Gadamer and Biblical Studies:
Retrospect and Prospect

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Hans-Georg Gadamer has been one of the most influential thinkers in the history of philosophical hermeneutics. His concepts of effective historical consciousness, the fusion of horizons, and the positive functions of pre-understanding and prejudice have been gratefully received by biblical scholars and theologians alike. This article surveys the usage of Gadamer in biblical studies in order to understand general trends and reflect on future possibilities. The relevant sources are organized into three categories: (1) the direct use of Gadamer for exegesis; (2) the use of Gadamer in abstract reflections on the hermeneutical endeavor; and (3) employment of Gadamer in the subdiscipline of reception history.

Keywords: Gadamer, hermeneutics, interpretation, Thiselton, reception history, exegesis, methodology, theology, subjectivity, Heidegger

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Introduction

Writing nearly two decades ago, Pearson observed that very few New Testament scholars had made use of the hermeneutical principles of Hans-Georg Gadamer for the purpose of exegesis.[1] Today, this is no longer the case. A number of scholars have sought inspiration from Gadamer for various tasks in biblical studies. Due to the fertility but also vast breadth of Gadamer's thought and its resultant possible applications, it is necessary to find a way to corral and evaluate the multitude of sources that utilize Gadamer in biblical studies.

This review article provides a summary and taxonomy of the relevant research. It further contends that previous publications in biblical studies that make use of Gadamer do so in three main ways: (1) the direct use of Gadamer for exegesis; (2) the use of Gadamer in abstract reflections on the hermeneutical endeavor; and (3) the employment of Gadamer in the subdiscipline of reception

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[1] Brook W. R. Pearson, *Corresponding Sense: Paul, Dialectic and Gadamer*, Biblical Interpretation Series 58 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 310.

history. Within each of these sections, something of an annotated bibliography of all possible relevant sources is provided. At the conclusion of each separate literature survey, major trends and, when relevant, subcategories will be identified.[2] The recurrence of surprisingly specific concerns throughout shows not only that certain topics have perennially resonated with biblical scholars, but that, potentially, wide swaths of Gadamer's thought remain open for exploration and multifaceted applications.

Main Tenets of *Truth and Method*

While it is not feasible to exposit Gadamer's thought with any detail here,[3] it is nonetheless appropriate to briefly survey the main contours of Gadamer's main work, *Truth and Method*,[4] as it makes visible the somewhat selective usage of this work in biblical studies. *Truth and Method* is organized into three parts. Part one argues that the meaning of art is best addressed along with the other human sciences (instead of a special aesthetic consciousness), and that the crucial category is art's mode of being. It then uses the analogy of play to explain the necessity of the viewer's self-involvement in a larger representation, and consequently, that understanding is integral to meaning being made.

Part two of *Truth and Method* is where Gadamer begins to develop his unique program, with his positive appraisal of the pre-understanding of the interpreter (drawn from Heidegger),[5] and consequently charitable view of prejudices, authority, and temporal distance. He further discusses his fusion of the classically separated steps of interpretation and application, appropriates Aristotle's ethics for a means to apply the universal to the particular, and uses legal hermeneutics as an exemplary model of the discernment of significance. He then covers his historically effected consciousness, which involves the experience of a Thou (with something to say) rather than an object, and his concept of the priority of the question in interpretation. Part three deals with the capacity of language to mediate understanding in a perspectival but accurate way.

With these key points surveyed, the remainder of this study will summarize and provide some preliminary reflections on the bibliography that has

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[2] That is, the purpose of this paper is to provide a survey and taxonomy and not to critique the specific sources (except for those dismissive of Gadamer as a whole).

[3] For such an overview, see Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of* Truth and Method (New Haven: Yale University, 1985).

[4] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel C. Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (1960; repr., New York: Continuum, 2006).

[5] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (1953; repr., Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1996).

accumulated around the appropriation of Gadamer in biblical studies, based around the descriptive categories introduced above.

Direct Use of Gadamer for Exegesis

For many practitioners of biblical studies, the most engaging methodologies are the ones with demonstrable results. In other words, biblical scholars are usually asking the question, "What difference does it make?" Accordingly, the first major section of the present study collates (chronologically) and attempts to synthesize some major tendencies of the sources that have significantly incorporated the work of Gadamer in hands-on interpretive examples.

The first such work is that of Schneiders,[6] which intends to examine the foot washing story of John 13:1–20, looking at the text (in accordance with the theories of Gadamer and Ricoeur) as a "work" rather than as an "object," and paying foremost attention to "the possibilities of human and Christian existence which it projects for the reader."[7] Thus, instead of posing the traditional questions of authenticity or historical accuracy, it inquires into "what interpretation of life and relationships does it present, is that interpretation true, and if so what are the implications for the interpreter's own understanding."[8] Turning to the text, Schneiders initially notes the significance of Peter's hesitancy to accept this act of service from Jesus, which corresponds to his shock at Jesus' foreshadowings of his crucifixion throughout the Synoptic Gospels.

Because of the centrality of the concept of service in this passage, the next element of the study is an exhumation of three models of the nature of service: (1) service based on obligation due to the position of the one being served; (2) service rendered freely because the server in some way desires to fill a need (a model that can all too easily place the server in a dominant position); and (3) service based on friendship, the only way to realize true equality.[9] Therefore, Jesus' decision to wash the feet of his disciples bypassed any hierarchy he had over them in his other capacities (such as a Teacher) and expressed a closeness and deliberate friendship. As Peter rejects Jesus' advance to wash his feet, he expresses his reservations about the abolishment of a hierarchical system in which he would exercise power under Jesus. Jesus self-identifies as Teacher and Lord in John

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[6] Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Foot Washing (John 13:1-20): An Experiment in Hermeneutics," *Ex Auditu* 1 (1985): 135–146.

