

FAULT LINES IN EVANGELICAL HERMENEUTICS:
DIVERGENT ACCOUNTS OF PATRISTIC AND
REFORMATION-ERA INTERPRETIVE APPROACHES
IN RECENT WORKS BY CARTER AND PROVAN

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Introduction

Within a short span of time, two books on evangelical hermeneutics, by Craig Carter and Iain Provan respectively, came out that championed very different models of reading Scripture. It is perhaps of minor interest that both Carter and Provan are situated in Canadian institutions.² Since each of these monographs essentially makes a case for why the hermeneutical approach of a certain historical period is preferable and should be adopted as normative today, it is worthwhile to compare their respective arguments. This review essay will first engage with the arguments of the two books individually, providing overviews and internal critiques of Carter and Provan (this order being chosen by the chronological progression of the time periods they champion). Next, it will focus on select topic areas where the works overlap, with the intention of creating a dialogue that will clarify the strengths and weaknesses of each case under review.

1. I wish to thank Sid Sudiagal, Spencer Boersma, and Parker Arnold for their willingness to read early drafts of this article. The insightful advice that they shared was of great benefit to me as I refined and developed the analysis throughout.

2. Shortly before Carter and Provan's books were released, another book on hermeneutics was written by an evangelical working in a Canadian institution: Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (see Fuller, Review of *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, R1–R6).

The key points of this study can be briefly summarized. Carter unhelpfully caricatures historical criticism, and his case for the normativity of Platonism, and by extension patristic allegory, in Christian theology is too generalized to be accurate. Provan misrepresents patristic allegory, along with structuralism, poststructuralism, and reader-response approaches, and his overall program entirely neglects crucial metaphysical questions. When their treatments of overlapping subjects are directly compared, Provan's work consistently displays far deeper research and more careful selection and handling of primary sources. But despite the individual shortcomings of these works, their comparison is still fruitful due to the lessons they have to teach regarding the role of the past in constructing the identities of evangelical interpreters today and the place of metaphysics in hermeneutical discussions.

Carter, Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition

Overview

Carter's robust ten-page preface provides an accessible roadmap of the book. He explains that he intends to offer an alternative to the paradigm of the authorial-intent, historical-grammatical approach currently taught in most evangelical institutions. Carter's cherished "Great Tradition" comes from a "pro-Nicene culture," with its "spiritual exegesis, dogma emerging from that exegesis, and the metaphysical implications of those dogmas."³ He accordingly rejects the inherently secular assumptions guiding much exegesis (and by extension, theology) today. Rather than viewing allegory as based in arbitrary symbolic leaps, Carter sees it as theologically required, since for the church fathers, "the biblical text functioned sacramentally . . . by manifesting Christ in the present."⁴ Another pillar of Carter's argument is a rewriting of the conventional understanding of the history and significance of the Enlightenment, in which the rise of reason and science is instead interpreted as a regression into paganism.

3. Carter, *Scripture*, xiii.

4. Carter, *Scripture*, xvi.

The “Introduction” part of *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition* contains only chapter 1, “Who Is the Suffering Servant? The Crisis in Contemporary Hermeneutics.” Carter begins by using the case of Isa 53 to illustrate the problem of how many expositors today wish to find Christ in the text of the Old Testament (as did the patristic writers) but are prevented from doing so by the historical-critical method, which they view as the only means of arriving at a valid interpretation. He then traces the historical process that led to this conundrum, in which the Bible is handled without regard to its “inspiration.”⁵ For Carter, the culprit is the naturalistic “religion” of the Enlightenment, which sought to both unchain the Bible from being read through the lens of the creeds and temper the “political power of the church”⁶ by replacing its exegetical authority with that of the university. The end result is essentially a system of “Epicurean naturalism” that proclaims “the new religion of salvation through technology, education, and social progress.”⁷ Carter concludes the chapter by surveying some “promising developments” in the retrieval of the church’s historic orthodoxy (among others, he particularly highlights the work of John Webster) and summarizing his main case: “the classical approach to interpretation has always allowed for a fuller meaning (*sensus plenior*) under the guidance of the Holy Spirit without opening the door to interpretive anarchy.”⁸

Part 1, “Theological Hermeneutics,” consists of chapters 2–4. Chapter 2 is entitled “Toward a Theology of Scripture.” Carter first addresses the subject of inspiration, which he sees as involving both “miracle” and “providence.”⁹ For the former, Carter notes the variety of ways God oversaw the writing of the text of Scripture, from outright dictation (such as in the case of the Ten Commandments) to the use of human research and editorial work. Regardless of their compositional process, however, all

5. Carter, *Scripture*, 9.
6. Carter, *Scripture*, 13.
7. Carter, *Scripture*, 15.
8. Carter, *Scripture*, 27.
9. Carter, *Scripture*, 37.

Scripture is equally inspired, the Old and New Testaments alike. As a result, God conveyed not just new information to the biblical writers, but even truths beyond what the human authors could comprehend in their own time period (pointing to 1 Pet 1:10–12). Carter takes this as evidence that a “single-meaning theory of hermeneutics” and “human authorial intention” are misguided.¹⁰ In the second half of the chapter, Carter turns to “The God Who Speaks.”¹¹ From his previous investigation into the role of miracle in inspiration, he extrapolates two key qualities about the nature of God, namely that God is both “transcendent” and “personal.”¹² The former means not just that God alone is sovereign, but that he uniquely has existence as part of his being, and thus humans can only speak of God in “analogical language.”¹³ For the latter, Carter contrasts classical theism with modern “theistic personalism,”¹⁴ arguing that the latter necessarily leads to a deficient understanding of inspiration due to its insistence on libertarian free will (putting divine and human action “in direct competition”),¹⁵ which would necessarily clash with the idea of God guiding the writers of Scripture. Carter concludes the chapter by turning to Webster’s argument for the operation of sanctification in ordaining the text of Scripture for divine revelation. As a result, the Bible participates in Christ, “the divine Word,”¹⁶ and “participation in the risen Lord Jesus Christ is the means by which we understand the words of Scripture as what they truly are: the Word of God.”¹⁷

In chapter 3, “The Theological Metaphysics of the Great Tradition,” Carter sketches out an “account of the nature of the world”¹⁸ that supports the models of inspiration and divine being articulated in the previous chapter. He defines “theological meta-

10. Carter, *Scripture*, 44.

11. Carter, *Scripture*, 45.

12. Carter, *Scripture*, 46.

13. Carter, *Scripture*, 49.

14. Carter, *Scripture*, 54.

15. Carter, *Scripture*, 56.

16. Carter, *Scripture*, 58.

17. Carter, *Scripture*, 59.

18. Carter, *Scripture*, 62.

physics” as “the account of the ontological nature of reality that emerges from the theological descriptions of God and the world found in the Bible.”¹⁹ Although many liberal and conservative theologians have rejected metaphysics as an alien imposition onto theology, Carter demonstrates that detailed theological investigation inevitably requires utilizing metaphysical categories, and that the Bible teaches “certain doctrines about the nature of reality.”²⁰ Carter describes the theological metaphysic of the “Great Tradition” as “Christian Platonism.”²¹ He builds his case for this identification by reviewing Augustine’s conversion account, in which Platonism played a pivotal role in helping him embrace Christian faith, and Augustine’s discussion of the merits and shortcomings of Platonism in the *City of God*. Reflecting on the relationship of Christian Platonism to general Platonism, Carter first points to Augustine’s utilization of Platonic thought regarding the nature of God “and his relation to the world.”²² The biblical descriptions of God ruling the cosmos require us to understand him as “the first cause of all things.”²³ To define “Platonism,” Carter draws from Lloyd Gerson’s model of “Ur-Platonism,”²⁴ which consists of “antimaterialism, antimechanism, antinomialism, antirelativism, and antiskepticism.”²⁵ Put more succinctly, Platonism can be understood as “top-down” explanations with “the smallest possible number of principles”²⁶ and that “the world is meaningful.”²⁷ These concepts are clearly affable with a Christian understanding of reality. Christian Platonism is “sacramental-historical”²⁸ in that it merges an adopted Platonic ontology with the biblical narrative of salvation in Jesus Christ. Carter closes the chapter with a succinct narration of how

19. Carter, *Scripture*, 63.
20. Carter, *Scripture*, 64.
21. Carter, *Scripture*, 66.
22. Carter, *Scripture*, 76.
23. Carter, *Scripture*, 77.
24. Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*.
25. Carter, *Scripture*, 79.
26. Carter, *Scripture*, 81.
27. Carter, *Scripture*, 82.
28. Carter, *Scripture*, 83.

the rise of modernity (a form of “neopaganism”)²⁹ led to the rejection of each of the five points of Platonism, in both the church and society at large. One significant effect of this metaphysical shift was the introduction of nominalism, which impacted the doctrine of God (and by extension humanity) such that “the will played a more prominent role than reason or love.”³⁰

Chapter 4 is entitled “The History of Biblical Interpretation Reconsidered.” It seeks to challenge the common consensus that views “critical” interpretation as vastly superior to the naïve, “precritical”³¹ period. Carter first considers the strengths and weaknesses of Childs’s seven common denominators of “Christian exegesis of the Old Testament.”³² Next, Carter looks at the history of biblical interpretation through the lens of the development of modernity that he sketched in the previous chapter, concluding that the overriding commonality of all the different deviations from Christian Platonism that evolved over time is that they involve a fundamentally naturalistic metaphysic that “does not and *cannot* acknowledge what the Bible really is,” resulting in the devaluation of Scripture to mere “myth.”³³

Part 2, “Recovering Premodern Exegesis,” consists of chapters 5–7. In chapter 5, “Reading the Bible as Unity Centered on Jesus Christ,” Carter provides three historical case studies to support his main points that (1) “biblical interpretation is a spiritual discipline”; (2) “the apostles are our models”; and (3) “the rule of faith is our guide.”³⁴ To illustrate point (1), Carter points to Ambrose of Milan, who argued that growth in sanctification is a prerequisite for a correct understanding of doctrine. Carter then traces later thinkers who held to this belief, such as John Calvin and Alec Motyer. Carter’s discussion of point (2) draws from Justin Martyr, whose apologetics were heavily based around demonstrating how Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled by Jesus Christ (as taught in the New Testament in Luke 24:25–27

29. Carter, *Scripture*, 85.

30. Carter, *Scripture*, 87.

31. Carter, *Scripture*, 94.

32. Carter, *Scripture*, 98; Childs, *Struggle*, 300–321.

33. Carter, *Scripture*, 123.

34. Carter, *Scripture*, 130.

and elsewhere), a proposal that would be unthinkable within the metaphysics of the Enlightenment. The treatment of point (3) revolves around Irenaeus' use of the "rule of faith," which is the Apostle's Creed, and "the expansion of this creed is described as the *skopos* or main theme of the Bible."³⁵ Reading the Old Testament as pointing towards this rule of faith ensures that all of Scripture can function together as a consistent unity (and thus is not forcing the Bible into a foreign set of beliefs). Based on this example, Carter indicates a preference for the biblical theology practiced by Geerhardus Vos, as opposed to the approaches of J. P. Gabler or Childs.

Chapter 6, "Letting the Literal Sense Control All Meaning," grapples with the disputed issue of the boundaries of and relationship between "literal" and "spiritual" meanings in Scripture. Carter defines what is "literal" as based on the "meaning" itself, rather than "how meaning is conveyed"³⁶ or the exact method that is employed. As a result, this literal meaning always has primacy, but it can also contain a spiritual meaning that may not have been apparent to the human author. Carter first engages with the interpretive practice of Augustine, who in his mature period saw "Christ . . . [as] 'virtually incarnate' in the Old Testament; his body already existed there in the form of Israel."³⁷ This real presence of Christ in the Old Testament means that "figurative readings always point to him" and that "the distinction between the literal and the spiritual senses . . . eventually recedes into the background."³⁸ Next, Carter works through this theme in a selection of patristic and medieval writers, charting a shift from a separation of literal and spiritual senses to a consensus that they are closely interrelated. This survey culminates in a treatment of John Calvin, arguing that he only opposed allegory when it was used in support of false doctrine, and that he otherwise largely stood in continuity with the church fathers. The

35. Carter, *Scripture*, 149–50.

36. Carter, *Scripture*, 162.

37. Carter, *Scripture*, 174.

38. Carter, *Scripture*, 175.

chapter ends with a list of ten theses that summarize the approach to interpretation advanced in chapters 5 and 6.

