

Scripture as primary intertext of theology.**Considering Scriptural Hermeneutics between systematic theology and biblical studies¹**

*to Prof. Welker on his 75. birthday***1. Introduction**

Scripture and its interpretation have been disputed in theology since its beginnings. An introduction in scriptural hermeneutics seems almost obsolete due to the multitude of such overviews. The shape and scope of the canon, its theological status and its proper interpretation – any aspect of the history or interpretation of Scripture is controversial: the „crisis of the principle of Scripture“ – for Pannenberg a „fundamental crisis of modern theology“² – has for decades been a headline for very broad discussion in Protestant theology: It includes the tension between the plurality of the biblical witness and its normative claim famously phrased as *sola scriptura*, the relation between reception history and authority, the debate about a possible center of Scripture, and the understanding of clarity and sufficiency of Scripture.

Historically, since the Enlightenment and the emergence of historical criticism, the debate about Scripture has been closely intertwined with the separation of theological disciplines and their methodological approaches to the biblical texts.³ Here we see the implications of the double character of the biblical texts in its Christian readings: On the one hand, they are historical texts, sources from different times and contexts. On the other hand, as canon and Holy Scripture, these texts have authority for faith and for contemporary doctrine. Very clearly, the confessions of Reformation state that Scripture serves as „rule and guideline, according to which at the same time all teachers and readers are to be judged and discerned“⁴ (Formula Concordiae). Overall, the tension between the normative and historical represents a continuing challenge for theology. However, these methods cannot be equated with theological disciplines – on the contrary, very different methods can be found both in biblical studies and in systematic theology. Therefore, the tension between the different approaches to Scripture is part of the debates in Systematic Theology and Biblical Studies.

This outlines the background to my reflections on reformulating the status of Scripture as primary intertext of theology. The following reflections are an essence of my research on Scriptural hermeneutics over the last years – inspired by the extensive debates with Prof. Welker on the relevance of biblical texts in systematic theology and exegesis during my studies in Heidelberg. In my Habilitation and even more in an interdisciplinary group of early career scholars I worked on that notion. Not only in terms of content does it arise from an interest that you, Prof. Welker - for example, in the seminar on exegetical and dogmatic Pauline exegesis together with Prof. Lampe. The working

¹ This is an unpublished manuscript without sufficient references. For references and more detail see van Oorschot, Frederike: *Schriftlehre, Schriftauslegung und Schriftgebrauch. Eine Untersuchung zum Status der Schrift in der und für die Dogmatik (DoMo 40)*. Tübingen 2022; van Oorschot, Frederike; Focken, Friedrich-Emanuel (Ed.): *Schriftbindung evangelischer Theologie (ThLZ.F 32)*. Leipzig 2020.

² Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Die Krise des Schriftprinzips*, in: Idem (Ed.), *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Göttingen ³1979, 11–21: 13, 15.

³ See for more detail Frederike van Oorschot, *Die Krise des Schriftprinzips als Krise der theologischen Enzyklopädie*, in: *EvTh 5.76* (2016), 386–400.

⁴ Irene Dingel et al. (Ed.), *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche, Vollständige Neuedition*, Göttingen 2014, 1216.

group was also inspired in concern, form and goal by the interdisciplinary discussions, I was allowed to get to know with you. The goal of our group was an interdisciplinary exchange on core questions of theological understanding of Scripture, the results of which are both exegetically and systematically theologically viable and connectable. And here we found the notion of Scripture as primary intertext – in one of the rooms at the FIIT. So, for many reasons I am deeply grateful to have the opportunity to discuss this with you here today.

2. Scripture as intertext

Let me briefly introduce the concept of intertext: The term „intertext“ comes from the field of intertextuality and describes a text that echoes in other texts via implicit allusions or explicit quotations and is thus a reference text for later texts.

At the level of text production, it describes the basic reference text that is alluded to in a text. At the level of reception, „primary intertext² is the text or collection of texts in which a community of reception, such as the Christian church, recognizes its basic reference text. „Primary intertext“ can thus also refer to the canonized plurality of biblical writings. Because of the esteem in which „primary intertext“ is held in this context of reception, there is a continuous reference to the intertext within the reception community, but this reference may vary both in manner and intensity. Thus, the term „primary intertext“ has a functional dimension, in the sense of the canon, and a relational dimension, in the sense of the continuous reference.

