

THE MORNING STAR

THE WYCLIFFE COLLEGE COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER

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Theological interpretation of Scripture: “not a method but a mode”

BY PETER ROBINSON

“The soul watered by sacred Scripture grows fat and bears fruit in due season, which is the orthodox faith, and so is it adorned with its evergreen leaves, with actions pleasing to God, I mean.” – John of Damascus (The Orthodox Faith, 4:17) as quoted in Psalms 1–50 by C.A. Blaising and C. S. Hardin.

During much of the modern era there has been a proliferation of techniques and approaches to reading the biblical text. Many of these approaches have enabled us to look more closely and carefully at Scripture. We’ve learned to ask all kinds of questions about the text and its setting. The information gained as to origins, context, and content is vast and complex. And yet, all too often, we seem to have lost a sense of how to read Scripture with imagination, devotion, and delight.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Sept 25, Wed
Einstein’s God, p. 4

Sept 27, Fri
Theology Pub Night on
Medical Assistance in
Dying, p.4

Oct 2, Wed
TST 12th Annual
Agapé Service, p. 4

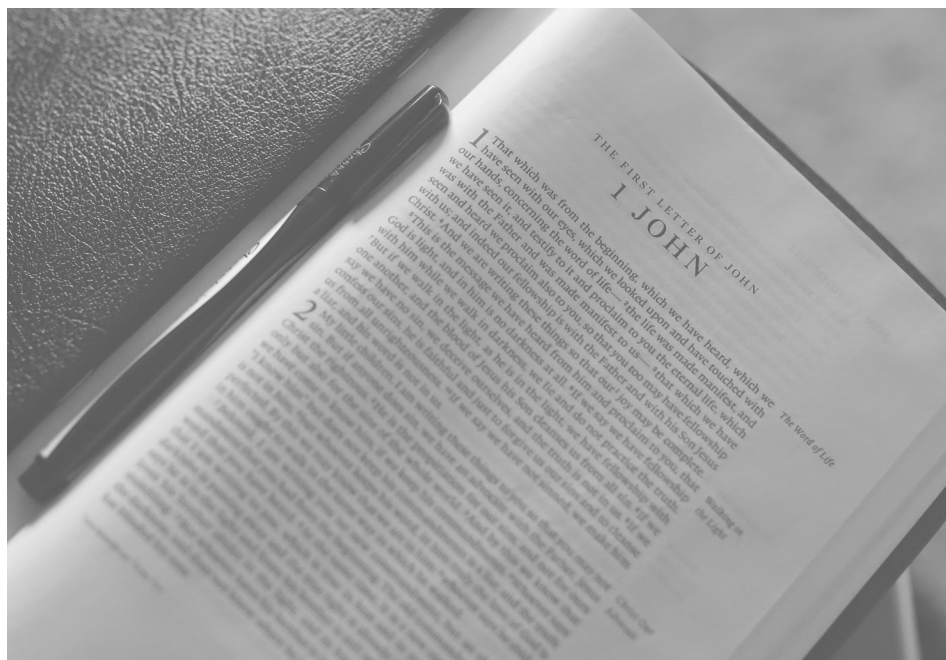
Oct 16, Wed
Founders’ Day
Memorial Lecture, p. 4

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Like a cadaver on an examination table

In the academy for a time people assumed that the best observer of Scripture was detached and neutral, a person who was able to put aside the lenses they brought to the text, including faith, in order to conduct a careful and thorough examination without bias or prejudice. That assumption has been unmasked as simplistic, but there remains a tendency to examine the text from above. It's as though the careful student of the Bible is one who sees the biblical text laid out like a cadaver on an examination table, to thoroughly pull, prod, and dissect it. Careful scientific methods and techniques can tell us all kinds of things about the life lived; bones once broken, diseases survived, perhaps even the wear and tear of overuse. Yet, in spite of all the information gleaned there isn't a basis for knowing the cadaver as a living being. There is no *personal* encounter. Any conclusions arrived at wouldn't wholly align with the understandings of those who knew and loved the person in question.

Today there is widespread recognition of the impossibility of a neutral, objective approach to the reading of Scripture. One result of this has been a proliferation of different interpretive approaches: a feminist reading, a liberation reading, a post-colonialist reading. Acknowledging that everyone brings to the text their own particular assumptions, their own particular theological frameworks (which inevitably shape the way in which they read the text), these "advocacy" approaches assume that all such approaches are legitimate in their own right. The result is a cacophony of voices. It's not surprising then, that the first question often directed towards



theological interpretation of the text is whose theology, which model or which approach is being assumed? But justifying a particular tradition or even a denominational approach to interpretation is not what drives the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS).