In chapter 7, “Seeing and Hearing Christ in the Old Testament,” Carter puts together his constructive proposal. He begins by drawing from Matthew Bates’s definition of “prosopological exegesis”³⁹ (“assigning nontrivial *prosopa* . . . to the speakers or addressees . . . in order to make sense of the text”)⁴⁰ and uses the example of the use of Ps 40:6–8 in Heb 10:6–7 to argue for the weakness of the prevalent typological readings in favor of a prosopological approach in which the person of Jesus Christ is literally speaking in Ps 40. Carter then examines Augustine’s readings of the Psalms, in which “Christ identifies with his church and speaks at some points as the body and at other points as the head.”⁴¹ The final section of this chapter argues that, contrary to what most modern hermeneuts believe, premodern exegesis can be considered “scientific,” in that it “produced classical orthodoxy . . . has a clear focus on God as the subject matter being studied, and employs the method of contemplating the self-revelation of God in Holy Scripture.”⁴² True science grows out of the Christian beliefs that events have a purpose and that the human mind was designed to understand the natural world, rather than from Enlightenment naturalism. Therefore, there is no reason to see exegesis based on the latter as being more “scientific” than the reading practices of the Great Tradition. An ontology in which “the Bible is Christ’s word” leads naturally to exegesis that understands that “the Bible is literally about Christ.”⁴³ As a result, above and beyond occurrences of divine speech in the Psalms, “we can expect to see recurring patterns that reflect the universals in which individual things in this world participate,”⁴⁴ such as Isaac signifying Christ in Gen 22.

The “Conclusion” section of the book contains chapter 8, “The Identity of the Suffering Servant Revisited.” Here, Carter

39. Carter, *Scripture*, 192.

40. Cited in Carter, *Scripture*, 192.

41. Carter, *Scripture*, 205.

42. Carter, *Scripture*, 216.

43. Carter, *Scripture*, 220.

44. Carter, *Scripture*, 221.

comes full circle with the example of Isa 53 used in the introduction by comparing its treatment in three different commentaries (from evangelical, critical, and mediating perspectives). He then provides a sermon he preached on Isa 53 as an example of how to apply the reading practices he advocates. Finally, he compares his approach with the principles given in some of Kevin Vanhoozer's and D. A. Carson's writings on hermeneutics. The book is capped off with the brief (less than two full pages) "Appendix: Criteria for Limiting the Spiritual Sense," followed by a bibliography as well as Scripture, persons, and subjects indices.

Evaluation

Since much of Carter's argument is built around the interpretation of key historical sources, consideration of these readings will be reserved for later in this study, when Carter's work is compared with Provan's *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture*. The discussion below will evaluate select aspects of Carter's argument that are best dealt with independently.

One of the most notable features of *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition* is its sheer antagonism to historical criticism. In many places, the tone reaches a shrill hyperbole. Documentation of the extent of this polemical engagement is necessary. Carter complains that the discipline is plagued by "chronic instability"⁴⁵ and that a multitude of positions exists for any given question.⁴⁶ The fact that source documents can have

45. Carter, *Scripture*, 22. A more balanced assessment might observe that in contrast to the speculation involved in many conventional critical idioms (such as the documentary hypothesis), the promise of comparison with ancient Near Eastern discoveries offers an ever-expanding field of information with the potential for new interpretive possibilities (see Hallo, "Compare and Contrast," 1–2).

46. Carter, *Scripture*, 23. This rather black-and-white disposition is reminiscent of Vanhoozer's critique of Derrida. Referencing the infamous Searle/Derrida exchange, Vanhoozer notes that if Derrida cannot have absolute knowledge, he will have none at all (Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 211–13). Elsewhere in this section Carter protests that the large number of methods results in a scenario where "feminist or liberation" advocates likely have little communication with those working in "literary" or "rhetorical" (Carter, *Scripture*, 22) criticism. This complaint

original meanings that differ from the intentions of later editors who compile them is apparently a fatal blow to the coherency of the entire enterprise.⁴⁷ The need for “historical reconstructions”⁴⁸ is eliminated by the practice of using Scripture to interpret Scripture and similarly, “Most of the historical information needed for accurate interpretation of biblical texts will be found within the canon of Scripture itself.”⁴⁹ Carter also favors a single-authorship approach to Isaiah on the grounds that it best allows for an understanding of inspiration that would support predictive prophecy and revelation lacking in cultural precedent.⁵⁰

is confusing, since many would consider these frameworks, grounded respectively in ideology and literature, to be wholly different than historical criticism proper (a distinction he does seem to acknowledge on p. 125). See below for discussion of Carter’s attacks on postmodern methods.

47. Carter, *Scripture*, 40, 44–45. Carter states this leads to viewing the Bible as “a mishmash of fragments from different centuries written by different authors and jammed together without regard for contradictions and incompatibilities” (45). Contra Carter, this line of research in reality has a long and fruitful heritage. The canonical criticism of Sanders observed how individual texts utilized in passages of Scripture underwent evolutions in their meaning over time as they were situated in larger contexts and adapted for different uses, referring to this phenomenon as “multivalency” (see Sanders, *Canon and Community*, xvii, 22–28). Comparison with the textual history of ancient Near Eastern models likewise reveals that texts were significantly changed over time, especially by new introductions or endings being added to cast the meaning of the whole in a new light (see Milstein, “Outsourcing Gilgamesh,” 37–62, as well as the in-depth applications of these models to Deuteronomy and Jeremiah in van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*).

48. Carter, *Scripture*, 153.

49. Carter, *Scripture*, 188. This assertion is handily refuted by even a short perusal of the examples compiled in works such as Hays, *Hidden Riches* and Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*.

50. Carter, *Scripture*, 43–44. This fails to interact with the substantive *theological* argument to the contrary made in Boda, “Authors and Readers.” Boda convincingly documents how even Isa 1–39 is shaped in light of the concerns of a later audience (259–61), and that the autobiographical first-person “voice” of the prophet is suddenly absent in chs. 40–66 (262–68). Most significantly, Boda contrasts New

Carter has relatively little to say about postmodern hermeneutics but is uniformly negative when he does mention the topic. He portrays poststructuralism as arbitrarily criticizing certain forms of hierarchy “based on nothing more than personal dislike,” and its practitioners as “emotivists with a persecution complex who tend to become caricatures of what they critique.”⁵¹

Another notable position taken in this book is that Carter argues that Arminianism (which he sees as an outgrowth of modern theistic personalism) necessarily leads to a deficient doctrine of inspiration, since its emphasis on human free will conflicts with divine guidance of the message of Scripture.⁵² However, this is readily countered by Olson’s extensive documentation of the high view of inspiration held by historical Arminian thinkers.⁵³ Olson also argues that the popular conception of Arminianism as being rooted in free will is mistaken, and that rather God’s love and grace is the foundation from which the possibility of human choice emerges.⁵⁴

One of the primary contentions of *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition* is its insistence on the historical precedent and conceptual necessity of Platonism for Christian theology.

Testament descriptions of originally delivered oral prophecy (2 Pet 1:21) with the later act of the writing down that prophecy (2 Tim 3:16), arguing that the inspiration of the latter cannot be subservient to the former, and that accordingly there is no reason to dismiss the possibility of God’s use of later scribes to shape and expand the prophetic books.

51. Carter, *Scripture*, 125. This characterization of poststructuralism as inherently ideological is problematic. The semiotic analysis of Roland Barthes (while admittedly sitting on the boundary between structuralism and poststructuralism) deliberately seeks the variety of possible meanings contained within the sign system of a text, rather than the correlation of these linguistic signs with a given “deep structure,” such as Marxism or psychoanalysis (see Barthes, “Structural Analysis,” 118–19). Regarding the issue of the preference of certain forms of hierarchy, it is interesting to note that Carter makes a passing comment (p. 15) about how Christendom is the ideal place from which to read Scripture.

52. Carter, *Scripture*, 56.

53. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 82–88.

54. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 97–114.

Strong language is used to make this point, one example being “To oppose Christian Platonism, therefore, is to oppose philosophy itself and, in so doing, to set oneself in opposition to reason, the moral law, and natural science.”⁵⁵ Proper interrogation of Carter’s argument at this point requires dividing the investigation into two separate questions: (1) Is it true that patristic thought universally operated within “the metaphysical paradigm of Ur-Platonism”?⁵⁶ and (2) is Platonism inherently necessary for faithful Christian theology?

Regarding question (1) (Is it true that patristic thought universally operated within “the metaphysical paradigm of Ur-Platonism”?), strictly speaking Tatian and Tertullian did reject Platonism, although they are admittedly in the extreme minority in doing so.⁵⁷ A more fruitful path forward for answering this question requires (a) probing the extent to which the adoption of Platonic vocabulary by the fathers implies they were holding to comparable concepts; and (b) whether engagement with such a school of thought, one so highly influential in this historical period, truly constitutes acceptance or appropriation, and if, viewed in context, this engagement was much more selective or polemical than it may appear at first glance.⁵⁸ Regarding point (a) above, Edwards argues that if the presence of Platonic “vocabulary” or “imagery” makes someone a “Platonist,” then simply every “Greek thinker” from Aristotle onwards would be considered a Platonist.⁵⁹ This is echoed by Ludlow’s study of Gregory of Nyssa. She states:

55. Carter, *Scripture*, 82.

56. Carter, *Scripture*, 84.

57. de Beer, “Patristic Reception,” 374–75; Morlet, “Agreement,” 17.

58. Although this position cannot be adequately engaged with in the confines of the present study, it is worth acknowledging the argument of Hart, “The Hidden and the Manifest,” who argues that the philosophical positions developed at Nicaea develop a significant departure from their Platonic precursors more so than the usual models of continuity and appropriation.

59. Edwards, “Origen and Gregory of Nyssa,” 92.

. . . it is rarely possible to trace Gregory's non-biblical sources precisely by identifying particular quotations or allusions—or even particular vocabulary words . . . even if Gregory held a theory of the soul similar to that of Aristotle, he would not necessarily express it using Aristotle's own terminology. Furthermore, if he does use a word commonly associated with, say, Plato, one should not necessarily assume that Gregory is using it in a Platonic (or Neoplatonic) sense.⁶⁰

Regarding point (b) above, Morlet documents the superficial engagement with Platonism by Christian thinkers prior to Clement of Alexandria, noting that while Justin Martyr and Athenagoras commend Plato, they only display knowledge of a handful of his ideas.⁶¹ Kenney discusses the breadth of what adherence to Platonism entailed, as it involved more “religious” devotion than is commonly recognized. Above and beyond being simply an intellectual practice, it was a “way of life.”⁶² Regarding its appropriation by Christians, Kenney states:

. . . when we refer in contemporary scholarship, for example, to the “Platonism of Augustine,” we usually call attention only to a limited subset of what constituted ancient Platonism, perhaps some aspects of its doctrine or contemplative practices acquired by Augustine second-hand. But that is a reductive use of the term “Platonist.” . . . Christians were never really Platonists in antiquity when we understand more fully what being a Platonist actually meant. Their “Platonism” was informal and fragmentary and borrowed.⁶³

Edwards provides a detailed taxonomy of the ways that early Christians could engage with philosophy, utilizing the labels of “formal,” “obsequious,” “metaphrastic,” “supplementary,”

60. Ludlow, “Christian Formation,” 164. Elsewhere in this volume this is exemplified as Zachhuber, “The Soul as *Dynamis*,” 143, states “. . . in Gregory's most developed and most sustained discussion of issues concerning the soul his theory moved consciously and decisively away from Platonic premises, so much so that, in fact, Platonic psychologies are of limited or no use for their interpretation.”