2.1. Scripture as primary intertext – a pragmatic dimension

The significance of Scripture has grown historically, is guaranteed in the Confessions from Reformation time, and has been postulated as a self-claim for theology - with very different justifications - almost continuously until today. As a phenomenon, therefore, the relation of theology to Scripture in and through its interpretation can be observed until today.

This description already contains normative elements: The confrontation - whether affirmative or critical or both - with Scripture is prior to and assigned to theology. Theology cannot get away from Scripture; it has a special relationship to Scripture. However, this does not mean that theology is absorbed in the interpretation of Scripture.

Starting with this look on the interpretation of Scripture enables an interdisciplinary discussion, which preserves the disciplines' methodological claims. In both disciplines Scripture is interpreted. In exegesis, moreover, research on processes of inner-biblical interpretation of Scripture has for some time occupied a broad space.

In systematic theology, the interpretation of Scripture gained attention in the recent debate: The factual interpretation of Scripture, its use in church and theology, is related to the understanding of its status in these fields – critically or confirmatively. Conversely, the lack of factual use of Scripture shows its diminishing importance. Thus, the connection between the understanding of Scripture and the interpretation of Scripture is an important point trying to understand the status of Scripture in and for theology. In my habilitation I show in detail, how dogmatic theologians use Scripture and how this is related to their understanding of its status: While the authority of Scripture is highly disputed in dogmatics, the uses of Scripture show a high argumentative status of the biblical texts to dogmatic thinking. Based on the different functions of the uses of Scripture, the variety of possible references to Scripture show a broad variety of relations of dogmatics and Scripture. The authority of Scripture is thus conceived procedurally: Its status is recognizable and enacted in and through its interpretation. The

pragmatic handling of the biblical texts as intertext of dogmatic work shapes the understanding of Scripture as intertext – dogmatically.

2.2. Scripture as primary intertext – a dogmatic dimension

In dogmatics authority of Scripture is a soteriological-pneumatological category: It describes the status of Scripture insofar as it is a witness to Jesus Christ and leads to faith. This reasons for authority given in the context of soteriology and pneumatology is not very sustainable regarding the status of Scripture in and for dogmatics: Why and how Scripture has significance for theological reasoning is not revealed by its pneumatological effect. At the same time, the performative imposition of Scripture observed in the uses of Scripture necessitate further reflection on the status of Scripture in and for theology itself, related to a terminological specification.

The interplay of dogmatic thinking about Scripture and interpreting Scripture is processual and dynamic - with its specific imbalance between the pre-given status of biblical texts as Scripture and individual decisions how to relate to it. In dogmatic debates, one can observe an explicit recognition of authority. The status of Scripture in and for dogmatics is therefore not a fixation in the sense of a norm or a principle, but a referential description of relations in the context of a continuous discourse.

To describe this process, I propose the concept of primary intertext, which I developed in the working group mentioned at the beginning – together with colleagues from the exegetical subjects, dogmatics and ethics: „The concept of 'intertext' [...] describes a text that alludes to other texts via implicit allusions or explicit quotations and is thus a reference text for later texts. [...] 'Primary intertext' refers to the text or collection of texts in which a community of reception, such as the Christian church, recognizes its basic reference text. 'Primary intertext' can thus also denote the canonized plurality of biblical writings. Because of the esteem in which 'primary intertext' is held in this context of reception, there is a continuous reference to the intertext within the community of reception, but this reference may vary both in manner and intensity. Thus, the term 'primary intertext' has a functional dimension in the sense of a basic reference text, such as the canon, and a relational dimension in the sense of continuous reference.“⁵

„inter“ expresses that texts arise from a relationship between several texts. This does not yet specify the direction of this relationship and whether it arises more from the author's intention or cultural anchoring or from the reader's inner library. Rather, what is described is that a text can only come into being through its relationship to other texts. With Roland Barthes, the text is taken seriously in the literal sense (from Latin *textus*/tissue) and texts are described as tissues into which other texts are always already interwoven and which, in turn, are integrated into a larger cultural system of references.

