

'Attentive' or 'responsible' readings of Scripture are ways of paying heed to what they teach, while avoiding simplistic or misleading interpretations. How necessary and helpful are such approaches? In employing them, how might dependence on theories about interpretation be avoided?

Question 4: 'Attentive' or 'responsible' readings of Scripture are ways of paying heed to what they teach, while avoiding simplistic or misleading interpretations. How necessary and helpful are such approaches? In employing them, how might dependence on theories about interpretation be avoided?

Contributors

Richard Briggs

I am currently adding to 11 years training ordinands through teaching the Old Testament, by being an ordinand myself, spending this year (2014-15) in training for ordained Anglican ministry, although from Jan-June this will be alongside resuming teaching OT in Durham. I have enjoyed direct interaction between academic and ministerial life: writing on wisdom and character in biblical interpretation, and working with the Old Testament as Christian Scripture, alongside everything else that it is. Currently completing a book on the theological interpretation of the book of Numbers, as a prototypical 'hard case'. I envisage maintaining academic work alongside being a curate.

Angus Paddison

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Philip Towner

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Round 1

Richard Briggs

Attentive and responsible readings of Scripture are completely necessary and helpful, in the sense that they are always a positive contribution, though not in the sense that the only permissible approach to Scripture is one that is attentive and responsible. I will first explore a little this positive and then negative point.

Positively, it is of real value to pursue readings of Scripture that may be characterised as 'attentive' and 'responsible'. To what might one be attentive? Here a range of familiar options are all important: the words on the page; the overall dynamic of the text in question (genre, communicative function, ...); insights from historically, socially, culturally, psychologically and philosophically orientated criticisms; reflections on how light is shed back on the text from the history of reception; and so forth. Minimally, the text must be some aspect of what one is attending to. Illuminating as it may be to attend to one's own predispositions and assumptions, these only come into play hermeneutically when brought within the orbit of the text.

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Comparably, we can ask: 'to what might interpretation be responsible?' There are ethical imperatives relevant here. I am drawn to the Pauline argument concerning food offered to idols in 1 Cor 8,10: all interpretations might be permissible but not all are beneficial, and if I read him rightly (or 'responsibly'?) Paul might suggest that one key criteria is whether the interpretation offered might lead someone into sin. There is a difference between offence and sin (I presume a reading where Paul thinks that you can eat meat offered to idols if all it does is offend others; but you cannot do it if it will cause someone to sin, since that 'destroys' them. The 'weaker brother' in Paul's argument is not the one who may be offended, but the one who might be led into sin.) Likewise, I think interpretation should be responsible to its wider ethical implications, and that there are therefore contexts in different types of church setting where one may or may not responsibly make a certain point concerning a biblical text. The net result of this approach is familiar from Augustine's famous discussion in *de doctrina* 1 – you can get away with loose attention to detail for so long, and it is excusable if you are promoting love and so forth, but in the long run, *and especially if charged with a teaching ministry in the church*, the looseness will find you out and people will be led astray. I think we live in the shadow of that (presumably) eschatological reality. It seems as if people get by with a great deal of looseness...

My preferred rubric for such attentive and responsible approaches is 'wisdom': this is to read the Bible wisely. To explore the negative point a little: there are always many ways to read the Bible, and I think there is benefit in learning from all and every approach. One is always prone to myopia, and to projecting one's own interpretation out across the world as if it were the way for all to read. Attention to other interpretations, from all manner of perspectives, is a salutary reminder that we are not in pursuit of one lock-down option with regard to any text, but rather in pursuit of a reading that coheres and is life-giving, here and now. That 'life-giving' may involve challenge and/or edification (as per Paul); it may involve dismantling as much as rebuilding (as per Jeremiah); but it is always a complex juggling act of attention to a specific text, the canonical whole, the Christian tradition, broader creedal and confessional affirmations, and the current presenting moment. A reading that deeply challenges and provokes me in my study may or may not be a useful one to bring into the open in church. I cannot see any formula by which one can prejudge this except in broad terms (I am mindful of recently coming across a reading that promoted white supremacy under the guise of the 'Phinehas priesthood' – I think one could prejudge that as problematic, let alone rather removed from the text.)

As regards dependence on theories of interpretation: I think what I have suggested thus far would indicate that one is best placed as open to all theories and dependent on none, or very few. My own conviction is that we are always invited to attend to the literal sense (the 'way the words run' as one of you alluded to), as long as we are familiar with the multi-valent resonances of that literal sense. But the text does exert some kind of pressure, and interpretation that ignores that may be fascinating, but is not ultimately 'of the text'. My own view is that the literal sense for Christians is a Christian construct, and that with the New Testament this sometimes overlaps the original sense (in so far as that can sometimes be ascertained), but with the Old Testament there is a canonical tension that immediately shifts the sense of the text away from its author or original context and into its new, figurally constructed function. The Old Testament is about the same reality that the New Testament is about, which invites one to avail oneself at least sometimes of Christologically informed categories in talking about the Old Testament, but not as a *sine qua non*. We are free to do this, but not bound to do it, as Ellen Davis puts it in her discussion of preaching from the OT.

Is that a theory? In one sense, yes, because it theorises about what we are doing when we interpret. But it is not a theory that can be cashed out as a series of steps, or a checklist of questions, or a requirement for a certain form for any or all interpretations. Or in other words: theory is not method. In my experience, the response 'your interpretation bears little relation to what the author intended', for example, may sometimes be a germane critique, and sometimes an irrelevant point. I do also

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wonder if hermeneutical theory has a useful post-hoc role in checking on what has been done after it has been done, as a way of clarifying and classifying what sorts of moves have been made; but that it is relatively unhelpful when presented as generative of interpretation. (Theories do of course generate interpretations, but as per Gadamer, they circumscribe what sort of interpretations will end up being generated.)

I am conscious of deploying a slightly unmethodical and non-theoretical discourse in responding to this question. Perhaps that models what I want to say too. For myself, much of this comes down to concerns with character: I suppose our dependence on theory may be partly avoided by emphasising the need for Christian character in interpretation, as long as this is not heard as a simple alternative to full critical engagement.

Angus Paddison

It is vital that consideration of how we ('we' being both those who preach and those who hear the Word preached) interpret texts is given the proper space it deserves. Not engaging with hermeneutical questions, or harbouring a suspicion that attention to hermeneutics could ever be something you could over-dose on, is a little like attempting to run away from one's shadow. Interpretation and the biblical text go hand in hand and we either subject our interpretations to scrutiny or allow them to go unchecked and unchallenged.

An answer to how 'necessary' and 'helpful' hermeneutical awareness is can be provided by unpacking what might be understood by talk of 'attentive' or 'responsible' readings of Scripture. To what should be attentive precisely? Attentive to the world of the author, to the forces that shaped them, and to how God, through the Spirit, might have held some superintendence over their writings? And/or attentive to the human frailties of the author, to their devices and desires, to the very human (sometimes destructive) ways in which they sought to express God's word? And/or attentive to the intricacies of the text and the debates about its translation, remembering that all translation is an act of interpretation? And/or attentive to the 'plain sense' of the text, to the way the words go, and to what they will us to do and to become? And/or attentive to the many different ways in which the text has been revelatory in the life of the church, to the new possibilities of living grace-fully it has opened up? And/or attentive to the peoples whose lives have been damaged by interpretations of the text, those who have not experienced the text as an instrument of grace? And/or how should be attentive to our present contexts in which the text is heard, in the knowledge that how we hear or read the text is inextricably bound up with the story of our lives?

