

# Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics

Mapping Divine and Human Agency

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## Chapter 1

# The Eclipsing and Usurping of Divine Agency in Enlightenment Epistemology and their Influence on Scriptural Hermeneutics

The typology we will present in the next chapter is designed to bring greater clarity to the full character of divine and human agencies involved in reading Scripture. This suggestion implies the *need* for clarity. This chapter will describe this need. It will be argued that certain developments in Enlightenment epistemology contributed to create an obscurity in the perception of the ideal act of discerning knowledge, of which reading books, including Scripture, has been treated as a subset.

The epistemological development we are concerned with involves the nature of the agency of the knowing person, particularly in the limitation of the investigation of knowledge to immanent spheres and actions. This resulted in the ideal situation being envisioned as that in which both the knower and the object are immediately and immanently present to each other. Further, that the action of the *knower* is, ideally, performed independent of the influence of other agents. The *object* is, likewise, limited to that which can be perceived via instruments of immanent human perception.

With respect to the reading of Scripture, both the moratorium on the influence of another agent on the knower and the limit of the object to that which can be perceived by human perception effectively combine to restrict any appropriate or constructive role for God's activity. In the wake of these limitations the task of interpreting Scripture came to be defined in terms of two arenas of agency, both competing with one another. These are the "text" and the "reader(s)." The tension between text and reader(s), as such, limits the range of activity responsible for determining the "meaning." As these epistemological limits gained purchase the result is that both the "text" and the "reader(s)" of Scripture are increasingly defined strictly by immanent parameters. The "text" reflects this in that it is perceived initially or primarily as being a container possessing the literary production or action of deceased and "distanctiated" human beings. The reader(s) reflected these limits insofar as it is the perception that they should be "objective" and, as far as possible, set aside any prior judgments or be influenced by other agents.

The obscurity produced here is that these developments combine to exclude God's agency from the picture, with the result that the ideal post-Enlightenment reading of Scripture arises against what is effectively a deistic or atheistic horizon or "worldview." Against this it is asserted that it is a highly specious notion for

the agency comprising the reading of Scripture to be defined initially, primarily or exclusively in these terms. Limiting the fields of agency to human agency in the text and human agency in the reading of Holy Scripture is an imposing reductionism.

To the contrary: properly construed, the activity of reading Scripture must also give an accounting of the concurrent *divine* agency that accompanies the “text” and the reader. In fact, the horizon of divine agency that frames the horizon of the interpreter is more fundamental and directive in how they negotiate hermeneutical problems than whatever they may hold regarding human agency. The approaches we will survey in Chapters 3 through 5 will demonstrate how the interaction of divine and human agency is formative and ingredient to any and all proposals for reading Scripture, and how it shapes subsequent decisions made about “texts” and “readers,” “reading communities,” “contexts,” and so on. The time is right and ripe in biblical and theological hermeneutics for approaching the task intentionally focusing on divine agency, as the most revealing manner to both expose and redress the obscurity created in the course of following modernity’s epistemological strictures.

Having said this, the concern with agency *per se* is by no means absent from contemporary debates on hermeneutics. A survey of recent work quickly reveals that notions of agency associated with the act of the reader or reading community, as well as the human agency ingredient in the text, are used with great frequency and force. We hear and read about what the text “does,” “says,” or “effects” and as the corollary issue how the “reader” or “community” “reads” or “uses” the text. The problem with these is that their discussion attributes agency with clumsiness and offhandedness; obscuring the relationship of divine and human agency. So: when one makes an assertion about what the “text says” or “how the church uses” the Bible one is, at the same time, making an assertion (or a denial) about the relative presence (or absence) and pattern of divine action. “What Scripture says” or “how the community reads” is, then, awkward and shorthand language for a constellation of theological assertions which orbit around divine agency.

And here is the rub. Even as notions of divine agency accompany and underwrite these proposals the residual influence of the dominant epistemological tradition tells us that it is preferable to minimize, remove ourselves from, or ignore the dynamic influence of another agent or influence (including God) on our investigations. Thus with respect to reading Scripture, caught between modernity and postmodernity, we live under a cloud of tension between the assumptions we continue to believe in, use and cannot escape from, accompanied by a nagging sense that we should not have them. Understanding and resolving this tension is necessary if we are to make any substantial progress in the debates over biblical hermeneutics.

This investigation follows in the long and fashionable tradition of attempting to describe “what went wrong.” That which I argue has gone wrong is the perception of how the Bible is ideally read and interpreted in its function as the speech action of God in the salvific<sup>1</sup> economy and milieu of God’s active and personal willing, self-

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<sup>1</sup> I would include here, without distinction, encompassing issues which revolve around justification and sanctification. On this point see the creative proposal of Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, 2002) and John Webster, *Holy Scripture* (Cambridge, 2003).

revealing, and self-interpreting.<sup>2</sup> I will not seek to narrate the process which resulted in the immanentization of the hermeneutics of Scripture. That history has been well plumbed.<sup>3</sup>

To assist us in clarifying this errant aspect of the hermeneutical problem we will initially look to the work of Immanuel Kant and briefly discuss aspects of his epistemological framework and its implications for metaphysical knowledge, knowledge about God, and for reading Scripture. In doing so I am not setting Kant up as either the primary or sole cause of the problems. Other representatives could have just as easily been selected. Kant's thought is a convenient point of entry for several reasons. His writings are a definitive expression of a great variance of streams of thought which preceded him and are acknowledged as a uniquely powerful influence in those who followed. He is of particular importance for our purposes in that he stands at a key crossroads for Empiricist and Rationalist (as well as Phenomenological) traditions. The influence of these on theological and biblical studies is profound and unquestioned. Further, the influence of the Enlightenment on Western theology and narrating how these had this detrimental effect on the Church, theology and interpretation of the Bible, continue to be a well worn path of discussion.<sup>4</sup> The reader is, therefore, more likely to be familiar with the basic terms with which we will be engaging. Finally, Kant is selected because of the way

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<sup>2</sup> I am now working on projects related to this point. One utilizes ancient rhetorical theory to provide a framework to see theological hermeneutics as "divine rhetoric." The other is a dogmatic account of the Church's reading of Scripture by way of the Doctrine of the "Heavenly Session of Christ."

<sup>3</sup> One compelling example would be the arguments and discussion in the 16th and 17th centuries leading up to and culminating in the work of Baruch Spinoza. Important new light has been shed on this period by J. Samuel Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (Cambridge, 2002). Also see Christopher Norris, *Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory* (Oxford, 1991). Also A. K. M. Adam, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology*, (Macon, 1995). Other accounts include Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Die Biblische Theologie: Ihre Geschichte und Problematik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1970); Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville, 1972); Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology* (London, 1990); Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, 2002); Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia, 1984). Also highly relevant is Isaak Dorner, *History of Protestant Theology Particularly in Germany* (Edinburgh, 1871).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, 1987); Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, 1974); Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids, 2000); Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight From Authority* (South Bend, 1981); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford, 1990) and *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford, 1997); C. D. Cashdollar, *The Transformation of Theology: Positivism and Protestant Thought in Britain and America* (Princeton, 1989). The ultimate genesis of the epistemological influences I discuss is not at issue here. Whether Descartes (Stout, Harrisville and Sundberg, Scholder et al.) bears greater responsibility, or whether the roots go back to the Medieval Disputations (John Milbank) or the influence of Bacon is a debatable point which does not ultimately affect the argument put forth here. This work *does* hinge on whether the

in which he discusses the ideal knowing moment. His discussion is precise, and helpful in providing a vocabulary from which we will draw to illuminate our own analysis.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, there may be certain readers who, because of the somewhat technical nature of the discussion that follows immediately in this next session, might benefit by skipping to the summary below, and returning to this section later.

