

Aesthetic Theology—Blessing or Curse? An Assessment of Narrative Theology

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Quite unawares of the origins of some of these thoughts, many pastors and church members may find themselves increasingly confronted with ideas like “story preaching” or “reading the Bible as literature.”¹ Harmless as it may seem at first—after all, have “story preaching” and “reading the Bible as literature” not been practiced with good success and enjoyment for a long, long time?²—these phrases in fact conceal trends of which the unsuspecting pastor, churchgoer, or Bible student may not be aware.³ In the end, we will still be able to enjoy a good sermon illustration or appreciate the literary quality of, say, John’s Gospel. But we will understand the unfortunate dichotomy between history and literature modern biblical studies have inherited as well as come to terms with the recent pendulum swing to the literary side of the biblical text. We will be able to discern and assess the influence of one of the most seminal narrative-theological thinkers, Hans W. Frei. And last but not least, we will be in a position to reconsider and fine-tune our own way of studying Scripture, making sure that our hermeneutical method properly balances historical, literary, and theological concerns.

I. “Aesthetic Theology” and the “New Yale Theology”

Kevin Vanhoozer has ably traced the “aesthetic turn” in modern theology and biblical studies.⁴ He argues that “the eighteenth century was enamored with reason, the nineteenth century discovered history, and the twentieth century is preoccupied with language.”⁵ The most recent development in modern theology Vanhoozer terms “aesthetic theology.” This kind of thought can be defined as “a theology which focuses on the Bible’s literary form or shape to the [partial or complete] exclusion of the author and historical context.”⁶

However, while the psalmist considered God’s word to be “a lamp to my feet” (Ps. 119:105), modern scholarship views all language as a labyrinth that leads nowhere. The aesthetic object (i.e. the text) is autonomous, cut off from its author, and its author’s authority. Aesthetic language is neither descriptive nor informative—it simply *is* (though it has effects).⁷ Once isolated from its historical grounding and its authoritative position, a text yields a limitless number of meaning possibilities. Radical pluralism and relativity in interpretation are the results,⁸ and authoritative biblical preaching degenerates into mere storytelling.

Once placed in this orbit, the “New Yale theology” is more readily understood.⁹ This brand of theology is not the most recent attempt at an adaptation of literary criticism to biblical studies. Because of its enormous influence on more recent efforts, however, it will be helpful to return to the roots of the contemporary malaise in biblical hermeneutics and to subject the “New Yale theology,” and in particular the contribution of Hans W. Frei, to close scrutiny.¹⁰ To be sure, time has not stood still since his seminal work. Only ten years after his death, Frei probably would be somewhat disoriented if he could witness the explosion of the postmodern perspective in the academic world, including biblical studies. But Frei’s work remains important, for it provides a bridge on which those disenchanted with the modern historical-critical method can safely cross over to postmodern territory.¹¹ Also, Frei’s views continue to be represented through those he influenced, such as Stanley Hauerwas, George Hunsinger, or William Placher.¹²

What is more, a recent volume devoted exclusively to the possibility of a rapprochement between postliberals and evangelicals keenly accentuates the relevance of Frei and his followers for the contemporary scene.¹³ Indeed, as the dustjacket of this work claims, the postliberal movement “may turn out to be the most significant theological realignment in more than a century.” In analyzing the school of thought of which Frei was one of the “founding fathers,” we will therefore gain understanding of developments that have taken their point of departure from Frei’s proposed “narrative theology” that has since come to full bloom and continues to exercise enormous influence.¹⁴

How shall we describe the “New Yale theology”? In short, it represents a “cooperative attempt to forge a biblical alternative to mainstream theological liberalism that eschews both confessionalism and fundamentalism.”¹⁵ In the making of theology, this postliberal alternative maintains, attention must be redirected to the biblical text itself. The historical foundation and justification is provided by Hans Frei, professor of Religious Studies at Yale University until his death in 1988. In his study of eighteenth and nineteenth-century hermeneutics, he concludes that a return to the framework of biblical narrative is imperative in order to reverse its “eclipse.”¹⁶ Why biblical narrative? Because we must allow the narrative form of Scripture to determine the shape of our theology rather than imposing foreign categories onto the text.

True to the “spirit of the age” sketched by Vanhoozer, Frei’s concern is primarily with the aesthetic component of the biblical text. He considers biblical narrative to be “history-like,” hoping to rescue from the clutches of historical criticism a genre of literature that can be meaningfully interpreted from a literary point of view.¹⁷ Karl Barth’s neo-orthodox understanding of theology as sustained commentary on the biblical stories provides the primary paradigm for the Yale school. However, while for Barth the Bible was the permanent possibility of God’s revelation, all that Scripture does for some of Frei’s colleagues is narrate a story that has an effect on the reader.¹⁸ Frei’s argument for narrative theology may in fact represent a *tour de force* designed to carve out some room in today’s theological world for what both Barth and Frei really desire: theology’s return to the Bible.¹⁹ However, this is not the way Frei has usually been understood. While his influence may have led some back to the Bible, Frei’s Bible does no longer seem to be the kind of Bible many of us have been accustomed to read.

