Hope as an Interpretive Virtue: The Grounds, Contents and Action of Christian Hope in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture

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This thesis examines the theological interpretation of the Bible as Christian scripture in the light of the Christian doctrine of hope, with specific reference to hope as a human characteristic. Hope is thus discussed in terms of interpretive virtue, as one human characteristic that leads to good biblical reading. The doctrine of hope is examined with reference to Jürgen Moltmann and James Cone, and in both lines of thought is outlined in terms of grounds, contents and action. Common contours are drawn; hope is grounded in God's promise and presence, and contains the dignity and transformation of humans in relationship with God and one another. Hope's grounds and contents directly shape the hermeneutical situation in which scripture is read. The action of hope involves living in accordance with one's grasp of these grounds and contents, and because these parameters have hermeneutical consequences, so living hopefully will shape the action of reading. The hopeful reader perseveres with the text in a tension between openness to God through the text, and 'closed' steadfastness in the reader's grip on their perspective of hope. By incorporating Garrett Green's description of the imagination, this steadfastness is described as a hopeful construal of reality that remains alert to alternatives. It is then argued that because Christian hope pertains to the renewal of human community, the hopeful reader seeks to read alongside diverse others. Finally, this thesis is tested by showing how hope is manifest in the reading of Howard Thurman and the South Sudanese People to People Peace initiatives. The thesis describes the hermeneutical circle in terms of Christian hope where hope aids, and results from, good biblical reading. Through this, the thesis creates a framework for theological interpretation which takes seriously the centrality of hope in Christian theology.

Contents

Abbreviations

BTIJ:	Black Theology: An International Journal
EDNT:	*Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds., H. Balz and G. Schneider, 3 Vols (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990-1993)
IGPS:	Thiselton, Anthony C., *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995)
JAAR:	Journal of the American Academy of Religion
JBL:	Journal of Biblical Literature
JD:	Thurman, Howard, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1949; repr. Boston: Beacon press, 1996)
JRE:	Journal of Religious Ethics
JRH:	Journal of Religion and Health
JTSA:	Journal of Theology for Southern Africa
JTI:	Journal of Theological Interpretation
LXX:	Septuagint
NLH:	New Literary History (Journal)
NRSV:	New Revised Standard Version
NSCC:	New Sudan Council of Churches
PPP:	People to People Peace Initiative
SBL:	Society for Biblical Literature
SCM:	Student Christian Ministry
SJT:	Scottish Journal of Theology
SPCK:	Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge

SPLA/M: Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army/Movement

STR: Southern Theological Review (Journal)

TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 Vols, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976)

Declarations

All material contained in this thesis, excepted where cited from other sources, is original to the author, and has not been submitted in this or any other form for another degree.

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to argue that theological interpretation of the Bible as Christian scripture may be approached in hope. Studies of the theological interpretation of scripture have benefitted much from a close engagement with the field of hermeneutics, and this has led to an increased awareness of some of the complexities and difficulties involved in interpretation. In particular, the possibility of misunderstanding and the problem of manipulative, self-interested use of the texts have been directly related to human nature itself, and hence also to human relationships. This situation has been brought sharply into focus through hermeneutical theories, but Christian theology also has much to say about what it means to be human, and hence what it means to interpret and understand. More than this, Christian theology has spoken of hope for humanity, for the transformation and renewal of human nature and the restoration of human relationships with God and one another. This thesis will argue this hope has hermeneutical consequences; the restoration of human relationships through love entails the possibility of genuine understanding, free from self-interest and alienation. But this is not only hope for a distant future; hope shapes present actions. It will be argued that the hopeful reader perseveres, and because this hope is grounded in God, they draw out those aspects of the text which point towards God's promised future, the redemption of humanity and the renewal of creation. But inasmuch as hope challenges the problems of the present, it also entails resistance against the fragmentation of human communities; thus the hopeful reader also actively seeks out dialogue partners from a wide variety of backgrounds. They do so to generate hope for others, and to be formed in hope by others. There can be no formal guarantee of the fruitfulness of this enterprise, but to read in hope is to persevere in spite of the risks.

In essence, this thesis will thus provide a way of thinking about the hermeneutical circle in a way which takes full account of the significance of hope within Christian theology. On the one hand, close attention to theologies of hope will help generate a framework for thinking about how and why Christian readers may seek to grow in hope through biblical reading. But this will in turn lead to a focus on

why *being* hopeful is itself significant in the process of reading, and why hope may become an important 'interpretive virtue'. The result of this double movement will be an approach to the questions of theological interpretation which accounts for the centrality of hope within the very texts under discussion. But beyond this, as it has been increasingly argued that theological interpretation cannot occur in abstraction from the world and the Church, this thesis provides a framework for biblical reading that takes seriously the human need for, and the divine offer of, hope.

1.1. Interpretive Virtue: The Character of the Reader

One might legitimately ask why this approach is being proposed over others. After all, discussion of theological interpretation of the Bible has been something of a growth industry for some considerable time. Given this, and despite the title of this thesis, it would be perhaps overoptimistic to attempt to offer a definitive approach. For example, in a recent article Richard Briggs demonstrates how one may arrive at several thousand potentially legitimate questions that the interpreter might bring to the biblical texts.[1] Even within the more limited field of explicitly theological interpretation, there are countless ways of articulating why we might read the Bible, and thus how we should interpret the texts. Given this, this thesis is an attempt to offer one approach that may sit alongside others, but with a specific focus on the way in which the Bible, in some sense, is intended to form hope in its readers. Coupled with a focus on human character, I will go on to explore the significance of the character of the interpreter, and thence why one might wish to become a hopeful interpreter.

The idea that the character of the interpreter might positively relate to their interpretation is somewhat controversial, given the general modern concern for interpretive neutrality. Yet the idea derives from a perspective that has some precedent in Christian tradition, not least because that very tradition has much to say about the pervasive effects of human nature. In this line of thought, John Webster

[1] Richard S. Briggs, 'How to Do Things with Meaning in Biblical Interpretation', *STR*, 2, 2 (2011), 143-160, (146-147).

argues that even if hermeneutics is useful for biblical interpretation, there is a deeper issue that requires our attention:

> If sophisticated hermeneutical theory fails to persuade, it is largely because, in the end, it addresses the wrong problems, and leaves untouched the real difficulty with reading Scripture. That difficulty [...] is spiritual and therefore moral; it is our refusal as sinners to be spoken to, our wicked repudiation of divine address, our desire to speak the final word to ourselves. From those sicknesses of the soul, no amount of sophistication can heal us.[2]

Setting aside the specifically Reformed flavour of this comment, a more general but vital point is being made. In this particular instance, Webster makes the explicit link between the Bible and the Word of God, but even before that link is made his argument is worth considering. If our nature influences all that we do, then it may be that our nature and character as human beings has some bearing on how we interpret texts.

In this more general sense, a number of scholars have revived an interest in the relationship between character and interpretation, and this interest primarily derives from the recognition that readers often interpret unwisely, carelessly or selfishly. This is not just a matter of a failure to apply critical tools correctly; rather, it is the character of the interpreter that makes the difference. Even if it were agreed that objectivity is desirable in interpretation, the moral ambiguity of the human condition makes such a goal elusive at best. For even at a subconscious level, it is all too possible for individual desires to creep into the interpretive process. However, the premise of this discussion is that it is in fact neither possible nor desirable to separate ourselves from our interpretation. As such, the question we are faced with is not one of how we keep ourselves separate from the process of reading, but what *kind of person we should seek to become, so that we might interpret well.* In this respect, the more negative recognition that human nature might inhibit interpretation sits alongside a more positive corollary; some lives are so compellingly good that we are naturally drawn to examine them. In one of the earliest contemporary treatments of this area, *Reading in Communion,* Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones argue that

[2] John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Church Dogmatics*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 109.

figures like Bonhoeffer display such discernible goodness that their work as interpreters becomes compelling.[3]

Most recent discussion of this topic has taken place using the concept of 'interpretive virtue', an idea which undoubtedly draws some momentum from the rising interest in virtue ethics since MacIntyre. While this concept generates complex offshoots of discussion, the basic idea is that if a virtue is a characteristic that aids a person in pursuing the good in life, then an 'interpretive virtue' is a disposition that leads one to the good in interpretation. Broadly in parallel with virtue ethics, the concept of 'interpretive virtue' shifts the focus from interpretation to the interpreter. Without artificially driving a wedge between the person and the practice, the main focus is on what makes a good interpreter, and hence which characteristics should be pursued for the sake of good interpretation. Some writers remain ambiguous towards virtue theory, while David Ford in particular engages with the discussion independently of it altogether, preferring to talk in terms of interpretive wisdom.[4] While I will highlight some potential problems with virtue theory in this context, the field offers a useful starting point, primarily because it remains prevalent in the literature, but also because it couples the question of character with the sense of goal; classically this goal is described in terms of that which is good.

Inevitably, this begs the question of what counts as 'good' for interpretation, and this is perhaps one of the reasons why there is a substantial range of interpretive virtues offered within the relevant literature. Furthermore, because some writers are ambivalent about the fit between the classical virtue framework and the content of the biblical texts, a number of 'virtues' are drawn directly from specific scriptural narratives. The result of this is that contemporary authors have collectively proposed the interpretive virtues of faith, hope, love, honesty, openness, attention, obedience, receptivity, humility, truthfulness, courage, imagination, trust and wisdom.[5] Aside

[3] Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1998; orig., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 135-159.

[4] See for example; David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and learning in Love*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). In chapter one it will be noted that Webster is also very uneasy about the use of virtue theory, though he does concede the idea that character is important. The main problem is that virtue theory is sometime used without explicit reference to God, and so we will need to consider how God relates to the process of human character growth.

[5] This list is drawn from the work of Vanhoozer, Jones and Briggs. Gregory Jones includes 'receptivity, humility, truthfulness, courage, charity and imagination.' Vanhoozer suggests faith, hope, love, alongside honesty, openness, attention and obedience, and Briggs's list comprises

from looking exhausting, this vast list begs the question of why any particular characteristic should count as an interpretive virtue. However, while this is a valid question it is perhaps less helpful to try to pre-determine what counts as a virtue in the abstract, than it is to consider potential virtues as they arise. The main reason for this is that it is not clear that the Bible offers its own theoretical discussion of virtue or human character in general, but it does depict good character in concrete situations. Given this, it is probably more helpful to begin with a specific virtue or character trait, and then ask whether and how it is appropriate for the practice of interpretation. This is a more heuristic approach, but as we shall see, it is necessitated by the degree of circularity involved in working towards a theological depiction of theological interpretation. Even though it makes the task more complicated, it seems appropriate to allow the Bible some role in working out a theological depiction of the hermeneutical situation, and in turn, which characteristics are desirable for readers.[6]

The three 'theological' virtues of faith, hope and love have sufficient weight within Christian tradition and the Bible to commend themselves as good starting places. There has been some recent interest in the *regula fidei*, though in general this refers to the use of creedal formulae as a lens for interpretation, rather than faith as a virtue.[7] Similarly, Augustine's *regula caritatis* has also garnered support within the broader discussion of theological interpretation.[8] Notably, Augustine's emphasis was on the cultivation of love *through* interpretation rather than *for* interpretation, but nonetheless a significant number of contemporary writers have drawn on Augustine to argue for the importance of being loving or charitable as an interpreter. By contrast, while some writers do mention hope within their general discussion of interpretive virtue, it has received relatively little attention. Might there be such a thing as a *regula spei* for biblical interpretation, and if so, what would it look like?

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humility, wisdom, trust, love and receptivity. See L. Gregory Jones, 'Formed and Transformed by Scripture: Character, Community, and Authority in Biblical Interpretation', in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. William P. Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 18-33, 32; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 376-377; Richard S. Briggs, *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

[6] See below for further discussion of this point.

[7] See e.g., Kathryn Greene-McCreight, 'Rule of Faith' in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (London: SPCK, 2005), 703-704.

[8] For a recent analysis, see: Joshua Marshall Strahan, 'An Ecclesially Located Exegesis Informed by Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*', *JTI*, 6, 2 (2012), 219-239.

1.2. Hope as an interpretive virtue

Beyond filling an apparent gap in the discussion, there is a more serious reason for exploring hope as a desirable character trait for readers. As noted, a key factor driving the discussion of interpretive virtue is the recognition that human nature has some impact on interpretation, and in particular, the negative aspects of human nature may have a negative impact on reading. However, if this depiction is true but unalterable, then all that this discussion can do is highlight some of the reasons why interpretation is difficult, why disagreement occurs, or why readers use the text to serve their own ends. But the real energy behind the concept of interpretive virtue is the idea that our character is not fixed, and that some change or growth is possible. If this possibility exists, there are good reasons to pay close attention to what kind of readers we are becoming.

However this growth or change occurs, most scholars recognize the ambiguity inherent to 'becoming' a better reader; no reader is either wholly good or wholly bad and there turn out to be significant theological reasons for maintaining this point. For example, Paul is particularly critical of those Christians who already claim to be wise (e.g. 1 Cor. 3.18), and even those whose wisdom is acknowledged are capable of mistakes. But if we are still able to speak of growth, then this very possibility calls forth hope; indeed hope is the characteristic that uniquely captures the expectation of positive change. Even if such growth were purely a matter of external influence, then hope would still describe this expectation in some sense or other. But passive waiting is unlikely to characterise genuine hope, not least because in the context of this discussion, reading is still very much an active human endeavour. Thus, if there is some development to be expected as a reader, some means of pursuing growth, then to take up this pursuit is to act in the hope of becoming a better reader, and to read in the hope of growing as a human being. Furthermore, if hope as such is desirable as a human character trait, then it is worth considering what it means to read the Bible hopefully. In this respect hope might turn out to have a primary role in the matrix of interpretive virtues because it energises the journey. Of course, as with any other human characteristic, hope may be problematic; we may hold unhealthy hopes, a problem that will be discussed in

chapter two. But at this stage, it is sufficient to suggest that if we are to discuss interpretive virtues, hope is worthy of attention.

The other main reason for considering hope relates back to the question of why we read scripture; what is the interpretive goal? In one sense, any reading is grounded in some kind of hope. One reader might read in the hope of personal edification, while another might read in the hope of learning something about the origins of Christianity. Both draw on hope in the sense that they adopt some view to the future which relates to their specific goals in interpretation. As noted there are many legitimate ways of construing the goal of reading scripture, but one important option is the deepening of our appreciation of God's promise for the future. In other words, one goal of reading scripture is the formation of hope in God. As Barth so eloquently argued, the Bible presents a 'strange new world', and reading scripture might thus become an exercise in anticipating and inhabiting that world in the present.[9] From this viewpoint, reading the Bible is not strictly an end in itself; rather it is a means to understanding God and God's promised future.

As a result, my proposal will not be to read in the hope of understanding the text *per se*, but to read in the broader economy of hope in God for creation, to read in the hope of God's promised transformation of creation. To be explicit, I will thus deal with a kind of virtuous cycle; the hopeful reader is disposed in turn to generate hope, not just for themselves but for others. The process of rereading is thus a process of deepening hope.

[9] Karl Barth, 'The Strange New World within the Bible', in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton, (Pilgrim Press, 1928), 28-50.

2. Methodological Issues

i) The question of circularity: Reading scripture to interpret scripture

Describing the process in cyclical terms is not new to this thesis, but it does raise methodological questions. Firstly, there is the question of how one joins the circle; if hope is the product *and* the prerequisite of reading, how does one read the text in the first place? This will be addressed in the next chapter with regard to interpretive virtue in general, but my argument is that theological hope actually offers good reasons for maintaining the possibility of being 'addressed' through the text, independently of one's context. Hope is thus best understood in terms of an ongoing process, and not as a hermeneutical prolegomenon.

However, in terms of the methodology of this thesis, there is a more serious theoretical issue. If hope aids good reading of scripture, how can we be sure that our understanding of that hope, drawn from scripture, is correct? Is not reading scripture in order to understand how to read scripture, a hopelessly circular enterprise? The question of how we enter the circle is not just a problem for the reader, but for this argument.

This problem will be addressed more directly in chapter one, but it warrants some attention at this stage. At least since Schleiermacher, the concept of circularity has been fairly familiar in hermeneutics. Even so, if scripture is simply used to refer back on itself then it does seem to leave the interpreter chasing their tail. But even among those who argue for a more objective or value-neutral approach to the Bible, it is commonly and increasingly recognized that nobody comes to any text as a blank slate, free from presuppositions. Given this, the thesis opens as a reflective exploration of theological pre-understanding, or as Thiselton puts it in the manner of Wittgenstein, 'home language-games'.[10] I will begin with an initial discussion of hope in theological tradition and the Bible, recognizing that this is necessarily provisional. This will yield enough of a working concept of Christian hope to go on to explore how it might relate to further interpretation of biblical texts. To begin in

[10] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), xxi-xxii.

this way is by no means value natural, and the cost of the approach will be the lack of hermeneutical prolegomena. However, if we are to take seriously the idea that theology and scripture might having something true to say about reality, then it becomes more hermeneutically coherent to take this approach, allowing the results of engagement with the texts and the tradition to shape the subsequent hermeneutical endeavour. Put simply, as the reader's understanding and appropriation of hope develops, so will their interpretive activity. The structure of chapter two will thus attempt to model the approach of the whole thesis. As described below, I will begin with an initial discussion of hope following Moltmann, and then revise this picture by engaging with an alternative tradition to my own.

ii) The approach to a Theology of Hope

Recent discussion of theological hope has of course been dominated by the figure of Jürgen Moltmann, and thus I will begin with certain aspects of Moltmann's work to frame the discussion. However, Richard Bauckham is right to note that Moltmann's use of scripture tends to be sporadic and often exegetically unusual, and this perhaps makes him an odd choice for a thesis primarily concerned with the Bible.[11] Despite this, there are at least two reasons for taking a more systematic approach. The first is that to address the question of Christian hope as such is to tackle a concept that is abstracted from the Bible, though it finds much treatment therein. Rather than asking questions about the concept of hope depicted in any given text, my aim is to ask how people may reasonably hope in the present day in the light of God. This certainly requires engagement with specific texts, but my aim is to consider a bigger picture for hope. Secondly, because I am asking whether there is hope for understanding, and for the reader, it is helpful to explore biblical hope in categories that relate more directly to the questions of hermeneutics and interpretive virtue. Additionally, because I am describing this task in terms of examining pre-understanding, there is necessarily an element of self-involved reflection; in other

[11] Richard Bauckham, 'Time and Eternity' in *God Will be All in All: The Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1999), 155-255, (179-180).

words, I will aim to examine the broad tradition concerning hope within which I have been formed.

This aspect of self-involvement is an important part of the thesis for another reason. The discussion of interpretive virtue requires a degree of self-involvement, because if biblical interpreters are subject to the influences of their character, so are hermeneutical theorists. If my biblical interpretation may be influenced by self-interest, then so might my description of hope. Given this possibility, I will attempt to engage in dialogue with a separate tradition, not just on the question of Christian hope, but throughout the thesis. As noted earlier, I will argue that the hopeful reader seeks to generate hope not only for themselves but for others too. And because I will argue that Christian hope is for everyone, reading hopefully actually necessitates an attempt to enter into dialogue with other contexts.

Many possibilities for this suggest themselves, but I will explore Black liberation theology, and in particular African-American theology and hermeneutics. Apart from providing an alternative perspective to my own, Black liberation theology presents a different angle on the question of hope. In my judgement, Moltmann represents a broader tendency to conflate eschatology and hope, which is conceptually unhelpful at certain points. But more than this, Black theology shows that hope may be drawn not only from eschatology, but from other aspects of doctrine such as creation. In other words, the distinction is not just between different eschatologies, but different grounds of hope for the present.

It is worth noting that ‘Black theology’ is a complex term with many different strands. Because it draws on the emphasis on experience and praxis within liberation theology, Black liberation theology finds varied expressions in America, Britain, the Caribbean, South Africa, and other parts of Africa. Furthermore, womanism has highlighted the multiple aspects of oppression and liberation by addressing gender, race and class issues (among others) simultaneously. It is important to be aware of this diversity in the remaining discussion, because failing to do so undermines some of the key arguments of liberation theology in general. Having said that, for the most part the contextual specificity of more recent liberation theology goes alongside dialogue with other contexts, and so I will discuss writers from America, South Africa and Britain under the same heading. The reason for

doing this is not to imply homogeneity, but to attempt to hear a more comprehensive critique of what is perceived to be the 'standard' range of perspectives.

3. The Argument in Outline

In pursuit of the character traits of the good biblical interpreter, hope has arisen as one possibility worthy of exploration. This is because of the more general significance of hope within theology and the Bible, but also because of the manner in which that hope speaks to the questions of hermeneutics. It was suggested that if there are the grounds of hope for understanding and interpretation, then there are also grounds for being hopeful. In other words there are broadly two dimensions to this thesis. Firstly I will argue that Christian hope provides grounds for hope in hermeneutics, in the sense that the content of that hope directly shapes the situation in which we interpret. Following this, I will argue that this perspective provides grounds for being hopeful, and as such I will explore what it means to be hopeful as a reader, and why this may lead to good reading. In particular, this aspect of the study will take place with reference to the idea that scripture itself is concerned with the cultivation of hope in the lives of its readers. In this respect, it will be argued that hope has the potential to influence interpretation in a theologically and hermeneutically legitimate manner.

In chapter one I will discuss the concept of interpretive virtue in more detail, outlining the various perspectives that have led writers to consider the topic, and the ways in which such virtues are expected to affect interpretation. I will highlight some of the issues involved in using virtue theory, and particularly the question of how well virtue theory fits with the biblical texts. One issue that emerges is the question of whether virtues are cultivated through human formation or divine action. It will be argued that this is an unnecessary dichotomy, but that it is important to emphasize divine action even as it pertains to human activity. There are several reasons for this, but the main reason will be that Christian hope is primarily grounded in the activity of God. Even so, human action remains important.

I will also address the question of whether drawing a hermeneutics of scripture from scripture is methodologically problematic because of its circularity. I will argue that a degree of circularity is inherent to the whole enterprise, and that the fruitfulness of that circle rests on the wager that the text does somehow depict reality. Alongside this, it was noted that the concept of interpretive virtue requires some account of the goal of biblical interpretation. One perspective on this question is that the goal of reading the Bible is the cultivation of hope, because the Bible itself conveys the promises of God for human beings. Thus I maintain that hope may be drawn from the text by those who have no hope. However, the appreciation and action of that hope is deepened by rereading in hope, and thus the circularity remains necessary to my proposal. Given this, it must be noted that what follows contains a necessary element of provisionality. It can be seen that there are clear affinities with the medieval anagogical sense of scripture, but while a more detailed engagement with that tradition may prove fruitful, I have largely avoided it for the sake of working within the categories of the contemporary discussion of interpretive virtue and theological hermeneutics, and to manage the scope of the thesis as a whole. Having said that, growing interest in pre-modern exegesis suggests that further research into Medieval anagogy could be beneficial.

Chapter two addresses Christian hope in more general terms, using the parameters of *grounds*, *contents* and *action*. As noted above, this will occur in dialogue with Moltmann and African-American theology, and in particular, the work of James H. Cone. I will follow Moltmann in noting the significance of divine promise as the ground of future hope, which nonetheless leads to present action. However, Cone shows that hope is also grounded in the doctrine of creation, because it is that perspective that has underpinned the dignity of humankind in African-American theology. Put simply, Christian hope is grounded in God. The content of this hope is more difficult to determine because its fulfilment partially stands outside present experience. However, it will be shown that it is necessary to speak of the contents of hope (i.e., what is hoped for), and in particular I will focus on the renewal of humankind before God which is prominent in both traditions under investigation. Finally I will discuss what it means to be hopeful in terms of the action of hope. It will be argued that through the dialogue of traditions, to be hopeful can be

described as living with a perspective of reality shaped by divine promise and presence.

Chapters three and four draw on this depiction to describe the hermeneutical circle of biblical reading in terms of hope. Firstly, chapter three will show how the grounds and contents of hope have implications for the hermeneutics of biblical reading. I will argue that there are theological grounds for being hopeful about reaching genuine understanding, and thus being able genuinely to 'hear' something distinct through reading the text. Firstly I will discuss the relationship between meaning and community, arguing that because Christian hope is grounded in God's gracious action, independent of human circumstance, there is hope of genuinely hearing something other in the text, something that is not preconditioned by our own social context. This hearing constitutes a primary 'good' for theological interpretation. Further, the relationality of human nature as divine creation creates space for the possibility of properly hearing one another across cultural boundaries. Secondly, I will discuss the question of self-interested interpretation, and the suggestion that universal truth claims disguise bids for power. With particular reference to Anthony Thiselton, it will be argued that this problem is very much real, but that there is hope for the transposition of self-interest with love. As a result, the argument of this chapter is not that genuine understanding is guaranteed, but that in hope it is possible. Furthermore, the possibility of transcending self-interest leaves hope for properly equal moments of dialogue between cultures.

Chapter four will consider what it means to be a hopeful interpreter, how the interpretive virtue of hope might lead the reader to good interpretation. By drawing on the relationship between hope and imagination, it will be argued that hopeful reading involves perseverance in tension between openness to the voice of God through the text, and a kind of 'closed' steadfastness in holding on to hope as it stands in tension competing perspectives on reality. It will be argued that to read hopefully is thus to read in a way which points beyond the confines of present existence, through commentary and action, in a manner that coheres an emerging sense of the promise and presence of God. On this basis, hopeful reading may be simultaneously encouraging and costly. It will then be argued that not only is cross-cultural reading provisionally possible, but that it is necessitated by Christian hope. Hope is not primarily an individualistic concept, and thus the hopeful reader must

seek to cultivate and receive hope beyond their own horizons. At times, this will mean that hope is in fact costly for some, and so hopeful interpretation is not merely optimism. In chapter three I will address the question of interpretive communities in more general terms, so that in chapter four it will be argued that an understanding of the Church as a reading community must consider the Church in eschatological terms. Reading in the Church thus becomes an act of witness to a global hope.

Chapter five will offer a test case for the thesis. Because a key part of this thesis is that hope entails reading scripture with other contexts, I explored biblical interpretation in the context of tribal conflicts in Southern Sudan. Jesus' command to love enemies emerged from this initial exploration, and so I adopt that text as a test case. This in turn led to the discovery of Howard Thurman's writing on love in the context of racial inequality in the USA. Thurman addresses the question of love for enemies where the enemy is clearly an oppressor, while the Sudanese context also raises the question where enemies are at times equals. Thus I will explore two different contexts in an attempt to work out the suggestion that hopeful reading must seek dialogue with other communities. Within these contexts, the main aim is to explore the first aspects of hopeful reading, namely that to read hopefully is to persevere in hope, and that such perseverance results in good readings of scripture which cultivate hope in others. Finally, I will draw the results of the investigation back into my own context. In this section I will highlight the necessity of allowing the preceding dialogue to reshape my own reading, so that the readings examined are not merely presented as encouraging artefacts. In fact, it will be shown that they pose serious challenges to the privileged reader, but these challenges remain properly hopeful because they cohere theologically with the encouragement offered to the specific contexts.

It is worth concluding by noting that this proposal is necessarily heuristic from the start, because it takes the form of an exploration of one option for theological interpretation. Furthermore, I self-consciously recognize the circularity involved in reading and rereading texts that seek to shape our understanding of reality. But most importantly hope, by its very nature, strains beyond that which we can experience or understand in the present. To hope in the sense described in this thesis is to anticipate something decisively new, something that cannot be fully comprehended now because it does not arise from the possibilities of the present. In

this respect, this thesis cannot be accepted on the basis that it successfully closes down all other options. Rather, it draws its force from the possibility that God will in fact finally renew creation, a possibility that invites not certainty, but hopeful trust. As such, this thesis will not suggest a *regula spei* in terms of a *rule* that can be applied for the sake of correct interpretation. But it will create a framework for thinking about theological interpretation of scripture which not only takes account of the importance of hope within scripture and theology, but takes account of the fact that theological interpretation must itself be understood to take place within an economy of hope, and must thereby seek to bring hope to the world.

Chapter One

Interpretive Virtue, the Bible and Hope

1.1.Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the concept of interpretive virtue in more detail. By noting some questions that this field raises, I will argue that hope has a significant enough place in theology to warrant the attention of this thesis. Firstly, I will outline the turn to virtue in interpretation, noting that interest in this area actually derives from a wide range of concerns. From here, two prominent interpretive virtues will be discussed; the exploration of love will show how interpretive virtues work in practice, while looking at wisdom will address the relationship between virtue theory and biblical tradition. This will lead to the consideration of three potential objections to interpretive virtue. In raising these objections, I will argue that a framework of hope will go a long way to addressing them, and that for this thesis the basic concept remains viable. Finally I will return to the question of the goal of reading scripture, one that is presupposed by the very notion of an interpretive virtue. It will be argued that the cultivation of hope is one of the ends of biblical reading, but that it is not in fact problematic to describe hope as character trait that draws hope from the text. Rather, I will argue that reading the Bible as Christian scripture involves a cycle of growth in hope through reading.

1.2. The Bible and the Reader

Returning to square one, it is my judgement that Krister Stendahl's famous distinction between what the text 'meant' and what it 'means', holds sway in much discussion of contemporary scriptural interpretation.[1] Christians understand the Bible as being applicable to contemporary life, but the process of interpretation requires

[1] Krister Stendahl, 'Biblical Theology, Contemporary', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G.A. Buttrick, 5 vols (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:418-432.

some expert understanding of its original context. This distinction remains familiar within the world of biblical studies, and as a result the 'expert' task has recently been wryly depicted as the 'paleontological' method.[2] Blount et al describe how it is assumed that something called 'meaning' lies within the text, and the task of the interpreter is to use the correct tools and methods to dig it out. This is of course a caricature, and Moberly has rightly cautioned against asserting that there is something called *the* historical-critical method, or that all users of this method adopt the same approach to theological questions.[3] Even so, the caricature represents quite a broad perception within some areas of scholarship, and as such is perhaps a symptom of a more general discontent with historical or critical approaches to interpretation. This discontent seems to stem from at least three areas.

Firstly, systematic theologians have lamented the 'relay-race' relationship between biblical studies and theology, in which theologians must wait for assured results before they can legitimately utilise the text.[4] Shifts in scholarly consensus about standard interpretations suggest that this creates an unsatisfactory situation of endless deferral, which would force theologians either to abandon the Bible, or to admit that their use of it is at the mercy of other disciplines. Secondly, the notion of scholarly objectivity associated with modernism has been critiqued at length from a vast array of philosophical and hermeneutical thinkers, ranging from Gadamer's critique of method, to questions about the social construction of meaning itself. In Stephen Fowl's terms, one may legitimately ask questions about authorial context and intention, but this is by no means the only way to talk about the *meaning* of the text.[5] Coupled with questions about theology and truth, this has led to an increased interest in pre-modern or pre-critical exegesis, which has allowed scholars to discuss theological truth, polyvalent meaning and the formation of the reader.[6] The question of meaning *per se* will occupy a major part of chapter three, but suffice to note here that it has garnered widespread interest in the study of theological interpretation.

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[2] Brian K. Blount and others, 'Introduction', in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed. Brian K. Blount, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 1-7, (2).
[3] R.W.L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 28-29.
[4] The term is drawn from Nicholas Lash; Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, (London: SCM Press, 1986), 79.
[5] Stephen E. Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture', in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 71-87.
[6] For a recent perspective, see: Strahan, 'An Ecclesially Located Exegesis', 219-239.

The third complaint about 'traditional' scholarship is perhaps most germane to this thesis, and comes from various kinds of liberation theology. Drawing on the previous two concerns, liberation theologians have argued that not only are traditional critical methods not value-neutral, but they have in fact served to reinforce the power-interests of the privileged.[7] In some cases it is argued that the critical tools themselves are value-laden, while in others it is argued that whatever the tools employed, interpreters cannot assume neutrality as though their own interests and situations did not shape their deployment of methodological tools. This point has been given a good deal of attention in hermeneutical philosophy, but it does in fact also have a strong theological pedigree. As well as Webster's more specific interest in human response to the word of God, Thiselton has argued at length that selfishness and self-deception in interpretation cohere with a traditional theological understanding of the human condition. Thiselton argues:

> Freud's emphasis on self-deception [...] entirely coheres with Christian theology. [...] Christian theology also coheres with Freud's analysis of the self as falling victim to forces which it does not fully understand and which certainly it cannot fully control. The postmodern self at this point stands closer to biblical realism than to the innocent confidence of modernity.[8]

Following Thiselton I shall argue that this is not the 'last word' on the subject, but it is an important 'first word'. Some of the language here can seem harsh, and at times western biblical scholars have been unnecessarily portrayed as nefariously working to strengthen their own power interests. But the crucial point is far subtler than that, which is perhaps why the argument may at times fail to ring true. In a recent article on the character of the interpreter, Stephen Pardue reflects this position by suggesting that the choice to read a Greek genitive as either subjective or objective can hardly be put down to 'moral deficiency'.[9] The point seems self-evident, yet it is only half true; such choices remain under the influence of theological preference, the context of one's learning, feelings towards opponents and so forth. Of course, it does not follow that such things always influence choices, but the fact that it is at least

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[7] For a recent expression of this widespread argument, see Blount and others, 'Introduction', 3.
[8] Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 129-130.
[9] Stephen T. Pardue, 'Athens and Jerusalem Once More: What the Turn to Virtue Means for Theological Exegesis', *JTI*, 4, 2 (2010), 295-308, (305).

possible should give us cause to consider our character as interpreters in even the most technical debates. The reason for this is simply that the theological problem of the human condition in not necessarily a conscious one. In other words, it is not that historical critics are consciously trying to gain power for themselves, but rather that we simply cannot separate ourselves from our interpretations. This issue will be treated further in chapter three, but the basic insight stands behind most discussions of 'interpretive virtue', the concept under discussion in the remainder of this chapter. As Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones put it, 'the interpretation of Scripture [...] requires the moral formation and transformation of people's lives because of the manifold ways in which people do not judge wisely'.[10]

2.1. Perspectives leading to Interpretive Virtue

If a virtue is a characteristic that leads one to the good in life, then an interpretive virtue is a characteristic that leads one to good interpretation. The use of virtue theory perhaps stems from the resurgence of interest in virtue ethics, but because of the specific focus on interpretation, the use of the term 'virtue' is quite wide ranging, leading writers in this field to describe a vast range of actual interpretive virtues.[11] The theory itself is primarily at the service of the more general notion that if the character of the interpreter affects their interpretation, then it is worth exploring what kind of character is desirable for biblical reading. But of course, this requires some understanding of the nature of interpretation and why we interpret the Bible in the first place. With potentially infinite variations on this theme, it similarly turns out that 'interpretive virtue' is the answer to quite a variety of questions in relevant literature. For example, we will see that scholars describe the interpretive virtue of love in terms of both loving the text, and loving other interpreters. Of course these two positions are by no means incompatible, but it will be necessary to consider to what question 'hope' is the answer, and thus how hope will operate in the process of reading the Bible. I shall begin by tracing three strands

[10] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 31.
[11] See: Introduction, 4, n5.

of thought that have led to the concept of interpretive virtue. These three strands are distinct, but inevitably they do overlap.

i) Virtue Epistemology: Vanhoozer, Treier and Pardue

If knowledge is in some sense a 'good', and virtues are those traits which lead one towards the good in life, then it could be argued that the pursuit of knowledge draws on the formation of virtue.[12] In other words, the acquisition of knowledge may relate not only to the application of rules and methods, but also to the formation of habits and dispositions. Thus in turn, theological knowledge may also be said to require formation in virtue. In this case, 'interpretive virtue' is the answer to the question of how we come to know things through reading, given the limits of human nature. While such a proposition may be controversial now, Daniel Treier argues that it is fundamental to pre-modern thought:

> Theologians were in hot pursuit of *sapientia* (wisdom), a kind of knowledge with a teleology: the formation of virtue in God's people. [...] By Enlightenment times [...] virtue could no longer be an orienting goal within theology, for it was methodologically excluded on principle.[13]

Treier's aim is broadly to reinstate the pre-enlightenment perspective, and this leads him to argue for the necessity of growing in 'practical wisdom' for the epistemic good of knowing God. He argues that the goal of interpreting scripture theologically is 'knowledge of God, ingredient to which is the formation of Christian identity and virtue, unto human flourishing and God's glory'.[14] In this respect, while knowledge is a good in itself, it also leads to other goods. This latter point overlaps with Fowl's and Jones's focus on discipleship, and it is helpful in showing that it is possible to speak of the goal of knowledge without it becoming the only goal in interpretation.

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[12] For a recent brief but critical discussion of this principle, see Pardue, 'Athens and Jerusalem'.

[13] Daniel J. Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God: Towards Theology as Wisdom*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 1.

[14] Daniel J. Treier, 'Wisdom', in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed., Kevin J. Vanhoozer (London: SPCK, 2005), 844-847, (846); See also Treier, Virtue, 104.

As a starting point however, the argument is that certain virtues are useful for guiding the enquiring mind towards some kind of knowledge; in Treier's argument the primary virtue is practical wisdom (on which more below). This view necessarily retains the idea that there is knowledge in some sense 'out there' to be acquired, a view that has received sustained attacks from various postmodern perspectives within hermeneutics. It is these attacks – in the form of Fishian social-pragmatism and Derridean deconstruction – to which Vanhoozer responds in *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* Working with the trio of author, text and reader, Vanhoozer aims to restore the concept of textual realism, and along with it a chastened view of the importance of authorial intention. In attempting to restore the author and the text, he also recognizes the need to attend to the reader, and in particular to their character and virtues. This leads him to define interpretive virtue as 'a disposition of the mind and heart that arises from the motivation for understanding, for cognitive contact with the meaning of the text'.[15] Because Vanhoozer's argument is that God gives humankind language in covenant for communication, his aim, in reverse of the more common approach, is to develop a general hermeneutics *from* the special hermeneutics of theological interpretation.[16] Thus, 'the text' in this quotation refers to any text, but later in the book he describes the specific case of reading scripture, arguing that 'the theological aim of biblical interpretation is to grow in the knowledge of God, as well as in wisdom and righteousness'.[17]

While both Treier and Vanhoozer see the goal of biblical interpretation as extending beyond 'cognitive contact' with the text, their arguments nonetheless rest on the idea that virtue is required even in a more traditional account of biblical or textual interpretation. This is clear in Pardue's article, where the usefulness of interpretive virtue is evaluated as it relates to biblical scholarship as it stands. In this context, Pardue helpfully suggests that it is better to speak of 'epistemic goods' beyond knowledge alone. For example, we might speak of the 'epistemic good' of coherence, and thus argue that the formation of virtue in the reader will lead to more coherent arguments.[18] He raises the question of whether or not this point could be made in the form of a rule, such that interpreters are simply told to be charitable or

[15] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?* 376.
[16] See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics*, (Nottingham: IVP Apollos, 2002), 159-203.
[17] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?* 406.
[18] Pardue, 'Athens and Jerusalem', 302-4.

coherent and so forth. In response, he rightly notes that the distinction is one of formation; all other things being equal, one whose character is charitable will be more likely to follow the 'rule' of acting charitably.[19]

It can already be seen that following the line of virtue epistemology on its own could do a lot to address the problem described in the previous section. If the development of virtues guides the gathering of knowledge and understanding, then the problem of making selfish judgements is at least provisionally addressed. In other words, with some attention to the character of the interpreter, the methods of 'traditional' biblical interpretation could remain largely unchanged. But this is not yet sufficient to our task. Even if it were possible to establish the possibility of gaining cognitive understanding of the text, we are still left with the question of why one might want to follow the results of the interpretation. In other words, if we are to consider how virtue might relate to interpreting the Bible *for theology and faith*, we must go further (as in fact do Treier and Vanhoozer), in considering the specific scenario of reading the Bible as Christian scripture.

ii) The Interpretive Virtues of the implied reader: Briggs and Bockmuehl

In *The Virtuous Reader*, Richard Briggs is fairly heuristic about the exact goal behind biblical interpretation; towards the end of the book, he describes the hope that the virtuous interpreter would 'bear "hermeneutical fruit" in due season'.[20] This description of 'bearing fruit' anticipates a general trend, to which we will turn shortly, of relating interpretation to discipleship. However, the major part of the book is taken up with describing the virtues depicted within the text itself, and as such, 'interpretive virtue' becomes a framework for describing the kind of person, and hence reader, described therein. Briggs argues that the biblical texts describe their own vision of 'the kind of character most eagerly to be sought after, and this in turn is the implied character of one who would read these texts, especially one in search of their own purposes and values'.[21] Here then, 'interpretive virtue' becomes

[19] Pardue, 'Athens and Jerusalem', 307-8.
[20] Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 210, following Psalm 1.
[21] Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 17.

a framework for describing a kind of virtuous hermeneutical circle. The text sets the agenda for the kind of virtues worth pursuing in life, but as such they also pertain to the act of reading the text itself. As one is formed by the text, so one's understanding of the text might deepen. Briggs develops this idea using the literary-critical concept of the 'implied reader', primarily drawing on Wolfgang Iser. He does not dwell heavily on the theoretical issues involved in this concept, but draws on the core notion that texts 'presuppose' certain kinds of reader. Thus he focuses on 'the sense in which the texts presuppose certain interpretive virtues on the part of the reader they are aimed at'.[22] What follows is a series of detailed character portraits drawn from specific biblical texts, and a discussion of how such traits might apply to the task of interpretation.

In his final chapter, Briggs rightly notes that there is a distinction between discerning the positive evaluation of a virtue in a given text, and choosing to pursue that virtue. Firstly, the reader may not wish to occupy the place of the implied reader, a point Briggs highlights in relation to the hermeneutics of suspicion.[23] The text may commend trust, but is trust always hermeneutically appropriate? Secondly, this raises the question of whether a virtue described in one text should be pursued in the interpretation of another. This point suggests some limitations to the usefulness of the concept of the implied reader with regard to biblical interpretation, but Briggs does recognize this issue. In the case of scripture, the second issue is in part subsumed by the first, in the sense that the decision to pursue this or that virtue described by the text comes down to personal stance on theological questions about the nature of God and the Bible.[24] This does not resolve the problem as such, but the point here is that the degree of self-involvement in the process of interpretation largely undergirds the question of whether or not one will pursue the virtues of the text. In this sense, Briggs's approach primarily commends itself to readers with some kind of theological commitment to the Bible.

This point is made clearer in the work of Alan Jacobs and Markus Bockmuehl. Because Jacobs does not draw on the concept of the implied reader, he is able to begin with a theological commitment to a biblical character portrait, and

[22] Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 38.
[23] Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 103-133.
[24] Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 207-8.

then relate that to the interpretation of any text. Jacobs begins with Jesus' double love commandment (Matthew 22.37-40) as a summary of the law and prophets. He argues that if the law pertains to every aspect of life, then 'it follows that there can be no realm of distinctively human activity in which Jesus' great twofold commandment is not operative'. If this is so, then the Christian reader (of any text) must seek to be a loving reader.[25] I will discuss how this might work in due course, but the point to note here is that adopting a self-involved commitment towards the specific text (in this case, Matthew) allows Jacobs to relate the described virtue to other interpretive situations, *because the text in Matthew relates directly to the reality of human life*. As we shall see, this also allows Jacobs to discuss particular cases where the specific virtue may seem problematic.

Overlapping with the scriptural focus of Briggs and the self-involved approach of Jacobs, Bockmuehl argues that 'the implied reader of the New Testament has a personal stake in the truthful reference of what it asserts'.[26] Thus the implied reader becomes the 'implied disciple'.[27] This formulation suggests a theological way of expressing that which is expressed hermeneutically by Briggs; that the texts themselves invite a response in the life of the reader. While Bockmuehl works with the language of wisdom rather than virtue,[28] the basic thrust of his argument is close to Briggs, because the text itself is allowed to shape its reader. In this respect we have moved beyond the concerns of virtue epistemology, in the sense that the kind of change in the reader that is being discussed extends beyond the realm of cognitive understanding, and into every aspect of life. In particular, if we understand the text as somehow inviting a response from the reader, then the very nature of interpretation might be understood to extend beyond verbal description. Furthermore, I will argue that the potential virtues described in scripture sit within a larger narrative that itself must take part in shaping the depiction of biblical reading. We will need to say more about how the virtues described in the text relate to the question of the activity of God.

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[25] Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 10.

[26] Markus N.A. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 69.

[27] Markus N.A. Bockmuehl, 'Reason, Wisdom and the Implied Disciple of Scripture', in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom*, ed. David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (London: SCM Press, 2003), 53-68.

[28] This distinction will be discussed later in this chapter, but it should be noted that Briggs, Treier and Fowl discuss wisdom within the framework of interpretive virtue.

iii) Interpretive Virtue and Good Interpretive Performance: Fowl, Jones and Nicholas Lash

Strictly speaking, even if the reader recognizes an invitation to follow the text, as suggested by Bockmuehl, they are still left with the choice of whether or not to take up this invitation. The choice to take it up, to become a 'disciple' stands behind a third strand of thought within the discussion of interpretive virtue, because this choice reshapes the reading situation. Stephen Fowl makes this point explicit in his dictionary article on interpretive virtue:

> The role of virtue in the theological interpretation of Scripture must be closely tied to the ends and purposes for which Christians are called to read Scripture. [...] Those ends and purposes are themselves tied to the ultimate end of the Christian life.[29]

This 'end' is described in a variety of ways through Christian tradition, but Fowl and Jones offer a broadly helpful start by arguing that 'Christian communities interpret Scripture [...] so that believers might live faithfully before God in the light of Jesus Christ'.[30] Alongside this, Fowl talks of interpretation as part of an 'ongoing journey into ever-deeper communion with God'.[31] Given this interpretive goal, the concept of interpretive virtue takes shape in two specific ways.

Firstly, Fowl has argued at various points for abandoning the concept of the meaning of a text. Following a broadly social-pragmatic line of thought, both he and Jones argue that different communities should be allowed to pursue their own 'interpretive interests' alongside one another.[32] This approach raises certain questions which will be discussed in depth in chapter three, but it does allow them to carve out a theoretical space for the specific task of reading the Bible as Christian scripture, without negating the value of other approaches. However, in arguing for a plurality of interpretive approaches, the question of whether or not 'anything goes' is

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[29] Stephen E. Fowl, 'Virtue', in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (London: SPCK, 2005), 837-839, (838).
[30] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 20.
[31] Fowl, 'Virtue', 838.
[32] See, Stephen E. Fowl, 'The Ethics of Interpretation, or What's left after the elimination of meaning?' in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in celebration of forty years of Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield*, ed. David J.A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl and Stanley A. Porter (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 380-385; Also, Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 15.

raised; are there ways of determining legitimate approaches to reading? The response to this question comes in the form of interpretive virtue. For a community to avoid reading scripture to support 'sinful practices', they must form readers in virtues that will lead to good readings of the text.[33] Methodologically, this means that any community can in theory choose its own interests and hence interpretive virtues, but Fowl and Jones turn their attention to the specific interests of the Church. Here, the virtues are themselves given shape by scripture because of the Church's specific canonical relationship to the biblical texts, and thus, following Bonhoeffer, Fowl and Jones argue that part of this formation comes from reading the text 'over and against' ourselves.[34] Once again, we are faced with a situation of circularity; the text must be allowed to form the virtues of the reader, but these virtues are themselves required for good interpretation. Thus, virtues are both 'the prerequisite for, and the result of, wise readings of Scripture'.[35] This raises a serious question about whether or not this circle is thus theoretically closed to new readers, a problem that will be discussed shortly, though Fowl and Jones do talk of the role of the Holy Spirit in formation as well. On this basis, I will argue that the circle remains open and laden with promise if the process is located within a broader picture of God's activity in the world. For now, it should be noted that the circularity is not a problem to the extent that for Fowl, Jones and other writers discussed here, reading scripture is generally understood as a long process of growth and rereading. In other words, the theological concept of interpretive virtue has less to do with a one-off reading of the Bible, and more to do with long term engagement and learning.

The second dimension within this perspective has to do with the specific ends of reading 'circumscribed' within the Church. For Fowl and Jones, interpretation is not only a matter of cognition or verbal commentary, but is also a matter of how life is lived. In this, they draw on Nicholas Lash, and thus implicitly on Gadamer. In Lash's view:

> The *poles* of Christian interpretation are not, in the last analysis, written texts [...] but patterns of human action: what was said and done and suffered, then,

[33] Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 60; Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 16-7.
[34] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 140.
[35] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 36

> by Jesus and his disciples, and what is said and done and suffered, now, by those who seek to share his obedience and his hope.[36]

Thus, for Lash, 'the fundamental form of the *Christian* interpretation of scripture is the life, activity and organization of the believing community'.[37] To develop this point, Lash uses the analogy of 'performance', suggesting that there are many texts, such as a play or piece of music, 'that only begin to deliver their meaning in so far as they are 'brought into play' through interpretive performance'.[38] This is only an analogy, and obviously the biblical texts are different kinds of texts to scores or scripts. But inasmuch as they deal with forms of life, Lash's analogy offers a helpful way of describing how appropriating those forms of life in the present, actually constitutes an interpretation of the text. The analogy is perhaps clearer with respect to texts that deal with ethics, because such texts more obviously suggest patterns of living. There must be some space for simply appreciating the truth of God as described in the texts. But even in this case, the life of the interpreter in some sense displays their own understanding of theological truth; a person's manner of living may tell us something about their understanding of even fairly abstract ideas.

Stephen Barton rightly notes that the analogy must not be allowed 'to obscure the distinction between acting and *play-acting*'.[39] Because musical performances are 'circumscribed in time', interpretive performance could appear to be a relatively mechanistic process of exegesis and application, one of the issues Lash was keen to avoid.[40] For the analogy to be of use, Barton argues that performance must be seen as a 'full time affair' and thus we must argue that the performative aspect of interpretation is not merely an add-on to the exegetical process.[41] To be sure, critical examination of the text may still be important, but it does not do all that must be done with the text if it is to be read as Christian

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[36] Lash, *Emmaus*, 42.
[37] Lash, *Emmaus*, 42.
[38] Lash, *Emmaus*, 41. See also Frances M. Young, *The Art of Performance: Towards a theology of Holy Scripture*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990).
[39] Stephen C. Barton, 'New Testament interpretation as performance', *SJT*, 52, 2 (1999), 179-208, (189).
[40] Barton, 'Performance', 185. This point echoes Gadamer's concept of application, which is an interwoven part of the whole interpretive process, rather than an activity that proceeds once interpretation has finished. See Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans., William Glen-Doepel, 2nd edn., (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979), especially 274-278.
[41] Barton, 'Performance',185.

scripture. This non-mechanistic understanding of 'performance' is summed up well by Rowan Williams:

> Christian interpretation is unavoidably engaged in 'dramatic' modes of reading: we are invited to identify ourselves in the story being contemplated, to re-appropriate who we are now, and who we shall or can be, in terms of the story. This has some affinity with what exegetical tradition has called 'moral' interpretation, in that the text is read as something requiring change in the reader, change of the kind depicted in the text itself.[42]

Williams' suggestion leads us into the question addressed by Fowl and Jones, concerning what counts as a good performance of scripture, and thus what it means to be a good performer. This question again shapes their description of interpretive virtue; if good interpretation consists in living well, then interpretive virtues are those characteristics which lead to good living in the light of the biblical text. This formulation is complex, in my judgement, because the word 'performance' does not quite capture the argument that reading, interpreting and living are fundamentally integrated. Furthermore, if the reading of scripture is integrated within a broader Christian understanding of the good in life, then virtues that lead to good interpretation are in any case likely to be virtues that lead to good living. For example, if love helps us read the text, and this leads to growth in love, then that love will also lead to better ways of living in general. To clarify this, Fowl and Jones offer the example of Bonhoeffer as an 'exemplary performer of Scripture'.[43] Their argument is that aspects of Bonhoeffer's life became a good performance of scripture because he had been formed in the virtues that would lead him to read or perform well. In turn, his reading would help form him into someone who would live well, specifically in a manner that fitted with the focus of the texts themselves.

As with Briggs and Bockmuehl, this perspective suggests that the virtues germane to biblical interpretation might be integrated with virtues germane to living the good life, from a Christian perspective. But by drawing on the concept of performance, Fowl and Jones argue that the reading of scripture is not an end in itself, but an activity which nurtures new life and communion with God. This seems

[42] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 50.
[43] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 136.

to me to be essential to an account of interpreting the Bible theologically as Christian scripture. Furthermore, the concept of 'good performance' will aid the dialogue with Black liberation theology, given its emphasis on praxis. However, while Fowl and Jones do talk about the question and activity of God, because they draw on a more pragmatic view of the text they leave little space for considering how the text might be heard outside of Christian communities, and thus also whether God might speak through the text independent of community formation in virtue. This problem will be addressed shortly.

iv) Initial Comments

Thus far I have outlined three strands of thought that give rise to arguments for interpretive virtue; the concerns of virtue epistemology, the nature of the text itself and the relationship between the text and the life of Christian discipleship. These perspectives are by no means mutually exclusive, and most of the writers discussed directly or indirectly interweave them. Indeed, I have noted potential problems created by taking individual strands on their own, but this has been done to illustrate the breadth of the discussion. The main point at this stage has been to highlight how the stated goal of biblical interpretation shapes the concept of interpretive virtue. It has been suggested that interpreting the Bible as Christian scripture requires some account of interpretation that extends beyond the cognitive dimension, but without eclipsing it. At the end of this chapter, I will return to this question with the aim of focusing the question of interpretive goals around the framework of hope. We must also consider whether or not the Bible has any potential to be 'heard' independently of the virtues of the reader. And, because virtue theory tends to focus on the question of human formation, we will need to consider in more detail how the activity of God changes the picture. These questions will be addressed shortly by discussing three main criticisms of interpretive virtues. Firstly however, I shall examine two suggested interpretive virtues to explore how they operate in practice; love and wisdom. This will allow us to explore the concept of interpretive virtue in more detail, but will also open up various points germane to the discussion of hope.

The importance of love in Christian theology is so uncontroversial that it frees us to explore how virtues operate in interpretation, and thus what is and is not at stake in following its guidance.[44] Focusing on wisdom allows us to explore the question of how appropriate virtues theory as such is to the biblical texts. Fowl, Treier, Briggs and Vanhoozer describe wisdom as one interpretive virtue, though with some kind of regulative role. In this respect they either implicitly or explicitly draw on Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*. But David Ford talks of interpretive wisdom by bypassing the field of virtue ethics altogether, highlighting the fact that the Bible has its own distinct flavours of wisdom.

2.2. Love as an interpretive virtue

Though a number of interpretive virtues could be used to explore the working of this theory in practice, love commends itself because of its widespread discussion in the literature. This probably also stems from its own theological heritage, as the summation of the law (Matthew 22.37-40) and as the greatest of what would become Paul's three theological virtues (1 Corinthians 13.12). However, it is worth noting that there are at least three relatively distinct proposals that come under the heading of 'interpretive charity' or love. Firstly, Jacobs, Briggs and Vanhoozer argue that love should be extended towards the text. Secondly, while Fowl and Jones also discuss virtues as pertaining to the text, their discussion of love revolves around being charitable towards other interpreters.[45] There are good reasons within virtue theory itself for suggesting that these two should go hand in hand, but it is worth at least noting the distinction. Many writers draw on Augustine concerning the relationship between love and interpretation, but it is less commonly noted that Augustine proposes a third perspective. Famously, he argues that:

> If it seems to you that you have understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up this

[44] Having said this, care is needed in articulating exactly how love is understood.
[45] L. Gregory Jones, 'Embodying Scripture in the Community of Faith' in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 143-159, (158); Fowl, *Engaging*, especially 83-96.