Not a method, but a mode

TIS is not so much a method of interpretation, a set of techniques, as it is a mode. Indeed, rather than speaking of theological interpretation as a singular approach it's better to recognize that there are different voices from diverse denominational and theological backgrounds who are seeking to read the text from below rather than above; approaching the text as its servant rather than as its master. Theological interpretation does not begin with an argument for a particular theological paradigm as foundational to interpretation. Rather, it begins with some basic theological commitments that shape the way the text is read. It suggests an orientation or posture that's assumed—a rule of faith—rather than a particular method or structure to examining the text. The

reader begins with basic lived theological commitments, which in turn frame the manner in which they approach the text.

Three assumptions

The first commitment is a theological assumption about God: that the One revealed through the text, who uses the text in revealing himself to us, is the Trinitarian God—Father, Son, and Spirit. "Those who approach the Bible as Scripture must not abstract it from the Father who ultimately authors it, the Son to whom it witnesses, and the Spirit who inspired and illumines it," writes Kevin Vanhoozer. This is not simply a reaction against the modern tendency to begin from a position of philosophical naturalism. It is rather, a claim about the biblical text in light of the way this God engages with us in and through it. And it centres around the confidence that God in Jesus Christ continues to engage with us through the Holy Spirit in and through the text. This first assumption is then bolstered by other assumptions that align with it.

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The second assumption concerns the unitive nature of the text. As Richard Bauckham observes in his essay, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story," the coherence of the text is not grounded in how it agrees with itself throughout, or even the integrity of principles or concepts put forward in the text, but is instead grounded in recognizing the text as a coherent narrative whose backbone is the story of God's intentional engagement with human beings and his creation culminating in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

That brings us to the third assumption, which is that in reading and engaging with the text we must do so in, for, and with the Church—including the chorus of witnesses who go before us. The retrieval of the work of the earliest interpreters of the text is vital to this endeavor for several reasons not the least of which is the variety of ways in which they approached the text (figural, tropological, allegorical, and literal). As such, they give a breadth and depth to the reading of the

text that challenges our own narrow reading.

The earliest interpreters

The earliest interpreters were struggling to make sense out of reading the text because they were seeking to make sense out of who this God is who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. As the scholar Tad Guzie puts it, "scientific exegesis begins with a text which speaks of mystery: patristic spiritual exegesis begins with the mystery spoken of in the text." As such, the early interpreters' basic posture in relationship to the text was one of reverent attention to the God who has and does make himself present to us in the text to foster our knowing of him.

TIS has at times been criticized for seeking a return to a pre-critical reading of the text. Listening to the voices of the saints—and especially the patristic writers—is central to TIS. Yet, there is not a naïve assumption that we can or should somehow bypass recent scholarship in a return to ancient interpretations. Instead, the fundamental assumption is that the

text must be read in the context of the Church, the communion of saints, both past and present. Neither is there a retreat from contemporary cultural issues as though a reader might isolate themselves from current matters or concerns. Rather, there is a rejection of the distance that a solely historical reading of the text places between it and our current situation, a distance that reflects a lack of understanding of the God who speaks to us (present tense) in and through the text. As such, our primary concern is not to make the text relevant or to try to bridge the gap between then and now, or to endeavor to apply the text to our current situation, but to listen to the voice of the Spirit who opens our hearts and minds to turn and listen to the God who continues to speak in a coherent and consistent manner into our lives and world through Scripture.

ABOUT

Peter Robinson is Academic Dean and Professor of Proclamation, Worship and Ministry.

From the Registrar

A NOTE TO ALL STUDENTS

The U of T will financially cancel students on September 27 if they are still at INVIT status and have not yet made a payment. If this applies to you, please make a payment as soon as you can because it takes up to 5 business days for this to reach your student account. Confirm this with Jeff Hocking and he can change your status to avoid the cancellation.

Due to changes at the Canada Revenue Agency, starting September 12th 2019, students will see a pop-up notification on ACORN, requesting that they add their Social Insurance Number (SIN).