### **Kant's Proscriptions to Reason's Activity: Defining the Ideal Knowing Act**

We begin by looking to some relevant passages in Kant's corpus to see how he imposes immanent limits on both the knowing agent as well as the object in the epistemological action of creating or building knowledge. We will pay particular attention to his own qualitative judgments regarding the influence of other agents in the act of knowing and especially to comments he makes regarding the relationship of God's agency to human agency.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* he makes an important distinction between "having an opinion," "believing," and "knowing."<sup>6</sup> This results in a hierarchy. "Having an opinion" is at the bottom from the standpoint of pure reason because it is "objectively and subjectively insufficient." It is insufficient in both of these ways insofar as there is no *a priori* or *a posteriori* way of validating it. "Beliefs" are higher on the ladder because they are subjectively sufficient (*a priori*) but are still objectively insufficient (*a posteriori*). The object of beliefs is beyond the pale of the senses of pure reason to discern rightly or wrongly, yet, the very structure of reason (the categories) gives necessary rise to the belief. "Knowledge" proper, is highest on the ladder and is superior to both beliefs and opinions in that it is both objectively and subjectively sufficient.

Notions about God, Kant says, can be no more than "beliefs" in that they proceed from a subjective *a priori* awareness of a "purposive unity" that is rooted both in the world and in one's moral nature yet are lacking in any possible objective demonstration.<sup>7</sup> Thus the belief in God is implicitly of a lesser quality than knowledge but greater than opinion. Beliefs about God solely originate from subjective grounds. Here, then, are two restrictions on the nature and origin of our notions of God which are imposed as a result: firstly, they are objectively insufficient as the perception of God by human beings is impossible; and secondly, that they then exclusively arise from the subjective ground of the structure of the knower's inherent awareness of the meaningful structure of the world which comports with the categories of experience.

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account offered by Kant is representative of Enlightenment ideals, broadly speaking, and that those ideals have been implicitly or otherwise accepted as normative by biblical theologians.

<sup>5</sup> See Gordon Michalson jr., *Kant and the Problem of God* (Oxford, 1999). Also Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>6</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 684 ff. German edition A 820/B 848 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 688-89, A 826/B 854.

Having sketched out Kant's taxonomy of knowledge with respect to *potential* knowledge, we now go on to look at limitations he imposes on the very process by which one would then go ahead and attempt to obtain knowledge, and particularly, knowledge of God. In the appendix to *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* Kant iterates the need for a thorough examination and critique of any metaphysical investigation undertaken by any person in seeking knowledge. He makes an initial distinction breaking the act of investigation down into two moments: he writes,

If the course of events is taken as it actually runs and not as it should run, then there are two kinds of judgments: a judgment that *precedes* the investigation...and then a different judgment that *comes after* the investigation, in which the reader is able to set aside for a while the consequences of the critical investigation...and first tests the ground from which these consequences may have been derived.<sup>8</sup>

He delineates two moments where judgments come into play; judgments which *precede* the investigation and judgments which *come after* the investigation. He suggests that the presence of both of these is characteristic of the way things often run but "not as it should run." He continues, discussing "antecedent" judgments—those that *precede* the investigation:

If what ordinary metaphysics presents were undeniably certain (like geometry, for instance), the first way of judging would be valid ... But if it is not the case that metaphysics has a supply of incontestably certain (synthetic) propositions, and it is perhaps the case that a good number of them ...are, in their consequences, in conflict even among themselves, and that overall there is not to be found in metaphysics any secure criterion whatsoever of the truth of properly metaphysical (synthetic) propositions: then the antecedent kind of judging cannot be allowed, but rather the investigation of the principles of the *Critique* must precede all judgment of its worth or unworth.<sup>9</sup>

Here Kant denies any appropriate role for antecedent judgments in the investigation of metaphysical knowledge. When applied to the investigation of beliefs about God as potential knowledge we see this as another restriction over and above the limitation to subjective grounds as "beliefs" noted at the outset. So: if a person wanted to investigate the possibility of metaphysical knowledge of God (or God's activity) on Kant's terms, they would be required to set aside any antecedent judgments *about* God.

Kant describes this in *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* He returns to the subject of antecedent judgments and their relationship to the investigation of "supersensible objects" and explores the implications of these limitations of antecedent judgments for the investigation of beliefs about God as potential knowledge.

A pure rational faith is therefore the signpost or compass by means of which the speculative thinker orients himself in his rational excursions into the field of supersensible objects ... and it is this rational faith which must also be taken as the ground of every other faith, and

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<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> Kant, *Prolegomena*, pp. 126-7.



even of every revelation ... The concept of God and even the conviction of his existence can be met with only in reason, and *it cannot first come to us either through inspiration (Eingebung) or through tidings communicated to us (erteilte Nachricht)*, however great the authority behind them.<sup>10</sup>

Kant again affirms the necessity to remove the influence of antecedent judgments, in this case as they relate to our investigation of God's revelation. He also makes another important distinction when he describes antecedent judgments as being comprised of two varieties, *both* of which need to be guarded against in the investigation of pure reason. For our purposes we will call these "operational" and "notional" judgments.

The first, operational, variety is "inspiration" which is offered as the translation of *Eingebung*. The word connotes a kind of influencing action of one person on another. The verb form *eingeben* can also be translated as "putting forward," "administering to," "suggest" or "put into his or her head." The word is used elsewhere by Kant in contexts where he is also considering the question of God's revelation (*Offenbarung*), but it has a more precise meaning than "revelation" in that it connotes the influence of another personal agent in the process of the individual obtaining or making knowledge. His discussion of revelation takes up this issue and, again, proscribes the agency of the knower in such a way that any antecedent influence should be, as far as possible, set aside or nullified, including the influence of God: "inspiration." Here, as in contexts where Kant discusses revelation he focuses primarily on questions involving the influence, assistance, or help of God but is not as critically interested in the question of the form or content of *notional* beliefs we may acquire or inherit from others. There is a reason for this: throughout his corpus *operational* judgments that assert any sort of assistance from God are considered a diminishment and a hindrance to the ethical powers fully resident within each and every person whereas *notional* judgments about God as a creating or judging agent are permitted insofar as they serve to pragmatically frame the moral action of the individual.

This relates specifically in the quote above to the other type of antecedent judgments that need to be restricted: notional judgments as "tidings communicated to us." These can be thought of as ideas which are given or delivered to us; bits of knowledge we can possess and manipulate. Alternate English words which can be used to translate this German term *Nachricht* are "news," "message" or "report." A simplistic way to describe the difference between these two types of antecedent judgments would be that the former, operational variety is like the influence of another person pushing or pulling us in a particular direction, directing of our attention. The latter, notional type of judgments, are like pieces of paper with bits of information written on them composed by others to which we might refer in our investigations.