II. Characteristics of Narrative Theology

A. History of the Movement

The movement, which is primarily a North American phenomenon, had its precursor in H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941).²⁰ Niebuhr sought to translate the experience of the community into relevant theological expressions (“experiential-expressivist” approach). Hans Frei, on the other hand, in his *magnum opus* *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974), influenced by Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1957), was more interested in conceptual redescription than in theological translation (“cultural-linguistic” approach).²¹ Another writer, Paul Ricoeur, pursues narrative theology in yet a different way.²²

In essence, a fundamental dissatisfaction with historical-critical research combined with a renewed appreciation of the Bible as literature. The call these writers issued was a call to return to a pre-critical reading of the biblical narratives as “stories.” The *form* of narrative, so narrative

theologians contended, not just the *content*, is significant for the narrative's meaning. Therefore narrative form, not just content, ought to play a part in the formulation of theology.²³ Further still, the story format is to be the *determinative* form for theology—hence the term “narrative theology.”

Since the 1970s, various proposals for constructing a narrative biblical theology have been set forth.²⁴ The broader categories of narrative theology have also filtered down to the exegetical discipline of “narrative criticism” which seeks to apply the general principles of narrative theology to the microcosm of particular biblical texts.²⁵ A significant consequence of narrative theology has further been the reconception of the nature of biblical authority.²⁶

B. Characteristics of Narrative Theology

Narrative theology is not a unified movement.²⁷ While some argue that a concern with biblical narrative in no way precludes an acceptance of the historical frame of reference, others focus almost exclusively on the text, considering any correspondence between text and history to be irrelevant for interpretation.²⁸ Therefore it is almost impossible to give a general survey of the characteristics of narrative theology. All that can be said is that generally narrative theology is primarily concerned with the literary dimension of the (biblical) text, and specifically with scriptural narrative. Ford defines narrative theology as “various approaches to theology in which stories play a leading role.”²⁹

Millard Erickson categorizes narrative theologies into three types, those focusing on the communicative, the hermeneutical, and the heuristic or epistemological (related to knowing) roles of narrative.³⁰ First, narratives have a *communicative* function. As such, stories translate the biblical message into communicative devices such as modern-day sermon illustrations.³¹ Second, narrative can be seen as providing the key to an understanding of the biblical text (*hermeneutical* function). The *form* of the story, not just the general idea it conveys, is significant. Normativity lies in the story *as story*. Third, the most radical approach focuses on a story's *heuristic* or *epistemological* function. This view believes story to be the actual means of discovering the biblical message. The purpose of a story is to show us life as it really is, and ourselves as we really are. For example, the narratives of the Exodus and the Cross are the means by which the Jewish and Christian communities respectively have understood themselves. If we resort to more overt theological formulations, we distort the story in our attempt to reexpress it in different categories. Rather, theology's task today is to transform the biblical message into modern narrative categories so that the individual begins to reinterpret his or her personal tradition in light of the Christian community's narratives.³² The wide range of approaches described conveys the substantial diversity found within modern narrative theology.³³

C. The Contribution of Hans W. Frei

Hans Frei provides the rationale for narrative theology's concern by his study in eighteenth and nineteenth-century hermeneutics. Frei detects in this period the opening up of “a reflective distance between the stories and the ‘reality’ they depict.”³⁴ While this distance increased steadily, a number of endeavors have attempted to bridge the gap. Most importantly, it was inquired to what extent the biblical stories were factually true, that is, whether or not they correspond to actual historical events. Frei decries this “breakdown of literal-realistic interpretation of the biblical

stories.”³⁵ Literal reading did no longer mean a “realistic” reading of biblical narratives as “history-like” stories, but rather grammatical-historical exegesis as developed by historical criticism. Thus a reading of the Bible as literature gave way to a one-sided focus on the historical referents outside of the text itself. Notably, such methodology lacked sufficient concern for intercanonical unity.³⁶ The effort was made to discover the “single meaning” of a text expressed in propositional statements.³⁷

Frei concludes,

[T]he confusion of history-likeness (literal meaning) and history (ostensive reference), and the hermeneutical reduction of the former to an aspect of the latter, meant that one lacked the distinctive category and the appropriate interpretive procedure for understanding what one had actually recognized: the high significance of the literal, narrative shape of the stories for their meaning. And so, one might add, it has by and large remained ever since.³⁸

As Frei traces the hermeneutical developments in the eighteenth century, he notes that “first in England and then in Germany, the narrative became distinguished from a separable subject matter . . . which was now taken to be its true meaning.”³⁹ A skepticism toward miracles, the category of “myth,” and a focus on subjective understanding over against the biblical narrative texts themselves were consequential developments moving the hermeneutical enterprise further and further away from a proper appreciation of the “history-like” character of narrative which must be appreciated by realistic reading. The heirs of the “Kantian” revolution” struggled to fill the gap between the interpreting subject and the ancient text to gain a normative interpretation. Yet, tragically, maintains Frei, these interpreters forsook the realistic narrative reading of biblical stories, the only enterprise allowing the reader properly to understand the stories of the Bible.