A responsible reading of Scripture is alert to the implications of each of these questions, aware that if we don't raise them we are only evading our responsibilities as readers and hearers of the Word. We are responsible for keeping all these different forms of attention to the text and how we engage with it in constant interplay. The number of questions reflective readers are faced by reflects, in one sense, the diversity of texts and genres in the biblical canon and the different types of afterlives the text has enjoyed. We do not necessarily ask the same questions of the Song of Songs as we do 2 Chronicles, nor do the Gospels speak in the same register as an epistle. These may seem elementary points, but they need to be made if we are to unpack a little critically talk of what the Bible 'teaches'. Some texts 'teach' a little more clearly than others. Sometimes it is what we have learned from the Bible's interpretation, or from our contexts, that can teach us how the Bible might be received now. Reading the Bible is not *always* a one-way street, in which the text speaks and we receive. We live with the text and the text lives with us. The Bible, as authoritative text, is held in the everyday complexity of our lives and it is within this dialogue that is living 'Christianly' that the text is suspended. "How does the text make sense of our lives?" "How do our lives throw new light on the text?" Such questions are basic to Christian discipleship.

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Two incidents from my immediate ecclesial context are offered in a bid to convey something of what I would call the 'ordinary hermeneutics' of Christian living, the everyday negotiation between context and text that is the stuff of discipleship.

The first incident was after a lectionary reading of the story of Jesus in the home of Martha and Mary (Lk 10.38-42). A sermon proceeded, in which the text was left rather unchallenged. It was only over coffee afterwards that the text was unsettled by a faithful member of the congregation who had heard the same text as I had heard, but who had heard it differently. She self-identified with the activity of Martha more than Mary, but she was uncomfortable with the text's (actually, it was Jesus she was unhappy with) dismissive attitude towards Martha. Looking back at a life spent serving the domestic needs of her family and the appetites and thirst of her church she spoke back to the text and the hierarchies it had helped support. In so doing, she unconsciously echoed the reactions of other feminist writers on the text. The church needs to engage with how those in its congregations are hearing the text, not in pursuit of a 'theory' of interpretation, but for examples of interpretation in practice.

The second incident also followed from the reading of the Gospel in the context of worship, and I raise it as a way to approach the second question, 'how might dependence on theories be overcome?' We heard what is commonly called the 'Parable of the Sheep and the Goats' from Mt 25.31-46. *Hearing* the text once more I was struck by its piercing clarity, by its simple distinction between those who visited the sick and the imprisoned, and those who did not, between those who responded to those who were hungry and thirsty, and those who did not act in response. Here, surely is a text whose binary distinctions needs not the response of a 'theory' of interpretation, but the interpretative response of action, of praying that our lives might be responsive to those around us. The stark simplicity of the parable seems to unsettle any evasive appeal to a 'theory' of interpretation. Reference could also be made to the Sermon on the Mount and the truth that the most faithful interpreters of Jesus' teaching on the Mount have been those who the majority church have labelled 'radical'. To not hear in some texts the refrain, 'Go and do likewise' (Lk 10.37), seems to go against their grain. The best defense against theory overburdening us is making sure we persist in our reading of and engagement with the text itself.

Christians, Robert W. Jenson said once, are those who 'hang out' with the biblical text. A 'Christian' response to the role and ends of interpretation will be found by looking to the Bible's nesting in the lives of countless Christians. If we expand our talk of hermeneutics beyond the ranks of professionally trained theologians we will find lives interacting with the text in nuanced and surprising ways. The role of professional theologians and church leaders is to open up and support spaces of encounter in our congregations so that we, as members of the one body, become alert to the ways the Word is at work in one another.

Philip Towner

In reflecting on the above (and with the benefit of having seen your two responses), I want first to identify the questions that come to mind when I read the statement. I may not get much beyond raising questions, but they will serve to mark out the territory to be explored, as I see things. It is interesting and helpful to observe the ways in which you've responded (each shaped differently with some important areas of agreement). Mine will be differently shaped yet again, although I think there will be significant areas of agreement. In any case, the statement above suggests to me the following questions:

1. What are "attentive" and "responsible" readings of Scripture?
2. What are simplistic or misleading interpretations?
3. How do we measure "necessary and helpful" in this context?

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4. Is there a sort of minimalist, non-doctrinaire, hermeneutics that can serve all (at least I think this is the core of the last question)?

1 and 2. The statement above separates possible “readings” of Scripture into two categories: attentive/responsible readings, and (apparently) all others. Before saying anything else, one should note the text/print focus in the term “readings.” I would assume that the aims of the BLC would be observant of communication and teaching practices in certain contexts in which “reading” plays a minimal role: i.e. in oral cultures, or cultures in which reading may be prevalent but in which also story-telling figures prominently; the role of film, music, drama and so on would also need to be factored in. “Readings” might then need to be understood to include “hearings” and “seeings” and “performings” as well as any other meaning-making activities through which the biblical narrative might be communicated or might be explored.

“Attentive and responsible” are evaluative terms, and in this context they assume hermeneutical rights and wrongs and/or outcomes that are desirable and undesirable. We could probably create a list of things requiring attention (the questions of AP’s second para are helpful here and need no repeating, as are RSB’s thoughts about the orbit of the text, avoiding a “lock-down” option, and the notion of valence): starting with the author’s words and world, history of interpretation, awareness of translation difficulties, and sensitivity to the audience.

It might be helpful to consider the role of the audience (those attending to the text) in the making of meaning. There are many ways to read a text, as one of you pointed out, and I would add (even if this is regarded as an epistemological bridge to far) even at the level of determining an author’s meaning, there may be multiple messages at work even in the original text—messages set off by intertextuality or by wordplay that “got away” from the author, ran in directions he/she/they might not have anticipated or intended. The role (or responsibility) of the audience in establishing a text’s meaning should not be minimized; but this audience role in the meaning-making process can, I think, be kept within a larger conversation or negotiation in which local readings are made and considered in relation to what might be called the narrative arc or storyline of the Scriptures as a whole (assuming we can agree on the arc’s basic trajectory). A given text (e.g. the Rape of Tamar) will be read differently by sub-Saharan African women, who experienced abuse and African men, or by these same African women and well-to-do American women; its impact, relevance and so forth will be different for one audience than another. If the coordinates of such differing readings were to be plotted in relation to the narrative arc (the broad story of God’s redemptive purpose), the differences of their locations could be seen. Is one reading more “attentive” than the other, by virtue of its location in relation to the “arc”? Not necessarily. I would agree that certain extravagant or overly-personal readings—proof-texting, and more bizarre uses of the Bible in search of “on the spot” guidance, etc.—would show more extreme variance from the arc; and such readings can be determined to be “inattentive” or “irresponsible” in the long run. But such determinations should be made in community, in a dialectical, dialogical manner, in context and in relation to the narrative arc, on the table and equally subject to discernment. (I’ve not gone into the power/authority dimensions and definition of responsibility when it comes to leadership of a given tradition or confession of the church teaching/interpreting in such a way as to maintain doctrinal continuity from one generation to the next.)

The category—attentive or responsible—can be most helpful, in my view, when it is understood that the making of meaning (interpretation) is not strictly a one-way affair; that readers and readerly communities are a part of the meaning-making process, as opposed to audience as passive recipients of some already-determined meaning; and that room be made in the interpretative process for private readings to be aired out as well as public ones.

