
2 to real intellectual work on Scripture and interpretation. Thinking along the
3 trajectory that Webster has set out has tremendous promise for contemporary
4 theology, and we are all in Webster's debt for the depth of the insights he con-
5 tinues to offer all those who reflect theologically on the Bible.
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