61. Morlet, “Agreement,” 18–19.

62. Kenney, “Platonism and Christianity,” 165.

63. Kenney, “Platonism and Christianity,” 166.

“strategic,” “catalytic,” and “dialectical.”⁶⁴ While this is not the place to discuss each category in detail, they provide sufficient proof that Christian thought could reference or appeal to philosophy in multiple ways without being said to truly work within a given philosophical framework. Edwards elsewhere argues that Origen (who was accused by many of being too Platonic)⁶⁵ was certainly led to address certain questions as a result of the prevalence of Platonism in his historical setting, but when read in context, Origen was critiquing Plato far more than he was agreeing with him.⁶⁶

Although question (2) (is Platonism inherently necessary for faithful Christian theology?) can only be briefly touched upon here, a small selection of counterexamples should suffice. Erickson agrees with Carter that Scripture teaches certain metaphysical positions (and clearly excludes others),⁶⁷ but nonetheless believes that the theologian should prioritize the content of revelation and utilize philosophy eclectically for conceptual clarification on an ad hoc basis.⁶⁸ More pointedly, Pannenberg consistently finds fault with theological formulations derived from Platonism. In the areas of the relationship of God’s unity and triune being as well as God’s relationship to time (to name but two case studies), Pannenberg argues that the patristic usage of Platonic frameworks inevitably led to problematic logical ends.⁶⁹ A fundamentally different approach entirely is found in the (Ana)-Baptist thought of James McClendon, who essentially replaced metaphysics as a foundation for theology with ethics. Working as something of a pragmatist, McClendon adopts a three-strand narrative ethic, consisting of personal formation, communal care and action, and attention to the active work of God, as the basis

64. Edwards, “Origen’s Platonism,” 21–32. A comparable typology is found in de Vogel, “Platonism and Christianity,” 18–27.

65. Edwards, “Origen’s Platonism,” 20.

66. Edwards, *Origen Against Plato*, 160–61.

67. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 57–59.

68. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 59–61.

69. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1*, 285–99, 403–10.

of how “Scripture is lived in the believing community.”⁷⁰ This offers no less of a detailed grid for handling the Bible than the metaphysical tradition, while arguably providing a more robust basis for the kind of spiritual growth that Carter sees as fundamental to proper interpretation.⁷¹

While the above interaction identified some flaws, they do not detract from the value of the book. Carter has done evangelicals a major service by highlighting the important role played by ontology and showing that metaphysics cannot simply be bypassed in discussions about hermeneutics and the nature of meaning. This study will now turn to consideration of Provan’s volume.

Provan, The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture

Overview

Provan’s introduction begins by framing the central concerns of biblical interpretation (such as Scripture’s canon, perspicuity, and literal and spiritual senses) within the context of Martin Luther’s renowned stand for *sola scriptura* in the early sixteenth century. Turning his attention to the contemporary situation, he then outlines a taxonomy of four current models of Protestant hermeneutics: (1) modernist historical criticism; (2) reader- and ideology-centered postmodernism; (3) the conservative approach of “Chicago Statement” inerrancy; and (4) the “Counter-Reformational Protestantism”⁷² exemplified in Carter’s work surveyed above. In light of the present confusion resulting from these widely disparate models, Provan outlines his own “fifth way” proposal. It seeks to appropriate the best aspects of the hermeneutics of the reformers (who themselves made much use of patristic and medieval thought) while also making intelligent use of the insights from other time periods, and not necessarily being restricted to all the conclusions drawn by the reformers.

70. Boersma, “Baptist Vision,” 79–106 (106). See also McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1*.

71. Carter, *Scripture*, 131–39.

72. Provan, *Reformation*, 17.

Provan states, “Such an approach holds fast . . . to the Reformation affirmation of the centrality of the literal sense of the text in right-minded biblical interpretation (and the importance of learning biblical languages in order to be able to accomplish this).”⁷³ After providing an overview of the structure of the book, Provan summarizes his main argument: “the Reformers’ confidence about our ability to read Scripture ‘rightly’ was well grounded . . . The ‘seriously literal interpretation’ of Scripture is still well capable of discerning the word that God wishes to address to both the Church and the world.”⁷⁴

The main body of *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* is divided into three parts. Part 1, “Before There Were Protestants: Long-Standing Questions,” seeks to demonstrate the precedent for the Reformers’ positions in earlier phases of church history. Chapters 2 and 3 lay the groundwork with discussion of the crucial questions of the role of the church in validating the contents of Scripture (chapter 2) and the formation of the canon (chapter 3). Crucially, Provan argues that “*Scripture does precede the church*”⁷⁵ and that the Reformers had substantial historical precedent for rejecting the Apocrypha. He also provides a succinct yet helpful summary of second temple evidence for the contents of the Old Testament canon being closed “prior to the time of Jesus.”⁷⁶

Chapter 4, “On the Meaning of Words: The Literal, the Spiritual, and the Plain Confusing” stands at the heart of Provan’s argument. After briefly documenting how Luther and Calvin rejected patristic allegory in favor of literal reading informed by their “Renaissance Humanist”⁷⁷ context, he outlines his definition of “literal” interpretation: “. . . to read Scripture ‘literally,’ in line with Reformation perspectives on this topic, means to read it in accordance with its various, apparent communicative intentions as a collection of texts from the past now integrated

73. Provan, *Reformation*, 20.

74. Provan, *Reformation*, 24.

75. Provan, *Reformation*, 28 (italics in original).

76. Provan, *Reformation*, 64.

77. Provan, *Reformation*, 82.

into one Great Story, doing justice to such realities as literary convention, idiom, metaphor, and typology or figuration.”⁷⁸ Provan insightfully notes that attention to historical context must not preclude attentiveness to the purpose of a text as a whole by reducing it to mere “description,”⁷⁹ a fault he attributes to both the first (historical criticism) and third (inerrantist) hermeneutical models from his taxonomy. Those who read texts as merely expressing bare “facts”⁸⁰ are forced to take a further step subsequent to that of exegesis proper in order to apply it to modern life. Provan would see this practical content as already intrinsic to a literal reading, properly understood. He exemplifies this principle by pointing to Ps 2, which as part of post-exilic collection known as the Psalter necessarily functions prophetically by anticipating a king who is still to come.⁸¹ This leads into a discussion of typology, which Provan merely sees as a kind of literal reading applied to whole books or multiple books, as intentional “resemblances” provide “coherence” through the “Great Story.”⁸² This is quite different from allegory, as the latter imports “conceptual frameworks”⁸³ foreign to the text itself, a distinction with precedent in Calvin. For Provan, then, reading literally involves attention to the context of the whole canon as the ultimate literary context for the discrete biblical writings.

With this definition in place, the remaining chapters in Part 1 provide a historical review of the hermeneutical practices of the church up to the period of the Reformation, for the purpose of answering the accusation that the Reformers erred in deviating from patristic allegory, itself supposedly based upon the apostolic precedent found in the New Testament.⁸⁴ Chapters 5 and 6 argue that Jesus, the apostles, and Paul read the Old Testament

78. Provan, *Reformation*, 85–86 (italics in original).

79. Provan, *Reformation*, 92.

80. Provan, *Reformation*, 93.

81. Provan, *Reformation*, 95–96.

82. Provan, *Reformation*, 99.

83. Provan, *Reformation*, 104. Provan draws this phrase from Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 114.

84. Provan, *Reformation*, 85.

literally. To highlight one example, Provan handles the challenging case of the use of Isa 7:14 in Matt 1:22–23 by considering the literary context of the post-exilic final form of Isaiah: Hezekiah becomes an “paradigmatic,” “eschatological” figure due to the literary progressions from the Hezekiah narrative in Isa 36–39 into the “words of consolation”⁸⁵ in Isa 40–55 and the arrangement of the expectation of “peace and security” (39:8) with the absence of a description of Hezekiah’s death, implying “that Isaiah’s promises will come to pass . . . during ‘Hezekiah’s’ reign.”⁸⁶ There is also an extensive discussion of Gal 4:21–31, which contains detailed excurses on allegorical readings of Homer and the approach of Philo of Alexandria. Provan argues that Paul differs entirely from the latter two models, as Paul discovers analogical connections between the larger context of the patriarchal narratives and the Galatian church involving “the chosen line . . . and all those who stand outside it,”⁸⁷ rather than importing a metaphysic that bears no resemblance to the surface meaning of the text.⁸⁸

Chapters 7 and 8 profile the interpretive practices of select patristic sources: Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Augustine. With the understanding of an apostolic practice of “literal” reading established by the previous two chapters, Provan readily faults these patristic sources when they deviate from this paradigm, thus vindicating the path followed by the Reformers.⁸⁹ Although detailed descriptions of these treatments must be deferred to the comparison with Carter below, it is significant that Irenaeus (for example) was committed to the unity of Scripture and the use of its story of redemption to explain its discrete parts, although he at times reads New Testament concepts into the Old Testament in overly speculative ways.⁹⁰ In contrast, Provan faults Origen for being overly influenced by Platonic metaphysics and allowing these, rather

85. Provan, *Reformation*, 120.

86. Provan, *Reformation*, 120.

87. Provan, *Reformation*, 147.

88. Provan, *Reformation*, 145–47.

89. Provan, *Reformation*, 152.

90. Provan, *Reformation*, 159–65.

than the biblical narrative, to determine his readings of individual texts.⁹¹ Augustine prescribed a literal approach to interpretation, although in practice he often used allegory.⁹²

Chapter 9, “How Shall We Then Read? The Church Fathers, the Reformers, and Ourselves,” draws key implications from the previous five chapters. Provan argues that the Reformers rightly rejected the excesses of patristic allegory⁹³ and were faithful to apostolic precedent in their prioritization of the literal sense.⁹⁴ Provan traces historical precedent for literal reading from the Middle Ages through modern Roman Catholicism, develops a critique of allegory (addressed in the evaluation section below), and documents places where patristic sources demonstrate awareness of the weaknesses of allegory. At the end of the chapter, Provan provides two reasons why readers today do not need to slavishly imitate the reading practices of the Reformers: the Reformers were at times inconsistent and lapsed into allegory, and sometimes what the Reformers understood as the “literal” meaning can be shown to be incorrect based on later developments in understandings of languages and historical background.

Chapters 10 and 11 together make a historical case that the Reformers were correct in their conviction that the Bible should be studied in its original languages, and specifically that the authoritative text of the Old Testament is the Hebrew rather than the Septuagint. Chapter 10 focuses on patristic reception of the Septuagint, noting that its authority was based in the assumption that it faithfully rendered the Hebrew and that the Hebrew was viewed as holding sole inspiration, even though widespread lack of facility in Hebrew prevented many from directly accessing it. Chapter 11 treats the Vulgate up to the time of the Reformation, similarly noting that while it was the Bible of the Western church for centuries, there was always a general understanding that sole authority belonged to the Hebrew text, a tendency that flowered in the Renaissance, with its passion for original lan-

91. Provan, *Reformation*, 179–83.

92. Provan, *Reformation*, 190–97.

93. Provan, *Reformation*, 199.

94. Provan, *Reformation*, 200.

guages. Provan closes the chapter by providing some reasons why our approach to biblical languages does not need to precisely imitate the practice of the Reformers, in a manner similar to the points made at the end of chapter 9.

Part 2 is entitled “Now There are Protestants: Scripture in a Changing World.” Its five chapters unpack the distinctives of the Reformers’ doctrine of Scripture and chart the worldview changes that led to modernity, along with helpful and unhelpful Protestant answers to the challenges to faith. Chapter 12 argues that the concepts of *sola scriptura* and perspicuity were hardly novel and that properly understood, they still support interpretation as being grounded in the church community and require proper training and effort to ensure valid results, although given the finitude of human existence pluralism will exist. Chapter 13 introduces the disputed topic of Scripture’s authority and consequently, the question of what subject matter it intends to truthfully address. Provan documents that both the Church Fathers and the Reformers had a nuanced understanding of divine accommodation and saw Scripture’s chief purpose as instructing in matters related to salvation. Thus, there is still room for general revelation, and the assumption of longstanding warfare between science and religion is inaccurate.