> twin love of God and neighbour, then you have not yet understood them. If on the other hand you have made judgments about them that are helpful for building up this love, but for all that have not said what the author you have been reading actually meant in that place, then your mistake is not pernicious, and you certainly cannot be accused of lying.[46]

Here, the focus is on the cultivation of love as the end, rather than the means, of reading scripture. Again there is no inherent theoretical incompatibility between Augustine's perspective and the others, but the distinction helps to clarify the varying emphases within the modern discussion. Augustine's remarks also suggest a fourth dimension to interpretive love, namely the focus of loving God in the act of reading.

i) Love towards the text

As noted, Alan Jacobs argues that if love is required in every aspect of Christian life, then this includes reading. To love is to situate oneself in a certain way in relation to others, where needs and weaknesses are shared. This point is emphasized by Jacobs to distinguish between the Aristotelian virtue of friendship, and the view of friendship derived from a Christian understanding of love. Thus, whereas for Aristotle friendship was for the 'aristocratic few', who sought friends to share and complement their strengths, the Christian community is open to anyone, and involves a sharing of both strengths and weaknesses.[47] This relatively unbounded view of love assumes a stance of reciprocal need against self-sufficiency; it is the recognition of human value. This leads Jacobs to suggest that interpretive charity begins with the possibility of receiving 'a poem, a story – a work – as a gift'.[48] Implicitly then, there is also a giver, and charity must be extended towards them, especially with the humility to recognize that they may at times have more to

[46] Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana: 1.40*, published in *The Works of Saint Augustine: a translation for the 21st Century, Part 1: Books*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, 23 vols, (New York: New City Press, 1996), 11:124.
[47] Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 48-9.
[48] Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 81.

say than does the reader.[49] Notably this perspective is fairly close to Barth and Bonhoeffer. Barth argued against the empathetic hermeneutical tradition on the basis that its desire to dig under the surface of the author was built on an 'anthropology based on alienation'.[50] The concomitant failure to allow the author to speak for themselves led Barth to exclaim 'What lack of love!'[51] With regard to scripture, Briggs makes a similar argument with regard to the text of Ruth. He argues that as 'Ruth pledges loyalty to Naomi, so the interpreter might pledge loyalty to the text: to go where it goes in the sense of following its own terms'.[52] If love is a kind of fidelity to another, so interpretive charity offers fidelity to the text as other.

At this point, interpretive love may seem hopelessly naïve given the many problematic texts in and out of the Bible. However, Jacobs and Briggs address this issue directly. Jacobs notes that some texts are not so benign and thus do not feel like gifts or neighbours. Yet he offers a way of construing problematic texts as potential bearers of gifts, despite their presenting difficulty. In an 'interlude' he offers the example of the critic Jane Tompkins, who was able to discover some value in the character of Buffalo Bill, despite the latter representing violence, subjugation, and the oppression of women.[53] Tompkins rightly never came to accept these things, but in considering him more carefully '"came to love Buffalo Bill"'[54] discovering more appreciable qualities such as hope and generosity. Jacobs suggests that 'Tompkins's charity consists in the wholeness of her attention, her refusal to sacrifice attention to the one truth so that another may be privileged. [...] Had Tompkins been more decisive, her essay perhaps would have been more coherent, but less charitable and less truthful'.[55]

Jacobs' argument is that a hermeneutic of love is directly at odds with an *a priori* hermeneutic of suspicion, because love invites attention with trust, whilst, in

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[49] Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 75.
[50] Richard Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 206.
[51] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. 1, Part 2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G.T. Thompson and Harold Knight, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 465.
[52] Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 153.
[53] Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 113-4.
[54] Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 117; Quotation from Jane Tompkins, 'At the Buffalo Bill Museum – June 1988', in *The Best American Essays 1991*, ed. Joyce Carol Oates (New York: Tickner and Fields, 1991), originally published: *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 89, 3 (1990), 525-545.
[55] Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 118.

view of his discussion of Nietzsche's later writing, suspicion comes from fear. However, it is specifically the '*a priorism*' of suspicion that is critiqued, rather than suspicion itself; '[a] healthy suspicion, bounded by a commitment to the love of my neighbour, is more properly called discernment'.[56] In a manner similar to Barth's 'emergency clause'[57] the loving reader works with an *a priori* assumption of trust, which can be broken if the text proves untrustworthy, but the movement is in that order, and not the reverse. The *a priori* assumption of trust is rooted in the hope that love will prove fruitful.[58]

ii) Love towards other interpreters

Much of what has been said so far applies to Fowl's work, and so a brief note is in order regarding his view of interpretive charity. His primary concern is to argue that interpreters must act charitably towards one another, particularly in the course of interpretive disagreement. This involves close attention to differences of opinion, willingness to listen patiently to other points of view, and effort to render another's viewpoint as intelligible as possible. This last point derives from close attention to the varied contexts within which interpreters work, and thus the various ways in which rationality is construed. Fowl follows Donald Davidson in assuming that the ability to recognize another's language *as language* provides the theoretical basis for translatability, and thus understanding.[59] Thus in the realm of interpretive discourse, the ability to recognize that two competing projects share anything at all in common, is the beginning of mutual understanding. Charity is the virtue that allows an interpreter to patiently persist with the possibility of mutual understanding.

In practice, this means that charitable interpreters take time to find common ground where possible, and to take the other viewpoints seriously. Fowl argues that in his disagreement with the Donatists, Augustine displays this kind of interpretive charity, highlighting the resulting point that being charitable does not equate to

[56] Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 87-88. See also Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 154-166.
[57] Burnett, *Karl Barth's Exegesis*, 196-207.
[58] Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 89.
[59] Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 88-90.

'being nice'.[60] While Fowl's basis for being charitable derives from Christian commitments, it is worth noting that his argument could apply to historical-critical debates without being seen as controversial.

iii) Love and God

Despite the theological focus on love, the argument so far effectively applies to any text, but Jacobs' comment about extending charity to the author refocuses the question raised from Augustine about how the love of God relates to biblical interpretation. Bonhoeffer responds to this point with characteristic boldness:

> When a dear friend speaks a word to us, do we subject it to analysis? No, we simply accept it, and then it resonates inside us for days. The word of someone we love opens itself up to us the more we "ponder it in our hearts," as Mary did.[61]

Of course, this raises questions about the relationship between divine and human authorship, and that takes us beyond the scope of this thesis. But bearing in mind the caveats of Jacobs, Briggs and Barth, this point seems germane to the question of what it means to hear God in the process of reading. It might remain the case that hearing God actually requires reading against the grain of a text, but this only makes sense within a broader economy of love. However to make the move from being generally charitable in the course of reading, to seeking to love God and live in the light of God's love, is a specific facet of thinking theologically about interpretation. Anthony Thiselton highlights this point with respect to pastoral theology. He notes that pastoral theology is influenced by 'criteria of relevance', where the focus of study on sociology, psychology and so on may be determined by what counts as relevant information in any given context. Following Ronald Cox, Thisleton argues that criteria of relevance are socially influenced, and thus are always open to change. To explain this point more clearly, he suggests the example of a couple from

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[60] Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 91-95, especially 92.
[61] Quotation from a letter to Rudiger Schleicher (April 1936**)** in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, ed. and trans. David Gracie, (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1986), 44.

relatively different social groups falling in love. The process of loving another person leads the criteria of relevance of each to expand and change, as they learn to appreciate what counts to the other. But by bringing in the notion of love, Thiselton's argument takes a decisive turn:

> *In theological terms, however, love represents the major transforming force of all systems and criteria of relevance. Interests which have hitherto gathered around the self as a system of self-centred relevance begin to be re-grouped and re-ranked round the self of another, or even the Other.* [...] In this case, the outgoing love from the heart of God to his creation *will constitute a new motive-force that re-defines criteria of relevance for the believer: the goal of transformation into the image of Christ is to see the world through the eyes and interests of God's purposes for the world* [italics original].[62]

iv) Conclusion

Thiselton's argument marks a decisive shift in the discussion so far. While the abstract notion of allowing love to become a guiding principle seems methodologically controversial, much of what has been said by Jacobs, Briggs and Fowl would not be controversial in practice. This is because love, in their accounts, either of the text of the interpretive opponent, equates to close attention and a willingness to listen. Thus it can be seen that quite often, interpretive virtue seems more problematic in its abstract form than it will in practice; even if the conceptual work relies on theological presuppositions, much of the content will be accessible to a wider group of readers.

The more difficult turn occurs when God is brought into the picture as both the object and subject of love, and as one who decisively shifts our understanding of the human situation. The difficulty takes the form of not only addressing the character of the reader, but of shaping the role of interpretation itself around

[62] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 609.

theological concerns about love and God. However, because such concerns have to do with the fundamental nature of reality, they must be allowed to speak to the question of how the Bible is interpreted as scripture. Finally, by way of anticipation, Jacobs and Briggs show that love does not always require naïve assent to a text, and this in part derives from the reality that not all texts give life. But also, our love is not perfect. In this tension, hope suggests itself as a way of characterising the reader seeking to read in love, fully aware of their need to grow in that virtue, and holding the expectation that such growth is possible.

2.3. Virtue, *Phronesis* and Wisdom

Reading the Bible wisely is widely recommended by a number of writers surveyed. Wisdom is not only offered as one interpretive virtue, but is quite often giving prominence as an overarching regulative virtue.[63] There may be several reasons for this, but clearly the notion of wisdom offers something of a bridge between Aristotelian and biblical traditions. However there are clear differences and so this discussion will allow us to disentangle the Aristotelian and biblical views of wisdom, thereby addressing the question of how appropriate virtue ethics as such is to the biblical texts. The key distinction will be that as the tradition develops, biblical wisdom becomes increasingly associated with divine gift.

i) Phronesis

Daniel Treier argues that taking account of the limits of human knowledge, 'theology's prime epistemological challenge is understanding the role of Christian practical reason, or *phronesis*, in biblical interpretation for the Word of God'.[64] *Phronesis* is one of Aristotle's qualities of the mind which is focused on discerning action that leads to the good in life. Both Treier and Vanhoozer modify the concept

[63] For example, Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 100-101; Jones, 'Formed and Transformed', 32.
[64] Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God*, 104; *Phronesis* may be variously rendered as prudence, practical reason or practical wisdom.

with a specifically Christian emphasis, such that for Vanhoozer, the 'good' is understood through the gospel.[65] Treier maintains the Aristotelian distinction between higher order wisdom (*Sophia*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and thus argues that 'Christian *Sophia* takes shape with reference to Jesus Christ, so that *phronesis* must understand present contexts of obedience in the light of his work *pro nobis,* and in view of his pattern to which we are being conformed'.[66] Thus his view of *phronesis* is 'Christianized' by drawing on Philippians, the one place in the New Testament where the language is prominent. Fowl also argues that Christian *phronesis* is best understood through Philippians, and thus with Treier he argues that it must be characterised by humility. Judgements on how to live are counted wise to the extent that they are in continuity with the humble and self-giving character of Christ.[67] As a result, scripture is interpreted wisely when the character of the interpreter reflects that of Christ, and thus a wise interpretation of scripture will raise practical and specific approaches to living well in the light of the text. Put simply, this Christianized *phronesis* describes the ability to make sound judgements in novel or ambiguous situations, judgements that reflect the character of Jesus.

While the idea of prudence or practical wisdom seems self-evidently good, it remains unclear as to whether *phronesis* as such is the best term for describing this faculty. Colin Gunton suggests that Christ's humility is so far removed from the world of Aristotle that his actions can hardly be described as resulting from *phronesis*.[68] It is perhaps this distinction that leads to Paul's description of the cross as foolishness (1 Corinthians 1), and this at least raises the question of whether conventional presuppositions about wisdom are necessarily compatible with a Christian perspective. Moreover, this draws into focus the more general question of how well virtue ethics as a distinct area fits with the biblical texts.

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[65] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 324.
[66] Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God*, 161.
[67] Fowl, *Engaging*, 193-6.
[68] Colin Gunton, 'Christ the Wisdom of God: A Study in Divine and Human Action', in *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?* ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 249-261, (254).

ii) Wisdom and the Bible

In addressing the above question, Briggs notes that the biblical wisdom traditions do resonate with virtue ethics in their general concern for the development of character.[69] Similarly, Ellen Davis has highlighted the use of *phronesis* in the LXX, and demonstrates several points of contact between classical virtue ethics and Proverbs among other wisdom texts.[70] However, both writers recognize that these resonances do not equate to a theoretical take on virtue ethics. Even so, while the Bible may lack a comprehensive theory of virtue, it does not follow that one cannot discern coherent portraits of desirable characteristics. Rather, the main problem with attaching the conceptual framework of virtue theory to the Bible comes with the question of how one's character is developed.

The answer to this question seems to develop through the tradition. Bockmuehl argues that in the earliest biblical wisdom texts, wisdom is to be sought and may be found. Even at this stage the pursuit of wisdom is a struggle, but by the time of the post-exilic wisdom texts, wisdom is more specifically depicted as a gift to be sought *from God*.[71] In the New Testament, wisdom finds its locus in Jesus Christ, especially in the gospel traditions, thus heightening the sense that wisdom is revealed as a gift by God.[72] Charting the tradition in this way allows Bockmuehl to suggest that for the biblical and patristic writers, 'the meaning of the sacred text is understood not primarily by creative genius or scientific dissection, but by the interplay of divine gift and human delight'.[73] Thus the reading of Scripture is properly undertaken with a receptive and open spirit, open to transformation and formation in wisdom by God. In turn, '[t]he object of biblical interpretation [...] is the interpreter as much as it is the text'.[74]

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[69] Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 29-32, noting that Wisdom 8.7 makes this link explicit.
[70] Ellen F. Davis, 'Preserving Virtues: Renewing the Tradition of the Sages', in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. William P. Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 183-201, (186-195).
[71] Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 79-80, referencing Wisdom 7.7; 8.21; 9.1-2.
[72] Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 80-81; cf. J.D.G. Dunn, 'Jesus: Teacher of Wisdom or Wisdom Incarnate?' in *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?* ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 75-92.
[73] Bockmuehl 'Reason, Wisdom', 63.
[74] Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 92.

Briggs's discussion of wisdom focuses on detailed exegesis of Solomon's wisdom in 1 Kings 3, and displays a balance between viewing wisdom as a human pursuit and as a divine gift. As with Bockmuehl, his approach ultimately bypasses the discussion of virtue theory by prioritizing exegesis, and thus he offers no theoretical discussion of *phronesis* as a virtue *per se*. His depiction of exegetical wisdom nonetheless resonates with Treier's work, but is perhaps clearer due to its narrative focus. In particular, Briggs notes the many indeterminacies faced by Solomon, and draws parallels with the significant indeterminacies in the relevant texts. Thus exegetical wisdom becomes a matter of discerning which textual difficulties matter, distinguishing between 'what can and cannot be known' and finding a practical and faithful way to navigate interpretive disputes.[75] The acknowledgement of potential indeterminacies coheres with Fowl's perspective, but in Briggs's case it leaves space for the use of standard critical tools when the text seems clearer. Again, Briggs's portrait of wisdom in operation is perhaps uncontroversial, but the idea that such wisdom is received as a gift is not. Furthermore, the notion of divine gift moves us away from pure virtue ethics and will be picked up shortly in our broader evaluation of this field.

Independently of the concept of interpretive virtue, David Ford also argues for a 'wisdom interpretation' of scripture, suggesting that '*Christian Theology requires an engagement with scripture whose primary desire is for the wisdom of God in life now* [italics original]'.[76] Similarly, '[h]ow one interprets scripture wisely within the horizon of the purposes of God and God's relation to 'everything' is perhaps the core issue for theology'.[77] Once again we are aware of the cyclical nature of growing through biblical interpretation, and in this case, Ford foregrounds the presence and activity of God in the process. Again, Ford's view of wisdom involves navigating indeterminacies, but also the specific and infinitely varied interactions between the 'ramifications' of the text, and the realities of human existence.[78] In *Christian Wisdom*, Ford focuses on moments of 'crying out' in the Bible and contemporary life, suggesting that such expressions carry ramifications beyond words. The culmination of these cries is the cry of Jesus on the cross (Luke

[75] Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 86-100.
[76] Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 52.
[77] David F. Ford, *Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 157.
[78] Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 33-34.

23.46). As a result, these texts can never be explained by abstractions without loss, and thus their canonization constitutes a permanent invitation to 'reread' them.[79] Furthermore, Ford argues that '[i]f Jesus embodies wisdom, then wisdom is vitally concerned to hear and respond with compassion to the cries of those who are suffering'.[80] This suggests that the wise interpretation of the Bible must occur with some sense of reference to the realities of the human condition and present sufferings.

This perspective has three important implications. Firstly, wise interpretation might extend beyond the navigation of textual difficulties into the navigation of textual interactions with human experience. This is to stake much on the contemporary relevance and truth of the scriptures' witness. Even accounting for problematic texts, any theological account of biblical interpretation requires some presuppositions along this line. Secondly, Ford argues that for the theologian seeking wisdom, 'the core activity is crying out for it'.[81] This coheres with themes in the wisdom of James[82] and appears as an attempt to balance the roles of self-formation and gift. Wisdom here is a gift from God, and the human response is described as a matter of stance rather than practice *per se*. This leads to the third point that as a gift, wisdom may be bestowed on anyone, a point explicit in Luke 10.21-22 or 1 Corinthians 1-3.[83] Thus, a Christian perspective on wise reading must take account of the possibility that anyone can theoretically display exegetical wisdom, but that God has a history of bestowing true wisdom of those whom the world might deem unlikely recipients. Again, this point will be elaborated shortly.

iii) Conclusion

By focusing on wisdom it has been shown that a biblically informed approach to interpretive virtue must take account of the activity of God as giver of wisdom. As a result, any virtue ethics that works predominantly with the notion of

[79] Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 66, 89.
[80] Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 20, 63.
[81] Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 51.
[82] E.g. James 1.5.
[83] See Ford, *Shaping Theology*, 159-161; Ford, *Christian Wisdom* 350-379.

human formation *apart* from the activity of God will be theologically deficient. This does not rule out the usefulness of virtue theory, but suggests that it requires some critical engagement, a subject to which we now turn. Before proceeding, it is worth noting that the pursuit of wisdom involves a sense of orientation towards future growth, and this again suggests that the pursuit of virtue in general calls forth hope in the seeker. Indeed, as with love, the very notion of interpretive wisdom requires a view to the future, because such a 'virtue' is not something that can be simply 'applied' in the moment. If such transformation comes as a gift, then the hope of being formed is staked on the promise of God. Either way, this is suggestive of the idea that hope is a crucial animating part of the pilgrimage of human growth. Thus as we now discuss three criticisms of interpretive virtue, it will be argued that a focus on hope may clarify what is at stake.

3. Three Criticisms of Interpretive Virtue

So far I have described three perspectives that have led to the discussion of interpretive virtue, and two specific virtues in practice. At several points critical issues have been raised, and in this section I will address them more directly in turn. In each case it will be argued that a focus on hope in interpretation will allow us to address the questions put to the broader field. This is not to argue that hope will become the definitive concept for biblical interpretation, or even the definitive interpretive virtue, but more modestly that it offers one way of dealing with some of the questions arising from our discussion that draws on an important strand of Christian theology.

i) Scripture is not for the virtuous, but sinners

Recently a number of writers have argued that biblical interpretation is best learned in dialogue with the 'saints of the Church', and this includes scholars in the field of interpretive virtue who offer the saints as 'exemplars'.[84] As Fowl puts it:

> Given that Christians are called to interpret Scripture as part of their ongoing journey into ever-deeper communion with God, it is not surprising that those who have grown and advanced in virtue will tend to be masterful interpreters of Scripture.[85]

But does this simply produce a shift in interpretive elitism, from the academic scholar to the saint? If Jesus came 'to call not the righteous, but sinners' (Matthew 9.13), then is not the implied reader of scripture a sinner, rather than a saint?

Something like this critique is in view in Rowland and Robert's book *The Bible for Sinners*. Early on, they suggest that:

> If it comes to a disagreement, the question is raised: what right do sinners and nobodies, individuals with their own agendas – people, in fact, in similar positions to that of Jesus – have to interpret the Bible in the light of their own experience? Shouldn't we get out interpretations from those above and before us, our moral or religious betters?[86]

The answer is a resounding 'no', and setting aside the slightly subversive tone of the argument, they raise a very important point. If, from a theological perspective, scripture is part of God's activity in redeeming humankind, then is not its message intended for those who are not virtuous at all? If so, then it becomes self-defeating to argue that it can only be interpreted by those who are already virtuous, and thus seemingly not in need of God's grace. Obviously this dualistic description overstates the case, but the basic point remains. If God's message is for sinners, then it is

[84] E.g. Jones, 'Embodying', 146.
[85] Fowl, 'Virtue', 838.
[86] Christopher Rowland and Jonathan Roberts, *The Bible for Sinners: Interpretation in the Present Time*, (London: SPCK, 2008), 5.

pointless - perhaps evil - to suggest that they (or rather, we) are somehow incapable of hearing it.

A similar point is raised by Briggs and Treier, with regard to the presenting circularity of virtue ethics. Treier notes that classical Aristotelian virtue ethics suffered from a kind of 'chicken and egg' problem, whereby only one who was virtuous was able to pursue the virtues. In this context, the school of virtue becomes very much a closed community.[87] Similarly Briggs notes that the necessity of interpretive virtue runs the risk of looking like an 'entrance requirement' such that the formation of virtue becomes a task prior to the actual moment of reading a text.[88] Even if it is accepted that there is value in the concept of a virtuous cycle of interpretation, the question of how one enters that cycle is nonetheless begged. It is my view that this question can only be addressed by locating this movement within a framework of divine grace.

Firstly, in the above quotation, Rowland and Roberts saw off the branch on which their argument rests by erroneously referring to 'sinners' and 'nobodies' in the same sentence. Implicitly equating these two groups ironically gives the impression of upholding the perspective not of Jesus, but of his opponents. The 'sinners' to whom Jesus refers are quite often not 'nobodies' but moralising religious leaders or the relatively wealthy.[89] But more than this, it is often the marginalised or outsiders that turn out to display wisdom or virtue of some kind.[90] Rooted in biblical tradition, interpretive virtue cannot be the preserve of the 'officially righteous' but as a fruit of divine grace, it is open to anyone.

Even so, this still fails to address the question of whether the circle of interpretive virtue leaves the Bible closed. If the formation of virtue is simply left to the imminent capacities of the reader and their community, then this risk stands, though in practice it seems highly obtuse to argue that someone who has not undergone formation is unable to understand anything *at all* in a text. Though Hauerwas's polemical style comes close, I am not aware that anyone has argued for

[87] Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice*, (Nottingham: IVP Apollos, 2008), 93.
[88] Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 208.
[89] Note that in the context of Jesus comment at Matthew 9.13, he is dining with tax-collectors who, however reviled, had some means of power. There is a degree of irony in Jesus' reference to the righteous in the light of, for example, the parable of tax collector and Pharisee (Luke 18.9-14).
[90] E.g. Matthew 8.5-14; 15.21-28; 18.1-5.

virtue as an 'entry requirement' for understanding.[91] Formation of interpretive virtue is better depicted as a refining and deepening of the interpreter's faculties of judgement, the 'transformation of the mind' (Romans 12.1-2). My argument however, is that the circle is opened and held, so to speak, by the grace of God. Rowland and Roberts are entirely correct to assert that the testimony of scripture is for all, and this is best understood as a result of the gracious redemption of the world by God, in Christ. But to talk of redemption is to highlight the point that even if Christ calls sinners, he does not do so only to leave the human condition unchanged. The call of the gospel is in some sense a call to transformation and growth, or in the language of much of Christian tradition, discipleship.

Thus Treier in particular argues that any Christian description of virtue must begin with the breaking in of divine grace, and the call of Christ to a life of discipleship.[92] This discipleship is not only a pattern of human action, but also the 'first-fruits' of the Holy Spirit. This point will be elaborated shortly in balancing the concepts of formation and transformation, but the point at this stage is that locating the process of reading within the economy of divine grace allows us to retain the specific idea that anyone may read scripture, and in some sense hear its message, or hear God. Interpretive virtue then becomes a framework for describing the specific act of discipleship that relates to the ongoing reading and hearing of scripture.[93]

Even with the specific interruption of God's activity, this process of reading occurs in time, and thus retains a view to the future. This is because, as I will argue in chapter two, God's activity also has a view to the future in terms of the transformation of the human condition. To read the Bible theologically as Christian scripture is thus to situate oneself in this narrative of God's transformation and renewal of the world, and so this approach to biblical interpretation is undertaken in a specific kind of hope. The major task of this thesis is to explore how this narrative of hope shapes the situation in which we come to scripture, and furthermore how *being hopeful* shapes the interpretive activity of the reader. On the specific question at hand, the virtue of hope carries with it the sense that no human can claim to be

[91] Hauerwas speaks of 'Taking the Bible Away' from those whose habits are 'far too corrupt'. Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 15-18.
[92] E.g. Treier, *Theological Interpretation*, 93.
[93] This will be elaborated in chapter three.

virtuous in some complete way, and thus the interpretation of scripture cannot be fenced off as the preserve of this or that group of readers. Equally, it will be argued that Christian hope begins with the gracious action of God, and therefore does not depend on the prior condition of the person. The concept of hope may thus carry the significance of personal growth alongside the insistence that the testimony of scripture remains open to all.

ii) Virtue Theory and Public Agreement

In a brief but significant comment, Christopher Seitz complains that Fowl offers no 'comprehensive, public, agreed-upon statement of what actually counts for virtue'.[94] One could respond by suggesting that there is very little left in biblical studies that could be described as 'comprehensive' or 'agreed-upon', but Seitz's point is worth considering. It was noted that many of the writers surveyed work with different virtue lists, and thus Seitz rightly raises the question of how one should decide what counts as a virtue. This concern is not trivial; humility was not always a virtue, and in contemporary biblical studies the virtue of trust, even with caveats, may prove problematic for those engaged in ideological criticism.

Ellen Davis rightly points out that classically, the virtues were understood to operate as a whole, and that while 'the biblical writers are less inclined to draw fixed categories for the various dispositions they commend, they also strive to represent a moral unity'.[95] Virtues such as love or wisdom have such a strong basis in the Bible and tradition that they are unlikely to cause conceptual problems as good characteristics, even if their relationship to interpretation does. But the more detailed the character portrait becomes, the more likely we are to find disagreement about what constitutes good moral character, and this is likely to stem for varying pre-theoretic, and theoretical notions of what is good.

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[94] Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 29.
[95] Davis, 'Preserving Virtues', 195.

Caution is thus needed, but I would concede that the search for a comprehensive account of good moral character is likely to be in vain, and at the very least would lead to the endless deferral of actually reading the texts. But if the interpretive virtues are themselves working concepts, in the sense that they are open to refinement and discussion, then this actually allows us to make some progress with the activity of interpreting the text. This seems to be necessitated by the very fact that if interpreters need formation because they fail to make wise judgements, so too our judgments about wisdom or the content of the virtues must be provisional and open to correction. But given this, it is perhaps unwise to hang too much on virtue theory as an abstract concept, simply because scripture seems to question such abstractions. Rather, what we are faced with is a set of character portraits and ideals that operate through specific contexts, and thus the process of discerning what it means to live well is an ever growing and reforming act of engagement.

In short the process is necessarily heuristic, but this is by no means problematic within a theological and hermeneutical framework that recognizes our own human limitations. In this respect, the decision to consider the virtue of hope in the context of interpretation is far from arbitrary, even if it is provisional. One could appeal to the tradition of regarding hope as a theological virtue, following Augustine, and picked up more recently by Vanhoozer.[96] However, the main focus of my thesis is that hope offers one particularly significant dimension to understanding the theological narrative within which we come to interpret the Bible as Christian scripture. This has to do with the argument that there is hope in God for all for growth in character, and hence deeper understanding and more fruitful interpretation. As with love, hope cannot strictly command public agreement, but its centrality to Christian theology suggests that it is a viable option for a compelling account of interpretive virtue.

[96] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?* 376.

iii) Formation and Transformation

The use of virtue ethics brings with it the idea that moral growth is a matter of steady progress through various habits and practices. This emphasis is particularly strong in Fowl and Jones, and at least implicit in Briggs, Bockmuehl and Treier. But even if some biblical texts display an interest in human character, it is not necessarily the case that they portray character development through human formation. For example, John Barton argues that even in the wisdom texts, which display the closest affinity to virtue ethics, human character seems essentially 'fixed'. The only means of transference from one course of life to another is 'conversion'.[97] This of course has close affinities with more Protestant concerns in the realm of ethics, and is certainly reflected in the language of John Webster. He shares concerns over the effects of the human condition on interpretation, but is unconvinced by the concept of interpretive virtue:

> Contemporary theories of hermeneutical 'virtues' move us in something of the right direction, especially insofar as they insist that fitting reading of a canonical text requires the acquisition of moral and spiritual habits and not simply right critical technology. But it remains doubtful whether virtue theory can successfully break free of the tug towards immanence; these accounts of hermeneutical activity still threaten to leave us within the relatively self-enclosed worlds of readerly psyches and habit-forming communities. If what has been said so far about the place of the canon in a network of soteriological relations between God and humanity is of any value, then it will require a much more vigorously charismatic-eschatological understanding of habits and their acquisition than has been offered in the quasi-Aristotelian accounts so far produced.[98]

Webster's concern lies with his understanding that the Bible, as Christian scripture, is 'annexed' to God's saving and transforming activity. Thus '[r]eading Scripture is an episode in the history of sin and its overcoming; and overcoming sin is the sole

[97] John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 67-68.
[98] Webster, *Word and Church*, 45.

work of Christ and the Spirit'.[99] Interestingly, he does concede that there is value in various habits and practices of the Church, but his argument draws on the same basic issue raised by Barton, namely that the texts themselves give far more weight to God's transforming activity, over the formative effect of human communities. To the extent that this is correct, one door is closed for biblical interpretation, and another opens. On the one hand if humans have little control over their character development, then the only hope for good reading is to wait on God. If this is the case, then however accurate our understanding of the relationship between character and interpretation, all this study can do is clarify why interpretation is difficult; it would offer nothing in terms of what interpreters could actually do to better their reading. On the other hand, if good character, and hence good interpretation, is a matter of divine grace, then as noted in our discussion of Rowland and Roberts, good biblical interpretation may not be the preserve of any one group of readers. The social disruption of much of God's activity suggests that good reading may be found where it is not conventionally expected. However, while I wish to maintain this latter point as a crucial part of the thesis, the picture is more nuanced than a formation-transformation dualism allows. In fact, there are good reasons for maintaining that God's transforming action takes flesh in human action, and that to oppose transformation and formation is to create a false dichotomy.

Firstly, Barton notes that while the Old Testament does not conceptualize human moral growth, its narrative character portraits capture the complexity of moral living highlighted by virtue ethics.[100] In this sense, there may be an implicit commendation of moral growth through real human examples. Briggs endorses this view and thus adopts it as a framework for his whole study. He points out that though certain texts do enshrine a wise/foolish dichotomy, the narrative portraits show that the wise do sometimes act foolishly (as in the case of Solomon or David).[101] Helpfully, he thus concludes that wisdom 'does not serve as a form of insurance against ever going wrong again'.[102] There is a subtle difference however, between moral ambiguity and moral growth. Briggs shows that in practice, biblical characters are rarely entirely wise or foolish, but this is not the same thing as

[99] John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 27, 88; Cf. Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God*, 87; Treier, *Theological Interpretation*, 93.
[100] Barton, *Old Testament Ethics*, 71-3.
[101] Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 33-34; Barton, *Old Testament Ethics*, 72-3.
[102] Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 96.

showing that a foolish character may gradually become wise. Even so, against Barton there are clear indicators that certain courses of action are expected to lead to growth in wisdom.[103] Furthermore, even when wisdom is received as a gift, the fact that it does not operate automatically suggests that divine transformation and human formation are not incompatible.

Somewhat ironically, the New Testament text that has sparked perhaps the most discussion over the nature of scripture argues that one of its purposes is 'training in righteousness' (*paideian tēn en dikaiosunē*, 2 Timothy 3.16). There is no need to raise anxieties about a righteousness that can be 'learned', lest we slip into the mire of debates about justification. The thrust of the text is towards growing into that which has already been made real in Christ.[104] In this manner, N.T. Wright represents a number of scholars who have argued that within a framework of grace one still finds character forming habits and practices commended in the New Testament.[105] Having said that, he correctly highlights differences between the Christian and Aristotelian traditions; in particular, the Aristotelian virtue of pride becomes a vice in Christianity, replaced by the virtue of humility. But this seems to beg an etymological question; if, as Wright points out, 'virtue' has something to do with 'strengths' that lead to the good, what are we to make of Paul's emphasis on his weaknesses?[106] This question has obviously produced a great deal of discussion from various perspectives, and it does not negate the value of human effort, even if only as a response to divine grace, held within the activity of the Spirit. But it does suggest that an interpreter could never legitimately claim virtue in support of their argument. In this respect, Fowl's emphasis on interpretive humility seems entirely right. Given this, perhaps the primary practice of virtue in the New Testament is prayer, as Ford

[103] The evidence of Proverbs is ambiguous, but I think that Barton overemphasizes its dualism. Barton suggests that growth in wisdom is still a closed circle to those who are already wise, as in the Greek view. See for example 1.7. There are, however, hints of an alternative view in the text, e.g. Proverbs 1.3-4, 8.5, 9.4-6. Even so, it remains unclear as to whether passages like 1.20-33 are pure denunciations, or implicit invitations.

[104] This is not to suggest that the phrase implies a virtue perspective as such, but that it does presuppose the possibility of growth and change. On the scope of *paideia* and its cognates, see, for example, William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 423.

[105] N.T. Wright, 'Faith, Virtue, Justification, and the Journey to Freedom' in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays*, ed. J. Ross Wagner, C. Kavin Rowe and A. Katherine Grieb (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 472-497. Wright's examples include Romans 5.4, 14.19 and 2 Cor. 10.5. Others might include Colossians 3.5-17 and Philippians 4.8-9.

[106] 2 Corinthians 11.21-33, 1 Corinthians 2.1-5, 4.10-13; cf. Wright, 'Virtue', 475-478.

suggests, 'crying out' to God for wisdom.[107] This is of course James' response to the quest for wisdom, and finds resonances in Paul and the Gospels.[108] For example, Paul's exhortation to be transformed by the renewal of the mind (*metamorphousthe tē anakainōse tou noos*, Romans 12.2) suggests a similar perspective. The exact meaning of the phrase is a little obscure, but the focal point of the text is a choice between two paths in life, the transformation of the mind in the following of God, or conformity with the world. Even if the work is located fully in the economy of divine grace, the very nature of the exhortation calls forth a human response. This idea also captures the aspect of 'testing' by God as way of developing character. The initiative lies with God, yet it carries the implicit notion of human response.[109] As such, human activity in the formation of character may still be seen as an aspect of God's transformative activity.

iv) Formation, Transformation and Hope

The key point behind the preceding discussion is that the viability of interpretive virtue as a concept depends on whether or not human character is able to change, and if so, how. Because all theories of virtue have some sense of orientation towards future change, one could argue that there must always be some working concept of hope involved in pursuing the virtues. But equally, any perspective on human character must account for the ambiguities and frustrations of human morality, and in my judgement it is here that Christian theology has its most distinctive contribution to the discussion. Wright correctly argues that any Christian concept of virtue must see its *telos* in eschatological terms,[110] and in turn, this will make a decisive difference for theological interpretation of the Bible. The hope of the gospel is that our nature and character are not finally fixed, nor will they always be subject to the frustration of our human situation. Christian hope derives from the

[107] Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 51.
[108] James 1.5, 4.8-10; cf. Luke 21.15, Ephesians 1.17, where wisdom is primarily a gift given to believers.
[109] E.g. Hebrews 12.1-13.
[110] Wright, 'Virtue', 476-479.

promise that our humanity will be finally redeemed by God. As Thiselton has argued:

> *At the heart of the Christian doctrine of the human person stands the belief that God can impart new life, grant new birth, and bring about a new beginning through new creation...* It is God *who has proven his creative power* who can "create new heavens and a new earth" [italics original].[111]

My argument is that 'hope' *uniquely describes the situation in which we navigate the moral ambiguities involved in biblical interpretation*. But just as there may be hope for moral growth which leads to understanding, hope itself has a moral dimension; hope is as much a character trait as love or trust. Here is the crucial point from which this thesis essentially begins; if the whole life of discipleship and human growth (including as a reader) is animated by the hope that such growth is possible through God, *then this hope is itself a character trait worth pursuing*. Furthermore, whether or not we are able to describe a perfect, eternal hope, hope is a characteristic that has particular significance for persons engaged in the path of discipleship and the struggles of life. As such, my argument is that it is worth considering hope itself as a virtue germane to biblical interpretation for Christian theology. Vanhoozer rightly notes that the kind of virtues required to read the bible are 'virtues commensurate with the status of the interpreter-servant in relation to the scriptural text'.[112] The language of 'interpreter-servant' is indicative of Vanhoozer's emphasis on humility as an interpretive virtue. But if he is correct in arguing that the interpreter's status in relation to the text matters, then the virtue of hope becomes crucial if the interpreter's status in relation to God's redeeming history is helpfully described in terms of hope.

To be sure, just as we might fail to love, so too hope is subject to the present problems of our existence. On the one hand, selfish desires may be projected onto theological hopes. On the other hand, the weight of circumstance may make it nearly impossible to feel hopeful. The question of the subjective appropriation of hope will be addressed in the next chapter, but it remains worth exploring if Christian theology

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[111] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 205.

[112] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Imprisoned or Free? Text, Status, and Theological Interpretation in the Master/Slave Discourse of Philemon', in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, A.K.M. Adam and others (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 51-94, (91-92).

is understood to posit objective grounds for hope, primarily the resurrection of Jesus. I will argue that on this basis, 'hope' best expresses the interpretive characteristic of actively waiting on God, anticipating the future in trust and persevering in reading for the sake of knowing God and witnessing to the possible flourishing of creation.

It is finally worth noting that the idea of moral growth raises the question of moral perfection noted briefly above. If part of Christian hope is that our character is not finally fixed, and furthermore, we recognize that humans hope imperfectly in the present, is there some concept of perfected hope, some hope that endures eschatologically? In other words, might we hope for being perfected in hope? This is an important question which derives in part from differing interpretations of 1 Corinthians 13.12, concerning the question of whether hope's endurance extends into eternity. However, I will not address this question in great detail, partly because I will argue that it is necessary to remain circumspect about the exact content of Christian hope, but predominantly because it is enough to recognize that hope is a gift for the present, regardless of its own future. It is possible to speak of hope as a gift for people 'on the way', a fruit of God's transforming grace in the present. In turn, we may recognize that humans do not always hope well but that one may grow in hope, without needing to define what perfect hope looks like.

4. Hope and the aim of Bible Reading

So far I have argued that the usefulness of interpretive virtue as a concept depends on the possibility of moral growth. Christian theology provides grounds for hope that moral transformation and growth are possible, not just ultimately, but in the present. But hope itself is a virtue, a human characteristic that is part of the fruit of that present transformation, and thus I have argued that it is worth exploring what it means to read hopefully, alongside other interpretive virtues. This is the task of the present thesis. However before we proceed, it is worth returning to the question of why we read scripture; what is the interpretive good to which hope might lead? Already it can be seen that this hope *for* biblical interpretation is itself partly the fruit *of* biblical interpretation, and as such we are coming against the question of

circularity in this proposal. But equally, this perspective suggests that the conveyance of hope is one of the ends of scripture itself, and thus from a theological perspective, it is reasonable to suggest that good biblical interpretation may cultivate hope. In this final section I will attempt to reconcile these two perspectives, arguing that a cycle of hope is an essential element of a theological depiction of biblical reading.

Firstly, it can be seen that many of the biblical texts explicitly aim at encouraging hope in their readers. The texts are rarely if ever disinterested repositories of historical information; narrative memory and exhortation serve the function of exhorting and encouraging the first recipient communities. Given this, the canonization of these texts turns their transformative purpose into the present situation, but even before we talk of canonization there has been an increasing emphasis among theological interpreters on the sense in which the biblical texts already point beyond themselves, through the present and into the future. In other words it is argued that the contemporary relevance of these texts is not in the first instance an imposition, but a recognition that the texts themselves bleed into the present.

This idea has close affinities with the pre-modern anagogical sense of scripture, as that sense which 'builds up' in hope.[113] Without direct reference to that tradition, the idea re-emerges in Barth's 'Strange new World within the Bible'. Barth noted that it is possible to read the Bible with many aims in mind, most of which will bear some kind of interpretive fruit. But he argued that the Bible itself has its own agenda, its own questions for our world. The Bible presents us with a strange new world, the world of God, and as such the end of scripture is transformation. 'We are offered the magnificent, productive, hopeful life of a grain of seed, a new beginning, out of which all things shall be made new'.[114] This line of thought has been picked up more recently by Hays, Davis, Bauckham and Webster, who variously argue that the Bible narrates a history of creation, sin and regeneration. This narrative encompasses the whole of creation, and as such encompasses our present existence as contemporary readers. To read the Bible theologically is thus not only to read

[113] See Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, trans. E.M. Micierowski, 3 Vols, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 2:180-193.
[114] Barth, 'Strange New World', 41, 49-50.

about this narrative, but within it.[115] In this economy, part of the end of reading scripture is the discovery of hope in this new world of God.

This idea is given particular focus by Moltmann and Thiselton who draw on the concept of promise to describe scripture. This should not be surprising given the etymological link between 'Testament' and 'covenant', 'covenant' and 'promise'. Moltmann describes scripture as 'promissory history', the history of God's promises and promise fulfilment from Abraham through Israel to Christ.[116] But Moltmann sees these promises as 'endorsed' but not completely fulfilled in scripture; the promise of new creation 'points beyond itself to the eschatological *coming of the kingdom of God* [Italics original]'.[117] Given this:

> The biblical testimonies are by no means theoretical testimonies. They do not aim simply at comprehension. They are witnesses to a suffered, experienced, acted-out promissory history, which prompts our own suffering, experiencing and acting within that history.[118]

The concept of promise will be discussed in chapter two, but it can be seen that Moltmann among others overstates the case somewhat. Clearly, not all biblical texts function in this manner, and here the significance of canonicity comes into play. But it does not need to be proven that all biblical texts have a promissory, hope-fostering function to suggest that many do, or at least that this is part of the significance of taking the Bible as scripture.

Thiselton is right to highlight the significance of covenant throughout the Bible, and in turn the importance of divine promise within this idea. In particular, Thiselton draws on the concept of promise within Searle's development of speech act theory to argue that promise has a function in shaping the world, not just in the future, but through the history between promise and fulfilment. In this sense, the covenantal, promissory aspect of scripture has a present, transformative function:

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[115] Ellen F. Davis and others, 'Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture', in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1; John Webster, 'Reading Scripture Eschatologically (1)' in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom*, ed. David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (London: SCM Press, 2003), 245-256, (248).
[116] Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl, (London: SCM Press, 2000), 103.
[117] Moltmann, *Experiences*, 125.
[118] Moltmann, *Experiences*, 131.

> The world order is characterized by failure, evil, suffering, and fallenness, which does not accord with God's will for its future. Hence *transformation* and *change* constitute the purposive goal of god's word: of the word as Christ, the word as scripture, and the word to which the Church bears witness through its life and preaching [italics original].[119]

While speech act theory clarifies the working of this idea, it is not in fact necessary to the basic argument. To the extent that the texts of scripture narrate a view of the frustration and final transformation of the history of creation, then scripture itself is inherently taken up into its own story. As such, a theological depiction of the Bible should understand it as an agent within the purposes of God, an aspect of God's saving history.[120] It becomes part of God's transformative purposes, and so reading scripture becomes one dimension in the process of being transformed. Even if this transformation is only partial, which in chapter two I will argue it must be, it can be seen that a theological depiction of scripture recognizes that one of its key ends is the conveyance of divine promise, which in turn cultivates hope in the present. Thus one goal of reading the Bible theologically must be the hearing of divine promise, and growth in hope. As such, the cultivation of hope may itself be described as an interpretive good.

If this is so, then it is here that the circularity becomes most clear. Can it really be said that hope is a virtue that leads to hope, or does this formulation leave the reader chasing their tail? This issue will be clarified in chapter four, but it must be noted that circularity need not be a problem in and of itself. In the first case, this grasp of hope within the biblical texts goes hand in hand with the recognition of human fallibility, and if human beings are fallible, so too will be our grasp of this hope. This point will be expanded in chapter two, but in this sense it should not be controversial to suggest that one outcome of the initial apprehension of hope will be a return to the source, to deepen and develop that hope.

This idea will be clarified by splitting the broad concept of hope into some component parts. In chapter two, I will describe hope in terms of grounds, contents

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[119] Anthony C. Thiselton, 'Communicative Action and Promise in Interdisciplinary, Biblical, and Theological hermeneutics' in Roger Lundin, Clarence Walhout and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Promise of Hermeneutics*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 133-240, (239).
[120] E.g., Webster, *Word and Church*, 31.

and action. Put simply, the contents of hope describes that which is hope for, and the grounds of hope describes the basis on which that hope might come to fulfilment. The action of hope describes the difference made by hope in the present; in other words, it describes what it means to be hopeful on that specific basis. Using these terms, I will suggest that one aim of biblical reading is growth in being hopeful, through an appropriation of the grounds and contents of Christian hope as conveyed in the texts. One action of being hopeful in a specifically Christian sense must be to return to the grounds and contents of that hope for deeper appreciation, precisely because this hope does not claim perfect understanding. *The virtue of hope thus leads to the interpretive good of better appreciating the grounds and contents of that hope as conveyed through scripture.* In other words, the circle of hope exists between the grounds and contents of that hope on the one hand, and the action of being hopeful on the other. While this may seem a little artificial, it means that the circle is not closed for two reasons. Firstly, as argued above, all of this sits within the economy of divine grace that gives it currency in the first place. The address of hope is first and last a matter of divine grace. The circle of growth depicts the response of the vocation to discipleship. But secondly, in terms of the methodology of this thesis, it means that we can begin as noted above with a reflection on theological pre-understanding. In the next chapter I will describe the nature of Christian hope, all the while recognizing that this description is provisional on its own terms.

All of this is to anticipate the argument of this thesis, but my aim at this stage has been to argue that hope is an important concept worth exploring for a theological depiction of biblical interpretation. Crucially, I have begun to show that the cultivation of hope as an end of scripture is not incompatible with the idea that hope aids the reading of scripture. Indeed the two are inherently linked; hope is not something that one either has or does not have. Rather, it is something that may be grown into, and because it will be argued that Christian hope awaits eschatological fulfilment, there is no theoretical end to this growth in the present time.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter it has been argued that our interpretive judgements are subject to the moral ambiguities of the human condition. Disentangling our interpretation from our own interests is a highly complex process, and as a result, we do not always read wisely. Given the impact of character on interpretation, a number of writers have explored the concept of 'interpretive virtue'. This field of enquiry is focused on what kind of readers we ought to become. This has led us to consider how we become such readers, and in particular, how we might perceive the interrelation of human effort with divine grace in the formation of good character. In response to this question it was argued that Christian theology bears the promise of God's redemption of humanity; in God, there is hope for the renewal of human character, and thus hope for the possibility of better understanding. But hope itself is an important character trait, and if the whole process of character growth is energised by hope, then hope as such is worth pursuing for the task of reading. Even though hope may also be subject to the problematic nature of human existence, it is nonetheless worth exploring what it might mean to approach the Bible in this economy of hope, in anticipation of the renewal of humanity depicted in scripture itself. This is the task of the rest of this thesis.

Chapter Two

Christian Hope: Grounds, Contents and Action

1.1. Introduction

Chapter one demonstrated that discussion of the theological interpretation of scripture would benefit from attention to the theology of hope. On the one hand, hope for the human person relates directly to any account of growth as readers, while on the other hand, scripture itself represents a rich source of theological hope. As such, the hermeneutical circle may be examined with regard to hope as that which both aids good reading, and is itself a product of good reading. This chapter will describe in greater detail what may be said about a Christian theology of hope, though clearly there will not be space to construct a novel approach to such a complex doctrine. Rather, I will describe various contours of hope from within two strands of Christian theology, in order to provide the conceptual tools for chapters three and four, where the question of what it means to approach biblical reading in hope will be discussed. The first strand of theology follows Jürgen Moltmann, whose work has been particularly influential in this area. Moltmann is helpful in simultaneously reinstating the significance of the future for Christian eschatology, whilst arguing that Christian hope is vitally active in the present through the anticipation of that future. These emphases will be maintained, though some critical engagement will be important. The second strand of theology follows James Cone, whose approach to Black liberation theology maintains a constant focus on the experience of many who are in the greatest need of hope. Whilst there are similarities between these strands, the latter places a greater emphasis on hope that is grounded in created human dignity, and in turn stresses a greater sense of God's ability to change the present. As noted, the broadly systematic approach of this chapter is adopted so that the concept of hope may be directly related to the questions of hermeneutics and reading which follow.

From the outset we are still faced with the question of what kind of thing we are talking about when discussing hope in general. Settling upon an abstract definition of the term poses some difficulty, not least because it covers a wide range of possibilities in ordinary usage. As a result, we are faced with a series of questions about what exactly is under discussion, concerning whether or not hope pacifies, whether hope depends on an optimistic nature, and how hope relates to external circumstances. These questions will be addressed as we proceed, but one can find everyday descriptions of hope that will answer them differently. Thus it is too cumbersome a task to define hope in the abstract, and then outline a Christian version. Rather, the whole of this chapter will constitute a description of hope as the concept is used within Christian theology. However, even within a more limited context such as the New Testament, the language of hope covers a range of possibilities and so it is worth clarifying some parameters of hope that will give shape to our answer. Drawing on New Testament examples, we will thus consider how hope may be described in terms of its grounds, contents and action.

1.2. Hope as a general concept in the New Testament

The use of *elpis* and its cognates in classical Greek is fairly broad, referring to general expectations of the future whether positive or negative. As such, the words could be rendered in English in terms of either hope or fear. Whether expectations were positive or negative would come down to 'what man [sic] considers to be his own possibilities'.[1] These possibilities would be grounded in both external circumstances and a person's 'internal' capabilities, and thus whatever future was imagined could come to fulfilment through a combination of human effort and, in a sense, luck. However, this usage narrows significantly in the biblical texts, where *elpis* and *elpizō* refer exclusively to positive expectation, and thus the language may reasonably be rendered in English with the connotations of 'hope' and 'to hope'.[2] This positive shift is partly because both the New Testament and the LXX relate *elpis* and *elpizō* directly to trust in God, and thus writers such as Ziesler suggest that

[1] R. Bultmann, '*Elpis*', *TDNT*, 2: 518-523, (518).
[2] B. Mayer, '*Elpis*', *EDNT*, 1:437-441, (438).

in contrast to Greek and contemporary thought, biblical hope never involves risk.[3] This seems to overstate the case; even confident trust in God requires the letting go of human security, and on this basis it is possible to speak of risk without diminishing the trustworthiness of God. Furthermore, even when referring to positive expectation the biblical usage can refer to day-to-day matters and so the certainty of 'hoping' will be understood differently in conjunction with the grounds of that hope.[4] This point is clarified by the fact that hope is expressed both verbally and as a noun, where hope is a thing that it is possible 'to have'.[5] The two are obviously related, but the distinction demonstrates that there are, so to speak, different parameters of hope, and distinguishing these will help clarify the nature of hope in its varying expressions. I will describe these parameters as the *grounds*, *contents* and *action* of hope.

i) Grounds

Towards the end of Romans, Paul is able to speak of hoping to visit Rome.[6] This hope must be grounded in a sense of possibility, without which it would simply become wishful thinking. Its fulfilment may be understood to come through the grace of God, but could also depend on Paul's own capacity for travel, financial means and so on. In this sense it can be seen more generally that two people might hope for the same thing, but expect that hope to be fulfilled in different ways. The possibility of fulfilment will be described as the *grounds of hope*, a factor which is particularly important in the New Testament because as shall be argued, Christian hope is primarily grounded in God. Thus the question of the grounds of hope constitutes the focal issue in the writer to Timothy's command that the rich should not 'set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God'.[7] However we understand 'the life that is really life' (6.19), the writer's argument is that this life

[3] John A. Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, (London: SCM, 1989), 132.
[4] E.g. Philippians 2.23; 1 Corinthians 9-10; Acts 16.19; Romans 15.24. Note that even on these occasions, imminent (non-eschatological) hopes are still related to trust in God, e.g. Philippians 2.19, 2 Corinthians 1.10.
[5] E.g. Romans 15.4; 2 Corinthians 3.12; Hebrews 6.19.
[6] Romans 15.24.
[7] 1 Timothy 6.17.

will not come through trust in wealth, but trust in God. Clearly, it is implied that if riches are uncertain, God is certain, and thus Ziesler's point about the lack of risk in biblical hope looks more convincing. But the degree of certainty derives not from the concept of hope as such, but from the grounds of the hope. Is it thus possible that some hopes equate to certainty? Clearly, there are good theological reasons for maintaining the certainty of God, but the rhetorical contrast between God and wealth suggests a more subtle perspective. Even if hope in God is objectively certain, it requires the relinquishing of other hopes, and this entails the letting go of human security. Thus, from a subjective perspective hope in God is not straightforwardly risk free, not because God is not trustworthy, but because only time will show that the choice to trust God was well made. If it were not so, then the temptation to trust in wealth would not be the problem that it so manifestly is. Thus, even when hope is grounded in God, it remains appropriate to speak in terms of faith or trust, lest theological hope should slip into presumption.[8] Either way, it is important to consider what the grounds of contemporary hope should be, and indeed it will be argued that this is the primary question for a theology of Christian hope.

ii) Contents

As noted above, Paul is able to speak of hoping to visit Rome alongside eschatological hopes, and thus our second parameter is the *contents* of one's hope. What unifies different expectations within the single concept of hope is not immediately obvious, but some view of the future is involved, a future which is both theoretically possible and in some sense desirable. In the case of Paul's travel plans, the content of his hope is clear, but in the case of 1 Timothy 6, what is being hoped *for* is less obvious. The writer speaks of 'the life that is really life' (6.19, NRSV, *tēs ontōs zoēs*), a phrase which at least implies a shift in the kind of future that is expected, if one chooses to hope in God. Thus some hopes may be more theologically appropriate than others, but at the same time it is clearly possible to

[8] See e.g., J.M. Everts, 'Hope' in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1993), 415-417, (415). Also, Anthony C. Thiselton, *Life After Death: A New Approach to the Last Things*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 22. This issue is controversial and will be treated more fully later.

hope for several things simultaneously. These may seem like fairly banal observations, but they become important when considering how different hopes interact. The crucial point is that when describing the content of Christian hope, it will be important to remain alert to the risk of 'reading' our own hopes into the narrative of God's promises. This may not always be inappropriate, but the fact that it is possible means that we should proceed with caution.

iii) Action

The third parameter concerns what difference hope makes in life; what does it mean to hope or to be hopeful? It is worth noting that the ability to choose the grounds of one's hope suggests that being hopeful is not to be equated with being naturally optimistic, but nor does it rule out this possibility. However, this raises one of the most complex issues concerning hope, namely the relationship between action and disposition. On the one hand, Anthony Kelly argues that hope comes into play when 'optimism reaches the end of its tether', a point made with respect to Paul's depiction of Abraham 'hoping against hope' (*par' elpida ep' elpidi*).[9] Here, hope is manifest as action, often pursued through gritted teeth. But there is ambiguity in this text; most scholars argue that Paul's focus is actually on the grounds of hope, and thus 'against hope' refers to God's ability to do what is humanly impossible.[10] Watson represents a number of scholars who argue in distinction to Kelly that hope in this context essentially refers to 'subjective confidence'.[11] However, the question remains as to whether this confidence derives from Abraham's temperament, or whether it arises from the encounter with God. On this, the texts are unclear, but a couple of points should be noted. Firstly, there are good reasons for the biblical writers' desire to inspire subjective confidence in their readers, but the fact that this inspiration is needed suggests that hope has not come naturally. The fact that hope can be 'seized'[12] or 'directed'[13] suggests an element of control, and the priority of

[9] Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), 5-6, 11.
[10] See e.g. J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 219.
[11] Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 145; C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 Vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 2:246.
[12] Hebrews 6.18 (*kratēsai*).

grace in Romans 4 implies that hope is a response to God. Secondly, Watson sees Paul reinterpreting Abraham's story not to contrast obedience to the law with the irrelevance of action, but obedience to the law with the obedience of faith. The entire post-history of Abraham's faith is the manifestation of that faith, and in the same sense, Abraham's hope is manifest in the course of life he subsequently follows. Thus Watson suggests that while the grace of the promise is 'presupposed' by Paul, 'a strenuous human response, encompassing one's whole life, is required'.[14] Clearly, it will not do to describe hope purely in terms of action, but it is clear that hope can entail the choice to pursue a particular path in life. Broadly, it can be seen that the action of hope may encompass both action and disposition, and at this point the language of virtue becomes more obviously relevant. Hope is that disposition which leads to good action as related to the hope's grounds and contents.

