

Introducing the *Journal of Theological Interpretation*

This is an opportune moment for fresh assessment and proposals regarding the relationship between the Bible and the theology and life of God's people, and this is the *raison d'être* of the *Journal of Theological Interpretation*.

"Theological interpretation," writes Kevin Vanhoozer, "is biblical interpretation oriented to the knowledge of God."¹ By way of filling this out somewhat, we can say that a *theological hermeneutics of Christian Scripture* concerns the theological role of Scripture in the faith and formation of persons and ecclesial communities. We are concerned with the potentially mutual influence of Scripture and doctrine in theological discourse and, then, with the role of Scripture in the self-understanding of the church and in critical reflection on the church's practices.

Issues of this sort do not always come naturally for biblical scholars or for theologians. Biblical scholarship in the modern period has not oriented itself toward approaches or development of means that would enable us to tune our ears to the voice of God. How do we read these texts as Christian Scripture so as to hear God's address? The methods of choice have generally focused elsewhere: the voice of the reconstructed historical Jesus, the voice of the redactor of the Gospels, or the voice of the "community" behind the text, for example. Maybe, then, it is not surprising that Wesley Kort can offer this commentary, "At one time people knew what it meant to read a text as scripture, but we no longer do, because this way of reading has, since the late medieval and reformation periods, been dislocated and obscured."²

Karl Barth is famously remembered for his programmatic expression of the task of theology: "dogmatics does not ask what the apostles and prophets said but what we must say on the basis of the apostles and prophets."³ However, as pastors and theologians have often complained, the passing of two centuries of biblical studies have left both the church and those engaged in constructive theology with little access to "what the apostles and prophets said." N.T. Wright admits that "many systematic theologians . . . have become

1. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?" in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2005), 19–25 (quotation from p. 24).

2. Wesley A. Kort, *"Take, Read": Scripture, Textuality, and Cultural Practice* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 1.

3. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (vol 1, part 1; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 16.

impatient with waiting for the mountains of historical footnotes to give birth to the mouse of theological insight.”⁴

Set in relation to the history of biblical interpretation, and especially in relation to recent study of the Bible with its primary interest in history, the program before us surfaces a number of important and not a few difficult questions. These would include:

- What is the status of the theological tradition, including the tradition of biblical interpretation, in theological interpretation today?
- What is the role of history and historical criticism in theological interpretation?
- What is the status and role of the OT in the two-testament canonical Scriptures?
- What is the relationship between exegesis and doctrine?
- What is the nature of the “unity” of Scripture?
- What is the role of the canon in theological interpretation?
- Does theological interpretation extract theological claims or principles from the Bible?
- Does theological interpretation draw up the plans for a theological superstructure towering above a biblical foundation?

And there are many others besides.

The *Journal of Theological Interpretation* aims to address such questions as these. Accordingly, we invite contributions in such areas as the following:

- Theological exegesis of selected biblical texts
- Concerns of theological method and the role of Scripture in theology (including practical theology) and ethics
- The history of reception or history of interpretation of biblical texts
- Hermeneutical challenges in theological exegesis
- Major review essays interacting with key books, contemporary or classical

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4. N.T. Wright, “The Letter to the Galatians: Exegesis and Theology,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 205–36 (citation from p. 206).

Texts in Context: Scripture and the Divine Economy

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Abstract In this article I investigate the phenomenon of hermeneutical plurality with respect to biblical texts. My purpose is to defend the legitimacy of claims that a scriptural text may speak in ways that diverge from the “original meaning” of a text, so far as that may be discerned, but also to offer a theological account of the limits that must be set upon this hermeneutical freedom. I begin by locating my argument within the landscape of recent hermeneutical debates, go on to explore, as a case study, the text of Isa 52:13–53:12, and then develop a theological account of what is involved in speaking of the “meaning” of a biblical text.

Keywords: hermeneutics, Scripture, Isaiah, meaning, text, context, divine economy.

LOCATING THE ARGUMENT

In his book *Engaging Scripture*, Stephen Fowl considers three accounts of biblical interpretation.¹ The first account, Fowl explains, contends that biblical interpretation is determinate; that is to say, it aims to light upon a single meaning of the text usually to be identified with what the author or compiler intended. Fowl quotes Ben Witherington III as representative of this view:

Meaning resides in the text and is placed there by the author by means of his or her configuration of its words and phrases. Therefore, though the writer may be deceased, his or her words and meaning can still live on without trying to impose a modern meaning on the text that violates the author’s intended sense.²

In some circles of biblical interpretation the author may be regarded as God himself, while in other circles more attention is paid to the human origins of the text. In this case, a portrait of a notional author, often unidentifiable with any precision, is pieced together from clues both within and outside of the

1. Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

2. Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), xiv n. 13; cited in Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 34.

text.³ However the relation between human and divine authorship is conceived, a commitment to determinate interpretation entails that the “meaning” of the text is circumscribed by what the author intended. In consequence, there is no scope in a single text for a multiplicity of meanings. In the face of variant readings the determinate interpreter will argue that in all but one case, at best, alien and illegitimate meanings must have been “imposed” upon the text. The task of interpretation, accordingly, is to determine which one of the variants is correct—once and for all.

Determinate theories of meaning are not the preserve of theologically conservative readers who might wish to defend the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. A similar effort to stand guard over the original meaning of a text may be found in Philip Davies’ efforts to exclude from the academy Christian readings of OT texts. “No ancient writer,” Davies writes, “should have his or her text accorded a retrospective meaning dictated by the dogmatic requirements of an institution that chose to ‘canonize’ it.”⁴ The implication, not consistently followed through by Davies, is that retrospective meanings of all kinds are problematic if they go beyond or conflict with authorial intention.⁵ They are, Davies argues, “alien impositions” on the text.⁶ It is precisely the phenomenon of “retrospective meanings” that I wish to defend, not, however, in defiance of the intentions of the author—so far as they may be discerned—but in accord with them. Frances Young is quite correct to say that “[y]ou cannot make a text mean anything you like, and the author’s intention does bear upon the question of meaning, even if it does not exhaust it.”⁷ I do not wish to ride roughshod over authorial intention, therefore, but rather to defend the legitimacy of *variant readings informed by* and *congruent with* the original purpose to which the text was directed.

Fowl secondly considers the case of “indeterminate,” or, as Fowl prefers, “anti-determinate” interpretation. Motivated by the recognition of a vast plurality of interpretive contexts and voices, “the aim of indeterminate interpretation is to upset, disrupt, and deconstruct interpretive certainties.”⁸ Anti-determinate reading, characteristic especially of deconstructionism, rejects

3. I recognize that the authorship of biblical texts, even at the human level, is a complex matter. The form of the texts we now have is frequently the product of a complicated process of transmission and redaction. None of that, however, materially affects the hermeneutical proposals I will offer below, and so in accordance with the limited purpose of this paper, I shall use the term *author* simply to indicate the person or persons involved in shaping the texts we now have.

4. Philip Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* (2nd ed.; London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 14.

5. If that is not the implication of Davies’ claim, then he is doing no more than revealing an unsubstantiated prejudice against Christian theology.

6. The phrase comes from Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 4. In opposition to Watson, Davies alleges that all Christian readings are alien impositions upon OT texts. Jewish readings too may be alien, Davies admits, because rabbinic Judaism is also later than the original literature (*Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* 40).