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<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, "What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?," in *Religion and Rational Theology* (New York, 1996), pp. 14-5. Emphasis mine. From the *Gesammelte Schriften*, V. 8: p. 142. The last sentence in German reads "*Der Begriff von Gott, und selbst die Überzeugung von seinem Dasein, kann nur allein in der Vernunft angetroffen werden, von ihr allein ausgehen und weder durch Eingebung, noch durch eine erteilte Nachricht von noch so großer Auctorität zuerst in uns kommen.*"

Kant goes on to describe the origins of both of these types of antecedent judgments and how they both violate the freedom of reason and rational faith in that they do not allow rational faith to have the “right to speak first” and therefore attack the “freedom to think.”<sup>11</sup> This freedom is preserved by eliminating these influences from three sources of compulsion: “civil compulsion” which is the influence and control of civil institutions; “compulsion over conscience” which is the influence of religious institutions; and finally any other law or influence other than “those which [Reason] gives itself.”<sup>12</sup> The indictment of these three realms has an exhaustive quality with respect to any sort of antecedent judgment that originates within a traditional or communal purview: political, sociological or religious.

The net result of these limitations on the investigation of knowledge is that the agency of the knower must begin unaffected by others and that the object of investigation should only be supplied by the immanent senses and measured by the subjective ground present within the individual. This circumscribes the knowing investigation to purely immanent actions and spheres initiated and maintained exclusively by the knower.

Summarizing up to this point: there are two limitations in Kant’s epistemology that have important implications for knowledge of God. First, the quality of any potential knowing of God can never attain pure or true knowledge insofar as our human faculties are insufficient to supply us with the requisite experience. The most we can attain is “faith” which is of a lesser quality than “knowledge.” Second, Kant places a strict quarantine on two types of influence that would hinder or taint the process; both the influence of other agents and the impact of opinions and prior judgments.

Kant continues this discussion in *What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?*, extending his critical evaluation to *subsequent* judgments. It is fortuitous for our purposes that he chooses to discuss the possibility of a subsequent judgment about God. He writes:

[I]n order to judge whether what appears to me, what works internally or externally on my feelings, is God, I would have to hold it up to my rational concept of God and test it accordingly...even if nothing in what [I] discovered immediately contradicted that concept, nevertheless this appearance, intuition, immediate revelation, or whatever else one wants to call such a presentation, never proves the existence of a being whose concept...demands that it be of infinite magnitude...but no experience or intuition at all can be adequate to that concept, hence none can unambiguously prove the existence of such a being. Thus no one can first be convinced of the existence of a highest being though any intuition; rational faith must come first, and then certain appearances of disclosures could at most provide the occasion for investigating whether we are warranted in taking what speaks or presents itself to us to be a Deity, and thus serve to confirm that faith according to these findings.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kant, “What does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?”, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Kant, “What does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?”, pp. 16-7.

<sup>13</sup> Kant, “What does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?”, pp. 16-7.

Kant does not, here, decisively shut the door on the possibility of God's *existence*, nor does he deny that God could attempt to give us an experience or expression of God's own being. However, these are irrelevant in that there are epistemological gaps and limits that humans cannot transcend. We lack both infinite categories of knowing as well as the sensory possibility of having an infinite experience. Therefore the possibility of human beings either actually having an experience of something supersensible, or of having reliable knowledge of a transcendent being which can translate into a subsequent judgment of the investigation of reason, are both impossible.<sup>14</sup> Thus the terms for the investigation of potential knowledge of God is, again, limited to immanent spheres for both kinds of judgments; those that precede the investigation and those which result or follow.

Contemporary epistemological traditions tend to proceed by critiquing and limiting the moment of experience and the investigation of reason in similar ways. Antecedent judgments are heavily scrutinized; their influence is deemed to be an impediment to a purer kind of investigation; a fly in the ointment of reason; a pinch of unwanted leaven. They are to be set aside, or, if this is not possible, the imposition of their influence is to be strictly controlled and eradicated as far as is possible. The immanent moment of experience or investigation is thus left unfettered in order to better perceive and/or appropriate the truth in the perceiving moment. Subsequent judgments are then carefully measured in light of the "ground" of immanent experience and/or by the categories from and by which the investigation proceeded.

This is the general layout for how Kant constructed the ideal knowing activity of the human being in the pursuit of knowledge and how he imposes limits on that action which restrict it to immanent spheres. We now go on to tease out further the nature of those restrictions with respect to how they become an unnatural impediment to theological undertakings and especially to the reading of Scripture.

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<sup>14</sup> This is a common claim. He also makes it in Book 3 of "Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason" in *Religion and Rational Theology*, pp. 129-171 see esp. 122-5, and also periodically in the section "The Conflict of the Philosophy Faculty with the Theology Faculty" in "The Conflict of the Faculties," pp. 247-93. A.K.M Adam notes that Gabler had an ongoing dispute with Kant over the nature of biblical interpretation. J. P. Gabler, who is counted as one of the founding fathers of modern biblical criticism, took exception that Kant, in "Religion within the Limits," allowed interpretations that defied or surpassed the literal sense of the text if those interpretations encouraged true morality. See Adam, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), pp. 56-9. Important for our purposes is the point that Gabler, who is often cited as a father of modern biblical criticism, felt that Kant *was not being strict enough* in the limitation and criticism of subsequent judgments arising from the study of the Bible. The degree to which this attitude continues in the course of modern biblical studies, as exemplified in Wrede and Stendahl et al., is indicative of a commitment to the criticism of judgments which is even more epistemologically exacting than Kant. See Adam, *Making Sense*, pp. 62-86 and chapter 3 for more recent interpreters. An important recent expression of the criticism of judgments and the commitment to modern historical methods to do the critiquing is Van Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (Philadelphia, 1966).

## Further Defining Kant's Critique of Antecedent Judgments with Special Attention to the Relationship of Human and Divine Agency

Reason must regard itself as the author of its principles independently of alien influences; consequently, as practical reason of the will of a rational being it must be regarded of itself as free, that is, the will of such a being cannot be a will of his own except under the idea of freedom, and such a will must, in a practical respect, be attributed to every rational being.<sup>15</sup>

Kant's underlying concern in limiting the influence of judgments in the gaining of knowledge is rooted in his idea of freedom. Any assistance or influence from others undermines our absolute responsibility as free agents to act morally. If we indeed received help from God in any tangible sense we would be relieved of our responsibilities as independent accountable moral agents and our motivation for improving ourselves and society would be deflated. His fear is not without justification. So, he suggests that judgments of others are to be set aside so as not to bias the free thinking of the knowing subject. This includes any prior judgments pertaining to God, especially operational antecedent judgments that claim knowledge that comes *from* God or of some claim of assistance *by* God. He writes,

[N]o one can *first* be convinced of the existence of a highest being through any intuition; rational faith must come first, and then certain appearances or disclosures could at most provide the occasion for investigating whether we are warranted in taking what speaks or presents itself to us to be a Deity, and thus serve to confirm that faith according to these findings.<sup>16</sup>

One problem we encounter in considering the relationship of operational and notional antecedent judgments is that they are, to some degree, constitutive to one another. Their interwoven relationship and their immediate proximity to the investigative action of reason must be taken into account whenever the question of epistemological method arises. Kant would agree. We disagree, however, that, with respect to theology and particularly the reading of Scripture, it is either within our capacity to remove ourselves from either of these influences, particularly that of the prior action and influence of God, nor is it appropriate to set this setting aside as ideal and the alternative as morally deficient. Further, we could ask, even if we could set them aside, whether it would be advantageous to do so, *especially* from the prior and concurrent action of the Triune God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Would not the abstraction of any of the activities of our lives, including the use of our reason, from the first and third of these divine actions and influences entail the negation or cessation of our existence? Wouldn't removing ourselves from the sphere of the second negate our salvation and acquire judgment: truly, then, *obtaining* our slavery instead of our freedom?

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<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," in *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 96.

<sup>16</sup> Kant, "What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?," p. 15.