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3. As to necessity: I completely agree with what each of you has said about interpretations (I would add, translations) that cause damage. This is the no-go end of the interpretative spectrum—so-called “texts-of-terror” is one thing; “interpretations of terror” (though sometimes related to such texts) range more widely. At the other end of the outcome spectrum would be “readings” that allow or produce an encounter with the story of redemption, resulting in redemption and restoration, value-shift, enabling one (or a community) to better embody Christ in life. (I realize that the meaning of this notion, and its details, is also subject to interpretation and will vary from one tradition/confession to the next. That’s okay with me.) Scripture encountered in this way, with this sort of outcome, is a necessity for the church to be the witnessing body of Christ in the world.

4. “Theories about interpretation” I take to mean rigidly constructed systems of interpretation. My view would be that hermeneutical essentials could be kept to a minimum. I would begin with the narrative arc of Scripture (the continuity of a singular story of redemption, with exceptional, resistant episodes within it—Job, Jonah, numerous stories and parts of stories that are angular at best); a communal approach to “reading” in which private “reading” can also have its voice; a fundamental commitment to audience participation in making meaning, a participation which includes conversation with author and sensitivity to the trajectory of the narrative arc.

I am very grateful to the two of you for your reflections. I hope something in my rambling above can contribute to our conversation as we go forward.

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Round 2

Angus Paddison

I would like to thank Philip and Richard for their first contributions to the conversation. There is clearly much on which we agree.

In what follows I want to pick out areas of resonance in what you have said, as well as points at which I am tempted to say, 'Yes, but...', or 'Yes, and....'.

I appreciated Philip's reminder that 'reading' of the biblical text should be interpreted generously, and should incorporate performative aspects, as well as aural aspects. *Hearing* is a very strong theme in John's Gospel – the one who truly hears is the one who knows the Word made flesh, and of course there is hearing, and there is hearing, just as there different levels of seeing (John 9). This pulls us to consider the responsibilities of being a hearer both of the text and of the text proclaimed. What do we need to be formed in order to *hear* the Word? Surely the attentive hearer of a text hears the echoes of other biblical texts in the public reading of Scripture, which is to say that an attentive hearer of a text, just as an attentive reader, has a non-negotiable commitment to the bible as *canon*. I wonder what a *canonical performance* would look like? How might we recognise a canonical performance?

Philip's emphasis on the meaning of the Bible being something *negotiated* in the life of a community is helpful too. You seemed to be saying something here about the vital accountability Christians have to one another, and for me this resonated with themes I have always appreciated in Rowan Williams' approach to Scripture. What you find in Williams is a palpable nervousness with regards to oracular accounts of revelation. The text means, and it means over time – historically - in the life of a liturgical community. A responsible reader parts company with fellow readers with whom they disagree very reluctantly and *only after* they have watched their interpretative moves and attended to the presence of the Spirit in their performance of the text. This attention to our fellow readers is necessary because we have a responsibility to the unity of the community through which the text is carried. Such attention to one another militates against any impatience in reading, or indeed any presumed superiority of one community over another. The church reads as a body. The responsibilities of reading the Bible as the body of Christ are difficult enough to imagine in our local communities. Williams poses the example of being violently disrupted by sharing communion with a fellow churchgoer whose career within the arms industry seems hard to interpret as a performance of the same text you both hear being read. Even more complexly, how are we to read the text in a worldwide church? How might our Eurocentric assumptions be unsettled by majority world readings of the text, pushing us to new forms of responsibility and attentiveness? What we understand to be 'responsible' and 'attentive' cannot be static. There is a link here with the earlier emphasis on the text whose meaning comes alive in performance. One of the enduring contributions of liberation theologies that had their genesis in Latin America was their allergic reaction to any theological approach that presumed you could know without being committed to transforming praxis. Surely, this is an invitation to avoid becoming dependent on interpretative theories that never connect with practice?

I was intrigued by Richard's reference to 'wisdom' being a way of thinking about attentive and responsible readings of the Bible. There is much here to learn from David Ford and Paul Fiddes, one an Anglican and the other a Baptist theologian. A reading of the Bible guided by 'wisdom' will, I think, be alert to the different 'intensities' involved in biblical reading. These intensities are found in worshipping communities, academic communities, inter-faith contexts, the experience of our lives and what is thrown at us, and the demands of public life. For many of us, of course, these intensities overlap and criss-cross all the time. Interpretation is never cocooned. This reminds us that we are

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wise to be resistant to the notion of what Heather Walton terms 'canonical narrative theologies', those styles of theology where the biblical narrative can look as though it is being laid blueprint-like over the other narratives in which we are placed and find ourselves. (Talk of 'narrative' is often associated with those forms of theology which want to prioritise talk of 'the church' ahead of grappling theologically with the empirical church.) In my approach to reading the Bible 'wisely' there is always an element of fluidity and negotiation, of living on 'the edge' of numerous narratives inter-relating one to the other. Wisdom has to do with the complexity of living and I worry that talk of 'the orbit of the text' may not always give us the needed leverage. To be sure, the orbit of the text was undoubtedly a helpful way to disrupt the complacency of 1930s German church life (Barmen Declaration) but we can think of countless other examples where to be caught in the orbit of the text has been far from liberating. Perhaps then, like Zoe Bennett, we need to emphasise the authority of the text *and* our experience, or perhaps the text *in* our experience. A biblical text that echoes this mode of being is the Song of Songs – a very worldly text that precisely in its 'worldliness' is deeply theological and inter-textual. Much is lost by this text's displacement from the lectionary! Interestingly, too, reference to the Song of Songs resonates with Richard's helpful reminder (via Ellen Davis) that we are free to read the Old Testament around Christ but not bound to. There is much to reap from the Song of Songs *before* it is read around Christ and, like some forms of narrative theology, a too-quick Christological reading could blind us to these possibilities of the text. A final thought. I wonder if 'responsibility' and 'attentive' should carry the same weight? There have been many deeply attentive readers of the text who have been accused of irresponsibility: think of pacifists who follow the way the words run in the Sermon on the Mount, or those who attend to the cumulative teachings of the New Testament on wealth and money. There is a form of attention to these texts that in the context of our lives could lead to some deeply 'irresponsible' behaviour, irresponsible at least in a 'Constantinian' sense. My sense is that the church could do with a little more irresponsibility in its reading and performance of Scripture.

Philip Towner

Dear Angus and Richard,

This is long overdue, and I fear it may be less well assembled than I would wish. I decided to make the attempt to avoid repeating observations made in my first response (which took into consideration your first responses to some degree). Here I specifically looked for the distinctive features of your reflections and how they emerged within your respective arguments—at least in my mind. On the whole, among the three of us, there is, I think, a useful level of agreement.

I send this along, warts and all, hoping you'll make sense of it.

I. Angus

1. Opening statement: Interpretation and the biblical text go hand in hand and **we either subject our interpretations to scrutiny or allow them to go unchecked and unchallenged.**

2. Attentive to which aspect(s) of the text? Angus describes the hermeneutical terrain with a series of questions and urges that each question:

re: role of the author/authorial context/God in producing the Scriptures;

role of human frailties/error/very humanness of the text;

role of "plain sense" of the text/or shall we say ways of reading;

role of different uses to which text has been put/how it has spoken to the church through history;

role of the text/interpretation in causing damage; role of the reader's present context

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3. Conclusions drawn from the multiple forces at work in interpretation: **"The Bible, as authoritative text, is held in the everyday complexity of our lives and it is within this dialogue that is living 'Christianly' that the text is suspended. "How does the text make sense of our lives?" "How do our lives throw new light on the text?" Such questions are basic to Christian discipleship."**

4. the 'ordinary hermeneutics' of Christian living

Two readings of Mary and Martha (or daring to object with Jesus' dismissiveness): thus "The church needs to engage with how those in its congregations are hearing the text, not in pursuit of a 'theory' of interpretation, but for examples of interpretation in practice."