7. Frances Young, *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 12.

8. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 32.

the claim that there is a single meaning of a text and resists the imposition of any semantic limits upon texts. Meaning is in the eye of the beholder, on this view, and is unconstrained, apparently, by authorial intention or by the “plain sense” of the texts themselves. The intention to be applauded in such a hermeneutics is the recovery of “what is excluded, reduced or obscured” in established systems of reading.⁹ The voice of the “other” is rendered audible. Not to be welcomed, however, is the removal of all hermeneutical limits so that texts can be made to mean whatever the reader pleases.

Fowl’s third and favored alternative, “underdetermined” reading, begins, following Jeffrey Stout,¹⁰ with the recommendation that we abandon the idea that the text has a meaning. It is the indeterminate meaning of the word “meaning” itself that leads Stout and Fowl to this recommendation. We would do better, they argue, to isolate from the notion of the “meaning” of a text the particular function that we want to perform. Thus, for example, we might say that we are interested in the author’s communicative intentions. “Alternatively,” says Fowl, “we might want to display a text’s contextual connections to the material or gender-based means of its production,” and so on. The recommendation, then, is to articulate precisely what we are looking for and “not cloud the issue further by calling the result of this interpretive activity ‘meaning’ at the expense of other interpretive interests one might pursue.”¹¹

I take from Fowl his suspicion of determinate meaning, especially where that is conceived narrowly and restrictively as the author’s intended sense discoverable by setting aside one’s own doctrinal or ideological commitments. I agree too with his rejection of anti-determinate interpretation that, despite a commendable concern to resist both the presumption that a text can be “mastered” and the tendency to exclude or override readings that differ from one’s own, nevertheless fails to provide any safeguards against errant readings of a text.¹² I depart from Fowl, however, in proposing that an account of textual meaning may be given that does not reduce to authorial intention but remains respectful of it, does not exclude variant readings—though it will exclude some, and does not preclude a range of interpretive interests being brought to the biblical text. This proposal will be developed in section three below (“Discerning the Meaning[s] of the Text”).

THE SERVANT OF GOD IN ISAIAH 52:13–53:12

It has been common practice in Christian theology and proclamation to read christologically the servant passages in Isa 52:13–53:12,¹³ thus identifying

9. *Ibid.*, 42.

10. Fowl draws on Jeffrey Stout’s article “What Is the Meaning of a Text?” *New Literary History* 14 (1982): 1–12.

11. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 58.

12. I recognize that there are advocates of indeterminate or anti-determinate interpretation who deny this result, but it is difficult to see, and it has not been demonstrated how a method that starts out by refusing all suggestion of semantic limits can conclude by reintroducing them without undermining itself.

13. Hereafter referred to simply as Isa 53, as is common in the scholarly literature.

the suffering servant motif as applicable to Jesus Christ or even as a direct prophecy of Christ. We know, however, that Isa 40–55 was formulated in the sixth century before Christ as a prophetic response to Israel’s exile in Babylon. The question arises, therefore, whether it is legitimate to read this text in specific reference to Jesus of Nazareth. We must beware, Walter Brueggemann counsels, of forcing upon the text “readings that are far removed from its seemingly clear intent.”¹⁴

It is well established that Isa 40–55 (Deutero-Isaiah) originates not from the period of the prophet Isaiah, son of Amoz, who lived and worked in Jerusalem from about 750 to 700 BC, but rather from the sixth century, shortly before the fall of the Babylonian Empire. The authorship of Deutero-Isaiah is unknown, but internal evidence suggests that more than one author may have been involved, and that at least one redactor has contributed to the present canonical form of the text.¹⁵ Despite uncertainties about the authorship, however, and many more disputes about the meaning of the text, a measure of agreement about the broad historical setting of these chapters can be adduced.

Following the devastating assault of Babylonian armies upon Judea in the early part of the sixth century, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC, a segment of the Jewish population was exiled to Babylon.¹⁶ That Jerusalem in general and the temple in particular had been reduced to rubble threw into question the scope and nature of Yahweh’s sovereignty and power. The tortured cries of the book of Lamentations, among other works of the period, testify to the theological crisis occasioned by the devastation that had been wrought upon Jerusalem and upon the people of God. If Yahweh authorized this devastation, as most assumed, what was his purpose in doing so? Or, if Yahweh was not in control, perhaps his sovereignty had been eclipsed by Marduk and Nebo, the gods of the conquering Babylonians.

The prophet Jeremiah’s analysis of the situation focuses on the lack of covenantal faithfulness among the people of God and interprets the crisis in terms of divine chastisement. Thus, according to Brueggemann, Babylon’s acknowledged power is “firmly subordinated to and incorporated into the intention of Yahweh.”¹⁷ Such was Jeremiah’s view, but the authority of the prophets was itself a casualty of the calamity that had befallen Israel (see Lam 2:9, 14). A crisis of such magnitude threatened to reduce to rubble not only the temple in Jerusalem, but the whole edifice of Jewish faith and thought. The long years in exile only added to the crisis. The gods of Babylon, a victorious and prosper-

14. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 5–6.

15. Brevard S. Childs, for instance, recognizes that “several different authors may well have been involved” and that “redactional layering is often clearly present” (*Isaiah* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001], 410).

16. It is not clear what proportion of the Jews were exiled in Babylon. Jeremiah 52:28–30 puts the total at 4600, but women and children may be additional to this number. For discussion of the matter, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* (AB 19A; New York: Doubleday, 2002), 95–99.

17. Walter Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1–25: To Pluck Up, to Tear Down* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 3.

ous land, surely had more claim to authority and power than the God of Israel whose people were scattered and beaten. Or so it seemed.

It is to this context that the words of Isa 40–55 are addressed. Deutero-Isaiah accepts Jeremiah's thesis of divine sanction and chastisement (Isa 42:24–25, 48:9–11, 51:17–23), but also proclaims an end to the suffering and the return of the exiles to Jerusalem. The immediate cause of that deliverance is understood to be the conquest of Babylon in 538 by the Persian king Cyrus and the subsequent liberation of the exiles (see 2 Chr 36:22–3, Ezra 1–2). Comfort for God's people is the theme thus announced in the opening lines of ch. 40 and developed through the succeeding chapters. Central to the prophet's testimony, furthermore, is the conviction that comfort will come through the ministrations of Yahweh's chosen "servant." The *Sitz im Leben* of the fourth servant song of Isa 53, therefore, is the Babylonian Exile and the announcement through Isa 40–55 of Yahweh's imminent deliverance of his people and the glorious restoration of Jerusalem.¹⁸ This historical and literary context is the key determinant of the *original* meaning of the text.¹⁹ The underdetermined hermeneutic that I will seek to defend below is one that places high value on attentiveness to this context, while leaving open the possibility that, by divine direction, the text will be a vehicle for the speaking and hearing of God's word for other places and times. Responsible reading of this text, however, must remain cognizant of the fact that the God understood to speak through it in new situations is the God of Israel who once returned the exiles home and restored to them the promised land. That reality, along with the way it was understood and presented in the text of Deutero-Isaiah, remains germane for all subsequent readings of Isa 53.