Setting these questions aside, we continue to look at Kant's writing, first summarizing that the results of Kant's exacting limitation on any and all *antecedent* judgments is that the *direction* (both in the sense of agency and orientation) of reason's investigation is viewed as being wholly and exclusively originating with, and the responsibility of, the knowing subject. The agency, activity, and impetus for the application of categories from the mind of the knowing subject to the perceived object originates and is, ideally, under complete control of the subject(s).<sup>17</sup> The immanent criticism of *subsequent* judgments also imposes strict limits on the object of the investigation in a manner that reinforces this view.

These immanent limitations are applied in writings where he considers the question of religion and morality. For example, in *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* there is a telling occasion for Kant to comment on the possibility of God's *Eingebung*. In the General Observation section for Part Three "The Victory of the Good Principle over the Evil Principle, and the Founding of a Kingdom of God on Earth" he clarifies what he sees as the proper way to view the "mystery of faith" which lies at the heart of personal religion. He suggests that there are two options; belief is either "divinely prompted" (*göttlich eingegebenen*) or is a "pure rational faith." (*reinen Vernunftglauben*). He recommends that "unless impelled by the most extreme need to accept the first kind, we shall make it a maxim to abide by the second."<sup>18</sup> The way to the mysteries of rational faith, then, is through the idea of freedom. And freedom implies the removal of alien influences or judgments.

The idea and ideal of freedom is also the one true route to the mysteries of faith because, on the one hand, freedom is an attribute which is *not* a mystery because it is potentially revealed to every person in the "determinability of their will" and thus *can* be publicly shared knowledge. On the other hand, the *ground* of freedom *is* a mystery, and *cannot* be communicated publicly. This combination makes the idea of freedom the one available avenue for understanding the mysteries of pure rational faith and its accompanying ethical benefit.

In the context of this freedom the person becomes aware that there resides within him or herself "the idea of the highest good." Kant goes on to indicate three things about God that can be deduced from the idea of the highest good: first, the idea that God is, as a holy Legislator, the omnipotent creator of heaven and earth; second, the

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<sup>17</sup> The plural indicator here accounts for the recent arguments of those like Jürgen Habermas, who accept the Kantian epistemological features but relocate their operation from the individual to the community.

<sup>18</sup> He continues; "Feelings are not knowledge (*Gefühle sind nicht Erkenntnisse*) and so do not indicate [the presence of] a mystery; and since the latter is related to reason, yet cannot be shared universally, each individual will have to search for it (if ever there is such a thing) solely in his own reason." Immanuel Kant *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, 6:137 in the German collected works edition, pp163-4 in *Religion and Rational Theology* Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (eds), The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). This indicates two of the key places where Friedrich Schleiermacher would issue his challenge; in the positive role of *Gefühl* and in the relocating of the individual's experience as dependent on the collective within the religious community. On this second point see Schleiermacher's important and neglected *Christmas Eve: Dialogue on the Incarnation* (Richmond, John Knox Press 1967).

idea that God is the benevolent Ruler and Preserver of the human race; and third, the idea that God is a righteous Judge and the Administrator of His own laws. We are warned not to take these three things as anything other than as a representation (*Vorstellung*) of a practical idea because to do so stretches human concepts beyond their abilities.<sup>19</sup> This warning is one with which Kant repeatedly hounds his reader.

Kant, in this moral cautioning, assumes an additional distinction between ideas (or judgments) as actually having some relationship to the way things are, and ideas as simply claims which have an indeterminate or nonexistent relationship to the things to which they seem to refer. The way this consistently works in Kant's writing is that he frequently allows for purely notional judgments about God as long as he can see them as somehow enabling people to spur themselves on to pursue the highest good. Yet he always makes it very clear that these judgments should not be seen as actually somehow capturing or referring to any true detail of what God may or may not actually be like, denying them any operational truck. Kant is concerned about walking the fine line between allowing the unenlightened masses to have their dogmatic pacifiers and crutches, and keeping them from drawing conclusions that could potentially lead them to absolve themselves of the moral and civic responsibilities they themselves should shoulder.

One result of this distinction between the purely functional aspect of an idea as being separable from whatever relationship it may or may not have to things-in-themselves is that this reinforces a bias in his writing towards being more amenable to judgments of the notional type over operational types (the *idea* that God created the world over the claim that God did, in fact create and does sustain the world).

Notional judgments have to do with the nature and essence of things which (to some degree) can be discussed in relative abstraction from their operation. Thus, on the one hand, the notional idea of God as creator of the earth has greater potential pragmatic value in encouraging people to pursue the greatest good. This is so, for one, in that the moment of the action of creation stands at a safe distance and serves as a kind of backdrop from the present moment of moral decision and therefore has a more acceptable risk level relative to the potential danger of someone thinking that this is truly the way God is or acts. On the other hand, any idea that implies that God actively and personally sustains me possesses much greater immediate risk in that one could then conclude that they are inadequate in and of themselves to face the demands of the immediate moral task. Kant, then, believes that there is a much greater moral danger in the influence of the operational judgment that God sustains creation and creatures than the notional judgment that God is the Creator of the world in undermining morality.

Furthermore, all three of the "beliefs" about God that Kant allows in the *Critique of Practical Judgment* lend themselves efficiently to observe this danger and to preserve the immanent limitations of reason, thus maintaining the independent self-sufficient moral agent. Considered from the standpoint of God's activity none of these considered on their own need necessarily impose themselves on the immanent sphere of the agency of the individual. God as Creator and as Future Judge are both logically resigned to a distant unknown past and future, respectively. Likewise, the

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<sup>19</sup> Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, pp. 165 ff.



image of God as “preserver” of the human race need not imply anything more than a kind of deistic oversight; a guarding and maintaining of the clock tower. Even these three beliefs about God that Kant promotes, then, continue to reinforce the clear and exact immanent prescriptions Kant imposes to keep clear the space for the independent self-sufficient moral agent.<sup>20</sup>

Returning to another point in Kant’s discussion above, we recall that the “mysteries of pure rational faith” are the grounds from which these ideas about God actually proceed. Of these grounds, he writes, “God has revealed nothing to us, nor can he reveal anything, for we would not understand it.”<sup>21</sup> In the text at this point there is a footnote which gives us another excellent example of what *Eingebung* indicates and how exacting is Kant’s denial of its possibility.

Now we can with right require of every mystery proposed for belief that we understand what is meant by it. And this does not happen just because we understand one by one the words by which the mystery is enunciated, i.e. by attaching a meaning to each separately, but because, when combined together in one concept, the words still allow a meaning and do not, on the contrary, thereby escape all thought.—*It is unthinkable that God could make this cognition come to us through inspiration, (Eingebung)* if we for our part do not fail earnestly to wish for it, for such cognition could simply not take hold in us, since the nature of our understanding is incapable of it.<sup>22</sup>

It is significant to note that Kant felt compelled here to discuss an interpretive question about the nature of language. He notes the difficulty, yet necessity, of moving from the meanings of individual words to how words indicate a developed meaning as they are collected under concepts. Consistent with our reading, he thought it more important to issue a strong warning about considering God an agent assisting us than to warn us about the influence that notional claims supplied to us in tradition may inveigh. This emphasis, then, remains firmly in place as he moves from the critique of pure to practical reason.<sup>23</sup> Thus practical reason can, and must, avail itself of these minimal notional ideas about God, but must refrain from ever making operational judgments about God’s present activity in the world.