The relationship between action and disposition will be addressed more fully in due course, but this brief discussion reflects the fact that the texts do not define this relationship at a conceptual level. This is important because while some kinds of hope relate more naturally to personal temperament, hope *as such* need not directly derive from one's disposition. Thus, I will argue that to be hopeful in a specifically theological sense is possible independently of circumstance and temperament, because Christian hope is primarily a matter of grace. Indeed, Christian hope by its nature derives from God's opening up of seemingly closed systems in history. What is important at this stage is that a general concept of hope is in one way or another manifest in the course of life, even if that course is passive.

The purpose of this brief survey has been to highlight the range of ideas involved in a seemingly simple term, and in response three parameters have been described which will give shape to the following discussion of an explicitly Christian hope. The discussion of these parameters also helps to clarify why the methodology of this chapter will be systematic and dogmatic rather than exegetical. Firstly, the aim of this thesis is to depict the hopeful reader in terms of the theological reality they inhabit, and as such, theological categories are crucial to the task. But as can be seen, the depiction of theological hope involves the *interaction* of the three parameters; thus while the biblical texts will remain important, it is not

[13] 1 Timothy 4.10, 6.17.
[14] Watson, *Paul*, 140.

straightforward to locate texts which deal with the full picture on an individual basis; to oversimplify, if Romans 4 focuses on the grounds of Abraham's hope, it does not describe the contents of hope. If Revelation 21 describes the contents of Christian hope, it has less to say about the action of that hope.[15] A systematic approach will allow us to describe the interaction of the three parameters in an overall account of the question.

2.1. Moltmann's Hope and Modern optimism

Christian eschatology and 'secular' hope have led parallel lives over the last century (if not longer). While it might be simplistic to argue that the decline of modernist hope has led to the re-ascendency of Christian eschatology, there are undoubtedly important connections. Moltmann opens *The Coming of God* by describing the horrors of the First World War as signalling the end of the Christian age. His argument was that a kind of realised millenarianism had flourished, whereby belief in the divinely ordained dominance of the Church was coupled with confidence that science (and those with power) would steadily improve the world. Such hopes came to a 'terrible end' in the wars of the 20th Century and the decline of Christendom, leading to a rekindling of eschatology.[16] Writing in 1999, Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart make a similar argument concerning the death of the modern 'myth of progress'.[17] They describe modern thought in its liberal, technological and Marxist forms as being characterised by a belief that humanity had within itself the capacity to perfect its world; hope was grounded in human capabilities. Again, such hopes seem dashed by the horrors of the twentieth century. In particular, they note that even where the hope of progress remains, it is called into question by the 'horror of history'; if progress comes at the cost of so much suffering, then it must be asked whether it can be called progress at all.[18] Beyond

[15] Clearly however, Revelation does have much to say about human action.
[16] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl, (London: SCM Press, 1996), 3-6, 159-164.
[17] Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), 1-25.
[18] Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, 12-20. Similarly, Pannenberg notes that even if human society were to be perfected, past generations would be unable to participate in it, and thus

this, David Wilkinson argues that scientific optimism itself has been tempered by astrophysics, which has shown that the earth as such cannot sustain life indefinitely. Thus even if progress can be achieved in the short term, there are cosmic limits to what humanity can achieve.[19]

Preceded by a general disinterest in Christian eschatology, Schweitzer and Weiss are credited with the rediscovery of the 'eschatological' Jesus. They argued that Jesus was an eschatological prophet, but that his expectation that the end of the world would come in his lifetime (or later at his death) went unrealised. Moltmann argues that this 'rediscovery' of the eschatological Jesus had, in fact, nothing to offer the present in terms of eschatological hope. If early Christian eschatology concerned the immediate future, but was also disappointed, New Testament eschatology could say nothing to our present.[20] By contrast Barth and Bultmann had recognised the importance of eschatology for contemporary theology, but Moltmann complained that their existential approaches eclipsed any sense of futurity. Against all these developments, the *Theology of Hope* began with the need to reinstate the consideration of *our* future into the discussion of contemporary eschatology.[21]

2.2. The Grounds of Hope: The Promise and Faithfulness of God

Responding to Barth's eschatology in the second edition of *Romans*, Moltmann asks:

> What is the meaning of 'eschatology' here? It is not history, moving silently and interminably onwards, that brings a crisis upon men's eschatological hopes of the future, as Albert Schweitzer said, but on the contrary it is now

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eschatology within history provides no hope for those who precede it; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, trans., George H. Kehm and R.A. Wilson, 3 Vols (London: SCM Press, 1970-1973), 3:198.

[19] David Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe*, (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

[20] Moltmann, *Coming*, 8-10.

[21] Strictly it is not our future in general terms that interests Moltmann, but Jesus' future, and then only our future in him.

> the *eschaton*, breaking transcendentally into history, that brings all human history to its final crisis.[22]

In both cases, Moltmann senses the loss of the ability to say anything about our future. If eschatology is confined to the unfulfilled hopes of Jesus or the first Christians, then it has nothing to do with our future in the present. Equally, if it has only to do with transcendent revelation, it remains focused on present experience, and not future hopes. By contrast Moltmann aimed to develop an eschatology that could speak about our future. Even so, he maintains a strong focus on present action, but all this draws its energy from an understanding of the future, and specifically the future of Christ.[23]

To describe Christ's future, Moltmann begins by separating his reading of Old Testament eschatology from the eschatology he finds in Barth and Bultmann. He outlines a distinction between 'epiphany' religions, and the 'nomadic' religion of the people of YHWH. For Moltmann, Barth and Bultmann had more in common with the epiphany religion of a settled people; here, eschatological revelation was understood as a present experience of something transcendent, such that the experiences of settled life were given divine meaning. By contrast, nomadic religion was mobile, and thus was focused on providing hope in ever-changing contexts. Moltmann argues that the religion of Israel took the latter form; 'it was not in the *logos* of the epiphany of the eternal present, but in the hope-giving word of promise that Israel found God's truth'.[24] In other words, Israel did not experience God as the giver of timeless truths, but as the one whose gracious, in-breaking promises kept them on the move. In this scenario, God became known through a history of faithfulness to his promises, and not through transcendent revelation. Crucially though, Moltmann argues that when Israel did finally settle their religion of promise did not give way to epiphany religion, because while promises were understood to have been fulfilled they were not *exhausted*; the future remained. This pattern is all

[22] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch, (London: SCM Press, 1967/2002), 25.
[23] Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 3.
[24] Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 26-7, 82-9.

the more clear after the return from exile, where the prophecies of the exile were both fulfilled and yet remained open.[25]

Promise is crucial to Moltmann's argument concerning Christian hope. The God of Jesus is known in faithfulness and promise, and yet his promises are in some sense inexhaustible. Within this framework, Moltmann describes the cross and resurrection of Jesus as the focal source of promise for Christians:

> This identity in infinite contradiction is theologically understood as an event of identification, an act of the faithfulness of God. It is this that forms the ground of the promise of the still outstanding future of Jesus Christ. It is this that is the ground of the hope which carries faith through the trials of the god-forsaken world and of death.[26]

The identity of the risen Jesus as the one who was crucified makes God known in his faithfulness that endures even death. God is the one who is faithful to his promises against hopelessness. Here there are apparent similarities with Cullmann, for whom the resurrection already fulfils God's promises in Christ.[27] However, Moltmann downplays the sense of assurance from the past event of Jesus' resurrection, arguing instead that hope is grounded in Christ's future which is seen ahead of time in his resurrection. The inexhaustibility of God's promise means that the fulfilment of resurrection is yet to be awaited. Thus the resurrection of Jesus opens out a new history for human beings now, which is inaugurated in the past faithful action of God in Jesus' resurrection, but is *grounded* in the future fulfilment of God's promise in the final resurrection of the dead. More than this, it is not merely God's ability to raise the dead that provides hope, but the sense of promise that Christ's followers will somehow be raised in him; the earliest Christians 'proclaimed that he is himself the resurrection and the life and that consequently believers find their future *in* him and not merely *like* him'.[28] Finally, this promise now extends beyond pre-ordained human boundaries; it is a promise that in some sense speaks to the whole of

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[25] Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth' in *New Frontiers in Theology, Vol. 3: Theology as History*, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 101-133, **(**120-1).
[26] Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 72-3.
[27] Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian conception of Time and History*, trans. Floyd V. Filson, (London: SCM Press, 1951), 235.
[28] Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 69-70.

creation.[29] The centrality of promise as grounds for hope represents the first major aspect of Moltmann's contribution, though at times his language seem unnecessarily obscure; specifically, Moltmann is never clear as to why the past event of Christ's resurrection should not serve as grounds for future promise. As Thiselton has argued, the concept of promise is best understood as linking past and future through actions of stated commitment.[30] The significance of promise is only strengthened by the idea that Christ's resurrection represents that commitment in some way.

Through the concept of promise, Moltmann demonstrates that Christian hope is first of all *in* God, before it is *for* something.[31] It is for this reason that we begin with the grounds of Christian hope, rather than the contents. But the focus on resurrection introduces a second fundamental concept, the 'new' or '*novum*'.[32] The promise of resurrection is not only that God will do something, but that God will do something new, something that is not latent within the capacities of that which already is. Divine promise is a matter of grace, breaking into history independent of the possibilities defined by historical systems. If the idea of promise calls human beings to put their hope in God, the concept of the new means that hope can only be fulfilled by a decisive act of God.[33] This idea finds widespread support, but is also widely questioned because it looks like a hope that merely pacifies humans. I will show that this is not the case, but it is worth noting that Moltmann's depiction of promise and newness require human action; in his description of nomadic hope, promise is inseparable from the vocation to 'arise and go to the place to which the promise points'.[34]

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[29] Colossians 1.20.
[30] Thiselton, 'Communicative Action', especially 227-239.
[31] Moltmann, *Coming*, 65. Here, Moltmann notes that belief in the immortality of the soul is hope drawn from an aspect of human nature, whereas resurrection is hope drawn from the faithfulness of God. The question of what is hoped for remains inescapable as we shall see, but the priority outlined here is important. Cf. Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2007), 144.
[32] Moltmann, *Coming*, 6, 27-8; Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 18-9.
[33] Moltmann, *Coming*, 234. Moltmann's context means that he focuses on issues such as environmental disaster and nuclear war, suggesting that human solutions to these problems are unlikely. While Wilkinson suggests that Moltmann is too anthropocentric, he nonetheless agrees that whatever happens imminently, the earth as a physical entity does not have the capacity within itself to sustain human life indefinitely; Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology*, 10.
[34] Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 108.

2.3. The Content of Hope 1: Newness, Imagination and Judgement

Christian hope is grounded in God, yet the question of what Christians may hope for is inescapable, if this hope is to have any purchase on present existence. However, describing the content of this hope is difficult for two main reasons.[35] Firstly, promise must have some purchase on the human situation to be understood and received, and yet this creates a hermeneutical problem if the promise of God is for something qualitatively new. Secondly, there remains the risk of projecting our own hopes into the discussion of eschatology. If our nature awaits perfection then it is risky to imagine what that very perfection will look like, given the enduring potential for human selfishness. Thus, before we consider the content of hope, we must explore the limits of what can be said.

The hermeneutical difficulty in describing the promised future was raised by Pannenberg in response to Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*. While Pannenberg agreed that Christian (and Jewish) hope derived from the promise of God, he suggested that Moltmann put too much emphasis on the sense of 'contradiction' between promise and present reality. I am not convinced that Pannenberg reads Moltmann rightly here but his point is valid; if the recipient of promise has no conception of what is promised, the promise cannot really foster hope. Indeed, it cannot be called promise at all, because a promise presupposes some relationship to extra-linguistic affairs.[36] If it has no relation to existing hopes then it will be perceived as 'threat' and not 'promise'.[37] In this respect, Pannenberg turns the hermeneutical question round; instead of asking how something that is entirely new could be understood, he argues that because divine promise *is* comprehensible in hope, the object and content of that promise must have at least some connection to human hopes. In other words, even in the discontinuity of the new there must remain some continuity. Furthermore, were the ultimate hope of Christianity for something utterly new, hope in God is still grounded in past experiences of God's faithfulness within history, and thus within human experience. Moltmann seems to address this in later work; a major emphasis

[35] This difficulty is hinted at in certain biblical texts, e.g., 1 Corinthians 13.9-12, 1 John 3.3, 1 Timothy 6.19, Hebrews 2.8.
[36] Again, Thiselton, 'Communicative Action', 236.
[37] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 3 Vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 3:175.

in *The Coming of God* is that just as the risen Jesus has continuity with the crucified Jesus, so too the new creation is a new creation of *this* creation, rather than a replacement creation.[38] This argument is followed by Bauckham and Hart among others.[39] The dialectic of continuity and discontinuity allows them to address the hermeneutical question through the category of imagination. It remains true for them that God's promise can never be fully described by human beings because of its radical newness, yet the continuity creates space for the drawing of analogies. The imagination can then be used to describe something unknown in terms of that which is known.[40]

The concept of imagination is important to the extent that any hope involves some imaging of what may come to pass, but it leads us into the second problem raised above. There must be occasions when human hopes cohere well with the promise of God, especially if we wish to say that God is the God who hears the cries of his people.[41] Yet the fulfilment of God's promise cannot mean the fulfilment of all our hopes, given the human propensity for selfishness. The risk of the imagination running wild is great. Significantly, Margaret Adam argues that the concept of radical newness in Moltmann shifts towards 'a more continuous development of new upon new'.[42] The cost of this is that the priority of God's own purpose may become once again eclipsed by historical progressivism, where hope's content collapses back into human imagination through experience. The sense of transcendent newness remains crucial to the idea that Christian hope is not limited by human expectation. At the same time, Adam rightly highlights that the focus on radical newness is itself a product of the modern spirit which shows less interest for the endurance of history or the past.[43] Once again, keeping a firm grip on the *past* of Christ's resurrection is crucial to balancing the radical newness of God's promise with God's faithfulness to creation, and in turn this faithfulness through past and present is essential to guiding our understanding of the contents of future hope. The turn to Black theology will help to strengthen this balance.

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[38] Moltmann, *Coming*, 265.
[39] Bauckham and Hart, *Hope*, 80; Cf. Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology*, 178.
[40] Bauckham and Hart, *Hope*, 72-108.
[41] Exodus 3.7,9.
[42] Margaret B. Adam, *Our Only Hope: More than We Can Ask or Imagine*, (Eugene, Pickwick Publications, 2013), 79.
[43] Adam, *Our Only Hope*, 81-82.

Rowan Williams addresses the problem of human experience coming to determine the content of hope. Writing on the resurrection of Jesus, he argues:

> When the power of given present facts is challenged as we come to see the present situation as the issue of contingent processes and choices, we gain resources for new decision, and openness to new stages of process. We learn to act and to hope. Memory, at this level, can be the ground of hope, and there is no authentic hope without memory.[44]

To begin with, this statement follows Moltmann's thought well. The newness witnessed already in the resurrection of Christ fundamentally challenges any suggestion that the world must remain fixed in its ways. Particularly for those who are the victims of history, the memory of the resurrection brings hope because its newness opens up an alternative future free from the seemingly closed systems of power and domination.[45] But memory is also necessary for the transfiguration of false hopes. For example, Jesus' post-resurrection encounter with Simon Peter has the potential to become a source of anguish and fear, precisely because it calls to mind the denials of the passion and the misdirection of the disciples' hopes. But Jesus' sustained invitation is both judgement and transfiguration of these former hopes into something new; 'The hope of the early days is challenged and broken in the cross' but a new hope is forged in the fact that the disciples' 'fantasies', false hopes and failures are not the last word.[46] It need not be said that the disciples' early hopes were entirely wrong, but the basis of this transformed hope is the gift of God and thus it is no longer something that can be claimed as a possession. In this respect, Williams remains very cautious about saying anything concrete about the future or the content of Christian hope. Indeed, Myers describes Williams' thought on hope as primarily 'negative' in the sense that he has more to say about projection and fantasy than hope as such.[47] But the very fact that a view of the future (and thus the present) cannot, for Williams, be 'possessed' is in itself a source of hope,

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[44] Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002), 25.
[45] Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections*, (Lanham: Cowley Publications, 1995), 209.
[46] Williams, *Resurrection*, 38.
[47] Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams*, (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 93-4.

precisely because it stands against the human tendency to claim control of our world.[48]

Two important points follow from this. Firstly, all our projections of the content of Christian hope remain under judgement, and are thus in some sense provisional. This does not invalidate strong conviction, nor does it mean that we can say nothing about the future of Christ. But, as Webster argues, the imagining the future is not first of all a 'task' that begins with us; rather hope begins with hearing and remaining open to the word of God.[49] This may seem a little abstract, but I will argue in chapter four that if imagination retains a role in hope, it does so as a means of articulating that which we believe we have heard, rather than that which we would like to see. Thus, even as a bearer of promise for the world, the Church can never 'claim finality for itself' or for its vision of the future.[50]

The second point is that judgement may be a hopeful concept, and may thus be part of hope's contents. Timothy Gorringe notes that this point is no surprise to the oppressed, those who have most often recognized the hope of judgement as the hope of God setting the world right.[51] By contrast, it is argued that those in power have no desire to see the world change, and thus take little interest in eschatology or apocalyptic literature.[52] This is probably historically fair, but I wish to argue that even for the comfortable, hope contains judgement. Williams notes that even when the rich take solidarity with the poor, their existence is questionable because they are invariably beneficiaries of unjust systems.[53] If Christian hope entails the destruction of those systems, then it may look more like threat than promise. But however costly the destruction of our selfish hopes and our systems of security, there is hope in relinquishing those systems if God's promise is believed to bring life. Thus in chapters three and four I will argue that hopeful interpretation does not equate to easy-going optimism. Genuine hope may be costly, yet still hopeful.

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[48] See Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 273-4.
[49] John Webster, 'Hope', in ***The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 291-306, (**302).
[50] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 100.
[51] Timothy Gorringe, 'Eschatology and Political Radicalism', in *God Will be All in All*, ed. Richard Bauckham, 87-114, (89-90).
[52] Gorringe, 'Eschatology and Political Radicalism', 91; Moltmann, *Coming*, 135.
[53] Williams, *Ray of Darkness*, 206.

2.4. The Content of Hope 2: New Creation

To some extent, Moltmann gives content to Christian hope through successive negations of death and decay. In the *Coming of God* he describes hope's content through expanding circles, from the personal to the political, to the cosmic and divine. The personal aspect begins with resurrection as the negation of death.[54] Yet if this notion of resurrection is a matter of divine gift, there are profound implications for the human person, as Williams describes:

> In the aftermath of the cross, the friends of Jesus are left stripped both of their inherited identities [...] and of the confused and embryonic new identities they had begun to learn in the company of Jesus. [...] Any identity, any reality they now have will have to be entirely gift, new creation; not generated from their effort or reflection or even their conscious desire.[55]

Here then is the positive side of judgement. The human person is reconstituted purely by the grace of God, and thus by love. Firstly, this holds out the hope of communion with God, undistorted by the corruption of sin, a perspective that lies behind the hope of seeing God 'face to face'.[56] This existence is however not static; it suggests new life, new flourishing in the presence of God. For Moltmann, this is ultimately understood in terms of creation's incorporation into divine *perichoresis*, though this raises numerous questions that take us beyond the scope of this chapter.[57] Even so, we may still speak of human flourishing in perfect relationship with God; '[w]hatever life with God is, it is not something more abstract or more isolated than what we now know'.[58] Renewed humanity can only be more real, more fully alive than that which we presently experience. Thus Thiselton argues that this also constitutes a new hope for human relationality, as self-interest is transposed by self-giving love.[59] This does not eclipse the self as an individual, but rather renews the human person as 'being in relationship'. In this respect, the new creation of the self

[54] Moltmann, *Coming*, 84-94.
[55] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 270.
[56] 1 Corinthians 13.23; cf. Thiselton, *Life After Death*, 185.
[57] See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1974), 249
[58] Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 141-2.
[59] Thiselton, *Interpreting God*, 150.

is inextricably linked to the new creation of human society, the second dimension of hope described by Moltmann:

> With the raising of the crucified Christ from the dead, the future of the new creation of all things has already begun in the midst of this dying and transitory world. But this presupposes that with the raising of the Christ crucified by the powers of this world, the end of this world and its powers has already become manifest.[60]

In the above manner, Moltmann invariably focuses on the implications of a renewed human society for contemporary politics. However, this does create the temptation to allow utopian idealism to shape the theology of new creation. The issue is not so much that utopian thinking is inherently wrong, but rather that, as Moltmann observes, history is littered with disastrous attempts to determine in advance what the perfect human society will look like.[61] However, this failure does not negate the hope for human community, and I will argue that the vocation of the Church entails straining towards this hope. We may at least suggest that human relationships and thus politics may be renewed in the transformation of self-interest by love.

Thirdly, Moltmann rightly points out that death and decay are not only human problems, but pervade the whole of our world. Thus for humans to be resurrected to an existence without death, they must rise into a cosmos that itself is freed from decay.[62] Without a redeemed cosmos, hope slips back into its more Gnostic or platonic forms by becoming hope for redemption '*from* the world', not '*of* the world' (italics mine).[63] Furthermore, Moltmann stresses that as creator, God is faithful to the whole of creation, and thus only a cosmic view of redemption does this justice. The fact that God is both creator and redeemer leads to two important conclusions. Firstly there is, as noted above, continuity. Moltmann discusses whether the world will be annihilated or transformed; the former stresses God's transcendent freedom, the latter God's faithfulness. In holding both these characteristics together, Moltmann argues that the world must be fundamentally changed, but that the new

[60] Moltmann, *Coming*, 136.
[61] Moltmann, *Coming*, 3-6, 159-164.
[62] Moltmann, *Coming*, 70.
[63] Moltmann, *Coming*, 259.

creation is very much a new creation of *this* creation.[64] Something may endure within present life and action, a point which is crucial to balancing the overemphasis on constant newness that Adam highlighted. Secondly, Moltmann concludes that salvation is universal, both in the sense that all of history is redeemed and that all things are saved, because God is faithful to all creation.[65] Bauckham is uneasy about this, and points out that God may still create things for a temporary purpose, a point that is surely reinforced by Moltmann's own desire to retain the absolute freedom of God.[66] There is not space to address this issue here, but it is important to note that the scope of salvation is universal at least in the sense that the message of the gospel is potentially, so to speak, for everyone. At the very least, there are no humanly ordered boundaries that prohibit a person from believing in Christ. And if the promise of God in Christ cuts across pre-ordained boundaries, it also breaks open the closed systems of human existence; thus Christian hope is in principle open to anyone, and anyone may become hopeful by the grace of God. This point will be crucial to the argument that Christian hopefulness does not firstly arise from human circumstance.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that the question of eternal time remains prominent in this field. Cullmann argued that whereas Barth had stressed a qualitative difference between time and eternity, the New Testament only works with linear time. 'Eternal life' is simply 'the life of the age to come' and is different only in that it follows a decisive moment *in* time.[67] Moltmann preferred to make a qualitative distinction between past and future, but either way he perceived time as being bound up with decay. As such, time itself would have to be transformed at the *eschaton* so that eternity could exist free from death.[68] What comes in the place of 'time' is unclear; recently, Moltmann suggests that 'in the restoration of all things, everything that happened in sequence in the progress of time will be present in the eternal moment'.[69] This 'eternal moment' sounds close to Pannenberg, who stressed

[64] Moltmann, *Coming*, 265-272. See also, Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 545.
[65] Moltmann, *Coming*, 132, 244.
[66] Richard Bauckham 'Eschatology in The Coming of God' in *God Will be All in All: The Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 1-34, (12).
[67] Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, 62-3.
[68] Moltmann, *Coming*, 26.
[69] Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End - the Beginning: The Life of Hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl, (London: SCM Press, 2004), 150.

the importance of the closure of history, such that the meaning of reality's parts could emerge in the light of a definitive whole. [70]

However, even Pannenberg worried that this view of eternity looks static, and thus dead. How can we speak of eternal *life* without some sense of progress and movement in time? Moltmann's response is to argue for a cyclical eternity, which he likens to dance or music, but this fails to recognize that the cycles of music interact with changes over time. Without this, music becomes tedious. Furthermore, Moltmann had stated that love always requires hope, because 'love looks to the as yet unrealized possibilities of the other'.[71] Yet if there are no new possibilities because futurity itself collapses into eternity, what kind of love can be said to endure? Alternatively, Pannenberg argues that 'God and not nothing is the end of time'.[72] Thus eternity 'will no longer have to be in antithesis to time but must be thought of as including time or leaving a place for what is distinct in time'.[73] But this assertion strains the idea of the closure of history.

The purpose of this brief foray into the discussion of time and eternity is to argue that it does little to help the question of hope, because it is too difficult to conceive of life without some sense of movement, and movement that goes beyond endless circling. In this sense, Bauckham helpfully suggests that it is perhaps easier to say what eternity is not than what it is; that transience, death and decay are no more.[74] As such, it is more helpful to speak of a transformation of time that negates death and decay but includes growth and flourishing.

2.5. The Action of Hoping: Living with a perspective of promise

By focusing on the obscurity of Christian hope, and its dependence on the decisive action of God, it is clear why many have criticised this view as essentially passive. If the end is entirely in God's hands, then all humankind can do is sit and

[70] Pannenberg, 'Revelation', 122-3.
[71] Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 321.
[72] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3:594.
[73] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3:595.
[74] Bauckham, 'Time and Eternity', 186.

wait, a perspective that seems to be corroborated by many New Testament texts that speak of 'patience' or 'endurance'.[75] In this view, being hopeful might equate to subjective confidence, but with no purchase on present action. This issue remains controversial, particularly because there is still much scholarly dissent concerning New Testament eschatological expectations. However, Moltmann has consistently argued that future hope must encourage present action.

In terms of New Testament hope, Thiselton argues that while waiting is often construed as a passive state, we should understand it primarily as referring to active readiness. He draws on Wittgenstein's example of waiting for a visitor, arguing that waiting has more to do with preparation.'The crucial factor in "expecting a visitor for tea" is not primarily what is going on inside someone's head, but the set of observable actions or behaviour to which the expectations give rise'.[76] This leads Thiselton to argue that the 'currency' of the promised future:

> [...] during the present period of "waiting" is not psychological intensity, but *living as those counted righteous* in advance of the final public confirmation of this, at the Last Judgment, and *living as those who belong to Christ as slaves to their Lord* [Italics original].[77]

To wait in hope is thus to re-envisage our entire understanding of reality, as people 'on the way', and in this respect, hope must change our fundamental orientation towards present existence. The hopeful self lives with a perspective on reality that is radically shaped by divine promise; New Testament 'waiting' has more to do with 'waking' than sitting back.[78] As such, to be hopeful on the basis described so far is to face the future in a manner which shapes all that is done in the present.

Secondly, despite his criticisms of Cullmann, Moltmann still basically follows Cullmann's emphasis on living in the overlap of the ages, grounding present action in the anticipation of God's ultimate future as a consummation of that which was inaugurated in Christ.[79] Early in the *Theology of Hope*, Moltmann suggests that:

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[75] E.g., Colossians 1.11, James 5.7, Revelation 1.9.
[76] Thiselton, *Life After Death*, 58.
[77] Thiselton, *Life After Death*, 66.
[78] Cf. Romans 13.11, Ephesians 5.14, Revelation 3.2-3.
[79] Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, 224; Moltmann, *In the End*, 87-89.

> To believe means to cross in hope and anticipation the bounds that have been penetrated by the raising of the crucified. If we bear that in mind, then this faith can have nothing to do with fleeing the world, with resignation and escapism.[80]

The resurrection of Jesus opens up a new future in Christ, filled with new possibilities derived from that contradiction of death itself. To live in 'anticipation' of the ultimate consummation of God's promise is thus to locate ourselves in a new line of future history, to recognise that the contradiction of the present involved in God's promise is a contradiction that we are called to inhabit.[81] 'Anticipation' (like 'waiting') is not living as though the promise has already been fulfilled, but it is living in character with the fulfilment as anticipated already in Christ. This is one reason why it is important to reflect on the 'what' of hope, recognizing that the promise of God sets present existence on a very different course. In this manner, being hopeful involves living with a degree of 'incongruity', because the one who hopes sees the world differently, and challenges all that dehumanizes just as the resurrection protests against death itself.[82] Being hopeful is not a matter of natural optimism, but perspective. In view of this, Webster is right to suggest that hope is not strictly action as such, but rather a 'quality' of action.[83] To be hopeful is firstly to face a certain way, to set out on a path described by the grounds and contents of Christian hope; hope may become the virtue which leads to the good as defined by the anticipation of divine promise.

The stress on the active nature of hope in Moltmann, Thiselton, Bauckham and Hart is perhaps a reaction to the criticism that future hope leads to passivity, a criticism that will be noted in the second half of this chapter. It may also implicitly come from a desire to chasten the confidence of modernist optimism. Moltmann often describes this active hope in terms of living in 'anticipation', and while he stresses the active nature of anticipation (as Thiselton does with 'waiting') it is not clear that the term does all that Moltmann needs it to do. Firstly, in the next section it will be argued that hopeful action relates to a broader view of Christian theology, and thus anticipation seems to place too much emphasis on the future. Indeed, given

[80] Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 6.
[81] Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 73.
[82] Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 7, 87.
[83] Webster, 'Hope', 305.

that Moltmann's own argument maintains that the ultimate future has already been inaugurated in Christ, hopeful action might be more robust if grounded in this past, as well as in anticipation of the future. Secondly, the term anticipation probably makes too little of the sense of being called to hope; living hopefully may be a response to a vocation to live in a certain kind of reality, the inaugurated kingdom of God. To talk of hopeful action in terms of vocation helps to capture Moltmann's point that the promise of God as recounted in scripture often involves a direct call to follow where the promise leads. Having said all this, it would be unwise to jettison the term anticipation altogether, lest the category of the future is eclipsed altogether; a balance is required.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that this description of hopeful action as a vocation again raises the question of the relationship between disposition and action. As above, it may be that this focus on the active nature of hope is in reaction to pacifying theologies of the future, but the result is that hope might be seen to leave the character of the person untouched. Thus on the one hand, an overemphasis on hope as disposition runs the risk of implying that hope derives directly from the optimistic temperament of the individual. On the other hand, an overemphasis on hope as action runs the risk of ignoring the human person as such. This issue will be addressed more at the end of the next section, but it is important to note that the content of Christian hope includes hope for the human person. Given this, the action of hope must be able to include the idea of human growth, of being persons-in-transformation. To have a hopeful disposition thus has less to do with prior temperament, and more to do with the gracious process of being encountered and shaped by God. As Hart argues:

> The power of the future to transform the present lies chiefly in the capacity of God's Spirit to capture our imagination and to open up for us a new vision of God's promise and the present which it illuminates, thereby stimulating alternative ways of being in the world in the present, living towards the future.[84]

[84] Trevor Hart, 'Imagination for the Kingdom of God?' in *God Will be All in All: The Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1999), 49-76, (75).

Two points follow from this; firstly, we must maintain that anyone can be hopeful; indeed the priority of divine promise suggests that circumstances that would prohibit natural optimism do not have the final word. God's promise may break into any situation, and as such, anyone may be called in hope.

Secondly, to speak of the Spirit's transformation is to suggest that even if hope is primarily manifest in action, this action does not arise from the mechanistic application of some or other vision. It derives from the gradual formation and transformation of the person in hope, and in this sense it is ultimately unhelpful to oppose disposition and action. Furthermore, to speak of this process in gradual terms is important because while 'on the way', no one can ever claim to hope perfectly. Indeed, the fact that Christian hope includes judgement prohibits such a possibility; action remains fallible, just as our grasp of the nature of hope remains shaky. Given this, to act in hope is also to persevere with openness to an ever-deepening apprehension of the grounds and contents of that hope. It is to follow creation as it 'cranes its neck' towards God.[85]

3.1 Hope in Black Liberation Theology

There are two reasons for turning to black liberation theology at this point in the discussion. Firstly, I will show that this tradition offers an important alternative perspective on the theology of hope, principally by locating the grounds of hope in creation, incarnation, and pneumatology, as well as in eschatology. The resulting theology of hope has similarities with the argument so far, but is more holistic because it more explicitly engages with the whole narrative of God that encompasses past, present and future. Secondly, these theologies almost entirely begin from the experience of oppression, and thus while we may still speak of the grounds, contents and action of hope, the whole discussion is framed entirely differently. It is for this reason that I have postponed this discussion until now.

[85] Thiselton's paraphrase of Romans 8.19; Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 547.

One of the key figures in the emergence of Black liberation theology is James H. Cone, whose early work engages with Moltmann. Whereas Moltmann explicitly sets out to treat hope and eschatology as systematic subjects, Cone begins with the experience of oppression and in particular, the need to reflect theologically on the Black Power movement as a specific response to racial segregation and inequality. All discussion of hope or eschatology comes out of the practical question, and as such Cone is much more self-consciously a participant as a matter of theological method. George Clark Chapman argued that one of the main difficulties with the 'theologians of hope' was that their work was too abstract to be of practical value to oppressed communities, and too 'alien to black experience'.[86] This is likely part of the reason that Cone was criticised for over-reliance on European theology, and when he responded to this issue in the *Spirituals and the Blues*, he noted that:

> The future about which they speak is too abstract and too unrelated to the history and culture of black people who have been and are being dehumanized and dehistoricized by white imperialists and colonists. As a black theologian I believe that authentic Christian hope must be defined by the oppressed's vision of the expectant future and not by philosophical abstractions.[87]

This does raise the issue of whether starting with experience then closes down space for self-criticism, an important question given the womanist criticism that this early writing failed to recognize gender issues, alongside Rowan Williams' concern over projection. Furthermore, Alistair Kee asks whether Cone's straight identification of Christianity with Black Power in *Black Theology and Black Power* fails to offer a theological critique of the movement.[88] I will argue that Cone does at least partially address this concern in later work, but at this stage we should note one important aspect of this approach. Pannenberg argued that the content of divine promise had to be in some sense comprehensible to human beings for it to generate hope at all. In this respect, any talk of eschatology that remains overly abstract has nothing to do

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[86] George Clark Chapman Jr., 'Black Theology and Theology of Hope: What Have they to say to each other?' in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, 2 Vols (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979) 2:193-219, (199, 208).

[87] James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: an Interpretation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991; orig. New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 96; See also James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th Anniversary edn., (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), xix.

[88] Alistair Kee, *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 57-62.

with *hope* as such, because it fails to interact with human experience. I would tentatively suggest that the more circumspect approach to making concrete statements about the future in European theology perhaps derives from an awareness of the failings and self-affirmation of the hopes of modernism. But for those who actually experience suffering as a matter of daily existence, such circumspection is neither logical nor possible. It seems to me that Cone, as with most Black theologians, begins with the fact of oppression and the very real desire for imminent freedom, and only then asks whether or not Christianity has anything to say to that experience. In this sense he begins with an almost pre-theoretic notion of the content and action of hope. From the start, the content of hope is liberation, freedom from oppression and the restoration of human dignity *in the present*. The action of hope is subjective confidence, energy for protest and the affirmation of dignity. The primary theological question is whether the gospel offers *grounds* for this hope, and only if this is so does theology then take a role in shaping the contents and action of hope. While my summary is slightly simplistic, it reflects the significance of asserting that God remains the God who hears the cries of the oppressed. In a sense, this discussion as before maintains the primacy of God as the grounds of Christian hope, but this section will proceed to describe those grounds through creation, the presence of God and only then eschatology. The question of the contents and action of hope will emerge as we proceed. Crucially, by locating a doctrine of hope within a broader framework than eschatology alone, we will gradually uncover a more robust account of how hopes for the present relate to God's ultimate future.

Before proceeding, it is important to recognize that Black theology is by no means a homogenous discipline. Firstly, Black theology tends (as it will in this context) to refer to Black liberation theology, but as a number of recent articles note, this is by no means the only, or even the most prominent form of theology among black Christians.[89] Secondly, even within Black liberation theology there are many varying perspectives, partly based on context, and partly based on different analyses

[89] Gayraud Wilmore observes this point in response to the twentieth anniversary of Cone's *Black Theology of Liberation*, as does Emilie Townes more recently. Gayraud S. Wilmore, 'A Revolution unfulfilled but not invalidated' in James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 145-163, (153); Emilie M. Townes, 'On Keeping Faith with the Center', in *Living Stones in the Household of God: The Legacy and Future of Black Theology*, ed. Linda E. Thomas (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 189-202, (196).

within a given context.[90] This variation at least partly derives from one of the main precepts of liberation theology in general, that it begins with the experience of the marginalised and with a focus on liberation *praxis*. As a result, Black theology begins with the experience of racial oppression in various contexts; Cone states that 'there is no truth for and about black people that does not emerge out of the context of their experience'.[91] Specifically, much of Cone's work (particularly in his earlier period) relates directly to the Black Power movement, and thus emerging discontent among many black Christians with the explicitly non-violent approach of Martin Luther King. As such, Cone described much of this work as an attempt to integrate 'Martin [King] and Malcolm [X]'.[92] But inevitably experience is complicated, and in particular, it is important to note (as Cone himself does) that womanist theology powerfully highlights the blind spot over gender issues in Cone's early work. This is an easy criticism to make, but of course it challenges white Europeans to realise that this criticism must apply even more to their own theological tradition, given that in fact the Western theological tradition is as much a product of its context as is Black theology.

The point of this preamble is to avoid implying that Cone represents all Black theology, and to avoid misrepresenting Cone by focusing on his early work. Nonetheless, I have chosen to focus on Cone's earlier work – with some critical engagement – for two reasons. Firstly, from the perspective of a white European man, Cone's work remains to me particularly challenging both theologically and practically, and is thus worthy of attention in its own right. It would be wrong to romanticize the shock factor in Cone's early writing, but it strikes me that in the interests of recognizing the urgency and seriousness of the issues raised by Black liberation theologians, it is well worth hearing afresh the incisive challenge of his early work, without ignoring later developments.

The second reason for focusing on Cone derives directly from this. In the previous section it was argued that Christian hope may be a costly endeavour,

[90] For example Cone and Roberts took a very different approach to black and white reconciliation within broadly the same context.
[91] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. edn. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 16.
[92] James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 59.

particularly for those who might wish to preserve the status quo. In *God of the Oppressed,* Cone argues that:

> While divine reconciliation, for oppressed blacks, is connected with the joy of liberation from the controlling power of white people, for whites divine reconciliation is connected with God's wrathful destruction of white values. Everything that white oppressors hold dear is now placed under the judgment of the cross.[93]

If seen as a rhetorical overstatement, this assertion is an easy target for critique. But it seems to demand the reader to consider the possibility that it is at least in some sense *true*. As a white European, what am I to make of this? Am I prepared to accept the possibility that my own values are indeed under judgement? While it may be argued that Cone needs to be more self-critical in this respect, the fact remains that a person of privilege must wrestle with the possibility that the content of Christian hope includes the judgement and destruction of dearly held values and privileges. We have begun to argue that this is in fact an important aspect of Christian hope, and in this section we will see that Cone very effectively brings this issue to the fore.

3.2. The Grounds of Present Hope 1: Creation

In asking whether Christianity has resources to speak to the human situation, Cone essentially answers affirmatively, but in beginning with the human situation he thus reorders the question of time. Whereas Moltmann prioritizes the future and then describes the present on that basis, Cone prioritizes the present and discusses the future only to the extent that it grounds present hope. Similarly, J. Deotis Roberts is critical of what he sees as an overemphasis on the future, stating that 'only after we are aware of what God is doing in this world to make life more human for blacks, may we speak of God's future breaking into our present and look forward to the new

[93] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 237.

age'.[94] This does not mean that either writer has nothing to say about the future, but that their focus remains at all times on the present. Much of the distrust for futurist eschatology among liberation theologians undoubtedly derives from the oft-quoted Marxist critique of religion as an opiate. Recently, Beckford has echoed the fairly common assertion that white Christian ministers taught slaves an entirely futurist eschatology as a deliberate tactic in pacifying them.[95] As we shall see, Cone agrees with this assessment, but also argues that there is good evidence that the tactic failed, and so in fact the future does have currency for now.[96] Nonetheless, he is fiercely critical of any eschatology that takes attention away from the present:

> Black theology refuses to embrace an interpretation of eschatology which would turn our eyes from injustice now. It will not be deceived by images of pearly gates and golden streets, because too many earthly streets are covered with black blood.[97]

However, we should note that much of what Cone says about hope is not necessarily derived from realized eschatology, but from creation and incarnation.

Black Theology and Black Power is essentially a sustained argument as to why black Christians identified with the Black Power movement, and why such identification was necessitated by the gospel. Similar to Moltmann's use of 'contradiction', but more concrete, Cone talks of the black person's experience of 'absurdity' as the 'inconsistency between his view of himself as a man, and the society's view of him as a thing'.[98] Whereas Moltmann depicted the contradiction existing between the promised future and the present, Cone sees the contradiction between created nature and present experience. For Cone, one of the first things that Christianity does is to reinforce the humanity of oppressed black people, and to challenge their dehumanization by white society. Thus he describes Black Power as

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[94] James Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, (New York: Orbis, 1994), 84. Cf. Chapman, 'Black Theology', 197. Chapman suggests that on this point Moltmann has been misunderstood, particularly over his distinction between future and advent.
[95] Robert Beckford, *God of the Rahtid: Redeeming Rage*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001), 34-5.
[96] Cone notes though that black Christians have adopted the other-worldly focus. See James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, rev. edn., (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997: orig. New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 121.
[97] Cone, *Black Power*, 127.
[98] Cone, *Black Power*, 8-11.

hope 'in the humanity of black people'.[99] There is an eschatological side to this as well, but it is first and foremost a statement of present theological fact, such that Black people engage in the fight for justice with the knowledge that their dignity is 'grounded in God himself'.[100] Hope is thus grounded in the reassertion of *identity as a creature and child of God* that stands in direct contradiction to the identity constructed by the oppressor; thus Cone states that even eschatological hope 'is born of struggle here and now because black Christians refuse to allow oppressors to define who we are'.[101] There is here both a sense of self-affirmation in terms of identity as well as the receipt of value as a gift from God, and it comes firstly from simply being human. But already we might recall Rowan Williams' argument, that if there is hope in simply being human, and having identity apart from the identifications of other humans, then we must consider where inappropriate constructions of identity go unchallenged. In other words the assertion of the human identity of the oppressed is simultaneously a challenge to the oppressor's identity as one who defines others. As Moltmann reflects, 'the master has to die so that the brother can be born'.[102]

God's creation of humankind as grounds for hope comes through particularly strongly in the slave spirituals. In response to criticism for failing to draw on black voices in his work, Cone wrote a theological interpretation of spirituals in 1972. He asserts that in Christianity, slaves 'encountered a new reality a new God not enshrined in white churches and religious gatherings. [...] They were "stretching out" on God's Word, affirming a new-found experience that could not be destroyed by the masters'.[103] This encounter was to affirm their 'somebodiness', and again became the grounds of hope and a strategy for survival and resistance in the present.[104] Howard Thurman had made a similar argument in his earlier interpretations of the spirituals, suggesting that black slave preachers were a source of hope because they 'were convinced that every human being was a child of God.' As a result, their message became; 'You are created in God's image. You are not slaves, you are not

[99] Cone, *Black Power*, 29.
[100] Cone, *Black Power*, 30.
[101] Cone, *For My People*, 207.
[102] Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 186.
[103] Cone, *The Spirituals*, 29.
[104] Cone, *The Spirituals*, 32-33.

'niggers'; you are God's children'.[105] In turn, this leads Thurman to stress that the inherent potentiality of each human person is itself a ground for hope in the present, and that as such, the action of this hope lies in recognizing and realising the potential within oneself.[106]

It is important to note that as a ground of hope this assertion retains some focus on the future in terms of looking ahead, but it was *drawn* from the concept of creation as a present brute theological fact. While the other-worldly aspect of hope is acknowledged by both Thurman and Cone, they both recognize that this hope from being human was primarily engaged with the present and *imminent* future.

3.3. The Grounds of Present Hope 2: The Presence of God

Following the theology of creation, Christian hope is also grounded in the continual presence of God, and particularly God's presence with those who suffer. This is often recognized in the story of Christ's suffering as solidarity with those who suffer, but also in the experience of God's presence in the here and now. I noted that the concept of 'encounter' was important, and in turn this leads to God's presence and action in contemporary life becoming grounds for hope. The nature of this encounter is rarely systematically explained, and so sometimes it is described in terms of an encounter with Jesus, and sometimes in terms of the Spirit or God.[107] The key point is that God is experienced as present in suffering, both identifying with the sufferers and actively involved in transforming the situation. As Jacquelyn Grant suggests, 'the condition of Black people today reflects the cross of Jesus. Yet the resurrection brings the hope that liberation from oppression is immanent. The resurrected Black Christ signifies hope'.[108] Both Cone and Thurman noted the

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[105] Howard Thurman, *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1990), 11-12. *Deep River* and *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* were originally two separate books, and are printed in this edition with original page numbers. They are subsequently referenced separately as *Deep River* and *Negro Spiritual*. See also A. Elaine Brown Crawford, *Hope in the Holler: A Womanist Theology*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 29, 36.

[106] Howard Thurman, 'What can we believe in?' *JRH*, 12 (April 1973), 111-119, (117).

[107] Cone, *The Spirituals*, 56; Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 117; Crawford, *Holler*, 64.

[108] Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 216.

significance of the exodus narratives for the slaves, and it is perhaps thus unsurprising that Cone as a liberation theologian highlights this point.[109] What is interesting in the case of the spirituals is that unlike other strands within liberation theology, the exodus is not adopted as a hermeneutic or theological foundation. Rather it is taken alongside other stories of God's deliverance as a demonstration of God's character. 'The concept is that inasmuch as God is no respecter of persons, what He did for one race He would surely do for another'.[110] To be sure this view creates its own problems, and Cone in particular recognizes that the lack of liberation did at times (though not always) cause doubts for slaves.[111] Furthermore, it could also be said to encourage passivity, although neither writer suggests that there is much evidence for this.[112] However, the point to emphasize here is that belief in God as liberator was both a result of derivation from scripture *and* of experience of God's presence.

Before his explicit turn to the spirituals, Cone had made a similar argument about the Black Power movement. He argues that just as God is seen to be involved in the exodus and the death and resurrection of Jesus, so God is presently involved in the liberation sought through Black Power. He argued that 'Black rebellion is a manifestation of God himself actively involved in the present-day affairs of men for the purpose of liberating a people'.[113] This kind of statement would make Cone controversial among both black and white theologians, and it would require serious scrutiny. Firstly it raises questions about violence and the ethics of rebellion, and secondly in retrospect, one must ask what the fruit of the movement turned out to be; could God be said to have been involved retrospectively? However, again we should be careful not to dismiss Cone's assertion so easily. For one thing, far fewer thinkers would condemn slave rebellions as easily, and while the context is partly different, I would suggest that it is primarily historical distance that makes them less difficult. Cone's words were, and remain, too close for comfort, but therein lies their significance. If God is in any sense at all actively involved in transforming the present world, then such change must necessarily cost some people more than others.

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[109] Thurman, *Deep River*, 15; *Negro Spiritual*, 38; Cone, *The Spirituals*, 32-35.
[110] Thurman, *Deep River*, 15; cf. Cone, *The Spirituals*, 32; 'Just as God delivered the Children of Israel from Egyptian slavery... he will also deliver black people from American slavery.'
[111] Cone, *The Spirituals*, 53-57.
[112] E.g. Thurman, *Negro Spiritual*, 30, 40-42.
[113] Cone, *Black Power*, 38.

For anyone who wishes their situation to remain unchanged, God's present involvement in the world must logically contain some element of threat.[114] Chapman argued that neither Moltmann nor Cone was clear enough about just how God can be said to be involved, and thus they failed to offer criteria for discerning *where* God was and was not active.[115] This is an astute criticism and thus we cannot uncritically accept that Cone is right about the equation of Christianity with Black Power. But equally we cannot simply dismiss his claim on the basis that it is disturbing. My argument at this stage is twofold. Firstly, that Cone among others draws hope from the fact that God is actively involved in history, and has shown himself to be involved in helping the poor and oppressed. To some extent this coheres with Moltmann's work inasmuch as he argues that human trust in divine promise grows from God's past faithfulness. Moltmann came quickly to argue that there is hope in God's presence, primarily through God's suffering with humanity in Christ.[116] This represented a development from the *Theology of Hope,* and as such puts Moltmann closer to the kind of hope described here. The key difference comes through the fact that while both strands recognize that suffering is not always alleviated, Cone's theology places a far greater emphasis on the sense of God's ability to affect change in the here and now. Secondly, for Cone, hope is localised for the poor and oppressed, but it must necessarily affect others. Thus again, I would argue that Christian hope in God's present action must also be costly hope for the powerful.

3.4. The eschatological future as hope for the imminent future

Along with other kinds of liberation theology, Black theology has tended to operate with a different perspective on eschatology to Euro-American theology. Stereotypically, liberation theology tends to work with a more realized eschatology than has been evident in 'mainstream' theology, in the sense that the 'now' of the kingdom of God is emphasised over the 'not yet'. However, this is only partially true; in *Liberation and Reconciliation,* J. Deotis Roberts argues that:

[114] Though not necessarily violent threat. The point is that matters will change.
[115] Chapman, 'Black Theology', 195, 214.
[116] E.g., Moltmann, *Coming*, 278.

> Eschatology for blacks must be both *realized* and *unrealized*. Whereas the evangelical-pietistic version of eschatology is preoccupied with the future, Black Theology must begin, I believe, with the present. In other words, for black Christians realized eschatology, the manifestation of the will of God in the present – abstractly as social justice and concretely as goods and services to "humanize" life – must be a first consideration for a doctrine pointing to the eventual consummation of God's purposes in creation and history.[117]

While the future remains important, its significance is almost entirely derived from its impact upon the present. More recently, and in a different context, Anthony Reddie has also argued that the main difference between black and white Christianity concerns eschatology, but interestingly he does not locate the difference in terms of degrees of realization, but on the content of what is hoped for. Reddie suggests that:

> The essential point of departure between black and white Christianity is our notions of eschatology. *All* black Christians, (irrespective of theological disposition), have a clear sense that the future reign of God will be radically different from the one we presently experience [italics original].[118]

Reddie goes on to suggest that for white holders of power, the content of hope is an 'enhanced version' of the present world. These are the two main issues for eschatology in black theology; firstly, eschatology must principally speak to present possibilities, and secondly it must describe something qualitatively different from the present world of injustice.

Rubem Alves wrote on hope shortly after Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* and criticised Moltmann for effectively negating the present; given this it is striking that Roberts criticised Alves for being 'too futuristic'.[119] If this builds up two layers of criticism concerning Moltmann's interest in the future, then it is perhaps all the more surprising that Cone is fairly positive about Moltmann's work in his first two books.

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[117] Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 83.
[118] Anthony G. Reddie, *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 16-17.
[119] Rubem Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, (New York: Corpus books, 1969), 55-68**;** Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 85.

Despite stating that 'the idea of heaven is irrelevant for Black Theology' he nonetheless argues that the future is important *if* it can transform the present.[120]

In this manner, God's future reinforces the present dignity of the oppressed. Just as hope was grounded in an assertion of the humanity of black people on the basis of creation, so eschatology confirms this dignity. Like Cullmann, Cone argues that something has happened in Christ akin to a decisive battle. The war continues but eschatological freedom, which Cone relates closely to being fully human, is a present reality. As a result, 'men of the new age know they are free' even in the midst of oppression.[121] Again, when Cone turns to the spirituals he discovers the power in the eschatological confirmation of human dignity; 'For black slaves, who were condemned to carve out their existence in captivity, heaven meant that the eternal God had made a decision about their humanity that could not be destroyed by white masters'.[122] Thurman had identified the same present significance in the eschatological perspective, noting in his well-known phrase that 'if perchance the contradictions of life are not ultimate, then there is always the growing edge of hope in the midst of the most barren and most tragic circumstances'.[123] Specifically this became a radical challenge of the finality of human mastery; the slaves did not in the final analysis belong to human masters, and eschatological hope could confirm this as a present experience. However, it is important to note that for Thurman, this denial of the finality of life's 'contradictions' remains a hope *within* history, as opposed to a post-mortem future.[124] While Luther Smith is right to stress this point, it remains the case that Thurman describes an eschatological future grounded in God, functioning as a ground for hope in the present. As such, while the contour of this eschatology is similar to Moltmann, the maintenance of possible realization *within* history may be judged to be a more effective ground for hope now.