One of the most pressing questions confronting readers of Isa 53 is: Who was or is Yahweh's chosen servant? Was he a historical figure of the time or one who had gone before, such as Moses; is Israel as a whole the servant of Yahweh; does the servant prefigure a still-future Messiah; does the prophet construct or adopt the figure of the servant as an *ideal* redeemer of Israel and a light to all nations; or is "my servant" a reference to the prophet Deutero-Isaiah himself with Isa 53 being penned by disciples as a eulogy after his death? These have been the main lines of interpretation to date. Among those who

18. Brevard S. Childs is a notable dissenter from this view. He claims that the text of Deutero-Isaiah gives scant evidence of its historical setting and prefers to read it as an anticipation of God's eschatological reign, in respect of which the immediate historical setting is of little hermeneutical relevance (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], 325–27).

19. There is some dispute about whether the "servant songs," identified as such by Bernhard Duhm, should be treated as original to the text of 40–55 or as incorporations from elsewhere, as Duhm himself contended (*Das Buch Jesaja übersetzt und erklärt* [4th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922]). More-recent scholarship has contested this. See, e.g., T. N. D. Mettinger, *A Farewell to the Servant Songs* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1983); Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 76–77. Settlement of this issue is not crucial for my argument, and, in any case, we have no more primitive setting of the songs from which to begin the task of interpretation than the canonical context in which we now find them. What matters for my purposes is that this was a Jewish context before it was a Christian one.

favor the view that the servant refers to a historical figure at the time of the Exile there is further debate, not only about who that figure might have been, but also whether the same person is in view in all four of the servant songs. A survey of scholarly literature undertaken in 1948 by Christopher North revealed a wide diversity of opinion on the identity of the servant with no clear consensus in view.²⁰ Subsequent literature has generally been cautious in its claims about the servant's identity.²¹ My interest in what follows lies not in trying to resolve the problem, but in showing the diversity of interpretation. The question to be explored is whether we can live with variant and conflicting readings while remaining responsible and faithful readers of this text.

1. *A Historical Figure at the Time of the Exile*

With due cautiousness Joseph Blenkinsopp has recently revived the suggestion that the servant of Isa 42:1–4 is King Cyrus who is elsewhere honored with the title of Yahweh's "shepherd" (44:28), and is also described as "anointed" (45:1).²² But even if Cyrus is conceivably the servant referred to in the first of the four songs, the vicarious sufferings and atoning death of the servant in ch. 53 are, as Blenkinsopp acknowledges, much less plausibly predicated of the Persian king. Blenkinsopp favors the view of a number of scholars that the three later songs may refer to Deutero-Isaiah himself, with Isa 53, referring to the servant's death, having been composed by a later disciple.²³ Isaiah 56–66 provides evidence of a group of disciples of Deutero-Isaiah, from which the eulogy of Isa 53 could have emerged. Blenkinsopp cautiously concludes,

What is proposed here, then, is that the servant eulogized in 52:13–53:12 is identical with the one who soliloquizes in 49:1–6 and 50:4–9 and is presented in deliberate contrast to Cyrus, the servant of Yahweh in 42:1–4. The inclusion of 52:13–53:12 in this section and the links with 49:1–6 and 50:4–9 favor the view that the Servant is none other than the author of the core of these chapters, the so-called Deutero-Isaiah.²⁴

We need not detail the matter any further here or decide upon the merits of Blenkinsopp's suggestion. The point has been simply to illustrate the *type* of

20. Christopher R. North reported in 1948 that 15 distinct historical individuals had by then been proposed by scholars for the mantle of the servant, while others favored corporate, future Messianic, or mythical/ideal interpretations of the servant (*The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah: An Historical Critical Study* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948]).

21. The highly speculative and implausible constructions of John D. W. Watts are a prominent exception (*Isaiah 34–66* [WBC; Waco: Word, 1987], 222–33).

22. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 210.

23. Blenkinsopp notes that, after Mowinckel's monograph (*Der Knecht Jahwäs* [Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann]) was published in 1921, "something of a consensus emerged" that, "while the author of Isa 40–55 could be speaking of himself and his prophetic mission in 49:1–6 and 50:4–9, if the fourth of the servant passages is understood to refer to him it must have been composed by a disciple" (*Isaiah 40–55*, 356).

24. Blenkinsopp, *ibid.*, 356.

exegesis that seeks a historical individual or individuals of the exilic period as the original referent of the servant songs.

2. *Corporate Israel*

Building upon his recognition that the “servant” can hardly refer to Cyrus beyond the first servant song in ch. 42, Blenkinsopp notes that “in the great majority of cases in chs. 40–48, Israel/Jacob, the people, is the servant, whereas in the following section 49–55 . . . the servant is an individual prophetic figure.”²⁵ An exception is 54:17 which provides an indication that subsequent disciples would take over the responsibility of the suffering servant and regard themselves as the faithful bearers of the prophetic message to Israel. Hints elsewhere of a corporate identity for the servant (e.g., 44:1) might suggest a deliberate blurring of the servant’s identity. It is entirely plausible that the calling of the servant to a prophetic and redemptive role for the nations applies equally to Israel as a whole as it does to the particular servant, Deutero-Isaiah, albeit Israel has not, at the time of the Exile, sufficiently taken up this task. Such is the view of Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, who writes, “The primary reference in all four songs is to the prophet Second Isaiah himself. Nevertheless, the individual prophetic Servant Second Isaiah cannot fulfill his worldwide mission of being a light to the nations without God’s Servant Israel, whom he calls back to God and prepares to be the prime exhibit before the world of God’s saving power (cf. 49:5–6).”²⁶

The claim that Israel as a whole, or else a remnant, is the servant anointed by Yahweh for a redemptive role among the nations is a reading of the text commonly taken up in later Judaism, as we shall see.

3. *Messianic and Eschatological Readings*

The understanding of Israel itself as the suffering servant to whom the songs refer has not excluded Jewish interpretations that identify the servant with a Messiah still to come.²⁷ Martin Hengel comments that “[u]nder certain circumstances the two possibilities could be viewed simultaneously as different aspects of the text, because a Messianic figure is always at the same time a representative of the whole people.”²⁸ In both cases, however, Jewish

25. Ibid.

26. Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, “The Fourth Servant Song in the Context of Second Isaiah,” in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 16–47 (here p. 16).

27. Joachim Jeremias proposes that, following the LXX, collective interpretations of the servant were favored in Hellenistic Judaism, whereas Palestinian Judaism takes them to be Messianic (“πῶς θεοῦ,” *TDNT* 5:654–717, esp. pp. 683–84). This view is contested, however, by Martin Hengel, who doubts that the relevant texts can be so clearly distinguished (“The Effective History of Isaiah 53 in the Pre-Christian Period,” in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* [ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 75–146 [see p. 81]).

28. Hengel, *ibid.*, 81.

interpretation began to move beyond the identification of the servant with a figure of the exilic period and thus found for the text a meaning and applicability somewhat removed from its original context.

Another feature of early Jewish interpretation of Isaiah (as a whole),²⁹ closely allied to messianic interpretations, is the eschatological reading of the text. Ben Sira, for instance, writing around 200 BC, celebrated Isaiah's "trust-worthy vision" (Sir 48:22) and wrote:

By a Spirit of might [Isaiah] saw the future,
and comforted the mourners in Zion.
Unto eternity he declared the things that shall be,
and hidden things before they came to pass. (Sir 48:24–25)

The same appears true of interpretations of Isaiah within the Qumran community. Hengel notes that, on the basis of the fragments of the Isaiah *peshtarim* A–D from Qumran Cave 4 (4Q161–165), one can assume that this important prophetic work was interpreted almost entirely with reference to the "last days," that is, in Qumran, also with reference to the present time "at the end of days."³⁰

The practice of applying the text to the situation of the readers, as in Qumran, is, of course, precisely the phenomenon I am interested in here. The question is, what legitimates this practice, especially when it moves beyond the confines of the original historical context and renders that *Sitz im Leben* of little hermeneutical significance?