The tendency to distinguish between the functional and the referential nature of judgments (and focus on the prior) also shows itself in the section called “The Philosophy Faculty versus the Theological Faculty” in *The Conflict of the Faculties*. There Kant suggests that the heart of the conflict between the faculties is that they have a strong difference of opinion over the nature of the influence (*Einfluß*) of God, or of some supernatural spirit. Kant continues to deny the appropriateness of influences as this undermines our moral freedom and our corresponding responsibilities. However, he cautiously suggests that he would allow, in certain situations, for the

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<sup>20</sup> It is no coincidence that modern theologians and hermeneuticians are drawn to the doctrines of creation and eschatology to underwrite their proposals. We shall see this trend emerge in our survey in later chapters.

<sup>21</sup> Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, p. 169.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis mine

<sup>23</sup> See Michalson jr., Gordon E., *Kant and the Problem of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), chapter 2.

*idea* of such influence, if it serves to motivate individuals in the improvement of their moral disposition.

This discussion indicates the difficulty in attempting to maintain a strict distinction between notional and operational judgments. For example, keeping straight the difference between the notional judgment that God is an assisting God and the operational judgment that God does, and is, in fact, assisting us can make our heads swim a bit, and rightfully so. Insofar as we are limited and immanent beings who, by necessity, employ language to engage our world and each other, at some point the distinction cannot be maintained and requires that we recognize that whenever we “talk about God” the congruous relationship of the functional and the referential (and ethical) will at some point be inextricable and unavoidable.<sup>24</sup> Rather, it is when the natural relationship between the functional and referential aspects are strained or severed, as it is in both cases in Kant, that the crises in modern theology and biblical studies find their roots and sustenance. Modern views of the freedom of reason compelled theologians and biblical scholars to take up a variety of positions relative to these in how they perceived the ideal investigation in their particular field. Among them there is one relatively consistent feature: It became the *status quo* that antecedent operational judgments should be resisted as a subjective imposition on the investigation of the “objective” individual. Thus an essentially deistic hermeneutical framework becomes the default setting.

### Clearing the Modern Ground: The Eclipse of God’s Agency

If the picture painted above is accurate then it is of obvious value to pursue the question of how these developments affected theological and biblical investigations. There is a fairly wide consensus that something like the terms we have laid out were also gradually and variously adopted and employed as the standard for biblical studies.<sup>25</sup> One implication of their adoption will receive a greater level of attention: the limitation to strictly immanent spheres of agency and investigation became the *status quo* in the self-perception of the task of reading Scripture; the limiting and removal of the influence of antecedent judgments, particularly those related to the agency of God Himself, in the act of reading the Bible became accepted norms both *de jure* and *de facto*.

Insofar as this is the case there are two tendencies that emerge. First, the theological scholar, as the knowing subject, perceives his or her task to be one in which the prior influence of other agents (or traditions) should be strictly controlled and if possible,

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<sup>24</sup> See the fine discussion in David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids, 2003), pp. 300-18.

<sup>25</sup> Adam, *Making Sense*, p. 109. See Craig Bartholomew *Reading Ecclesiastes* (Rome, 1998), Chapter 1. See bibliography for other relevant works by Bartholomew. He describes in *Reading* that DeWette, the oft proclaimed father of modern biblical criticism, was deeply influenced by a lecture he heard Kant give and that he himself saw his work as an effort to implement the basic features of Kantian thought. On this point also see John W. Rogerson, *W. M. L. de Wette: Founder of Modern Biblical Criticism* (Sheffield, 1992).



eliminated. “Objectivity” is the watchword.<sup>26</sup> In biblical studies this manifests itself in the perception that studies which set aside tangible theological frameworks are superlative to those which do not. In debates biblical scholars invariably point to any hint of the presence of theological interests that may remain in the writing of their opponents as if this is a point of weakness.

Second, the object of study for the biblical scholar is limited to those things which are immediately available to immanent categories and experience. The intense scrutiny of “events” under the general rubric and guidance of “history” is evidence of this. Increasing preoccupation with finding the exact text is another. The well known passions with which certain Protestant denominations have rallied around the King James Version as well as the exaggerated efforts of the Jesus Seminar are both examples of these tendencies fully working themselves out.

The net result of both of these for theology as well as the reading of Scripture is that the task in either case is ideally viewed as presiding strictly and wholly under the agency of human knowing subject(s) and is limited to attending to immediately available immanent objects of study. In both cases the investigation proceeds in relative abstraction not only from the perceived contaminating influence of other human agents but also from God’s immediate and/or mediate agency and presence in, with, and under, both the objects of study and the activity of the reader(s). For example, modern theologians increasingly turned their initial, primary or exclusive attention to anthropological issues, whether individually, or collectively, or to some immanent dynamic at work in relation to human phenomena. The other option which stood alongside like a younger brother, or better, as a lower caste cousin to this was, and is, to look to nature, and natural occurring phenomena for the raw material for theology.<sup>27</sup> For biblical studies the turn was to the sorting out of historical questions, taking their cue from sociological and historical categories and methodologies.

In both cases there is a tendency to abstract the fields of study from any consideration of God and God’s activity in, with, and under the object of study or with the knowing subject in the study. Talk of God’s activity is, in these scenarios, ideally, only a *result* of the investigation.<sup>28</sup> Accompanying these developments there gradually grew a consensus that accepted the superiority of the kind of investigation

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<sup>26</sup> Of course this is a Modern definition of “objectivity”; a term which underwent severe transformations from the early Medieval period forward. See S. Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Syracuse, 1987); E. Cassirer, “The Subject-Object Problem in the Philosophy of the Renaissance” in *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (New York, 1963); Daston, L., “Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective” *Social Studies of Science* V. 22 (1992), 597-618; T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford, 1986); J. R. Solomon, *Objectivity in the Making: Francis Bacon and the Politics of Inquiry* (Baltimore, 1998); M. Bowald, “Objectivity” in *The Dictionary for the Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> An excellent account of the relationship of the development of natural science to Protestant notions of reading Scripture is found in Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> See the interesting and highly relevant account in Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

which exercised careful and exacting controls on *all* antecedent judgments which indicate any prior influence of another agent. Thus those who sought to challenge the results of other scholars *perceived* the only arena for challenge to be that of *subsequent* judgments.

Once these boundaries settled the terms for disagreement were set as well. Biblical scholars of a conservative stripe argue against the more radical conclusions of their opponents in terms of the textual and historical evidence suggesting that a fuller and more objective accounting of the evidence at hand leads one to a different conclusion. In this they nevertheless continued to accept the moratorium on antecedent judgments. The investment in historical critical methods, underwritten by the immanent epistemological preferences and limitations of the Enlightenment, was unanimous across the theological and denominational spectrum at this point.