Crucially the knowledge of eschatological freedom (in whatever exact form) confirms the human dignity of each person and thus gives hope action in the struggle to realise that freedom in the present.[125] Both Thurman and Cone argued that while a

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[120] Cone, *Black Power*, 125.
[121] Cone, *Black Power*, 29, 37, 40, 66-7. Cf. Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, 84.
[122] Cone, *The Spirituals*, 82.
[123] Thurman, *Deep River*, 60.
[124] Luther E. Smith Jr., *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet*, (Richmond: Friends United press, 1991), 70.
[125] Thurman, *Negro Spiritual*, 4.

purely 'other-worldly' eschatology may have been used to pacify slaves, there is much evidence to suggest that this tactic failed, in many cases though not all. In fact, the knowledge of eschatological human dignity gave fuel to protest in the present.[126] Cone argues that:

> Though the black preacher looked to the future and spoke of it in heavenly terms, it was because of his vision into the future that he could never reconcile himself to the present evil of slavery. To look toward the future is to grasp the truth of God, and to grasp the truth of God is to become intolerant of untruth. [...] Hope, then, as seen in the minds of the slave preachers, is not patience but impatience, not calmness but protest.[127]

More recently, A. Elaine Brown Crawford has undertaken a detailed analysis of black women's narratives which includes the slavery period. She agrees that for the slave women, 'the eschaton functioned proleptically in their lives'.[128] Thus, she argues that their reading of Christianity and the Bible, far from being an 'opiate' became a 'fire that ignited passion for justice and full humanity'.[129] It is important not to romanticize this period, nor assume that slave preachers were proto-liberation theologians, but this argument is borne out both in the songs themselves, the relationship between slave preachers and revolts, and among the writings of ex-slaves, also analysed by Crawford. It is worth noting the suggestion that the future in eschatology was not only a part of the theology of the slaves, but that it was also potent, effective in the present.

This potency is often ignored in some recent liberation theologies, which, in reaction to the assumption that other-worldly eschatology still dominates, tend to avoid talking about the future at all. For example, Garth Baker-Fletcher proposes a realized eschatology where other-wordliness is 'sinful'. Furthermore, he praises Cone for critiquing 'the corrupting infestation of otherworldliness'.[130] But while Cone vigorously challenges any eschatology that distracts from the present, he has also recognized the power of the 'other-world' to transform the present. While Cone

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[126] Thurman, *Negro Spiritual*, 40-42, 60; Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 119.
[127] Cone, *Black Power*, 101-102.
[128] Crawford, *Holler*, 15.
[129] Crawford, *Holler*, 28.
[130] Karen Baker-Fletcher and Garth KASIMU Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 272.

is criticised for drawing on Moltmann in his early work, the advantage of his doing so is that he does not attack an eschatological straw man by assuming that all European eschatology is solely concerned with an other-worldly future. As a result he is able to go further than Moltmann; whereas Moltmann argues that the future should logically affect the present, Cone, Thurman and Crawford offer concrete examples of this in action. This is not to deny that there is a danger with future-oriented eschatologies. Robert Beckford has shown that such eschatology does often go hand-in-hand with political quietism.[131] But he is surely right to maintain that the issue is not with the future *per se*, but with the failure to highlight its impact upon the present. Thus Beckford argues that 'the promise of future transformation at the end of time must be grounded in the contemporary struggle for justice. [...] We are able to risk all because, as the Pentecostal church song says, 'we have the victory''.[132] My argument is not that Black theology can actually affirm Moltmann after all, but rather that independently of Moltmann Black theology actually has a stronger argument for the potential power of future eschatology in the present.[133]

3.5 The Ultimate Future as the Content of Present Hope

Despite this, there remains a tension in Cone's work concerning the future. On the one hand, he remains opposed to any view of the future that draws attention from present injustice, but equally he criticised Bultmann precisely for failing to take account of future possibilities.[134] As a result, Cone's view of the future at times looks like historical progressivism. This is tricky because in its historic form, progressivism tended to be a corollary of the modern period that is also associated with slavery and oppression. Thus Black theology and progressivism – even in

[131] Robert Beckford, *Jesus is Dread: Black Theology and Black Culture in Britain*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998), 33.
[132] Robert Beckford, *Dread and Pentecostal: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain*, (London: SPCK, 2000), 191.
[133] Adam notes that 'Moltmannian hope' has increasingly tended to agree with the idea that a focus on the future leads to quietism, but shows that this may be a reaction (perhaps common to Moltmann and Cone) to American rapture theology. She argues that retaining the transcendence of God, and hence of hope, allows hope itself to transcend human possibility, a vital point for theological hope. Adam, *Our Only Hope*, 38, 82.
[134] Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 138-9.

Marxism – rarely sit comfortably together.[135] Cone's earlier work is ambiguous in this respect because the possibility of progress within history is essential to his project.[136] Nevertheless, the ultimate future as a literal dimension of hope's content remains important for a number of interlocking reasons. Unsurprisingly the concept of heaven never gets a systematic treatment by Cone, and as such, we will use it here *only* as a shorthand term for anything associated with life after death. It has been noted that even when the spirituals talk of heaven, they may refer firstly to earthly hopes; the North, Canada or Africa. But even though this is often the case, the idea of heaven as at least connoting life after death remains important. Firstly, Thurman argues that in the slave spirituals the transcendent reality of heaven was itself necessary for grounding the assertion of human dignity, as noted above.[137] But secondly, Cone suggests that the songs display a kind of surplus of hope, such that the concept of freedom '*included* but *did not depend upon* historical possibilities [italics original]'.[138]

The significance of heaven as a future hope derives from the extreme nature of oppression in the present. Firstly, hope remains even when the chances of liberation look slim. Thurman observed that in the spirituals, the 'other-worldly hope looms large, and this of course is not strange; the other-worldly hope is always available when groups of people find themselves completely frustrated in the present'.[139] Thus, even when death seemed inevitable, belief in God affirmed the hope that death was not the end.[140] Secondly, hope in heaven affirms hope for those who have already died. This is a particularly important issue that as noted in the previous section, counts against historical progressivism. This need not deny the urgency of seeking progress now, but it prevents the achievement of progress from becoming a justifier of suffering.[141] The relationship between the necessity of progress and the acknowledgement of its frustration is complex. Garth Baker-Fletcher and Delores Williams argue that human salvation is primarily a matter of Jesus' 'vision' for life than it is of transcendent salvation. Williams' argument comes

[135] E.g. Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 84-5. Roberts critiques Alves' interest in technology. Also, Cone, *For My People*, 187-8.
[136] See e.g. Cone, *Black Power*, 125-6.
[137] Thurman, *Negro Spiritual*, 48-53.
[138] Cone, *The Spirituals*, 82.
[139] Thurman, *Deep River*, 25.
[140] Cone, *The Spirituals*, 70.
[141] Cone, *The Spirituals*, 92-3, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 141.

by way of making a very serious point against the justification of surrogate violence through glorifying the cross, but as such it leaves open the question of what lies beyond death, and whether there is any decisive hope after this life.[142] Whilst accepting the rightness of this point, Crawford suggests that in fact, the empty cross may remain an important symbol of hope for black women, because the empty cross shows that 'trouble don't last always'.[143] Furthermore, Karen Baker-Fletcher notes that the first European settlers in America may have had some kind of realized utopian vision, and as such one should be cautious in assuming that it is possible to build perfect societies in history.[144] More helpfully she draws on African spirituality and the concept of the presence of the ancestors to articulate a view of life after death that connects with the present. Her view seeks to affirm 'both concrete and "otherworldly" concepts of the world of the Spirit'.[145] Even so, she does at times seem to suggest a gradual movement towards a more harmonious earth within history.[146]

The reasons for focusing on this-worldly hopes and action are clear and justifiable, but it seems to me that in downplaying the importance of 'heaven' as a transcendent reality, we risk losing resources to deal with unpleasant and untimely death now. This is not just an issue with death in oppression; we understand to be unpleasant death is a necessary part of reaching equilibrium within our habitat. To be reconciled with this reality requires a change in our view of death so fundamental that it is as radical a conception as resurrection itself. Equally, we noted Wilkinson's point that the earth does not have an indefinite life. Any view of ecological wholeness must reckon with this fact. What I believe Cone achieves is to show that it is possible to retain hope in the face of death in a way that enlivens socio-political activity, rather than dulling it, but does not require us to ignore the reality of our present physical existence.

However, the principal function of a transcendent heaven in Cone's work, and his reading of the spirituals, is to foster courage and hope in the face of great difficulty. It has often been noted that those who do not fear death are the most

[142] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 165-167.
[143] Crawford, *Holler*, 114.
[144] Baker-Fletcher and Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother*, 283.
[145] Baker-Fletcher and Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother*, 292.
[146] Baker-Fletcher and Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother*, 297-8.

dangerous in society, not because of nihilism but because the final weapon of the oppressor does not stop them from continuing to protest.[147]

> For black slaves, Jesus is God breaking into their historical present and transforming it according to divine expectations. Because of the revelation of Christ, there is no need to worry about the reality of liberation. It is already at hand in Jesus' own person and work, and it will be fully consummated in God's own ordained future.[148]

Chapman notes that this kind of vision must not lead to a joyous detachment from circumstance, a tendency that he observes in Moltmann.[149] Indeed such a suggestion is highly dangerous not least because it would serve to sideline the reality and extremity of the historical suffering under slavery. Cone's point is that the assurance of heaven in fact keeps political resistance going in spite of terrifying odds.[150] In the end, this is not a separate point from the affirmation of eschatological dignity in the present. Rather, the reality of the heavenly destiny affirms human dignity as something that cannot be taken away, not even by death. For Thurman:

> The slave's answer to the use of terms of personal designation that are degrading is to be found in his private knowledge that his name is known only to the God of the entire universe. In the judgment everybody will at last know who he is, a fact which he has known all along.[151]

3.6. Judgement

Thurman's quotation leads us finally to the issue of judgement by reminding us that for those who suffer, judgment is often a hopeful thing. Earlier I raised the question of whether Cone's view of judgement was too one-sided. Firstly, does judgement for white people only mean the destruction of their values? Secondly, does the focus on experience allow any space for the judgement and transformation

[147] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 147.
[148] Cone, *The Spirituals*, 52.
[149] Chapman, 'Black Theology', 196.
[150] Cone, *God of the Oppressed* 120; Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 141.
[151] Thurman, *Negro Spiritual*, 45.

of the hopes of even the oppressed? To some extent, Cone's own acknowledgement of the blind spot over sexism answers the second question, inasmuch as he recognized the need for a transformed vision called for by womanist theology. But he does address the issue more directly, particularly at a couple of points in *God of the Oppressed.* Directly after arguing that the vision of heaven can fuel the struggle for justice in the present, he argues that for black Christians:

> Their struggle for justice is directly related to the coming judgment of Jesus. His coming presence requires that we not make any historical struggle an end in itself. We struggle because it is a sign of Jesus' presence with us and of his coming presence to redeem all humanity.[152]

This represents a shift from his earlier books, and certainly looks closer to Roberts. While this point coheres well with the concern over simply baptizing our own hopes, it would be wrong to suggest that in the end, Cone agrees with the idea of being necessarily tentative about our description of the future. In the same book, God remains the judge of the white oppressor, and is intimately bound up in the struggle of the oppressed. Cone is able to state that Jesus 'stands in judgement over all statements about truth' whilst affirming that there is 'no truth in Jesus Christ independent of the oppressed of the land – their history and culture'.[153] There seems to be tension here; on the one hand, Jesus cannot be totally identified with any movement, lest he be identified with its shortcomings or failures. But at the same time, the urgency of liberation demands that Jesus must be present in historical struggles in some sense.

Cone is unclear on this point, but this tension may be best left unresolved. Detached speculation and uncertainty about the shape of God's promised future is perhaps a luxury for those who do not suffer, but it will not suffice for those who do, nor does it do justice to the God of the Bible. It is perhaps enough to recognize that all human movements are susceptible to error, without having to diminish the vigour with which they necessarily proceed. Furthermore, as has been argued throughout, deferral of this issue can lead to the deferral of reckoning with judgement on the part of the privileged. However careful Cone is to allow space for self-criticism, we must

[152] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 122.
[153] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 31.

nonetheless try to hear the full force of his challenge. The conclusion of this chapter will thus focus on how Christian hope can cohere with the recognition that one's own system of security is under judgement, not just in the future, but now.

3.7. The Action of Hope

The fact that in this discussion of Black theology, hope is so clearly related to present-day action, suggests a degree of similarity to the previous section on European theology. Yet there are important differences. The sense of hope as subjective confidence seems more important in Black theology and this is perhaps unsurprising. The idea of confidence seems less prominent in Moltmann and others, perhaps because of an underlying need to chasten the confidence of modernist optimism. By contrast, Black liberation theologians have sought to inspire confidence in those who have known oppression and dehumanization. But even if being hopeful is closely related to being confident, it cannot be said to derive from the natural temperament of the individual. Indeed, Crawford argues that the hope of black women has mirrored their suffering by being 'maldistributed, enormous and transgenerational'.[154] In this sense, the discovery of hope is something surprising to be rejoiced in. But equally this expression of hope does not override the pain of suffering, and thus being hopeful is often a matter of persevering with 'gritted teeth'; thus in Crawford's work, hope is also closely related to courage.[155] Whatever the strength of the subjective experience, the primary focus of being hopeful is resistance; to be hopeful is to persevere in fighting for one's identity, with a degree of sustained refusal to relinquish that identity.

Once again we are faced with the complex relationship between disposition and action. Black theology raises the importance of psychological disposition, yet the necessity of hope for the downtrodden suggests that it is something that can be fostered and grown through human and divine activity. The question of divine activity is also complex. On the one hand, the role of God in meeting the oppressed

[154] Crawford, *Hope in the Holler*, 17.
[155] Crawford, *Hope in the Holler*, 87.

serves to undermine any claim made by the oppressor on the lives of others. But equally the emphasis on the innate dignity of the person as a child of God suggests that at times, the confidence of hope is also innate. However, if it is innate, this may simply be because the person remains a creature and child of God. In this respect, where hope is weak it can be argued that this weakness derives directly from the dehumanizing systems of oppression. Thus it was noted that Thurman argued that hope was grounded in the innate potential of the human person, and in this respect it becomes a possibility for any person able to recognize their own humanity. To foster hope in the face of suffering may thus be related to reawakening a facet of the created humanity of the person. As such, to be a hopeful self is again to live with a vision of reality shaped by divine creation and, in this case especially, by God's presence both in suffering, and as one who can change the world.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined two traditions of reflection on Christian hope, one broadly following Moltmann and one broadly following Cone. There is much debate within each tradition, and thus while I have attempted to highlight points of similarity between different perspectives it is impossible to harmonize the discussion. Of the several distinctions that arise, I will highlight three by way of conclusion.

Firstly, black liberation theology has tended to be more holistic in its doctrine of hope, by taking in creation, Christ, the Spirit and the future of God as grounds for Christian hope. This reflects the Trinitarian doctrine of hope outlined by John Webster,[156] but does so through much more concrete engagement with the realities of human suffering, and thus keeps the focus on God as the one who hears the cries of humankind. While Cone focuses primarily on present liberation as the contents of Christian hope, he is able to maintain a perspective on the ultimate eschatological future. While a number of the writers discussed have downplayed eschatology, the more holistic approach that emerges in Cone and others seems important. The

[156] Webster, 'Hope', 294-5.

overemphasis on the future perceived in European theology risks undermining the fact that the imminent future is as much the realm of God as the transcendent future. In fact, Christian theology is able to contain imminent hopes alongside hopes for the *eschaton*. Conversely, the downplaying of unrealized eschatology in some liberationist writers risks the loss of the ability to say anything in the face of realities that stand outside human control. In my argument it remains an important facet of Christian hope that God is able to finally redeem the cosmos in a manner which is not dependent on human potentiality, and thus does not require past failures and evils to somehow become the ground on which God's kingdom is built. Given these points, it can be seen that the contents of Christian hope may rightly include both hopes for the present and for the ultimate future, both of which involve human flourishing in communion with God and one another. Because both are grounded in God, imminent and ultimate hopes need not be understood to be separate or in opposition. The emphasis of Black theology provides a more robust perspective on the dialectic of creation and new creation, such that both remain firmly the realm of God's hope. As such, hopeful action is open to God's new world, whilst remaining steadfast to God's faithful presence in creation.

Secondly judgement is crucial not only to eschatology, but to the content of hope. Judgement is a thing of hope for both the oppressed and the oppressor, but it looks different from each perspective. What unites humankind in judgement is the fact that humanity does not speak the final word over itself; the grace of God speaks the final word for all creation. The call to this hope will mean something *different but coherent* for the oppressed and the oppressor. For the oppressed, judgement means that human dignity is affirmed in contradiction of all that dehumanizes. But for the privileged, the hope of judgement means that human systems of security are destroyed and replaced only by grace. Given this it must be maintained that hope is not primarily an individualistic concept; it is only in this mode that we may speak of judgement as a hopeful thing for all. But the result of this is that hope is not necessarily without cost. Particularly for the privileged, acting in hope may involve great cost by anticipating changes to one's life that include relinquishing power and security. But such cost remains *hopeful* to the extent that it points towards a more divine existence for all creation. In this vein, it will be argued that hopeful interpretation of the Bible does not equate to reading in a self-interested manner.

Rather, Christian hope includes the eclipse of self-interest by love, and so hopeful interpretation must take account of love for the other first and foremost.

Thirdly, in relation to the question of action and disposition, both strands of the discussion emphasised the importance of seeing hope as directly manifest in present day action. There are numerous indications that this emphasis serves to counter the idea that hope pacifies, and as such it would not do to describe hope as a matter of internal dispositions or feelings. Furthermore, the very fact that Christian hope is grounded in the gracious action of God underlines the argument that anyone may hope, regardless of prior circumstance or temperament. However, at times this active description risks collapsing hope into a somewhat mechanistic application of a particular perspective. Theologians such as Crawford highlight the importance of disposition, partly as it relates to the created dignity of the person, and partly in its utmost necessity for those who suffer. Subjective confidence is an invaluable gift to those who are oppressed and discouraged. As such, it is important to see the action of hope as an integration of action and disposition, as a faculty of the whole person. Hope becomes that disposition (or virtue) which leads to the good in terms of acting in accordance with a vision of reality shaped by divine promise and presence. While 'perseverance' could imply a degree of passivity, I will use this term to capture the idea that hope is active through engaging the whole person.

By noting three points of distinction that display the relative strengths of the positions discussed, I have attempted to articulate some basic 'contours' to the grounds, contents and action of Christian hope. Clearly it will not do to suggest that the various perspectives can be harmonized without loss, and given this I will attempt to note distinctions between different views on hope throughout the thesis as required. However, by outlining these contours of Christian hope we are able to move forward to begin to examine how hope speaks to the hermeneutics of scripture, and thus what it means to become a hopeful reader. In summary, it has been argued that Christian hope is grounded in God's promise and presence, across creation and new creation. As such, while the content of this hope includes the radical newness of future new creation, it also includes hopes for present change in line with God's purpose for creation; in both cases this hope includes the renewal of human community with God. Being hopeful involves the whole person, and so hope may be manifest in confidence and action. By taking various forms, hope perseveres towards

the new, but does so in tension with faithfulness that flows from God's own faithfulness. As such, hopeful action does not pursue newness for its own sake, but newness which derives from God's justice and love through creation and new creation.

Chapters three and four will follow the schema of grounds, contents and action to address the question of what it means to approach biblical reading in hope. Chapter three will examine how the grounds and contents of hope shape the hermeneutical situation in which scripture is read, in terms of the possibilities for understanding God and one another. Chapter four will turn to the action of hope in reading, where the characteristic actions of the hopeful reader will be outlined.

Chapter Three

The Grounds and Content of Christian Hope and the Questions of Theological Hermeneutics

In chapter two I examined a Christian theology of hope in terms of its grounds, contents and action. A range of perspectives were examined, but some common contours were outlined to generate a working theology of Christian hope. I argued that Christian hope is grounded in God's eschatological promise (following Moltmann), but expanded this (following Cone and others) to include God's faithfulness to creation and humanity, and God's presence in the Spirit of Christ. Given this, Christians may legitimately hope for eschatological resurrection and new creation, but also for manifestations of God's renewal of humanity in the present. Finally, it was argued that being hopeful on this basis does not entail passivity; rather, the action of hope consists in responding to a vocation to inhabit and work for this reality now. But because this hope is also a matter of human transformation, it also pertains to the disposition of the person. As such, to be hopeful is to persevere with openness and steadfastness to God, living with a view of reality shaped by the divine creation, promise and presence.

The aim of the remainder of this thesis is to discuss what it means to read the Bible hopefully following the contours described above. Chapter three will consider how the grounds and contents of Christian hope speak to questions of hermeneutics. Because the ground and contents of Christian hope depict reality as such, this vision of reality gives a decisive shape to the situation in which we come to scripture and to discussion of the texts with others. In dialogue with recent work on theological hermeneutics, I will argue that in God there are grounds for a specific kind of hope in the process of reading the Bible with others. Chapter four will then examine how the action of this hope relates to the activity of reading. It is worth noting that through both these chapters I will maintain that theological interpretation is not an end in itself. Strictly speaking then, hopeful reading does not primarily entail hope for getting at 'the meaning' of the text and so forth. Rather, it will be argued that

hopeful reading involves reading the Bible in the broader economy of divine hope as outlined above. This distinction is subtle but important, because it will be argued that the hopeful reader keeps the process of reading rooted in the whole life of hope.

1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter then is to consider how the grounds and contents of Christian hope might shape the theological hermeneutics of reading. A number of possible approaches suggest themselves. For example it was noted that Pannenberg's view of time and eternity has important implications for the question of how meaning emerges in relation to the parts and the whole of history. The possibilities for hermeneutics suggested by this eschatology have been explored by Anthony Thiselton, and with specific reference to the Bible by James McHann in an unpublished dissertation.[1] Briefly, if meaning emerges through the interplay of parts and whole, then the decisive meaning of reality cannot be known until the closure of history when the whole as such is complete. Following Pannenberg, McHann argues that this total view of history is present proleptically in Christ, and this in turn leads him to argue for Christological interpretation of scripture.[2] While this argument has much to commend it, I will pursue a different approach for two reasons. Firstly, the concept of meaning as such has been heavily debated, and particularly in the work of Stephen Fowl whose challenge of the term ties in with his interest in interpretive virtue. Without needing to rehabilitate meaning as a concept, the Christian hope for human relationality has important implications for that discussion. Secondly, the hermeneutics of McHann and Pannenberg are essentially eschatological, but a crucial aspect of chapter two was to show that Christian hope does not only derive from eschatology. Thus while eschatology will remain important, other aspects of Christian hope will need to be discussed. On this basis, this chapter will focus on the hermeneutical implications of the hope for human and divine-human relationships,

[1] James C. McHann, 'The Three Horizons: A Study in Biblical Hermeneutics with special reference to Wolfhart Pannenberg', (Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1987). See also, Thiselton, *Life After Death*, 10-15; Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 337-8.
[2] McHann, 'Three Horizons', 384. Note that in principle, this argument leads to a Christological interpretation of everything.

as grounded in God's creation and new creation. The discussion will proceed in two main sections, taking into account questions raised from wider issues in theological hermeneutics.

The first section will examine two interrelated areas of thought in biblical hermeneutics. Initially, I will discuss the question of textual meaning and plurality in Stephen Fowl and A.K.M. Adam, outlining in particular Fowl's rejection of determinate textual meaning in favour of community-driven interpretive interests. I will then turn to the hermeneutics of suspicion, focusing on the suggestion that if textual meaning is a local phenomenon only, then universal claims about 'meaning' are in fact disguised power bids. It will be noted that this suggestion coheres with Fowl's theological hermeneutics in the sense that selfish and self-interested reading is a problem that coheres with Christian theology and tradition. Through both these discussions, two questions will be raised which relate directly to the theology of hope described in chapter two. 1) Fowl's emphasis on interpretive interest raises the question of whether and how the text retains a formative independence. Furthermore, if interpretive selfishness and oppressiveness is a problem, could the biblical text itself have any role in transforming the reader? 2) The focus on community-formed interests raises the question of how interpretive plurality is to be understood. Is fruitful dialogue between communities even possible without metacritical tools? Further, even if such dialogue were possible, could it be freed from plays for dominance of one community over another?

The second main section will attempt to respond to these two questions from the perspective of Christian hope as described in chapter two. Firstly with regard to the biblical text, it will be argued that hope in God's covenantal, relationship-forming action provides grounds for the possibility of anyone being able to genuinely hear God in the text, giving it a potentially formative role that transcends individual communities. Furthermore, this action goes hand-in-hand with God's transformation of the reader, such that their self-interest begins to be transposed into love. As such, 'interpretive interest' is itself a concept open to divine renewal. The biblical text may be thus encountered in hope; the possibility of interpretive selfishness remains, but there is hope for undistorted understanding of God through biblical reading. Secondly with regard to dialogue with others about the text, it will be argued that hope for the renewal of human relationality in general grounds hope

for the possibility of fruitful interpretive dialogue. This derives from the renewal of a human common life grounded in our creatureliness, and from the transposition of self-interest by love. However, this hope does not equate to a promise of agreement about 'the' meaning of the text, but is rather hope for a genuine *coherence* to interpretive plurality. As such, the hope for hearing God and for interpretive coherence is not grounded in a particular method, nor a particular concept of meaning, but simply in God's gracious action.

2.1. Meaning and Plurality in Stephen Fowl and A.K.M. Adam

i) The problematic nature of 'meaning' and the importance of interpretive interest

Much recent discussion around theological interpretation has been focused on the question of interpretive plurality, and thus in turn the nature of meaning as it relates to texts. Many scholars agree that the biblical texts may offer a range of meanings, but disagree as to exactly how readers should discern the boundaries of legitimate interpretation (if there are any at all).[3] This question has featured prominently in the work of Stephen Fowl, who argues that the problem lies with confusion about the term 'meaning' itself. He observes that disputes about *the* meaning of a text ostensibly revolve around the application of methods, but in fact more often derive from differing views about what counts as the meaning of texts in the first place. These disputes run so deep that Fowl comes to view public agreement about meaning as an impractical pursuit. Instead, following Jeffrey Stout's 'What is the meaning of a text?' he declares; 'I would like to propose that we in Biblical studies give up discussions of meaning and adopt Stout's position of dissolving

[3] For four close perspectives on this issue, see A.K.M. Adam and others, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

disputes about meaning by explicating these disputes in terms of interpretive interests'.[4]

Fowl's solution is to abandon any talk of pursuing meaning in favour of limited interpretive interests pursued by different reading communities. This would not solve any interpretive disputes outright, but would serve to clarify what is really at stake. It is worth noting that Fowl is not opposed to the use of meaning in its limited, everyday sense, but rather opposes the use of the term as a means of deciding between competing interpretations.[5] Without it, it would be possible for a given community to retain their interest in, for example, authorial intention, provided that it was not assumed that this constitutes *the* meaning over and against the interpretive interest of some other group.[6] Different interested communities could exist more happily alongside one another, pursuing their various aims without needing to denigrate the others' interests.[7] The perspective is further developed in his 1998 book, *Engaging Scripture,* where he charts three 'stories of interpretation'.[8] As above, he argues against a 'determinate' view of meaning which assumes that there is one meaning of a text. He does this partly because of the intractable nature of theoretical debates about the meaning of texts, and partly because of the specific way in which pre-modern Christian tradition has found multiple layers of meaning within the Bible. Fowl's target is thus a specifically modern belief that there is a single stable meaning in the text that may be found with the right methods.[9] But equally he attacks the more iconoclastic 'anti-determinate' view of meaning he associates with Jacques Derrida, which finds expression in biblical studies in various forms of ideology criticism and hermeneutics of suspicion. In a crucial move, Fowl challenges this approach by arguing that one cannot unmask the ideology latent within a text because the text *as such* cannot 'have' an ideology (also 'rights' in the argument of

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[4] Fowl, 'Ethics of Interpretation', 380, Citing: Jeffrey Stout, 'What is the meaning of a Text', *NLH*, 14 (1982), 1-12; See more recently: A.K.M. Adam, *Faithful Interpretation: Reading the Bible in a Postmodern World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 1-11, 57.

[5] Richard Briggs notes that meaning remains a useful concept in specific cases, but not as an abstract metacritical concept. This highlights the fact that Fowl's argument does not lead to anarchistic meaninglessness. See Briggs, 'How to Do Things with Meaning',143-160.

[6] See in particular, Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention', **71-87. Fowl argues that authorial intention remains one possible interpretive interest, though he takes care to show that 'intention' is not a straightforward concept.**

[7] Fowl, 'Ethics of Interpretation', 382.

[8] Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 32-61.

[9] Note that Treier argues that in this argument, Fowl takes a worst case view of 'determinate' meaning and treats it as normal. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, 91.

A.K.M. Adam).[10] This leads Fowl to describe the remaining option as 'underdetermined' interpretation. The term derives from the argument that there is no universal determination of meaning, and so reading communities are allowed to determine their own 'circumscribed' interpretive interests. However, 'underdetermined' implies that the text remains as a real and independent artefact, but that the process of 'meaning-making' occurs as the community approaches it with its specific set of interests.[11]

The question that follows this concerns which interpretive interests to pursue. Though not explicit, it seems to me that the pursuit of a specific interest derives from a combination of prior formation and choice, and that this relationship is important for Fowl. On the one hand, it can be seen that interpretive interests will emerge from an individual's personal history, community and life. This is in essence another way of expressing the commonly recognized adage that interpretation 'without presuppositions' is impossible. But given this scenario, Fowl and Adam maintain

[10] Fowl, *Engaging*, 65-76; Adam, *Faithful Interpretation*, 58. Importantly, Fowl does not make this argument from first principles so to speak, but rather shows that texts can be employed for such a wide variety of ideological uses that the notion of a stable text becomes *practically* unsustainable.

[11] A.K.M. Adam, 'Poaching on Zion: Biblical Theology as Signifying Practice' in Adam and others, *Reading Scripture*, 17-34, (28). Behind this perspective lies the pragmatism of Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish, both of whom are cited with approval by Fowl and Adam at various points. Briefly, Rorty has argued that there are no universally given criteria for discerning truth, and as such claims about truth and meaning are really only local means for 'coping' with life as we experience it. In the realm of textual interpretation, Stanley Fish similarly argues that communities create their own conventions for *writing* texts, such that the 'meaning' of the text is simply whatever the community takes it to mean. As a result, the text effectively disappears in the process of reading, and what remains are community specific interpretations. Fish does not see this as a problem – it is merely the way things are. While this might look like radical relativism, it is important to note that within this framework communities exercise a strong function in limiting interpretive possibilities. Describing exactly how this works is not straightforward. To oversimplify, it can be seen that the meaning of 'pain' depends on the context and community of usage (French or English), and as such, the community in which the reader is formed will determine the range of interpretive options that they bring to the 'text'. In this sense, it is the community that becomes the primary determining factor of meaning, though it can be seen that the text itself remains as a genuine artefact. However, the relationship between the formation and choice of interests is highly complex. To what extent is an interpretive interest chosen, and to what extent is it a product of prior formation? Without requiring a full account of free-will, it can be seen that one's interpretive approach is influenced by personal formation, but it is clear that there remains the choice to transgress the boundaries of the community and interpret 'against the grain'. Given this possibility of choice, it seems right to maintain that there are no *theoretical* limits to interpretive plurality. As such, the negation of 'silly' relativism (along with the choice to pursue any particular interpretive pathway), is best understood in terms of relationality rather than textuality. See especially Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980); Stanley E. Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 13, 171ff .

that there is thus no straightforward epistemological priority for any single view of meaning, and so no *theoretical* priority for one interpretive interest over another.[12] Their discomfort over the idea that texts have stable properties derives from this basic perspective, because no text or reader exists in a vacuum. On the other hand, an element of choice remains. Given this, it becomes important to reflect on why one should choose a particular interpretive interest, and because interpretation takes place within a community, this choice is both political and ethical.[13]

As one potential way forward, Fowl highlights Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza's well known SBL address on the ethics of biblical scholarship.[14] Schüssler-Fiorenza had argued that biblical scholars should abandon claims to neutrality and recognize the public implications of their work. In this way, biblical interpretation should be publically accountable in terms of how well it contributes to the work of social justice. While Fowl has some sympathy with her aims, he does not think that there is a sufficiently universal notion of justice that would be needed for this to work. Like 'meaning', he views 'justice' as a community-relative concept, and thus a global vision of justice requires some kind of 'supercommunity' (borrowing Richard Rorty's term). However, Fowl does not concede that such a supercommunity could exist, even if it is theoretically possible. He concludes that 'an interpreter's responsibilities are relative to her or his communal allegiances'.[15] Adam agrees with this position, while commending the same address. He argues that however offensive it might seem, an oppressive New Testament interpretation from within a specific community cannot be said to be '*methodologically* illegitimate' (italics mine), because even if the ethical criteria employed transcend the concerns of the group in scope, they remain particular to that specific group of readers'.[16]

Instead of searching for either a universal definition of meaning, or a transcendent concept of justice, Fowl has essentially carved out a space within which he can focus on the specific 'circumscribed' interests and ethics of the Church. Here

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[12] Fowl, 'Ethics of Interpretation', 388-391; A.K.M. Adam, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology: Modern Problems and Prospects*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 175ff.
[13] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 17; Fowl, 'Ethics of Interpretation', 391.
[14] Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, 'The Ethics of Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship', *JBL*, 107 (1988), 3-17.
[15] Fowl, 'Ethics of Interpretation', 393.
[16] Adam, *Making Sense*, 177-178, 186. Adam's point is not as negative as it might sound, and much of his work displays a concern for inclusion and responsibility at the widest level.

again, the relationship between prior formation and choice is important because Fowl rightly detects a conflict of interests within the Church. On the one hand, Fowl and Jones suggest that 'Christian communities interpret Scripture [...] so that believers might live faithfully before God in the light of Jesus Christ'.[17] While the Church has traditionally employed a range of approaches to this end, there is a kind of unifying theological 'interest' in view. On the other hand, Fowl rightly notes the tendency of Christians to interpret the biblical texts so as to support 'sinful practices'.[18] This tendency is however not merely a failure to apply the right methods; it is a moral failure, a result of the human condition of sin. In other words, the human condition leads readers to adopt unhealthy or selfish interpretive interests. Furthermore, Fowl and Jones suggest that some communities have become so wayward that readers are largely pre-formed with ethically questionable interpretive interests. I will return to this relationship between nature and nurture in due course, but for now the basic point is that even within the Church, readers' interests will often be morally ambiguous. What is needed is the moral formation of 'virtuous readers', a process which itself involves an element of choice in the sense that readers choose to participate in the formative practices of Christian communities. The virtues of these readers lean towards the primary good for Christian theological interpretation, which as noted above is to hear the word of God in the text so as to 'live faithfully before God'.[19] Crucially, these virtues are themselves shaped by the content of scripture; they are thus 'the prerequisite for, and result of wise readings of Scripture'.[20] In other words, Fowl proposes a hermeneutical cycle of virtue between the text and the reading community. Given this picture, while theological interpretation remains a community-specific interest (specific to the Church), it is clear that the text itself has some role in shaping the interpretive interest of the community. If this is so, we will need to consider exactly how the text takes on this formative role, and in turn whether this formative role is a contingent choice of the Christian community, or a property of the text as such. This question will be outlined shortly.

Before proceeding it is worth noting that Fowl retains the possibility of dialogue with other communities (inside and outside Churches) about the text, even

[17] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 20. Also, Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture: A Short Introduction*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 2-7, 13.
[18] Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 61.
[19] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 20.
[20] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 36; Fowl, 'Virtue', 837-839.

if the interests of different reading communities come into conflict. He does so partly on the basis of Stout's argument for translatability, where the very possibility of recognizing another's language as language forms the basis for translation and hence dialogue.[21] However, he also argues that Christian ethics and mission require an outgoing focus, where dialogue with others is sought however difficult it might be in practice. I will go on to support this argument on both counts, but even with this perspective Fowl seems to remain opposed to the suggestion that there is a means of adjudicating such dialogues. Similarly, Adam argues that there are in fact 'no transcendent rules or criteria for judging interpretations'.[22] Dialogue is thus possible, but without the guarantee of shared points of reference; in particular, the text itself does not constitute a shared point of reference for determining its own meaning. However this raises important questions, to which we now turn.

ii) Questions arising from the concept of interpretive interest

My primary reason for focusing on Fowl's work is that I wish to maintain the importance of the formative cycle that he proposes between the text and the community, as it relates to interpretive virtue. Furthermore, his concern over the problematic use of meaning in interpretive disputes seems well founded, though it remains more controversial. For example, Kevin Vanhoozer has argued for the enduring validity of authorial intention as the primary locus of textual meaning, by using theological foundations for the nature of communication.[23] I broadly agree with Vanhoozer's focus, but by prioritizing theology he still fails to generate a definition of meaning *as such* that will command assent in the public sphere. More recently, D. Christopher Spinks has argued for a 'triadic' view of meaning based on the triadic categories of speech act theory, in order to balance Fowl and Vanhoozer. In this vein, Spinks argues that meaning is best understood as residing in the

[21] Stephen E. Fowl, 'Could Horace talk with the Hebrews? Translatability and Moral Disagreement in MacIntyre and Stout', *JRE*, 19, 1 (1991), 1-20, (7-13).
[22] Adam, *Making Sense*, 178.
[23] See Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*; also, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse and the Discourse of Covenant' in *The Scripture and Hermeneutics Series Volume 2; After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene and Karl Möller (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 1-49.

interplay between authorial intention and community interest.[24] Spinks's argument has much to commend it, but again could only command widespread assent if the field of speech act theory itself was widely endorsed.[25] In other words, both Vanhoozer and Spinks offer convincing accounts of textual meaning, but Fowl would simply point out that they are only convincing within a localised framework, and thus fail to revitalize a universal concept of meaning that could usefully mediate interpretive disputes. Given this, I will not attempt to reinstate a concept of meaning as such, but I will attempt to modify Fowl's view of the virtuous cycle by raising two questions that relate to a theology of hope. In responding to these two questions I will argue that there is something more determinate in the reading process, even if it is not meaning *per se*.

Firstly, Spinks is correct to note that Fowl is not clear as to exactly how the biblical text takes on a formative role within the Christian community.[26] In *Reading in Communion*, Fowl and Jones argue that 'the Bible constitutes the authoritative Scripture of Christian communities, and this makes a decisive difference. The life of Christian communities is to be formed and regulated by the interpretation of Scripture'.[27] In this way they draw on Bonhoeffer's assertion that Christians should read scripture 'over and against' themselves.[28] However, it is crucial to note that they only give scripture this regulative role *within* the Church as the community that has chosen to accept it in this way. In this respect, formation becomes a function of communal use and thus does not derive from any property of the text as such. But this creates a peculiarity within *Reading in Communion*. Two of the prominent examples of virtuous readers are not virtuous *because* of their communal formation, but *in spite* of it. Both the prophet Jeremiah and Beyers Naudé of the pro-apartheid DRC were in fact virtuous readers because they stood at odds with their communities.[29] But we are thus required to ask how they came to be virtuous readers; indeed, Fowl and Jones speak of the 'forming' of Jeremiah, but without

[24] D. Christopher Spinks, *The Bible and the Crisis of Meaning: Debates on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 113-147.
[25] Adam rightly points out that serious critiques of speech act theory from Fish and Derrida are often overlooked in biblical hermeneutics. A.K.M. Adam, 'Review of *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*', *Modern Theology*, 10 (1994), 433-434, (434).
[26] Spinks, *Crisis of Meaning*, 108. See also Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 549. Thiselton argues that Fish's account leaves no space for the text to reform readers 'from outside'.
[27] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 19.
[28] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 140.
[29] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 102-104.

detailing how this occurs in the absence of a 'vigilant community'.[30] This case is particularly suggestive because of course Jeremiah does not read the Bible but hears the word of God, and this suggests a decisive difference. In chapter two I argued that Christian hope is grounded in the belief that God can and has broken the seemingly closed boundaries of human existence to impart new life. As such, the formative role of the biblical text might not derive from its textuality, but from the possibility that God speaks. In turn, might not the voice and promise of God also have some decisive role, in distinction to the interpretive community, in shaping interpretive interests?

This area leads to a second question, concerning the nature of dialogue between communities in terms of the limits of interpretive pluralism and the possibility of public agreement. Against a monophonic view of determinate textual meaning, Adam argues that the Church should pursue a harmonious plurality of interpretive performance, and in turn look outwards to a 'dissonant and disordered world'.[31] Similarly, Fowl and Jones believe that the Church must seek dialogue with other communities towards mutual enrichment and challenge.[32] I will argue that this is entirely right, but that a Christian theology of hope offers specific grounds for this dialogue, for a plurality of interpretations that might nonetheless find coherence. In this respect it should be noted that it has not been established that interpretive plurality is a problem as such. Rather, this question revolves around how interpretive plurality becomes either coherent or dissonant. This will be discussed in section 3.2, though it should be noted that both questions overlap in scope.

Behind both of these questions lies the question of God and the accessibility of the divine life. While I am not concerned by the loss of meaning as a conceptual tool, I wish to maintain that the gracious action of God as an extra-linguistic reality makes a determinate difference to the hermeneutical situation. However, determinate does not necessarily mean determinable, and as noted from the outset, my own apprehension of divine action is subject to frustration on its own terms. It is for this reason that I agree with the cycle proposed by Fowl and Jones. What I am arguing for is thus a dogmatic 'wager'; if there is some truth in the picture of hope described

[30] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 95-102. Jeremiah is described as being formed by his faith (95) and by the word of God (101).
[31] Adam, 'Poaching on Zion', 31-34.
[32] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 110-130.

in chapter two, it must be allowed to shape the subsequent hermeneutical course, and I will argue that as such it modifies the reading situation as described in this chapter so far.

2.2. Selfishness, Power and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion

So far I have raised two related questions, one that essentially concerns the hermeneutics of the biblical text, and one that concerns the hermeneutics of dialogue with others *about* the text. The task of the second main section will be to address these questions with regard to Christian hope, but firstly they will be raised again with respect to a second layer in theological hermeneutics; namely the specific issue of power, and the hermeneutics of suspicion that results. This area has received much attention in philosophical hermeneutics, and is perhaps most discussed in biblical studies within the world of liberation hermeneutics. It is argued that 'traditional' studies from Euro-American contexts are not the value-neutral enterprises that they might claim to be, and thus they derive their success not from 'correctness', but 'dominance'.[33] Theologically, this should not be surprising as Fowl was right to note that readers both deliberately and unwittingly read to support sinful practices. Given this possibility, dominant interpretations are subjected to suspicion.

i) Manipulative self interest and the theology of suspicion

At the heart of the problem we are trying to address is a general rise in mistrust that is associated with the so-called postmodern shift away from the confidence of modernity. In its more general form, this takes the shape of a mistrust of traditional truth claims and systems of control. Thus Garrett Green rightly suggests that 'the root of the hermeneutics of suspicion in all its forms is the fear of

[33] Blount and others, 'Introduction' , 3-4.

being deceived, especially by oneself'.[34] But beyond this, there is also the fear of manipulation and violence that derives from the political realities and fallout of the modern period. In other words, the problem we are facing relates both to the self as such, and the self as related to others, a problem that has been analysed in relation to theology and hermeneutics by Anthony Thiselton in *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*.

Whether postmodernism represents a phase of modernity or a new period altogether, Thiselton argues that the term 'implies a *shattering of the innocent confidence* [of modernity] *in the capacity of the self to control its own destiny* [italics original]'.[35] Following the classic 'masters of suspicion', Thiselton suggests that the self as understood within postmodernism has become 'decentred' in the sense that it is no longer autonomous but situated, and is thus subject to external forces and its own inner drives. Far from being in control, it may 'fall victim to its own deceptive, self-protective and manipulative devices'.[36] On the one hand, the result of this is that the self is already a victim of its own circumstances, but inasmuch as it is subject to its own desires, it also comes in effect to victimize others. As we shall see, Thiselton rightly argues that this picture actually fits Christian theology better than the confident modern self, but it should be noted that this perspective emerges in distinction to Christian tradition. This depiction of the self initially stands to disrupt traditional understandings about reality.

This is because the corollary of this problematized selfhood is its effect on others. If, as noted in the previous section of this chapter, the self and its interpretations are context dependent, then any claims to *universal* truth or meaning begin to look like disguised bids for power over others. As Thiselton puts it, 'the postmodern self follows Nietzsche and Freud in viewing claims to truth largely as devices which serve to legitimate power-interests. *Disguise covers everything* [italics original]'.[37] Obviously this critique has been levelled at Christianity as much as it makes claims to universal truths, but it can be seen that even *within* Christian tradition this problem might remain. As Fowl and Jones point out, it is very possible

[34] Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 192.
[35] Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, 11. (Hereafter *IGPS*).
[36] Thiselton, *IGPS*, 121,127.
[37] Thiselton, *IGPS*, 12.

for interpreters to read scripture 'for' themselves, in the sense that scripture is manipulated to support sin.[38] But if universality is then claimed for these readings, the selfish interest of one group may then come to dominate another. The result of this manipulative process is the dehumanizing of the other, because as Thiselton puts it, 'to be manipulated is to be treated as less than a personal self'.[39]

The result of this is a 'culture of distrust and suspicion' which leads to the need to unmask seemingly neutral claims for the power bids that they are. This may seem like an overstatement of the problem, particularly as the description of a 'culture of distrust and suspicion' seems hardly value neutral in itself. We need to take care to recognize the range of views that emerge from the recognition that the self is inherently situated. Furthermore, because self deception is part of the problem, power bids may not be conscious moves but may operate unwittingly. Either way, Thiselton is right to highlight the prevalence of the basic insight that human beings do act selfishly in the guise of acting neutrally, and thus it is necessary to take the hermeneutics of suspicion seriously, particularly because as we shall see, a hermeneutics of hope begins by recognizing the problem of the human condition. At the heart of Thiselton's argument is the idea that:

> Christian theology also coheres with Freud's analysis of the self as falling victim to forces which it does not fully understand and which certainly it cannot fully control. The postmodern self at this point stands closer to biblical realism than to the innocent confidence of modernity.[40]

The postmodern description of the 'fallible' self coheres well with the New Testament's depiction of the human capacity for the 'pursuit of self-interests', which at its root is the problem of sin.[41] Rather than conceiving of sin in terms of isolated acts of self interest, Thiselton argues that the problem is better explained as the human condition.[42] This perspective is important for a number of reasons, but in this discussion it underlines the fact that acting in self interest is not necessarily a conscious decision, so much as an innate capacity. The problem of interpretation is not necessarily that readers deliberately manipulate the text to their own end (though

[38] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 140, 41-42.
[39] Thiselton, *IGPS*, 13.
[40] Thiselton, *IGPS*, 130.
[41] Thiselton, *IGPS*, 128, 13. cf. Hebrews 3.13, 1 John 1.8, 1 Corinthians 3.18.
[42] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 264ff.

this does happen) but that the hold of sin preconditions us to act in this way. As Garrett Green points out, Christians thus have good reasons to be suspicious.[43]

Further to this, selfishness has inevitable social consequences; in this respect the condition of sin may also be described in terms of the damaging of human relationships with God and one another. The hermeneutical consequences of this are drawn out by Rowan Williams's discussion of Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer. Williams describes how both question the assumption that meaning is somehow always hidden beneath surface presentations. Writing from prison, Bonhoeffer had commented that '[a]nything clothed, veiled, pure, and chaste is presumed to be deceitful, disguised, and impure; people here simply show their own impurity'.[44] This comment has less to do with a formal hermeneutics of suspicion and more to do with general public perceptions, but Williams highlights two important points:

> One is that the assumption of an equivalence between the 'inner' and the 'essential' is controversial and historically conditioned; the other is that a large part of what conditions it is the development of cultures in which isolation has become an increasingly widespread experience.[45]

Two points are worth making in response to this argument. Firstly, just as Gadamer challenged Schleiermacher's idea that alienation was essentially given with individuality, so Williams suggests that such alienation is better understood as relating to isolation within communities.[46] He is thus right that the kind of suspicion described by Bonhoeffer grows from a failure to question the givenness of the present climate. But secondly, Williams argues that suspicion derives from a lack of common life. The possibility of misunderstanding derives from the rise of mistrust, because of the uncertainty over what 'people mean'.[47] While Williams is right to highlight that this situation comes and goes in its intensity, I would argue that if the possibility of isolation, and hence alienation, is woven into the human problem of sin, then it is at least universally potential if not always actualized. Crucially

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[43] Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics and Imagination*, 192ff.
[44] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald H. Fuller, (London: SCM, 1956), 345.
[45] Rowan Williams, 'The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer' in Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton, (London: SCM, 2007), (186-202), 191.
[46] See Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 157-173.
[47] Williams, 'Suspicion', 191.

however, it will be argued that from a theological perspective, human selfishness and alienation do not have the last word. As well as the renewal of a common life, there is also hope for the renewal of the self; indeed the two depend upon one another. And if there is hope for the transcendence of self interest, there is also hope for fruitful inter-community reading.

ii) Power, suspicion and the biblical text

The hermeneutical perspective under discussion takes many forms within biblical studies, and to explore it I will continue my dialogue with Black liberation theology. It is worth noting that not all Black liberation hermeneutics operate explicitly within the framework of suspicion, but most writers do recognize the problematic interweaving of 'traditional' Christian theology with European power. Particularly helpful is the contribution of womanist hermeneutics in recognizing the multiple dimensions of oppression, and also the way in which it is possible to remain blind to some marginalised groups even within a liberation framework. Generally within liberation hermeneutics, suspicion operates with a blend of two perspectives. Firstly, 'standard' or 'dominant' interpretations and modes of interpretation are suspected of concealing the interests of the interpreter, and supporting their ideologies. But secondly, and particularly since Itumeleng Mosala's landmark study, the biblical text itself has been suspected of enshrining power interests, and this creates particular problems for the status of the Bible.

Firstly, if all interpretation is grounded in its own context, then no interpretive practice is free from contextual influences. Recently Blount and others have argued that:

> The Euro-American, scientific, systematic, exegetical, and philosophical community has no interpretive privilege or advantage. That community, too, provides readings influenced by the space it occupies. Its readings of the

> biblical texts, then, are not more accurate interpretations of biblical texts; they are simply more privileged ones.[48]

Similarly, in the British context, Reddie has argued against the 'hierarchy of credibility' that allows established procedures dominance in producing interpretive results, over minority perspectives.[49] With respect to the subject of race, Reddie notes Beckford's argument against the idea that 'whiteness is able to function as an ethnically neutral category that can go unexplored and unchallenged as the standard for expectation and evaluation'.[50] The result of this is that standard academic approaches to interpretation are exposed as deriving from the perspectives of predominantly white, male scholars, but because they have been accorded a degree of neutrality, so too the *particular* perspective is granted normative status. Thus Maxine Howell argues that even when 'unconventional' interpretations are produced, they still often derive from male, white perspectives.[51] While Howell does not engage with such 'unconventional' approaches, there is a great deal of literature devoted to questioning the ways in which apparently technical interpretations of texts such as Galatians 3.28 might in fact eclipse minority perspectives.[52] It is easier to assert this problem than to prove that it is always the case, but within this thesis it is enough to recognize that it is at least possible. The result of this is that much recent literature deliberately stands in contrast to Euro-American academic perspectives, by highlighting aspects of recent history, experience, and the perspectives of non-academic readers.

Rarely however, has this suspicion of 'standard' interpretation been wholly separated from a suspicion of the biblical text itself. A number of African-American writers have noted that long before the theoretical emergence of the hermeneutics of suspicion, African slaves rejected both interpretations offered by masters or white preachers, and portions of the Bible itself. We will return to this early context shortly, but Norman Gottwald is probably correct to note that the most sustained

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[48] Blount and others, 'Introduction', 4.
[49] Anthony G. Reddie, 'Not just seeing but really seeing: A Practical Black Liberationist Spirituality for re-interpreting reality', *BTIJ*, 7, 3 (2009), 339-365, (345ff).
[50] Robert Beckford, *God and the Gangs*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 75.
[51] Maxine Howell, 'Towards a Womanist Pneumatological Pedagogy: Reading and Re-reading the Bible from British Black Women's Perspectives', *BTIJ*¸ 7, 1 (2009), 86-99, (88).
[52] E.g. Demetrius K. Williams, 'The Bible and Models of Liberation in the African American Experience' in *Yet With a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Randall C. Bailey (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 33-59.

critiques of the text have come in the wake of Itumuleng Mosala's work in the context of South Africa.[53] Though Cone had recognized the problematic nature of certain texts, Mosala attacks both him and Allan Boesak for failing to question the status of the Bible as such. Early in his seminal book, Mosala argues that:

> The insistence on the Bible as the Word of God must be seen for what it is: an ideological maneuver [sic] whereby ruling-class interests evident in the Bible are converted into faith that transcends social, political, racial, sexual, and economic divisions.[54]

The status of the text is problematic precisely because its authors have left ideological fingerprints. Mosala's task is thus to unmask the ideological agenda within the text itself, allowing the marginalised voices of liberation to emerge. Significantly, one of Mosala's test cases is the opening chapters of Luke, texts that have at other times been brought to prominence for their liberating potential.[55] He argues that Luke's primary aim was in fact to ingratiate Christianity to the imperial powers, and as such the stories are retold in a way that eclipses any kind of class critique. Here, the double aspect of suspicion is in operation. On the one hand, biblical writers are suspected of inscribing their own power interests within the text, but as a result, privileged interpreters are unable to do anything other than 'collude' with the ideology of the text:

> The dominant exegetical practices, however, seem incapable of penetrating the ideological practices of Luke to reach the radical story of Jesus and his followers, which Luke *produces* in such a way that it is "acceptable" to the rich and the powerful. In a frenzied attempt to defend the ruling-class interests of Luke as revolutionary – of course, "responsible revolutionary" – recent studies of political issues in Luke have colluded with the ideological interests of the texts at the expense of the oppressed and exploited people of

[53] Norman K. Gottwald, 'African American Biblical Hermeneutics: Major Themes and Wider Implications' in *Yet With a Steady Beat*, ed. Bailey, 177-182, (178).
[54] Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 18.
[55] Classically, see Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Sr Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, (London: SCM, 1974), 207-8.

> first-century Palestine, as well as their descendents in the contemporary world.[56]

Mosala's argument appears odd because of the importance given to Luke's gospel by so many liberation theologians. The inclusion of the 'Magnificat' and the woes of Luke 6 make it hard to accept that Luke's agenda was as bourgeois as Mosala describes. Having said this, ideological criticism has shown that minority voices are often co-opted by the powerful in a way which neutralizes the protest by making it respectable.[57] Just as the *Sex Pistols*' 'God Save the Queen' has become a nostalgic part of British musical heritage, it could be that Mary's protest is recorded for its quaintness. However, because of the ambiguity of the evidence, it is not clear that Mosala's suspicious reading is to be preferred over the less suspicious approach of, say, Gutierrez. Having said that, this ambiguity does nothing to undermine the basic *possibility* that underlies Mosala's argument.