4. Postexilic Figures

The history of Jewish interpretation has sometimes taken the servant to refer to, or at least be applicable to, a historical figure or figures quite remote from the exilic period of the sixth century BC. One of the best known of these appears in the book of Daniel. In his 1942 dissertation on the reception of Isa 53, Hans Walter Wolf identifies several echoes of Isa 53 in the OT, including Dan 11–12 where the "wise ones" who "lead the many to righteousness" (Dan 11:33–35, 12:3) are apparently identified with the suffering servant.³¹ The suggestion had previously been made by G. H. Dalman, who writes, "The *masdiqê hā-rabbim* are certainly to be considered as the concrete manifestation of the Servant of God in Isa. liii. . . . Isa. liii was then understood of the fate of those who were teachers of the law in the time of violent opposition preceding the end of things."³²

29. It would be anachronistic to speak of Deutero-Isaiah at this point since the distinction between the two or three parts of Isaiah was not made until the nineteenth century A.D.

30. Hengel, "Effective History of Isaiah 53," 84.

31. See Hans Walter Wolf, *Jesaja 53 im Urchristentum* (3rd ed.; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1952), 38–39.

32. G. H. Dalman, *Der leidende und der sterbende Messias der Synagoge im ersten nachchristlichen Jahrtausend* (Berlin, 1888), 31; cited in North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah*, 7. See also Hengel, "Effective History of Isaiah 53," 90–98.

Hengel endorses the point by noting that “the author of Daniel can identify Isaiah’s Servant with ‘the wise’ because the fourth Servant Song begins by saying . . . ‘See, my servant will act wisely’ (Isa. 52:13, NIV).”³³ Daniel 12:3 promises the divine vindication of the wise who will lead many to righteousness. So too in Isa 52:13 the servant shall be “exalted and lifted up” because, as we learn in 53:11b, “the righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous.” Divine vindication and the redemptive action of the one for the many come, however, through suffering. Daniel 11:33 notes, “The wise among the people shall give understanding to many; for some days, however, they shall fall by sword and flame, and suffer captivity and plunder.” The situation in which Daniel was written is, of course, one of persecution and trial. The book originated in 165/164 BC when, again, the temple had been desecrated and Israel was suffering persecution at the hands of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The Isaianic allusions in Daniel’s call for perseverance thus serve to impress upon Israel that Yahweh has not deserted them, but will, through the faithfulness of his servants, deliver them from hardship once more. Blenkinsopp notes, “The parallels are close enough to justify the conclusion that the author of the apocalypse of Daniel is identifying the group to which he belongs with the Isaian Servant as an example of suffering and martyrdom borne heroically in the expectation of ultimate vindication.”³⁴

Perhaps the author of Dan 11–12 regarded Isa 53 as a prophetic promise to be fulfilled at a future time of persecution, now upon them, although I would expect in that case that the allusions to Isa 53 would be much more explicit than they are. More likely, I suspect, is that Daniel’s author interpreted Isa 53 as setting forth the *type* of a servant figure now represented in the wise ones of his own time,³⁵ or else, while understanding the servant to be a particular historical figure of the sixth century, he nevertheless sees no difficulty in appropriating the text anew as a word for his own time.

5. *Christological Interpretation*

A much more far-reaching and explicit reappropriation of the text of Isa 53 takes place in respect to Jesus of Nazareth. It is clear, of course, that the early church understood Jesus in terms of the suffering servant who “bore the sin of many” (Isa 53:12) and “makes many righteous” (Isa 53:11), but, in opposition to earlier opinion, some scholars have recently argued that the impetus for such interpretation came from Jesus himself. Opposing the view that “the application of the Servant conception to Jesus was the work of the early church,”³⁶ Peter Stuhlmacher writes:

33. *Ibid.*, 92.

34. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 85. The parallel is even stronger if, as some argue, the suffering of the wise in Daniel is to be understood vicariously. The matter turns on an ambiguity in translation of the text, on which see Hengel, “Effective History of Isaiah 53,” 92.

35. For a discussion of the typological reading of Scripture, see Young, *Art of Performance*, ch. 3.

36. H. Haag, *Der Gottesknecht bei Deuterocesaja* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche, 1985), 78; cited in Peter Stuhlmacher, “Isaiah 53 in the Gospels and Acts,” in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish*

Rather, as scholars including J. Jeremias, H. W. Wolff, O. Betz, L. Goppelt, and others have long since realized, it is the other way around: the Christological interpretation of Isaiah 53 that comes to the fore in Romans 4:25; I Corinthians 15:3b–5; I Peter 2:22–25; Hebrews 9:28 and so forth was not first and foremost the fruit of post-Easter faith; its roots lie rather in Jesus' own understanding of his mission and death. He himself adopted the general messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 current in early Judaism.³⁷

We need not survey the detailed defense of this point offered by Stuhlmacher. It is sufficient for our purposes to note the conviction of the early church, whether originating with Jesus or not, that the song of the suffering servant in Isa 53 applied to Jesus in a way hitherto unparalleled. Stuhlmacher again:

*Jesus' appearance in history and his messianic understanding of his mission, which was oriented towards Isaiah 52:13–53:12 (as well as Isa. 43:3–4; 52:7; 61:1–2), present a decisive new development in the history of interpretation and influence of Isaiah 53. Given Jesus' own understanding, the Easter witnesses were able for the first time to relate the whole Suffering Servant text to an individual historical figure and to interpret Jesus' sufferings soteriologically from this text.*³⁸

The pattern of interpretation established in the NT was taken up in the patristic literature, notably by Justin Martyr in his *Dialogue with Trypho* and also by Clement of Rome. These two authors, so Christoph Marksches observes, represent two different models of patristic interpretation of Isa 53, the *exemplary* model and the *christological* model.³⁹ The former is represented by Clement, who assumes that the servant of Isa 53 is Jesus Christ but appeals to the text, not primarily for christological reasons, but rather to urge the divided church in Corinth to keep the peace. Clement quotes the full text of Isa 53 but leaves out Isa 52:12–15 because he wants to impress upon the church in Corinth the need for humility rather than triumphalism. Attending to his own context, Clement pleads that the lowliness and suffering of Christ the servant be taken heed of rather than his exaltation.⁴⁰ The pattern of behavior urged upon the divisive Corinthians is that of Christ, who “did not come with the pomp of arrogance or pride” but “in humility” just as the Holy Spirit previously spoke

and Christian Sources (ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 147–62 (citation from p. 148).

37. Stuhlmacher, *ibid.*, 148–49. The sources referred to are Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1971), 298–99; Wolff, *Jesaja 53 im Urchristentum*; Otto Betz, “Die Frage nach dem messianischen Bewusstsein Jesu,” in *Jesus—Der Messias Israels: Aufsätze zur Biblischen Theologie* (WUNT 42; Tübingen: Mohr, 1978), 140–68; *idem*, *Was wissen wir von Jesus?* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1991), 106–8; Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 1.195–96.