Furthermore, biblical scholars tended to issue their challenging criticisms not only with respect to subsequent judgments, but to *notional* subsequent judgments. This is a more subtle point. I have in mind here the occasions when biblical scholars discuss the conclusions of their work. Often they talk *about* God as if describing the features of a painting. Their discussion tends toward description and yet the implications are disregarded as to whatever this description might suggest in terms of God as a personal and active agent, and how the admission of this shape of agency would transform the self-perception of the very act of reading Scripture which they themselves are undertaking. Thus the self-perceived activity of the theologian, as well as the self-perception of the task of reading Scripture received increasing abstraction from their prior (and proper) location within the milieu of gracious divine agency and presence. This occurred in concert with the developments William Placher has helpfully narrated as the “domestication of transcendence.”<sup>29</sup>

Louis Dupre eloquently characterizes the results of these trends and their implications and results for religious traditions in Western culture:

The unity of the integrated culture on which Western metaphysics once rested became fragmented into isolated spheres: nature, the meaning-giving mind, the inscrutable God. The transcendent component gradually withdrew from culture. That process now appears to have become completed. It is, of course, not the case that contemporary culture *denies* the existence of God or of the divine. But transcendence plays no vital role in the integration of our culture. The fragmentation ... has not halted at the ultimate principles. Once the human subject became solely responsible for the constitution of meaning and value, tradition lost its former authority. Each group, if not each individual, eventually felt free to advance a cultural synthesis of its own, ransacking the tradition for spare parts. Freedom was restricted only by the right of others to be equally free. Symbolic universes became sovereign realms, beholden only to self-made rules.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence* (Louisville, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> Louis Dupre, *Metaphysics and Culture* (Milwaukee, 1994), pp. 44 and 48. Also George Schnier writes, “This fundamental shift occasions the move to illogical discourse within Christianity itself ... it involves the effort to preside both over the identity of God and over our own facticity. Thus, what has accompanied our particularly modern conception of the deep and persuasive factors accounting for human inventiveness ... has been a loss of a sense of the transcendent, of the sacred.” Schnier, “Waiting for Godot,” *Toronto Journal of*

The loss of tradition's authority is one of the additional features of the impact of the developments we have been tracing.<sup>31</sup> Going beyond Dupre's suggestion, it is only when tradition is relativized and abstracted with respect to its prior perceived location within the milieu of God's gracious action that the possibility of denying or misconstruing the nature of its authoritative role in relation to the reading of Scripture becomes a live option.

The inclination of the enlightenment epistemological tradition that has concerned us here is the eclipse of God's agency in the perception of the task of reading Scripture. This development has, at its foundation, an overt theological dilemma. If it is true that one can remove oneself, even "for the sake of argument" from the milieu of God's gracious activity, then God is not the God attested to in Christian Scripture and the tasks of a particular Christian reading of the Bible or theology quickly become moot. On the other hand, if one cannot remove oneself from the sphere of divine assistance and influence then the Enlightenment valuation of detached objectivity is flawed and the self-perception of the reader of Scripture and the theologian need to be redefined accordingly. This is an unavoidable, clear cut and significant either / or to negotiate.

It presently still tends to be the case that scholars (and many ordained and laypersons) still idealize the reading of Scripture from *within* the limits and strictures of the epistemological tradition of the Enlightenment. In the wake of the eclipse of divine agency that this inaugurates comes a usurping of that action by the only other arena of agency available in the immanent sphere to replace or supplement it: human agency.

### **The Hermeneutic Reversal: The Usurping of God's Agency**

Once God's antecedent agency is set aside as an improper imposition on Scripture's reading there is a vacuum formed from the traditional or pre-critical perception of the task. Formerly, it was God's supervenance and guidance which accompanied and administered the reading. Once God's instructive role is diminished, denied or lost there arises a need to account for whom or what is controlling or animating the act of reading Scripture. In God's absence humans are the only agents left to take up the responsibility for this action. Michalson identifies this as the logical outcome of Kant's epistemology:

The transfer of transcendence to the immanent human domain is itself an activity implicitly structuring Kant's thinking, as it is structuring reason itself. Indeed, the aspects of the principle of immanence identifiable in the details of the moral argument and in Kant's aggressive theory of autonomy are considerably reinforced here by the virtual personification of reason. In assuming the very characteristics of divine agency, reason

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*Theology*, 17/1, 2001, p. 42. See also William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence* for a compatible reading of history which supports this conclusion.

<sup>31</sup> A story narrated eloquently by Jeffrey Stout in *The Flight from Authority* (South Bend: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

becomes providential in both its restless quest for the satisfaction of its aim and the definition of the aim itself. In light of the effects of the other aspects of the principle of immanence, this personification of reason occurs against the backdrop of the increasingly faceless nature of God, for now God has less and less to do.<sup>32</sup>

This shift has been described by others as a sort of “reversal”. George Schner, a Jesuit who studied under Louis Dupre and Hans Frei at Yale, has aptly described the results of these shifts of thinking about theology in the course of the Enlightenment in contrast to the assumptions of the prior Christian tradition in these terms:

The Great Tradition has generally presumed that the order of reality is reflected in the order of possibilities ... because Jesus was raised from the dead, others can come to know this act of God and to live according to it, and ultimately the whole of reality will manifest its effects. This order of happenings leads to an order of discussion: first, of the identity of Jesus and the nature of such an event in history; second, of the relation of the believer as observer and participant—in general a matter of Jesus’ calling, commissioning, and upholding his disciples;<sup>33</sup> and third, of the implications of the resurrection of Jesus for the ultimate transformation of the whole universe ... For many scholars, not to mention believers, the order is presently reversed. There is a force or power for transformation (whether developmentally progressive or serendipitous) within the universe; individuals can come to know and be empowered by that force; Jesus can be construed as someone who also participated in, was effected by, or functions as a symbol of this same force.<sup>34</sup>

The direction of the theological logic which orients the relationships of God, Christ, human and creation is important for our purposes. The prior Christian tradition understood the shaping, direction and *telos* of knowledge to flow from the actions of God in Christ in, with, and under events in time and space to the elect people of God, to all humanity and to the cosmos. This is the theological logic that flows from the very shape of our basic ecumenical creeds. The modern situation perceives this relationship as reversed; there is a latent power in the cosmos that awaits our knowing action to animate it, organize it, give it meaning and make it effectual. We reason our way *to* God, not *from* God. Schner implicates Kant and the role of the same two key regulative principles in Kant’s epistemology detailed above, which have contributed to this reordering:

The first [implication] concerns how the meaning of things is arrived at: it is produced by the careful (i.e. logical) application of the structuring activities of the mind, *not by either a receptive intellectual perception of things or an inspiration independent of the senses*. The tendency among humans not to function in this way leads to the second...all knowledge not formed in this fashion is naïve ....<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Michalson, *Problem*, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Schner’s endnote here refers to David Demson, *Hans Frei and Karl Barth: Different Ways of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> George Schner, “Waiting for Godot: Scripture, Tradition and Church at Century’s End”, *Toronto Journal of Theology* 17, no. 1 (Summer 2001), p. 39.

<sup>35</sup> George Schner, “Waiting for Godot,” p. 39. Emphasis mine

For Kant, as for the majority of post-Enlightenment thinkers, meaning does not in any way *come to us* nor should it be *given* to us. It is neither received nor inspired. We saw this in the survey of his work above and his critique of antecedent judgments. The act of meaning making is initiated, maintained, and substantiated by us. *We go to it and/or make it.*<sup>36</sup> It is an action that originates within us and is initiated by us using the raw material of experience and shaped by the immanent categories of human understanding. The validity of any sort of prior action in the production of meaning by things themselves or by another agent is, from this view, naïve or morally suspect. Michalson again:

Instead of moving from the reality of God to judgments about human freedom, the argument must account for God and the divine will *subsequent* to our apodictic certainty of the reality of human freedom. Kant's position never really modifies the important reversals that are at stake in this ordering of thought.<sup>37</sup>

The net results of this reversal are that the modern enlightened path to meaning is one which humans perceive themselves to travel alone. We approach nature; we examine rocks; we measure and explore the universe. In fact, we tend to view ourselves as being *ideally*, and even *preferably* unaccompanied, unaffected, and unaided in this activity.<sup>38</sup> "Henceforth the entire burden of conveying meaning falls upon the person who must find his way in an opaque and dark world."<sup>39</sup> At best, this is methodological Deism. At worst, there is a transfer of attributes and actions that rightfully belong to God, to humans.<sup>40</sup>

Hans Frei, in his seminal book *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, also discusses a kind of "reversal" which preceded and anticipated Schner's. Frei's reversal also brings us nearer to the primary point of our study in that he is describing the impact of the same influences on the reading and interpretation of Scripture. He writes,

Originally, the current reader would submit their world to the one impressed on them by the reading of the biblical story. This story was one history, one world, the one true real world, comprised of a literal-realistic reading, which included, but did not distinguish, reference to the events that they portrayed. These two aspects were gathered into the figural reading that gave the whole its unity. This figural reading contained all of these aspects without distinction. The figural reading impressed itself on the reader in a fashion which dictated that the reader interpret their own life and world in terms of the biblical

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<sup>36</sup> So Michalson, *Problem*, Chapter 1.