Chapter 14 initiates a detailed historical investigation into the circumstances in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries that led to the Great Story of Bible being dethroned as the means of organizing all human knowledge. In the sixteenth century the “biblical, Christian doctrine of creation”⁹⁵ as taught by the Reformers challenged the prevailing Greek metaphysics, which tended to devalue empirical investigation of the material world, even as the rise in individual Bible reading led to a proliferation of divergent interpretations. In the seventeenth century, Provan documents two ways that Protestants dealt with scientists such as Galileo, whose findings appeared to challenge the Bible.⁹⁶ The first path, deemed the most faithful to the Reformation heritage by Provan, involves synthesis and reinterpretation of Scripture,

95. Provan, *Reformation*, 355.

96. See summary in Provan, *Reformation*, 382.

guided by the principle that the Bible in many cases describes matter phenomenologically. The second path instead simply rejected science in the name of upholding biblical authority,⁹⁷ a position Provan labels as “obscurantism.”⁹⁸ Provan also covers the wars that began due to religious conflict, a situation which led to attempts to use unaided reason to find peaceable ways of ordering society. With this rise of confidence in the possibilities of what reason could accomplish came the rise of the hollowed-out “Christianity” of deism.

Chapter 15, “The Emergence of Secular History: The Way We (Really) Were,” covers the crucial territory of the rise of “secular history” and “ethical rationalism,” along with the diminished use of the Bible in “political thought”⁹⁹ through the nineteenth century. It profiles the influence of Spinoza in the seventeenth century, who advocated for human freedom and viewed the Bible as only instructive regarding morals, anticipating many of the positions of later historical critics.¹⁰⁰ The eighteenth century contained people and movements as diverse as Jonathan Edwards and German rationalism, the latter contextualizing the Bible in a university curricula in which Scripture was merely an important artifact of the past that could be used for training citizens to support a stable and prosperous state.¹⁰¹ The nineteenth century brought the biological evolution of Darwin and the diverse responses to it among Protestants, along with “critical” readings of the history of Israel.

Chapter 16 draws Part 2 to a close by taking stock of current Protestant responses to the conundrum of “the eclipse of biblical narrative”¹⁰² in the western world and offering some prescriptions. Provan begins by addressing the fourth model (“Counter-Reformational Protestantism,” or patristic retrieval), which will be covered in the evaluation section below. Next, Provan offers a

97. Provan, *Reformation*, 367.

98. Provan, *Reformation*, 381.

99. Provan, *Reformation*, 384.

100. Provan, *Reformation*, 386–90.

101. Provan, *Reformation*, 397.

102. Provan, *Reformation*, 415.

rebuttal to the engagement tactics of his third model (“Chicago statement” inerrancy, in particular the 1982 statement on hermeneutics [*CSBH*]). He first charges *CSBH* with abandoning the Reformers’ understanding that “Scripture *reflects* previous (and present) limitations in human knowledge”¹⁰³ in its assertion that the “propositional statements” of the Bible are “objective and absolute.”¹⁰⁴ In doing so, *CSBH* also neglects to recognize that Scripture was written using different genres for the purpose of conveying “historically located . . . communicative intentions.”¹⁰⁵ Second, in its treatment of questions raised by science, *CSBH* simplistically states “Genesis 1–11 is factual”¹⁰⁶ without considering “which *kinds* of facts are there in Genesis 1–11, and how . . . the rhetoric of these chapters relate[s] to these facts”¹⁰⁷ or the ways in which the “facts” expressed in the text are framed within the thought forms and questions that would have been meaningful to the original audience.¹⁰⁸ Provan also finds it downright contradictory that *CSBH* acknowledges some historical instances where scientific discoveries rightly prompted reinterpretations of the Bible but assumes that such a paradigm shift could not take place in the matter of modern “macro-evolution.”¹⁰⁹ He furthermore accuses the approach of *CSBH* and its ilk (“quasi-Gnostic retreat . . . into an intellectual black hole”)¹¹⁰ for bearing much of the responsibility for the “eclipse of biblical narrative.”¹¹¹ This leads to Provan’s prescription: Protestants need to abandon Greek philosophy as a default framework, to be open to revising beliefs based on scientific discoveries, to be willing to consider different forms of societal change, and always maintain a posture of love that rejects violence. He ends

103. Provan, *Reformation*, 428.

104. Cited in Provan, *Reformation*, 428.

105. Provan, *Reformation*, 429.

106. Cited in Provan, *Reformation*, 430.

107. Provan, *Reformation*, 430.

108. Provan, *Reformation*, 431.

109. Provan, *Reformation*, 433.

110. Provan, *Reformation*, 437.

111. Provan, *Reformation*, 437.

the chapter with a call for a commitment to a robust vision for Christian education.

Part 3, “Still Protesting: Scripture in the (Post)Modern World,” contains six chapters along with a postscript that seek to engage with modern interpretive models and discern what they might offer for the modern Reformed reader. Chapter 17 ultimately faults source criticism for engaging in circular reasoning regarding the relationship between posited historical and literary sources.¹¹² It is more positive about the potential of form criticism for genre classification, but remains wary of the tendency of form critics to be skeptical about historicity.¹¹³ Chapter 18 cautiously praises redaction criticism for its promise to illuminate the purpose of the final form of a text¹¹⁴ and is fully enthusiastic about rhetorical criticism, although it chides some of its practitioners for arbitrarily failing to consider the truth claims being made in these different rhetorical forms.¹¹⁵ Chapter 19 finds some value in structuralism’s emphasis on the universal grammar of storytelling, but ultimately faults it for often neglecting close reading in a hasty effort to detect implicit deep structures, undermining authorial agency, and dismissing the possibility of the text offering access to a reality beyond itself.¹¹⁶ The conclusions about structuralism and the overall treatment of poststructuralism in chapter 19 will be addressed in the evaluation section below. Provan is highly enthusiastic about narrative criticism (chapter 20), even providing “reading guidelines”¹¹⁷ with some practical steps. His only reservation is that (as with many of the other methodologies above) some narrative critics are prone to dismiss the historicity of the stories they analyze.¹¹⁸ Chapter 21 sees value in social-scientific approaches due to their potential for illuminating the “larger social matrix”¹¹⁹ within

112. Provan, *Reformation*, 467.

113. Provan, *Reformation*, 481.

114. Provan, *Reformation*, 496.

115. Provan, *Reformation*, 512–13.

116. Provan, *Reformation*, 530.

117. Provan, *Reformation*, 564–66.

118. Provan, *Reformation*, 572–75.

119. Provan, *Reformation*, 590.

which texts function, as long as this does not lead to a diminished place for the theological claims made by these texts.¹²⁰ It also allows that feminist criticism may have some promise for exposing misogynistic interpretations, although the notion of isolating an essentialized “women’s experience”¹²¹ is found to be problematic.

In chapter 22, “The Canonical Reading of Scripture: The End of Criticism,” Provan surveys the contributions of Brevard Childs, although he criticizes Childs for being overly committed to historical-critical conclusions in his practice.¹²² Provan uses the rest of the chapter to exposit what a canonical reading of the book of Jonah might look like, informed by the best aspects of all the other methodologies. He finishes by reiterating the main points of his “fifth way” model: unlike conventional historical-criticism and postmodernism, it does not abandon the governing role of the “Great Biblical Story,”¹²³ and unlike inerrantists and advocates of patristic retrieval, his “fifth way” embraces the latter two methods when they offer genuine “insights into . . . the humanity of Scripture.”¹²⁴ The purpose of any discrete act of interpretation within the “fifth way” model is to cast light upon “the Great Biblical Story as a canonical whole”¹²⁵ and form readers in accordance with the goals set forth in 2 Tim 3:16–17. Crucially, this reading is still “literal” and does not need to make the arbitrary leaps of allegory to find “spiritual” meaning in the text.¹²⁶

Finally, a brief postscript returns to the example of Luther found in the introduction, affirming that the “reformed”¹²⁷ hermeneutic is still valuable (with appropriate adaptations) today. Next is an appendix, “Modern Developments in Our Understanding of the Biblical Text,” which drives home Provan’s conviction

120. Provan, *Reformation*, 591.

121. Provan, *Reformation*, 604.

122. Provan, *Reformation*, 620.

123. Provan, *Reformation*, 638.

124. Provan, *Reformation*, 638.

125. Provan, *Reformation*, 638.

126. Provan, *Reformation*, 638.

127. Provan, *Reformation*, 642.

that the goal of textual criticism should be to “reconstruct the original version of that [Hebrew] text as received as canonical by mainstream . . . Palestinian Judaism prior to the first century AD, and then by the Church in the first century AD”¹²⁸ rather than seeking “the earliest possible version of a Hebrew text.”¹²⁹ The back matter contains a bibliography as well as indexes of ancient sources, authors, and subjects.

Evaluation

As noted in the evaluation of Carter above, certain topics will only be addressed in the comparison section below. These include his interpretations of patristic and reformation figures, his narration of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, and certain aspects of his treatment of the merits and shortcomings of Christian Platonism. Likewise, due to the sheer length and comprehensiveness of this text, other topics, such as canon formation and the majority of his surveys of various critical methods in Part 3 will have to be omitted. The evaluation below will offer some observations on miscellaneous issues throughout, perform some critical soundings into Provan’s evaluation of structuralism and poststructuralism, and interrogate the coherency of the core of his proposal—his proffered “literal” interpretation and consequent rejection of allegory.

The heart of Provan’s critique of the conservative inerrantist platform is his interaction with the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics.¹³⁰ However, treating the *CSBH* as representative of the current understanding of inerrancy as a whole is problematic, given that it was far less widely adopted than the earlier (and more restrained) Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.¹³¹

Provan’s treatment of structuralism and poststructuralism in chapter 19 provides a useful test case for his expositions of different methodologies. Beginning with his critique of struc-

128. Provan, *Reformation*, 647.

129. Provan, *Reformation*, 646–47.

130. Provan, *Reformation*, 425–37.

131. Davidson and Turner, *Manifold Beauty*, 11.

turalism, he makes the following bold claim: “The ‘death of the author’ in such cases—an impressive piece of hyperbole that in all honesty should not be taken very seriously, since someone still needs to have composed the structured text—has been engineered precisely to allow imaginative readers full scope to have their way with the text without the possibility of authorial revenge: the author’s death is necessary for ‘the birth of the reader,’ as Barthes puts it.”¹³² But this is hardly an accurate representation of Barthes’ argument. Barthes’ essay in question begins by posing a vexing problem:

In his story *Sarrasine*, Balzac, speaking of a castrato disguised as a woman, writes this sentence: “*It was Woman, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive fears, her unprovoked bravado, her daring and her delicious delicacy of feeling.*” Who is speaking in this way? Is it the story’s hero, concerned to ignore the castrato concealed beneath the woman? Is it the man Balzac, endowed by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it the author Balzac, professing certain “literary” ideas of femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Or romantic psychology? It will always be impossible to know, for the good reason that all writing is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin: literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes.¹³³

It is clear, then, that Barthes is hardly looking for an excuse for interpretive anarchy but is rather laying bare the pressing challenge of identifying the genuine voice (and legitimate agency) in a text. In doing so he actually dethrones the “critic” from their quasi-heroic quest of assigning an author in order to “impose a limit on that text.”¹³⁴ Similarly, Barthes defines the “reader” by stating “the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he

132. Provan, *Reformation*, 529–30.

133. Barthes, *Image*, 142 (italics in original).

134. Barthes, *Image*, 147.

is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted,”¹³⁵ which hardly accords with the willful playfulness attributed to the reader by Provan. Provan’s final stab at structuralism—that “common sense” alone should lead to the rejection of the “deterministic account of writing”¹³⁶ attributed to structuralism likewise swings wide of the mark, since this appeal to “common sense” simply assumes the metaphysical foundations (implicit as they may be) that lead to his conclusions. A more robust engagement would need to take seriously the *ontology* behind these structuralist accounts of writing and acknowledge the contrasting accounts of the locus of subjectivity at play.¹³⁷ Furthermore, all of structuralism cannot be said to be so hopelessly “deterministic,” as Barthes’s early work *Writing Degree Zero* actually calls for authors to attempt to resist the overpowering voices within language itself that threaten to silence them.¹³⁸

The subtitle for this chapter’s section on poststructuralism is “The Creative Reader,” which unsurprisingly claims that “what marks out poststructuralists is that they are much less interested in *texts* than they are in *readers* and the act of reading.”¹³⁹ But in the case of the significant continental works of theory that gave rise to this movement, this is simply not true, as Cusset documents that what was originally an interest in the phenomenon of *writing* was only in North America later adapted for the discussion of reading.¹⁴⁰ That this focus is on writing rather than

135. Barthes, *Image*, 148.

136. Provan, *Reformation*, 531.

137. For example, see Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 35: “[T]he subject is not an individual plenitude which one is or is not entitled to pour off into language . . . but on the contrary a void around which the writer weaves a discourse which is infinitely transformed (that is to say inserted in a chain of transformation), so that all writing which does not lie designates not the internal attributes of the subject, but its absence. Language is not the predicate of a subject which is inexpressible or which language serves to signify; language is the subject.”

138. Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 2–3, 86–87. See also Fuller, “Roland Barthes,” 409–43.

139. Provan, *Reformation*, 532.

140. Cusset, *French Theory*, xiv–xv.

reading is apparent from even a cursory examination of canonical texts such as Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, which Provan mentions only in passing.¹⁴¹

Another significant issue in chapter 19 is the classification of reader-response theory under the umbrella of poststructuralism. A more accurate understanding of reader-response criticism would observe that this particular interest in readers and what they might bring to an instance of interpretation can be manifested within a wide variety of paradigms and is hardly limited to poststructuralism. This is argued, for example, by Suleiman, who states, "Audience-oriented criticism is not one field but many, not a single widely trodden path but a multiplicity of crisscrossing, often divergent tracks that cover a vast area of the critical landscape . . ." ¹⁴² It is also attested by Tompkins, whose edited volume on the subject contains essays that "represent a variety of theoretical orientations: New Criticism, structuralism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction . . ." ¹⁴³.

In this section on reader-response theory, Provan points to Fowler's monograph on Mark as an example of this reading strategy in practice.¹⁴⁴ In his summary of Fowler, Provan skips over the method section,¹⁴⁵ neglecting Fowler's own testimony regarding theoretical orientation. At the core of Fowler's method is the concept of "Meaning as Event,"¹⁴⁶ which relies on speech-act theory (which Provan himself praises earlier), "historical studies of orality and literacy,"¹⁴⁷ and detailed models of the "functions of language,"¹⁴⁸ the latter drawing primarily from the

141. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*; Provan, *Reformation*, 517, 532, 542–43.

142. Suleiman, "Introduction," 3–45 (6). Cited in Webb, "A Hermeneutical Disposition," 35–36.

143. Tompkins, "Introduction," ix–xxvi (ix).

144. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*.

145. Note that the footnote citations in Provan, *Reformation*, 538–39 jump from Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 1–2, all the way to the application on pp. 61–80.

146. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 47.

147. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 47.

148. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 52.

work of Hernadi,¹⁴⁹ who himself is far from being a poststructuralist.¹⁵⁰ Prior to the exposition of Fowler, Provan does discuss the work of reader-response theorist Stanley Fish,¹⁵¹ but Fish stands in the tradition of Anglo-American pragmatism, not post-structuralism.¹⁵²

The remainder of chapter 19 addresses deconstruction, which Provan characterizes with “the impossibility of knowledge.”¹⁵³ He provides examples of the theological formulations of John Caputo and Peter Rollins,¹⁵⁴ and dismisses it as having a general nature of “incoherence.”¹⁵⁵ He unsurprisingly concludes that “there is little in the deconstructionist approach . . . that is worthwhile . . .”¹⁵⁶ But Provan hardly provides adequate source material to support this claim. Out of the 25 footnotes in the section on deconstruction, 10 cite a survey text by Culler,¹⁵⁷ 4 each cite survey works by Vanhoozer and Zimmerman respectively,¹⁵⁸ 3 cite Rollins,¹⁵⁹ and 2 each cite Caputo and Bartholomew respectively.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, he is almost entirely dependent on one literary theory survey text (Culler) and overviews by other evangelicals (Vanhoozer, Zimmerman, and Bartholomew). Most glaringly, this documents an absence of *even a single* primary source on

149. Hernadi, “Literary Theory.”

150. Carroll (*Evolution and Literary Theory*, 54) explicitly contrasts the model Hernadi works from with the platform of poststructuralism.

151. Provan, *Reformation*, 533, 535–36.

152. Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 547.

153. Provan, *Reformation*, 542.

154. Provan, *Reformation*, 544. The most significant works he highlights here are Caputo, *Insistence of God* and Rollins, *Idolatry of God*.

155. Provan, *Reformation*, 545.

156. Provan, *Reformation*, 545.

157. Culler, *On Deconstruction*.

158. Vanhoozer, *Meaning*; Zimmerman, *Hermeneutics*.

159. Rollins, *Idolatry of God*; Provan also cites an essay by Rollins had posted on his personal website entitled “The Fidelity of Betrayal,” which is no longer available online.

160. Caputo, *Insistence of God*; Caputo, “What Do I Love When I Love My God?”; Bartholomew, “Postmodernity and Biblical Interpretation.”

deconstruction, let alone example of how it might be applied to the biblical text (the sudden turn to the philosophical systems of Caputo and Rollins is inexplicable).

Had Provan instead seriously grappled with the readings generated by key innovators within poststructuralism, his conclusions may well have been different. For examples, Barthes's *S/Z* begins with a detailed discussion of method, expositing the ways that literary texts invite a vast multiplicity of connections to be made among the various expressions of meaning inside the text as well as with elements of the world outside the text, such that there is no ultimately fixed master key that can restrain this interplay.¹⁶¹ This leads into a close reading of "Sarrasine," in which Barthes detects intricate thematic relationships that themselves create an effect of chaos, as the usual boundaries between elements in the systems of culture are repeatedly blurred.¹⁶² Paul de Man's analysis of Proust reveals sophisticated tensions between the detailed metaphors throughout the passage and the fact that their effectiveness depends on their being juxtaposed with metonymy, or more "literal" uses of words, creating an effect of language itself grappling with its author.¹⁶³ Within biblical studies, Greenstein has effectively deployed concepts taken from Barthes¹⁶⁴ to tackle the classic problems of narrative contradictions in Gen 37, concluding that the narrator deliberately combined expressions of Joseph's brothers being in control along with their plans being thwarted, corresponding to similarly ambiguous statements later in the story about how exactly Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt.¹⁶⁵ This indeterminacy regarding exactly which human parties sent Joseph to Egypt is resolved later in the narrative as YHWH is revealed to have ultimately orchestrated these events, suggesting that the earlier contradictions function to express that human causes are comparatively superfi-

161. Barthes, *S/Z*, 1–11.

162. For further discussion, see Fuller, "Roland Barthes," 423–27.

163. de Man, "Semiotics and Rhetoric," 27–33 (30–32).

164. Greenstein, "Equivocal Reading," 116–17. He references both Barthes' earlier (structuralist) and later (poststructuralist) work. In any case, the boundary between the two schools is hardly airtight.

165. Greenstein, "Equivocal Reading," 121–22.

cial.¹⁶⁶ Contrary to Provan's accusations that "readings multiply as 'products' for consumption"¹⁶⁷ and that the deconstructionists' real motivation is "to disable competing worldviews,"¹⁶⁸ these sources expisit the very real issues involved in the mechanics of how texts express meaning and even how authors may utilize these apparent clashes to express certain kinds of points.

One issue closely related to this matter of textual meaning is the role and use of biblical languages. Provan repeatedly stresses the importance of biblical languages and chides postmodern hermeneuts¹⁶⁹ and counter-reformational Protestants alike¹⁷⁰ for being insufficiently committed to their primacy. His "fifth way" approach claims that careful analysis of original languages is indispensable for arriving at the correct "literal sense of the text."¹⁷¹ However, Provan does not make clear exactly what *kind* of difference such a use of languages might make, or how one might use them to arrive at a well-grounded interpretation. In one place he mentions that subsequent developments in "Hebrew vocabulary . . . [and] hendiadys" would challenge Calvin's reading of Gen 3:16.¹⁷² In another place, when expositing how "we understand much more than our forebears about the biblical languages and how they function,"¹⁷³ he simply mentions that the flowering of comparative Semitics has allowed for many insights that were not available to the Reformers. While he indubitably had to be succinct in that section, this neglects to mention the dangers present in the overuse of comparative data and the more recent application of different modern linguistic theories.¹⁷⁴ Finally, in his closing example of the interpretation of Jonah, he makes a few comments about the relevance of the repetition and

166. Greenstein, "Equivocal Reading," 123.

167. Provan, *Reformation*, 543.

168. Provan, *Reformation*, 546.

169. Provan, *Reformation*, 14.

170. Provan, *Reformation*, 18–19.

171. Provan, *Reformation*, 20.

172. Provan, *Reformation*, 223.

173. Provan, *Reformation*, 276

174. Barr, *Comparative Philology*; Noonan, *Advances*.

grammatical gender of different Hebrew words.¹⁷⁵ While Provan can hardly be faulted for failing to provide a rigorous exegetical method proper, the above examples do not rise to the level of the “serious language learning” he advocates.¹⁷⁶ Instead, they have the unfortunate tendency of reinforcing the “isolated details” approach to languages that has been prevalent in seminary curricula for decades,¹⁷⁷ and would seem incidental to the large-scale, canonical (and typological) readings he demonstrates throughout. Nowhere does he mention the existence of tools such as discourse analysis, which allow an interpreter to construct a scalable, accurate description of the key linguistic features of a text.¹⁷⁸

This provides an appropriate transition into the central question of the viability of the “Reformed” hermeneutical proposal developed by Provan. As noted in the description of chapter 4 above, Provan defines “literal” interpretation in such a way that it incorporates canonical and typological features. He is also concerned to demonstrate that texts, utilizing various genre conventions, intend to inspire a response from their audience over and above preserving bare “facts,”¹⁷⁹ pointing to the example of classical Greek historiography. He rejects allegory (which he contrasts with typology)¹⁸⁰ and defines it by pointing to various articulations by Treier,¹⁸¹ Vanhoozer,¹⁸² and Bartholomew.¹⁸³

175. Provan, *Reformation*, 628, 630.

176. Provan, *Reformation*, 273.

177. For example, see Miller, *Greek Pedagogy*.

178. Fuller, *Discourse Analysis*, 18–42. See also Fuller, “Joseph’s Dialogue with the Egyptians.”

179. Provan, *Reformation*, 91–93.

180. Provan, *Reformation*, 105.

181. Provan, *Reformation*, 104, citing Treier, “Typology,” 825: “symbolic [mimesis,] which . . . imposes a thoroughly ahistorical connection.”

182. Provan, *Reformation*, 104, citing Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 114. Vanhoozer describes allegory as involving “texts that have been resituated within alien cultures and conceptual frameworks.”

183. Provan, *Reformation*, 104, citing Bartholomew, *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 145: “Allegory emerges from a flattening of the scriptures into an atemporal whole, in which the same truth is to be

Provan ends the chapter by reiterating that his “literal” interpretation involves understanding individual texts “as components of Scripture’s unfolding covenantal Story,” and seeking “what to believe, how to live, and what to hope for.”¹⁸⁴ Given the conventional ways that the word “literal” is employed in everyday use, this is an expansive application of it indeed. The crucial question that arises, then, is whether such an approach is consistent in setting the practical goals (of ascertaining meaning, life instruction, etc.) that it does when its core dataset comes from the biblical canon itself, although not without appropriate supplementation from general revelation. But first, it is necessary to take a closer look at chapter 9.