Is Frei’s depiction of eighteenth and nineteenth-century hermeneutics correct, or is it a revisionist historiography designed to set up his argument for the kind of “paradigm shift” he advocates? While his documentation of the “eclipse of biblical narrative” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries generally seems accurate, one may question whether Frei’s analysis encompasses the totality of the evangelical theological enterprise of that time period. More important still, even if his analysis is essentially on target, is his proposal the answer to the dilemma that has befallen modern Protestant hermeneutics? Here many have expressed reservations. We will first survey some of the significant evaluations of narrative theology offered in recent years. Unless indicated otherwise, the present author agrees with the objections raised in these contributions. In the final section, we will attempt to move beyond these criticisms and seek to make some suggestions of how a concern for biblical narrative can be properly integrated into a balanced system of evangelical hermeneutics.

*III. Assessments of Narrative Theology*⁴⁰

A. Kevin Vanhoozer

Vanhoozer directs attention to the “Romanticist dualism” that runs throughout modern literary criticism, that is, the distinction between “descriptive” and “poetic” texts.⁴¹ These two kinds of texts have different criteria of truthfulness. “What makes a descriptive text true is its correspondence to an external reference; but a work of literature has another criterion for truth:

inner verbal consistency.”⁴² Vanhoozer puts Frei’s narrative theology squarely in this context. He points out that Frei’s desire is to free the interpretation of biblical narratives from the association with external historical referents. But such a reading of the Bible “as literature” is reductionistic. It is indifferent to the story’s historical referents by driving a wedge between its respective functions, most notably between literature and history. Such an approach also robs Scripture of the kind of author-ity Christians have accorded to the Bible. In constructing an alternative, Vanhoozer seeks to adapt Austin’s and Searle’s “speech act” theory which sees communication as rule-governed behavior involving both intention and convention.⁴³ While giving proper due to language, this theory also asserts authorial intentionality and the moral authority of diverse forms of communication.⁴⁴ Vanhoozer’s constructive alternative suggestions should be compared with the “field approach” of Grant R. Osborne and the “action model” of Lundin, Thiselton, and Walhout.⁴⁵

B. Carl F. H. Henry

Henry summarizes his difficulties with narrative theology as follows.⁴⁶ First, he notes that not all biblical material is in the narrative genre. Second, he asks the question on what grounds narrative theology considers the biblical narratives to be unified. Third, Henry points out that the Bible itself attaches first-order importance to the historicity of certain events to which it testifies (such as Christ’s resurrection). Narrative theology’s all too loose connection between text and historical actuality disparages the latter in favor of the former, under the misimpression that one thereby best promotes the final authority of the written text. Thus a preacher can narrate the story of Christ’s resurrection without truly embracing its historicity. Fourth, narrative hermeneutics removes from the interpretive process any text-transcendent referent and clouds the narrative’s relationship to a divine reality not exhausted by literary presence. Fifth, an approach to Scripture merely as narrative does not do full justice to the orthodox evangelical view of the Bible as an authoritative, divinely inspired book.

Henry concludes that the narrative approach is not fully befitting the historic Christian faith, nor is it fully serviceable to the need for an intellectually compelling argument with modernity. He calls narrative theology “an enchantment with the affective, a flight from history to the perspectival that enjoins no universal truth-claims, a reflection of the revolt against reason, a reliance on ‘symbolic truth’ and imagination, an interest in earthly theater more than in revealed theology.”⁴⁷ Henry notes that, “The unresolved dilemma facing narrative theology is how the method itself, given its epistemological hiatus, can escape yielding the divergent and contradictory theological claims that its practitioners advance.”⁴⁸

C. Grant R. Osborne

Grant Osborne cautions against the following inherent weaknesses of narrative criticism:⁴⁹ (1) a dehistoricizing tendency; (2) setting aside the author;⁵⁰ (3) a denial of intended or referential meaning; (4) reductionistic and disjunctive thinking (literary vs. historical); (5) the imposition of modern literary categories upon ancient genres; (6) a preoccupation with obscure theories; (7) ignoring the understanding of the early church; and (8) a rejection of the sources behind the books. Osborne advocates a hermeneutical model in which “all aspects (historical-critical, grammatical-historical, literary) function together and inform one another in the hermeneutical process of

discovering the meaning of a narrative text.”⁵¹ As a constructive alternative, Osborne proposes a sevenfold methodology for studying narrative texts: (1) structural, (2) stylistic, (3) redactional, (4) exegetical, and (5) theological analysis, (6) contextualization (that is, application to the contemporary situation), and (7) utilizing a narrative form for the sermon.⁵²