<sup>37</sup> Michalson, *Problem*, p. 22. Emphasis mine.

<sup>38</sup> See William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking About God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

<sup>39</sup> Dupre, *Metaphysics*, p. 48.

<sup>40</sup> Michalson writes, "...the transfer of transcendence to the immanent human domain is itself an activity implicitly structuring Kant's thinking, as it is structuring reason itself. Indeed, the aspects of the principle of immanence identifiable in the details of the moral argument and in Kant's aggressive theory of autonomy are considerably reinforced here by the virtual personification of reason. *In assuming the very characteristics of divine agency, reason becomes providential* in both its restless quest for the satisfaction of its aim and the definition of the aim itself." Michalson, *Problem*, p. 23. Emphasis mine.

world. The figural reading is the link between the text and us. In the original direction the figural reading is determined by the literal-realistic reading. Once the direction is reversed the figural reading loses this determination and seems, to the modern reader, to be directed by the individual interpreter. Conservative readers sensed this and, assuming there was no other option, quickly eschewed figural reading as subjective and dangerous. Liberal readers also viewed it as subjective but did not dismiss it as dangerous, but as foolish, as an unnecessary distraction.<sup>41</sup>

Frei identifies the reversal from the former to the present way of reading in terms which have been aptly summed by George Lindbeck as from “the text absorbing the world” to “the world absorbing the text.”<sup>42</sup> Schnier’s comments are instructive at this point in that the key difference between Schnier’s reversal and Frei’s is that the latter’s occurs primarily *within* the Kantian limitations on antecedent judgments we discussed above, particularly as they relate to *operational* antecedent judgments, whereas Schnier’s reversal carries within it a challenge to the validity of those limitations on antecedent judgments, especially as they relate to God’s agency and action on the knowing subject(s). Schnier’s characterization of the reversal is, then, the more exacting comment on modernity for our purposes.<sup>43</sup>

## Summary

The purpose of this book and typology is to challenge a misleading legacy of Enlightenment epistemology. That legacy insists that the prior influence of another agent on the reasoning act of the person is an act that impinges on the freedom of the individual and corrupts the knowing process. This produced a bias against “confessional” readings of Scripture and instills “neutral” and “objective” readings of Scripture with greater authority. Neutrality is, however, both unattainable and, in the end, impeding, for discerning the full character of the dynamic of human and divine agency that comprise all aspects involved in the reading of Scripture. To continue to see antecedent judgments about God’s action as something to set aside is effectively to remove something that constitutes our very lives; dislocating this key activity that constitutes and sustains our spiritual life from the active milieu of the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in the administration of Christ’s Heavenly Session. The attempt to remove ourselves from the divine agency in, with and under this text as an instrument of God’s gracious judgment, salvation, guidance and comfort is, from this perspective, an act of denial or resistance; even defiance.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 survey how recent contemporary hermeneutical proposals on the reading of Scripture tend to be prone to these problems and neglect these fundamental issues in that they still (to various degrees) accept the limiting terms of the Enlightenment for reading. In this they tacitly or explicitly assume judgments

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<sup>41</sup> Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 6-7; see full discussion pp. 5-12.

<sup>42</sup> George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia, 1984), p. 118.

<sup>43</sup> David Kolb, in *The Critique of Pure Modernity* (Chicago, 1986), p. 11 describes the reversal between the relationship of “substantive rationality” and “formal rationality.”

against both types of antecedent judgments, especially *operational* antecedent judgments.<sup>44</sup> They also share a tendency to accept the Enlightenment's terms for the criticism of *subsequent* judgments by initially limiting the object of the investigation to that for which we have categories and can experience. As we survey these proposals we will also carefully exegete the manner in which the representatives we have selected all, nevertheless, manifest antecedent judgments particularly with respect to the role and relationship of human and divine action in the reading of Scripture.

Regardless of whether or how exacting the theologian or biblical scholar is in his or her handling of antecedent judgments, it is still broadly assumed that greater degrees of "objectivity" have greater value as scholarship. This may not be true *de jure* insofar as many biblical theologians would, when asked, wish to acknowledge the location of their work within the milieu of divine action. Nevertheless, the neglect of the accounting of this divine action in biblical scholarship still tends to be *de facto* prevalent in the way scholars actually proceed in their tasks. The acknowledgment of God's active presence as an actual influence within their methodology, in their consideration of the admixture of authorial agency in the composition of the text or its reading, normally only occurs as a notional judgment and is typically not relational or operational in the self-perception of the practitioner. Thus one question that will be more compelling in this study will be how the reader of Scripture acknowledges, appropriates, and indicates divine action in, with and under the form and content in the host of exegetical, hermeneutical, and theological questions to which he or she attends.

For example: one common area of contention where we can observe these tensions is in the question of the role of tradition in biblical studies. Specifically, the role and function of canonicity is fraught with these problems. Many biblical scholars will accept the authority of the canonical corpus as possessing a unique or unquestioned authoritative quality and yet, at the same time, see the process and influence of the theological judgments of the first four ecumenical councils and creeds as either an unnecessary hindrance or irrelevant. In making such a distinction, the net effect is to make a positive judgment about God's activity in, with and under the historical process of the church's recognition and acceptance of God's gift of the canon, while at the same time making a relative and simultaneous negative judgment about the nature of God's activity in the same course of events which culminated in the councils and the creeds. The intimate interconnectedness of these issues historically and theologically forces the acknowledgment that this is a very difficult and awkward position to justify and maintain.

Another reason why focusing on operational antecedent theological judgments will be more telling involves a recent softening of attitudes towards notional antecedent judgments. This is a result of the postmodern criticisms of the idea of neutrality in methods.<sup>45</sup> The recognition that we necessarily bring assumptions to our task is once again becoming an accepted term for theological debates. At the same time the moratorium on any constructive role for *operational* antecedent judgments

<sup>44</sup> See Louis Dupre, *Metaphysics*, pp. 6-11, 38-40.

<sup>45</sup> See Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (South Bend, 1991).



is still by and large in place. In other words: it is becoming more acceptable for theologians to express themselves overtly out of a confessional framework, as long as those frameworks do not assert that the beliefs they hold to divine agency have any purchase with God's true nature or activity.

Therefore, greater attention to the relationship of divine and human agency that is indicated in the hermeneutical proposals that follow will produce a better barometric measure of the present atmospheric pressure that the Enlightenment epistemological limitations still exert. Attention to these will allow us to be able to discern with greater clarity the degree to which proposals and enactments of reading Scripture continue to operate within the reversals named by Frei and Schner.