38. Stuhlmacher, “Isaiah 53 in the Gospels and Acts,” 160–61; italics original.

39. Christoph Marksches, “Jesus Christ as a Man before God: Two Interpretive Models for Isaiah 53 in the Patristic Literature and Their Development,” in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 225–323 (here p. 231).

40. See *ibid.*, 235–41.

concerning him in Isa 53 (*1 Clem.* 16:2).⁴¹ This “exemplary” reading of the servant in Isaiah takes it as self-evident that the text refers, or is applicable, to Christ.

In *The First Apology*, Justin Martyr cites Isa 53 in support of his contention that the prophets foretold both the advent and the saving work of Christ, and that Jesus is indeed the hoped-for Messiah.⁴² The conformity of Christ’s life to the pattern foreseen by the prophets is taken as proof that “having become man for our sakes, He endured to suffer and to be dishonoured, and that He shall come again with glory.”⁴³ Further quotation of Isa 53 occurs in ch. 13 of the *Dialogue with Trypho* and here the purpose is more polemical against Jews. The atonement accomplished by Christ the suffering servant is said by Justin to surpass the sacrificial system of the Jews and to render obsolete their religious observances. Isaiah 53 is cited again in response to Trypho’s allegation that “this so-called Christ of yours was dishonourable and inglorious, so much so that the last curse contained in the law of God fell on him, for he was crucified.”⁴⁴ Shortly thereafter, Justin accuses Trypho of “not [having] understood anything of the Scriptures.”⁴⁵ The assumption, now clear enough, is that Christians know better than Jews how to interpret Isa 53. It is in reference to Jesus Christ, allegedly, that the true meaning of the prophetic text is to be discerned.⁴⁶

The anti-Semitic nature of Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho* and his use of Isaiah in support of that cause is a pattern that is repeated in John Chrysostom’s *Eight Homilies against the Jews*.⁴⁷ Chrysostom writes,

But let me return to the topic which I proposed to discuss and prove, namely, that the Jews are enduring their present troubles because of Christ. It is time now to bring in my witness, Isaiah, who spoke these words. Where, then, did he say this? After he spoke of the trial, death, and ascension, after he said: “His life is taken from the earth,” he went on to say: “And I shall give the ungodly for his burial, and the rich for his death”

41. *Ibid.*, 236.

42. On the minor departures from the LXX evident in Justin’s citation of Isa 53, see *ibid.*, 248–51.

43. *The First Apology of Justin*, ch. 50 (*ANF*, 1:179).

44. Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 32 (*ANF*, 1:210).

45. Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 34 (*ANF* 1:211). Justin’s further use of Isa 53 as “proof” of Christian claims about Jesus of Nazareth is explored fully by Marksches, “Jesus Christ as a Man before God.” See also Daniel P. Bailey, “‘Our Suffering and Crucified Messiah’ (*Dial.* III.2): Justin Martyr’s Allusions to Isaiah 53 in His *Dialogue with Trypho* with Special Reference to the New Edition of M. Marcovich,” in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 324–417.

46. Although the anti-Jewish polemic surrounding Justin’s use of Isa 53 is relatively moderate, in other parts of the *Dialogue with Trypho* Justin employs texts from Isaiah in a more vicious and overtly anti-Semitic fashion. For discussion of this aspect of Justin’s work, see John F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 108–11.

47. For commentary on the anti-Semitic use of Isaiah, see *ibid.*, ch. 6 and especially pp. 111–12 on Chrysostom.

[Isa. 53:8–9]. He did not simply say “the Jews,” but “the ungodly.” What could be more ungodly than those who first received so many good things and then slew the author of those blessings?⁴⁸

That the suffering servant is Jesus Christ, and that the servant’s ungodly persecutors are the Jews, is taken as self-evident by Chrysostom. The text originating from the sixth century BC is thought to speak unequivocally of events occurring half a millennium later, and then, a further three centuries on, is turned against the Jews of Chrysostom’s own day. Elsewhere in the *Homilies*, the Jews are accused of behaving like drunkards (Isa 29:9),⁴⁹ and as resembling the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah (Isa 1:10).⁵⁰ Chrysostom is not alone among Christian authors in using Isaiah in the cause of anti-Semitic polemic⁵¹ but most Christians are now likely to say that in such cases the text has been wrongly heard.

The assumption that the servant figure of Isa 53 refers supremely to Jesus of Nazareth likewise continues throughout much of the Christian tradition as is apparent, for example, in Calvin’s commentary on Isaiah. Commenting, for instance, on Isa 53:13—“See my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted”—Calvin proclaims, “Having spoken of the restoration of the church [*sic*], Isaiah passes on to Christ, in whom all things are gathered together. He calls Christ **my servant** on account of the office committed to him. . . .”⁵²

Interpretations by Christians of Isa 53 have not gone unchallenged by Jews, of course. Some scholars claim to have detected in *Tg. Isaiah 52:13–53:12*, likely to have originated between AD 70 and 135, a polemic against the Christian identification of the servant with Jesus.⁵³ A much clearer example, how-

48. John Chrysostom, *Eight Homilies against the Jews*, 6.5.4.

49. *Ibid.*, 8.1.1.

50. *Ibid.*, 4.6.2.

51. See, e.g., Augustine’s *Adversus Iudaeos* and Isidore of Seville’s *De Fide Catholica adversus Iudaeos*. In both cases the Jews are accused of deicide. The evidence given is that Christ “was stricken for the crimes of my people” (Isa 53:8).

52. Calvin, *Isaiah* (ed. Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer; Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2000), 324; emphasis original.

53. Jeremias, for example, contends that the Targum is “an instance of *anti-Christian polemic*” (“παῖς θεοῦ,” 695). See also H. Hegermann, *Jesaja 53 in Hexapla, Targum und Peschitta* (Gütersloh, 1954), 121; Pierre Grelot, *What Are the Targums? Selected Texts* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 87; Bruce Chilton (*The Glory of Israel: The Theology and Provenience of the Isaiah Targum* [JSOTSup 23; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983], 91–94) and Jostein Ådna (“The Servant of Isaiah 53 as Triumphant and Interceding Messiah: The Reception of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 in the Targum of Isaiah with Special Attention to the Concept of the Messiah,” in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* [ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 189–224 [see pp. 190–94]) argue, by contrast, that while no such anti-Christian polemic is evident, the Targum interprets the servant as a triumphant Messiah who does not suffer. The suffering is predicated, rather, of others (the Gentiles, the wicked in Israel, etc.; Ådna, *ibid.*, 189). This predication might be intended as a rebuttal of christological interpretations of the servant but a Hellenistic influence upon the meturgeman would account just as well for this exegetical strategy, as would the desire to read Isa 53 as a commentary on the suffering of Israel brought about by the destruction of the temple in AD 70. An anti-Christian polemic in the Targum is, in my view, no more than a possibility.

ever, is the *Sefer Hizzuk Emunah* (“Faith Strengthened”) of Rabbi Isaac ben Abraham of Troki.⁵⁴ Isaac ben Abraham was a Lithuanian Jew of the sixteenth century whose cosmopolitan and multi-religious home city of Troki was a center of inter-religious dialogue between Jewish scholars and various Christian groups.⁵⁵ Stefan Schreiner explains that “[t]he immediate occasion for Isaac’s compiling the [*Sefer Hizzuk Emunah*] was the conversion of an apparently considerable number of Lithuanian Jews... who chose for whatever reasons to live as members of Christian society.”⁵⁶ Isaac sets out to answer “the objections that the Christians raise against us [and our biblical interpretation] and the proofs they cite [from the Hebrew Bible] for their faith.”⁵⁷

Chapter 22 of the work is devoted to a consideration of Isa 53 and begins with a summary of Christian interpretation of the passage before moving to refute the Christian ideas. Thus Isaac writes,

“See my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up and shall be very high” (Isa. 52:13). From this verse, as also from the following verses from “Who has believed what we have heard?” (53:1) until “and he made intercession for the transgressors” (53:12), the Nazarenes argue that Isaiah the prophet, peace be upon him, prophesied these verses about Jesus the Nazarene, for it is about him that he said, “he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high” (52:13b). For this saying applies to him and to him alone.⁵⁸

Isaac then proceeds to explain why these verses cannot be applied either to the Messiah in general, or to Jesus of Nazareth in particular.