Sheep and Goats: such texts make points that essentially manage the task of interpretation themselves; and the application of "theories of interpretation" in such cases amount to attempts to avoid/deny the implications of the clear "go and do likewise".

5. Conclusion. "If we expand our talk of hermeneutics beyond the ranks of professionally trained theologians we will find lives interacting with the text in nuanced and surprising ways. **The role of professional theologians and church leaders is to open up and support spaces of encounter in our congregations so that we, as members of the one body, become alert to the ways the Word is at work in one another."**

I include above my distilled version of Angus's first response to our question (R1) for two reasons: first, so that in what I say below, you (Angus and Richard) can decide whether or not I have gotten the gist; and, second, because it is these points I wish to explore here briefly, before shifting to Richard's (R1).

First, as I think we are all agreed, Angus's opening comment is our opening assumption. After rereading his reflection, I restate (interpret) this opening comment in my own words:

- because interpretation and reading the biblical text are inextricably related,
- because meaningful reading without interpretation is impossible, and
- because no act of interpretation is free from the effects of the interpreter's (or interpreting community's) agenda, values, goals, needs, location (etc.),
- therefore making meaning of the Scriptures must be a process in which all may have a say and in which all that is said should be open to scrutiny.

We may wish to limit somewhat the "all" above; but I think the point I make here is drawn from A's two parish examples—one of which suggests the authentic situation of multiple readings of a text; one of which questions "readings" that are ultimately seeking to evade responsibility. In any case, the "because" and the "therefore" attempt to tie together what I see to be the main ideas shaping Angus's response.

At the core of Angus's response, as I see it, is this necessary relationship between the complexity of interpretation and the complexity of human life. But (or "and") I see Angus, finally, in the light of the complexity of the interpretive task, and having recognized the role of the professional and the church leader in that task, opening this task up to all who read. In taking this tack, Angus (beautifully and importantly, I think) has taken our discussion question about "readings," "interpretations," "approaches," and "theories" and turned it rather into a question about "readers," people who interpret, communities of people for whom understanding the Bible is crucial for understanding their lives, and who in seeking to understand the Scriptures will benefit from listening to the readings of others as they open their own readings up to evaluation.

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II. Richard

Richard's way into the matter is to consider the descriptors "attentive" and "responsible" as they relate to "readings of Scripture."

"Attentive" describes the objects interpretation must take into account, from matters of textuality to the multiple discourses that have contributed to interpretation of the Scriptures through history. The focus here, it seems to me, is on the HOW of interpretation.

"Responsible" is played out more in terms of the effects or implications of interpretation. Does it lead readers into sin? Will an interpretation that is poorly or badly constructed cause harm to unsuspecting people? What does the HOW do to the WHO? Constructive, health-inducing (even if dismantling is the first effect), or destructive?

Richard brings these two things (attentive and responsible) together under the rubric "wisdom": to read the Bible wisely. This, he suggests, involves reading in awareness of a plurality of interpretations, which safeguards against "personal" or "private" readings becoming oppressive, while it also insists on the willingness to keep personal interpretations open to evaluation, dismantling them when necessary, modifying them in the light of other perspectives: avoiding interpretive "lock-down."

There is too the awareness that wise reading is a complicated task: **"but it is always a complex juggling act of attention to a specific text, the canonical whole, the Christian tradition, broader creedal and confessional affirmations, and the current presenting moment."**

This leads to a response to the "dependence on theories" part of our question. Here Richard begins by saying: "I think what I have suggested thus far would indicate that one is best placed as open to all theories and dependent on none, or very few." He will conclude this reflection with the statement that "theory is not method," which is to say that he distinguishes the theory he has just introduced from a precise, step-by-step methodology.

In between—his "conviction"—he sets out briefly the notion of a Christian construct version of "literal sense." My own reference to Scripture's redemptive narrative arc may be similar—the idea being that there is a continuous story from Gen-Rev that Christians read as "their" story in multiple sections. It is here, this business of a Christian way of reading (reading the text as Christians), that I think we could benefit from some further dialogue. I am reminded of Walter Bruggemann's way of exposing different (conflicting) voices in the Old Testament—the priestly (with its aims of protecting the status quo) and the prophetic (seeking to expose the lie of ideology). And of course I think we would need to think in terms of multiple Christian constructs or narrative arcs (though there might be agreement on some basic common denominator). In any case, a bit more collaborative thinking on this topic of the "Christian construct" introduced by Richard, or more broadly on the role of the social construct in which communities of readers live upon in determining their way(s) of reading might be helpful in defining "attentive or responsible" readings.

Richard Briggs

I too am grateful for the stimulating responses offered to this question by Angus and Philip. We seem to be overlapping and criss-crossing in striking ways, and unsurprisingly offering points that converge and others that diverge, which is itself relevant to our reflections on the *Bible in the Life of the Church* as modelled in miniature by the three of us.

'Attentive' or 'responsible' readings of Scripture are ways of paying heed to what they teach, while avoiding simplistic or misleading interpretations. How necessary and helpful are such approaches? In employing them, how might dependence on theories about interpretation be avoided?

Before I take up the comments of each of you in turn, I start by noting that your discussions enabled me to go back and re-read the original question more attentively in itself. I see now how the question majors on the verb 'teach', whereas both of you showed, differently, that teaching is one of many actions performed in and through scripture in the church.

Secondly, the question of what the readings of scripture are attentive or responsible to is broached: to the text (as we all affirmed in some measure), but also to some mix of readers' contexts and overall perspective. Drawing out that overall perspective in some sense is clearly key: be the emphasis theological, doctrinal, canonical, narrational, praxis-orientated, and so forth.

Thirdly, I was struck that you both moved easily between 'attentive or responsible readings' and 'attention to hermeneutics', perhaps prompted by the question. Maybe I did this myself too. On reflection: if hermeneutics is a 2nd-order reflection on reading, then such 'attentive or responsible readings' could be entirely necessary without prejudice to the need for hermeneutical reflection. (I note, in anticipation, that Angus' 2nd piece does not use the word 'hermeneutic/s/a' nor hardly the word 'theory'.)

And fourthly, the question leans in favour of avoiding dependence on theories of interpretation, which is worth some reflection. I am reminded of the biblical studies guild (and even many Christians within it) urging that exegesis might attend to the text without dependence on theological (or Christological) convictions, as if this were either possible or desirable. We all score the easy point that over-determined or heavy-handed theories block the way to responsible reading, but the real work is to be done in discerning what sorts of theoretical commitments (if any) are inherent in the act(s) of Christian reading? The parallels with, say, musicians, musical theory, and those like myself who love music but can neither play nor understand any musical theory, are germane.

So with the question now more fully in hand, let me offer some specific responses.

First, Angus pushes us very helpfully to consider what it means to 'live with the Bible'. I warm to your examples and reflections here. Your points regarding multiple attentiveness and multiple functionality of the text are all compelling.

The Matthew 25 example of the freshness of hearing speaks to me of the role of scripture in the daily office: heard, in full canonical sweep, without the intervention of a sermon. Likewise it reminds me of the practice of concluding a sermon by (re-) reading the biblical text, on the basis of the sermon having cultivated people who can now hear the word of the Lord. I adopted this practice some years ago after reading John Goldingay suggesting it (in *Models for the Interpretation of Scripture*), and it has never felt odd or forced, and in fact often focuses the sermon very helpfully.