The second more serious issue with this book is that it begs the question of why one should continue to read the text for its own sake. The question is brought forward by the fact that Mosala's basic framework is Marxist-materialist rather than Christian *per se*. He argues that 'exploited black people must liberate the gospel so that the gospel may liberate them. An enslaved gospel enslaves, but a liberated gospel liberates'.[58] But if there is a principle available by which the exploited might 'liberate' the gospel, it would seem that the gospel thus becomes a particular expression of a more general metacritical principle. It may be that the gospel is a more effective tool for liberation than Marxism, but this point is never addressed, and so this in turn begs the question of whether the gospel has anything independent to contribute to the discussion. The point of this is to argue that a *thoroughgoing* suspicion seems to leave the text redundant. This does not invalidate thoroughgoing suspicion on its own terms; for example there may be aspects of the text that can still be usefully co-opted for some other purpose. Equally, there may be value in resisting and challenging a text that has been hugely influential. But if there is something *in the text* that is worth recovering, and that because it relates to truth about God or humanity, then we must consider whether the text in fact contains its own self-

[56] Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 163.
[57] Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies*, (London: SPCK, 1990), 96.
[58] Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 168.

critical principles. If this is so then it would be possible to retain a necessary suspicion *within a framework that retains the value of reading the text in its own right*. I will argue that this is in fact the case.

iii) Questions arising from the hermeneutics of suspicion

It might appear that by highlighting these gaps in Mosala's argument, I have set up a straw man to attack in the next section. There are indeed more nuanced approaches to biblical suspicion, and some of these will be highlighted as the following questions are addressed. But I have focused on Mosala because I wish to maintain the basic theological validity of the principle that stands behind his argument; human beings *do* inscribe selfish power-interests in their writing, and because the biblical writers are human, they are at least in theory as much open to this problem as any other person. So too, biblical interpreters are fallible and may both intentionally and unintentionally collude with power interests in the text, and impose their own ideological agendas upon interpretation. However, two important questions are raised by this situation.

Firstly, as noted above, it is unclear as to how (if at all) the biblical text retains some kind of formative independence with respect to the community. This is essentially a second angle on the question raised with respect to Fowl, and it is interesting to note that some liberation hermeneutics do tend towards pragmatic use of specific texts that aid the liberation struggle.[59] In this case, the crucial question concerns at what point thoroughgoing suspicion renders the text completely inert. This is particularly important if some external metacritical principle is in operation; in this situation, would the text itself have any contribution to the formation of metacritical principles, and if not, would its significance become purely functional? To address this question, it is worth noting a particular oddity with Mosala's *Biblical Hermeneutics*. He critiques Cone and Boesak for relying too heavily on white

[59] Thiselton notes this tendency, though as discussed below, it is not always the case that choice to focus on affirmative texts equates to pragmatism as such. Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 420-423.

European theologians, only to turn to Marx early in the book.[60] I do not make this point as a cheap criticism, but because there seems to be an implicit trust of the Marxist-materialist perspective, which is quite understandably lacking towards the white theological perspective. But in distinction to Cone and Boesak, it is not clear that this trust is extended towards the text. Of course, there is no *a priori* reason why the text should be trusted, but if the text is to continue to be read theologically, and that because it speaks in some sense about the hope of God, then it is worth exploring whether this hope might restore trust for a genuine encounter with God through the text, in spite of inherent difficulties of that enterprise.

Secondly, and perhaps more straightforwardly, we must consider whether cross-contextual dialogue is possible in a way which avoids the problems of one group imposing their agenda on another. To some extent, Fowl and Adam have argued that the elimination of determinate meaning would lead to a more benign coexistence between reading communities. However, the conflict of interpretations itself has ethical and political implications, and for this reason alone it seems that dialogue is simultaneously necessary and difficult. I will argue that this remains the case, but that a Christian theology of hope offers specific grounds for hope that this dialogue can reach towards coherence while retaining some degree of plurality, and do so free from self interested power games. In chapter four it will be shown that the action of this hope entails actively seeking out dialogue partners on these grounds. In the remainder of this chapter, I will address the two questions raised in these two discussions so far; 1) concerning the status of the text and 2) concerning the possibilities for dialogue about the text.

3.1. Christian Hope, the Biblical Text and the Interests of the Reader

Fowl himself has noted that his earlier interest in philosophical hermeneutics as discussed above has given way to a prioritization of theology.[61] I began with this aspect of Fowl's work because it is crucial to his concept of interpretive virtue, but

[60] Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 1-4.
[61] Stephen E. Fowl, 'Further Thoughts on Theological Interpretation', in Adam and others, *Reading Scripture*, 125-130, (125).

following his turn to theological categories we will now consider how the specific theology of hope shapes a response to the two questions raised about the status of the biblical text. In this section I will hold together two important lines of thought that have been considered thus far. On the one hand, I agree with Fowl that interpretation is made complex by the human situation; sociologically, because humans are embedded in communities and traditions, and theologically because of the reality of sin.[62] From this perspective, a theory of determinate textual meaning is unlikely to resolve interpretive disputes. Following Mosala we have raised theological reasons for caution with regard to the biblical text itself, because of the human propensity for inscribing self interested ideologies in writing.[63] On the other hand, a Christian theology of hope is grounded in the claim that God speaks and promises, opening up the seemingly closed boundaries of existence. Furthermore, the hope grounded in God's creation and new creation speaks to and transforms human nature, and thus also what it means to interpret. On this basis, I will modify the discussions so far by arguing that there remains hope for genuine communication with God through the biblical text. The problems of power and selfishness remain, and thus the virtuous cycle also remains crucial; however it will be argued that this cycle begins with God, and is hopeful in God.

i) Hope in God and the Bible reading situation

In chapter two it was argued that Christian hope is grounded in God, acting in creation, salvation and the promise of new creation, all of which might be linked by God's covenant faithfulness. The content of this hope is broad, but at its heart lies hope for the human person in relationship with God. Cone and Thurman emphasized present hope drawn from the fact of being created by God, and from the presence of Christ and the Spirit to human existence. Thurman describes the conviction of slave

[62] I will go on to note that while sin clearly connotes a problem, community embeddedness does not. In other words, it does not follow that interpretive plurality is inherently a problem.

[63] As noted above, Fowl was unconvinced by ideology criticism because he argued against the idea that texts could have ideologies at all. However, as soon as the argument for reading scripture 'over and against' ourselves is made, the objections made by Mosala and others return with full force.

preachers that 'every human being was a child of God'.[64] This conviction derives from the belief that humanity was created 'in the image' of God, and serves the dual function of undermining oppressive human definitions, and reinforcing the dignity inherent in the relationship as a matter of simply being. In this view, to be human means to be created *and loved* by God.[65] Similarly, Moltmann has argued that 'when we say that God created the world 'out of freedom' we must immediately add 'out of love'.[66] What follows is that within human created nature there is the capacity for relationship with God, and thus genuine communication as an expression of that relationship. Thiselton picks this point up in Barth:

> In Barth's view divine creation and creation in the image of God provide *conditions for the possibility* of intercourse between God and humankind. *But divine grace* and human response operate to *actualize* this in dynamic, eventful communication [italics original].[67]

God creates us with the capacity for understanding God, prior to our experience of that relationship. In this context, the condition of sin might be understood as alienation, but crucially this alienation derives from the damaging of the image of God in the human creature. As such the very possibilities for communication are distorted, not by God becoming distant but by the damaging of that which makes communication as communion possible. Death itself becomes the ultimate negation of communication, and in this light part of the hope of the resurrection may be understood as God's gracious speaking, and God's restoration of humankind's ability to hear. Thus the eschatological promise of new creation creates hope for the consummation of this divine-human existence, and the proleptic transformation of the human self in the Spirit grounds hope for genuinely hearing God in the present. Divine promise 'lifts the self out of its pre-defined situatedness and beckons from 'beyond' to a new future'.[68] But crucially, even though this hope reflects a particular perspective of the Church, its scope is universal; though I will maintain that God's

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[64] Thurman, *Spirituals*, 32-33.
[65] However, being created and loved by God does not necessarily equate to being human. There is some difficulty in determining exactly what is meant by 'the image of God'.
[66] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, (London: SCM, 1985), 35.
[67] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 232; See also Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 150.
[68] Thiselton, *IGPS*, 153.

word elicits a human response (part of which becomes the cycle of hope), the chance of hearing God derives from the priority of God's action and does thus not depend on, for example, being in the Church. As noted in chapter two, Christian hope is grounded in God's ability to break open the seemingly closed boundaries of present existence, and especially present oppression.

To the extent that the Bible 'is itself a servant of the triune king and a means of his covenantal self-communication',[69] a theology of hope suggests that *these* texts retain some formative independence, separate to the interests of the different reading communities, because they convey God's promises to humankind through *God's* use of the texts. The idea that the biblical canon is 'annexed' to God's saving purposes is of course a particularly reformed perspective,[70] but it is interesting to note that a widening range of scholars in this field have taken this kind of view as a starting point. Indeed Fowl recently speaks favourably of Aquinas' assertion that scripture 'uniquely reveals the truth about God, the world, and God's relationship to the world'.[71] Similarly, it was noted in chapter one that Moltmann and Thiselton stress the promissory role of scripture, as a means by which God communicates his promise of new creation to human beings. It is my argument that any account of theological interpretation must go some way to working within this framework; if scripture is to be interpreted theologically, it is because in some way it communicates the truth and promise of God, and in this (broad) sense, God speaks to humankind through it. As such, good reading from the perspective of theological interpretation relates in some way to seeking the voice of God. However, it is precisely this perspective that Mosala disputes, because it is seen to give authority to human, ruling-class ideologies. Given this, is it possible to speak of the Bible as scripture in a way that avoids authorizing sinful ideology on the one hand, and avoids the loss of the independent grounds of hope on the other?

A potential way forward is suggested by writers such as Renita Weems and Clarice Martin. Womanist perspectives have been particularly helpful in highlighting the blind spots of earlier liberation theology, and the result of this is that they are able to point out where some paradigms of liberation have left certain groups of

[69] Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation and Reading*, (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 35.
[70] See Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 27.
[71] Stephen E. Fowl, 'The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of Scripture: The Example of Thomas Aquinas' in Adam and others, *Reading Scripture*, 35-50, (38).

people marginalised. Martin questions the use of the exodus narrative as the paradigm for liberation, because it pertains more to the question of slavery than to other inequalities, such as sexism. The result of this blind spot is that texts such as the *haustafeln* have been criticized more directly for their injunctions to slaves than for their marginalisation of women.[72] Similarly Weems shows that the biblical texts are written almost entirely from a male perspective for male readers, and that even when the voices of the marginalised are included, they are reported in the voices of the dominant. Thus she argues that African American women have rightly learned to approach the Bible with 'extreme caution'.[73] In a manner similar to Mosala, the interpretive process she describes involves recovering the marginalised voices from within the text. The decisive difference is that Weems and Martin offer a stronger rationale for why readers should persevere with the text at all.

Alongside other writers, they note that long before the rise of the hermeneutics of suspicion as a theoretical concept, African slaves had found themselves able to critique not only the interpretations of slave masters and white preachers, but also the biblical text itself. This was partly because, as Weems notes, their initial encounter was primarily aural, and this more naturally led to a piecemeal appropriation of the text because the text as a written artefact was not primary.[74] But more directly, there was a natural rejection of the use of various passages to support slavery, and in turn a rejection of the passages themselves. One of the most quoted passages of Howard Thurman's writing refers to his grandmother's decision never to read 'that part of the Bible' which commanded slaves to submit to their masters.[75] Thus in Weems's analysis:

> [...] her aural contact with the Bible left her free to criticize and reject those portions and interpretations of the Bible that she felt insulted her innate sense of dignity as an African, a woman, and a human being, and free to cling to

[72] Clarice J. Martin, 'The *Haustafeln* (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation: "Free Slaves" and "subordinate Women"', in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 206-231, (226-7). See also Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 144-6; Cheryl Kirk Duggan, 'Let My People Go! Threads of Exodus in African American Narratives' in *Yet With a Steady Beat*, ed. Bailey, 123-143.
[73] Renita J. Weems, 'Reading *Her Way* through the struggle: African American Women and the Bible' in *Stony the Road*, ed. Felder, 57-77, (66, 62-76).
[74] Weems, 'Reading *Her Way*' 61.
[75] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1949; repr. Boston: Beacon press, 1996), 30-31. Thurman's grandmother is quoted by numerous writers concerned with the status of the text during the slavery period.

> those that she viewed as offering her inspiration as an enslaved woman and that portrayed, in her estimation, a God worth believing in. Her experience of reality became the norm for evaluating the contents of the Bible.[76]

Weems highlights two aspects of a hermeneutics in which the exercise of suspicion finds its home. As with most liberation hermeneutics, experience was a vitally important framework for hearing the text. But alongside this, the affirmation of human dignity and God's goodness found *within* scripture was allowed to cut against the more negative passages. In Clarice Martin's terms, 'it was believed that the slave regulation neither exemplified the whole gospel nor manifested its central thrust'.[77] Thus while Thiselton among others considers this kind of use of the text as equating to pragmatic affirmation, in my judgement there is a more subtle principle in operation.[78]

The piecemeal appropriation of scripture may work at a deeper level than simply choosing favourable passages and rejecting unfavourable ones. Weems and Martin argue that there is an internal conflict within scripture, but that the strand of thought concerning the fundamental dignity of all humanity is sufficiently strong to create a framework *within which* other aspects of the text might be critiqued. The central emphasis of the gospel becomes a hermeneutic lens for critiquing the text, and thus scripture in some sense can be seen to be self-critical. On this basis, even with a strong degree of suspicion, Weems is able to explain why the text might still be read:

> African American women have continued to read the Bible in most instances because of its vision and promise of a world where the humanity of everyone will be fully valued. They have accomplished this reading in spite of the voices from within and without that have tried to equivocate on that vision and promise.[79]

Francis Watson forms a similar argument to Weems with respect to Euro-American feminism, and describes the process as a 'hermeneutics of hope'.[80] He argues that

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[76] Weems, 'Reading *Her Way*', 61-2.
[77] Martin, 'The *Haustafeln*', 217.
[78] Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 423-427.
[79] Weems, 'Reading *Her Way*', 77.
[80] Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 200.

even when texts imply gender equality they are often written from a patriarchal perspective, but it is nonetheless possible to trace a strand of equality between the horizons of creation and new creation. Thus the critical principle of gender equality is internal to the text rather than external, and as such the text has its own capacity for 'self-criticism'.[81] In this way, we may still speak of God speaking through scripture despite the potential problems created by its human conduits.

At this point we are very close to the kind of approach advocated in this thesis. The potential for God to speak, for the word of hope to be apprehended by human readers in spite of human distortions, provides grounds for hope in pursuing the voice of God through biblical reading. Chapter four will extend this perspective by addressing the question of what it means to *be* hopeful as an interpreter, how hope energises the pursuit of this interpretive good. While there are inevitable methodological implications, my argument will not be for a particular method, but for a particular kind of hope in the application of various methods. Ultimately a hermeneutics of hope is not grounded in a specific interpretive method but in God. On this basis, it has been argued that the idea of theological interpretation must draw on the assertion that human hope is grounded in God's creation of humankind for relationship with God. If this is so, then biblical reading may occur in the hope that this divine-human relationship may be actualized by God so as to overrule human power play, and in turn it remains possible to speak of the text conveying the hope of God, whilst providing its own textual self criticism. Indeed, the discussions of slaves' interpretations offered by Weems, Martin, Thurman and Cone all highlight the argument that slaves *were* able to hear a word of hope, protest and affirmation, in spite of the weight of oppressive use of the texts. Caution and critique remain appropriate, but a framework of hope maintains that such critiques may themselves create space to hear God through the texts.

So far it has been argued that the theology of hope suggests that the biblical texts may retain a formative role amid complications on the basis that God, in some sense, draws the text into the purpose of communicating his covenant promises and hope. Clearly, it could still be argued that this claim represents the pragmatic interest of a specific community, but the scope of the claim is broader; in other words, if it is

[81] Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 190-200.

true at all, there remains the possibility of anyone hearing God in the text, regardless of their reading community or context. Having said that, this claim is of course itself textually mediated. The reformed perspective emphasizes the role of the Bible in communicating God's covenant hope to the reader, yet I have argued that it is precisely this covenant hope that creates the possibility of understanding the text. Furthermore, because this hope points beyond our present to a final consummation, our potential for hearing and understanding God in the present remains provisional and partial. As such, my argument remains a 'dogmatic wager'; God offers grounds for *hope* in reading, and not presumption.[82] Again, it is important to note that this hope is not strictly the hope of understanding the text. A hermeneutics of hope does not view the biblical text as an end in itself, but as a means of communion with God which is the proper content of hope. Viewed in this way, we might resolve some of the tension between the idea that the Church is a 'creature of the Word', and that the human word of the Bible is a creature of the Church. The latter observation is not merely a recognition of the process of authorship and canonization, but a problem detected by some with regard to the pragmatic tradition, where the word is continually 'created' by the reading interests of specific communities. In view of the hope of covenant, we may retain the priority of God's word in forming the Church, while maintaining the fact that there is a human response in the moment of communication. But given this, we must now consider this human response by addressing the significance of the transformation of the reader in depicting the reading situation.

ii) The transformation of readers and their interpretive interests

God's communication with humans depends firstly on God's gracious initiative in speaking, but also on the creation of human beings with the capacity for divine-human relationship. Returning to the terms discussed earlier, I would argue that God is the ultimate 'interpretive interest' for theological reading of scripture, but that this interest is not only a contingent choice of the Church because of its

[82] Cf. 1 Corinthians 13.12; 2 Corinthians 5.7.

particular constitution. Although the expression is a little awkward, it is *the interest for which humankind is created*, to the extent that 'interest' could describes divine-human communication and relationship. To be sure, other interests may work with specific reference to the Bible for God is not monophonic, and the very newness of the eschatological consummation described in chapter two negates any suggestion of a return to single determinate 'meaning' as a concept; to some extent, interpretive plurality remains a function of created and eschatological diversity. What it does suggest is the eschatological possibility of determinate coherence, a notion that will be described in the next section. To anticipate, it will be argued that the concept of the reading community must be rethought in the light of the idea that human beings are united in creatureliness, and are to be eschatologically unified in a diverse but harmonious new creation.

Thiselton has argued that the hermeneutical issues of selfish interest and power bids do actually cohere with the 'first word' of Christianity, but they are by no means the 'last word'.[83] A fundamental content of Christian hope is the renewal of the created self in the image of Christ, promised for the future and anticipated proleptically in the work of the Holy Spirit. And this renewal takes shape in the transposition of self interest by love.[84] Here Thiselton outlines two aspects of this love that reshape our understanding of the self as described above:

> First, *gift*, which *depends on nothing in return*, constitutes the *rejection of manipulative power or self-interest*. Second, gift comes *from beyond the horizons of the situatedness of the self* [italics original].[85]

The eschatological renewal of the self is thus a renewal and perfection of the created human capacity for loving relationships with God and other humans. It is my contention that this hope for the human self shapes the present hermeneutical situation in two interlocking ways. Firstly, grounded in God, there is hope for moments where this potential relationship will be actualized in divine-human communication in various ways but certainly through the act of reading the Bible. As such, there are grounds for being hopeful in pursuing such moments of communicative encounter because the interest with which we pursue it is being

[83] Thiselton, *IGPS*, 130.
[84] Thiselton, *IGPS*, 130ff, 150-59.
[85] Thiselton, *IGPS*, 150.

transformed and renewed. But secondly, because these encounters will often constitute moments of hearing divine promise and hope, the human person may be presently transformed into a hopeful self, a self energised and oriented towards God and not selfish interest, a self whose perspective on reality is being shaped by divine promise and presence. The virtuous cycle described by Fowl is thus grounded in this transformation in hope, as it is hope which energises the pursuit of 'ever-deepening communion with God' in the here and now.[86] On this basis, the actual situation of biblical interpretation takes on a dialectic character.

Negatively, because human transformation awaits final consummation, all interpretations remain under judgement, and are thus provisional. This does not negate strong convictions, but being hopeful thus means being aware that no interpretation can be claimed to be final, as our capacity to hear awaits perfection. In a sense, the text and the community are gifts for precisely this situation, and thus the cycle of virtue and growth described by Fowl and Jones remains essential. Before proceeding, it is necessary to highlight that this negative pole of judgement raises one important issue with respect to the role of experience as described by Weems and others. For Weems, Thurman's grandmother's 'experience of reality became the norm for evaluating the contents of the Bible'.[87] Similarly, Cone argued that for the poor, '*their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel, but is the gospel of Jesus Christ* [italics original]'.[88] As a result, it is only the poor who are really able to *hear* the truth of the biblical message. In these specific instances, I have no wish to argue against Weems or Cone, in the sense that I agree that the gospel entails hope for the poor and the affirmation of the human dignity of the oppressed. But does not the message at times also entail judgement for the oppressor, which may at times be heard?[89] Furthermore, much hermeneutical trouble has resulted from oppressors evaluating scripture in the light of *their* experience of reality. My concern here is to argue that a hermeneutics of hope must include judgement as a matter of necessity, lest the text simply be read as a matter of pragmatic use and affirmation. Having said this, such a perspective will mean very different things in different contexts, and I would argue that the word of judgement

[86] Fowl, 'Virtue', 838.
[87] Weems, 'Reading *Her Way*', 62.
[88] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 72-3.
[89] E.g. Luke 19.8-10.

in scripture is predominantly reserved for the powerful. Even so, an important contribution of womanist hermeneutics has been to show that even liberationist perspectives can remain blind to certain groups, and given this possibility the reader must be understood to remain open to challenge.

Positively, there is hope that the present reading of biblical texts will lead to genuine communion with God, and genuine hearing of divine promise in a way which transcends selfish interest. As well as hope grounded in God's gracious speaking, there is hope for the transformation of selfish interest into love, and for the renewal of our capacity to hear. Awkward as it sounds, there is hope for being made more hopeful in the present. What this means is that there is hope that our perspective on reality will become more deeply shaped by God, through a deepening vision of God's promises and a deepening awareness of God's presence. To the extent that this changing perspective suffuses the whole person, the hopeful self is thus energised for the life of discipleship, and hence the *pursuit* of ever deepening comprehension of God's promises and presence. While Weems, Martin and Watson have forged a kind of method that may be described in terms of hope, my focus here is to suggest the reader has grounds for *being hopeful* in the act of reading. In practice, I will argue in chapter four that the hopeful reader is likely to adopt an approach very similar to these writers, but that its fruition lies not in the application of method *per se*, but in the hopeful persistence of pursuing 'ever-deepening communion' with God.[90] Crucially, I have argued in this section that the cycle of interpretive virtue is animated by God's grace, and is at its core a hopeful cycle because God's word of promise transcends and breaks into the contextually embedded nature of our existence. Engaging in this cycle becomes a matter of vocation. Thus in chapter four I will argue that the action of this hope involves perseverance in rereading.

[90] Fowl, 'Virtue', 838.

3.2. Christian Hope, Interpretive Plurality, and the Possibilities for Dialogue

The second major question raised in section two revolves around the limits of interpretive plurality and the possibilities and problems of dialogue with others about the biblical text. At its root, this question emerges from the broadly undisputable fact that different persons and communities will interpret the same texts in different ways. The resulting question is how best to respond to this fact. As noted, many writers embrace this situation, Adam for example celebrating 'semiotic abundance' as a witness to God's graciousness.[91] In the same volume, Fowl notes that even when Aquinas talks of the 'literal sense' of scripture, that literal sense is 'multivoiced'.[92] However, there are clearly times when interpretive plurality becomes a field for conflict. Even this may be positively harmonized, with both parties recognizing the validity in each others' position, but particularly when ethical and political issues are in view, interpretive plurality may become a major problem. In this situation, it is essential to consider how such conflicts are to be addressed. In general, the pursuit of transcendent methods or interpretive criteria emerges as a response to this situation, but as noted above, methods and criteria are rarely value neutral, and the risk of one group dominating another in dialogue is great. As such, the situation of interpretive conflict is delicate.

In this context it is tempting to appeal to universalized theological criteria, but such an idea has been rendered problematic; firstly because such criteria would only have currency in the Church, but also because as argued already, the Church's grasp of God is necessarily provisional. In this respect, Adam is right in his appraisal of Peter's comments on reading Paul:

> The church's criteria are not ultimate or final, not singular or uncontested; indeed, the very rhetoric of Peter's judgement appeals to the only transcendent judge of interpretation and warns of the eschatological consequences of wrongheaded hermeneutics.[93]

[91] Adam, 'Poaching on Zion', 24-6, following Augustine.
[92] Fowl, 'The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense', 46-50.
[93] Adam, *Faithful Interpretation*, 64-5, with reference to 2 Peter 3.

Adam goes on to note that we do not have access to any final criteria, but that localised criteria suffice for our needs. However, if God is in some sense the final judge of all interpretation, and God's eschatological judgement and hope shape present action, might there be some sense in which that announcement of judgement affects interpretive disputes? As noted above, this judgement is not something that can be grasped and employed to one's own ends in interpretive disputes; rather, it means that my own interpretations must be humble and open to challenge. But in this section I will argue that God's hope affects present interpretive disputes by offering hope for the renewal of human relationships. In other words, I will not argue that there is hope for the reinstatement of univocal meaning, and certainly not hope that the Church's internal interpretive criteria will somehow prevail in wider debates. Criteria are not the issue; relationships are. The hope described here is for a network of relationships comprehensive and loving enough to render dialogue both possible and fruitful, and leading to coherence.

i) Community and Common Life

In section 2.2 it was noted that Rowan Williams highlights the problem of alienation and isolation as standing behind cultures where suspicion is widespread. Conversely, Fowl and Jones argue that the concept of meaning has most currency in reading communities who must, in some sense, share a kind of common life. The question that this raises is thus what kind of common life or community is possible?

In my judgement, Fowl is sometimes a little uncritical in his discussion of 'communities'. If meaning is a concept that is relative to specific communities, then it matters as to exactly what kind of community we are talking about. In *Reading in Communion*, the positive focus on Bonhoeffer's formational community at Finkenwalde suggests that the kind of communities in view are relatively small, discrete units.[94] At other times, Fowl and Jones speak of 'the' Church as opposed to

[94] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 143-159.

'Christian communities' though the former seems far less prevalent.[95] Beyond this, with regard to John Searle, Richard Briggs makes the following observation:

> Searle would allow the idea that texts are understood against community assumptions, but would insist that for a significant proportion of cases the community is large enough to include anybody who speaks the language.[96]

Adam notes this possibility, but argues that it hardly ever becomes significant in practice; 'some audience specific criteria are specific to so vast an audience that they are virtually universal. The nearer the criteria approach to universality, however, the more trivial they are'.[97] Whether or not this is borne out in practice, the point of these brief comments is to suggest that there is a vital link between the degree of commonality experienced and the coherence of interpretive interests.

On the strength of this point it seems uncontroversial to maintain that reading communities are most helpfully understood as being relatively small (if overlapping); the usefulness of the pragmatic approach is precisely in highlighting that even within large communities like 'the' Church, smaller groups operate to shape interpretive interests. But even so, it is worth considering in more detail exactly what is meant by community, particularly from a theological perspective. John Webster is right to argue that too much is taken for granted too often about 'communities'; he suggests that the working notion of Church in work like that of Fowl or Hauerwas amounts to an 'ecclesial gloss' on the 'sociology of texts and their uses'.[98] The specific role of the Church will become more important in chapter four, but as a distinctively eschatological community, the Church's function in the present has much to do with the question of humanity as such, and specifically the hope for humankind before God. Thus I will take up Webster's challenge, but primarily by considering the hope for humanity as a whole, in God.

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[95] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 19-20. 'Christian communities' and 'Church' are broadly used synonymously. Cp. Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture*, 21-23.
[96] Richard S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 116.
[97] Adam, *Making Sense*, 182.
[98] Webster, *Word and Church*, 23-5.

ii) Interpretive disputes and the hope for a common life

In the first instance, we might suggest that the very fact of being created is common to all humankind, but this in itself provides a rather 'thin' concept of humanity, which amounts to no more than noting that all humanity exists. But the theology of creation must be far richer than this. Above, I recalled Thurman's conviction that human dignity is grounded in being created in the image of God, and thus also in love. This fact of being created in love is not enough on its own to convince us that humans share enough of a common life to understand one another, but it does begin to describe the possibility of humankind *as such* being able to live in relation to God. In other words, humankind is in some sense unified by its nature as divine creation, and more specifically as creatures with the capacity for communion with God. As God's creative action provides grounds for hope, this idea forms the seeds of hope for a common human life, but much more needs to be said.

While the concept of the image of God has a long and complex history, as well as opening up the possibility of relating to God, creation in God's image has also become commonly associated with relationality in broader terms.[99] This at least in part correlates with a recent resurgence of interest in Trinitarian *perichoresis* (not least in the work of Moltmann). Thiselton is right to caution against asserting a *perichoretic* view of the Trinity solely to underpin a view of human relationality or equality, but is nonetheless content that if we understand the Trinity in these terms, then it follows that relationality flows from being made in the image of God.[100] In particular, this created relationality must in some sense be understood in terms of self giving love for the other. This view is slightly problematic however, because we are able to recognize relationality in non-human animals. Furthermore, *pace* Watson, humans are able to describe understanding between human beings and animals, as any dog-owner will testify.[101] In this respect, is relationality *only* a feature of the image of God? Or, if Watson remains correct that such relationality is grounded in likeness, might we speak of the whole of creation as sharing some kind of common existence, grounded in God's self giving love, and allowing for mutual

[99] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 235.
[100] Thiselton, *IGPS*, 155-156; Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 231-240.
[101] Cf. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 150.

understanding? This begins to take us beyond the scope of our study, and it need not be denied that human beings, in the account of creation, do share some specific relation to God. If God's Trinitarian nature is in some sense reflected in humankind then this only reinforces the created ability to relate meaningfully to others. My point here is to stress that such relations are grounded in *sharing the common life of being created in love by God*, and in turn, sharing a God-given capacity for loving relationships.

All of this is to suggest an initial hypothesis that being created by God provides the basis for a common life for all creation, and thus the possibility of being able to genuinely hear and understand something from the other without manipulation. In this there are grounds for hope for fruitful dialogue between different localised communities. In turn, it may be possible to speak of humankind thus sharing a common sense of interest as a matter of human nature; for those who experience alienation, this argument may itself be a source of hope, suggesting that there are possibilities for common life and understanding as a result of simply being human. However, two objections present themselves. Firstly, this depiction appears all too idealistic, and in part this concern derives from the alienation and isolation as a result of sin. But secondly, and in a sense more seriously, this argument runs the risk of suggesting that we are in fact all the same. This is particularly problematic for Black theology as described in chapter two, and warrants close attention.

If the idea of sharing something in common with all humankind is hopeful for some, the opposite may be true for others. J. Deotis Roberts noted the need for a balance between focusing on the particularity of black experience, and the common experience of all humankind.[102] While Cone was reluctant to take a more integrationist view in his early work, we do find references to the common humanity of all people.[103] Even so, it remains problematic to prematurely harmonize human perspectives, and thus it should be noted that the hope derived from being created might not derive from the possibility of common experience, but rather from the *disruption* of generalizations, and the assertion of one's *unique* relation to God. The dignity discovered by Cone and Thurman in the spirituals was drawn from the fact that the God-given identity as a beloved child destroyed the human-given identity of

[102] Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 87.
[103] E.g. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 122.

being a slave. Discovering one's created dignity actually related to the assertion of created *distinctiveness*, of a unique identity that could not be taken away and that would resist human assimilation. Hope was thus drawn in the context of refusing the slave master's definition, and thus creating and hermeneutic *strangeness* between master and slave. In this context, it becomes easier to understand why Cone had been so against white involvement in black liberation. It was essential for Cone that if reconciliation did occur, it would be on black terms refusing any terms that would perpetuate inequality.[104] Thus in the context of black separation, the hermeneutics of hope-in-creation actually begins with separation and not sameness.

The crucial point at this stage is that the dignity of distinctiveness is also part of creation. Adam emphasizes this in relation to biblical hermeneutics. He argues against views of interpretation that equate plurality with sin, suggesting that just as creation is diverse, so too must biblical interpretation be if it is to be faithful to our created nature.[105] If creation is diverse, then it follows that God's interactions with creation must also be equally diverse, and in turn the need for hermeneutic openness to the other is itself a part of God's good creation. As such, Adam's (and Fowl's) argument that interpretation is rightly pluriform stands, and this point is particularly important with respect to the question of power. In this respect, Fowl strikes the right balance in the following comment on translation:

> Maclntyre rightly warns us speakers of internationalized languages of modernity that the strangers and outsiders we encounter are not simply us in disguise. We also, however, need to remember that such outsiders are not completely alien.[106]

Watson describes this relationship between unity and diversity in terms of 'wholeness':

> At the end of the working week, however, the divine creator surveys the entire field of his labours and discovers that it not only contains a diversity of entities that in each case correspond to the maker's intentions (he already knew that) but also that the diversity is not mere heterogeneity but an

[104] See for example: Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 244.
[105] Adam, *Faithful Interpretation*, 90-99.
[106] Fowl, 'Could Horace talk', 7.

> interrelated whole which may itself be pronounced 'very good' (v. 31), corresponding to an intention which has not been directly expressed.[107]

Following this, we might re-describe our initial question in the following manner; to what extent is corporate interpretive 'wholeness' a possibility in the present? On the one hand, as God's creatures, human beings share the grounds for the possibility of common understanding and dialogue which transcends particularity. But in the present our creatureliness itself is damaged, and hence dialogue is rendered problematic because the very thing that creates the possibility for understanding has been fractured. Thus, while some interpretive plurality is rightly understood as an aspect of creatureliness, the fragmentation of that creation means that some plurality and conflict remains problematic. Indeed, the theology of hope outlined in chapter two suggests it will remain a problem throughout present existence until the *eschaton*.

However, as has been maintained throughout, the eschatological prospect for creation is important for depicting the present. The eschatological promise of God entails the restoration of the divine image and the renewal of both human relationships and the relationship between humankind and God. As a result, it also entails the restoration of the possibility of genuine encounter and mutual understanding, which will not undo the diversity-unity wholeness of creation, but perfect in it new creation; Thurman was right to argue that 'personal identity was not lost but heightened'.[108] Christian hope does not involve assimilation of one into the other, but perfected, loving relationship (on which, more below). Watson describes this as 'the eschatological vision of universally undistorted communication which lies at the heart of [the Church's] gospel of the kingdom of God'.[109] With this vision in mind, Adam argues for 'patience in the shared hope that when all things are revealed, the Revealer will also display the manner in which our diverse interpretations form a comprehensive concord in ways that now elude our comprehension'.[110]

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[107] Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 146.
[108] Thurman, *Negro Spiritual*, 50.
[109] Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 114.
[110] Adam, *Faithful Interpretation*, 103.

This is correct, but it is worth emphasizing the way in which eschatological hope still shapes the present. In spite of the reality of human fragmentation, there is hope for present experiences of human communion which transcend pre-ordained boundaries. As such, there is hope for genuine present coherence within the field of interpretive plurality, where diverse communities experience mutual enrichment through their discussions of the text, and in turn a mutually affirming apprehension of the promise and hope of God. As we shall see, this remains fraught with difficulty, but it is also a real possibility in God; from these grounds, I will argue in chapter four that the Church has a specific vocation to pursue this kind of common life, which necessitates engaging with as wide a dialogue as possible. Part of the action of this hope is to listen to others seeking fruitful and respectful interactions grounded in a common life before God, pointing towards the final consummation of God's promised renewal. However, at the moment it has only been argued that this kind of common life is proleptically possible; its actualization depends on being transformed in love.

iii) Interpretive disputes and the hope of being transformed in love

In the above discussion of the biblical texts, I highlighted Thiselton's argument that grounded in God, the content of Christian hope includes the transformation of the self such that selfishness is transformed into love for others. This very clearly has implications for human relationships, and thus also for interpretive dialogue. Thiselton argues that 'love in which a self genuinely *gives* itself to the Other *in the interests of the Other* dissolves the acids of suspicion and deception [italics original]'.[111] To the extent that human beings would be able to act not in self interest but in love, the problems of interpretive domination and the suspicion of ideological agendas would be weakened. Furthermore, Thiselton argues that this love finds its substance in divine gift, and that this 'gift comes *from beyond the horizons of the situatedness of the self*'.[112] On this basis, the finitude – creatureliness – of the self ceases to become a problem. Indeed, Garrett Green argues

[111] Thiselton, *IGPS*, 159.
[112] Thiselton, *IGPS*, 150.

that finitude is part of human nature *as created*, precisely because humankind owes its existence to the eternal grace of God.[113] The idea of eschatological finitude is tricky, because it strains description, but the force behind this argument is that finitude does not connote lack; rather it entails the enduring sense of finding one's being in another, an existence defined by love. Christian hope is for undistorted communion; to borrow an analogy from Reddie, hope lies not in everyone eating a 'standard meal' but in everyone unselfishly sharing their 'favourite meal'.[114] The point of this argument is that love prevents a person from assimilating another into their own framework, and this has important implications for how the hope of renewal in love shapes the present hermeneutics of dialogue. Again, this situation may be described as taking a dialectic shape.

Negatively, the transformation of human persons in love will not be completed short of the *eschaton*. As a result, the hope of love in some respects makes the hermeneutical situation *more* risky, because 'love' can be used manipulatively in support of dominant and oppressive interpretations.[115] Intentionally or unintentionally, appeals to love in interpretive disputes may serve as a smokescreen for specific agendas. But if this is so, can the grounds and content of Christian hope really change the situation in which different groups debate scripture? In the light of this question, a more pragmatic approach to hermeneutics has a clear advantage because it creates a certain degree of hermeneutical 'safety' for small or marginalised groups, and if this is so, Christian hope looks too fragile to make any difference to interpretive dialogue. A crucial difference is made, however, by recognizing that the hermeneutics of suspicion itself almost always operates within a framework of hope. This can be seen in the work of Mosala, Weems and Martin, whose suspicion of the texts is directed towards the hope of liberation. Bearing this in mind, it is important to remember that Christian hope includes judgement, and as such all power bids, including manipulative appeals to love, are under judgement. Christian hope thus contains Christian suspicion, but this is a suspicion that operates in the hope that when manipulation is shown up for what it is and self-interest is unmasked, there may yet be hearing, understanding and interpretive coherence. This has some affinities with hermeneutics described in terms of trust. Here, trust is

[113] Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics and Imagination*, 163.
[114] Reddie, 'Not Just Seeing', 363.
[115] Cone in particular highlights this, on which see chapter five.

argued to be a default position, with suspicion operating only in the cases where trust is no longer sustainable.[116] The difference in my argument is that suspicion is not a suspension of trust, but is itself *part of the situation of hope*, because both trust and suspicion are grounded in the possibility of arriving at understanding and coming to know the truth of ourselves. Ironically but importantly, the exercise of suspicion on the part of oppressed groups is part of the action of this hope, a point which will be considered further in chapter four. Crucially, the action of suspecting dominant readers is grounded in the hope that the powerful may yet repent and genuinely listen, and in the hope of being genuinely heard. Clearly by contrast, the action of hope on the part of the powerful will be to repent and listen to others; hopeful interpretation may thus be costly for some readers, but again this will be explored as we proceed.[117] But in this slightly oversimplified description we can begin to see what interpretive coherence might look like; reading one text might 'mean' different things to different groups of readers by entailing different kinds of action, but there is hope that these different readings may cohere in drawing these groups together, mutually enriching each others' appreciation of divine promise and of God.

Positively then, there is hope that dialogue between diverse groups may lead, if not to agreement, then to mutually coherent readings of specific texts. Exactly what this coherence will consist of cannot easily be predetermined, precisely because I am not arguing for a method but rather that there simply is hope for such proleptic moments of coherence; the fact that no method is in view reinforces the point that love cannot be claimed in support of an argument. However, because interpretive coherence consists in the transformation of humankind, we may speak of a kind of coalescence of interpretive interest around love of God and love of neighbour, as the twin ends of human existence before God. Again, it must be stressed that this does not collapse human activity into one homogenous unit, but it does suggest that if the interpretive interest of fostering love unites humankind eschatologically, then interpretive coherence will occur where such love is mutually sought. This interpretive end is of course the Augustinian view discussed in chapter one in relation to Fowl, Jacobs and others, but my argument is that this interpretive end represents the *telos* of humanity itself, and as such there is hope that human

[116] Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 80-89.
[117] See chapters four and five.

interpretation may come together towards this *telos*. But because the present is also transformed in terms of hope that orients us to this end, human interpretive action may also seek coherence as the mutual fostering of hope among diverse communities. Again, we are in the slightly awkward territory of talking about hope for hope; the present argument is that grounded in God's inaugurated kingdom, the reader may *act* in hope to deepen not only their own appreciation of God's promise and presence (i.e. the *grounds* and *contents* of that hope), but must do so communally in a way which anticipates the renewed wholeness of humanity. In the next chapter, it will be argued that this defines the interpretive vocation of the Church as such.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to show that the grounds and contents of Christian hope significantly shape the situation in which we come to scripture as readers, and in which we come to dialogue with others about scripture. Difficulties with biblical interpretation and dialogue were discussed with regard to the contextual formation of interpretive interest, and the problem of self interested power dynamics. It was argued that both these perspectives accurately capture the situation in which the Bible is read as scripture, but that Christian hope decisively alters this depiction. Firstly, Christian hope is grounded in God's gracious, in-breaking activity and promise; as such, there remains hope for genuinely hearing God through the biblical texts, at times in spite of the difficulties therein, because God's self-communication breaks through contextual boundaries.

Secondly, this divine grace engages persons in a process of transformation and growth. This aspect of personal transformation has two implications for hermeneutics that lead to two dimensions of the argument in chapter four. Firstly, as self interest is transposed by love, the capacity to hear God is restored. The reader's perspective on reality is shaped by God, especially in terms of divine promise and presence. In this chapter, it was argued that this creates grounds for hope in the task of reading scripture, because the reader's perspective becomes more attuned to the

reality of God. In chapter four, it will be argued that this transformation necessarily shapes the manner in which the texts are read, and as such, the hopeful reader is aided in pursuing the interpretive good of discerning the promise and presence of God as attested in the biblical texts. This pursuit occurs in the tension described here between openness to God as a requirement of judgement, and a steadfast perseverance with one's grasp of hope. Secondly, the transposition of self interest has inevitable implications for dialogue with others concerning the texts. In this chapter, it was argued that this transposition creates grounds for hope that such dialogue may be genuinely open and undistorted by power interests. In the next chapter, it will be argued that the exercise of this love constitutes a major part of the vocation of the Church. As such, dialogue with near and distant others is not only possible, but necessary.

Chapter Four

Characteristic Actions of the Hopeful Reader of Scripture

1. Introduction

In chapter two it was argued that the ground of Christian hope is God, and that what Christians hope for derives from every aspect of God's dealing with humankind, particularly in creation and new creation. On this basis, being hopeful entails being on a path towards God, with God, and inaugurated by God in Christ. Being hopeful by no means equates to passivity, but neither is hopeful action simply a matter of 'applying' a particular perspective. This is primarily because Christian hope includes hope for the transformation of the person, and as such present action is necessarily related to such transformation. Thus, hope is that disposition which helps the person to pursue the good as understood through these grounds and contents of hope. Hope thus entails action in accordance with a particular vision of reality that is radically shaped and animated by divine promise and presence.

In chapter three it was argued that the grounds and contents of Christian hope make a decisive difference to the possibilities for biblical reading, because they relate directly to the hermeneutical context in which scripture is read. Christian theology portrays a view of reality that holds out hope for genuinely hearing God in the act of reading scripture, and for open, unselfish dialogue with others concerning the biblical texts. These possibilities are, in a sense, penultimate because they derive from the bigger picture of hope in creation and new creation, but as such, they describe the kinds of interpretive good whose pursuit will be aided by being hopeful.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the characteristic actions of this hope, how *being* hopeful shapes the actual task of biblical reading. In the terms with which this thesis began, I will describe the interpretive virtue of hope as it might look in practice. The action of this hope will be outlined in three sections. Firstly, the hopeful reader perseveres in the very task of reading scripture, because hope itself

animates the process of pursuing the voice of God and thence personal growth. There is hope for hearing God in the text and for growing in our capacity to hear, but that capacity remains partially frustrated. As such, the hopeful reader perseveres in rereading with *openness*. Secondly, this openness is held in tension with a perseverant *steadfastness*, in the sense that being hopeful involves holding on to a vision of reality that stands in tension with various competing perspectives, all of which would shape the process of interpretation in different ways. In other words, the hopeful reader is steadfast in pursuing possibilities for theological interpretation that cohere with their grasp of the promise and presence of God, in pursuing deeper appreciation of the grounds and contents of hope as an interpretive good. Again, we are close to De Lubac's recognition that the anagogic sense of scripture holds a tension between the concrete apprehension of hope, and the fact that such apprehension can never attain to completion.[1] In order to clarify this, I will draw on the relationship between hope and imagination noted in chapter two, and following Garrett Green, I will argue that this kind of steadfastness equates to employing the imagination to construe hopeful possibilities from each text, *whilst remaining fully conscious of alternatives*. Thirdly, it will be argued that inasmuch as hope constitutes a vocation to look for a renewed humanity, the hopeful reader necessarily reads in dialogue with near and distant others. Indeed, it will be argued that it is only in this way that truly hopeful readings may be discerned.

Before proceeding, I will return to the relationship between hope and imagination, in order to provide some conceptual tools for the rest of the discussion. It has been suggested that hope entails a particular perspective on reality, and several writers have discussed this in relation to the exercise of the imagination. If hoping entails living with a vision or perspective on reality shaped by divine promise and presence, then it can be seen that this perspective will stand at odds with some alternatives. In this context, it will be shown that a careful description of the imagination will clarify *how* the reader maintains a hopeful perspective in the midst of alternative construals. Furthermore, there has been some recent discussion concerning the exercise of the imagination in the reading of scripture, and given this, some helpful parallels will emerge with regard to the aims of this overall chapter.

[1] De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 2:193.

2. Hope, Imagination and Scripture

i) Future possibilities and the imagination

As noted in chapter two, Bauckham and Hart argue that hope depends on the ability to imagine a different world; 'Hope transfigures the present precisely by enabling us to transcend it imaginatively and, upon our return, to perceive all too clearly its lacks and needs'.[2] Here, they echo the thought of Paul Ricoeur in arguing that *any* expression of hope requires the imagination in order to grasp the content of what might be hoped for. For Ricoeur, both imagination and hope relate to possibility and so he resists the idea that imagination relates only to the unreal, or to recalling the absent past.[3] Rather, the imagination is able to produce images of what may yet be, of 'new worlds' which in turn shape present existence in conformity with those images.[4] Given Ricoeur's interest in theological hope and resurrection, it is unsurprising that this idea of the imagination of possible worlds conceptually resembles the relationship between God's promised new world and the present, as described in chapter two. However, for the most part, Ricoeur's description of the imagination is applied to hope in a broader, philosophical sense by focussing on possibility; put simply, acting in hope depends on the ability to imagine new possibilities.

In addition to this, Bauckham and Hart argue that imagination is essential to the *articulation* of God's promised future, specifically because that future entails something which lies outside present possibilities. As something qualitatively new, God's future can only be expressed through the use of imaginative analogy and cannot be fully articulated through ordinary representative language. Despite the difficulty this might present, Bauckham and Hart nonetheless argue that 'of God and

[2] Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, 56.
[3] Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. and trans. Lewis S. Mudge, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 161; Paul Ricoeur, 'Listening to the Parables of Jesus', in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of his work*, ed. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 239-245, (237).
[4] Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: CUP, 1981), 181.

his promised future, speak we must unless we would be content with agnostic silence'.[5] Similarly, Vanhoozer suggests that:

> If the creative imagination provides the means to *think* what is beyond the bounds of objective knowledge, its product, figurative language, provides the means to *speak* what is beyond the bounds of descriptive language.[6]

Already then, it can be seen that the imagination might be related to hope in two interlocking but distinct ways; the imagination may be *captured* by a possible future, and it may be *employed* to articulate a qualitatively new future. In the first case, the imagination is simply the faculty through which the contents of hope are grasped. Ricoeur, Hart and Bauckham all recognize that divine promise is directed to the imagination in this respect, such that 'through the captivity of our imagination, God's Spirit draws us forward into the reality of his own future'.[7] But secondly, if Christians have a missionary vocation to articulate the contents of their hope, then the imagination must be actively employed for this task; new images and figurations of language must creatively respond to the need to speak of God's promised future. In this latter sense, while it is the *contents* of hope that are being described through the imagination, it can be seen that the exercise of the imagination is also an *action* of hope to the extent that Christian hope carries in itself the need to be proclaimed and passed on. The use of the imagination becomes part of the vocation of hope.

However, it is worth noting that John Webster's main objection to the imagination derives precisely from the idea that the exercise of the imagination is a 'task'. In his view, imagination:

> [...] suggests something too projective or poetic, too little oriented to what has been accomplished. [...] A natural counterpart of a strongly futurist eschatology, imagination is oriented more to possibility than to actuality; and it can make hope's envisaging of the future into a task to be undertaken,

[5] Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, 81-2.
[6] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), 46.
[7] Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, 71.

> rather than the hearing of an authoritative divine judgement which has already been announced.[8]

Webster's comment ignores the fact that Christian vocation does involve 'tasks', classically, preaching the gospel. Given that persons may be given tasks by God, it is not clear why the imagination could not serve as a tool. However, his critique may emerge from the worry that employing the imagination will lead to persons projecting their own desires on to the content of Christian hope, a problem that as noted relates to the prospect of 'divine judgement'. This problem was addressed in chapter two, but if we are to retain the concept of the imagination within the depiction of hopeful reading, the question of an ethics of imagination cannot be ignored. What must be noted at this stage is Webster's suggestion that imagination relates to possibility rather than actuality, and thus it seems confined to hope that is based on a primarily futurist eschatology. However, in chapter two it was argued that Christian hope relates not only to eschatology, but to a holistic set of doctrines taking account of the whole history of God's faithful love. In this light, it might seem that the imagination becomes less important to the expression of hope. However, Garrett Green argues that the imagination is fundamental to the comprehension not only of possibility, but of actuality as well. If this is so, then the imagination may remain crucial to the expression and action of hope, but in a manner which does more (though not less) than depict the future.

ii) Imagination, Possibility and Reality

In distinction to Webster, Green does not confine the imagination to the production of future possibilities. Rather, the imagination is the very faculty through which we come to know God and think about God in the present; it is the 'organ of faith'.[9] Crucial to Green's depiction of the imagination is his distinction between the terms 'is', 'as if' and 'as':

[8] Webster, 'Hope', 302.
[9] Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 144-5.

> The paradigmatic action – the "as" faculty – can bring conceptual precision to Ricoeur's suggestive distinction between a "first" and a "second naïveté." The first inhabits the world of "is," blissfully unaware of other possibilities. The second lives in a world of "as," construing reality according to a particular vision in full awareness of other options.[10]

Seeing the world 'as' something distinguishes itself from simply stating that such and such 'is' the case, because it recognizes that there are other ways of seeing the world. However, seeing 'as' is not the same as seeing 'as if'; seeing 'as if' is an imaginative act which makes no claims about actual states of affairs, whereas seeing 'as' has to do with construals of reality itself. To explain this, Green suggests that when a person looks across the room at a lamp, they are unable to see its far side but nevertheless see it 'as' a whole. To see the lamp *as if* it were a whole is to avoid considering its actual nature. To see it *as* a whole is to employ the imagination to make a judgement about its reality.[11] Following this, Brueggemann suggests that to live 'as if' one were free is to concede that one is in fact not free, but 'the injunction to live "*as* free persons" means to accept one's status as free and to live that way, no matter how much some dominant social definition may cast one as a slave'.[12] Here, we are reminded of the argument made by Cone and Thurman concerning the affirmation of human dignity discovered by slave preachers in scripture. For persons to see themselves *as* dignified humans is to make a claim about reality in distinction to the master's claim to see them *as* slaves. As Thurman argued:

> The slave's answer to the use of terms of personal designation that are degrading is to be found in his private knowledge that his name is known only to the God of the entire universe. In the judgment everybody will at last know who he is, a fact which he has known all along.[13]

For Green, this is an act of the imagination, but it is emphatically not imaginary; rather the imagination is used to apprehend reality through an alternative vision. The reason for labouring this point is to show, responding to Webster's critique, that the

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[10] Green, *Imagining God*, 140. On this, see also, Alison Searle, *'The Eyes of Your Heart': Literary and Theological Trajectories of Imagining Biblically*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 178-187.
[11] Green, *Imagining God*, 143.
[12] Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 14.
[13] Thurman, *Deep River*, 45.

imagination may not only pertain to possibility but to actuality, and in particular that the imagination *is crucial to perceiving the world in hope amid a range of alternative claims*.[14] Thus if as suggested, to hope is to live with a vision of reality shaped by divine promise and presence, it can be seen that the exercise of the imagination is ingredient to the action of hope. This focus on the imagination as a faculty for construing the world will be particularly important as we proceed; what begins to be clear is that if we follow Green's depiction of the imagination, then it becomes crucial to articulating Christian hope in distinction to perspectives which deny hope. In this sense, to be a hopeful reader is to live within a distinctive construal of reality (including, but not limited to, the future), which in turn shapes the character of one's engagement with the text. This idea stands behind some of Brueggemann's work on the prophetic imagination and scripture, to which we now turn.

iii) Imagination and Scripture: Walter Brueggemann

Walter Brueggemann argues that the use of the imagination is fundamental to the task of 'prophetic' preaching. For Brueggemann, the role of the prophetic voice is to nurture an 'alternative consciousness' in the community, a view of the world that differs from the dominant view which precipitates a new way of living.[15] The alternative *consciousness* resembles Ricoeur's new 'vision', and both terms suggest a sustained perspective, as opposed to isolated moments of imaginative fantasy.[16] By describing an *alternative* consciousness, Brueggemann follows Green's argument

[14] As before, this raises the question of how to adjudicate various claims, and in turn how to discern when the imagination might go astray. In the first case, Green works with the idea that there is no formal means for adjudicating between construals of the world; as such, people come to believe the Christian gospel by imaginatively construing the world *as* depicted in the gospel, and then being persuaded that this *is* the case. In turn, Green suggests that 'Christians acknowledge the authority of the scriptures of Old and New Testaments because only they render Christ, the image of God, fully and coherently to the imagination.' Without objective criteria, this leads Green to assert that much rests on trust. However, it is important to note that this argument is not straightforwardly relativistic. In a manner close to the discussion of meaning in chapter three, Green shows that the Christian construal of reality is one claim alongside others, but as a construal of *reality*, it resists an easy-going relativism. As noted before, the complexity of the situation derives in part from human finitude, and in part from the problematic nature of the human imagination because of sin. See, Green, *Imagining God*,125,144; Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics and the Imagination*, 200-204.

[15] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd edn (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

[16] Ricoeur, 'Listening', 241.

that *all* views of reality are imaginative construals. Indeed, Brueggemann has defined the imagination as 'the human capacity to picture, portray, receive, and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be at first glance when seen through the dominant, habitual, unexamined lens'.[17] Because the 'dominant lens' is also an imaginative construal of the world, Brueggemann often refers specifically to a 'counterimagination'. In turn, he suggests that:

> The core of our new awareness is that the world we have taken for granted in economics, politics, and everywhere else is an imaginative construal. And if it is a construal, then from any other perspective, the world can yet be construed differently. It is the claim of our faith, and the warrant for our ministry, to insist that our peculiar memory in faith provides the materials out of which an alternatively construed world can be properly imagined.[18]

One fundamentally important source of these 'materials' is scripture, whose task is 'to *fund* – to provide the pieces, materials, and resources out of which a new world can be imagined'.[19] In particular, '[t]he doxological tradition of Israel that issues in praise and thanks offers an inventory of "miracles", that is, of narrative memories of the exhibits of God's power for the impossible'.[20] The phrase 'power for the impossible' echoes Kierkegaard's 'passion for the possible' as a definition of hope. By talking of the 'impossible', Brueggemann's proposal fits well with the task of proclamation as described by Bauckham and Hart, because it includes the articulation of something that is qualitatively new. However, Brueggemann places greater emphasis on the present, on using scripture to re-imagine the world as it is. As such, he offers a way of relating imagination and scripture to the broader view of hope taken in this thesis. However, while this represents an important step in our argument, there are two issues within Brueggemann's writing that need clarifying.