This argument of theirs is not valid.

(a) For where the text says, “See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, etc.” (52:13), how can they apply this to Jesus of Nazareth, since they themselves, according to their own absurd tenets, assign to him deity, and how could God in any prophecy be called a *servant*?

(b) It must in addition be remembered that the words “he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high” were not fulfilled in him, since he was condemned to death like any other common man among the people.

(c) Nor was the prediction “he shall see his seed” (53:10b) ever fulfilled in him: he had no seed; and it cannot be said that his disciples are here meant by his “seed”, for we never find disciples termed “seed” but only “sons” . . .

54. I am reliant here on the interpretation of this text by Stefan Schreiner, “Isaiah 53 in the *Sefer Hizzuk Emunah* (“Faith Strengthened”) of Rabbi Isaac ben Abraham of Troki,” in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 418–49.

55. *Ibid.*, 422.

56. *Ibid.*, 423.

57. Cited in *ibid.*, 423–24. Schreiner’s citations of *Sefer Hizzuk Emunah* are taken throughout from the text collection of A. Neubauer and S. R. Driver, *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah according to the Jewish Interpreters* (2 vols.; Oxford, 1876–77; reprint ed., New York: Ktav, 1969).

58. Cited in Schreiner, “Isaiah 53 in the *Sefer Hizzuk Emunah*,” 426.

(d) Similarly we do not find that “he shall prolong his days” (53:10b), for he was put to death when thirty three years old. . . .

(e) Then, again, of whom will they interpret the verse, “Therefore I will allot him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the mighty” (53:12a)? Who are the many and the mighty that are made his equals, and with whom, as they imagine, is he to divide the spoil?⁵⁹

Isaac’s argumentative strategy is clearly evident in this brief excerpt, as is the contention that Christian interpretation of Isa 53 is mistaken. The implication here is that the legitimacy of diverse readings of the text is strictly limited. Those limits have been violated, moreover, in the case of the “Nazarenes.” I will return to this claim below.

Meanwhile, Isaac’s own account of the meaning of the text is of interest. We shall limit our discussion to his identification of the servant. In company with a venerable tradition of Jewish exegetes,⁶⁰ Isaac favors a collective interpretation of the servant. “The truth is, the whole *parashah* from ‘See my servant shall prosper’ (52:13) with the following verses until ‘and he made intercession for the transgressors’ (53:12) was spoken prophetically to Isaiah . . . with reference to the people of Israel, who were enduring the yoke of exile, and who are called ‘my servant,’ in the singular, as frequently elsewhere.”⁶¹

Schreiner explains that “for Isaac the Servant is . . . not the people of Israel absolutely, *but the people of Israel suffering in exile*. This means Israel in the Babylonian exile, first of all, but then also, every generation of Israel that suffers in exile. The Babylonian exile (גלות) is understood to prefigure all other exiles (גלות).”⁶² According to Isaac’s account, the text of Isa 53, while clearly tied to the Babylonian Exile of the sixth century BC, speaks with equal poignancy to every subsequent generation of Jews who find themselves exiled from the promised land. “The general design, then, of the prophecy contained in the *parashah* ‘See my servant shall prosper, etc.’ is to confirm and encourage us in the assurance that although by our exiles we⁶³ are exceedingly depressed and brought down, even to the dust, there is still hope for us hereafter, that through the Lord’s compassion on us we may again be ‘high and exalted.’”⁶⁴

Not only comfort is offered through these verses, however. Isaac explores at length the call upon Israel to suffer vicariously for the nations, and looks forward to that day when, as anticipated in Isa 52:15, the nations will acknowl-

59. Cited in *ibid.*, 427–28.

60. North discusses the collective interpretation of the servant in *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah*, 202–7, while, according to Schreiner, H. A. Fischel also provides an overview in “Die Deuterjesaianischen Gottesknechtlieder in der juedischen Auslegung,” *HUCA* 18 (1944): 53–76.

61. Cited in Schreiner, “Isaiah 53 in the Sefer Hizzuk Emunah,” 431.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Schreiner comments, “Because of his thoroughgoing identification of the Servant with Israel’s in the present exile, Isaac does not hesitate to change the ‘he’ of the statements about suffering in Isa. 52:13–53:12 consistently into a ‘we’ that includes him and his Jewish contemporaries” (*Ibid.*, 436 n. 79).

64. Cited in *ibid.*, 436.

edge the suffering Israel has borne on their behalf. The servant role of Israel is a continuing one, according to Isaac. The text speaks of and to the present day.

DISCERNING THE MEANING(S) OF THE TEXT

What are we to make of the hermeneutical diversity evident even in the very small sample of interpretations of Isa 53 surveyed above? Is it legitimate to take texts from antiquity and to find in them a meaning arguably unintended by the original author and/or redactor, or should we regard this practice as a violation of the integrity of the texts themselves? The question is of particular interest to those who hold the Bible to be the Living Word of God and a means, therefore, by which God continues to speak to his people today. The author of Daniel apparently had no qualms about treating the text in just this way, reappropriating it for his own times and finding a new subject to bear the title of Yahweh's servant.⁶⁵ Likewise in the NT, Jesus himself apparently set a precedent for the [re]interpretation of Isa 53 as the prophetic anticipation of his own vicarious suffering, death, and resurrection. But how far can this practice be allowed to go? Are there limits to hermeneutical freedom of this sort; and if there are limits, how might they be defined? Can it be possible, furthermore, to uphold the legitimacy of divergent readings that in some respects conflict with one another, as, for instance, in exilic Israelite and christological interpretations of Isa 53?

According to the policy of determinate interpretation described above, hermeneutical plurality is simply illegitimate. If Isa 53 refers exclusively to Jesus Christ, then it must do so on account of the inspired prophetic vision of Deutero-Isaiah, who could not, after all, have been referring to a historical figure of his own day or enjoining the people of Israel to recognize their appointment as a vicariously suffering, servant people. Conversely, if exilic Israel or the prophet himself were the original referent of the servant of Yahweh, then the christological interpretation of Isa 53 should be abandoned. From a theological point of view, determinate interpretation combines the considerable virtue of respect for authorial intention with the yet more considerable fault of failing to recognize the sovereignty of God over his revelation. It denies, effectively, that God, through scriptural texts, might speak a *new* word for our time not wholly envisaged by the authors of those texts.