International students who do not have a SIN will only need one if they want to work in Canada, file an income tax return or have access to Canadian government programs and benefits. International students will be able to see a link in ACORN that will encourage them to [learn more about Canadian income taxes](#). That page includes instructions about how an international student can apply for a SIN at a Service Canada office.

For more information, International students can visit [Income Taxes in Canada](#) website or they can contact the [Centre for International Experience](#) if they have further questions.

ALL NEW STUDENTS

I trust the beginning of term has gone well and you are all settling into the rhythm of the College.

Please make sure your U of T email has been prepared and that you send a test message to either Jeff or me. From Oct 1, any communication to students in conjoint degree programs will be through the U of T email and not your personal email. If you have any questions or concerns, please drop by the student services centre.

Barbara, Registrar and Director of Enrollment Management

WEEKLY CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Morning Prayer
Mon-Fri, 8:30 a.m.

Taizé Evening Prayer
Mon, 5:30 p.m.

Wine Before Breakfast
Tue, 7:22 a.m.

Sung Evensong
Tue, 5:30 p.m.

**Holy Eucharist with
faculty sermons &
child care**
Wed, 4:45 p.m.

Prayer & Praise
Thu, 5:00 p.m.

Evening Prayer
Fri, 5:30 p.m.

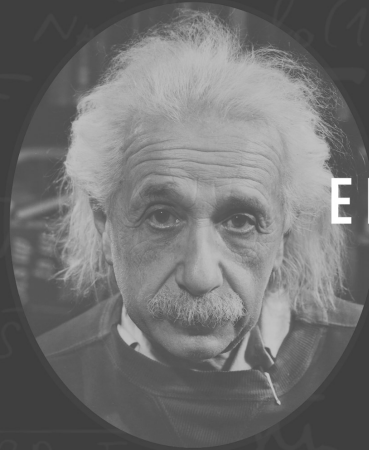
LOOKING TO MAKE SOME EXTRA CASH?

We are looking for students and/or residents for the following areas:

- Event support (set-up and tear-down)
- Audio editing support
- Donor relations (thank-you phone calls)
- Data entry
- Graphic design
- Miscellaneous tasks

Please e-mail Peter Herriman at pherriman@wycliffe.utoronto.ca indicating the area(s) you are interested in. Thank you!

Events & Announcements



PUBLIC LECTURE WITH Q & A

EINSTEIN'S GOD

A THEORY OF EVERYTHING (THAT MATTERS)

SEPTEMBER 25, 2019

7:00 P.M.

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
630 SPADIAN AVENUE, TORONTO

THEOLOGY PUB NIGHT

Friday, Sept 27, 7:00—9:00 p.m. in Leonard Hall.

Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) will be the subject on the agenda for discussion at this month's Theology Pub Night. Wycliffe Program Director Steve Hewko will interview featured guests Larry Reynolds, Julia Lee, and Natasha Fernandes. Together they will consider how the legal practice of physician assisted suicide reflects on Canadian culture and the status of Canada's current and future health care. This event is free and open to the public. Bring your friends! Oh, and there will be beer.

12TH ANNUAL AGAPÉ SERVICE FOR THE TST COMMUNITY

Wednesday, Oct 2, 1:30—3:00 p.m. at Knox College Chapel, 59 St. George Street, Toronto

This is an annual worship gathering to which all members of the Toronto School of Theology community are invited: students, faculty, and staff. This year, Knox College will host the event in the Knox College Chapel at 1:30 p.m. with reception and refreshments to follow. The theme of the service is "The Power of Love," based on 1 Cor. 12:31-13:13, Psalm 133, and John 17:20-23.

THE STORY OF RADIO MIND: A MISSIONARY'S JOURNEY ON INDIGENOUS LAND

Wednesday, Oct 16, 3:00—4:30 p.m. at Wycliffe College

The Founders' Day Memorial lecture honours the vision and commitment of the original founders of Wycliffe College through an annual lecture whose subject matter relates in some way to the history of the College and its role in the Church. This year the lecture will feature Professor Pamela Klassen (Department for the Study of Religion U of T), who will speak about her new book, *The Story of Radio Mind: A Missionary's Journey on Indigenous Land* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), which tells the story of Frederick Herbert DuVernet, 1860-1924, a Wycliffe graduate (Class of 1880).

It is a free, public event. Anyone is welcome to attend.

WYCLIFFE MERCHANDISE

This week's discount: Wycliffe Pens may be purchased for \$3 at the Front Desk!