Firstly, the purpose of Brueggemann's scriptural 'counterimagination' is to give expression to a 'counterworld'[21] but it is not always clear as to what this 'counterworld' consists in. On the one hand, he seems to suggest that the shift to

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[17] Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, 13.
[18] Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, 17.
[19] Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, 20
[20] Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 108.
[21] Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, 55

postmodernism has created space within which Christians might imagine a world which runs counter to the hegemonic view of western modernism.[22] On the other hand, his writing often implies that the postmodern situation is not the *context* for a counterworld, but rather *is* the counterworld. The role of the contemporary prophetic voice is thus to encourage hearers to relinquish the old world of modernism, and receive the new world coming in its place.[23] Because this 'new world' stands in contrast to hegemonic modernism, and because it is characterised in terms of the openness and decentralisation associated with much postmodern thought, it appears at times that the counterworld is the world of postmodernity. In this view, the imagination becomes the means by which this socio-historical shift is construed as occasioned by God.

On balance, Brueggemann's aim is probably to argue that in a more fragmented postmodern environment, the Church has an opportunity to become a specific, discrete community that lives more faithfully to God in the present. To this extent, I sympathize with his proposal. However, this interest in postmodernism only confuses the issue. On the one hand, the concept of a counterimagination makes less sense in the diverse, postmodern environment than in a more obviously 'hegemonic' context, where there is a clearly dominant view to counteract. On the other hand, it is never made clear as to why the postmodern world should have any kind of eschatological significance, even in a strictly penultimate sense. From both angles, Brueggemann's argument would be clarified by simply jettisoning the relation to postmodernism. In doing so, we may retain the basic proposal that in any situation, the imaginative reading of the Bible allows persons to construe reality differently to, but conscious of, other construals.[24]

Secondly, because Brueggemann describes the Bible as a 'fund' for the imagination, we must consider whether or not the imagination is thereby unrestrained, and whether or not it should be so. Recently, Brueggemann has drawn on Levinas to argue that:

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[22] Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, 27, 55; Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 184-191.
[23] Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, (London: SCM Press, 1992), 6, 17-18, 26; Brueggemann, *Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, 4, 136-145.
[24] To use the example of slavery, this would allow Christians to affirm the dominant mode of thought when that mode is anti-slavery, as well as highlighting when movements within modernity, such as the abolitionist movement, displayed a counterimagination.

> What interests us [...] is our capacity to locate prophetic preaching under the rubric of "infinity," of open possibility that defies containment. [...] For it is the *unthinkable* and the *unsayable* that bear witness to *divine impossibility* [italics original].[25]

This comment echoes Ricoeur's suggestion that the open-ended form of the parables leaves the hearer open to 'indefinite possibilities' through the story.[26] Furthermore, Brueggemann argues that while the imagination may be shaped by one's context, 'the personal zone of imagination is a protected place of intimacy and interiority [...] and no one else has access to it'.[27] Preachers may offer texts and interpretations to congregations, but they have no control over what occurs in the imagination of their hearers. This assertion rightly attempts to safeguard individuals from the often negative influences of those in authority. But this concern surely reflects the fact that the imaginations of those in authority are themselves susceptible to sinful fantasy and misjudgement; thus the question remains as to whether the imagination may be transformed or constrained by God. Having said this, Brueggemann (along with Ricoeur) does sometimes talk of constraints and transformations. He comments that the title of *The Prophetic Imagination* was a happy accident, but that the term 'prophetic' had the advantage of moving the discussion of 'imagination' away from 'sheer fantasy', and towards the expression of a covenant relationship with YHWH.[28] As such, the imagination is not strictly constrained, but all imaginative, prophetic speaking and hearing occurs in a context where God is the 'compelling partner' of all involved. In other contexts, Brueggemann speaks of the 'imagination led by God's spirit'[29] and of the fact that the prophets are 'rearticulating the old story', drawing imaginatively on a corporate memory of God's faithfulness in order to inspire hope.[30]

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[25] Brueggemann, *Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, 144.
[26] Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 155.
[27] Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, 62-3
[28] Brueggemann, *Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, 22.
[29] Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience*, 4.
[30] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 64, 77.

iv) Clarifying the relationship between imagination and hope

As noted above, Brueggemann's concept of reading scripture to nourish an alternative way of seeing and living will have close affinities with the present depiction of the hopeful reader. The reason for labouring over the lack of clarity at certain points is to argue that the problems derive directly from the concept of the imagination, if the imagination is not firmly grounded within a theological framework of hope. Webster was right to worry that the imagination can be unhealthily projective, but this possibility is not enough to rule out the imagination if the potential difficulties can be dealt with theologically. This was precisely the task undertaken by Garrett Green (and also by Hart).[31] While Brueggemann draws positively on Green, some confusion results from the places where he seems to depart from Green, especially where he states that 'there is no final arbiter who will finally adjudicate rival claims'.[32] Although I am not convinced that this assertion is followed through by Brueggemann, it raises a crucial dimension of Christian hope to the fore. In chapter three it was argued that while Christians may not claim finality for their perspective on reality, they need not relinquish belief that in judgement, God will finally render human existence coherent. As such, the promise of judgement must be understood by Christians to feed back into the present exercise of the imagination. It is this point that Green seems to clarify in arguing that the Christian imagination is judged and transformed in Christ, who alone embodies a perfected imagination as a facet of being the perfect human image of God.[33] This in effect locates the imagination *within* a framework of sin, redemption and hope, and thus also grounds hope for the imagination itself. Specifically, Green does not view the imagination primarily in terms of projecting a world (or counterworld), but in terms of *grasping* a particular construal of the world and its future.[34] In turn, he argues that:

[31] See in particular Hart, 'Imagination for the Kingdom of God?', 49-76.
[32] Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, 10.
[33] Green, *Imagining God*, 87-92, 105-6.
[34] To be sure, the way that the world 'is' includes the way that it will be, and thus Green does not underplay eschatology. But by articulating his view of the imagination in this way, he is able to bring clearer expression to the reality of God in construing the task of theology as such.

> Scripture is the means by which individual and group identity is formed and reformed, and it is the means by which the community of believers seeks to transform the world around it by converting the world's imagination to conformity with the Word of God.[35]

In this sense, the Christian imagination takes on the specific end of grasping the world and looking forward in a manner that flows from God's promise and presence. It is worth noting that to speak of limiting the imagination, or as Green does of transforming the imagination to be in 'conformity' with God, seems counterintuitive in a context where the freedom of the imagination is highly prized. Indeed Brueggemann at times emphasizes the limitless possibilities of God's freedom, suggesting that the human imagination is accordingly and rightly limitless.[36] However, Barth was surely right to stress that the freedom of God's speaking has less to do with an 'automatically working force of nature' and more to do with free choice to act in self-limitation.[37] This means that the potential for God to do something new does not equate to limitless possibilities for the present, but to possibilities in keeping with God's covenant faithfulness. It would be entirely wrong to suggest that God is thus limited, but in concrete terms, my argument is that Christian hope derives not from the possibility that God can do the impossible *per se*, but from the fact that God has promised to do specific impossibilities, principally to redeem creation and humanity in Christ. As such, I wish to suggest that the imagination is best understood in relation to biblical reading *within* a framework of Christian hope derived from divine presence and promise. The imagination's role is best understood in Green's terms as a means of grasping the reality and promise of God, and in particular, the reality and promise of God as the ground of Christian hope. This does not reduce the imagination to a non-active role; rather, if being hopeful entails living with a specific vision of reality, the imagination becomes the faculty through which that reality is grasped and articulated.

The imagination is thus first and foremost *addressed* by God. Particularly in Christ's resurrection, the world is reconstrued. In the story of creation and the promise of renewal, persons come to see the world as on a hitherto unimagined

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[35] Green, *Imagining God*, 123.
[36] E.g., Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 45; Brueggemann, *Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, 110,145.
[37] Barth, *Church Dogmatics 1.2*, §21, (685).

course. To be hopeful is to be on *this* way, is to see the world with fresh eyes enlightened by God. In this respect, Ricoeur's 'vision', Green's paradigmatic 'as', and Brueggemann's 'alternative consciousness' all depict aspects of what it means to be hopeful. However, I wish to locate the concept of imagination within a framework of hope, because as Thiselton argues, 'a view of the future [...] does not depend on [...] the speculative use of our imagination. It depends on appropriating the promises of God, and trusting him'.[38] Hope begins with God truthfully redescribing the world to human persons. Only then is the imagination employed in the expression of our grasp of that redescription.

3.1. The Hopeful Reader 1: Perseverance and Openness in Rereading

i) Perseverance and the circle of hope: Hope leads to rereading

It was suggested above that to hope is to live with a vision of reality shaped by God, but that that vision of reality and the grasp of hope's grounds and contents are necessarily provisional. There is hope for genuinely hearing God in the act of biblical reading, yet only in the knowledge that one's hearing is never final. As such, the first action of the hopeful reader is to persevere in the rereading of the texts, in the hope that doing so will deepen and sharpen their grasp of God's promise and presence as attested in the scriptures, and lead to growth in their capacity to hear. Margaret Adam indirectly raises this notion of perseverance in relation to her account of 'Moltmannian hope', arguing that the Moltmannian focus on constant newness has influenced an *ad hoc* hermeneutics that tends towards ignoring passages that seem irrelevant. By contrast, she argues:

> A passage that seems inappropriate today might seem a welcome resource in radically changed circumstances. God's constant presence continues to provide hope regardless of the limits of human perception and imagination.[39]

[38] Thiselton, *Life After Death*, 45.
[39] Adam, *Our Only Hope*, 86.

Again, this highlights why it was necessary to recognize that Christian hope is grounded across time, through creation to new creation. To read does not simply entail a quest for novel perspectives, but instead a tension between openness and steadfastness. The texts must continually be read, though it will be shown that this does not equate to an inherent conservatism. The aim of this section is to clarify this perseverance means in practice, in two moves. Firstly it will be necessary to clarify the nature of the circularity involved in this description. This question was raised in chapter one, where it was noted that it is the texts themselves that mediate the grounds for being hopeful in their interpretation. After commenting on this circle, the question of what is meant by perseverance as such will be addressed.

The concept of circularity is widespread within discussion of hermeneutics, though its articulation varies; in Schleiermacher and Dilthey the circle moves between the whole and the parts of the text; in reception theory it moves between the text and the horizons of expectation of the reader. There are numerous other discussions of hermeneutical circles, but it is thus not surprising that the literature concerning interpretive virtue almost always consciously describes a circle between the virtues of the reader and the depiction of those virtues in the text. In principle, this movement could occur in the reading of any text that somehow speaks to the question of human character, and thus Briggs is right to note that there is a difference between recognizing that the Bible describes love, for example, in a certain manner, and deciding to pursue the virtue of love as described.[40] However, because most of the writers discussed in chapter one do acknowledge the peculiar status of the Bible for Christians, it is generally assumed that while the interpretive virtues may pertain to the reading of any text, the circle of interpretive virtue is of most significance in the reading of the Bible as scripture. Even then it is clear that specific biblical texts display vices as well as virtues, and in this respect the whole-parts circle is also important because of the complexity of the canonical description of the ideal human character (if indeed it can be spoken of at all). Despite this complexity, the basic argument remains that the biblical texts depict the kind of character to be desired by its readers; thus growth in love will aid deeper understanding of the text, while deeper understanding of the text will aid growth in love.

[40] Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 206-7.

In broad terms, my argument is that Christian hope operates in a similar way, but with a subtle difference. With regard to other interpretive virtues, such as love, discussion of the nature of the 'loving interpreter' naturally draws on texts which describe the operation of love *in practice*.[41] Unsurprisingly, writers such as Fowl and Jacobs draw on accounts of Jesus to depict a loving character, and this leads them to describe how this specific way of being relates to interpretation. Briggs focuses on the narratives of Ruth and Elisha, but the principle remains the same; the aim is to describe what love 'looks like'.[42] However, the case of hope is slightly different because generally fewer texts address the specific question of what hope looks like in practice or what it means to be a hopeful person; rather, far more attention is given to the grounds of hope, and to picturing that which readers may hope for. It is for this reason that hope was treated through these parameters in chapter two. Though some texts offers clues as to what hope looks like in the life of a person, more texts offer specific reasons for being hopeful. Thus unlike other treatments of interpretive virtue, the virtuous cycle for which I am arguing here has less to do with a movement between the character of the reader and character as described in the biblical texts, though this dimension remains. Rather, it has more to do with a cycle between the hopeful character of the reader (in the sense of hope's action) on the one hand, and the textual basis for being hopeful (broadly, the grounds and contents) on the other. The biblical texts convey reasons for hope to the reader, but as argued in chapter three, this hope comes with the recognition that it may only be grasped in partial ways; thus, one of the actions resulting from the apprehension of this hope will be to return to the source, in order to deepen the appreciation of its grounds and contents. The texts themselves shape the imagination of the reader in the sense of shaping their perspective of reality, and in turn, to live with this perspective as described in chapters two and three is to return to the texts which captured the imagination to begin with. As noted in chapter one, it is necessary to maintain that this circle is not closed because our account of Christian hope begins with the in-breaking communication of God. But because such communication is textually mediated, the hope that this hermeneutical circle is virtuous and not vicious remains a 'wager'. As such, it remains necessary to state that this circle is undertaken in hope

[41] Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 9-11.
[42] Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 135-166.

and not in presumption; the hopeful reader reads in the hope of hearing God, and never with the presumption of hearing God.[43]

ii) Perseverance in openness to the text

Perseverance in reading may result from any number of concerns, and so the aim of this section is to consider how the nature of Christian hope gives specific shape to the reader's perseverance with the text. It is worth noting that several writers on interpretive virtue speak in some way of perseverance as a mark of the virtuous reader, although mostly indirectly. This in part surely derives from the fact that perseverance is inherently required in the pursuit of the virtues, and as has been argued already, hope thus necessarily binds the whole process of growing as a reader. More specifically, discussion of perseverance comes through conceptually in Vanhoozer's argument for 'attention', and in Jacobs's and Briggs's discussion of love.[44] Jacobs in particular argues that love and hope are necessarily intertwined. He argues that 'hope is the virtue by means of which suspicion can be overcome', in the sense that perseverant, loving attention to another (in Jacob's context, the text of another) is possible in the hope that such loving perseverance will bear fruit. It was argued in chapter three that a kind of hermeneutics of suspicion may operate within the rubric of hope, and Jacobs is fully aware that readers will at times need to depart from the views they find in a text. Thus even in this case, the operation of suspicion occurs in the hope that when problems are uncovered, some fruit may still be borne in love. Jacobs' argument, like Vanhoozer, relates to the Christian reading of any text, but the specific focus on reading as an expression of communion with another fits well with the depiction of hope in the final section of chapter three; to read in hope is to persevere with another for the sake of a fruitful 'relationship' through the text. This formulation certainly pertains to the biblical text, in the sense that the hopeful reader perseveres with the text in the hope of relating more closely to God,

[43] As noted in chapter three, the hope that animates this circle (the hope for hearing God and being renewed in the capacity to hear) is an imminent sub-aspect of the hope for the renewal of creation, both of which are attested in the texts. As such, it must be borne in mind that the hope of better understanding the text is not an end in itself. Rather, the hope of hearing God in the text is the hope of hearing the grounds for hope more deeply for life as a whole. This point will be crucial to section 3.2.
[44] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, 377.

and in a sense in terms of the communion between the reader and the human authors of scripture. While the question of God is foremost in this argument, the latter question concerning the human authors will become important in considering when perseverant attention to the text nonetheless leads the reader to dissent.

Primarily then, the hopeful reader perseveres with the text in the hope of hearing God, or in terms of the discussion so far, in the hope of having their imagination addressed and transformed by God. Describing the hope of the reader in this way clarifies why it was necessary to attend to the relationship between the imagination and hope, and why it was necessary to challenge Brueggemann's argument that the Bible constitutes a 'fund' for the imagination. Rather than seeing the text as at the disposal of the human imagination, the imagination is firstly at the disposal of the text. To read in *love* may be described as allowing the other to speak to one's imaginative construal of reality, to listen to the offer of a new perspective or a fresh vision on the world. To read in *hope* is to persevere in attention the other's vision in the hope that doing so will expand the reader's perspective, allowing them to imagine or construe the world more truthfully. Clearly this suggestion may again relate to the reading of any text, but is particularly germane to reading the Bible as Christian scripture. As Green argues, 'Christians acknowledge the authority of the scriptures of Old and New Testaments because only they render Christ, the image of God, fully and coherently to the imagination'.[45] Thus the hopeful reader reads the Bible with perseverance in the pursuit of the transformation of the imagination such that they might perceive the world in truth, and in particular this will include seeing the possibilities for the world in hope. Hopeful perseverance may thus be described as sustained attention to the voice of God through the texts, as readiness to be addressed.

Strictly then, this sense of readiness to be spoken to is first opened by God in grace; as such, the reader's openness is not a precondition for being addressed. But as the reader's imagination is captured by God, so they are called to pursue the voice of God as a matter of vocation, as a characteristic action of hope. It is for this reason that the writer to the Hebrews is able to challenge the audience thus:

[45] Green, *Imagining God*, 125.

> Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today', so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold fast our first confidence firm to the end.[46]

The writer draws on Psalm 95 to exhort the Hebrews not to allow their hearts to grow hard to the voice of God, as their 'ancestors' had done in the wilderness. In both textual scenarios the promise and call of God is primary, but it draws forth a response that requires the action and sustained attention of the follower. As such the hopeful person, and thus the hopeful reader, seeks to remain open to the God of promise on the way, and hence open to the promises of God in the biblical text. This openness should not be surprising given the emphasis in chapters two and three on judgement. Such openness will be particularly important in the context of familiar texts, where the reader must persevere in seeking deeper appreciation of seemingly mundane readings, alongside remaining open to unfamiliar interpretations of familiar texts.

Having said this, the value of openness (to the other) has the character of a truism in recent hermeneutical thinking, and is itself proposed by Vanhoozer as an interpretive virtue.[47] Similarly, the virtue of 'receptivity' described by Jones and Briggs has close affinities with the idea of openness.[48] But concerns with openness as a matter of course were implicit in the discussion of suspicion, given that many texts seem to dehumanize the reader. In this scenario, openness becomes highly problematic. In addition to this, the very nature of hope stands at odds with the idea of an *a priori* openness; in the quotation from Hebrews above, the audience are exhorted to 'hold fast', an idea which stands in tension with outright openness. Given this, section 3.2 will examine the other side of this circle of hope, that the hopeful reader exhibits a certain steadfastness and even 'closedness', that in the face of competing construals of reality they remain able to read the text in a way which witnesses to hope in God and thus bears fruit in the action of hope in their life and the lives of others. For now, it is necessary to consider whether openness as such may still be fruitful in the reading of problematic texts.

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[46] Hebrews 3.13-14.
[47] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, 377.
[48] Jones, 'Formed and Transformed', 32; Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 167-192.

iii) Perseverance, openness and problematic texts

As noted, the idea of perseverant openness is most difficult in relation to problematic texts. The very thing that renders a biblical text problematic is a clash of perspectives, though not necessarily between the text and the reader. This of course will happen, but it might be said that the very value of reading lies with the potential influence on one's perspective on the world. The main difficulty with the Bible is actually, as Allen Dwight Callahan noted for slaves, that 'letter of Holy Writ was sometimes at war with its spirit'.[49] In other words, *pace* Green, the Bible does not always seem to render God '*coherently* to the imagination' (emphasis mine). Given the prevalence of this experience, the resulting question concerns how the reader should respond, and in this context, what it means for the hopeful reader to persevere, open to a problematic text. One option would simply be to reject the problematic text outright, the option classically taken by Thurman's grandmother.[50] However, in *her* context I find it impossible to suggest that this decision constituted a lack of hope; the very decision to persist with portions of the Bible at all appears as a massive triumph of hope in such circumstances. Even so, as long as the canon maintains its status the question of how to read difficult texts endures. Thus I intend to show that the hopeful reader may persist with difficult texts, open to the voice of God in spite of the complications.

This proposal is well illustrated in the way in which certain African American writers have persisted in reading Philemon. Philemon has of course a particularly problematic history with regard to slavery, and thus it brings the idea of openness to problematic texts into focus. On the one hand one may cite good reasons for rejecting the text of Philemon outright, if its history of interpretation is too problematic to set aside. On the other hand, by remaining alert to these problems the text could be read with the explicit aim of generating a critique of its dominant voice. However, both these options might seem to preclude the possibility of openness. But while writers such as Lloyd A. Lewis and Allen Dwight Callahan remain fully aware of potential problems, I wish to show that they have sought to recover the liberating

[49] Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 25.
[50] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 30-31.

potential of Philemon in a manner which retains a sense of genuine openness to the text on its own terms.

Lewis argues that in the letter to Philemon, '[w]e see Paul addressing a case in which freedom and slavery and environment and the gospel collide'.[51] Implicit within Lewis's description is the fact that the result of this collision is the fundamental ambiguity of Paul's position on slavery. There is much debate as to whether Paul asks Philemon to release Onesimus, and clearly this question is of crucial importance against the backdrop of modern slavery.[52] In an earlier article, Lewis offers a close reading of the text, paying particular attention to Paul's use of kinship language as it pertains to status.[53] In this light he argues in particular that Onesimus' 'usefulness' (Philemon 11) does not derive from his status as a slave, but rather the opposite, from his status as a 'brother', as one 'on a par with both Paul and his former master'.[54] Despite this focus, Lewis does not concede that Paul requires Philemon to manumit Onesimus, and hence the ambiguity remains intact. What he does suggest is that within the text there are hints of Paul working out the implications of the gospel in process. Thus Onesimus' escape constitutes a 'rupture of social codes', but in this moment, 'Paul could accept that rupture as yielding some fundamental truth about living in the family of God'.[55] However, the final move in the drama is left to Philemon.

By contrast, Callahan notes the actual lack of textual evidence behind the assumption that Onesimus was a slave at all. He traces this argument back to Nineteenth Century abolitionists, noting with Blount that the text was a battle ground for the issue of slavery.[56] Like Lewis he focuses on Paul's use of kinship language, but argues instead that Onesimus and Philemon were brothers as blood relatives, as well as 'in the Lord'. As such, the slave-brother relation of verse 16 represents the *state* of their relationship; 'slavery' conceptually describes the breakdown of human relatedness, 'brotherhood' its restoration. Thus, '[t]he problem that Paul engaged in

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[51] Lloyd A. Lewis, 'Philemon' in *True to Our Native Land*, ed. Blount, 437-443, (438).
[52] Briefly, with references, J.D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996) 334-335.
[53] Lloyd A. Lewis, 'An African American Appraisal of the Philemon-Paul Onesimus Triangle' in *Stony the Road*, ed. Felder, 232-246 (234-6, 243).
[54] Lewis, 'An African American Appraisal', 245.
[55] Lewis, 'An African American Appraisal', 245.
[56] Allen Dwight Callahan, 'Paul's Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative *Argumentum*', *HTR*, 86, 4 (1993), 357-376, (357-363).

the letter was not that Onesimus was a real slave (for he was not), nor that Onesimus was not a real brother to Philemon (for he was), but that Onesimus was not a *beloved* brother to Philemon'.[57] In conclusion, Callahan argues:

> It is perhaps as an exemplar of reconciliation that the epistle recommended itself to its first audience, and perhaps it is as an exemplar of reconciliation that Paul's Epistle to Philemon must recommend itself to its audiences today.[58]

Clearly Lewis and Callahan provide different readings of the text at the historical level, but the significance of their approaches at this stage does not lie with the relative success of each argument, but rather with their ability to hold together three key concerns. Firstly both are fully aware that the text is 'odious to many black exegetes' in Lewis's terms, because of its apparent ambiguity on slavery, and its tradition of being used to inhibit bids for freedom. Secondly, against this backdrop, they both offer close readings of the text in its own context. As such, they maintain a strong degree of openness to the text as text, without assuming that it will either turn out to be unusable, or that it could be co-opted to reinforce a pre-given perspective. Lewis neither exonerates nor condemns Paul. His conviction about slavery does not lead him to portray Paul either as pro-slavery or as an abolitionist, because close attention to the text shows that it will not easily support either conclusion.[59] Callahan appears to depict a more acceptable Paul, but principally by arguing that slavery is not the issue of the letter. Thirdly, this openness is extended to the theological level, each drawing out places where the text offers *theological* resources that point beyond the ambiguities of human contexts to the freedom that was apprehended in the presence of God, mediated through scripture and even through Paul.[60] In short, they offer grounds for hope through close and open attention to the text as it speaks of God. It is not my place to argue whether either writer successfully deals with the 'odious' nature of the text, and clearly the two perspectives are not neatly compatible. But my argument is that at the level of approach, both illustrate the kind of perseverance that characterises the hopeful reader. The result is not necessarily

[57] Callahan, 'Paul's Epistle to Philemon', 372.
[58] Callahan, 'Paul's Epistle to Philemon', 376.
[59] Lewis, 'An African American Appraisal', 245-6.
[60] Lewis explicitly reads Philemon in relation to Galatians 3.28, though note Demetrius Williams' analysis of some critical issues in using that text to promote equality. Williams, 'The Bible and Models of Liberation', 40-59.

'better' exegesis of the text, but the sustenance of a better conversation, keeping the text open for theological interpretation in the face of serious difficulties. This perseverance maintains openness *to* the text, and indeed in this case to the possibility that God may speak in some sense in spite of the apparent ambiguities. Thus while there remain difficulties in reconciling their interpretations at the historical level, it can be seen that their interpretations are able to offer coherence at the theological level, coherence which need not be undermined if one or other historical perspective proves to be untenable. However, alongside this openness, we shall now consider the important element of steadfastness in hopeful reading.

3.2. The Hopeful Reader 2: Perseverance and Steadfastness in Hope

i) The other side of the circle

The argument of section 3.1 essentially followed the hermeneutical circle of hope from one side. The initial grasp of hope in the biblical texts leads to a reshaped view of reality, and hence new forms of action. One of these actions is to return to the texts, persevering with them in openness to God. This section will, in a sense, view the circle from a different starting point; because the action of rereading the texts is energised by a grasp of hope's grounds and contents, that hope will necessarily shape subsequent readings. Thus the hopeful reader is disposed to seek the interpretive good, with that good focused on ways in which the biblical texts point beyond the confines of present existence in a manner which reflects the hopeful promise and presence of God. However, this means that the sense of openness is held in tension with a kind of steadfastness, a grip on the initial understanding of hope's grounds. The result of this tension will be rereading that takes time, which is why *both* openness and steadfastness are described as ingredients of hopeful perseverance.

This section will proceed in three moves. Firstly, the effect of hope on subsequent readings will be described with reference to Green's depiction of the

imagination, such that the reader is able to grip onto their apprehension of hope whilst remaining alert to alternatives. Secondly, the manifestation of hope as steadfastness or even stubbornness in reading will be discussed in relation to problematic texts. Thirdly, I will address the management of the tension between openness and steadfastness in discerning readings in hope.

ii) The hopeful reader and the transformed imagination

In chapter two it was argued that being hopeful involved being disposed to live in accordance with a particular view of reality, a perspective grounded in God, looking both to the imminent present and the ultimate future. It was argued that anyone could be hopeful in the Christian sense, for the precise reason that Christian hope begins with God's breaking into the present, opening up a seemingly closed reality. But equally, hope becomes a matter of transformation, and hence of character. The hopeful person is primarily engaged in a process of growth, such that living hopefully becomes a matter of action engendered through transformation. There is thus a complex interplay between acting out of choice and acting out of a growing nature; as such it remains possible to speak of being hopeful in the context of extreme pressure, and indeed it is often in such situations where hopeful action is most clearly visible. In relation to the question of biblical reading, this balance is well captured by the work of Paul Ricoeur, who draws on Christian theologies of hope (especially Moltmann) to develop his primarily philosophical hermeneutics. Writing on the parables of Jesus, and in particular the parable of the treasure in the field (Matthew 13.44), Ricoeur suggests that 'the Kingdom of God is compared to the chain of these three acts: letting the Event blossom, looking in another direction, and doing with all one's strength in accordance with the new vision'.[61] The 'Event' itself comes to encompass 'encounters' with the kingdom of God in the parables, and *mutatis mutandis* other biblical texts. The textual encounter does not precipitate a mechanical response, though Ricoeur does speak of a responsive 'choice'. Rather, the reading leads to a fresh vision, and in my view this term helpfully carries the

[61] Ricoeur, *Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 241.

interrelation of being transformed in hope (disposition) and actively responding to the call of God in hope (choice).

> To listen to the Parables of Jesus, it seems to me, is to let one's imagination be opened to the new possibilities disclosed by the extravagance of these short dramas. If we look at the Parables as at a word addressed first to our imagination rather than to our will, we shall not be tempted to reduce them to mere didactic devices, to moralizing allegories. We will let their poetic power display itself within us.[62]

Thus as above, the biblical texts may be seen to transform the imagination such that the reader sees the world differently, in growing correlation to God's promise and creative reality. Indeed, to read in hope is to read with the expectation that such transformation will occur, but if this is so, it can begin to be seen that reading in hope necessarily shapes subsequent reading of the Bible.

As noted above, before anything else is said it could be immediately objected that the cycle between the reader and the text is thus a vicious one. If the text shapes the reader's perception of reality, and this in turn shapes the subsequent reading of the text, then it may appear that the reader's world collapses into the world of the text such that they are only able to see what the text will allow them to see. Even if the reader is opened up to new interpretive possibilities in the first instance, it might seem that they will eventually become blinkered to other ideas, a situation which could only be remedied by a rejection of the framework of the text. In this case we are faced with the original modern objection to theological interpretation, that theological categories and vision predetermine the results of biblical interpretation. While a number of writers point out that historical-critical interpretation may become equally blinkered, my argument is that the virtue of hope helps to clarify what is at stake because hope *as hope* remains fully conscious of where it differs from its environment. As shown above, to become blinkered to alternative perspectives is to slip from hope to presumption.

Garrett Green notes that it is more common for scholars within the field of theological interpretation to speak of reading the Bible *as* scripture than to state that

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[62] Ricoeur, *Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 245.

the Bible *is* scripture.[63] Following his distinction between the 'is' of certainty and the 'as' of imagination, he suggests that to read the Bible *as* scripture is to read with a particular vision of reality that is nonetheless alert to other construals. While this dichotomy is perhaps not entirely necessary, it helps clarify the distinctiveness of speaking of theological interpretation in terms of hope. Following Moltmann's concept of 'contradiction' and Cone's concept of 'absurdity', hope quite specifically deals with seeing reality through hope in God, *in the context of an environment that may see reality differently*.[64] Without this awareness of other possibilities, hope becomes presumption. But in hope, the reader's imagination allows them to see new possibilities in the text, possibilities that speak to present reality without blocking their awareness of the logic of other readings. Because of this, we can begin to speak of the imagination being *employed* by the reader as an action of hope in the process of reading. Again, I wish to maintain that the imagination is first and foremost a faculty that is addressed by God through the text. However, in the midst of competing construals of the world, it is necessary for the reader to engage in the task of discerning between competing imaginative construals of what is real, and thus competing interpretive possibilities. To this end, the hopeful reader employs their imagination to test ways in which specific texts might point beyond the confines of present existence in a manner which reflects the presence of God in creation and the promises of God for new creation. As Bauckham and Hart argue:

> Only insofar as we are able to envisage how things might be different from the way they are in this world, how they might change in the future, how they are intended by God ultimately to be, do we have any final grounds for refusing to accept the way the world presently is.[65]

Bearing this in mind, the employment of the imagination in reading is not simply about generating new interpretive possibilities for their own sake, *but about seeking and testing interpretations that bear witness to the reality of divine hope in specific situations*.

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[63] Green, *Imagining God*, 141.
[64] Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 3-4; Cone, *Black Power*, 8-9, 11.
[65] Bauckham and Hart, *Hope against Hope*, 56.

iii) Perseverance as stubbornness in rereading problematic texts

As noted above, the idea of hope as perseverance in openness stands in tension to clear examples where hope is manifest as steadfastness, perhaps even stubbornness. The very description of Abraham's hoping 'against' hope (*par' elpida ep' elpidi*)[66] suggests a hope which steadfastly contradicts apparent possibility.[67] As such, the apprehension of divine possibility leads to a stubborn refusal of the prevailing notion of the world, of what is humanly possible. Thus the kind of stubbornness in view is not a stubborn refusal to be addressed (in *direct* contrast to openness), but a refusal to let go of the promise and presence of God in the face of challenges or confusion. As Hart suggests:

> Refusing to buckle under the painful weight of actuality (whether that be persecution, exile or whatever) the faith which holds fast to such hope resists and contradicts it, insisting upon living as if it were not thus, living in the light not of the way things are, but of the way things will be in God's future.[68]

I choose the specific term 'stubbornness' deliberately for two reasons. Firstly, it suggests a characteristic that is not self-evidently good, in the sense that commending the stubborn reader seems counter-intuitive in the context of recent discussions of hermeneutics. This of course is not enough to commend the term, but the oddity of the word thus forces us to rethink the potentially self-evident nature of 'openness' in a way that more saleable terms like 'persistence' or 'conviction' do not.[69] But secondly, stubbornness seems to me to capture the important point that hope often stands in the face of a prevailing perspective. It was argued earlier that this is not always the case, and thus I am not arguing for an *a priori* stubbornness. But my argument is that the dialectic of stubbornness and openness characterises the

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[66] Romans 4.18.
[67] As emphasized in Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 219
[68] Hart, 'Imagination for the Kingdom of God?', 51.
[69] The latter term is coined by Vanhoozer. While I find his argument convincing, I wish to push the terminology further to highlight the way in which hopeful convictions may stand in direct contrast to prevailing perspectives, and hence prevailing notions of what counts as 'reasonable.' See Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, 455-467.

perseverance of the hopeful reader. In particular, this dialectic will help clarify the shape of perseverance in the face of problematic texts.

Returning to the example of Philemon, Blount notes that the text was often used by white preachers in support of slavery and specifically as a tool to inhibit slaves from trying to escape. But in response to their apprehension of the gospel, slaves rejected such interpretations, and at times critiqued the text in itself.[70] However, Blount goes on to argue that '[t]his doesn't mean that the New Testament text lost its authority for the slaves. But it *does* mean that their perception of God in their midst was *more* authoritative'.[71] As argued in chapter three, this does not constitute a straightforward hermeneutic of pragmatic affirmation, and this argument may be clarified by the discussion of imagination. It can be seen that the 'perception of God' describes a construal of reality itself, which as Martin highlighted coheres with the 'central thrust' of the biblical gospel.[72] In other words, it is the hopeful imagination of reality that actually leads to a specific moment of dissent from the text. Indeed it is this hopeful perception of reality in the light of the overall biblical witness that renders the specific text problematic. However, Martin notes that while some readerly dissent took form in a wholesale rejection of the text, it also occurred through resistance to any hermeneutics that seemed to undermine the 'parenthood of God'.[73] From this angle, readers continued to persevere with Paul's letter through a steadfast grip on their perception of reality, a perception that could not support slavery.

Bearing this in mind, it can be seen that Lewis and Callahan hold onto a fourth concern that rightly stands in tension with their openness to the text of Philemon. While their approaches are primarily historical (and sociological in the case of Lewis), they hold onto a fundamental conviction concerning the dignity of the human person which renders slavery inherently evil. Thus the reality within

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[70] Brian K. Blount, 'The Last Word on Biblical Authority' in Walter Brueggemann, William C. Placher and Brian K. Blount, *Struggling with Scripture*, (London: WJKP, 2002), 51-69, (58). As with Weems, this may also relate to aural contact, and not textual contact. See also Callahan, 'Paul's Epistle to Philemon', 364-5.

[71] Blount, 'Last Word', 58-9.

[72] Martin, 'The *Haustafeln*', 217.

[73] Clarice J. Martin, '"Somebody Done Hoodoo'd the Hoodoo Man": Language, Power, Resistance, and the Effective History of Pauline Texts in American Slavery', *Semeia*, 83-4 (1998), 203-233, (224-5); Similarly, Callahan notes that despite the usage of Paul in supporting ante-bellum slavery, few commentators have rejected his writing outright. Allen Dwight Callahan, '"Brother Saul": An Ambivalent Witness to Freedom', *Semeia*, 83-4 (1998), 235-250, (235-6).

which the text is read is imaginatively understood to be one which will not ultimately support slavery, a hopeful perspective on reality that is grounded in the presence and promise of God. As such, the theological resources that they draw from the text in part derive from being hopeful in this manner, and are thus an operation of the imagination because their view of reality stands in contrast to alternative views (on which, see below). As such, the theological aspect of their interpretation derives from the tension between their openness to the text on its own terms, and their perspective on reality borne in hope. There is a *right* stubbornness in the refusal to leave the question of human freedom out of the discussion for the sake of a so called objectivity. Because that issue lies at the heart of Christian hope, and thus the construal of reality, it remains right that it is brought into the discussion of a text whose interpretation has necessary implications for contemporary theology. In this manner the hopeful reader draws out places where the biblical texts point beyond the confines of present existence, fostering genuine hope in contemporary readers. By noting this communal aspect, it becomes easier to maintain the sense of circularity in the process; hope in one reader leads to the interpretive good of fostering hope in others.

Of course, reading with the vision of hope may be considered to introduce an element of bias, but in my argument it constitutes the pre-understanding of the reader about the very reality within which the text is read. The problem with the vision of hope is not that it is a bias *per se*, but that it stands in contrast to seemingly dominant biases and perspectives about the reality of the hermeneutical situation. This is why it is necessary to hold stubbornness and openness in tension. On the one hand, the theological exegete must contend for their construal of reality in the face of other competing perspectives. On the other hand, it will not do to suggest that 'standard' perspectives are *always* to be suspected, as though the good would never prevail. Clearly then, there must be cases when the pre-understanding, even as that of hope, must give way to the weight of textual evidence. But because hope pertains to reality, this pre-understanding should not give way on the basis that it is somehow non-objective. Against that suggestion, it is right to speak of a degree of stubbornness in tension with openness. Ultimately, there is no straightforward way to determine when the reader should change his or her mind, and it is for this reason that this dialectic constitutes the *perseverance* of hope. But as such, the reader may

persevere in the genuine hope of better grasping the truth and promise of God through their attention to the text. Having said this, it is worth considering options for discerning when a reading may be said to be genuinely hopeful, and to this question we now turn.

iv) Discerning hopeful reading

As noted in chapter three, part of this argument stands close to the perspective of Francis Watson. Watson argued that '[t]he story of the creation of the community is set within the story of the creation of the world and its final destiny'.[74] In broad terms the canon as canon creates its own framework of creation and *eschaton*, with Jesus as the 'mid-point'. Watson notes that the accounts of creation in particular are told from a patriarchal perspective, but that in the manner discussed through Mosala's work, it is possible to recover an alternative perspective in spite of the patriarchal telling. This would be useful in any situation, but by arguing for an original and final equality in the respective accounts of creation and new creation, Watson suggests that gender equality is present in the biblical accounts of creation and new creation. Furthermore, because the history between the two depicts the place inhabited by the contemporary reader, it is possible to read against the grain of the patriarchal lens of scripture, *whilst remaining faithful to the biblical story*.[75] In a similar manner, it is worth noting that Lewis' argument was made by reading Philemon in relation to Galatians 3.28, an approach that has been used many times in various strands of liberation theology.[76] Thus while Watson moves from the big picture to the specific, and Lewis moves from the specific kernel to broader textual engagements, both moves are hermeneutically similar by drawing on a textual thread that is understood to relate to divine and human reality and history *as a whole*. In this sense, neither Watson nor Lewis posits just a canon within the canon, but rather they posit a reality *within which* the canon is read. As such, there are strong similarities between these views and the hermeneutics of hope argued here, because it has been

[74] Watson, *Text Church and World*, 138.
[75] Watson, *Text Church and World*, 190-201.
[76] Lewis, 'An African American Appraisal', 233.

argued that hope involves an imaginative construal of reality based on divine promise and presence. Crucially, by describing hope (and in this case, the contents of hope), as a hermeneutical framework Watson offers a point from which the reader might discern when theological interpretation in the mode of hope has gone astray. This framework will have to operate alongside others (including even historical-critical ones) and thus theological interpretation will remain at all times accountable to various critical questions. However, the basic thrust of the argument allows for two helpful points in the discernment of good reading. Firstly, if scripture is read within a framework of Christian hope, then the overarching narrative of hope from creation to new creation provides a framework by which specific readings may be tested. Specific readings may be discerned to be genuinely hopeful to the extent that they flow with the broader picture of Christian hope. Secondly, as noted above, this perspective may allow the reader legitimately to dissent from the plain sense of a text whilst reading it theologically.

However, it could be argued that such a framework does ultimately constitute a canon within the canon, and unless the framework itself remains open to revision, it might unhelpfully predetermine what a specific text is able to say. Hence by contrast to Watson, it was noted that Brueggemann's view of the imaginative reader focused on the *specificity* of each biblical text in contrast to the broad canonical narrative. While Brueggemann recognizes that there is a strong tradition behind speaking of 'the' biblical narrative, he worries that such a view is 'excessively systematic'. He argues that '[t]he Bible offers many small dramas, some of which are not easily subordinated to the large "drama of salvation"'.[77] He argues that readers should allow individual texts to speak on their own terms, free from systematic construal. As such, he stands apart from Watson, suggesting that each text be allowed to fund the imagination independently. Following this, it is necessary to consider the extent to which the transformed imagination of the hopeful reader becomes a bias, overriding the individuality of specific texts. In turn, can a reading be described as hopeful without that simply meaning that it has collapsed into bolstering an abstracted view of 'the' biblical narrative?

[77] Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*, 70.

In essence this dilemma represents a particular angle on the question of how the whole of the Bible relates to its parts, but again my aim is to describe this hermeneutical circle with specific reference to the theology of hope. Returning to the start, it was argued that Christian hope is first and foremost in God, and specifically in God as the creator, the redeemer of humankind in Christ and the one who promises the fulfilment and renewal of creation at the *eschaton*. Our apprehension of this reality is partial, and as such it remains a wager. But it is a wager built on trust in God, and trust that God has in fact spoken and remains faithful to creation and to God's promise of new creation. Furthermore, it is to trust that God's renewal of human beings has begun through the Spirit in the present. As such, being hopeful does not begin with the adoption of a coherent framework, but with a relationship that gradually shifts and renews one's perception of reality, history, and the future, in accordance with God. As such, while the hopeful reader does indeed read with a transformed imagination or construal of reality, this perspective does not derive so much from the conscious adoption of a hermeneutical lens, but from the growth in a divine-human relationship. In the end, this proposal is guilty of the charge of leaving the reader bereft of interpretive criteria, but because of the reality of judgement it must be maintained that no definitive framework for theological interpretation can be possessed as such, though provisional frameworks may be employed.

On this basis, to read in hope is to read specifically in the hope that God speaks, is faithful, and thus may be heard in the specific moment of each reading. As such, even though the reader's hope may be understood in principle to cohere with the character of divine promise as mediated through scripture, each moment of attention to a specific text is characterised by attention to the voice of God *through* the specificity of that text. However, in persevering with the text for the sake of God, the hopeful reader reads in trust that if God is to be heard, even in the specific interaction of text and context, God's faithfulness means that the reader may anticipate coherence between the specific reading and the whole narrative of divine hope. Returning then to the examples of Lewis and Callahan, both writers suggest ways in which the text, interpreted theologically, points beyond the experience of the present in accordance with Christian hope, yet both take care to avoid warping the text to fit a pre-given framework. Lewis concludes by seeing 'even Paul struggling with the fact that a gospel that subverts the fundamental distinction between Jews

and Gentiles would not leave the issue of slavery alone'.[78] As noted, he does not repaint Paul as a proto-abolitionist, but does argue for a reading which points beyond the confines of slavery in accordance with a Christian hope, without negating the historical specificity of the text. Callahan argues against viewing the text as relating to slavery, but does suggest that the text depicts possibilities for human reconciliation. Clearly the exegetical differences between the two present a problem, but from a theological perspective, this problem may not be primary. In the first instance it can be seen that there are resonances between both readings at the theological level, and it may be at this level that both perspectives are best brought into dialogue for the sake of tightening the historical aspect of the exegesis. To put it another way, if God is in any sense to be understood as capable of speaking through the text, then the potential coherence of the theological possibilities outlined in both articles is not necessarily undermined by the different historical reconstructions. Even if one historical view is disregarded, the theological reading need not *necessarily* go with it.

Finally, while the hopeful reader rightly seeks coherence between the specific hope of a specific text and their overall perception of hope in God, it is crucial to remember that the perception of hope, and thus the efficacy of the imagination are necessarily provisional. As Alison Searle notes, '[t]o imagine biblically [...] is both to recognise the evil and suffering that characterises the present, but also to anticipate the *eschaton* with a creativity simultaneously provisional and fostered by hope'.[79] Given this, specific texts must be allowed to challenge the reader, and thus to reshape their perception of divine promise and the nature of Christian hope. There is thus no final way (within human grasp) of deciding whether a reading may be understood to be theologically appropriate, and it is for this reason that discernment alongside other readers is so important. As Kathryn Tanner suggests, at this point the imagination serves against 'complacency' by refusing interpreters the chance to settle.[80] As in the case of the comparison between Lewis and Callahan, what matters is not the attempt to close down interpretation onto a final, 'correct' reading of each specific text. But nor is each text simply a means for sparking the individual

[78] Lewis, 'An African American Appraisal', 246; Lewis, 'Philemon', 443.
[79] Searle, *'The Eyes of Your Heart'*, 210.
[80] Kathryn Tanner, 'Scripture as Popular Text' in *Theology and Scriptural Imagination*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 117-136, (133-4).

imagination of the reader. Rather, the hopeful reader is involved in the sustenance of a theological conversation for the sake of better living with God and others in the light of divine promise and presence. Clearly it will not do to offer two or more readings as interesting interpretive artefacts without any means of moving forward, but nor will it do to require that one is to be judged hopeful and one is not. Rather, both readings may be 'hopeful' if they contribute to the corporate process of discerning the reality of God through the text and sharing the discernment of God's promised future and its impact on the present. In other words, the hopeful reader is neither one who seeks to finish the task of interpretation, nor one who simply accepts interpretive pluralism without recognizing the urgency of discerning good interpretation from bad. The hopeful reader pursues the specific text for the sake of offering resources to the community in order to energise the shared journey towards God. Thus all other things being equal, the reader who hopes in God and whose imagination is shaped by divine promise and presence is more naturally able to see ways in which each text might contribute to the shared life of hope in God. Given this, we now turn to consider the role of the community in the task of theological interpretation.

3.3. The Hopeful Reader 3: Plurality and Coherence through reading with others

i) Initial comments

In chapter three, questions were raised concerning the possibility of interpretive dialogue with others and the limits of interpretive plurality. It was noted that if the criteria for good interpretation are local and community specific then dialogue with other reading communities becomes more problematic in the absence of public, universally agreed methods and aims. If this depiction is accurate then the potential for one group to impose their interpretations on another is compounded, if local interpretations are passed off as universal. Furthermore, the problem of power interests influencing interpretation was shown to be theologically grounded, in the

sense that human beings are susceptible to the desire to impose their own interests on others. As a result, dialogue between reading communities becomes a highly complex and potentially dangerous affair.

However, it was also argued that the Christian hope described in chapter two has consequences for this scenario. Firstly, Christian hope begins with the inbreaking promise of God, and as such it is possible for that voice to be heard independently of the local interests of the reading community. Given this, dialogue becomes possible to the extent that God can be said to speak to humanity across pre-given boundaries. Secondly, it was argued that Christian hope involves the transformation of human persons in love. This creates the possibility for a renewed common humanity which in itself becomes the basis for a shared dialogue. But by being renewed in love, self interest is also eclipsed. As such, a renewed humanity does not take shape through the imposition of a homogenous perspective, but through the risky possibility that the stranger, encountered as such, may become a friend. As such, reading together need not lead to homogeneity, but may lead to coherence.

Broadly speaking, in chapter three it was argued that dialogue with others is *possible*; in this section, it will be argued that in hope it is *necessary*. The hopeful reader cannot read in isolation, but rather seeks dialogue with as wide and distant a group of others as possible. This necessity has begun to emerge already in the above discussion as it was suggested that the discernment of good theological interpretation in hope must be a corporate affair. But in turn, the formation of human community is itself a vocation of hope, and as such to read in hope is to read as part of this vocation. In particular, it will be argued that readers must work together to seek coherence amidst varying readings, such that the emerging life of hope can be said to be coherent amidst plurality.

Arguments for reading with others have been fairly widespread in recent literature, and Richard Burridge has argued that a core feature of contemporary New Testament ethics must be an 'open, inclusive community'.[81] My argument will be that such activity has more to do with the hopeful character of the person than with taking communal reading as a matter of method. Furthermore, the discussion of hope

[81] Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), especially 388-409.

thus far requires some conceptual precision with regard to what is meant by reading in community with others.

ii) Communities and the Church

While much of the recent interest in reading with others is to be welcomed, it was noted that at times there can be a lack of clarity concerning exactly what is meant by the reading community. Specifically, by foregrounding the importance of reading communities in the formation of interpretive interests, writers such as Fowl and Jones seem to slip between talk of communities (plural) in general, and talk of the Church. Thus Webster has expressed concern that:

> [...] we do not allow theological language about the church to dissolve into generic language about 'forms of life', 'sociality' or even 'ecclesiality' [...] 'ecclesiality' and 'church' are not concepts of the same kind; and to talk of the latter we need to say much of God and the gospel.[82]

While this complaint perhaps overlooks the fact that Fowl and Jones do offer theological resources for reading within the Church, Webster suggests a distinction between talk of the Church (singular) and communities (plural) that is worth taking into account. In my judgement, the importance of this distinction lies with the idea that the Church as such has an eschatological vocation to witness to the renewed humanity which constitutes part of the contents of Christian hope. In this respect, it must be argued that the hopeful reader reads with others not only as a matter of communal accountability and formation, but as a matter of the action of being hopeful in the first place.

This particular aspect of the Church's vocation and existence is discussed by Rowan Williams who holds together the necessary tension of diversity and unity that was outlined in chapter three. Williams challenges what he terms the 'incarnational consensus' of much Anglican theology, namely that the incarnation is essentially affirmative of human social relations as they are, as opposed to setting up some rival

[82] Webster, *Word and Church*, 85.

institution. By contrast, he argues that the doctrine of the incarnation does not strictly lead to a social vision, but that almost the reverse is true; rather, the doctrine of the incarnation itself emerged from the fact that a new covenant people had begun to form around Christ in a way that crossed all preordained boundaries, manifest in the calling of the marginalised and the *mutually marginalising*.[83] The incarnation as a concept thus derives from the acceptance that such a covenant people emerged as a gift of God. Furthermore, while this people was not unbounded it was missionary, and the scope of its mission was effectively unbounded. Following this, the Church as such 'proclaims and struggles to realize a 'belonging together' of persons in community in virtue of nothing but a shared belonging with or to the risen Jesus'.[84] Given this, the character of the Church as a community of persons is bound up with its missionary vocation, which in turn is bound up with the eschatological promise of God for humankind.

> The Church claims to show the human world as such what is possible for it in relation to God – not through the adding of ecclesiastical activities to others, and not through the sacralizing of existing communal forms, but by witnessing to the possibility of a common life sustained by God's creative breaking of existing frontiers and showing that creative authority in the pattern of relation already described, the building up of Christ-like persons.[85]

The kind of common life here described is first and foremost a gift given in Jesus. But in the very nature of the giving, i.e. the incarnation, cross and resurrection, it is a common life that is defined by openness to a common humanity as gift, and thus is characterised by vulnerability and trust. Furthermore, it is a common life that bears witness to God's 'breaking of existing frontiers' and as such it calls for trust that extends quite firmly into the potentially unknown, given the scope of that movement. Indeed it is a common life that is hopeful about the possibility of trust and enrichment, particularly in its encounter with the stranger, a theme also discussed by Williams:

> There is no alternative to the work of mutual trust – which already implies a certain relinquishing of power. The hope is for a shared and reciprocal

[83] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 226-231.
[84] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 230-1.
[85] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 233.

> *empowering* for growth towards the Kingdom. [...] It is not without each other that we move towards the Kingdom; so that Christian history ought to be the story of continuing and demanding engagement with strangers, abandoning the right to decide who they are.[86]

The kind of common life being described begins to look very similar to that offered by Fowl and Jones and also Burridge, particularly in their emphasis on being open to the voices of those outside reading communities.[87] The decisive difference lies in the primary focus on the activity of God in creating a strange new humanity, or rather 'reconciling' humanity in a way which in the (eschatological) final analysis calls into question both the idea of plural communities, but equally the assumption of uniformity. As such, the vocation of the Church to embody this kind of common life is a direct function of the eschatological hope that it is called to proclaim.[88] Following this, to *read* in the Church is to read toward this kind of common existence, and this entails careful attention to near and distant voices concerning the interpretation of scripture. In distinction to Burridge there remains the need to maintain the sense of strangeness in the other as a matter of respecting their human dignity,[89] but in distinction to Fowl and Jones it is equally important to maintain a unifying hope beyond pluralistic communities.

iii) Plurality and coherence: hope and judgement in reading together

So far it has been argued that in hope, interpretive dialogue is possible, and that in keeping with the Church's vocation as witness to an eschatological humanity, it is necessary. However, such a task is inherently difficult, because it attempts to tread a path between two tempting and problematic options. On the one hand, the recognition that universal criteria remain out of reach makes optimistic pluralism an appealing response to interpretive conflict, but the urgency of hope grounded in the real possibility of divine action renders this option highly problematic. On the other

[86] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, (286.
[87] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 110-134. Burridge dislikes the language of outsiders, preferring to speak in terms of an 'inclusive' community; Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 396.
[88] See Williams, *Ray of Darkness*, 161-162.
[89] See Chapter Three, pp146-148.

hand, the risk of uncritically universalizing one's local interpretive criteria, thereby subduing the readings of others, has been shown to be theologically problematic because of the human condition. But if between these options lies the possibility of interpretive coherence, or 'wholeness' as described following Watson, it is necessary to consider what form this coherence might take.[90]

In the first instance, the hard work of 'mutual trust' described by Williams coheres well with the above argument that reading hopefully entails close attention and perseverance. As well as giving attention to the text, it would involve sustained listening to the reading and interpretation of others. In particular, Adam is correct to note that all hermeneutics are 'special' in the sense that the individual's hermeneutical assumptions are not universal but local, so attention is required not only to actual interpretations, but to the context and hermeneutical perspectives that surround them.[91] In addition to the suggestion that dialogue itself is necessitated by the hope of the Church, the very concept of interpretive virtue highlights the possibility that good interpretation is not only a matter of method, but of character. As such, those readers whose character leads them to fruitful interpretation may be spread far and wide, and thus the process of interpretive dialogue becomes a search for such readers. In regards to wisdom, Ford has argued that wise readings may thus be found in unexpected or unexplored places.[92] In turn, it might be suggested that the hopeful reader seeks out expert witnesses, readers whose hope leads them to fruitful appreciation of the grounds and contents of Christian hope, and in turn readers whose lives witness to the promise and reality of God as creator and redeemer. However, if this depiction is valid, it creates a further problem. What has been suggested thus far has close affinities with Adam's argument concerning differential hermeneutics in the process of engaging in dialogue with others. In particular, Adam argues that 'the unity by which believers bespeak their allegiance to the one God derives not from their consensus about the textual meaning of Scripture but from the obligation to bear with one another'.[93] While I agree with this, this perspective on the unity of the Church itself derives from a localised interpretation of certain texts. Recognizing this highlights the fact that the whole argument for sustained attention

[90] Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 146.
[91] Adam, *Making Sense*, 175-7.
[92] Ford, *Shaping Theology*, 150-161.
[93] Adam, *Faithful Interpretation*, 103.

to the other clashes with certain aspects of the perspective of James Cone and other liberation theologians, who argued that sustained attention to dominant perspectives was in fact part of the problem.