Anti-determinate interpretation, on the other hand, has no objection to the plurality of interpretations. It is, as Fowl puts it, "dedicated to continuously opening texts to further interpretation."⁶⁶ As noted above, such a strategy warns against the presumption of mastery of the text and resists attempts to exclude or override interpretations that differ from one's own. If there are

65. I have not explored above the (for a time) very influential suggestion of Duhm that the four servant songs have a provenance outside their present setting in Deutero-Isaiah. If that were true then their incorporation into Deutero-Isaiah would itself be an act of interpretation and reappropriation in respect of which the same questions about legitimacy arise.

66. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 55.

no limits to interpretive freedom, however, as anti-determinate reading would have it, then there are no grounds for opposing errant readings of a text, such as, for example, anti-Semitic readings of Isa 53.⁶⁷

Fowl therefore proposes instead an “underdetermined” hermeneutic that allows for a measure of hermeneutical diversity, while precluding the absolute freedom that provides no safeguards against error. Although I concur with Fowl’s intention, I am not persuaded that the way to achieve that end is to abandon the notion of textual meaning as Fowl recommends. I shall argue, by contrast, that consideration of the “meaning” of a text is a helpful means of safeguarding both the legitimacy of hermeneutical diversity and the limits to interpretive freedom.

We must begin with an account of what “meaning” means. Fowl and Stout think that the problem begins here. Because “meaning” can mean so many different things, it would be better, Fowl suggests, simply to specify which of those things in particular we are interested in rather than retaining the slippery and ill-defined concept of meaning.⁶⁸ I suggest, however, that a conception of “meaning” is available that is precise enough to set boundaries to what we are looking for, yet rich enough to accommodate the multifaceted character of textual meaning. According to this conception, the meaning of “X” is the role that “X” plays in its context. This applies equally to a word in a sentence, a sentence in a book, a text in a historical and social context, or indeed, a text in a whole religious tradition. The meaning of a text so conceived is a function of both authorial intention and reader reception. Particularly in respect to the macro levels of historical, social, or religious context, the text may have multiple meanings corresponding to the changing contexts in which the text is heard. The meaning of Isa 53 in the context of the ministry of Jesus, or of exilic Jews in the medieval world, therefore, need not be the same as but should rather be congruent with the intentions of the author in the context of the Babylonian Exile.

In each context, the text may play a different role, and so its meaning will change accordingly. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that for the Babylonian exiles, the Isaianic claim that the suffering servant of Yahweh has borne the sin of many and made intercession for transgressors meant that Deutero-Isaiah himself became a scapegoat for Israel’s faithlessness, and that his intercession contributed to Israel’s deliverance from exile and restoration to righteousness. The meaning or role of the text in this context would thus be to testify to what the prophet has done and especially to what God has done through him. The same may be true in respect to Jesus, and again in respect to later generations of Israel as it endures suffering and persecution at the hands of other nations. The text plays a different role in each of these situations, and yet, in all of these cases it serves to testify to the saving economy of God. It is

67. Why they are judged “errant” will be considered further below.

68. See Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 57–59.

this last point that establishes congruence with the author's original intention and secures the legitimacy of at least that degree of hermeneutical diversity.

If, as we may suppose, it belonged to the intention of the author of Isa 53 to bear witness to the divine economy, then it is in keeping with this intention to interpret the text as bearing witness in new ways to the singular divine economy in many different contexts. Let me clarify what is here proposed. The meaning of a text, in this case Isa 53, is a function of its location within a particular context. That context is not just the narrative context—though this is clearly important—but also its historical context, which is to be conceived theologically as the terrain in which God is bringing about his purposes. The meaning of a text is thus a function, ultimately, of the role(s) it serves in the divine economy. If we accept that the biblical texts were written with the intention of bearing witness to the divine economy,⁶⁹ we can then specify the ways in which authorial intention may be violated and the limits of legitimate hermeneutical freedom exceeded. This occurs first, when the text is isolated from this theological context and is treated merely as a literary artifact or as a historical curiosity; second, when the text is adapted to a mistaken construal of the divine economy, about which I will say more below; and third, when it is pressed into the service of some cause other than the working out of God's purposes for the world.

Several features of this account are to be noted. First—and here I follow the lead of John Webster⁷⁰—just as, under the doctrine of the divine inspiration of Scripture, the writing of Scripture is to be understood as an episode in the divine economy, an episode through which God establishes a witness to his creative and redemptive work in the world, so too the reading of Scripture, and the apprehension of its meaning, are further episodes in the divine economy that are likewise dependent on divine inspiration. Webster's position here accords with Brevard Childs's recent observation, made after extensive study of the Christian hermeneutical tradition, that, “[a]ccording to traditional Christian theology, the Bible is ‘God’s means of telling God’s story.’”⁷¹ Thus, as Webster argues, “[t]he texts are that which they are appointed to become, namely instrumental means of gracious divine action. The being of the canonical texts is determined by their divine use.”⁷² So too, I believe, is their meaning. Discerning the meaning of Scripture is, on this account, a pneumatic event in which God sounds his word afresh. This again agrees with the Christian tradition of interpretation summarized by Childs: “When the early

69. This is an assumption in support of which much internal evidence may be adduced. The intention to tell where God is at work in the world is implicit in the subject matter of the biblical texts and is made explicit in such instances as the frequent prophetic refrain, “Thus says the Lord . . .,” and in statements of intent like those of Luke 1:1–4 and John 20:31.

70. See John Webster, “The Dogmatic Location of the Canon,” in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001), 9–46.

71. Brevard S. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 296.

72. Webster, *Word and Church*, 31.

church spoke of the coercion or pressure exerted by the biblical text on the reader, it was a formulation grounded in the conviction that the written Word possessed a voice constantly empowered by God's Spirit."⁷³ The hermeneutical diversity that I wish to allow for issues from the fact that God continues to speak through Scripture and continues to establish a role for it in widely varying circumstances. The limits to that diversity, on the other hand, are determined by the fact that Scripture is a witness to the being and acts of God and not something else.⁷⁴

Second, the proposal here set out assumes that the location of texts within the biblical canon is hermeneutically significant. The relation of particular books of the Bible to the other biblical books is not merely arbitrary so far as their interpretation is concerned but sheds light on what the individual texts may be said to mean. Such a position owes much, of course, to the method of canonical criticism developed by Brevard Childs. Childs contends that the final form of a text and its location within a body of material shaped by a particular religious community is of fundamental hermeneutical importance. The biblical texts are not to be treated as discrete fragments having only incidental relation to their canonical and religious context. They are characterized, rather, by a canonical unity brought about by their shared witness to a common object. "Biblical theology," Childs writes, "attempts to hear the different [biblical] voices in relation to the divine reality to which they point in such diverse ways."⁷⁵ I have suggested that the object to which the variety of voices bears witness is the God who creates the world, who establishes within it a covenant people to be his instrument and witness, and who, through Word and Spirit, is active within the world in order to bring about his purposes. Childs adds more-explicit christological specification:

The dialogical move of biblical theological reflection which is being suggested is from the partial grasp of fragmentary reality found in both testaments to the full reality which the Christian church confesses to have found in Jesus Christ, in the combined witness of the two testaments. . . . [B]oth testaments bear witness to the one Lord, in different ways, at different times, to different peoples, and yet both are understood and rightly heard in the light of the living Lord himself, the perfect reflection of the glory of God (Heb. 1.3).⁷⁶

The common object to which the varied texts bear witness determines the primary and normative context within which the texts are set. Attention to this common object is a necessary condition if the meanings of the texts are to be "understood and rightly heard."

73. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*, 296.

74. I am again in agreement with Childs here. He contends that the constitutive feature of the biblical texts is their witness to the presence of God in the history of Israel and the church (ibid., 321).

75. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 85.

76. Ibid. See also idem, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*, 313–17.

Third, the account of textual meaning here set out accommodates a range of views on the authorship of biblical texts. Whether God himself is to be regarded as the author of the text, or whether he calls forth from human authors a testimony to himself, the meaning of the text remains bound to the authorial intention to announce and explore the saving economy of God.

Fourth, this understanding of textual meaning is consonant, I submit, with both Jewish and Christian understandings of Scripture as the Word of God. God remains the Lord of revelation and uses particular texts, or not, in the working out of his purposes. That means that particular biblical texts may sometimes and in some places have little meaning for their readers while in other contexts they will be given fresh vitality as instruments in God's communicative economy. The history of particular texts in the divine economy is characterized by an ebb and flow of significance. Some texts had particular resonance at the time of the Reformation, for example, others in the midst of the holocaust, and so on. Their meanings, for the time, were bound up with these historical circumstances and were established at God's behest. It is the same whenever the people of God in their own historical contexts open the Bible and read with the prayer that God will make known his Word.

Fifth, it has been stressed above that, however diverse may be the *historical contexts* in which the text is heard as a word of God, there are limits to how far the diversity of *meaning* may extend. The limits are defined by the divine economy, of which we learn in Scripture itself. Scripture is interpreted in the light of Scripture. Christianly understood, the divine economy is Christ-shaped, so that when it is claimed of a text that it has a particular meaning—a particular role to play in the divine economy—the test of that, for Christians, will be whether the meaning claimed accords with what God has made known of himself through Christ. The use of Scripture in defense of apartheid, for example, will be ruled out, as will the bending of Scripture to serve a “prosperity gospel.” Anti-Semitic readings of OT texts will also be excluded, as is made clear by Paul in Rom 11. Attention to the gospel of Jesus Christ reveals that it is not the prerogative of Christians to exclude Jews from the saving work of God, or to claim that Israel has been superseded by the church.⁷⁷ Paul will have none of that, but urges humility in light of the irrevocable dependence of Christian existence upon the divine economy as it is worked out through the election of Israel. That principle applies also to the Christian reading of Israel's Scripture. The meaning of the text is irrevocably bound up

⁷⁷ I recognize that the question of supersessionism in Paul's theology has occasioned much recent debate. For a helpful summary of the debate, see Bruce Longenecker, “On Israel's God and God's Israel” (paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Philadelphia, November 2005; forthcoming in *JTS*). One's view on whether Paul will have none of supersessionism depends to a large extent on how one defines supersessionism. I mean here only to exclude the view that, on account of Christ, Israel has been cast off by God and has no further part to play in the divine economy. Paul makes very clear that God has not rejected his people (Rom 11:1) and that the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable (Rom 11:29). Precisely how Paul understands the relation between the church and the continuing role for Israel, however, certainly requires further consideration.

with Israel's existence, even when understood christologically. Moreover, Christians have no business denying that Jews have truly heard the Word of God when, in the midst of exile still, or in the midst of their present-day struggles, Jews read Isa 53 and recognize again that God has made them to be a servant people for the world. Christians can only agree, while confessing that of one Israelite in particular the claim is especially true.

For Jews, of course, the essential and consistent features of the divine economy are identified through another set of biblical coordinates, most especially God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. This story, retold every year in the Passover *Haggadah*, functions for Jews as a rule of faith that both is drawn from Scripture and also offers guidance in turn for the reading of Scripture afresh. The meanings of Scripture must, for Jews, be consonant with the story thus told of God's deliverance of his people from bondage. We see this within the OT itself: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Therefore. . . ." The divine economy, briefly recalled, is the context within which Israel is to understand the Word of God now spoken anew. Because Christianity draws its life still from Jewish roots, Christian readers are not at liberty to ignore this and other key Jewish markers of where God is at work in the world. Christian readings of Scripture bear an irrevocable responsibility to Jewish accounts of the divine economy and are bound to be congruent therewith, even while telling the story of the new thing that God has done.

The notion of the divine economy as the key framework for forms of biblical interpretation that are faithful both to authorial intention and to the Jewish and Christian understanding that God somehow communicates his own Word in and through the biblical texts does not provide us with a foolproof means of detecting the definitive meaning of a text in any given context. In this, as noted above, I side with Stephen Fowl's plea for an underdetermined hermeneutic. There will continue to be debate about how the divine economy is to be construed and about the role that a particular text might play in that economy. What I have offered, however, is a proposal about how to read the Bible on its own terms as witness to and instrument in the saving of economy of God. Commitment to such a principle is a *conditio sine qua non* of faithful reading among the people of God, both Jewish and Christian.

Further work then needs to be done, of course, in specification of the divine economy itself. Diversity of opinion on this matter is also to be expected but only within certain limits. For Christians, the limits are christological. For Jews, they will be determined principally by the Exodus. In the Exodus and in Jesus Christ, so Jews and Christians respectively believe, the creative and redemptive purposes of God have been disclosed. Faithful reading of Scripture must take its point of departure from these definitive manifestations of the divine economy. We are not free as Jews or as Christians to impose an alien criterion upon the texts. The hermeneutical proposal suggested here does not provide a means of settling all hermeneutical disputes. What it does, rather, is to identify a hermeneutical framework within which the reading of biblical

texts must take place if it is to be faithful to the distinctive theological character of the texts themselves.

What has been offered is a sketch of a hermeneutical logic. It is a logic according to which the meaning of a text is the role it plays in its context. There are many layers of context—historical, literary, Jewish, Christian, and so on—but each of these has its place within the larger context of the divine economy to which Scripture itself bears witness. That the divine economy should be regarded as the overarching context for the interpretation of Scripture and as providing the logic according to which the meaning of Scripture is to be discerned cannot be established from a point outside Scripture itself. It is a logic that is internal to Scripture and that is sounded forth in the declaration, “Thus says the Lord. . . .” When the texts of Scripture are read prayerfully and so, with God’s help, then, in ways congruent with their original *Sitz im Leben*, they continue to be the means by which God makes known his Word.

I conclude by returning once more to Isa 53. The account of scriptural meaning here offered allows for a plurality of meanings of this text. The meaning of a text, we have said, is the role it plays in its context. The fourth servant song as it is now placed within Deutero-Isaiah was clearly intended to announce both God’s intervention to end the Babylonian Exile and the renewal of Israel’s righteousness. In time, however, the text is read in other contexts and takes on new meanings somewhat removed from the meaning it had for Deutero-Isaiah himself. These meanings are congruent with that of Deutero-Isaiah, however, and are therefore also legitimate instances of hermeneutical plurality, so long as, under divine guidance, they bear witness truly to where God is at work in the world. This is especially true, Christians believe, of Jesus of Nazareth, of whom the text may be taken to speak with a particular poignancy. Christians need not claim this, however, as the determinate interpretation. It is no threat to the christological reading of Isa 53 to recognize that God has also used this text to comfort Israel in exile and in holocaust. These too are episodes in the divine economy, congruent, Christians can say, with what has been revealed in Christ. Such recognition should engender humility among Christian readers of the OT, a humility borne of gratitude that through Israel and its witness God continues to make known his Word.

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