The description of Scripture as the primary intertext of dogmatics locates the status of Scripture in the constitutive context of understanding and interpreting Scripture. The status ascribed to the texts is constitutively linked to the discursive engagement with the texts and thus procedurally determined: „Thus the normativity of Scripture is no longer constructed in terms of a normative logic, but rather dynamized and expanded. It is not by means of mere correspondence between a scriptural statement and a theological thesis or logical inference that the 'norma normans' is accounted for, but by pursuing the intertextual references between scripture, traditions, and the presently responsible.“⁶

⁵ van Oorschot/Focken 2020, 47f (my translation).

⁶ van Oorschot/Focken 2020, 215 (my translation).

Insofar as Scripture is determined as the primary intertext of dogmatics, Scripture as a „boundary“ of theological reasoning is preserved and modified at the same time. On the one hand, Scripture does not mark a hard „border“: it cannot be conclusively determined, but can only be grasped in the context of plural reconstructions and interpretations. On the other hand, it is not the only limit of dogmatic reflection: the plural determinations of the criteria of dogmatic judgment, such as their orientation to the present, their actualizing moment, or their orientation to the other sciences, must also be included. The limits of the discursive space are therefore not indisputable either, but are the subject and source of the dispute about their interpretation.

2.3. Scripture as primary intertext – an interdisciplinary dimension

The relation between text and intertexts is widespread in biblical studies. Looking at the uses of Scripture in Systematic Theology shows that such intertextual references to biblical texts form and determine the status of Scripture for dogmatic thinking. At the same time, differences in dogmatic and exegetical references to biblical texts become visible: Within the framework of intertextuality these can be described as complementary perspectives of interpretation.

Basically, a distinction between historical and systematizing perspectives of interpretation seems helpful. Speaking of “systematizing” perspectives – in contrast, for example, to a systematic or dogmatic perspective of interpretation – highlights the ongoing process of interpretation from a certain systematic perspective. “Systematizing” does not aim to read the biblical texts into a certain system or at interpreting them in or for a specific dogma, but expressing the interest in a coherent approach relating Scripture to actual questions.

Systematizing perspectives do not describe boundaries between the theological disciplines but “directions” of theological research that are pursued in all theological disciplines. This is easily visible looking at dogmatic and exegetical work: historical questions are also dealt with in dogmatics - editorial history, history of motifs, history of tradition and history of reception have found their way into dogmatic research. Conversely, exegetes do not only work with historical methods, but on the one hand also ask questions with a systematizing intention and on the other hand are themselves shaped by subjective presuppositions of thought.

Therefore, theological interpretation of Scripture includes different perspectives: In systematic theology, an unhistorical, direct access to the biblical texts is impossible, if it does not want to miss its text. Thus, reflection on the biblical texts as historical sources becomes a genuine part of dogmatic interpretation of Scripture - and not an interpretive perspective of the exegetical disciplines alone. Theological interpretation of Scripture relates different perspectives. It is not a combination but a "combinatorial" interweaving of theological horizons - taking up a term from Dalferth's model of combinatorial theology:⁷ According to Dalferth, comprehensibility between different rationalities is achieved by combining the systems. The method therefore consists in the art of combining different systems of reflection, each with its own rationalities, in order to develop an “orientational framework of common interpretive activities and design procedures.”⁸ For Dalferth, theology is therefore a complex interpretive practice that relates the interpretation of Christian faith, the Christian life of faith, and the respective

⁷ Dalferth, Ingolf U.: *Kombinatorische Theologie. Probleme theologischer Rationalität* (QD 130). Freiburg 1991., 14f. 29 [my translation].

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

overall cultural structure to one another.⁹ Taking up Dalferth's considerations for interpretation of Scripture, I see three cornerstones of a "combinatorial interpretation of Scripture":

First, the theological character of interpretation does not lie in one of the disciplines or perspective, but in the combination of them. Thus, it is not the one - exegetically, dogmatically and ethically - hardly determinable matter of Scripture that then has a unifying effect, but in the interpretation of Scripture itself the various questions are combined.