Over and above the overview of chapter 9 provided above, certain details are notable. Provan finds it problematic if there is “a significant gap opening up between the communicative intention of a human author and the communicative intention of God.”¹⁸⁵ He accuses allegory of lacking appropriate constraints to prevent interpretations wildly at odds with authorial intent and suggests that allegory is only applied when readers are dissatisfied with the plain sense of a text. Since the resultant new interpretation is acceptable to their sensibilities, readers would have no need to allegorize *it*.¹⁸⁶ This possibility of imposing another thought system is unacceptable in the case of Protestant biblical interpretation, as “any concession to such a thoroughgoing hermeneutical Platonism will mean for historic Christian faith . . . its end.”¹⁸⁷ Provan furthermore accuses allegory of turning texts into “dogs that cannot bite,”¹⁸⁸ in other words, removing their ability to challenge readers with (for example) moral instruction that they do not wish to receive. The historical accuracy

found throughout. In this it reveals the vertical dualism of Platonism rather than the eschatological vision of Scripture.”

184. Provan, *Reformation*, 105.

185. Provan, *Reformation*, 206.

186. Provan, *Reformation*, 208.

187. Provan, *Reformation*, 209.

188. Provan, *Reformation*, 213.

of this specific claim has been ably rebutted elsewhere,¹⁸⁹ but it is still necessary to ask the broader question of whether allegory is really as dispensable as Provan claims.

The discussion below will offer some linguistic and philosophical lines of evidence to argue that (1) allegory (understood in the general sense of correlation to a conceptual framework outside the text itself) is in fact operative in *every* act of interpretation; and (2) that Provan cannot consistently leave metaphysics out of his system. Put simply, rather than adopting an expansive definition of the “literal” (as does Provan), it would be more accurate to designate interpretation as a fundamentally allegorical activity (with allegory defined in an appropriately chaste manner).

Linguistic models of the relations between text, context, genre, and culture (among other relevant variables) make it difficult to argue that one can simply understand a text with no recourse to outside conceptual frameworks. This is made clear in the Systemic Functional Linguistics of Halliday.¹⁹⁰ Halliday uses the illustration of his “stratification-instantiation matrix,” a three-dimensional cube with the rows from top to bottom consisting of context, semantics, lexicogrammar, phonology, and phonetics, the columns from the left side to the right side consisting of potential, subpotential/instance type, and instance, and the columns from front to back consisting of the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions.¹⁹¹ Although the lexicogrammar itself does express a certain kind of meaning with the internal configuration

189. Gallagher, Review of *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture*, 5–6.

190. While Halliday’s version of Functional Grammar is of course only one option from the larger field of theoretical linguistics, his work involves not only a detailed model of the relationship between linguistic signs and meaning but also contributes a concrete procedure for systematically accounting for all the grammatical features of a text. In other words, if there was a method that could produce a robust account of “meaning” by dealing solely with the text in isolation, it would be something comparable to Halliday’s Functional Grammar.

191. This description was drawn from Fuller, *Discourse Analysis*, 31. See also Halliday, *Halliday’s Introduction*, 50.

of the wordings in the text, the kind of “meaning” expected in most conventional uses of the term is found at the layer of “context.” Halliday’s row of “context” is further divided into the context of situation (which is still internal to the text, involving its linguistic variables as they are employed for a specific use) and the context of culture. The latter refers to the generic set of assumptions that shape texts produced in that culture, and specifically the assumptions relevant for that register or genre.¹⁹² The fact that Halliday’s model has columns from the left to right side moving from “potential” to “instance” should signal that analysts can move in both directions. Thus, the lexicogrammatical layer realizes (text-level) meanings, which gain further significance and depth when placed in the larger contexts of situation and culture, while at the same time the context of situation expresses itself through language at the lower levels.¹⁹³ As Halliday states, “A text, as well as being realized in the lower levels of the linguistic system, lexicogrammatical and phonological, is also itself the realization of higher-level semiotic structures with their own modes of interpretation, literary, sociological, psychoanalytic and so on.”¹⁹⁴ Therefore, these “ideological” lenses are an integral part of the “context” that is necessary for the activation of meaning, rather than being an alien (or secondary) imposition. Although this does not eliminate the obvious epistemological problem of determining exactly what this “context” is for an ancient text,¹⁹⁵ it strikes a fatal blow against Provan’s case that the

192. This description was drawn from Fuller, *Discourse Analysis*, 25–29.

193. This description was drawn from Fuller, *Discourse Analysis*, 29.

194. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, 138.

195. Toffelmire (*Discourse and Register Analysis*, 27–28) states, “Because context exists as a stratum beyond specifically linguistic strata, a bottom-up examination of a text’s register, with the intent of describing the related context of situation, will only ever be able to proceed so far . . . What context of situation provides is a theoretically adequate account of linguistic context that can serve as the basis for statements about the represented context of some given text.”

biblical narrative itself provides the necessary framing to arrive at meaning to the exclusion of other conceptual systems.¹⁹⁶

However, the argument advanced in the paragraph above could be dismissed as an example of category confusion. Just because the context of a given text includes the activation of a given set of literary conventions (which Provan certainly acknowledges), does this really warrant comparison with allegory? Furthermore, is it not a step further to require the explicit importation of metaphysics? To answer the first question, yes, since (in the example of Halliday's system) context determines the ultimate referent or purpose of differing wordings, this includes the possibility that the ultimate referent differs significantly from what a "face value" summary of the wordings themselves may be stating. The use of the term "allegory" is then entirely appropriate, even based on Provan's usage of the term, since the question of what a text is really "about" does involve moving outside the text itself. As a result, Provan's critique of allegory ultimately falls short since it does not fully take into account that there is always a metaphysic driving the symbolic leaps. Additionally, Provan's appeal to the context of the canon as a whole is insufficient because the entirety of the texts within the canon still themselves need further contextual grounding to establish their importance and significance (and inner typological connections) as well, to say nothing of the metaphysical grounding necessary for a modern reader to adequately understand the realities it expresses. This is not to argue that Provan's specific interpretations fail. On the contrary, many of them are sensible and convincing. However, the crucial point is that his theory of reading would be much stronger and more consistent if it acknowledged that this process of moving from text-level meaning to significance re-

196. The above summary of the chapters in Part 3 of *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* makes it clear that Provan is certainly positive about many of the insights available from different critical methods. The question remains, though, as to whether his overall understanding of "literal" meaning is coherent. Given the inextricable connection between "ideology" and context established above, it is arbitrary for Provan to accept some of these grids but dismiss others without advancing an explicit metaphysical basis for doing so.

quires an outside framework, and, furthermore, that this choice of framework is inherently metaphysical. It is now necessary to address this latter claim.

To first use the example of Halliday's system itself, it most certainly relies on an anthropology influenced by (among others) the language-heavy sociology of Bernstein.¹⁹⁷ Although this is not formally recognized as a metaphysic as such by Halliday (or many practitioners of biblical studies who utilize his work),¹⁹⁸ the fact remains that a certain understanding of reality itself, including the makeup of the human person, underlies this model of language and meaning. At times Provan makes gestures in this direction. His postscript states that his book "express[es] an entire system of philosophy (and ethics),"¹⁹⁹ and he characterizes the proper reader of the Bible as "a hopefully recovering heretic, with respect to belief; as to practice, every reader is a prodigal son, hopefully on the way back from a life gone astray."²⁰⁰ The proper goal of his hermeneutical program is to understand the formative capacity of Scripture (following 2 Tim 3:16–17), which is "the ways in which it summons us to be the *ideal readers* that we ought to be."²⁰¹ His earlier description of reading literally includes the clarification that this includes looking for "what to believe, how to live, and what to hope for."²⁰² However correct these admonitions for the motivation of the reader may be, they nonetheless leave untouched the crucial question of the ontological *being* of the human subject, which is itself determinative for the types of meanings that can be expressed by authors or received by readers. It is now necessary to provide support for this contention.²⁰³

The connection between anthropology (or subjectivity) and meaning is illustrated especially in the work of Ricoeur on the

197. See Fuller, "Limits of Linguistics," 137–38.

198. On this latter point, see Fuller, "Limits of Linguistics."

199. Provan, *Reformation*, 642.

200. Provan, *Reformation*, 225.

201. Provan, *Reformation*, 638 (italics mine).

202. Provan, *Reformation*, 105.

203. The next paragraph is drawn from Fuller, "Limits of Linguistics," 135–37.

significance of the legacy of Freud. The point is not whether Freud, or Ricoeur's interpretation of Freud, presents an accurate portrayal of human nature. The point is that the chosen understanding of the subject matters, and there is no "neutral" or "self-evident" approach that is beyond suspicion. Ricoeur observes that every hermeneutic, from patristic allegory to modern psychoanalysis, has a higher plane of reference (or "semantic node") that exceeds the bare meaning of the text.²⁰⁴ For Freud, consciousness and the unconscious are essentially reversed, as the latter is not a negation of the former, but rather a zone of significant activity.²⁰⁵ This has the further consequences of abandoning the traditional object as the mere accident of the direction of one's instinct, and the relocation of the ego from "the subject of the Cogito . . . [to] the object of desire."²⁰⁶ The various views on the unconscious found in Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche carry the implication that texts must be "deciphered" rather than taken at face value. The result of this "deciphering" is not only potentially more coherent than the base text; it possesses therapeutic value.²⁰⁷ In this context, hermeneutics becomes, "a demystification, a reduction of illusion."²⁰⁸ The locus of meaning thus is

204. Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations*, 11–12. He thus defines interpretation as, "the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning."

205. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 424.

206. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 425. Thus, Freud also rejects the subject/object distinction in his own way.

207. Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations*, 150. Ricoeur states, "the method is justified by the fact that the discovered meaning not only satisfies the understanding through an intelligibility greater than the disorder of apparent consciousness but that it *liberates* the dreamer or the patient when he comes to recognize it or make it his own" (150). He also notes that Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche essentially created "a mediate *science* of meaning, irreducible to the immediate *consciousness* of meaning" (Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 34). At the same time, this apparently damaged consciousness is still capable of mapping its own journey in the process of interpretation (34–35).

208. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 27. This is Ricoeur's summary of Freud. In the larger project of this book, Ricoeur adds to this a

transported away from an originating deliberate act of consciousness, to something that is much less deliberate; acknowledging this is necessary for true understanding.²⁰⁹ Thiselton observes that this same relationship between meaning and subjectivity is found in the thought of Schleiermacher, whose embrace of human “consciousness” and interpretive agency makes him an ideal contrast to Freud.²¹⁰ Crucially, Thiselton concludes:

. . . in each individual case, these thinkers approach questions about meanings with pre-understandings which, in their view, unlock and disclose them. Freud believes that the key to meaning comes from the unconscious psyche. Hence he interprets consciousness from the standpoint of this pre-understanding. Nietzsche approaches the matter in terms of man’s will to power. Marx interprets life and history with presuppositions about man as a social being. Their view of “meaning” is inseparable from their own pre-understanding. None of these three thinkers could achieve his goal by ignoring or suppressing his own preunderstanding.²¹¹

Therefore, behind every understanding of meaning lies a model of human subjectivity, however implicit it may be.²¹² But this point holds true for the broader category of ontology as a whole.

dialectical movement that is more constructive (59–64), but it is not relevant to the concerns of the present study.

209. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 54–55. He states, “Can the dispossession of consciousness to the profit of another home of meaning be understood as an act of reflection, as the first gesture of reappropriation?” (55).

210. Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 113.

211. Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 114.

212. It bears repeating that this dependence of meaning upon subjectivity applies to both author and reader. Within certain configurations of the understanding of human agency and consequent locus of meaning itself, “meaning” as such only truly exists when there is a reader to activate it. A similar argument is made through dialogue with Aristotle and Gadamer in Porter and Robinson, *Active Hermeneutics*. Regarding the latter study, see Fuller, Review of *Active Hermeneutics*, R64–R69, especially the summative thoughts on R68–R69. See also the appropriation of Wittgenstein towards these ends in Webb, “A Hermeneutical Disposition.”