Cone argued that 'Christianity came to the black man through white oppressors who demanded that he reject his concern for this world and his blackness and affirm the next world and whiteness'.[94] Sustained attention to *this* other (white, dominant) perspective would thus equate to focusing on a pacifying and dehumanizing vision, unless such attention was sustained to the end of offering a radical critique.[95] Indeed, the affirmation of human dignity at the heart of Black theology suggests that there is more hope in rejecting the demand for attention from the oppressor, and first of all affirming one's own inherent ability to interpret the Bible as a person before God. If there is a critique to be made of an *a priori* openness to other contexts and persons, then this is surely it. This point was touched upon in chapter three where it was noted that this approach, as a suspension of trust may well constitute a hopeful perspective before the *eschaton*. But if this is so, it is necessary to consider how these two approaches – openness and suspicion – might be held together. My argument is that both poles cohere under the rubric of hope precisely because the hopeful reader is part of an eschatological community. As such, discerning exactly how being hopeful should shape the individual reader's engagement with the community becomes a matter of discerning the eschatological shape of present human relations. Put simply, whether being a hopeful reader means openness or 'closedness' to other readers depends on the corporate discernment of social relations as understood in light of the promises and presence of God.

To some extent, this point has been proposed by many writers who suggest that the poor and marginalised have a specific hermeneutical relationship to the text, because it is primarily to the poor that the hope of the gospel is addressed. Cone argues that 'there is no truth for and about black people that does not emerge out of the context of their experience'.[96] Given this, he states that scripture can only be interpreted in the light of the experience of the oppressed.[97] This connection between

[94] Cone, *Black Power*, 33.
[95] However, if critique was the goal of attention to the other, it is doubtful whether this would thus constitute genuinely open attention in any case.
[96] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 16.
[97] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 32.

the experience of oppression and the interpretation of scripture is of course widely made in liberation theology, and has thus been picked up by a number of western writers. In particular, Moltmann argues that the specific hope of divine promise is primarily addressed to the poor who thus become the group of readers best attuned to hear and understand it.[98] For precisely this reason, it has thus been argued that western readers must pay closer attention to liberation theology and to the exegesis of the oppressed. Rowland and Corner argue that the contextual attention of liberation theology has much to offer the 'first world' by awakening it to its own contextual placing.[99] But beyond this, they highlight how themes drawn out by liberation exegetes speak directly to situations of power, noting in particular Jesus' word of judgement for the rich.[100] In turn, they argue that privileged readers need to engage more seriously with liberation theology for the sake of socio-political self criticism, and must attempt to side with the oppressed by critiquing and challenging their own unjust structures of power.[101]

What is *not* often made explicit is the fact that in order to achieve this, a different kind of hermeneutic must be adopted by the power holder. To be sure, liberation theology calls both rich and poor to pay attention to their own context, and to become alert to the socio-political implications of the text. Furthermore, it is possible to unmask power structures from both angles. But if the *experience* of oppression is itself a crucial aspect of liberation hermeneutics, then clearly the powerful cannot read in the same way. Firstly, for the theology and political praxis of the rich and poor to pull in the same direction, biblical texts will need to be read in different ways with different emphases. Secondly, in the process of engaging in dialogue between oppressed and oppressor, there is a sense in which liberation theology requires that the oppressed speak, and the oppressors listen. This is valid to a point, but because it has been shown that even liberation movements can have blind spots, it is necessary to consider in more depth how any reader discerns when to speak in the interpretive debate, and when to be spoken to. It is my argument that the cultivation of hope is crucial to this discernment.

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[98] Moltmann, *Experiences*,131-2.
[99] Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, 54.
[100] Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, 162.
[101] Rowland and Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, 172-182.

Throughout the thesis it has been argued that hope entails both affirmation and judgement, and that indeed the two concepts are inseparable because Christian hope looks to the renewal of humankind as a matter of divine grace. The aspect of judgement is universal in the sense that no human may claim finality for their perspective or their interpretive judgements. This becomes important even in the case of liberation movements so that such groups remain open to blind spots. But even this judgement is a matter of hope because it gives way to receiving one's humanity from God. As such, the aspect of affirmation is also universal in the sense that all persons are under God; thus as many liberation theologians have argued, even the oppressor may be liberated from their oppressiveness.[102] However, on this point it becomes clear that even if the twin aspects of judgement and affirmation are universal in scope within the framework of Christian hope, the implications for what it means to be hopeful are varied. But crucially, even if the hope of judgement entails great cost for the individual, this may be understood to be hopeful *if it is taken in the light of its implications for the whole community, and ultimately for the whole of creation.* By way of analogy, we might suggest that the rich man of Mark 10 fails in his response to Jesus' command at precisely this point. Jesus tells him to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, but the man is unable to respond positively. Taken in isolation, the required act thus becomes a moment for despair, for the choice seems to be between two negatives. But taken in a social and eschatological perspective, the cost may yet be a thing of hope; for the individual, there remains the promise of 'treasure in heaven' if the cost can be counted, and for the poor there is the hope of a more equitable existence in the here and now. Furthermore, there is hope for the rich man of experiencing social relations in the present which conform to the promised kingdom. Placing the cost of the text within this light shifts it from a point of despair to a point of hope, while remaining a genuine cost. In turn, the hopeful person may be described as one who is able to locate individual moments of action, and thus interpretation, in this wider context.

The argument is thus that the hopeful reader, through the transformation of the imagination, is better able to locate their own moment of reading within this perspective of divine promise and hope as it pertains to the whole community of

[102] E.g., Jorge Pixley and Clodovis Boff, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, trans. P. Burns (London: Burns & Oates, 1989), 228-9.

humankind and creation. As such, they are better able to discern when the text affirms their present existence, and when it challenges them. But in particular, the hopeful reader seeks to discern when the one text will entail judgement for them and affirmation for the other, by locating the communal relations in the context of divine hope. While this possibility remains necessary for all readers, the argument is directed particularly to those readers who recognize their own positions of privilege. I wish to stress that in this specific scenario, to read hopefully does not necessarily mean to read in a manner which is self affirming. Indeed for the powerful, hopeful reading may more commonly entail cost, but even so it remains hopeful because it results in a form of life which reflects divine promise and presence. As such, it is possible that the oppressed reader may read a text in a manner which affirms the struggle for liberation, while the powerful reader interprets the *sam*e text in a way which challenges their own status and calls them to account. But both readings cohere at the theological level as a product of being hopeful, because *in tandem* both readings may point towards God's promise for human relations in creation and new creation. In this respect, the hopeful reader will seek out this kind of interpretive coherence, where different readings are corporately tested for their ability to speak with a coherent theological voice. For some this process will be costly, but it remains a thing of hope.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to describe the characteristics of a hopeful reader, and hence the characteristic action of reading hopefully. Firstly, the relationship between hope and imagination was discussed in more detail, and in particular, Garrett Green's description of the imagination was highlighted. Green describes the imagination as a faculty for comprehending both possibility and reality, and in particular his emphasis on 'seeing as' helped clarify the operation of the imagination in relation to competing construals of reality. As such, the imagination perceives the good through a vision of reality that maintained its awareness of alternative perspectives. While the imagination has been suggested as a potential

interpretive virtue itself,[103] it was argued that Brueggemann's depiction of imaginative reading, while helpful, created confusion over the question of how the appropriateness of imagination was to be discerned. As such, the Christian imagination fits better within a framework of hope.

Following this, the characteristic action of the hopeful reader was depicted in three interlocking moves. Firstly, the hopeful reader perseveres with the text in order to deepen their apprehension of the grounds and contents of their hope. In the first instance, this perseverance requires a sustained openness to the details of the text, and to the voice of God through the process of reading. Secondly, it was argued that the hopeful reader is one whose imagination of reality has been transformed through encounter with the hope of God. As such their reading of the text will be shaped by this grasp of reality, and so they persevere in rereading with a closed, steadfast grip on hope. By drawing on Green's view of the imagination as faculty for construing reality, it was possible to maintain the fact that the hopeful reader remains alert to competing perspectives, and as such they do not become blinkered by their grasp of hope. Rather, reading in hope helps the reader to perceive new interpretive possibilities in the text, specifically possibilities which elaborate on the grounds and contents of divine hope, and render possibilities for hopeful living projected by the text in the present. Overall, openness to the text is held in tension with a steadfast, even stubborn, grip on hope in God. The discernment of the appropriateness of readings undertaken in this light was in the first instance considered to be a matter of relating reading to trust in the faithfulness of God to God's covenant promises. Even so, because the argument has focused on the *character* of being hopeful, there can be no straightforward way of predetermining what would count as a hopeful exegesis.

Finally, it was argued that the hopeful reader reads with others as a matter of necessity, and in particular, distant others from varying cultural contexts. Following Rowan Williams, it was argued that the Church as such has a vocation to witness to God's renewal and reconciliation of humanity, and so the hopeful reader must read in response to this vocation. Because this humanity is neither homogenous nor isolated, the Church's communal relations must take the form of loving openness to each other as strangers. Thus there remains a real interpretive plurality, particularly

[103] Jones, 'Formed and Transformed', 32.

as the voice of God is heard in so varied a range of situations. However, amidst this plurality it is necessary to seek coherence because hope's genuineness demands the corporate process of discerning the voice of God in scripture. It was argued that this coherence comes through recognizing that the varying contextual demands and implications of the text are nonetheless grounded in God. In particular, where power relations are an issue it is possible to recognize that a single text may entail affirmation for one group and judgement and cost for another. Even so, if both moments of reading are taken together, both may rightly be described as hopeful if in tandem they point to a coherent hope grounded in God.

While this final point was made as a matter of general principle, it was primarily directed to readers who inhabit positions of power or privilege. It was important to maintain that reading hopefully does not necessarily equate to reading with self affirmation and hence the reading of many texts by the powerful will entail the recognition of cost. Thus, as we now move to consider a test case of hopeful reading, the discussion will take place with attention to the present context of writing. The main aim of the test case will be to locate examples of hopeful reading in contexts other than my own. However, it will then be crucial to consider how such readings influence a further reading which pays attention to my own situation. In this respect, we will be able to test whether or not a costly reading may cohere with other readings in a manner which allows the discussion, as a whole, to be described as hopeful.

Chapter Five

‘Love your enemies’: Hopeful Reading in Practice

1.1. Introduction

The aim of this final chapter is to engage in a test case for the thesis so far, to examine a concrete example of how Christian hope might fruitfully shape the theological reading of a specific text. This test case will operate in two dimensions. Firstly, the major part of this chapter will examine readers whose interpretation and appropriation of biblical texts manifests, in some sense, the kind of hopeful reading described thus far. In particular, I will focus on how these readers persevere with both openness and steadfastness in their theological response to the text. Secondly, these readers will be drawn from contexts different to my own, so that the whole chapter effectively works out the argument that hopeful reading involves reading with others. On this basis, I will conclude with a rereading of the text from my own perspective, taking into account the perspectives of the interlocutors, and searching for the kind of theological coherence discussed in the final section of chapter four.

1.2. Approach

Because it has been argued that reading hopefully includes reading with others, the aim of this chapter is to examine readers from contexts other than my own. Inevitably, the range of potential interlocutors is enormous, and furthermore, because this thesis is concerned with the theological reading of scripture, the search for readers cannot be confined to those engaged in analytical exegesis of a given text. As such, I have attempted to allow the contexts to determine the texts and format for this discussion. Through a personal connection I began to explore the use

of scripture in Southern Sudan,[1] and this led to a consideration of Jesus' command to love enemies in the context of local conflicts between various groups. This exploration in turn led back to the context of African American theology, and Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* which explores love in the context of oppression. It is important to note that neither context has yielded what might be thought of as detailed analytical exegesis of the texts (Matthew 5.43-45; Luke 6.27, 32-35a). However, both contexts involve biblically literate readers, in the sense that theological and ethical reflection and action flow from biblical reading. Thus, while the examples will be more discursive with regard to the concept of love for enemies, and less analytical with regard to the textual artefacts, it is my argument that the discourse is partly but directly drawn from a hopeful reading of the relevant texts. Following this, the aim of each test case is threefold. Firstly, I will describe what is said about love for enemies. Secondly, I will show why this discourse is a manifestation of hope in the reader. Thirdly, after both cases have been examined, I will consider how each might shape my own rereading of the text, and how each speaks to the thesis as a whole.

The chapter will proceed as follows. Section two will examine Thurman's writing, noting that his work retains a strong degree of critical integrity, though it is not his stated aim to exegete a specific text. However, it will be shown that his discourse on Jesus is fully informed by scripture, and as such his argument is of great significance to the theological reading of the texts on love for enemies. Whilst raising some critical questions, it will then be shown that his writing manifests the kind of hopeful perseverance with the textual witness for which this thesis has argued. Section three will discuss the relationship between love for enemies and peacemaking in Southern Sudan, which in Nicholas Lash's terms, offers a kind of communal 'performance' of the text. It is crucial to note that this section will not attempt to outline *the* Sudanese view, nor will it be possible to provide a comprehensive historical account of the events described. Rather it will be argued that the resources available, in themselves, offer valuable responses to enemy love that in turn constitute important readings of the text. Again, it will be argued that these responses manifest hope in the relationship between text and context.

[1] South Sudan became independent during the writing of this thesis. Most of the material dates from before this point, and hence South Sudan is primarily referred to as Southern Sudan, as it was at the time.

These readings will then be brought into dialogue with my own context, and I will suggest ways in which a coherent theological picture might be drawn. My own context remains dominated by critical analysis and I will show that the theological discussion may yet retain its critical integrity. However, the principal aim is to examine the text at the theological level. Finally, the whole process will be reviewed as a test case for the thesis. In this respect, the overarching task of the chapter is not to construct an argument about the texts on love for enemies, but to show how reading in hope has influenced the pursuit of good readings.

2.1. Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*

Howard Thurman is a popular and appealing author, and his writing has become highly accessible over a very wide range of contexts. However, his accessibility may create certain difficulties as a choice for this chapter, especially given the ongoing dialogue with Black liberation theology. Firstly, Thurman broadly predates that movement, and while he addresses similar issues, he does so for the most part without reference to liberation theology *per se*. Secondly, Thurman is known for his focus on the inner life, and it was noted in chapter two that the imposed focus on inner spirituality from white theologians created problems for writers such as Cone. Given Thurman's accessibility on this point, care will be needed when turning to my own reading not to neutralize either the challenge in Thurman's work, or the challenge of later writers on this subject. Having said that, it is worth noting from the outset that Roberts believed Thurman had to some extent anticipated the turn Black theology would take,[2] and crucially, Gay Byron notes that Thurman's view of the inner life was directly related to outer, social and political matters:

> During the tumultuous years of social protest during the sixties, instead of rallying the streets, Thurman set forth directives for self-mastery that would enable Civil Rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Whitney

[2] Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 74; Vincent Harding describes Thurman's 'quest for a liberating spirituality', Vincent Harding, 'Foreword', in Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), second unnumbered page.

> Young to focus their efforts on developing resources and strategies for an inward journey toward freedom. This "inward journey" would enable them to stand firm in their faith in God who is able to tear down demonic strongholds and bring about change. Thurman wanted his students and protégés to gain a type of "strange freedom" that would empower them to meet the spiritual and political challenges of their time.[3]

In Thurman's passing autobiographical note, he states that *Jesus and the Disinherited* began life as a critical response to the question of a Hindu friend concerning how Thurman, as an African American, could remain a Christian given Christianity's questionable history with regard to human oppression and slavery.[4] In Callahan's view, Thurman 'returned to the story of Jesus in the Bible and, in seeking to answer for himself the pointed question of his Hindu interlocutor, found profounder meaning in his own faith'.[5] The result is a careful and thought provoking outline of the significance of the 'religion of Jesus' for those who live with 'their backs to the wall'.[6] Thurman's book thus derives from a concrete set of questions concerning what resources Jesus may offer for the lives of the oppressed. Given this, he focuses on Jesus' teaching, and this leads him to discuss a range of potential responses of the oppressed to their oppressors, culminating in a discussion of love. The result is a serious examination of whether love for enemies is possible or desirable as a stance of the oppressed, and whether it offers a 'technique of survival' as a ground and action for hope in the present. Given this, Thurman's book does not offer a detached analysis of the relevant texts, but nor does it jump straight to mechanical application of the concept. I will show that in fact, Thurman attempts to get at the theological heart of Jesus' command as it pertains to Jesus' context and to Thurman's; his aim is to examine the contemporary religious significance of the biblical witness to Jesus. On this basis, Thurman's text may rightly be understood as a theological reading of the biblical texts.

In the final analysis, it could be argued that Thurman is not critical enough at the historical level, but my point at this stage is that while he is not interested in purely historical questions, he remains fully aware of the importance of that range of

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[3] Gay Byron, 'James' in *True to Our Native Land*, ed. Blount, 461-475, (464).
[4] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 13-15, hereafter cited as *JD*.
[5] Callahan, *Talking Book*, 245.
[6] Thurman, *JD*, 13.

approaches. This partly demonstrates the importance of the text within his theological discourse, but crucially, his essentially positive account of Jesus takes place in the midst of a fully conscious awareness of other approaches. In the previous chapter, it was argued that this awareness is vital to the hopeful reader. However, before this point is detailed it is necessary to turn to the argument of the book as a whole.

i) Fear, deception and hate

In successive chapters, Thurman describes fear, deception and hate as three possible responses of the oppressed to their enemies. He describes how such traits may be simultaneously found in the oppressor, and astutely highlights how each has an immediately positive role for the oppressed. However, he argues that in each case, allowing the characteristic to develop ultimately dehumanizes the oppressed, just as it will have dehumanized the oppressor.

Thurman describes fear as a response to the loss of personal significance and security. For the marginalised, fear is most clearly a response to the threat of violence and death in a context where no provision is made for protection. Yet at the same time the strong will develop fear from the ever-present threat of uprising induced by oppression.[7] For both the weak and the strong, fear becomes a 'protective mechanism'. In the former case, it keeps one alert to danger and thus affords a better chance of avoiding violence and death, given the lack of protection. In the latter case, fear of uprising is used to legitimize the oppressive measures of the powerful that protect the *status quo*.[8] In both cases, Thurman is realistic about the positive contribution of fear, and why it is thus hard to counteract. However, he objects that fear ultimately leads to death by setting individuals at odds with one another, and equally by forcing the powerless to yield 'all claim to personal significance' in order to obviate suffering. 'In the absence of all hope ambition dies, and the very self is

[7] Thurman, *JD*, 39-44.
[8] Thurman, *JD*, 40, 44.

weakened, corroded'.[9] For Thurman, Jesus' response to this is to assert the status of the poor and disinherited as children of God; referring to Jesus' description of God's providential care (Matthew 6.26-30), he states that 'to be assured of this becomes the answer to the threat of violence – yea, to violence itself. To the degree which a man knows *this*, he is unconquerable from within and without'.[10]

Thurman's basic argument is that to fear another person is to wrongly estimate the relative worth of that person, oneself and God. Jesus' response is to show that all persons are equally valued by God, and that as such, fear may be driven out. Beyond this, the knowledge of one's worth in relation to God and other humans provides the inner strength to survive in the face of oppression. Of Jesus, Thurman suggests that '[b]y inference he says, "You must abandon your fear of each other and fear only God [...] Love your enemy"'.[11] Two points are worth highlighting at this stage. Firstly, because of the close relation between fear and hope, it is unsurprising that the focal points of Thurman's hope as noted in chapter two form the basis of his response to fear in this case. This emphasis emerges at several points in the book.[12] Secondly, this inner strength relates directly to the relationship between oppressed and oppressor, and as suggested in the preceding quotation, forms a crucial step in his reading of love for enemies. Quoting Luke 17.21, Thurman states: 'Deep from within that order [Jesus] projected a dream, the logic of which would give all the needful security. There would be room for all, and no man would be a threat to his brother'.[13] This link between the inner life (as in Luke 17.21) and the outer reality is crucial to the whole book.

Deception is the second potential tactic for resistance. Thurman is aware that deception is much harder to challenge given that sometimes it will seem essential, but he is concerned that ultimately, deception corrodes the moral agency of the deceiver and thus they dehumanize themselves as they become more and more accustomed to deception.[14] He argues that this is the issue behind blaspheming against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 9.34 and parallels), in the sense that those under discussion in this passage (deliberately) name something as bad that is actually

[9] Thurman, *JD*, 45, 46.
[10] Thurman, *JD*, 56; Thurman also refers to Psalm 8 and Matthew 16.26.
[11] Thurman, *JD*, 35.
[12] E.g., Thurman, *JD*, 21; Thurman invokes Matthew 12.34, (par. Mark 7.27-28, Luke 17.21)
[13] Thurman, *JD*, 35.
[14] Thurman, *JD*, 64-5.

good.[15] But as before, as well as noting the inner effect of deception on the self, Thurman focuses on how deception affects the estimation of relative status before God.

Thurman quotes Jesus' words on speaking truthfully (Matthew 5.37) alongside the words of non-resistance (Matthew 5.39, 43), and asks:

> What does he mean? Does he mean that the factors having to do with physical survival are trivial or of no consequence? Is this emphasis merely the counsel of suicide? […] It may be argued that the insistence upon complete sincerity has only to do with man's relation to God, not with man's relation to man. […] Unwavering sincerity says that man should always recognize the fact that he lives in the presence of God, always under the divine scrutiny, and that there is no really significant living for a man, whatever may be his status, until he has turned and faced the divine scrutiny.[16]

But Thurman then turns to the parable of judgement in Matthew 25.31-46, and draws out the linking of human relations with divine-human relations.

> The climax of human history is interpreted as a time when the inner significance of men's deeds would be revealed to them. But here a new note is introduced. Sincerity in human relations is equal to, and the same as, sincerity to God. If we accept this explanation as a clue to Jesus' meaning, we come upon the stark fact that the insistence of Jesus upon genuineness is absolute; man's relation to man and man's relation to God are one relation. A death blow is struck to hypocrisy.[17]

As before, this leads Thurman to argue that sincerity has the power to effect truthful and equal relations between the oppressed and their enemy, because to be sincere is to relocate that relationship under divine judgement. Thus:

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[15] Thurman, *JD*, 64.
[16] Thurman, *JD*, 71.
[17] Thurman, *JD*, 72.

> Instead of a relation between the weak and the strong there is merely a relationship between human beings. A man is a man [...] The awareness of this fact marks the supreme moment of human dignity.[18]

Thurman reads a close relationship between Jesus' command of sincerity and his challenge on the *lex talionis*, because he sees that both direct the oppressed to assert their own dignity and sense of self in relation to the oppressor, while properly esteeming the enemy-oppressor as an equal before God. As such, it can be seen that this again forms part of the backdrop to Thurman's reading of the love command.

Thirdly, hatred is described as 'a source of validation for your personality [...] your hatred gives you a sense of significance which you fling defiantly into the teeth of their estimate of you'.[19]Again, hatred creates a skewed relationship between enemies because it leads to inaccurate appraisal of the relationship. Yet Thurman is rightly realistic about what he calls the 'positive attributes' of hate. Not only is it a logical response to enmity, but it serves as a means to undergird the rightness of a struggle, both for the oppressed and the oppressor. Thurman sees this taking shape in the *lex talionis*, implying that the rightness of even measured retaliation derives from justifying hatred of the enemy.[20] Further, he notes that in times of war, hatred of the enemy becomes 'respectable'.[21]

In response to this, Thurman quotes Jesus' command to love enemies (here, Matthew 5.44-45), suggesting that this constitutes Jesus' counsel 'against hatred'. From this, he argues that, 'despite all the positive psychological attributes of hatred we have outlined, hatred destroys finally the core of the life of the hater'.[22] The apparent respectability of hatred insulates the conscience of those engaged in war or struggle, such that the problematic nature of violence is masked. Thus, as with deception, hatred of the enemy can only become self destructive in the long run, because it 'blinds the individual to all values of worth'.[23] Again, this maps out the context within which Thurman reads the love command, but it does so by highlighting reasons for Jesus' challenge on the *lex talionis*, and beyond that on any

[18] Thurman, *JD*, 73.
[19] Thurman, *JD*, 80.
[20] Thurman, *JD*, 83.
[21] Thurman, *JD*, 74.
[22] Thurman, *JD*, 86.
[23] Thurman, *JD*, 86.

form of aggressive stance towards the enemy. At this point, Thurman turns to the positive possibilities of love.

ii) Love

Bearing in mind these possible responses to the enemy-oppressor, Thurman turns to the subject of love, and in particular, love for those outside one's social boundaries. He argues that love is central to the religion of Jesus, and reads the relationship between the love commands and the parable of the 'Good Samaritan' (Luke 10.25-37) as indicating that 'neighbourliness is non-spatial; it is qualitative'.[24] For Jesus, this ethic is worked out vividly in his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Matthew 15.26-27, Mark 7.27-28), where in Thurman's view he is drawn out of his own tradition to recognize the demands of his new ethic through the request of the woman.[25] From this starting point he turns the question of love for enemies, examining three concentric scenarios in which that command might apply. In outlining these scenarios, Thurman pays equal attention to the context and life of Jesus and to his own context.

Firstly, to love the personal enemy is to seek reconciliation, such that a relationship that was positive, *within* one's own social group, is restored. For Jesus, this would pertain to those among his people who rejected or opposed him, and Thurman suggests that it is this kind of situation that stands behind Jesus' 'charge' to be reconciled before presenting gifts at the altar (Matthew 5.23-24).[26] He suggests that this is the easiest form of love for enemies, and is thus the most common interpretation found in churches, resulting in the following epithet; 'Love those who have a natural claim upon you. To those who have no such claim, there is no responsibility'.[27] However, he suggests that this view is too narrow, and as the interpretation likely to be found in both black and white churches, it fails to require either group to reach beyond its own boundaries.

[24] Thurman, *JD*, 89.
[25] Thurman, *JD*, 90-91.
[26] Thurman, *JD*, 92.
[27] Thurman, *JD*, 93.

The second layer refers to loving those who have become enemies by shaming or compromising a social group. In Jesus' context, an example of this kind of enemy would be the tax collectors. Here, there is not only personal enmity, but potentially a deep rooted sense of betrayal which makes love all the more demanding. It is important to note that Thurman never suggests that loving enemies means ignoring their errors, and so within this category, he suggests:

> Jesus demonstrated that the only way to redeem them for the common cause was to penetrate their thick resistance to public opinion and esteem and lay bare the simple heart. This man is not just a tax-collector; he is a son of God. Awaken that awareness in him and he will attack his betrayal as only he can – from the inside.[28]

Quoting this time Luke 6.27, he suggests that Jesus' calling of Levi directly works out this imperative. This kind of love does not cover over wrongs, but is focused on restoring the relationship between the enemy and the group from which they have been separated. Again, it is focused on the humanity and identity of the enemy, and the political consequences follow directly from addressing the human, interpersonal dimension of the scenario.

The third level relates to the enemy outside of a social group, the impersonal enemy that threatens the survival of the group. For Jesus, Thurman states that this enemy is Rome. For the disinherited black community in America, it would be the white holders of power. For Jesus:

> This was the hardest task, because to tamper with the enemy was to court disaster. To hate him in any way that caused action was to invite the wrath of Rome. To love him was to be regarded as a traitor to Jesus' own people, to Israel, and therefore to God.[29]

As before, the means and end of this imperative derive from the need to shift the relationship from the impersonal to the personal; instead of oppressed and oppressor remaining defined by their enmity, each had to be capable of relating to the other as a human being. 'To love the Roman meant first to lift him out of the general

[28] Thurman, *JD*, 95.
[29] Thurman, *JD*, 91.

classification of enemy. The Roman had to emerge as a person'.[30] But equally, loving the enemy-oppressor becomes for Thurman the means by which the humanity of the oppressed survives and flourishes; 'The religion of Jesus says to the disinherited: "Love your enemy. Take the initiative in seeking ways by which you can have the experience of a common sharing of mutual value"'.[31]

Thurman suggests that this idea is worked out by Jesus in his encounter with the Roman Centurion (Matthew 8.5-13, Luke 7.3-10). This encounter (which immediately follows the sermon) requires the meeting of two enemies in a context of personal grief and need which levels the relationship. The Roman has to relinquish his pride in approaching Jesus:

> The Roman was confronted with an insistence that made it impossible for him to remain a Roman, or even a captain. He had to take his place alongside all the rest of humanity and mingle his desires with the longing of all the desperate people of all the ages. When this happened, it was possible at once for him to scale with Jesus any height of understanding, fellowship, and love.[32]

Thurman is consistently realistic about the degree of difficulty involved in such a task, but is insistent that this is the most appropriate response for the sake of the humanity of those involved. To love the enemy is to maintain one's humanity. So too, Thurman believes that the black American is called upon to see the white person in their humanity.[33] This last point really summarizes the heart of Thurman's view, a perspective that emerges consistently throughout the book. The call to love the enemy is firstly a call to see them differently from the way in which one is accustomed to see them, to view them as a human being like oneself, neither too low nor too high in status. In response to the appeal of fear, Thurman argued that:

> One of the practical results following this new orientation is the ability to make an objective, detached appraisal of other people, particularly one's

[30] Thurman, *JD*, 95.
[31] Thurman, *JD*, 100.
[32] Thurman, *JD*, 103.
[33] Thurman, *JD*, 100.

> antagonists. Such an appraisal protects one from inaccurate and exaggerated estimations of another person's significance.[34]

The task of loving one's enemies, particularly in the third category where the enemy is an impersonal aggressor, is the task of challenging the impersonal status of the enemy, and thus the very category of 'enemy' itself.[35] On the one hand, the enemy's status is lowered in the sense that they are denied the ability to determine the worth of the oppressed. But in a sense, their status is raised inasmuch as they are seen for what they really are, also human beings. Thurman remains realistic about the risk of such love as estimation; there is no guarantee that the enemy will respond in kind by re-evaluating their estimation of the oppressed, and thus he is also aware that love for enemies is the most demanding of spiritual disciplines.[36] But his argument is that attempting the hard task of loving enemies is the best way, offered by Jesus, of preserving the God-given humanity of the disinherited, and it is thus the best means for the survival of the dignity of the human person. Love for enemies remains a political 'technique' in this respect, but it is a technique that draws its force from addressing the humanity of the persons involved as children of God, and for Thurman this technique is thus rooted in the deepest of spiritual realities.

2.2. Thurman as a Hopeful Reader

A significant amount of scholarly energy has been spent on debating the scope of Jesus' command to love enemies, with textual critics and ethicists alike discussing whether the 'enemies' (*echthroi*) in question are personal or political.[37] While Thurman begins by outlining three concentric layers of enemies, his work ultimately dismantles the distinction between personal and impersonal enemies, precisely because he sees *loving* the enemy as fundamentally concerned with their personhood. To describe a person as an enemy is to locate them within an

[34] Thurman, *JD*, 52.
[35] Thurman, *JD*, 97.
[36] Thurman, *JD*, 100,103.
[37] Compare James Moulder, 'Who are my enemies?: An exploration of the semantic background of Christ's command', *JTSA*, 25 (1978), 41-49, with Richard A. Horsley, 'Ethics and exegesis: "Love your enemies" and the doctrine of non-violence', *JAAR*,54, 1 (1986), 3-31.

impersonal category, regardless of whether they had been known previously. To love them is to 'lift' them from the impersonal category by recognizing their humanity. Thus the so-called impersonal enemy is in fact a person, or a group comprising human persons, and cannot finally be described as falling within a different category as the personal enemy. The point is not simply that Thurman takes one particular perspective as to the scope of *echthroi* in this command. Rather, because love requires that all enemies be viewed as persons, there *can be no distinction* as to the range of meaning, and thus any debate itself misses the point.[38]

Thurman certainly understands love for enemies as a 'technique of survival' for the oppressed. While he is under no illusion that such a stance will definitely change oppressive structures, he is nonetheless committed to it as something which grounds concrete, present hope for the disinherited. We noted that Thurman sets out with the deliberate goal of finding something more substantial in the religion of Jesus, something that will offer hope for the present life, and in this respect, his perspective is at first glance at odds with writers such as Ulrich Luz, who argues that '[l]ove-with-the-goal-of is not love and not that which Jesus has intended'.[39] On the other hand, some commentators view love for enemies in primarily strategic terms, be it as an evangelistic strategy or a socio-political one.[40] However, Thurman offers something of a third way, by holding on to two simultaneous aspects of love with regard to the enemy. On the one hand, love is indeed a *means* of undermining the enmity between persons with the hope of undoing oppression. But equally, because the enemy is viewed in terms of their humanity, and not their impersonal status as enemy, love becomes an *end* in itself, to the extent that human persons are an end in themselves. Because love is the end of the religion of Jesus, it becomes the means by which genuine change occurs.

It is my argument that part of what allows Thurman to take this perspective is his hope. This is not to suggest that Thurman operates with a conscious hermeneutics of hope, but rather that his approach in this book demonstrates the kind of

[38] Both Horsley and Moulder agree that in any case, *echthroi* can refer to both personal and impersonal enemies; see Moulder, 'Who are my enemies?', 42-44; Horsley, 'Ethics and Exegesis', 8.
[39] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 350.
[40] E.g., John Nolland, 'The Mandate: Love our Enemies', *Anvil*, 21, 1 (2004), 23-33, (33), also D.M. Lloyd Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount: Vol. 2*, (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1959), 305-6.

interpretive hope for which this thesis argues. It is crucial to note that Thurman's own understanding of Christian hope differs from others, and as Luther Smith highlights, Thurman shows little interest in post-mortem hope at all.[41] But just as Thurman's hope is grounded in created human potentiality, so too he believes that this potentiality may be realised in renewed community as a future hope within history. As noted in chapter two, while this human renewal remains latent within human nature for Thurman, it remains simultaneously a God-given hope. As such, the hermeneutical consequences of this hope remain close to those described in chapter three, because this hope looks to divine-human and human-human renewal in community, grounded in God. Thus Thurman's hope is shaped by the possibility of divine-human understanding, and it takes form in the action of persevering with the text in the light of his hope for a renewed human community. A crucial distinction lies in the fact that he says little about the nature of scripture, and his ambivalence over Paul's writing suggests that his perseverance does not relate to a conviction about the Bible *per se*. Thus while I will argue that he displays hope as a reader, towards the end of this chapter I will specify how Thurman's example might modify the thesis.

Firstly, Thurman displays perseverance in openness to the text, and this point is made clear through the seriousness with which he takes the general opposition to white Christian tradition, along with specific challenges to the concept of enemy love. In the case of general opposition he perseveres in seeking resources offered by Jesus for the survival of the oppressed, in the context of acknowledging that Christianity has often served as a tool of oppression. But in the specific case he fully acknowledges why love for enemies may be problematic, and this takes shape in his detailed discussions of fear, deception and hate. He treats each of these in detail precisely because he is able to recognize that each offers a compelling alternative to love, and as such each challenges the assertion that love is the best mode of life for the oppressed. The recognition of the seriousness of these challenges undergirds the necessity of *persevering* with close attention to (rather than merely rereading or reasserting) the command to love enemies. Furthermore, while it must be stressed

[41] Smith, *Howard Thurman*, 51, 70. Thurman indeed notes criticisms of a post-mortem focus: 'The desperate opposition to Christianity [among some of Thurman's contemporaries] rests in the fact that it seems, in the last analysis, to be a betrayal of the Negro into the hands of his enemies by focusing his attention on heaven, forgiveness, love, and the like.' Thurman, *JD*, 29.

that Thurman gives no special status to the text in relation to the word of God, his perseverance does nonetheless relate to the possibility of encountering some kind of religious truth in the accounts of Jesus. While I will return to the fact that he does not neatly follow the thesis of chapters three and four, he *does* demonstrate open perseverance in the task of theological interpretation.

Secondly, Thurman's openness operates alongside his steadfast grip on hope, and in particular his hope grounded in the created dignity of humanity. This grasp clearly shapes his reading, but because he remains conscious of alternative perspectives (at the ethical and political level), he may be said to read with a hopeful imagination or construal of reality (Green's 'as' faculty), rather than a blinkered bias of hope. In chapter two it was shown that Thurman's perspective on hope was heavily grounded in the dignity inherent in humankind from being created in the image of God. In part, this reading of Thurman's hope derives from *Jesus and the Disinherited*, but it is clear that in this specific discussion of love for enemies, he is interested in what hope Jesus' command offers for the present day survival of the disinherited. However, this imminent hope can be seen to emerge from its broader grounding, because Thurman understands this present survival to come from an apprehension of one's created and innate human worth. If love for enemies constitutes a truthful estimation of the self and the enemy as human persons, then this seems to derive from the conviction that this human identity is already, in some sense, a reality. Similarly, if love is understood to be genuinely effective as a strategy which is nonetheless focused on the inner disposition of the person, then this would derive from a (theological) conviction about the efficacy of love as such. For Thurman, love for enemies may be described as a truthful estimation of human relations that is effective of social change and is thus a ground for imminent hope. But my argument is that this interpretive possibility only makes sense within the theological conviction that human beings are created with innate dignity, and that human love is effective because in some sense it flows from divine love. In this sense, Thurman's reading of love for enemies and its imminent hope seems to be drawn from a broader hope, expressing a perspective on reality grounded in God's creation of humankind.

Smith notes that Thurman's thought is shaped by both hope and optimism, in the sense that Thurman remained temperamentally optimistic about his hope coming

to fruition within history. Smith concedes Thurman's optimism is more 'vulnerable' to criticism because the witness of history towards this progress is ambiguous at best. Rather, Smith argues that Thurman's *hope* is 'more profound' and:

> [...] is derived from the feeling of security, power, and meaning received through religious experience. Thurman's mysticism, his reliance upon the God-encounter, assured him that love can be experienced in the midst of hate, meaning in chaos. [...] God can provide the sense of community even though conditions and forces would seek to prevent it.[42]

This sense of reconstruing reality in hope is important. Thurman argued that:

> A man need not ever be completely and utterly a victim of his circumstances despite the fact, to be repetitive, that he may not be able to change the circumstance. The clue is in the fact that a man can give his assent to his circumstances or he can withhold it, and there are a desert and a sea between the two.[43]

Following these points I would argue that Thurman's hope (in distinction to his optimism) takes action in part through the imagination as described in chapter four, because he seeks to construe reality and humankind *as* created in God's image, and hence his perspective remains conscious of alternate views. The degree of this consciousness is hard to assess accurately, and we will presently note some critical questions that must be posed to his text from alternative viewpoints. However, Callahan argues that Thurman's approach avoids practices that have the 'effect of placing claims of faith above criticism', because he returns to the biblical texts with a spirit of critical enquiry.[44] While Thurman works with concrete theological and ethical questions, he remains alert to historical and critical issues with the text. In his opening chapter, Thurman describes how Jesus' thought would have been shaped by his own situation as a marginalised Jew.[45] Callahan observes that this focus on the Jewishness of Jesus was unusual at a time when European scholarship was still

[42] Smith, *Howard Thurman*, 213-4
[43] Thurman, 'What can we believe in?', 117.
[44] Callahan, *Talking Book*, 245.
[45] Thurman, *JD*, 16-19.

largely interested in Jesus apart from his Jewish context.[46] It may be Thurman's own ready identification with this aspect of Jesus that allows him to anticipate the direction that interest in the historical Jesus would later take. Yet at the same time, Thurman does not attempt to explain Jesus as *only* a product of his time, as though in the end there was nothing distinctive about Jesus:

> Any explanation of Jesus in terms of psychology, politics, economics, religion, or the like must inevitably explain his contemporaries as well. It may well tell why Jesus was a particular kind of Jew, but not why some other Jews were not Jesus. And that is, after all, the most important question, since the thing which makes him most significant is not the way in which he resembles his fellows but the way in which he differed from all the rest of them.[47]

Taking all this into account, it is my judgement that Thurman's reading may properly be described as hopeful because it derives from his grasp on an imaginative construal of reality that remains conscious of other perspectives.

2.3. Critical Questions

As noted in the introduction, Thurman is a particularly accessible writer, and as such it is worth considering some alternative perspectives on love for enemies within the African American and Black liberation tradition. This task is particularly important in order to establish that he does not appear hopeful because of his accessibility. To clear the groundwork for my own rereading, it will be necessary to explore how other writers draw out the more challenging aspects latent within Thurman's work.

Much of James Cone's work fits well with Thurman's but in his vigorous engagement with politics and Black Power, he outlines this problem with great

[46] Callahan, *Talking Book*, 218. See also Anthony G. Reddie, *Working against the grain: re-imagining Black Theology in the 21st Century*, (London: Equinox, 2008), 147. Reddie discusses the issue of Jesus as 'one of us' or 'one of them' relating to the relative emphases of the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history, particularly given that the latter is more obviously an oppressed person.
[47] Thurman, *JD*, 19

clarity. Cone describes two crucial problems with regard to love for enemies, as viewed from the perspective of the oppression of black Americans. Firstly, Cone noted the disenchantment that emerged towards Martin Luther King's non-violence, suggesting that black Americans in the 1960s could not be expected to love their enemies until they had learned to love themselves. He cites Malcolm X's observation that '[i]t's not possible to love a man whose chief purpose in life is to humiliate you and still be what is considered to be a normal human being'.[48] Immediately we can see a very different perspective to the one described in Thurman's work; for Malcolm X, love for enemies dehumanizes, whereas Thurman believes the opposite. It is almost impossible for an outside observer to attempt to arbitrate between these two claims, except to note that in different ways both Malcolm X and Howard Thurman speak from their own experience and convictions. Cone however described his work as standing at the intersection of these two perspectives, inasmuch as he attempts to grapple much more directly with the Black Power movement as it emerged.[49] As a result, he is much more circumspect about the possibilities for loving one's enemies, particularly as it seems too close to the theology of white Christianity.

There are broadly two aspects to this problem. The first is that love for enemies has been used to directly or consciously undermine black liberation. Cone notes that this was a problem early in the emergence of Black theology, where even the concept of Black theology as such was seen as divisive and contrary to Christian love.[50] More recently, Robert Beckford has argued that love for enemies was used to pacify slaves and thus undermine any possible change:

> From my analysis, 'enemy love' was probably grounded in a corrupt teaching to Caribbean slaves. Certain forms of African-Caribbean Christianity taught that a literal reading of Matthew 5:38-44 (loving your enemies) would enhance personal piety. Under this scheme retribution for the wicked would come from God, beyond history.[51]

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[48] Cone, *Black Power*, 47-8. See also Cone, *For My People*, 202-203, on the significance of history to love oneself. This point is crucial in the debate over eschatology, especially in relation to future orientation vs. past orientation.
[49] Cone, *For My People*, 59, on the integration of 'Martin and Malcolm'.
[50] Cone, *For My People*, 44-54.
[51] Beckford, *God of the Rahtid*, 35.

While Beckford does not refer directly to Thurman, the latter's interest in what might be termed piety suggests that his work, while in a different context, might stumble against the same problem. In any case, it could well be argued that for a white thinker to hold up Thurman as a good exegete is to take the place of the oppressor, highlighting the inward aspects of love for enemies in a way that undermines the need for social change in the present. There is no straightforward response to this issue, but a significant amount of the discussion would turn on whether or not it is agreed that Thurman's belief in the genuine *efficacy* of love and the nature of the human person is well founded. But if Thurman's argument is to be accepted, then his writing ceases to be as comfortable for the privileged reader than it might at first have seemed. As stated above, my aim is not to rest with Thurman as though the search for a hopeful reading were over. Rather, it is to suggest that his reading must be allowed to reshape a reading of the text in my own context, taking into account his own estimation of the context of oppression. The argument of this thesis has been that to read in hope with a writer like Thurman is to allow the present context to be challenged by his writing. Only when this task has commenced will we be able to return to this issue.

The second dimension to this problem is more insidious, and for Cone occurs when white 'help' actually serves to hinder black liberation.

> It seems that whites forget about the necessary interrelatedness of love, justice and power when they encounter black people. Love becomes emotional and sentimental. This sentimental, condescending love accounts for their desire to "help" by relieving the physical pains of the suffering blacks so they can satisfy their own religious piety and keep the poor powerless.[52]

He notes that it was the assumption that whites knew what was best for the civil rights movement that led to their exclusion from various marches in the 1960s.[53] This is a particularly complex problem because while Cone remains opposed to separation, he was far more vehement in his opposition to white involvement in black liberation, stating that '[w]hite people must be made to realize that

[52] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 54-55.
[53] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 241.

reconciliation is a costly experience'.[54] On this point, he openly disagreed with James Deotis Roberts' work in *Liberation and Reconciliation*. While Roberts was very much aware of the need for social change, Cone argued that he was too ready to allow blacks and whites to work together without sufficient confrontation over white oppression. He believed that Roberts' approach would allow whites to become involved without having to face up to their collusion with injustice, and in turn allowing whites to 'set the terms' for reconciliation.[55] As far as the white sympathizers were concerned, Cone stated that: 'We must make it clear to them that we will not be distracted from our liberation with their obscene talk about "love" and "forgiveness"'.[56]

Despite his gentler tone, Thurman seems well aware of this problem. In order to humanize the enemy and thus 'attack [...] the enemy status', points of contact and genuine fellowship were needed. But Thurman noted that all too often, positive contact remained framed within a master-servant relationship, and thus inequality was enshrined and masked by the relatively good natured mood of the context. Thurman described this as 'a kind of armistice for purposes of economic security'.[57] Nonetheless, he saw no alternative than to find points of contact, and particularly in the context of worship where the objective reality was at least that all would be equal before God, even when this was at odds with the subjective reality.[58]

While Cone's earlier writing has a more militant tone in contrast to Thurman, I do not wish to oppose him to Thurman. Far from it; the dangerous suggestion that reconciliation can occur without cost must be challenged with full force, and it shall be argued that Christian love must be most costly for the powerful. Rather, there are certain key similarities between their work that allow us to see the ways in which Thurman's thought fits the agenda of liberation, potentially over against any agenda that may be prematurely imposed upon him.

Firstly, Cone is highly sympathetic towards Thurman's focus on the dignity and worth of the oppressed as human beings created by God. While noting the limits of Thurman's theological analysis, Cone remarks upon the profundity of Thurman's

[54] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 238-9.
[55] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 238-244.
[56] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 244.
[57] Thurman, *JD*, 97.
[58] Thurman, *JD*, 98.

work on the spirituals, particularly with reference to the 'somebodiness' of the slaves in the face of a context that denied them their value as persons.[59] While we noted divergent views over how to effect a sense of self love or self worth, Cone agrees with Thurman that it is a core issue, and that the love of God defines the worth of the person over and against any definition imposed by another human being.[60] In turn this discovery is crucial to becoming involved in the struggle for freedom. Michael Brown recalls an anecdote used by Thurman to argue that the struggle for freedom is innate to all beings created by God. Thurman had described how, when younger, he trod on a snake and realised that its struggle for freedom reflected the struggle for freedom embarked upon by all who experience oppression. Brown notes that:

> If Thurman's claim regarding liberation is correct, as black theologians believe it is, then the eminent example of freedom is God. Freedom, an essential aspect of God that makes God who God is, is a property of existence that God bestows on all living beings as such.[61]

In this sense, while Thurman appears more focused on the spiritual, inner life, and Cone on the political, the inner and outer worlds are explicitly linked by both writers.[62]

The second point worth noting concerns whether or not love does, in the end, pacify those who have a justified demand for justice. Again, it is easy to read this problem into Thurman's focus on the inner life, and thus ignore any political potency within his work. Can love for the enemy be reconciled with a just desire to call the enemy to account, when the enemy has in fact perpetrated gross injustices? Numerous writers have argued that it can, and must be. For both Cone and Roberts, the key point is to recognize that God's love must be understood to be interwoven with God's power and righteousness.

> I submit that a God who is absolute in both power and goodness makes sense to blacks. Absolute goodness is important as well as absolute power.

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[59] Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 16-7.
[60] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 50-52, cf. Thurman, *JD*, 51 as quoted above.
[61] Michael Joseph Brown, *Blackening of the Bible: The Aims of African American Biblical Scholarship*, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2004), 172-3. See also Theodore Walker, Jr. 'Theological Resources for a black neoclassical social ethics' in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Wilmore and Cone, 2:35-52, (48).
[62] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 52-53.

> Absolute power ensures the ultimate triumph of the good; but absolute goodness assures us that absolute power will not be abused.[63]

> But the new blacks, redeemed in Christ, must refuse their "help" and demand that blacks be confronted as persons. They must say to whites that authentic love is not "help", not giving Christmas baskets but working for political, social, and economic justice, which always means a redistribution of power.[64]

The need for confrontation derives from the nature of God as judge, and the concomitant need to assert the personhood of the oppressed.[65] Beckford's *God of the Rahtid* again articulates this issue, formulating a concept of 'redemptive vengeance', described as:

> [...] a way of responding to injustice that redeems both the sufferer and the perpetrator. In this sense vengeance is a form of retaliation geared towards the salvation of both the 'Self' and the 'Other'. In essence redemptive vengeance is the process of returning *evil* with *good*.[66]

This calls to mind a range of other contexts where love leads to confrontation with the hope of liberating both the oppressed and the oppressor. It is found in Desmond Tutu's writing on the Truth and Reconciliation commission,[67] and among a range of Latin American liberation theologians on the liberation of the rich.[68] Given these points of reference, if we concede that love genuinely can and must accommodate calling the enemy to account, then it will be possible to retain this thread from within Thurman's own work. For example, we noted that Thurman's description of sincerity became the means to unravel the deceptive tendencies of the oppressor.[69] In this sense, if Thurman is a hopeful interpreter, it is not because he offers us a vision of love that covers over injustice. As such, any privileged reader of Thurman must engage with the fact that in Thurman's view, the humanization of the oppressor

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[63] Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, 44.
[64] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 54-55.
[65] See also Michael Brown, 'Matthew' in *True to Our Native Land*, ed. Blount, 85-120, (85).
[66] Beckford, *God of the Rahtid*, 38.
[67] See Desmond Tutu, *No future without Forgiveness*, (London: Rider, 1999), 5, 204.
[68] 'On the other hand, when the rich persist in injustice towards the poor, upholding and even strengthening oppressive structures, then the church can only be against the rich – or rather, against their unjust practices. In doing so, the Church is actually working in favour of their persons ("souls") and for their salvation'. Pixley and Boff, *The Bible, The Church and the Poor*, 228-229.
[69] Thurman, *JD*, 73.

requires them to sacrifice their pride and status. If my own reading is to draw on Thurman, it must begin with this point. However, before we consider such a reading, we will now turn to the second set of interlocutors on this text.

3.1. People to People Peace in Southern Sudan

In this section, love for enemies will be explored in the work of the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC), in the period at the turn of the millennium. In Howard Thurman's writing on love for enemies, the enemy in question was identified primarily, and naturally, as the oppressor. However, Thurman argued that for the most part, churches read the command as referring to localised disputes only, and as such his aim was to argue that it should also pertain to the enemy-oppressor. In this section, we will focus on an aspect of conflict within Southern Sudan where the enemies in question are apparently more evenly matched. 'Apparently' is an important qualifier, firstly because the Sudanese conflict has been so complex, but secondly, as we shall see towards the end of the section, because the nature of *any* conflict will be construed differently by the various parties involved. While a superficial characterisation of a conflict might portray two groups as evenly matched, the experience of individuals or sub-groups may well be one of oppression and helplessness. As a result, the Sudanese situation highlights the complex interplay of different levels of conflict, and thus the reflections of love for enemies will also display this complexity. Furthermore, this section will explore a different kind of interpretive medium, drawing on documentary evidence for actual peace building initiatives. In particular, this approach gives focus to Nicholas Lash's assertion, noted in chapter one, that 'the fundamental form of the *Christian* interpretation of scripture is the life, activity and organization of the believing community'.[70] Alongside commentary and interpretations of the events, the aim of this section is to argue that the NSCC peace initiative was in itself, as understood by the NSCC, a hopeful interpretation of the command to love enemies.

3.2. Background to Conflict

[70] Lash, *Emmaus*, 42.

International description of Sudan has often focused on conflict, primarily because the country slipped into civil war not long after its independence from condominium rule in 1956.[71] Since then, the conflict was characterised in British journalism as being fought between the Arab, Muslim North, and the African, Christian South. While this is a useful shorthand, it does not do justice to the situation, particularly since the second civil war which began in 1983. While the North-South dimension of conflict was dominant, the South became increasingly troubled by internal conflicts between various tribes or ethnic groups within the region.[72] This dimension of conflict grew out of pre-existing disputes over issues such as fishing and grazing rights, but was exacerbated by the influx of modern weaponry.[73] Furthermore, these tribal distinctions ran through the liberation movement, leading for example to a serious split within the SPLA/M in 1991.[74] This split forms the backdrop to the growth of the People to People Peace initiative (PPP) of the NSCC.

This problem of tribal conflict between Southern groups grew during the second war, and it becomes increasingly prevalent in Christian literature during that period. Even after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 and Southern independence in July 2011, it is not hard to find references to the problem of internal Southern conflicts.[75] In 2000, an NSCC review of its attempts to broker peace within the South described the problem as having been compounded by the civil war:

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[71] This refers to the period of Anglo-Egyptian rule before independence.

[72] The words tribal and tribalism will be used throughout this section, as they are the words primarily used by the Sudanese writers being discussed. At times tribalism is described positively, for example Gabriel Zubeir Wako and others, 'No Longer Slaves to Sin', in Diocese of Rumbek, *The Church in Sudan Journeying towards justice and Peace*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001), 56-65, (59). However, it is important to note Bishop Francis Loyo's critique of the term in Francis Loyo, 'Leadership and Ethnicity', *Hope: A Newsletter of the New Sudan Council of Churches*, November-December 2000, 8-13, (8-9).

[73] Roland Werner, William Anderson and Andrew Wheeler, *Day of Devastation, Day of Contentment: The History of the Sudanese Church across 2000 years*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2001), 656.

[74] Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army/Movement. See New Sudan Council of Churches, *Inside Sudan: the story of people to people peacemaking in Southern Sudan*, (Nairobi: New Sudan Council of Churches, 2002), 12.