Secondly, such a theological interpretation of Scripture cannot work monoreferentially, but always exists in plural - without slipping into arbitrariness. Speaking with Welker, there is a need for a pluralism of perspectives that goes beyond arbitrary plurality.¹⁰ The combination of different perspectives must not itself lead to simplifications and simple analogies: The goal of interpretation must be the elaboration of differentiated reflections which, instead of monolithic analogies, relate systemic, canonical, historical, or contemporary differences to one another.¹¹ The guiding principle is thus the search for structures of difference and descriptions of problems that can be observed in the very divergent contexts of scriptural interpretation. Possibly emerging hermeneutical analogies of difference can then be made fruitful for the respective discussions.

In the process, thirdly, the modes of interpretation not only complement, but also limit each other. The outlined attribution to the historical interpretation of Scripture of preserving the character of the biblical texts can then be supplemented by a complementary attribution of systematizing modes of interpretation: While the historical perspective protects against arbitrary actualizing interpretation, the systematizing perspective guards against overriding the interpretive claim and the systematizing interests of the biblical texts, which are also actualizing in their reference contexts – both within and between the theological disciplines.

3. Disputing Scripture in theology

Disputing Scripture in theology is – in this understanding – not a loss but a constitutive sign of living theological discourse. The dispute itself is a form of recognition of Scripture in its canonical significance in the ecclesial community of interpretation on the one hand, and of taking the biblical texts seriously in their plurality, historicity and mediality on the other. The cultivation of a methodologically grounded dogmatic and interdisciplinary culture of dispute in „epistemic humility“ with regard to one's own interpretations and “interpretative charity“ regarding others becomes a central task of dogmatic reference to Scripture within and between the theological disciplines.

In this understanding, theology is bonding to Scripture – and binding to it. In the working group we coined the term „Schriftbindung“ to describe this relation: “Bonding to Scripture” is initially a

⁹ Ibid., 53.

¹⁰ Welker, Michael: Das vierfache Gewicht der Schrift. Die missverständliche Rede vom ‚Schriftprinzip‘ und die Programmformel ‚Biblische Theologie‘. In: Hiller, Doris; Kress, Christine (Ed.): Dass Gott eine große Barmherzigkeit habe. Konkrete Theologie in der Verschränkung von Glaube und Leben. FS G. Schneider-Flume. Leipzig 2001, 9-27: 15; Idem: Sola Scriptura. Die Autorität der Bibel in pluralistischen Umgebungen, in: Hamm, Berndt; Welker, Michael (Ed.): Die Reformation. Potentiale der Freiheit. Tübingen 2008, 91-120; Idem; Schweitzer, Friedrich (Ed.): Reconsidering the Boundaries between theological disciplines. Zur Neubestimmung der Grenzen zwischen den theologischen Disziplinen (Theologie, Forschung und Wissenschaft 8), Münster 2005.

¹¹ Welker: Gewicht, 23-26.

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descriptive category and open to various basic theological positions. It captures the relationship of theology to Scripture as a binding in which theology is permanently related to Scripture. At the same time, it leaves open who binds: God, Scripture itself, or theology itself. Regardless of who is seen as the agent, the theory of scriptural binding assumes a passive moment of being bound and an active moment of shaping that binding – theology is not in bondage, to use another metaphor. A theory of scriptural binding must not receive the evangelical tradition in such a way that scripture becomes a “paper pope,” but employ the formative potentials of evangelical scriptural doctrine.

Thus, secondly, “Bonding to Scripture” describes a relational structure. At least three relations come into view: the Scripture, the individual recipients, and the respective communities of recipients. Thus, scriptural binding describes relations that have to be differentiated and explicated. The differentiations and explications take place with regard to central means of interpretation (Interpretament), and it quickly becomes clear that determinations can only be obtained from the interaction of the relations with each other and in connection with the respective means of interpretation (Interpretament). Determinations that want to describe one relation independently of the others fall short. Thus, statements about Scripture can only be characterized as statements about Scripture in relation to the recipients and the interpretations.

Third, Theology’s Bonds to Scripture is not static, but can only be grasped in processes of active and passive binding. Since relations are also not static but open to change, our description of Scripture binding is process-oriented. Therefore, the theses describe Scripture in relation to its production and reception.

In order to describe the relational and procedural character of theological interpretation of Scripture, describing Scripture as the primary intertext of theology is an attempt to revive the discourse on the fundamental theological status of Scripture in and between the disciplines.