I previously have argued that Provan's contention about "common sense" in the case of structuralism and writing is better understood and addressed on the level of competing metaphysical platforms. A further example of this issue will serve as an appropriate introduction to this topic. In his exposition of the "historical sense" Provan asserts that "the literal cannot be reduced to the historical, the empirical, and the factual."²¹³ This statement is admittedly in the context of a discussion of the various things that literature *does*, such as how stories can convey moral lessons even when these lessons themselves are not explicitly spelled out on the surface of the text. But metaphysics presents itself the moment one considers this topic further: one's viewpoint on the ultimate nature of reality cannot but circumscribe and determine what a text could *really* (or "literally") be about. Provan correctly recognizes this in his historical overview of the eclipse of the biblical narrative from the sixteenth century onwards but does not seem to fully appreciate that for today, a proper confessional resistance to unhelpful ideologies requires an explication of this "literal" reality, which is something more abstract than the biblical narrative itself. Modern historical-critical scholarship that treats the biblical text as a collection of historical artifacts mostly expressing political ideologies,²¹⁴ based (usually implicitly) on a materialist worldview (with some possibly Nietzschean assumptions about the impetus towards power), should be countered with a robust Trinitarian theism and consequent anthropology. Debate over what these texts are "literally" about cannot be accomplished simply by appeals to the narrative shape of the canon alone. Rather, scholars should be able to recognize that the real locus of their disagreement lies on the metaphysical plane. Thus, only with this necessary ontological superstructure in place could Provan consistently apply the label of "literal" to his reading program, although the sheer volume of

213. Provan, *Reformation*, 91.

214. See, for example, the essays collected in Jeon, ed., *The Social Groups behind the Pentateuch*. Several decades ago, Childs criticized such scholarship for failing to grapple with the inherently religious purpose of the material (*Introduction*, 16, 41, 73).

facets attached to this “literal” interpretation²¹⁵ suggest that it would be more terminologically felicitous to adopt the chastened definition of allegory as suggested by this study. To draw this critique of Provan’s program to a conclusion, then, his model of a reader interacting with Scripture via a certain set of pragmatic interests and an eye towards the whole canon would be much stronger if it was supplemented with a metaphysic that provided proper grounding for an understanding of reality, human subjectivity, and consequently meaning. Only with such fortification could it avoid the instabilities of the divergent ways that the arc of the biblical narrative has been construed, and adequately establish expectations for the locus and nature of meaning itself.

With this internal examination of Provan’s book now conducted, it is appropriate to place it directly in dialogue with Carter’s work. The next section will selectively compare the two volumes in key areas in which they overlap.

Comparison of Carter and Provan

With these separate summaries and critical interrogations of Carter and Provan conducted, it is now possible to directly compare their proposals and conclusions. This section will begin by briefly contrasting some of their exegetical examples and reviewing their narratives of the progress of secularization in the Enlightenment period. Next, it will then review their differing interpretations of key patristic and reformation-era thinkers. It will finish by directly comparing their arguments regarding the nature of “literal” interpretation and the doctrinal implications of the applications of patristic allegory.

Exegetical Examples

Carter commends Augustine’s reading of Ps 16.²¹⁶ Following its usage in Acts 2:23–25 and through the lens of Christian Platonism, Augustine read it as the words of Christ spoken through David. In the request for deliverance and the words of confident

215. Provan, *Reformation*, 105.

216. Carter, *Scripture*, 209–11.

hope in the psalm, Augustine saw the entirety of Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and exaltation. Furthermore, the church already existed in these words of Christ, spoken long before the incarnation. For Provan, as noted above in the summary of his reading of Ps 2, it is instead canon that is determinative for reading the Psalm Christologically, as the death of the historical David leads readers to expect a future son of David to reign.²¹⁷

Further on in the same section, Carter reviews Augustine's treatment of Ps 22, which is spoken by Christ on the cross as he assumes the representation of Adam.²¹⁸ Provan instead sees Ps 22 (and its usage in John 19:22–24) as merely being part of a larger pattern in which Jesus fulfills "what happens to the righteous in the Psalms," and thus constitutes "literal, contextual reading of Scripture."²¹⁹

Another key text for the New Testament use of the Old Testament is Luke 24. In his discussion of Justin Martyr, Carter reads Luke 24:25–27 as communicating several key points.²²⁰ Jesus' characterization of the disciples as "foolish" indicates that the disciples lacked faith. When Jesus states in v. 26 that it was "necessary" for the Messiah to suffer before being exalted, Carter takes this to mean that the disciples' lack of understanding of this teaching meant that they needed Jesus to correctly "interpret" (v. 27) the Old Testament for them. Provan reads Luke 24:25–27 in a diametrically opposed manner. For Provan, the accusation that the disciples are "foolish" instead means that the messianic predictions of the Old Testament should have been perfectly clear to the disciples already.²²¹ He expands on this point elsewhere in his critique of Richard Hays, stating "to see the pattern in question never required their 'reading backwards' after an encounter with Jesus . . . It only ever required their 'reading forwards' from 'all that the prophets have [*already*] spoken.' Certain these disciples had not hitherto noted the perva-

217. Provan, *Reformation*, 113.

218. Carter, *Scripture*, 212.

219. Provan, *Reformation*, 127.

220. Carter, *Scripture*, 140–41.

221. Provan, *Reformation*, 308.

sive presence in Old Testament Scripture of the theme in question—but the point is that they *should* have done so, because it was there to be found.”²²²

These three examples are more than adequate for clarifying some of the key differences between Carter and Provan’s respective approaches. Carter does not hesitate to “literally” find Christ in the Old Testament, although his treatment of Luke 24 reveals that the early Christian readers of the Old Testament needed extra-Biblical guidance to accomplish this reading correctly. In contrast, Provan asserts that all the necessary information is found within the canon itself, whether the means of using this canonical data set involves extrapolating future developments from the information within one book as a whole (as in the case of Ps 2) or reading certain types from the Old Testament as being ultimately exemplified in Christ (as in the case of Ps 22).

The Rise of Secularism

Carter largely plays into Provan’s hand in his narration of the rise of secularism, as he overwhelmingly neglects to account for ways that the church itself might have been responsible for the eclipse of the biblical narrative. In the multiple places Carter narrates this development,²²³ he repeatedly views the abandonment of historical Christian beliefs as the result of willful disobedience to biblical morality and the desire to remove religious influence from the political process. While Carter does mention the impact of historical events such as the Thirty Years’ War, he sidesteps the problem of whether faulty instantiations of Christianity were responsible for such strife and violence.²²⁴ Provan, in contrast, is

222. Provan, *Reformation*, 123.

223. Carter, *Scripture*, 12–16, 84–91, 111–23.

224. See Carter, *Scripture*, 12. He states, “Much of the intelligentsia of Europe, rightly or wrongly, blamed religion of all kinds for the passion and fury of these wars. The purpose here is not to adjudicate historical blame or decide between competing historical interpretations; the point here is the narrower one of highlighting the motives of those who became convinced that the interpretation of the Bible must be wrested from the hands of bishops, pastors, and theologians and placed under the control of philosophers committed to reason as their

far more willing to note that the fall of the Great Story could have been partially caused by the violence and persecution carried out by its supposed advocates.²²⁵ Regarding the situation at the end of the Thirty Years' War, he states "Many Bible readers had hitherto not shown themselves capable of loving their interpretative enemies, preferring instead to try and crush them. There had been little evidence among them of any commitment toward maintaining in Christian Europe the tension created by interpretative pluralism rather than trying to resolve it violently."²²⁶

In other places Carter displays a considerable lack of nuance in trying to claim that the worldview of Christian Platonism was itself sufficient for leading to scientific progress. He claims, for example, "The rise of modern science took place on the foundations of Christianity and Platonism, as Pope Benedict XVI explained clearly in his masterful Regensburg Lecture,"²²⁷ and "The development of modern science took place on the basis of Christian Platonism, which supported the belief that natural law and rational order are imprinted on the universe."²²⁸ However, this is readily corrected by Provan's detailed historical review, which notes that Platonism (and its Christian instantiations) actually *rejected* the kind of empirical enquiry necessary for modern science and that it was the Protestants who rejected such synthesis with Greek thought who pioneered many scientific advances.²²⁹ Carter also does not consider that the "obscurantism" of Protestants who rejected scientific advances rather than updating their interpretations of Scripture when necessary might have

highest authority." Carter (*Scripture*, 88) further mentions the Great Schism and Hundred Years' War of the fourteenth century, but simply concludes "In such an age, the dark god of sheer nominalism somehow began to seem plausible . . . the time was ripe for new ideas . . . that might allow human beings to enhance their security in a fragile world by gaining control of the forces of nature."

225. Provan, *Reformation*, 357–60.

226. Provan, *Reformation*, 371.

227. Carter, *Scripture*, 85.

228. Carter, *Scripture*, 218.

229. Provan, *Reformation*, 352–57.

been responsible for some of the widespread rejection of faith.²³⁰ Ironically, Carter stands guilty of the simplistic narrative of “unjustifiable apostasy” that Provan attributes primarily to the “Chicago statement” circles.²³¹

Portrayals of Historical Figures

Central to both Carter and Provan’s cases are their very different readings of the hermeneutics of patristic and Reformation-era thinkers. While the present study is not the place to directly evaluate their respective facilities with all the relevant primary sources, it is nonetheless instructive to compare their conclusions and the depth of the source writings and secondary scholarship from which they have drawn. This section will compare their readings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Augustine, and Calvin.

The first patristic source that Carter and Provan both examine is Justin Martyr. As noted above, Carter’s interest in Justin Martyr is due to his admirable example of following the apostles in reading Old Testament prophecies as pointing towards Jesus.²³² He reviews some of the texts that Justin uses throughout the *First Apology* to prove that Christ was predicted, and draws from Childs’ treatment of Justin to argue that he read Christ as being the central theme of the Bible in a detailed and Spirit-led manner, not simply through solitary proof-texts. Carter uses the remainder of this section to polemicize against historical-critical scholarship that arbitrarily denies the possibility of predictive prophecy due to unbelief, not superior rationality.²³³

Provan is chiefly interested in documenting that Justin read the Old Testament in a “literal” fashion. This claim that does not conflict with Carter’s usage documented above, although Provan does uncover cases where Justin’s impetus towards the plain

230. Provan, *Reformation*, 366–69.

231. Provan, *Reformation*, 349–51 (349).

232. Carter, *Scripture*, 142–48.

233. Carter, *Scripture*, 144–48.

sense results in far-fetched interpretations.²³⁴ Provan further notes that Justin's exegesis involved positing predictions of Christ in unlikely places unsupported by New Testament revelation,²³⁵ resulting in the predictions attributed to the Spirit being hopelessly disconnected from the intention that could have been held by the human author.²³⁶

The second key thinker examined by both Carter and Provan is Irenaeus. Carter uses Irenaeus as an example of reading Scripture while guided by the rule of faith, which includes the beliefs in the Apostles' Creed and the conviction that the ministry of Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament.²³⁷ Carter asserts that Irenaeus believed that the Old Testament scriptures ontologically participate in Christ in a Platonist sense, although he does not support this with any direct citations.²³⁸ The concept of the fulfillment of the Old Testament includes more than predictive prophecy, extending to the entire linear redemptive message of the Old Testament pointing to Christ.²³⁹ While Provan essentially agrees with Carter's presentation of Irenaeus in terms of his use of the rule of faith,²⁴⁰ he documents multiple places where Irenaeus departs

234. Provan, *Reformation*, 153–54, particularly highlights the cases of Justin's readings of Isa 9:6 and 7:14, examples that Carter merely notes in passing with approval (Carter, *Scripture*, 143–44).

235. Provan, *Reformation*, 155–56.

236. Provan, *Reformation*, 157–58. Provan states that this kind of hermeneutic carries the danger of potentially turning Christianity into a "mystery religion" (159, citing Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, 153).