D. Other Responses

Schäfer observes that Frei for the most part contents himself with a mere descriptive treatment of eighteenth and nineteenth-century hermeneutics while failing to clarify the criteria for his evaluation. He registers his skepticism that it is legitimate to separate a text from its author, since there is “unity of narrator and narrated.”⁵³ Nineham notes that while it is true that certain subject matters can be treated justly only in narrative form, Frei fails to draw out precisely why he thinks the Bible was misunderstood as a result of a failure to read it within its narrative context.⁵⁴ Borsch states that Frei fails to provide concise definitions of such important terms as “narrative” or “history,” and to clarify the relationship between narrative form and meaning.⁵⁵ Wallace charges the “Yale school” with a “relativist alethiology” (conception of truth) that renders intratextual claims about reality little more than “a private wish, a tribal outlook.”⁵⁶ Bruce remains neutral when he concedes that Frei “has given us a fresh perspective on the history of hermeneutics,” compelling us to think seriously about matters of fundamental theological importance.⁵⁷ Finally, Carson’s criticism of R. Alan Culpepper to “have sacrificed the gospel’s claims to certain historical specificity, and set sail on a shoreless sea of existential subjectivity” applies to much of narrative theological theory and practice in general.⁵⁸

IV. An Evaluation of Narrative Theology

What can be added to the perceptive critiques summarized above? The following comments seek to provide a constructive perspective for the discerning, qualified use of narrative theology and criticism by the evangelical interpreter and theologian.⁵⁹

A. Strengths of Narrative Theology

To begin with, one can certainly welcome Frei’s contention that the study of biblical narrative (and, in fact, of Scripture as a whole) must once again become the basis for theology rather than the interpreter’s subjective experience or external theological or philosophical systems.⁶⁰ Frei shares this rejection of categories foreign to the text with biblical theology and canon criticism, to name but two movements with similar concerns. His call for theology to return to the biblical text can only be welcomed.⁶¹

Frei must also be commended for being sensitive to the difficulty of “translating” a biblical text into the contemporary world.⁶² In theory, his proposal to leave the biblical text in its narrative framework and for the contemporary interpreter to enter the narrative world of the text seem appropriate.⁶³ However, when Frei calls for a return to a “pre-critical” reading of the biblical text, one wonders if he has given sufficient consideration to the findings of modern hermeneutics since Schleiermacher. We can appreciate Frei’s desire to read and interpret the text in its final form rather than viewing it as a conglomerate that must be sorted out according to hypothetical source-critical proposals such as JEDP. But Frei arguably underestimates the role of an interpreter’s pre-

understanding which has significant ramifications for the hermeneutical process. Rather than simply “entering the narrative world of the text,” understanding occurs in interaction with the ancient text, moving the interpreter in a hermeneutical circle (or spiral).⁶⁴

Narrative theology has stimulated much fruitful discussion and dialogue. Helpful developments include a renewed attention to story preaching,⁶⁵ an appreciation of the life-transforming impact of stories, and a better understanding of the early church’s use of narrative material.⁶⁶

B. Weaknesses of Narrative Theology

In the ultimate analysis, however, narrative theology’s flight into aestheticism renders its methodology seriously inadequate in dealing with the Christian Scriptures. By focusing unilaterally on the literary factor, it leaves the historical dimension of the text wide open.⁶⁷ Merely to defend postliberal theology against the charge of antirealism by arguing that it is in fact “metaphysically neutral concerning this question” won’t do, since Scripture itself can hardly be said to be “metaphysically neutral.”⁶⁸ What is more, when Frei states that “the New Testament story deals . . . with the story of Jesus of Nazareth, whether it is fictional or real,” it becomes clear that Frei’s narrative approach is incompatible with an evangelical reading of Scripture.⁶⁹

Another criticism must be registered regarding an inherent inconsistency of narrative theology as a system. While claiming to take seriously biblical narrative, Frei and his followers are in fact unable to establish any transcendent truth claims for Christianity on the solitary basis of a printed text.⁷⁰ If Scripture is nothing but the church’s “language games” (Wittgenstein’s term), why even accord Scripture the status Frei and his colleagues are willing to give it?⁷¹ On what grounds can we justify a preference for *biblical* narrative over, say, the Book of Mormon or Aesop’s Fables?⁷² Narrative theology’s reductionism (that is, its reduction of Scripture to “history-like” literature) inevitably results in relativity owing to the lack of text-transcending referents to historical and trans-historical reality.⁷³

While it is commendable that narrative theology, much like Brevard Childs’s canon criticism, seeks to redirect modern scholarship to the biblical text itself, its rationale for doing so must not be overlooked. Postliberal aestheticism is an ultimately futile exercise in sophistication. It is not significantly more conservative than its liberal counterpart (as it professes to be), for it loses what it claims to preserve, that is, textual author-ity. It is not even as consistent or radical a movement as deconstructionism or reader-response theory. For the latter schools of thought at least follow the notion of reader-generated meaning to a logically consistent extreme. Narrative theology, on the other hand, is left with a world populated by nothing but self-contained, self-referring, autonomous text.