There is a familiar way that the results of this bias against antecedent operational judgments in modern perceptions of reading Scripture can be named: that God's action is, for "practical purposes," limited to a deistic framework.<sup>46</sup> The possibility of God's revealing particular knowledge or of guiding us to any knowledge through God's own ongoing, personal, and present action is more strictly controlled and denied whereas notional ideas that project God as creator, ruler or judge is allowed as long as we remain agnostic about its referential status.

The possibility and even necessity of separating and isolating the functional and representational aspects of language about God also remains as one of the basic modern features of debates in theology and biblical studies. These distinctions tend to be employed on behalf of more radically oriented reform efforts from within and without the Christian church. It will not be a central concern of this work to discuss this phenomenon. However, it is increasingly clear that this claim, not only of the *necessity* of separation of the functional and referential aspects of language, but even of the *possibility* of such a separation, is a myth which, in an ironic reversal of Kant's intentions, tends to just as easily underwrite the very same self-serving and self-justifying morality that he sought to resist.

Again, it tends to be the case that modern theologians, if they challenge the epistemological critique of judgments, primarily do so only regarding the limits imposed on subsequent judgments and secondarily to the limits of antecedent judgments but typically only in terms of notional judgments. If this is true, then the net result is methodological Deism. In other words, if one still accepts the limits of *operational* antecedent judgments, either *de jure* or *de facto*, one begins the study of theology assuming no prior influencing action of God on the investigative action of the person(s) doing the investigation. Once this stance is assumed the best or the most one can arrive at in one's resulting investigation is that God may exist, and may purportedly have this or that feature. However, the *subsequent* affirmation of God's prior and on-going personal activity in the world is not a conclusion which can be consistently made.<sup>47</sup> If one attempts to make a claim that God's creating, sustaining

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<sup>46</sup> So Michalson, *Problem*, chapter 2. See also Vanhoozer, *First Theology* (Downer's Grove, 2002), p. 128.

<sup>47</sup> This is one of the chief arguments of Michalson, *Problem*. So, he concludes, even though one can attempt to utilize Kant in the name of some kind of accommodating theology, the most consistent position relative to Kant's philosophy is atheism. An alternate reading of Kant is found in the work of Allen W. Wood who argues that, in the end, for Kant belief in



and redeeming activity in any way has a prior shaping influence on the stance and direction of the person engaged in the investigation, then the original epistemological stance of the knowing subject, in setting aside judgments pertaining to antecedent influences, is negated, thus voiding the terms under which the investigation initially defines its own validity.

One could respond that something exactly like this occurs in the conversion of an individual to the Christian faith and that therefore the move is not impossible. Hans Frei, as Karl Barth and St. Paul, before him was appropriately agnostic on the mechanisms of conversion.<sup>48</sup> Yet this case helpfully illustrates the point. Certainly conversion occurs; individuals move from positions of unbelief or denial of God's existence or activity to positions of acceptance. However, the corollary to this as a way to argue for the legitimacy of the modern criticism of antecedent judgments in reading Scripture would be like asking the Christian, each time he or she enters into a reading, to reverse or eschew themselves of their conversion.

The net result of this is that the modern ideal for reading Scripture places immense responsibility on every new act of reading. Every time a pastor, scholar or layperson reads their Bible, a host of decisions must again be sorted out and evidences weighed; whether this passage indicates that Christ is God, whether God is one, two or three "persons," etc. The impracticality of asking the individual to do what the collective Christian tradition could itself do, and only awkwardly at best, over the course of many centuries each and every time they read their Bible is absurd. Yet this is essentially the burden that the Enlightenment criticism of antecedent judgments places on the responsible reader of Scripture. Is it any wonder that doctrines like the Trinity and the divinity of Christ have become, in many circles, awkward and impractical notions?

In this study I will push these observations even further in the construction of the typology. I have made suggestions along this line above but it bears repeating and emphasizing here. For Christian theology, and even more resoundingly for the Christian reading of Scripture it is effectively *impossible* for anyone, including biblical scholars, to assume an investigative posture like the one Kant recommends towards operational antecedent judgments. If God exists, and if God is the God whose actions are faithfully indicated in the Christian Scripture and Creeds, then it is impossible *not* to assume a stance of judgments or, better, orientation, toward the prior action this God has taken in time and space, preeminently in Jesus Christ. There is no third alternative position (or location or realm) in the listening attentiveness to God's Word between acknowledging God's present unique and personal speech action and denying it. To attempt some kind of neutrality is to attempt to set oneself outside of the sphere of God's presence and prior action, which is operationally a denial or removal. If one could remove oneself from the field of God's action, then this is not

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God is necessary. See among others *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca, 1970) and *Kant's Rational Theology* (Ithaca, 1978). My reading falls in between Michalson and Wood (but closer to Wood) in that I see a strong agnosticism, or some mix of agnosticism and Deism, is the most consistent outcome of Kant's work and maintaining any substantial Theism is awkward at best.

<sup>48</sup> Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia, 1975).

the God of the Christian tradition and the question of the particularity of a Christian reading of Scripture is moot. Thus, if one wishes to take with any seriousness the legitimacy of the Christian God the only real alternatives in the stance one assumes in reading the Bible are cooperation or resistance.<sup>49</sup>

For Christians, reasoning in faith implies that the exacting limits enlightenment epistemology places on both antecedent and subsequent judgments stand together or fall together. They are challenged together, or they cannot be challenged at all. Further, the primary point where they are best challenged is with respect to the appropriate and constructive role that operational antecedent judgments play in reading Scripture.

My comments toward the Enlightenment epistemological trends could be construed as predominantly negative. To clarify: I am sympathetic, with some reservations, of Charles Taylor's perspective, for example, on the relative but substantial value for modernity to the Christian faith,<sup>50</sup> and with Karl Barth who continued to affirm a relative value to historical criticism of the Bible and who described the value of philosophy as the *advocatus hominis et mundi*.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, I am convinced that the reading and interpretation of Scripture are, in their initial epistemological and hermeneutical posture, *sui generis*. We do not read Scripture, as the adage goes, "like any other book." In this book alone we may gather to hear the *viva vox Dei*. This is an utterly exceptional activity because God's action is uniquely present in, with, and under this text in a way that it is not for any and all others. Other texts, even the most "inspiring", are the written speech actions of human beings, thus the categorical limits of antecedent and subsequent judgments have greater relevance for their reading. Human authors (if they are deceased or not in direct communication with us) are not personally present to us as we read. They are incapable of giving us additional guidance in the way we should read them. They were not personally involved (beyond their lifetime) in the formation of the tradition of reading their books that stands between them and us. Beyond these simple distinctions, human speech actions are definitively limited in comparison to God's. To some degree, then, these epistemological ideals are more useful for writings other than Scripture. Finally, they continue to maintain their greatest usefulness in areas of so-called hard or pure sciences, although the degree of objectivity one can attain in these fields has also been challenged and has assumed a much more (appropriately) humble bearing as a result.

We can now proceed in the next chapter to outline and develop the triangle typology by which we will measure and map recent proposals for reading Scripture. Using it we will attend to the adequacy (and inadequacy) to which they account for the stance they necessarily assume toward the relationship of divine and human agency in their hermeneutical proposals.

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<sup>49</sup> "Our ultimate question in this existential situation of dependent freedom is not whether we will choose in accordance with reason or by faith, but whether we will choose with reasoning faithlessness or reasoning faith." H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, 1951), p. 251.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*, pp. 13-38.

<sup>51</sup> Karl Barth: "Philosophy and Theology" in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth Essays and Comments* (Allison Park, 1986), p. 94.