[75] See for example, Daniel Deng Bul, Preaching at Trinity Church, Wall Street, New York, October 2010, 'Wau Diocese', <http://www.wau.anglican.org/index.php?PageID=archvid> [accessed 10/2011].

> Inevitably, such a context became a fertile ground for the cultivation of "tribalism" and the manipulation of ethnic violence by elite groups in the sub-regions. This is true of how the northern based governments and regimes have administered power in southern Sudan. However, it is also true of how many of the southern liberation movements have organised their internal affairs: wilfully allowing ethnic fault lines to persist rather than harnessing their cultural richness as an inspiration for the unity of the Sudanese people. As a result, forces of *unity* and *disunity* have become interwoven in the southern Sudan people's contest for liberation. This trend has continued up to present times.[76]

This is by no means a neutral assessment of the situation, but it does reflect a widespread perception of the problem within the Sudanese Churches. Indeed, it is precisely the NSCC's lack of neutrality that makes it an interest focus in our study, as it attempted actively to address the problem of 'tribalism' thus perceived. The above quotation comes from a review of the NSCC's 'People to People Peace' (PPP) initiatives, and it is this process of tackling tribal conflicts that will be examined in this section. In particular, the review dates from a year after the historic Dinka-Nuer West Bank conference, held at the village of Wunlit on the West bank of the Nile (hereafter referred to as 'Wunlit'). In Wheeler's assessment 'there can be little doubt that the most hopeful event at the close of the 1990s was the signing of the Wunlit Covenant and Resolutions in March 1999'.[77]

At Christmas 1999, the year of the Wunlit conference, Catholic Cardinal Zubeir Wako wrote:

> We have to add a new chapter to our presence in Sudan. In that chapter, we will no longer identify ourselves as Ndogo, Zande, Nuer, Dinka, Lotuho [...] with each one claiming for himself the right to jump at the other's throats [...] but simply as "Children of God!" – that means, Brothers and Sisters.[78]

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[76] NSCC, 'A Strategic Review Of the Southern Sudanese People to People's Peace Process and The Support Role the NSCC is undertaking', NSCC, July-August 2000, (Sourced: Durham, Palace Green Library, Middle East Documentation Unit (Hereafter MEDU)).
[77] Werner, Anderson and Wheeler, *Day of Devastation*, 659.
[78] Gabriel Zubeir Wako, *Roll Back the Stone of Fear: Prayer-Poems and Letters from the Suffering Church in Sudan*, ed. John Pontifex, (Sutton: Aid to the Church in Need, 2005), 49.

At first glance there is a shift here from earlier perspectives where tribal distinctions were seen as gift, provided that they did not descend into conflict.[79] However, it is probably necessary to see the rhetorical force in these words; it is unlikely that Wako or any other writer sees Southern diversity as negative *per se*, but the will for peaceful resolutions drives the need for powerful exhortations during this period. Bishop Francis Loyo, of the Episcopal Church of Sudan (ECS) perhaps best describes the careful balance between unity and diversity that was sought at the time by church leaders. Writing in the NSCC newsletter in 2000, Loyo argues that diverse ethnic groups and cultures are in themselves to be valued, but that 'in this community [the church in Sudan], God affirms the humanity of all ethnic groups equally'.[80] The year before, celebrating the centenary of the Sudanese Episcopal Church (ECS), Loyo wrote:

> The Church in the Sudan advocates a human community that is not only based on the similarity of its members – the same race and same language, the same class, the same views and the same morals. These are the things that always bind people together. We find people who are different from us disturbing. That is why we love our friends and hate our enemies and despise strangers. [...] The Christian Church lives quite differently to this law of homogeneity. It lives in recognition of other people in their otherness, and that means reconciliation.[81]

This perspective represents a crucial tension at the heart of the PPP; on the one hand, tribal diversity remains affirmed along with various aspects of traditional culture. But the urgent need for peace drives with it a sustained reflection of unity within the Church, and the wider cultures. It is a tension that NSCC itself experienced, an ecumenical body from its start and thus also subject to the same challenges.[82]

One of the NSCC founders, Catholic Bishop Paride Taban reflected that 'many friends of Sudan are very keen on relief work but spending on relief alone is

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[79] Wako and others, 'No Longer Slaves to Sin', 59.
[80] Loyo, 'Leadership and Ethnicity', 8.
[81] Francis Loyo, 'The Church Today as I see it', in *"But God is not Defeated!": Celebrating the Centenary of the Episcopal Church of Sudan 1899-1999*, ed. Samuel E. Kayanga and Andrew C. Wheeler, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1999), 37-41, (39).
[82] This problem derived from the 19th Century missionary 'Spheres' system, where separate denominations were permitted to work within distinct regions. Thus denominational lines partially fell along ethnic lines. Werner, Anderson and Wheeler, *Day of Devastation*, 218-220.

like fattening a cow for slaughter, so how long can one be doing this work without dealing with the root causes of the war and poverty'.[83] Thus the PPP became a means to focus on one of these 'root causes': internal Southern conflicts. Taban himself remained publically active in promoting peace with the North and within the South, and in a pithy, practical manner. Referring back to the second war in a 2010 speech, Taban reflected:

> Sometimes, I was told by Friends: "commander so and so wants to kill you Bishop Taban, be careful". When I heard this, I took my car and drive [sic] to Commanders' house and took Cup of Coffee with him, played with his children. Some People who heard such things told about them, feared and fled the Country. I remained with the People till the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.[84]

This anecdote reflects Taban's outlook that reconciliation is a fundamentally relational, rather than legal, activity, and that enemies must be sought out with love.[85] This practical approach perhaps stands behind Taban's development on the Kuron Peace Village from the late 1990s. In 1998, Taban was involved in the construction of a bridge across the Kuron River to link the Upper Nile region with Eastern Equatoria.

> Eighty-one families of different ethnic groups from Toposa, Jiye, Murle, Nyangatom and Kachipo decided, on their own, to settle around the bridge in order to protect it. Although these communities trace their origin to a common ancestry, they view themselves as traditional enemies due to cattle raiding, competition for control and access to natural resources, mainly water sources and grazing land.[86]

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[83] NSCC, *Inside Sudan*, 12.
[84] Paride Taban, 'Speech to Peace Bridgers' Conference', Germany 2010, 'Kuron Peace Village', <http://www.kuronvillage.net/2010/Peace%20Bridgers%20-%20Bishop%20in%20Germany.pdf> [accessed 06-2012], 2.
[85] See Taban, 'Peace Bridgers', 1, 3; Sudan Catholic Bishops Regional Conference, 'SCBRC Paper', *Proceedings of the Sudan Ecumenical Forum Assembly*, (Pretoria: Sudan Focal Point Africa, 2003), (Sourced: MEDU), 102.
[86] Paride Taban, 'Proposal for conducting strategic organizational and management plan 2007-2017', 'Kuron Peace Village', <http://www.kuronvillage.net/Kuron%20Strategic%20Plan.pdf> [accessed 06-2012], 4.

Taban describes how the bridge exacerbated the problem of cattle raiding by giving better access to other land, and yet by focusing efforts on the diverse community that gathered round the bridge, the village itself began to turn traditional enemies into neighbours. This particular example of inter-tribal peace building is slightly more isolated and perhaps esoteric than the PPP, but it is worth noting here because of the way in which Taban has construed what has happened. Taban, as with other Church leaders seems to describe the tribal peace efforts in terms of traditional enemies learning to love one another, or become neighbours. The enemy status derives from a number of factors, but the most common is cattle raiding or other issues that essentially relate to the welfare and livelihood of the group. In other words, a key factor in making groups enemies is the conflict of welfare interests, and thus to challenge the enemy status is to seek a common solution to the problem of survival. In practice, tribal conflict is far more complex, but this aspect does emerge frequently, and it is worth highlighting because it suggests one reason as to why different groups become enemies. In turn, 'loving enemies' is often related to seeking their welfare. A 2002 paper for the Sudan Catholic Bishops Regional Conference defines reconciliation by taking account of the relational aspects, and the need for the desire for common welfare:

> Reconciliation is a process of agreement between formerly opposing persons or groups (enemies) who agree to respect and not to violate the basic dignity and human rights of the other party and to cooperate for better with the other party in aspects of life that foster the common good of both.[87]

3.3. The Wunlit Conference

The increasing availability of modern weaponry during the second war turned once small scale, local conflicts over issues like cattle raiding, into something far

[87] SCBRC, 'Paper', 101.

more devastating.[88] However, as noted above, a number of other issues created serious conflicts between Southern groups, particularly with military and political opposition to the North. In 1991 there was a serious split within the SPLA/M, primarily between the Dinka and Nuer, two of the largest groups within the South. Division along military and tribal lines inevitably carried with it division along denominational lines, which in turn threatened the NSCC as an ecumenical body. The NSCC's initial connection with Torit meant that it was easily associated with John Garang, the SPLA and the Dinka, and thus its neutrality amid the conflict was hard to maintain.[89] At the same time, the NSCC's ability to challenge various practices of the SPLA meant that the relationship between the two was also fraught.

During the 1990s, and especially the latter years, the NSCC worked to broker peace between these various groups, culminating in the most famous and best documented meeting at Wunlit in 1999. A number of other meetings had led up to this conference, with the ultimate aim of agreeing a covenant of peace between the two groups, through bringing them together in dialogue. As a result, the majority of the several days of the conference were spent in storytelling, with Dinka and Nuer chiefs and others given the chance to explain their grievances and respond to accusations. The conference included Christian prayers and worship, generally led by members of the NSCC. However, the NSCC was always clear that the process should be indigenous, understanding its role as a broker of peace and not as the bringer of peace.[90] Thus, Wunlit also included the sacrifice of a white bull (Mabior), a traditional reconciliation ritual. The ritual involves the idea of directing the antagonism between the two groups into the bull, which is then killed, and the meat shared.[91] It has been noted that the nature of the sacrifice allows for some quite natural links to be drawn with the crucifixion of Christ, leading to understanding the cross as a means of reconciliation between people as well as with God.[92] In a similar sense, sharing the meat of the bull offers a logical counterpart to the Eucharist. While

[88] See Werner, Anderson and Wheeler, *Day of Devastation*, 656.
[89] On this see Werner, Anderson and Wheeler, *Day of Devastation*, 655; NSCC, *Inside Sudan*, 12.
[90] NSCC, *Inside Sudan*, 15. Also, NSCC, 'Strategic Review', 9.
[91] NSCC, *Inside Sudan*, 60
[92] Marc Nikkel, ***Dinka Christianity: the origins and development of Christianity among the Dinka of Sudan with special reference to the songs of Dinka Christians*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2001),** 255-256.

Nikkel and Stancliffe agree that the Eucharist was not celebrated widely at the time, it is at times described in primarily reconciliatory terms.[93]

The Churches' construal of the Wunlit conference draws on the concept of love for enemies. Early in the NSCC account of the PPP, it is stated:

> Jesus repeatedly teaches and demonstrates that the practice of love is the will of God – He says that the greatest of the commandments is to love God wholly, and the second one is to love your neighbour as yourself. Christians are called to love neighbours, and strangers, and adversaries, and even enemies. Jesus urged non-violence, and the practice of love as the way for his disciples, such as turning the other cheek to violence.[94]

As in other cases, this quotation seems to contain a mixture of reflection and exhortation, but the clear sense is that conflicting parties are being called upon to love their enemy. Conferences like Wunlit thus became a framework within which this activity might begin. Although Wunlit ended with the signing of a formal covenant agreement, the NSCC's desire for the people to own the process, and the narrative character of the process itself, suggest that the relational element was understood to be primary. The above mention of non-violence is likely to serve as a rhetorical function rather than suggesting pacifist ethics, partly because the NSCC did maintain links with the SPLA, and partly because in the context of Southern conflict resolution, non-violence would at times be quite a practical possibility.

Similarly, on the first day of Nuer narratives at Wunlit, John Akumo preached on love for enemies:

> God tells us that we must love our enemies. Humanly speaking this is very difficult. But if you are a true Christian you must love your enemy. By doing so, even the word *Jellaba* will not come into your mouth. For God has said you must love your enemy. This is expressed in Luke 6:37, you may read this exhortation. I want to read but one verse: "But love your enemies. Do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your

[93] See for example, Sudan Catholic Bishops Conference, 'Christ's gift of himself to heal his broken body, the Church', 2004, (Sourced: MEDU), 4.
[94] NSCC, *Inside Sudan*, 10.

> reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful, and the wicked."[95]

While this sermon was primarily directed to the Dinka-Nuer conflict, it is interesting to note the comment about the word '*Jellaba*' a derogatory word for the Arab people of the North. As in Wako and Taban, this suggests that love for enemies is not seen as a localised requirement, and yet it is important to note that the word does in fact appear several times in the narrative records. On the first day, Salvar Kiir spoke thus:

> The *Jelaba* is our enemy. Let us put our efforts toward building up our true friends. Our true friends are peace and reconciliation and unity. Our real enemy, the *Jelaba* Government in Khartoum, shall, with absolute certainty, be defeated, and the New Sudan be born.[96]

Similarly, one of the Nuer chiefs, Peter Rin Patai Kun, describing the uniting of Southern people suggests that 'When our enemy, the *Jilaab* hears this, he will be angry and become ill'.[97] The significance of these comments lies in the fact that many of the *participants* at Wunlit describe the process in terms of the reconciliation of Southern brothers or neighbours, alongside uniting against a common enemy. In other words, love for enemies *as such* is not seen by all as an aspect of the process. This is not always the case; six months after Wunlit, an NSCC progress report offers an unnamed quotation that states that the two groups 'have moved from being enemies to brothers and sister. Now our unity strengthens the security for both Dinka and Nuer'.[98] A further quotation suggests that the result of the process 'is no longer a Dinka and Nuer peace. It is the way to unite the whole South and bring peace to all of Sudan. Those who fought against their neighbours are now joining the peace. Everyone is welcome'.[99] These reflections suggest that participants were open to the idea of reconciliation between enemies, including those beyond the Southern

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[95] John Akumo, Sermon, 'Dinka-Nuer West Bank Peace and Reconciliation Conference', (2nd March 1999), transcribed South Sudan Friends (hereafter SSF), 'South Sudan Friends', <http://southsudanfriends.org/wunlit/day4.html> [accessed 06-2012].
[96] Salvar Kiir, Speech, 'Dinka-Nuer West Bank Peace and Reconciliation Conference', (27th February 1999), transcribed SSF, 'South Sudan Friends', <http://southsudanfriends.org/wunlit/day1.html> [accessed 06-2012].
[97] Peter Rin Patai Kun, Testimony, 'Dinka-Nuer West Bank Peace and Reconciliation Conference', (2nd March 1999), transcribed SSF, 'South Sudan Friends', <http://southsudanfriends.org/wunlit/day4.html> [accessed 06-2012].
[98] Telar Deng and NSCC, 'Dinka-Nuer West Bank Peace Council Communication', NSCC, September 1999, (Sourced: MEDU), 1.
[99] Deng/NSCC, 'Dinka-Nuer West Bank Peace Council Communication', 2.

boundaries. Having said that, the fact that they are part of an NSCC report suggests that they may have been singled out to reinforce the NSCC description of the process. It is worth noting that the NSCC was worried about the idea of uniting the South against a common enemy, partly on theoretical grounds, and partly because such unity would be undermined if peace was made with the North.[100]

The crucial point here is that the same process of reconciliation has been construed in at least two distinct ways. Some of the participants saw Wunlit in terms of the reuniting of brothers who shared a common heritage and bond, a bond not shared with the Arab people of the North. On day four, the Dinka Dr Michael Wal Duony appealed to the Nuer in the following terms; 'I invite the Nuer chiefs what has gone wrong that we, children of one mother, should have fought each other for so many years'.[101] Similarly, a year on, Awut Aweil representing the Dinka women described the result of Wunlit; 'Our children have not died in the hands of our own brothers, no more hostilities between two brothers'.[102] While none of this is to suggest that the participants did not also want peace with the North, the basis for Southern peace was drawn from a common heritage. Indeed the NSCC shared this perspective, noting that through certain shared aspects of culture, including creation myths, 'the Dinka and the Nuer view themselves as "brothers"'.[103] This basis would be even more crucial when the PPP addressed conflicts within the Nuer as a single group. While the emphasis on brotherhood through a shared history is a strong one for reuniting conflicting groups, the narratives at Wunlit suggest that it is also more effective on the local scale.

By contrast, the connection of Wunlit specifically with love for enemies comes primarily from the Church. While the NSCC did appeal to common bonds, the language of love for enemies suggests a slightly different basis for resolving conflict, and to some extent this construes the conflict itself differently. This construal derives its force from the teaching of Jesus, and thus conflict resolution becomes a kind of ethical imperative. The problem is that for this particular

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[100] NSCC, 'Strategic Review', 2.
[101] Michael Wal Duony, Transcribed Speech, 'Dinka-Nuer West Bank Peace and Reconciliation Conference', transcribed SSF, (2nd March 1999), transcribed SSF, 'South Sudan Friends', <http://southsudanfriends.org/wunlit/day4.html>, [accessed 06-2012].
[102] NSCC, **'**Wunlit Dinka-Nuer peace Covenant: First Anniversary in Rumbek', NSCC, April 2000, (Sourced: MEDU).
[103] NSCC, *Inside Sudan*, 28

imperative to be effective, it is necessary for the parties to see themselves as enemies in the first place, and it is not clear that the participants at Wunlit all did. However, it seems that the Churches' own role in the process suggests that they did recognize the enmity between Dinka and Nuer as making them enemies. From this perspective, it follows that the internal Southern conflict and the North-South conflict fall under the same imperative, because there is no suggestion that enemies *need* a common bond in order to love one another. Having said that, Cardinal Wako in particular suggests that love for enemies does derive from the restoration of a common bond, but in his view this common bond is found in the fact of being human, and thus love for enemies pertains to any form of human reconciliation. In one of his prayer-poems, Wako writes;

> Your birth, Lord, is the Father's hymn
> To the glory of every man and woman,
> In you each one of them
> Is the Father's precious gift to the others.[104]

The poem goes on to reflect on the value of all, including 'oppressors and persecutors' with the hope of 'building a new world/ In which each and every man and woman/ Will become a living image of God, Perfect as the Heavenly Father is'. In this respect he intermingles the reconciling imperatives of enemy love and the restoration of common bonds.

The point of this discussion is to suggest that varying perspectives on Wunlit demonstrate the complexity of the categories of 'friend' or 'neighbour' and 'enemy'. It might be suggested that for some of the Wunlit participants, those who had begun as neighbours or brothers had become estranged, and thus needed to return to their original friendship; in this view, there is no particular imperative to reconcile with the enemy because the enemy as such does not share this bond. On the other hand, even if it is conceded that enemies need not share a common bond, the Church recognized in the command to love enemies an imperative to seek friendship with them, regardless of whether or not these enemies had been neighbours previously. In this sense, reconciliation shifts from *restoring* a common bond, to *creating* one with

[104] Wako, *Roll Back the Stone of Fear*, 18. While these words predate Wunlit, this line of thinking is carried through to the turn of the millennium.

the enemy. Thirdly, and particularly in the writing of Wako, these two perspectives are drawn together by suggesting that all humankind shares a common bond. As such, the category of enemy inherently refers to a person with whom one shares this bond, but with whom one is at odds. Thus the emphasis shifts back to *restoring* a common bond, whilst retaining the category of the enemy. This may seem like an over analysis of the situation, but it is crucial to assessing the scope of the command 'love your enemies', and furthermore it demonstrates how theological perspectives on human reality shape the interpretation of both the text and the interpretive context. This complexity means that our conclusions as to the 'meaning' of the PPP must be tentative, but it is possible to suggest ways in which a theological perspective has shaped the Churches' reading of text and context, and thus ways in which this reading might be described as hopeful.

3.4. The Church at Wunlit as a Hopeful Interpreter

The argument so far is that the Church at Wunlit has construed that peace conference at least in part as a response to the command to love enemies, and that as such, we may describe the conference itself as an interpretation of this command. Given this, a couple of points are worth highlighting. Firstly, love for enemies seems to have a strong practical aspect; the context of enmity was focused on the welfare and livelihood of each group, and in the context of peacemaking, love thus comes to connote a practical concern for the needs of the 'enemy' group. But the structure of the conference itself suggests that love is not understood to be purely instrumental. The time given to individual storytelling in particular, along with the rituals of reconciliation, show that love is understood as an expression of the common bond between peoples, and that love inherently requires attention to each other. The potentially impersonal enemy from the other group is listened to, and through this activity of love they become known, in some sense, personally. Finally, while no commentator was naïve about the possible results, there were indicators that love was understood to be inherently effective. In other words, the practical effect of love does not depend on it being understood in purely instrumental terms.

There are two senses in which the Wunlit 'reading' may be seen to be hopeful. Firstly, it was argued that hopeful readers persevere through difficulties, open to hearing God in some way. While there is little documentation of exegetical perseverance as might be found in a written commentary, the shape of Wunlit demonstrates a corporate perseverance, at least from the Churches' perspective, in bringing the text to bear on the actions of the people. In my judgement this is particularly clear in the storytelling aspect. As noted, it could be possible to characterise the conflict in question as relatively even, given the means and status of the groups or tribes involved. From this, it could be possible to read love for enemies in relatively general terms as a command for reconciliation. However, the difficulty with this superficial reading emerges when one pays attention to the specific instances of conflict, and the individual grievances of the persons involved. At this level, it can be seen that the conflict will not be perceived as equal at all, because one individual may only have suffered at the hands of the enemy, and may not have directly perpetrated any wrong themselves. As a result, the command to love the enemy becomes a far more costly and troubling command, because the grievance brought forward is genuine and the conflict feels one-sided. In the context of this far more difficult approach to conflict resolution, it requires greater perseverance to speak about love for enemies because this command is no longer read with regard to a superficial characterisation of the situation. It is my suggestion that to persevere with openness to this command, whilst simultaneously focusing on the complexity of the conflict demonstrates the action of hope in reading.

Secondly, it was argued that reading hopefully aids the perception of possibilities in the text according to divine promise and presence. As before, this hermeneutic is never made explicit in the sense that there is no self-conscious attempt to read hopefully. Rather, the reading associated with Wunlit displays the action of hope implicitly. The Church seems to be able to see beyond the present conflicts to the possibility of enemies becoming friends. Indeed, by using the language of love, enemies and friends, there is a stronger sense in which the process is expected to transcend present reality than would be the case if it were described solely in terms of reconciling estranged brothers and sisters. Beyond restoring what may once have been the case, there is a sense in which the text is read to point to an imminent new reality which will itself point beyond to further reconciliation. Even if

the idea of love for enemies is used in tandem with the assertion of a common humanity, there remains the sense of pointing beyond present conflicts to a total renewal, and this is why it makes sense for writers such as Wako to blend the reflections on the internal Southern conflicts with reflections on the North-South conflict. As before, the distinction between types of enemies is at times dissolved by the hope of total human renewal. At times the rhetorical force of much of the documentation masks any sense in which the perspective of hope constitutes an imaginative construal as opposed to a blinkered viewpoint. In this respect, it is harder to argue that any of the readers involved read with hope as opposed to optimism. On the other hand, the very context makes it almost impossible to suggest that the perspective of the readers emerges from an unqualified optimism; the belief in the possibility of transcendence is rarely expressed without any reference to the myriad competing forces that imply hopelessness.

3.5. Conclusion

In this section I have attempted to show that while the Churches' interpretation of Wunlit differs from some of the participants, there are clear indicators that the Churches' own involvement was understood to incorporate a reading of the command to love enemies. I have noted ways in which this understanding displays both perseverance, and the sense of 'pointing beyond' that manifests the hope of the readers. It was noted that from an external perspective, the Southern conflicts may appear relatively even, but that part of the perseverance of the Church was shown in working beyond the superficial level to hear individual experiences. This means that in our reading of these events, care must be taken not to characterise the conference as superficially hopeful, as though the process was uncomplicated. To suggest that Wunlit counts as a hopeful reading is not to suggest that the external observer may draw hope from it without recognizing the challenge its inherent complexities pose to their own interpretive context. It is only hopeful because it pays close attention to the complexities. Bearing this in mind, it is necessary to return to my 'home' context of interpretation, to complete the test case of hopeful reading. Here, the task is to consider how the readings of Thurman and

Wunlit might reshape a reading of the text in my own situation in a manner that coheres with the hope displayed in those situations.

4.1. Returning to the 'home' context

In chapter four it was argued that to read in hope entails reading alongside diverse other readers, and this chapter has been structured as a whole towards testing this argument in practice. So far, two interpretive contexts have been discussed, and thus it is now time to return to the 'home' context in order to explore ways in which the above readings might reshape a reading at home. This task is crucial to the argument because it will not do to imply that the readings discussed are hopeful for my own context because they are relatively positive in outlook. In fact, both manifest hope but the readings present quite serious challenges to the privileged reader.

Because this rereading is my own, it is a far more problematic task to show that I display the kind of interpretive hope that was highlighted above, and as such I will not attempt to argue that my reading is hopeful in the same way. While it is rarely acknowledged in studies of interpretive virtue, the success of this reading does partially depend on an external observer evaluating whether or not it manifests virtue in some way, and so my principal aim is simply to outline some concrete *possibilities* from this thesis. The more modest aim of this section is to demonstrate the potential implications of reading with others in the manner described in chapter four, by offering a reading which takes seriously the perspectives examined thus far, and seeks theological coherence with them whilst focusing on the specificity of my own context.

4.2. Who is my enemy?

The identity of the enemy is a crucial factor for the interpretation of Jesus' command, and it is brought into sharp focus by the contexts discussed above. For Thurman, the obvious enemy would be the white power-holder, while in Southern Sudan the enemy may be either the Northern government or another tribal group. Yet in both situations it is striking that the command is not read within the limited scope of the context; particularly in Thurman, it is clear that any kind of enemy falls within the imperative of love, even when the enemy is an oppressor. From my own perspective, it is worth asking to what extent the texts will sustain this reading, but more importantly, how they relate to readers who are oppressors, or who are at least privileged in some way.

In much western discussion of the texts, scholars tend to divide over whether *echthroi* refers to disputes within local communities (e.g. Horsley) or whether it does speak to the question of military violence and political threat (e.g. Hays).[105] This is perhaps unsurprising given that the debates occur in a context that raises questions over local antagonism and global military action. But given that in wider usage *echthroi* can refer to *all* kinds of enemies, it is worth considering whether the readings examined here rightly shed light on this question, and thus in turn raise other dimensions of the text that are germane to western readers.

Horsley is right to highlight that in the 'focal instances' of love for enemies, local, interpersonal interaction must be in view. Doing good or lending to enemies (Luke 6.35, Matthew 5.42) requires the possibility of local interaction, just as those who mistreat Jesus' hearers must also be in some sense personally present.[106] While this does suggest that in its immediate context of usage, *echthroi* refers to enemies who are personally present, Horsley is wrong to suggest that this means they must be local or personal enemies from within a small-scale social group. Thurman was particularly aware of this point, describing how even in the context of worship it was possible to identify enmity between two groups – the dominant and the oppressed – who were nonetheless personally present, and known to each other.[107] This led him to the case of the Roman centurion who sought Jesus' help and as in the general case, the Roman, who embodies the 'impersonal' category, 'had to emerge as a

[105] On Hays' response to Horsley, see Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 368.
[106] Horsley, 'Ethics and Exegesis', 19.
[107] Thurman, *JD*, 97-98.

person'.[108] Thurman shows that the sharp distinction between impersonal and personal enemies is actually blurred, if not absent, in Jesus' own context, and thus the command of enemy love does not easily support a confined focus.

Within the context of tribal conflict in Southern Sudan, we are much closer to the kind of scenario that Horsley envisaged for Jesus' teaching. Horsley notes how desperate economic circumstances can lead to conflict among marginalised groups, arguing that this forms the likely backdrop to Jesus' command.[109] But if this is correct, it is interesting to note that there is some ambiguity as to whether the conflicting tribal groups in Sudan do consider themselves enemies. By contrast, there is no doubt that the North, perceived as the oppressor, is the enemy. Although we cannot then conclude that Jesus' hearers would have thought the same way, we must remain open to this possibility given that the language used allows for it. In other words, it may be historically plausible that Jesus' hearers would have thought of Rome, even if his examples pertained to more immediate acquaintances. Within the scope of the language, there is a degree of inevitability that the hearers will turn to whichever enemy (*ecthros*) seems most prominent, regardless of the immediate dialogue.

The significance of this argument is that by highlighting the open-ended scope of the command, theological readers are required to look beyond their own immediate context of threat, at least to the extent that they are more able to perceive where they might pose a threat to others. In turn, it may be possible to recognize where enmities have been masked or covered over, and this is particularly crucial for the privileged reader. It is my contention that both Thurman and the PPP show where the unquestioned privilege of the powerful is necessarily threatened by the emancipation of the oppressed, and in this respect there is a hidden enmity. If the scope of Jesus' command is in fact unlimited, then might it not apply to the privileged reader in a manner which differs from, but coheres with, the readings offered thus far?

4.3. Love for enemies for the privileged reader

[108] Thurman, *JD*, 95.
[109] Horsley, 'Ethics and Exegesis', 22.

At first glance, it was suggested that the issue of tribal conflict in Southern Sudan offers a case where love for enemies was considered with respect to relatively evenly matched enemies. However, the methods of the PPP demonstrate that the picture is far more complex. Within two apparently evenly matched groups, some will hold more power than others, and some will have been the victims of abuse, while others have acted more as perpetrators. The experience of individuals and subgroups thus shifts aspects of the overall picture from even conflict to oppression. Furthermore, the growing enmity depersonalizes the apparently personal or local conflicts.[110] The methodology of the PPP involves a kind of 'repersonalizing' of the conflict by drawing individuals to face one another and confront each other with wrongs committed and suffered. As a result, those who hold more power are forced to face up to a claim upon them from a weaker party. It is at this point that the differences of opinion over whether or not they are enemies become significant. But at least in the Church leaders' formulation, viewing the weak as the enemy of the strong serves to highlight the conflict of interests, and moreover, the fact that reconciliation will cost the stronger party. To describe both *groups* as 'enemies' is to call specific *individuals* to recognize their enemy status because their welfare comes at the expense of others'. My argument is that even if Jesus' context is limited to marginalised groups, his command to love enemies may challenge those with some power to care for those whose livelihood is threatened by the powerful person's security.

Thurman suggested that in many ways, the powerful also experience threat. In his chapter on fear, Thurman wrote:

> Obviously, if the strong put forth a great redemptive effort to change the social, political, and economic arrangements in which they seem to find their basic security, the whole picture would be altered.[111]

In this passing comment, Thurman acknowledges that some oppression is less a result of deliberate malice, than it is of the desire to maintain the comfort and security of those already in power. As a result, the 'strong' would hardly describe the

[110] This point is implicit in Thurman when he talks of the 'enemy status'.
[111] Thurman, *JD*, 46.

'weak' as an enemy, and yet Thurman argues that even in this scenario, the possibility of threat is not far away. In his specific context, Thurman suggests:

> The fear that segregation inspires among the weak in turn breeds fear among the strong and the dominant. This fear insulates the conscience against a sense of wrongdoing in carrying out a policy of segregation.[112]

The 'weak' are not described as an enemy, but Thurman points out that their emancipation is perceived as posing a threat to the comfort and security of the 'strong'. The difference between the weak and the strong in this case is simply that the strong are able to better insulate themselves from threat. It is interesting to note that in the context of terrorism, the strong perhaps experience the fear of a threat to their lifestyle much more acutely, but Thurman's point seems to be that once insulated from threat, the strong become blind to the fact that they are the enemy, and thus to the possibility that the flourishing of the weak will cost them. Indeed, Laurie Johnston argues that in the climate of fear from terrorism, preaching on love for enemies thus tends to retreat to the solely personal dimension.[113] While the idea of identifying the weak as the enemy of the strong may seem far from hopeful, my argument is that it is crucial to the unmasking of injustice because it requires the powerful to recognize the full cost of freedom. Thus for example, in the context of terrorist threats, the command to love enemies might entail the recognition that the perception of threat is in fact two-way.[114]

While Jesus' focal examples do refer primarily to local situations, the rationale in both Matthean and Lukan contexts draws much force from the idea that in loving enemies, the hearer imitates God.[115] Whether or not Jesus directly addressed those with power, his logic retains the possibility that they are addressed even if the logic remained dormant for a time. Care will be needed not to overstate the case at this point, given that the reference to God's nature is persuasive rather than doctrinal, but even so the concept of God's universal benevolence introduces an angle on enemy love that is sometimes overlooked by commentators but may be crucial to a hopeful reading of the text. The point here is that God's love is not

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[112] Thurman, *JD*, 44.
[113] Laurie Johnston, '"Love your enemies" – even in the age of terrorism?', *Political Theology* 6, 1 (2005), 87-106, (100-101).
[114] Clearly this issue is far more complex than may be discussed here.
[115] Matthew 5.45b; Luke 6.35c

reactive, but *proactive.* The focal images that describe love for enemies are primarily reactive, in the sense that love is commanded as a *response* to a prior threat.[116] As a result, the vast majority of commentators describe love for enemies in reactive terms, wherein the enemy (especially the oppressor) defines the terms of engagement, and love is somehow worked out in response. But God's love is proactive in the sense that God seems actively to seek out the objects of his love without regard to their relation to God; God eschews any sense of isolation from threat for the sake of loving his creation. Significant strands of New Testament theology suggest that God seemingly abandons security for the sake of seeking out those who may even be opposed to God. In this respect, God's love for enemies is proactive.[117] Even if Stott is correct that Matthew 5.45 (and Luke 6.35c) refer to 'common grace', a natural state of goodness in creation, we must maintain that God in Christ is depicted as being proactive in loving those opposed to God in some sense.[118] As a result, it becomes possible to see that some of the Lukan text in particular suggests a more proactive approach to loving enemies, particularly in terms of doing good 'to those who hate you', and praying 'for those who abuse you' (Luke 6.27).

There is of course danger in describing God as a paradigm given that this section is focused on the privileged reader, and it might seem that a parallel is being drawn between God's benevolent love and the benefaction of the powerful.[119] This would fall foul of, for example, Cone's rejection of white help. As such, we must maintain the absolutely fundamental difference between God and humanity, whilst drawing upon Thurman's insistence that all humankind is equally dignified as God's creation. The specific point I wish to argue is that the command to love enemies requires the powerful to eschew isolated security for the sake of human equality. Just as Thurman highlights the Roman's need to relinquish power and pride to allow an encounter between human persons, so the privileged reader is called to leave behind

[116] See Matthew 5.39-42; Luke 6.29-30.
[117] Notably, Philippians 2.5-11.
[118] Classically, Romans 5.8-10, but cf. Matthew 8.7, Luke 19.10. On Stott's comment, see John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1978), 120.
[119] Alan Kirk notes this link, but even if God is portrayed as a benefactor, aspects of the text that Kirk does not take into account, such as praying for persecutors, undermine any direct parallel to human benefaction because they undermine the assumption that the hearers necessarily have such means. See Alan Kirk, '"Love your enemies", the golden rule, and ancient reciprocity (Luke 6.27-35)', *JBL*, 122, 4 (2003), 667-686, (675-685).

the privilege that makes them the enemy, and to pursue such human encounters today.

5. Conclusion

The rereading undertaken above is necessarily limited, but it has been offered for two reasons. Firstly, it was argued that reading with others in hope must move beyond identifying uplifting interpretations from other contexts, to a reassessment of one's own perspective. Any rereading that follows need not be the same as that of the interlocutors, but it may be theologically coherent. In the case of love for enemies, I have drawn different emphases from the text to those of the dialogue partners, but have shown that they cohere at the theological level. While further attention to my own context would be needed, the simple aim has been to show what a hopeful rereading may look like.

Secondly, this rereading has aimed to demonstrate that hopeful reading will not always equate to comfortable reading. In chapter two it was argued that if Christian hope contains judgement and the radical transformation of human existence, then it does not simply involve the augmentation of one's present experience. To be hopeful is thus to live with the possibility of cost for the sake of pointing beyond the present to a more Godly reality. So too, reading in hope involves recognizing the potential cost of the text as an interpretive good.

This last section has aimed to outline what it means to read with others in hope, while the bulk of this test case chapter has been taken up with examining how Thurman and the PPP manifest the tension between openness to the text and steadfastness of perspective, the hermeneutical tension that was argued to derive from Christian hope. This tension emerged from the argument that was followed through chapters two, three and four; the contours of Christian hope as described in chapter two were used to argue for certain hermeneutical possibilities in chapter three, and this led to the characteristic reading argued for in chapter four. However, because this argument was drawn from *contours* of the argument of chapter two, it is

worth concluding by noting that each context brings specific emphases to the nature of hope which must inevitably give specific shape to the work of hope in reading.

With Thurman and the PPP it was suggested that the hope displayed is grounded in the kind of theological anthropology highlighted in chapter two, namely that humankind is created and dignified by God. Furthermore, in both there is the indication that the possibility for communal transformation relates closely to the presence of God. As these emphases were followed through chapters two to four, I wish to maintain that the concrete discussion here does offer a good demonstration of this thesis in practice. Put simply, the argument in chapter four concerning the operation of hope as an interpretive virtue is heavily dependent on just these emphases. However, while it was argued in chapter two that Christian hope must relate to the future action of God, it is clear that the transcendent or post-mortem future does not feature in the discussion of this chapter, though it is not strictly negated. Furthermore, because the whole thesis has attempted to explore this issue by engaging in dialogue with another tradition (Black liberation theology), and while a constructive dialogue between these traditions has served the whole argument, it is worth noting how the dialogue between specific, contextual actions of hope might be taken seriously.

The reduction in emphasis on the transcendent future places a greater burden on what is possible in the present, and thus implicitly what is hermeneutically possible. In practice, it is worth noting that Thurman, for example, remains fairly circumspect in his approach in the sense that he does not try to construct a systematic version of Jesus' teaching. But at the same time he reads with the clear hope of finding resources for the present, and this requires a certain confidence in the results. In chapter two it was suggested that the emphasis on the future in much recent western theology may derive from the recognition of the potential failures of modernist hopes and optimism. If so, it may in turn be suggested that the degree of provisionality for which I have argued is more appropriate to that context. By contrast, the confidence that Thurman and the PPP require in the texts' relevance may be more appropriate to their own expression of hope, though as noted above, Thurman remains ambivalent about the Bible as a unit. But in view of the overall dialogue, *their* confidence might remind the privileged reader of the urgency of

acting in hope in the present, but this time with a greater degree of consciousness of what other communities are saying.

The basic point of this argument is that reading with others requires attention to the specific character of their interpretive virtues in their own context, as well as to their specific interpretations. The greater the degree of coherence that can be found in the understanding of these virtues, the easier the dialogue might become, though care is still essential. But even when two contexts might operate with quite different conceptions of a given characteristic (such as hope), dialogue remains possible provided that attention is given to both the difference in hope (or another virtue) as well as the differences in reading.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to argue that a theological depiction of biblical reading would benefit from being worked out within a framework of hope. Working within the broad field of interpretive virtue, I have argued that Christian readers of scripture should seek to pursue hope in their reading, and I have outlined in detail exactly what may be meant by hope, and what range of effects it will have on the reading process. While interpretive virtue never prescribes an interpretive method, it has been argued that it is possible to discern the kind of interpretive fruit that might result from the pursuit of hope, and hence the final chapter has shown how certain readers display this kind of hope in actual readings of biblical texts.

The reason for focusing on hope was broadly threefold. Firstly, it represents something of a gap in the literature; whereas both faith and love have received a great deal of attention within the field of theological interpretation, hope has been far less prominent, though it occupies a major place within Christian tradition as one of the three 'theological' virtues. Secondly, because Christian hope relates directly to God's transformation of humankind, yet also denotes a human characteristic, it helps to address some potential objections to virtue theory itself. A number of writers have raised concerns over the linking of virtue theory with biblical interpretation, partly with regard to the relationship between divine action and human effort (which relates the virtue theory in general), and partly with regard to how well virtue theory as such fits with the contents of the biblical texts. In addition to this, it was noted that if the message of the Bible is in any sense directed to 'sinners' for their sake, then it becomes self-defeating to suggest that virtues are somehow required to interpret the texts. In response to these issues, it was argued that the virtue of hope uniquely helps to clarify what is at stake in each case, a point which would be elaborated in the discussion of hope in its own right. It was argued that because Christian hope relates directly to God's creation and transformation of humankind, focusing on the interpretive virtue of hope would help give clarity to the relationship between divine transformation and human formation. From this, it was also shown (and elaborated in chapter three) that while the Bible should rightly be understood to be accessible to anyone, the growth of the reader remains significant as a facet of this transformation.

In terms of fit with the contents of scripture it was argued that there are sufficient points of contact between virtue theory and the Bible to recognize the significance of human character, but that in the specific case of hope there was a clear sense that the cultivation of hope was in itself an 'end' of scripture.

This point represents the third main reason for discussing hope. To the extent that scripture itself is focused on cultivating hope in the reader, it follows that hope in some sense becomes central to living as a disciple in the present. And if hope is central to Christian life, then it becomes significant in leading the reader back to scripture to deepen that hope. While this creates a degree of methodological circularity, it was argued that this circularity represents a theologically legitimate hermeneutical wager that in the process of reading *and rereading*, the reader deepens their hope and understanding. As such, the bulk of the thesis could only represent an instance in this longer process, because the content of the argument would be, by its own definition, provisional. It was also noted that this argument about the purpose of scripture drew the thesis close to the medieval interest in anagogy. This discussion was largely bypassed for the sake of scope, but it should be noted that the overall discussion would benefit from closer attention to the anagogic sense. This represents one important direction for further research.

Given this, the aim of the thesis was to provide a way of thinking about a hermeneutical circle for theological interpretation that took account of the significance of hope. The discussion proceeded in chapter two by examining the nature of Christian hope. It was argued that hope may be understood by its grounds, contents and actions, three parameters that would in turn shape the rest of the thesis, and would help clarify the distinction between different kinds of hope, optimism or wishful thinking. Firstly, these parameters were outlined in the work of Jürgen Moltmann and the tradition of thought that broadly followed him. Moltmann in particular sought to emphasize the importance of divine promise for the future as the grounds of Christian hope, whilst maintaining that to be hopeful involved acting in the present in accordance with that future vision. However, in order to balance this perspective, the work of James Cone and other Black liberation theologians was discussed with reference to the same parameters. Retrospectively, it should be clearer that this approach relates to the eventual argument that reading in hope should result in dialogue with other contexts, but even at this stage it was shown that

the dialogue between these traditions would yield important results for a doctrine of hope. In particular, it was shown that alongside divine promise, divine creation and presence were important for the theologies of hope represented by Cone and others. In turn, the action of this hope included a degree of subjective confidence, precisely because this was challenged by the context of racial oppression. In both Moltmann and Cone it was argued that because hope relates to God's action, anyone could be hopeful regardless of prior temperament. This would be crucial to any argument of interpretive virtue, in order to prevent fruitful biblical interpretation from becoming captive to circumstance. Whilst crucial differences in perspective were highlighted, it was argued that certain contours of Christian hope emerged that would form the basis of the subsequent argument. Firstly, hope is grounded in God, in creation, God's presence, and in the promise of new creation. Christians rightly hope for the future renewal of creation and human relationality as an act of God, but may also hope for transformation and change in the present; there should be no sense in which both are mutually exclusive. Finally, the action of this hope in essence derives from a vocation to live in accordance with its grounds and contents in the present. Even when the content of that hope is located in God's future, to be hopeful in the present entails living in character with the anticipated future. Moving beyond any dichotomy of actions against dispositions, I described characteristic actions of a hopeful person.

Following the contours of grounds, contents and action, chapters three and four examined what it would mean to approach biblical reading in hope. In chapter three, the grounds and contents of Christian hope were discussed as they pertain to the questions of hermeneutics, because both relate to matters of human nature and reality. Hope for reading becomes a sub-aspect of the broader Christian hope. As such, it would be maintained that the hopeful reader of scripture does not strictly read with the hope of understanding scripture, but rather reads with the hopeful perspective outlined in chapter two. Nonetheless, this hope has crucial implications for the possibilities of biblical reading. Two main lines of argument were pursued, both of which were relevant to the hermeneutics of biblical reading, but also to the hermeneutics of dialogue with others *about* the text. Firstly, it was noted that a number of recent writers on theological interpretation highlight complexities in the relationship between meaning and community. If meaning depends on community, then the idea of determinate meaning in texts becomes hard to sustain. While this

point is well made, it was argued that if God speaks independently of human situatedness, then there could be hope for genuinely hearing God through the biblical texts, independently of one's communal formation. As such, the perception of the voice of God through the texts becomes an important interpretive good. Furthermore, if dialogue with others is limited by this human finitude, there remains hope for such dialogue if Christian hope includes the renewal of humanity. However, in both cases hope awaits fulfilment, and as such there can be no legitimate present claim to the final determinate meaning of the text.

The second line of argument related to the hermeneutics of suspicion, noting that dialogue was inherently susceptible to power games. Again it was argued that the hope for human renewal entails hope for the transcendence of human self interest, and that as such dialogue would be possible, free from selfish power bids. However, it was at this point that the provisionality of hope becomes particularly important, otherwise hope could be claimed as another tool for grounding a dominant perspective. Following Cone and Thurman, it was argued that in fact, hope necessitated careful attention to the other, partly as a factor of love, partly because Christian hope also includes the individual dignity of persons, and partly because the promise of judgement negates the self-assurance of the powerful in the present. As such, there is hope for dialogue with others concerning the biblical texts, but this dialogue must be undertaken in the knowledge that one cannot claim inherent superiority for one's own view. In this respect, suspicion cannot be finally ruled out.

From arguing that there is hope for biblical understanding on the basis of the broader Christian hope, chapter four turned to explore what the action of this hope would be in the act of reading. Firstly it was noted that a number of writers explicitly link hope with the exercise of the imagination, and this relationship was discussed in order to provide certain conceptual tools for the argument. In particular Garrett Green's view was highlighted, in which the imagination is understood to construe reality as a whole whilst remaining conscious of alternative perspectives. The point would go some way to dealing with the objection that reading in hope constitutes a bias on the interpretation. To a certain extent this objection is correct, but Green's depiction of the imagination argues that all perspectives in some sense entail bias, but the consciousness of alternatives allows one to hold onto one's perspective with a strong sense of critical integrity.

Following this point, it was argued that the hope involves perseverance in pursuit of the voice of God in the text, and takes particular shape as a tension between an openness to the text, and a 'closed' steadfast grip on one's own sense of hope. Both of these together constitute hopeful perseverance. On the one hand, if there is hope that God may speak through the biblical text, but that in awaiting the fulfilment of hope we cannot presume to have concluded the text's final meaning, then rereading must always occur with a degree of openness. This could be problematic in the face of difficult texts, but it was shown that such openness may be possible even while the reader dissents from the plain sense of the text. In contrast to this openness, it was shown that being hopeful also entails steadfastly holding onto one's perspective of hope. Following the discussion of imagination, it was argued that the hopeful reader rightly reads in a manner which is shaped by their hopeful construal of reality as a whole, whilst remaining conscious of competing viewpoints. They are, in this sense, able to employ the imagination to perceive ways in which a text might point beyond present confines towards God's promised reality, but they do so without becoming blinkered to other readings or critical questions. The idea of steadfastness captures the suggestion that if hope aids the pursuit of the voice of God, it does so with the particular sense of aiding the deeper pursuit of God's promise and presence as the grounds of hope.

Finally, it was argued that as Christian hope includes the possibility of human community, the hopeful reader must seek to read with others. While this idea has been prevalent in recent literature, it was suggested that to act in hope is to seek a genuine sense of theological coherence through such dialogue, though this may include different theological emphases specific to each context. Furthermore, because of the hope of judgement, hopeful reading may thus lead some readers to encounter the challenge and cost of texts, but that in the context of dialogue, such costly readings may still be described as being hopeful because they cohere with positive possibilities for another.

In chapter five, this argument was tested in practice, though it can be seen from this point that the attempt to engage in a dialogue with Black liberation theology throughout the thesis draws some logic from the final step of the argument in chapter four. While it could be argued that there is a problem in drawing the methodology of the whole thesis from the argument of the penultimate chapter, it

strengthens the overall thesis because the theoretical argument concerning hope (in chapter two) bears a far stronger relation to the specific hopes manifest in the test cases contexts.[1] As such, while the hopes of the interlocutors in this chapter have their own specific emphases, they can clearly be seen to relate well to the contours of the hope that created the structure for the conceptual argument. Even then, the specificity of each context was noted, and it was argued that dialogue with others would require attention to their own hopes (or any other interpretive virtue) as well as to their interpretation. Clearly, the limit of this argument would be reached if the hopes of an interlocutor could not sustain the necessity of the dialogue itself, but because chapter three showed that the possibility of dialogue was sustained by a broad range of perspectives in Christian theology, the argument that Christian hope should proceed to dialogue remains strong. In turn, I would assert the value of maintaining the dialogue throughout the thesis, despite the questions it might raise.

The majority of chapter five was spent examining two readings of Jesus' command to love enemies, one from Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, and one from the Southern Sudanese Churches' Peace Process focused at Wunlit in 1999. While neither case claimed to offer exhaustive exegesis, both offered instructive scenarios in which the texts in question were read theologically with attention to the context of each. In both cases it was shown that the texts were read with the twin sense of openness and steadfastness, and as such the resultant readings were themselves worthy of attention. It was not argued that any of the readings were novel, nor that they could be described as decisive, but rather that they manifested a form of hope in the readers, and that the resultant readings were theologically significant. Given this, it is important to note that the approach detailed in this thesis does not promise novel readings, nor does it claim to lead to readings that are correct because they manifest hope in some way. What was shown was that in both cases, reading hopefully was an important part of how the biblical texts were drawn upon for the sake of living faithfully and generating hope in the specific contexts of reading. Hope was a crucial factor in moving the texts from abstraction to immediate, local significance, through theological reading.

[1] This is more obvious with regard to Howard Thurman. While there is relatively little explicit overlap between the Sudanese literature and black liberation theology, important points of overlap were noted, especially with regard to the issue of human dignity and hope for imminent change.

Following this, I turned to describe a rereading of the text from my context, in dialogue with the two test cases. It was noted that this rereading could not be argued to be hopeful from the first person, but it served to highlight the fact that any dialogue undertaken in hope would have to feed back into my own situation. Furthermore, it was necessary to demonstrate how a reading could be potentially hopeful whilst also being costly. Again, it was not argued that the rereading achieved this conclusively, but rather that it demonstrated the possibility in practice.

Finally, it was noted that while each scenario examined did manifest the kind of hopeful reading for which the thesis has argued, each would have its own emphasis within Christian hope, and in turn the action of that hope in reading would vary. In response to this point it was noted (as above here) that the constructive argument about hope in chapter two had taken account of a broader dialogue that related well to the test case contexts, and as such, the hermeneutical consequences of the specific hopes would still cohere with the broader thesis. At the same time, the very fact that each reader's hopes cannot be contained under one straightforward rubric means that dialogue must necessarily take account of, among other things, the specific nature of the readers' hope. Again, it was for this reason that care was taken from chapter two onwards to engage in such dialogue, but it can be seen that by its very nature, it must remain ongoing. Further research would be beneficial into other contexts, not only with regard to the specifics of hope, but following this lead, into contextual variations in the understanding of wisdom, love and so on.

Overall, this study has shown that Christian hope by its very nature speaks directly to our understanding of the situation in which we read the Bible as Christian scripture, and especially to the question of how human nature shapes the process of reading. Because Christian hope includes the transformation of humanity, it must recognize that this transformation will continually reshape the reader's interpretation of the text. But because *being* hopeful is itself a crucial aspect of living as a Christian, hope itself will rightly and inevitably shape the reading of scripture. In broad terms, it was argued that from the perspective of theological interpretation, one crucial interpretive good is the cultivation of hope in the reader and the wider community. But hope is itself the interpretive virtue that leads to this good. While

this movement is circular, it was argued that as a wager on the truth of God's transformation, it is not a closed or vicious circle. Rather, hope begins with God's gracious speaking, but in response, the reader is energised to pursue the voice of God in the text, and this in particular includes pursuing the voice of God as it speaks of the grounds of that hope. Although the idea of a *regula spei* was suggested, I have not pursued that term because while it does capture the basic thrust of the thesis, I have argued that real care is required to test the foundation of one's hope. As such, it would not do to argue that the cultivation of any vague sort of hope counts as an interpretive good. Put simply, it is not appropriate to speak of a *rule* of hope as something that may be straightforwardly applied to a text in order to generate a theologically 'correct' reading.

Particularly through the test case, it was argued that as the contents and action of Christian hope cannot be finally determined in the present, each reader will understand their hope slightly differently, and hence the action of that hope in reading will vary from place to place. As such, attention is required not only to the interpretations of others, but also to the kind of hope that has shaped their approach to the text. This attention is necessarily fluid, and indeed there will be perspectives on hope that make this attention to others less significant. But it was shown that there are sufficient points of contact across a range of Christian traditions to make this dialogue meaningful, though still requiring care. In turn, this suggests that the same care is required in considering variations in any kind of interpretive virtue.

While interpretive virtue is never used to refer to an interpretive method, this study has shown how the pursuit of hope may nonetheless legitimately shape the actual act of reading scripture. It was shown that hope opened up theological possibilities within the command to love enemies, possibilities which nonetheless retained a strong degree of critical integrity. It was noted that Pardue is probably right to argue that it will not do to suggest that an interpretation is correct because the reader is somehow more virtuous than others.[2] But the argument of chapter five was not that the interlocutors were correct in their reading because of their hope, but rather that their readings were important parts of a wider picture concerning the theological significance of scripture, and this was in part due to the action of hope in

[2] Pardue, 'Athens and Jerusalem', 305.

the process of reading. On this basis, theological discussion of actual biblical texts would benefit greatly from closer attention to readers that display interpretive virtues, including hope. Because it has been shown that there are good theological reasons for recognizing the potentially significant insight of non-academic readers, a much wider group of readers may be drawn into biblical scholarship, without confining studies of non-academic readers to their own niche. On this basis, further research into theological interpretation would benefit from research into the reading of academic and non-academic readers alike, with particular attention to the effects of hope, love, wisdom and so on. From the perspective of theological reading, this thesis has shown that Christian hope may aid readers in the pursuit of a rich, coherent and credible theological dialogue.

Because of the heuristic nature of the proposal, and the fact that interpretive virtue focuses on the character of the interpreter rather than the methods they employ, this thesis has never claimed to provide a novel interpretive paradigm, nor has it claimed to generate a novel rule by which interpretations may be judged to be correct. What this thesis has done is to follow the increasing awareness that if the Bible is to be read theologically, it cannot be abstracted from theological depictions of reality. Rather, theological interpretation must take full account of every aspect of human existence, and this must include hope. This thesis has provided a framework for articulating how and why hope should shape the task of biblical reading, and it has shown that while hope may not solve any technical problems within biblical interpretation, it will be an important factor in sustaining a theologically responsible conversation. I have shown that the cultivation of hope is one important part in the ongoing process of forming good readers of scripture.

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