237. Carter, *Scripture*, 149–50.

238. Carter, *Scripture*, 151. Carter draws this from John Behr's notes in Irenaeus, *Apostolic Preaching*, 11, where Behr cites Irenaeus as stating, "To me the archives [the Old Testament] are Jesus Christ." But the surrounding context of Behr's discussion hardly supports the metaphysical content Carter wants to read into it. For further discussion of the relationship between Irenaeus and Platonism, see Briggman, "Revisiting Irenaeus' Philosophical Acumen"; Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, 198–200, 261–63. While Irenaeus clearly made use of platonic concepts, this understanding of the sacramental nature of the OT itself is not mentioned in these sources.

239. Carter, *Scripture*, 151–52.

240. Provan, *Reformation*, 159–64.

from a careful reading of Scripture in the context of its redemptive history and lapses into absurd allegories.²⁴¹

The third overlapping example is Origen. Carter constructs an Origen who is largely palatable to modern evangelicals. Although he admits that Origen disassociates literal meaning from human authorial intention, he draws from Childs to argue that the majority of Origen's deviations from literal interpretation were in the context of polemics against Jewish readings.²⁴² Again relying on Childs, Carter argues that Origen generally used the literal meaning as a starting point before pursuing spiritual significance, and extends this observation to plea for the rehabilitation of the Alexandrian school as a whole.²⁴³ In contrast, Provan provides a detailed reading of Origen's *First Principles* to exposit the nature of the spiritual meaning Origen sought, which for Provan is far more connected to the exegesis of Philo of Alexandria than the reading guided by the history of redemption modeled by Justin and Irenaeus.²⁴⁴ Provan further documents a variety of ways in which Origen's desire to find Platonic concepts in the Bible led him to substantially deviate from orthodoxy.²⁴⁵

In his brief paragraph on Theodore of Mopsuestia, Carter (again guided solely by Childs) characterizes him as being "overly literal," exemplifying "some of the worst features of modern historical criticism," and "outside the orthodox consensus."²⁴⁶ In contrast, Provan directly cites Theodore's own writings on the perils of allegory and the role of a chastened version of typology.²⁴⁷ Provan also provides some defense for the accusation of "Judaizing" that was hurled at Theodore by the participants in the Second Council of Constantinople in 553. Most significantly, Provan notes that Theodore's opponents were signifi-

241. Provan, *Reformation*, 164–65.

242. Carter, *Scripture*, 178–79.

243. Carter, *Scripture*, 179.

244. Provan, *Reformation*, 174–78.

245. Provan, *Reformation*, 178–83.

246. Carter, *Scripture*, 179–80.

247. Provan, *Reformation*, 184–89.

cantly influenced by Origen (whose work Provan has already evaluated negatively).²⁴⁸

Unsurprisingly, the figure of Augustine looms large in both works, particularly so for Carter, who references him in multiple places throughout. Carter's main discussion of Augustine uses him to make the point that the spiritual meaning of a text is closely connected with its literal sense.²⁴⁹ Here Carter draws on the research of Michael Cameron,²⁵⁰ who specifically focuses on the development of Augustine's exegetical practice rather than his theoretical statements.²⁵¹ He expositis Augustine's four-stage understanding of salvation history, in which each stage points forward.²⁵² As a result, Christ is "virtually incarnate" in the nation of Israel in the Old Testament.²⁵³ This metaphysic, in which "Christ was ontologically real and sacramentally present before his incarnation," means "that Christ is *literally* present in the Old Testament, so the texts that speak of him do so in a literal sense."²⁵⁴ Later on, Carter develops how Augustine merged Platonism with the Christian understanding of history, in which Christ's work on the cross and its significance for the end of time is paramount.²⁵⁵ He exemplifies this discussion with a review of Augustine's reading of Ps 3, which Augustine reads on the levels of the historical David, the experience of Christ, and the experience of the Church as the body of Christ.²⁵⁶ Some of Carter's other examples of Augustine's readings of the Psalms were reviewed in the section comparing exegetical examples above.

Provan's portrait of Augustine is starkly different than that of Carter. Provan focuses on Augustine's theoretical statements

248. Provan, *Reformation*, 189–90.

249. Carter, *Scripture*, 170–76.

250. Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere*. Carter neglects to mention that this book focuses on the first fifteen years of Augustine's Christian life, leaving untouched several more decades of his writings.

251. Carter, *Scripture*, 170–71.

252. Carter, *Scripture*, 173–74.

253. Carter, *Scripture*, 174.

254. Carter, *Scripture*, 175.

255. Carter, *Scripture*, 203–4.

256. Carter, *Scripture*, 206–9.

rather than specific examples of interpretative practice. Provan summarizes key discussions from *On Christian Doctrine* and *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* to argue that Augustine was deeply committed to understanding the literal meaning of Scripture based on careful study of the original languages, historical context, and narrative shape of the whole canon.²⁵⁷ Provan explains the discrepancy between these guidelines and much of Augustine's biblical commentating by noting that Augustine did not have the requisite facility in Hebrew or Greek to be able to carry out his own instructions.²⁵⁸

Moving ahead to the Reformation period, Carter draws from Muller²⁵⁹ to argue that Luther and Calvin essentially stood in continuity with the church fathers. One key example Carter points to involves Calvin's commentary on Gal 4:24, where he cites Calvin's words:

Paul certainly does not mean that Moses wrote the history for the purpose of being turned into an allegory, but points out in what way the history may be made to answer the present subject. This is done by observing a figurative representation of the Church there delineated. And a mystical interpretation of this sort (*anagoge*) was not inconsistent with the true and literal meaning, when a comparison was drawn between the Church and the family of Abraham. As the house of Abraham was then a true Church, so it is beyond all doubt that the principal and most memorable events which happened in it are so many types to us. As in circumcision, in sacrifices, in the whole Levitical priesthood, there was an allegory, as there is an allegory in the house of Abraham; but this does not involve a departure from the literal meaning.²⁶⁰

Commenting on these words of Calvin, Carter states:

This is an example of Calvin standing squarely in the trajectory of Great Tradition exegesis insofar as he views any legitimate spiritual sense as an extension of the literal sense. Note

257. Provan, *Reformation*, 195.

258. Provan, *Reformation*, 197.

259. Muller, "Biblical Interpretation," 12.

260. Calvin, *Galatians*, 136, cited in Carter, *Scripture*, 184.

that he says that circumcision, the sacrifices, and the Levitical priesthood are all “allegories,” as also is the house of Abraham. But the reason the house of Abraham can be an allegory is that the church was ontologically present in it. One could say that an extended literal or spiritual sense is legitimate for Calvin *when it is really there*, and it is really there when it is there ontologically.²⁶¹

The problem with Carter’s reading of Calvin is that it imports a metaphysical grammar that is simply not present in the surface of the Calvin text. Direct evidence (whether from primary or secondary sources) for the claim that the church was “ontologically present” in the house of Abraham, as opposed to simply being in continuity with the people of God under the Old Covenant (which would be the most natural reading of Calvin), is mysteriously lacking.

As noted above, Carter argues that Calvin was only opposed to allegory when it was used to promote false doctrine. His evidence for this comes from surveying six places in Calvin’s *Institutes* where Calvin directly addresses allegory.²⁶² Crucially, he observes that Calvin rejected the heterodox results of certain interpreters, not the use of allegory itself. Furthermore, Carter asserts that Calvin “shows no interest whatsoever in arguing for a single-meaning theory as the Enlightenment does; he merely wants to find whatever meanings may be in the text and ensure that there is an organic connection between the literal and the spiritual senses.”²⁶³

Provan’s portrait of Calvin’s hermeneutics is unsurprisingly quite different. He sources quotations from Calvin’s commentaries that directly challenge the practice of allegory itself.²⁶⁴ He also finds Calvin reading Scripture canonically in a matter that examines books as individual compositions before situating them in their larger literary collections and finally the whole Bible.²⁶⁵

261. Carter, *Scripture*, 184–85.

262. Carter, *Scripture*, 185–86.

263. Carter, *Scripture*, 186.

264. Provan, *Reformation*, 83–84.

265. Provan, *Reformation*, 102.

However, drawing from an article by Thompson,²⁶⁶ he simply notes that at times Calvin reverted to the practice of allegory even though his statements on method elsewhere would seemingly disallow it.²⁶⁷

It is necessary to observe some common denominators in how Carter and Provan treat some of these key patristic and Reformation-era sources. Carter tends to uncritically praise sources that he finds amenable to his position, whereas Provan is usually more even-handed and notes places where they were inconsistent or came to problematic conclusions (such as the cases of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus). Carter often is reliant on a handful of select secondary sources, such as Brevard Childs, who is hardly a patristics specialist, whereas Provan generally evinces greater awareness both of primary sources and divergent modern readings.

The Nature of Literal Interpretation and the Fruits of Patristic Allegory

As noted in the survey of Carter above, he understands what is “literal” based on meaning rather than a specific method. He clarifies this assertion by noting that Scripture must ultimately be expressing “the doctrine taught in the church.”²⁶⁸ He also provides the example of how many conservatives insist on a “literal” interpretation of Gen 1 since they wish to protect the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and many “non-literal” readings end up rejecting this doctrine. However, Carter states “if someone were to propose that we read Genesis 1 as a ‘parable that teaches creation *ex nihilo*,’ I would have to consider that reading to be a serious possibility.”²⁶⁹ Of course, this raises the question of where the doctrine itself comes from if it can be found in the text in ways other than following the plain sense. At this point it is necessary to review some of Provan’s other arguments against allegory that have not yet been covered.

266. Thompson, “Calvin as a Biblical interpreter.”

267. Provan, *Reformation*, 219–20.

268. Carter, *Scripture*, 163.

269. Carter, *Scripture*, 164.

Provan takes direct aim at many of the *doctrinal* conclusions that were reached using patristic allegory. He documents how Platonism influenced many of the fathers to adopt a gnostic position that devalued the body at the expense of the soul, leading to the prioritization of celibacy over marriage, even at the expense of disregarding the surface meaning of the biblical text.²⁷⁰ Provan states “For these ideas to flourish, Scripture must be read in ways that its human authors . . . cannot be shown to have intended.”²⁷¹ He elsewhere argues that the sheer diversity of patristic thought makes positing a general Platonically-informed orthodoxy to be impossible,²⁷² that a Platonic ontology cannot be meaningfully derived directly from Scripture itself,²⁷³ and that the nostalgia for a Platonic metaphysic displayed by the advocates of patristic retrieval could not consistently allow for or support the kind of scientific advances we all utilize today.²⁷⁴

While exhaustively adjudicating between the two books on the issues raised above would require a much longer treatment, it is nonetheless apparent that Provan has made his overall case much more convincingly than has Carter, his own neglect of metaphysics notwithstanding. As was documented above, Carter failed to consider ways in which Platonic thought inhibited rather than helped the discovery of the natural world, and generally failed to interact with examples of ways that Platonic thought was a hindrance rather than a help for doctrinal formulations.

Conclusion

This article provides separate overviews and critiques of Carter and Provan, followed by the direct comparison of some relevant portions of each. Both of these books are well worth reading for all evangelicals interested in hermeneutics, due to the effective-

270. Provan, *Reformation*, 210–13.

271. Provan, *Reformation*, 212.

272. Provan, *Reformation*, 417.

273. Provan, *Reformation*, 419.

274. Provan, *Reformation*, 420–22.

ness of the way they function together to document the sheer disparity among different accounts of the interpretive practices of the past. Although this essay noted certain problems in component parts of Carter's argument, it nonetheless found the exposition of the key role played by ontology in the determination of meaning to be convincing and valuable. Likewise, while this study argued that Provan's model would require further metaphysical grounding to be fully robust, it offers much information about the history of biblical interpretation in its varying historical contexts that is informative and instructive. Moving forward, evangelical hermeneutics should accordingly seek to accurately understand the historical figures and periods that they claim to champion as authoritative for present-day practice. They should likewise be aware of the important role that philosophy plays in determining how meaning is understood, and furthermore be willing to explicitly identify and articulate the metaphysical principles informing their chosen hermeneutical platform.

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