Your Mary and Martha example seems to pull in a different direction, highlighting the importance of the context of the reader/hearer, whether in socio-political terms or other ecclesial terms. I agree with your conclusion here about the church needing to hear how its people hear the text, from all points on many spectrums. Yet I often have a nervousness with this line of thought, though perhaps I extrapolate here to things you do not in fact say or even intend. It seems to me that all (most?) biblical texts are susceptible to considerable ranges of interpretation, and these are often linked precisely to questions about the readers' perspectives and locations. As you indicate, feminist readings offer many cases of such insights: and any 'decentred' (or 'recentred') reading will do so; including, of course, Christian rereading of the Old Testament. Given this, I always want to say that the church has a responsibility towards those readings that give life: reading the Bible in the life of the Church is to read it in the service of rendering a word of life from the text in the given context. That word of life may include judgment, or challenge, or rebuke, but it would always be intended as a life-giving judgement, challenge or rebuke. Often, the word of life seeks hope, or vision, or wisdom.

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My point is that multiple perspectives, and decentred readings, often seem to be celebrated as a hermeneutical end in themselves; an escape from the tyranny of traditional readings. But what will it profit the church to see that some people are burdened or oppressed by texts and their readings if this cannot be translated into finding specific (multiple) ways that the text brings life? Perhaps all I am saying is that the hermeneutical component of this analysis is only of any use in service to a bigger theological agenda. Hermeneutics as diagnosis, not cure?

Which leads briefly to a third consideration, perhaps the one sentence in your piece where I disagree, when you talk at the start about 'harbouring a suspicion that attention to hermeneutics could ever be something you could over-dose on ...'. For myself, deeply nourished as I have been by many years writing on hermeneutical theory, I do think one can over-dose on it, and that it can become an end in itself, precisely when people conceptualise a hermeneutic as what one arrives at, rather than as the tool-kit with which one arrives at the (theological) job to be done. Maybe it depends on whether one thinks a good systematics can count as a hermeneutical theory? The 'over-dose' image could still be brought into productive interplay with the claim that it is 'essential'. How best to articulate the requisite balance?

Philip's piece also touches on some of these same issues, but I appreciate here your drawing in of communal emphases in discerning responsible reading, and your helpful way of focusing the question of the role of scripture's narrative arc (which I take up below). I agree that the text often gets away from the author: intertextual resonance is one key category. Our focus is presumably more the text than the author, even allowing that for some kinds of texts (epistles, notably) one needs to posit a working author in trying to make sense of the text. More commonly, a (canonically-constructed) model author seems to suffice.

You are right too to emphasise that 'reading' is not always a text-on-the-page issue, but can be thought about in terms of other performances: I am reminded of Kevin Vanhoozer's image of the dramaturge bringing about faithful performance of the Word (as script), which I think could be really helpful other than the unlikelihood of 'dramaturge' even being a term embraced by church goes ...

Your example about the rape of Tamar read by abused Africans raises some of the same issues as I noted above about decentred readings. You also start to talk about restorative or redemptive readings which brings in the dimension of the church's purpose in reading scripture.

For our purposes, I wonder if the single most helpful issue to discuss might be your reference several times to scripture's narrative: 'the narrative arc or storyline of the Scriptures as a whole'. This clearly plays quite a role in your approach, and is not so unfamiliar from various recent works. Perhaps you both, like me, have found that N.T. Wright's '5-act play' analogy is a fruitful stimulus to such reflection, as well as other narrative proposals.

Here I wonder whether we would be well-served by separating out several similar proposals, to see what precisely we are getting at. One could try to locate the readings of specific passages in wider scripture-related contexts by making reference to (a) scripture's narrative arc, as you do; (b) the canon of scripture; or (c) some kind of theologically-articulated doctrinal core. One obvious candidate for (c) is the old rule of faith, and this has often been parsed in narrative terms. Is it worth us teasing out what is at stake in these different articulations? For myself, (a) is a helpful initial step, but can end up quite diffuse in practice, and seems to over-privilege one dominant textual category (narrative) with the inevitable result that some texts are marginalised (Proverbs?) while others are persistently re-constructed in terms in which they do not present themselves (narrative substructures in epistles come to mind). The third, doctrinal, category is the one against which much biblical studies, even among Christians, situates itself: 'yes, the Church may have said that, but this text does not ...'. I have a lot of time for (c), indeed in practice I think it is always in play when I preach or teach

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in church, but a couple of comments are important. One is that clearly dogmatic formulation (in a good, theological sense of 'dogmatic') can easily slide into dogmatic prejudice that obscures the awkwardness of a biblical text. That this can happen need not mean we should not risk it, of course; and not everyone is persuaded that Barth models both fanatical adherence to the text *and* to coherent dogmatic articulation, even if he certainly gets a long way with both. A second issue is that I really don't think that we should re-parse such doctrinal convictions as narrative. The rule of faith as attested in Irenaeus' *Apostolic Preaching* looks a bit like a narrative, but is even less a narrative than scripture is. (I was persuaded here by the paper of Nathan MacDonald: 'Israel and the Old Testament Story ...', *JTI* 3 (2009): 281-98). It's the doctrinal commitments that drive it.

The second option ((b) – the canon) is possibly the best while also the slipperiest. I remain most indebted of all to Childs' attempt to articulate the canon as overarching context. That the canon is not all narrative is then one factor to take into account in assessing a text in a bigger context. The interplay of canon and doctrinal commitment then drives us past the text to core Christian theological commitments. My own view, which is a work in progress here, is that there is a valuable difference to uphold between saying (i) the text leads readers to core theological commitments and (ii) the core theological commitments – however they are arrived at – may be shown to be supported by the text. Most often they are arrived at by way of immersion into the tradition. Reading Cranmer's homilies recently I came to the conclusion that he espoused (i) in principle but (ii) in practice; and my suspicion is that many (Protestant) Christians do so. Again, my own barely developed view: an Anglican hermeneutic makes peace with (ii) and says that we should expect nothing else.

Philip – the above is less comment on your own piece directly than my own veering off into attempting to articulate what I think might be important for us, triggered by one feature of what you wrote, but not thereby meaning to imply that you were upholding a particular view on all these further matters.

I recognise that I have gone on long enough, too long probably. I look forward to further reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. It is a pleasure to be stimulated by your reflections on these topics that remain so significant to us all.

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Round 3

Philip Towner

Angus and Richard, in the same spirit of reflection that has marked your latest pieces, I plan in what follows to attempt to readdress a few of the topics we touched on and think about the process of our exchange—I may well get off on a rabbit trail too—we shall see.

First, in various ways we have identified the reality of context (social, cultural, linguistic, ecclesiastical, academic) and its relevance to our question. A personal case in point: In the thick of this Advent season (now past—a waypoint in the current response), I am finding that what I might normally process or explore mainly in academic mode, with implications for “the life of the church” seeming to be a follow-on (viz. the set of questions we’ve considered in our exchanges), does something of a methodological about-face. I become the priest inviting my parishioners to look at life—their own, our community’s—through the great Christmas stories we return to again and again, with little or less (anyway) regard for all those current questions of scholarship. And although I’d like to think the so-called “assured results of modern scholarship” ought to enhance our understanding of the faith—some scholars do have this effect—all too often the outcome resembles more the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle than the whole the pieces are intended to produce. I would not want to jettison biblical scholarship, not even in its most arcane manifestations; but it is refreshing and therapeutic to (seem to) stand back and let the Story speak for itself. I think actually what I mean to do from the pulpit is to present the Scriptures in ways that allow the hearer/reader access: in Barthes’s terms, which are actually fairly modest, to allow hearers/readers to discover the (moderate, parsimonious) plurality in the text that become ways into the Story and spaces in which committed readers in a very real sense to become “writers” of the text (following connotation and intertextuality wherever they might lead) and so make it meaningful. My approach, which favors putting the hearer/reader/parishioner in the meaning-making role, may seem to put the ideals “*Attentive' or 'responsible' (readings of Scripture)*” at risk. But I imagine a dialogical and communal process, which, through discussion, homes in on the good and useful and relevant outcomes of active reading. And I think I feel even more strongly about the value of dialogue (in the context of our brief) as a consequence of the three-staged discussion we’ve been engaged in. While the geographical distance that separates us and the rather long pauses between our communications could be said to hinder us in accomplishing our task, these realities, which allow life, work and reflection to enter and reenter our discussion and enrich them at each stage, have also served a positive purpose.