In the end, Frei’s brand of narrative theology is a case of literary-religious biblicism built on a highly dubious rationale. While the historical-critical method has its limitations, and reading the Bible as literature, rightly understood, is certainly a commendable enterprise, narrative theology as developed by the Yale theologians is both reactionary and one-sided: in its effort to provide an alternative to traditional liberal theology, and in its dissatisfaction with historical-critical scholarship, it throws out the baby with the bathwater, leaving history orphaned and thus amputating Scripture, which in their hands becomes nothing but text, a Christian classic with perhaps sentimental value but certainly not universal compelling authority.⁷⁴

Moreover, narrative theology places undue weight on methodology itself. Any approach to theology that presents itself as the solution for all its problems promises more than it is able to deliver. Because of narrative theology's excessive focus on methodology, its findings tend to be rather bland in the ultimate analysis, lacking explanatory power in interpreting specific biblical texts. Evangelicals who avoid such infatuation with methodology, on the other hand, can still employ the findings of narrative criticism and theology discerningly and with profit. In this context, it is important to realize that the hermeneutical enterprise is larger than devising a theory of the meaning of texts. Scripture, tradition, reason, experience, the interpretive community, and other factors, properly weighted, all combine in the hermeneutical task and must be fit into a holistic hermeneutical framework.⁷⁵ In such a balanced structure, there is room also for the insights of narrative theology.

A closing illustration may help to expose the inadequacy of narrative theology at a practical level. Many of us have known faithful Sunday School attenders who seemed to live in a "Bible world" populated by Abrahams and Davids and who were completely absorbed in the stories of Scripture. However, while a thorough knowledge of Scripture is essential, and an appreciation of its stories vital, these people appeared, at least to some extent, to live in an imaginary world of the past rather than the real world of the present. They failed properly to "translate" these biblical narratives into the world in which they live. Thus, from a practical perspective, I question Frei's call to "enter the world of the biblical narrative" as the final answer. With the cautions registered above kept in mind, this can be an important exercise along the way, but in the end the world of the biblical narrative must be translated into terms relevant to our own contemporary existence.

For evangelicals, the question remains how biblical narratives ought to be interpreted and how theology should be derived from narrative material. As Kevin Vanhoozer points out, theology is "ordinary literature" analysis of an extraordinary book.⁷⁶ Any fully adequate Christian theology needs to be based on a proper understanding of Scripture's uniqueness as inspired revelation from God. We are not locked into a "narrative theology" of the kind Frei proposes. For theology can attempt to describe what it cannot comprehend exhaustively in conceptual terms. While theology must never be a substitute for Scripture, it can be a legitimate attempt to grasp God's revelation.

V. Conclusion

How then should modern interpreters and theologians go about constructing theologies for the twenty-first century? First, a literary paradigm by itself is inadequate. It can enhance the usefulness of other approaches, it must, however, be supplemented by other methodologies. Rolf Rendtorff's call for balance and continuity in the development of methodologies is surely appropriate.⁷⁷ A new generation of scholars must learn to appreciate historical-critical tools while seeking to balance historical-critical with literary approaches.⁷⁸

Second, while text and reader both have an important role to play, authorial intention must be affirmed as ultimately decisive for a text's meaning. As long as literary approaches are used to promote notions of textual autonomy or reader-response readings, narrative theology inappropriately seeks to usurp center stage rather than fulfilling the supportive role due it.

Third, biblical theology, that is, a study of the theology of Scripture itself, ought to take ultimate precedence over both historical-critical and literary paradigms. Theological relationships established by the biblical writers under divine inspiration must be recovered sensitively and used in constructing a systematized biblical theology.⁷⁹ We should ask historical questions (what do I

learn from this passage about what really happened?), and we should ask literary questions (how is a given story developed?). But foremost of all, we must ask theological questions: what do I learn about *God* and his dealings with human beings in this passage? In studying Scripture, historical-critical and literary approaches have their usefulness. Yet theologians must first and foremost remain *theologians*.⁸⁰

¹Cf. Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997). Representatives of the "New Homiletic" include David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority: Essays on Inductive Preaching*, 3d ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) and *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985); Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997); Henry H. Mitchell, *The Recovery of Preaching* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977) and *Celebration and Experience in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990); and Charles Rice, *Interpretation and Imagination: The Preacher and Contemporary Literature* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970). What all these proponents of the "New Homiletic" share in common is an emphasis on narrative and experience and a rejection of a propositional or expository approach. See William J. Curtis, "Preaching to Communal Consciousness: The Influence of the Phenomenology of Language on David Buttrick's *Homiletic*" (Wake Forest, N.C.: seminar paper, 1998).

²Cf. David Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1995).

³For a list of literature up to 1987, see Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 464, 475–76. For the recent state of dialogue, see *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996).

⁴Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "A Lamp in the Labyrinth: The Hermeneutics of 'Aesthetic' Theology," *TrinJ* 8 NS (1987): 25–56.

⁵*Ibid.*, 26, n. 3.

⁶*Ibid.*, 25.

⁷*Ibid.*, 27.

⁸Cf. also Edgar V. McKnight, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible – The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988); Tremper Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); and Roger Lundin, Anthony C. Thiselton, and Clarence Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985).

⁹Cf. Mark I. Wallace, "The New Yale Theology," *Christian Scholar's Review* 17 (1987): 154–70. Wallace lists Hans Frei, Paul Holmer, George Lindbeck, and David Kelsey as the four Yale theologians belonging to this circle.

¹⁰Cf. e.g. the recent essay by Mark Allan Powell, "Narrative Criticism," in *Hearing the New Testament*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 239–55, who takes Hans Frei's work as his point of departure (p. 239).

¹¹For an incisive treatment of literary criticism in the context of postmodernism, see esp. the section on "Handling Texts" in D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 82–86.

¹²Cf. Phillips and Okholm, *Nature of Confession*, 11.

¹³See *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm.

¹⁴Frei's work has also greatly assisted in the rise of the "New Homiletic," a movement that has been described as having brought about the "Copernican Revolution" in North American preaching. Cf. Lowry, *Sermon*, 12; see also Richard L. Eslinger, *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 65; and David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/ John Knox, 1994).

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁶Cf. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), 130. Note also *id.*, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Basis of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); and the posthumously published *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William Placher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William Placher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). For an excellent bibliography of Frei's works, see the Festschrift devoted to him by Garrett Green, ed., *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 199–201.

¹⁷This approach is similar to Lindbeck's "intratextual theology," and Holmer's view of Christianity as the church's "language games." Cf. Wallace, "New Yale Theology," 158–59.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 169–70. This matches the "New Homiletic's" emphasis on the evocative nature of the sermon (cf. Lowry, *Sermon*, 32). The goal of preaching, likewise, is considered to be aesthetic effect (entertainment) rather than spiritual conviction and conversion.

¹⁹This has been suggested by Kenneth S. Kantzer in class discussion (December 4, 1991).

²⁰Cf. the inclusion of this essay in the collection edited by Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 21–44; and Hans W. Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), pp. 00–00. Other precursors include Baillie and, indirectly, even G. E. Wright, and even C. S. Lewis (as has been suggested to me by Kenneth S. Kantzer).

²¹Cf. *ibid.*, 7.

²²Cf. *ibid.*, 6–7. For Ricoeur's theory as applied to biblical interpretation, cf. his *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis M. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). Cf. also the interaction with Ricoeur's proposals (especially in relation to Frei's) by Gary Comstock, "Truth and Meaning: Ricoeur Versus Frei on Biblical Narrative," *JR* 66 (1986): 117–40; and William Placher, "Paul Ricoeur and Postliberal Theology: A Conflict of Interpretations?" *Modern Theology* 4 (1987): 35–52. Cf. also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1990).

²³Likewise, in the "New Homiletic" the focus is on the (narrative) form of the sermon rather than on an exposition of the content and intention of the narrative _ hence the term "narrative or story preaching."

²⁴For a sample of the lively discussions, see Hauerwas and Jones, *Why Narrative?*; and Garrett Green, *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*.

²⁵Narrative criticism analyzes a piece of literature with regard to characterization, plot, narrative tension, and other literary characteristics. The Pentateuch and historical books in the Old Testament, and the Gospels and Acts in the New Testament, have been the focus of narrative criticism as applied to the Bible. For general treatments of narrative criticism, cf. Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); id., “Narrative Criticism,” 239–55; R. J. Banks, “Narrative Exegesis,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 570–71; and Grant R. Osborne, “Narrative,” in *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 153–73. For application to the Gospels and Acts, cf. Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); David Rhoads and Donald Mitchie, *Mark as Story. An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke–Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia/ Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986, 1990); R. Alan Culpepper, *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel. A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); and Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel*, SNTSMS 73 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). For a more extensive bibliography, see Powell, “Narrative Criticism,” 255.

²⁶Cf. most recently Jonathan R. Wilson, “Toward a New Evangelical Paradigm of Biblical Authority,” in *Nature of Confession*, 151–61. See also Charles M. Wood, “Hermeneutics and the Authority of Scripture,” 3–20; and Maurice Wiles, “Scriptural Authority and Theological Construction: The Limitations of Narrative Interpretation,” 42–58, both in Garrett Green, *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*. While Wood advocates reader-response approaches (14), Wiles favors a “soft” view of scriptural authority in which the Bible functions as basic resource rather than binding norm. Both writers are influenced by David Kelsey. Regarding the impact of the “aesthetic turn” in theology on biblical preaching, see Richard Fischer, “The Limits of Story,” *Int* 38 (1981): 46–58.