Of course the assignment given us included these guardrails: “*while avoiding simplistic or misleading interpretations*”; and we were asked also to consider “theories of interpretation”: we turned this into “hermeneutics” and stressed wisdom and common sense. In any case, my first attempt to frame our task was to translate it into smaller questions, which I think we each did in our own way:

1. What are “attentive” and “responsible” readings of Scripture?
2. What are simplistic or misleading interpretations?
3. How do we measure “necessary and helpful” in this context?
4. Is there a sort of minimalist, non-doctrinaire, hermeneutics that can serve all (at least I think this is the core of the last question)?

The two of you each summed things up by recalling places we’ve visited during this prolonged conversation. I will do the same thing in a moment. But first the very method, a sort of eternal return in miniature, allows us to understand that the work of discussion goes on, that no topic is exhausted, and awareness of these things is central to our conversation and to the business of making meaning of the Scriptures. (A note on the “incomplete” in closing)

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Through discussions about narrative and narratology, to which Angus has returned in round 3, I have been reminded that the “narrative arc” I tossed into the ring (certainly not my invention), as a way of linking hermeneutics to reading and living, has to be held on to loosely. Upon reflection, I completely agree that the notion of a “narrative arc” can easily become an interpretative paradigm, the more so if the narrative or its “arc” is too narrowly delineated. I think my view was that by imagining an arc or a trajectory, I was allowing the redemptive story, or the readers of the redemptive story, sufficient “yaw, pitch and roll” to allow for necessary diversity. But I am now not so certain that “narrative arc” on its own is all that helpful, especially if it becomes a means of avoiding truly difficult texts or episodes that seem simply beyond reconciliation (texts, for instance, which seem to trace acts of genocide back to God). The idea of “open narrative” is appealing because it compels a consideration of Scripture as a story, or sets of stories, that remains open, giving God the opportunity to act afresh, to surprise, while it also compels believers and communities to enter the story(ies) creatively, open to their own incompleteness, and to engage with the proposition that in their entering, God is at work writing their stories and splicing them into a larger narrative flow. (I see that I am not yet willing to let go of the narrative notion. But if it works at all it is something like the stories written in which the reader can make decisions along the way that affect the outcome.)

On the matter of “authority in the life of the church,” which you both reflected on in convergent ways, I want to take up one matter that I think bears on the BLC initiative and on the authority—perhaps in a somewhat different sense—of the community in determining its directions and needs. I am presently engaged (in the Bible Society context) in creating a theoretical framework for what has come to be called “Scripture Engagement,” which is meant to be followed by the development of teaching/learning materials designed to facilitate “engagement in the Scriptures.” As Stephen understands (we’ve discussed this at length) this activity and the BLC initiative run generally on parallel tracks. But the one aspect that cannot be fully accounted for in the inter-confessional context of the Bible Society movement is that of “authority”—the diversity is too great for any single model of authority to cover the ground. But the one constant is that of the community, the parish, church membership, etc., and their rights and authority to decide what is relevant, which social or personal challenges should be the focus of the study of the Scriptures and of service? There are two scenarios (at least) that present themselves. One we have all tried out in various ways is that of a very small interest group (perhaps an Adult Ed committee) deciding on a number of topics to be studied during the liturgical year: we post the announcement and see who shows up. I want to focus on a different approach. The Ujamaa Centre in Pietermaritzburg has adopted (and developed for its own purposes) a system of Bible Study called “Contextual Bible Study.” “Contextual” might call to mind any number of things, but in this case it is significant that it is the context of the people who will study the Scriptures that is a first consideration. Often those who will engage in study together are gathered together because they all share a particular need, or have experienced a specific kind of upheaval—women who have been abused by men, members of ethnic groups that have been oppressed, people suffering from poverty or HIV/AIDS. That is, the shape of the study, the direction of the “storying” and the entire approach to Bible Study originate in the identified and felt human need, owned by a group which holds this in common. In the process of study—of communion together—they are not simply told what texts of Scripture mean (of course this context is also addressed); rather, the individuals and, through dialogue, the group become interpreters, as they tell and retell their stories into the narrative context of relevant Scriptures, in the process finding their voices to argue with God, disagree with God, but also to be honest, to pray, to plead. I must say that the thought of such an activity seemed very haphazard to me: teachers became traffic cops, directing the flow, ensuring that each voice could be heard, and, yes, sometimes also sticking up for God. There is something about authority, community authority, identity and self-determination inhabiting this approach. If it seems rather messy, there are a number of ways that progress is assessed and the path-trodden by the group is marked out for later reflection. But in any case, this is an approach that begins and ends with “the church”—the people who make it up—and they are immediate participants in charting the course of Scripture “activation” and traversing it together.

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As I come to the end of what I think I can usefully add to our summaries, we have looked at guardrails or limits, systems of theology, of hermeneutics, ways of thinking about the nature of Scripture and of human experience of it. I think we are in agreement that in many ways, some more evident than others, our own process of tossing out ideas for each of us to consider and respond to is somehow central the mystery that is BLC. You have each said, in your own ways, that our interpretation, our reading of the Bible, will always be incomplete. (And, Angus, I found your discussion of spatiality intriguing in the way that it takes my thinking in directions that are not linear, involving the whole person and the whole community—and it made me thought of the perichoretic model of the Trinity as dance.) If there is a way to package “incomplete” in terms of frontier, “space available,” adventure, belonging, healing, understanding, restoration, and so on, then regarding our work (and the work of theology in general) as incomplete is a helpful one.

I am grateful for the opportunity I've had to think with you, Richard and Angus, about the role and reading of Scripture in the church today. I can only think that the chance to follow this up with some sort of face-to-face encounter would be wonderful.

Richard Briggs

Warm thanks again to Angus and Philip for further reflection and provocation. As Angus has expressed it: we refine each other's attention to the detail of what we say knowing that we will be held to account by responses in turn.

I take my remit here to stand back and reflect on where I think we have got to. So here are a few reflections, one or two of which take the form of thinking about what else might have been important to consider.

First, it is true, as all three of us occasionally note, that the process of putting forward ideas and receiving gracious critique is formative for the substance of one's reflections. The dialogical element extends to recognising, for example, that Angus persistently talks about the reality of the church(es) in which we find ourselves, and the role of preaching ministry, in ways that supplement and sometimes overturn the frameworks I see myself operating with. Or, for a second example, Philip's attention to matters of cultural diversity or blindspots recalls me to re-interrogate my own location, which I might term 'parochial' both literally and metaphorically. It simply is invigorating to realise that the angle of approach taken by someone else discloses true aspects of the interpretative task that I had not grasped or at least foregrounded. On the one hand it drives me to the embrace of new perspectives. On the other it presses me to go back and check that my own perspective might still accommodate this extra angle, though – one hopes – in a more rounded and appropriate way

Secondly, it takes time to arrive at the genuine issues. I noted before that it is easy to score the point that heavy-handed doctrinal formulations override the angularity of the text. It seems to me that one can understand two equal and opposite pulls here: if one is burdened with dogmatic constraint, a la Schleiermacher, then one wants the text to break free. If one is awash on a pleasant sea of textual openness, a la young pastor Barth, then one wants doctrinal conviction to anchor the point of appealing to scripture at all. So does one need an eye and an ear to discern the times, and recognise whether we are battling dogmatic foreclosure or polyvalent carnival? And is it then true that the Anglican Communion contains elements of both? So if I then imagine sitting down in an actual meeting of Bible readers from around the communion, which we have modelled in miniature in our 3-way emailing, how long will it take to get past the tendency to pluck points out from one side or the other ('the text must be free to speak!'; 'the church's deposit of faith must guide us!' ...), and discern where the pressure of our contexts most likely threatens faithful engagement with scripture?

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It must take a while. Hearing each other's perspectives must be key to that process, without thereby saying that hearing each other is the goal in itself.

Thirdly, our use of examples has attempted to consider specific passages (Angus' examples of sermons, or Philip's example of how the Rape of Tamar may be heard around the world). What would happen if we anchor our reflections around issues? I am reminded, in training ministers, how interested they are in 'What does the Bible say about X?' rather than 'What does Matthew/Jeremiah/... say about X?' Some issues that focus these concerns, though, are so worked over that they are like wounds in the body (in one sense: the body of the church) and it seems that we will not learn hermeneutical wisdom in the midst of caring for a wound. The obvious example of this is same-sex relationship and activity, on which the appeal to scripture has proved to be endlessly contested. My own view is then that we are not well-placed to understand the role of the Bible in the life of church by way of this issue; as indeed we were not well-placed with regard to the other flashpoint issues of earlier ages. I suggest we need to work with examples of issues that allow us to reckon with the pressures of texts at some remove from these wounded areas, while we try to allow space for healing. One candidate I use in teaching is the practice of forgiveness: how does scripture press us to forgive (or not)? But this too is an area of immense hurt for some. Another issue I use, therefore, is Sabbath rest. If Bible readers can work out why they do or do not observe a Sabbath then they are probing deep into the role of the Bible in the life of the Church, balancing judgments about canon, old and new, law and grace, health and well-being, work and obligation, and so forth. Many readers/hearers may see that they have constructed a settlement of various claims on this topic that they could have constructed differently, but in the end one practices (or does not practice) Sabbath in certain ways, so a decision has *de facto* been reached. Can lessons then be appropriated with regard to other issues?

Fourthly, I have found myself reflecting on the appropriate role of interpretative *confidence* in the light of our discussions. We all work with and talk about the complexities of interpretation, but none of us have wrung our hands in despair at the overwhelming difficulty of it all. Academic discourse specialises in complexity, and our reflections have tended towards the theoretical and complex. In practice I think many academics nevertheless remain quite confident that the Bible has something to offer. The present context, in both academy and (global) church, suggests that we might do well to factor in explicit reflection on how to have 'proper confidence' (to use Lesslie Newbigin's phrase). My own settlement on the matter is this: a text can sustain a range of plausible construals, usually a few, not a huge number (but also not just one). A preacher might therefore be held to whether their reading is plausible, coherent, and life-giving; but not expected to show that they must be right, or that no other perspective is permitted. It would be interesting to see church practice develop a strain of proper confidence in preaching. A positive urging of life-giving readings that leaves space for other readings.

Fifthly, I note that our discussions have weaned me further away from narrative as the over-arching category. Yes there are overarching narrative dimensions, but they only occasionally seem to be the presenting issues in any given text. On this specific point, our discussions have had the interesting effect of making me dwell longer on the problems with this conceptuality rather than its benefits. [An attempt at an image here: I wonder if our discussions could be captured by suggesting that we move from the occasional attempt to say 'the Bible has an overarching narrative, like a film or a novel' towards saying that 'the Bible's overarching narrative is more like that of a multi-season TV drama'. One can analyse the overall narrative of something like *The West Wing*, or *Doctor Who*, and they have their 'narrative worlds', but the actual experience of watching an episode requires only basic awareness of that world and a willingness to watch; while the overall narrative element only rarely presses through to be an important factor. Reading a Bible passage seems more like that.] My own interim conclusion: narrative is helpful but perhaps over-played; and 'canon' describes the contours of precisely what is in front of us, and may therefore be better.

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Sixthly, the more I have been pressed by my interlocutors the more I have been aware of wider issues that one could fall back to and which would also offer real help. I think for example of the virtuous circle between text and (virtuous) reader that highlights how character is key. Or the importance of locating our readings in the context of wide-ranging reception history, to better understand how our horizons are pre-shaped. I am also intrigued, on reflection, that my own most prominent issue with respect to articulating good biblical interpretation has not surfaced: the merits of thinking about the text as ascriptive rather than descriptive (after Hans Frei). I do not intend to explore that now, but it is in fact what I am most often writing about in my own work at present, so it is surprising to me that we sustained all this engaging dialogue without my coming upon the occasion to talk about it.

So seventhly, one learns that the work of biblical interpretation can never be completed, but that there is a time for rest from all our labours. Thank you again.

Angus Paddison

I thank Richard and Philip for their gracious responses to my previous contributions. By way of offering what can only be a temporary conclusion to an ongoing conversation I want to reflect further on some of the themes that have emerged in what we have written. Although I have numbered my reflections, all are linked one to the other.

1. First off, I want to say something more about **narrative**. As we all know narrative has become a commonplace in modern theology. It is no surprise therefore to find Philip appealing to the 'narrative arc' of the Bible. At the outset I raised some critical questions in relation to narrative talk - how does such talk do justice to the diversity of narratives within the canon? (In his first contribution Philip usefully refers to the 'angularity' of Scripture.) How do we avoid imposing a narrative of our choosing? How do we avoid any suggestion that this narrative is to be traced, like some kind of brass rubbing, onto the particularity of our lives? There are some legitimate ideological questions to be raised about 'narrative' being relied upon as a theological category. In his second contribution Richard made some very helpful suggestions here: we need to think about how the narrative-like parts of Scripture relate to those parts that are *not* narrative-like. In order to stretch our talk of narrative a little more I would want to place an emphasis on the importance of 'open narratives' and on seeing the Bible as an irrepressibly 'open book'. As an open book the Bible constantly affords 'space' to its readers (more on this spatial imagery will be said below). Moreover, an open book is porous - knowing 'Christianly' is enriched by placing one's self in the borderlands, and an open book (can we bear this tension?) as opposed to a closed book is located on the boundary of other texts, other readers, and other ways of viewing the world. This is not, I want to say, to suggest that the fact of the canon is up for grabs. It is more that we need to imagine the act of canonisation differently, as part of the ec-centricity of the Christian life. Paul Fiddes in his recent writings on wisdom is a source of inspiration here. This very openness of the Bible's narrative is both its promise and its peril. Promise, because the Bible constantly allows new readers to re-imagine their world alongside the biblical world. Peril, because this very openness is resistant to control. To locate one's self in the borderlands, in the places that encourage resistance to 'closed' readings, is a sometimes unsettling place to be.
2. The second area I want to prompt some reflection on is the different locations of **authority** in the life of the church. Richard Briggs' point about needing to harness multiple ways of reading and hearing the text towards 'a bigger theological agenda' are intriguing and chime with some of my own recent thinking on the topic of the preacher's authority. Reading through what I wrote in my contributions I was struck by how democratic (anarchic?!) they might have seemed: the church as roundtable. I 'confess' to finding this notion of the church amenable. Perhaps one of the reasons I