²⁷Cf. David F. Ford, “Narrative Theology,” in R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990), 491.

²⁸Regarding the former position, cf. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 96–98; regarding the latter view, cf. R. Alan Culpepper, “Story and History in the Gospels,” *RevExp* 81 (1984): 473, who writes, “If the gospels depict primarily neither the actual history of Jesus’ ministry nor the situation in which they were written but a narrative world . . . , then the extent to which the gospels accurately represent the ministry of Jesus is irrelevant for understanding their meaning.” Cf. also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), who considers biblical narrative to be “historicized prose fiction” (24) and remarks, “the creators of biblical narrative . . . took pleasure in exploring the formal and imaginative resources of their fictional medium . . .” (46).

²⁹Ford, “Narrative Theology,” 489.

³⁰Millard Erickson, “Narrative Theology: Translation or Transformation?” in Walter Freitag, ed., *Festschrift: A Tribute to Dr. William Hordern* (Saskatchewan: University of Saskatchewan, 1985), 31.

³¹*Ibid.*, 36. Erickson cites Gabriel Fackre’s *The Christian Story* as an example of this approach.

³²*Ibid.*, 32–33.

³³Cf. also Gabriel Fackre, “Narrative Theology: An Overview,” *Int* 37 (1983): 340–52.

³⁴Frei, *Eclipse*, 5.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 6.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 7.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 9.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 12.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁰For a good summary of the major flow of Frei's study, cf. J. K. Riches, "Review of Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*," *RelS* 12 (1976): 117–19.

⁴¹Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 70–71.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 72, referring to the literary critic Northrop Frye. Concerning the issue of truth and narrative, see also Garrett Green, "The Bible As . . . : Fictional Narrative and Scriptural Truth," 79–96; and Stephen Crites, "The Spatial Dimensions of Narrative Truth-telling," 97–118, both in Green, *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*.

⁴³Regarding Vanhoozer's appropriation of speech act theory, see also his essay in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994). The first consistent application of "speech act" theory to biblical studies is J. Eugene Botha, *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman. A Speech Act Reading of John 4:1–42*, *NovTSup* 65 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991).

⁴⁴Vanhoozer, "Semantics of Biblical Literature," 86–92.

⁴⁵Cf. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, App. Two; and Lundin, Thiselton, and Walhout, *Responsibility of Hermeneutics*, 42–77, 107–13. Cf. also the assessment of narrative theology by Grant R. Osborne below.

⁴⁶Cf. Carl F. H. Henry, "Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," *TrinJ* 8 (1987): 9–19. Note also the response by Hans W. Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" *TrinJ* 8 NS (1987): 21–24; and the recent attempt to adjudicate by George Hunsinger, "What Can Evangelicals and Postliberals Learn From Each Other? The Carl Henry–Hans Frei Exchange Reconsidered," in *Nature of Confession*, 134–50.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 19. But see Rodney Clapp, "How Firm a Foundation: Can Evangelicals Be Nonfoundationalists?" in *Nature of Confession*, 81–92; and Phillips and Okholm, "The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals," in *Nature of Confession*, 14.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹Grant Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 164–68.

⁵⁰Cf. Thiselton's assessment in *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*, 81.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 68. In some of his earlier writings, Osborne called for various elements of hermeneutical methodology to take their "proper place in pantheon of exegetical tools" and advocated "a combination of redaction criticism and narrative hermeneutics." Cf. "Round Four: The Redaction Debate Continues," *JETS* 28 (1985): 407; and "Preaching the Gospels: Methodology and Contextualization," *JETS* 27 (1984): 42. The latter essay concludes with the comment, "In effect we are simply Biblical theologians . . ." (*ibid.*). Cf. our own similar conclusion below.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 168–72. Cf. also Stanley Hauerwas, "The Church as God's New Language," in Green, *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, 179–98, esp. 179–87. For a more cautious assessment of narrative criticism, see Scot McKnight, *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 121–37.

⁵³Rolf Schäfer, "Review of Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*," *TLZ* 101 (1976): 49–50.

⁵⁴Cf. Dennis Nineham, "Review of Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*," *Theology* 79 (1976): 46–48.

⁵⁵Cf. Frederick H. Borsch, "Review of Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*," *Religious Education* 70 (1975): 571–72.

⁵⁶Wallace, "New Yale Theology," 169. But see now the attempt to exonerate G. Lindbeck, one of the members of the "Yale school," of this kind of charge by Jeffrey Hensley, "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealistis? Reexamining the Metaphysics of Lindbeck's Postliberal Theology," in *The Nature of Confession*, 69–80.