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have found this so is a conviction that we are in danger of losing sight of the 'official' role of preaching and of the preacher. The distinctions between 'official', 'ordinary' and 'systematic' theologies are very clearly delineated in an article by Nicholas Healy ('What is Systematic Theology?', *IJST* 11 (2009), 24-39) One of the lessons I take from this article is that those who write or proclaim 'official' theology do so on behalf of the whole church body, not in magisterial isolation from it. I take it as crucial that those who preach do so in an 'official' capacity – their vocation to preach to the church is recognised by the church. So, the 'office' of preaching is not a personal one. Put frankly and baldly, if I have to listen (as I gladly do!) to one voice preaching the Word on a Sunday I have to trust that this person has prayerfully listened to the whole voice of the church, assumed that it into their reading of the text, and brought the diversity of the church's experience into contact with the text. All this in order that the body of Christ, in all its diversity, may be drawn more fully into the richness of the text. In this way, preaching is the bringing into focus around the text the diversity of experience that is 'the church'. In emphasis, I recognise that this is somewhat distinct from Richard's emphases. Yet, the 'orbit of the text' is not something that can be neatly disentangled from the church's experience and life of faith. The preacher who discerns the layers of imbrication between text and the experience of the church needs to be blessed, of course, with considerable pastoral gifts, above all patient attention to the lives of the congregation and their experiences. At the very least it requires the preacher to not assume that it is *their* experience with which they must start and end. Such presumptions will only lead the congregation to wonder where their experience has gone!

We are obliged then to sketch something of the ecology of the different locations of authority in the life of the church. Every account of the Christian life relies upon authority in some way. Appealing to experience is as much an appeal to authority as an appeal to a biblical text as authority. To think we can dispose of talk of authority is ideologically suspect. Appeals to experience are not immune to the risk of appeals to the text – of being self-enclosed and resistant to interruption. The rule must be – no appeals to text in isolation from the irregularity of our experience, and no appeals to our experience without the possibility of being brought short by the text. Something like this was what I was hoping to communicate in my first response.

3. A final word on hermeneutics and **theories of interpretation**, not least because the latter is in the original question we are wrestling with. I think Richard is right to chastise me gently for my insistence that hermeneutics is not something we could 'overdose' on. Perhaps I would not choose the same wording again, but my point was one that we are all agreed on. To deny the important role played by interpretative decisions we *all* make is to evade our accountability to one another in the body of Christ. There can be no space for the preacher who cannot see that they are in the business of interpreting texts for the church. Hence my language. Nevertheless, we should be vigilant for when theory overweighs the text, or for when we are so busy clearing our throat that we never get around to proclamation. Basic to Christian identity has to be a trust in the accessibility of the text, and the text's capacity to be read and heard as gospel, good news. 'The Word of God is living and active...'
4. I want to say something in closing on the **spatiality** of biblical reading. There is a spatial element right in the initial title of this project. We are being asked to think about the role of the Bible *in* the life of the church, not *on* the life of the church. You both use spatial metaphors to speak of how the text works – Philip speaks of the narrative as an 'arc', where Richard speaks of the 'orbit' of the text. Both metaphors seem to evoke a sense of the text creating a space for reading. We find ourselves sheltering under an arc, within its protective ambit. An arc is an *enclosing* space. An orbit seems to imply a forward trajectory, the text as a space into which we are brought. Both metaphors have their strengths and weaknesses. The notion of the text having an orbit seems pleasingly eschatological, but perhaps risks downplaying the kind of ecology I have emphasised as being so important. Text as an arc seems a sheltering kind of space, but I wonder if it risks

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downplaying the importance of reading the text on the 'edges'. The salient point is that if God creates space within God's self – the flow and interchange that is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – it is surely not surprising to spot that the Christian life, in which reading the Bible is enclosed, has a spatial dimension to it too. Our challenge, as a reading community, is to ensure that we embody a hospitality that resonates with the roomy God we worship.

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Epilogue Reflections on the process

Richard Briggs

I wonder if this email conversation has been a modest attempt to recapture something that we have lost in our digital world: the art of letter writing. Given that the New Testament contains several substantial epistles, we might not have been surprised that letter writing is one important genre for exploring theological issues. Repositories of theological correspondence down the ages have been illuminating, indeed at times key: in the 20th century alone one thinks of the collected letters of Barth and Bultmann; Bonhoeffer's correspondence; the multi-volume span of C.S. Lewis's letters. Lewis of course went further and conceptualised entire theological works in epistolary form as deliberate authorial strategy.

Today we have email, blogs, and other even briefer forms of correspondence, but they rarely seem to cultivate either attention to detail or discursive treatment of complex ideas. Is our church life impoverished thereby?

My own experience of this forum has been that I have been pushed into writing in a different way: attempting serious theological communication, as per an article or a short talk, in the end even a sermon as an act of focused communication, but with the consciousness of specific dialogue partners, only two in number, with whom it has been important to listen well and speak clearly. It has been a strikingly different experience for me from almost any other writing I have done. I think at first I did approach it as if it were like an email: here are a few thoughts, and they ramify here or there, yours in haste, etc. My first response to the set question was faithful but loosely expressed. I had to dig deeper and think through what was really important to say. At the same time, the format saved me from endless attempts at making generic show of footnotes and cross-references for the sake of an editor or a wider reading public. I have only reflected on this issue today, at the very end of writing, and I am pleased that I engaged in the whole correspondence without diverting attention to the nature of the interchange. There may be a little hermeneutical parable in that: communication first, bringing with it in due time some theoretical and methodological conceptualisation to capture what could be passed on elsewhere.

A final point of relevance of the 'letter/epistle' model of theological reflection is that it is inherently geared to not allowing a final word, but only the arrival of pauses where life goes on being lived. I shall need to ponder how this reflects back in turn on my reading of New Testament letters.

So this experience has been an immensely positive one for me: a shifting conversation of epistolary exchange between specific persons in the Anglican Communion; marked by times and places, but straining for wider reach. Face-to-face is good, and I have valued it highly over the years; but here I have learned a little of the power and utility of page-to-page communication.

Angus Paddison

It has been a great privilege to be involved in this conversational project, which coincided neatly with a time when in my own research I have been thinking determinedly about the role of the Bible in the life of the actual church, the one we experience. Just as God gathers the church into being as a permanent reminder that one cannot follow Jesus alone, so one can never think or write theologically alone in any sustained way. (The polyphony of the biblical texts is its own testimony to this!) I hope therefore that it is evident that I could not have written what I wrote without inching my way through what Richard and Philip said. The conversation will have worked if after reading one of us the reader feels compelled to read the other in order to understand why what is being said has been said. Reading

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one of us should be like listening to half of a telephone conversation. I have approached this exercise with the assumption that only together can we make sense.

I have been grateful for when Philip or Richard have pushed the conversation on (especially around narrative), reinforced emphases (especially around the roles and limitations of contextual readings), and rebuked when necessary (especially when the rhetoric that sometimes goes with theological thought can iron out too quickly what must properly remain a little irregular). I think it was Rowan Williams who said theology was a form of 'word-care'. Being part of this conversation has reminded me of the truth of that insight. Indeed, by the stage of the final contribution I was more conscious than ever that I would be held to account for my words. When it is always possible for words to run too quickly it is essential to have conversation partners to remind you to linger a little more. When you know you are being attentively listened to you take extra care over your words, clarifying what you do mean and what you don't intend to mean. Nevertheless, as those of us familiar with hermeneutics should know one is always surprised by where one's words go, despite our intentions as authors!

A final thought. I get the strong sense that the conversation could go on. We are not finished. And that in itself serves to reinforce that we are never done trying to mine the richness of the Christian life.