⁵⁷F. F. Bruce, "Review of Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*," *Christian Scholar's Review* 5 (1975): 201.

⁵⁸D. A. Carson, "Review of R. Alan Culpepper, *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*," *TrinJ4 NS* (1983): 123.

⁵⁹Cf. David Stubbs, who, in a recent paper entitled "Breathing Space for the Word Made Flesh: Hans Frei and N. T. Wright on the Narrative and Historical Jesus" presented at the Spring 1998 Southeastern Regional AAR/ SBL Meeting, casts Frei as precursor for the British New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, best known for the first two volumes of his projected five-volume New Testament theology, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

⁶⁰Cf. esp. Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) and the perceptive (favorable) review by Stephen D. Kovach in *Faith & Mission* 14, No. 2 (Spring 1997): 100–103.

⁶¹For an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of narrative criticism, cf. Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*, 85–98. See also Scot McKnight, *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels*, 121–37, esp. 133.

⁶²Cf. David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

⁶³But cf. Hauerwas, *Why Narrative?*, 1, who notes the tendency to consider narrative and story as the “panacea to Enlightenment’s illnesses.”

⁶⁴See e.g. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*.

⁶⁵This renewed attention to narrative preaching, however, is found primarily among adherents of the “New Homiletic.” It has yet to make a significant mark in conservative evangelical circles where propositional approaches continue to predominate.

⁶⁶Cf. William Richard Stegner, *Narrative Theology in Early Jewish Christianity* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/ John Knox, 1989). See also the brilliant article by George Lindbeck, “The Story-shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation,” in Green, *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, 161–78, in which Lindbeck points out that the early church considered the history of Israel to be its own history. The community of believers had just one history, the history of God’s people, not two, the history of Israel and the history of the church.

⁶⁷Note the importance passages such as John 19:35; Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–3; 1 Cor. 15:14; and 2 Pet. 1:16 place on historicity. Events in the life of Israel such as the exodus can be a sign of hope and encouragement precisely because and only because they really occurred. The same can be said for the Word’s incarnation (John 1:14) and Christ’s resurrection (1 Cor. 15:14).

⁶⁸Cf. Hensley, “Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealists?” 79.

⁶⁹Cf. Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 56, quoted in McGrath, “Evangelical Evaluation,” 42.

⁷⁰Cf. the section entitled “What Is Truth?” in the essay by Alister E. McGrath, “An Evangelical Evaluation of Postliberalism,” in *Nature of Confession*, 35–39.

⁷¹Cf. the section entitled “Why the Bible?” in *ibid.*, 39–41, where McGrath also refers to Carl F. H. Henry’s critique of David Kelsey’s *Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (1975) entitled “Theology and Biblical Authority: A Review Article,” in *JETS* 19 (1976): 315–23.

⁷²This criticism was voiced to me by Kenneth S. Kantzer.

⁷³Rodney Clapp’s defense of “evangelical anti-foundationalism” leaves something to be desired when he depicts his vision of evangelicals “drawing others into Christian friendship, telling Christian stories and sharing Christian worship,” thus altering “the way others interpret their experience” and introducing “a new set of desires into their desires” (“How Firm a Foundation,” 90). This scenario strikes one hardly as an accurate representation of, say, the apostle Paul’s rationale for Christian witness.

⁷⁴This is precisely the impetus for Craddock’s *As One Without Authority*.

⁷⁵Cf. the proposals in Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, discussed above. Cf. also Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology. From biblical interpretation to contemporary formulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) and John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey, eds., *Doing Theology in Today’s World. Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), esp. the essays by Kenneth S. Kantzer and J. I. Packer.

⁷⁶Vanhoozer, “Semantics of Biblical Literature,” 104.

⁷⁷Address at the Annual Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature (November 24, 1991).

⁷⁸Cf. the recent article by Steve Motyer, “Method in Fourth Gospel Studies: A Way Out of the Impasse?” *JSNT* 66 (1997): 27–44.

⁷⁹Some may question the need to systematize biblical theology altogether. Why not leave biblical theologies in their proper narrative contexts? The issue of the unity and diversity of Scripture is dealt with in John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987); and James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990). While these writers focus on the diversity of “biblical theologies,” it still seems appropriate to see an essential unity underlying the diverse perspectives of the human biblical writers (cf. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1981], 49–59). There is only one gospel; there is only one Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and New Testament eschatological expectations. If then there is unity in diversity, one biblical theology can be constructed from the various biblical theologies. It is in this sense that the term “systematized biblical theology” is used above. For an example of such an effort, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, “The Challenge of a Systematized Biblical Theology: Missiological Insights from the Gospel of John,” *Missiology* 23 (1995): 445–64.

⁸⁰In this narrative theology has not remained true to its mentor Karl Barth who emphasized the spiritual nature of Scripture and the theological relevance of its message. How well have narrative theologians read their Barth?