[7] Ibid., 135.

[8] Ibid., 137.

[9] Ibid., 140–141.

13:13, but these attributes are bypassed by a much more foundational friendship and love, which is to be instructive for his followers.

Schneiders ends with some methodological observations. While the exegesis began with a pre-understanding that Jesus was in some way performing an act of revelation with his foot washing, crucial for making sense of the text was the contemporary experience of service, not class structures in first-century Palestine. While it certainly made use of insights from conventional historical criticism, it was not restricted to these in the search for present meaning.[10]

The most significant leveraging of Gadamer for exegesis is that of Pearson (*Corresponding Sense*),[11] who seeks a hermeneutical framework to cast light on four areas of dispute in the Pauline corpus. In his preface, he describes the project as "a test-case and development of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, and an attempt to formulate some original ways forward in this area through the close analysis of a representative group of texts."[12] He further notes that his use of Gadamer involves the clarifying of various pre-understandings that are extant in Pauline studies, as well as the examination of how the character of Paul engages dialogically with various cultural voices.[13]

Pearson's first example is the enigmatic background of the book of Philemon, which is usually assumed to be about a runaway slave, although this relies on a set of highly speculative extrapolations from the discourse of Philemon 10–19. Pearson walks through the usual evidence adduced from the letter and notes that individually, most of the data points are far from clear. Further complicating the ability of both lay and academic readers to see the text in new ways are the heavily interpretive headings found in both English translations and Greek texts.[14] He concludes with an appeal for interpreters to pursue "genuine dialogue" unencumbered by dominating background reconstructions.[15]

Pearson's second example deals with the information about Paul in Acts and how the status of this information is informed by the rhetorical strategies of this book. While Acts undeniably contains historically reliable details of Paul's life, the search for these must always be governed by Luke's overall purpose.[16] Thus, Pearson states, "We Pauline scholars rarely check to see that Luke is answering our questions, and we even more rarely notice that he is putting

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[10] Schneiders, "Foot Washing," 143–146.

[11] Pearson, *Corresponding Sense*.

[12] Ibid., xiv.

[13] Ibid., xvi.

[14] Ibid., 86.

[15] Ibid., 89–90.

[16] Ibid., 110.

questions *to us*."[17] After reviewing several areas in which Pauline scholars often rely on Acts for evidence, Pearson reiterates the need for carefulness and caution in the use of this book to adjudicate either the details of Paul's life or aspects of his theology.[18]

His third chapter of analysis looks at Romans and how Paul's argument to his Christian audience also contains implicit dialogue with other contemporary religious traditions. Specifically, Pearson reads Romans 1:23 as "Roman anti-Egyptian rhetoric."[19] He argues that Paul uses certain concepts to raise in his audience's mind certain negative sentiments associated with Egyptian religions, which then serve to "trap" his audience once they proceed farther into the argument of Romans and realize that they themselves are included in the entirety of humanity that is condemned in sin apart from faith in Jesus Christ.[20] He also correlates the discourse about baptism in Romans 6:1–11 with "the baptismal practices of the Isis and Sarapis cult."[21] In both cases, by incorporating Rational Choice Theory, his point is that Paul is able to evoke a certain aura of Egyptian cults as a whole by only explicitly mentioning small parts of their beliefs or practices.

His fourth chapter of analysis probes the relationship between James and Paul, arguing that the book of James was written as a direct attack on Paul's early theology, and that instead of writing in response Paul performed the deed of organizing collections for missions,[22] as "*Paul's theology will not be enough in and of itself to prove the case one way or another. . . .* The only way that Paul can finally demonstrate to his detractors that his theology does not lead to the kind of problems raised in James is by *showing that it does not do so*."[23] Pearson's concluding chapter provides two main methodological reflections. He references Gadamer's parallel between interpretation and a musical performance, noting that the multiple layers of mediation and reception in even the simplest performance greatly complicate Gadamer's analogy.[24] Secondly, he wishes to further probe Gadamer's incipient thoughts on the competition of different interpretations. He uses the example of various mathematical equations that might be devised to explain a complicated event in space, and notes that while it may be difficult to evaluate them (as they all might be looking at the event from a

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[17] Pearson, *Corresponding Sense*, 111.
[18] Ibid., 151–152.
[19] Ibid., 160.
[20] Ibid., 193–194.
[21] Ibid., 160.
[22] Ibid., 235–290.
[23] Ibid., 286. Italics in original.
[24] Ibid., 293.

different angle), the important thing is that they are examining the same event, in contrast to recent literary theories that diffuse the text itself.[25]

Not all of Pearson's readers find his examples entirely convincing. For example, Thiselton finds it incongruous that Pearson pleads for a "lack of specificity" in the situation of Philemon, yet for Romans he demands a highly specific Egyptian background. (Thiselton further finds this Egyptian background quite tenuous, amongst other factual errors.)[26]

An intriguing comparative use of Gadamer is performed by Kim,[27] who generates three readings of the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 using Gadamer, Habermas, and Ricoeur, respectively. From Gadamer, Kim draws on his use of tradition and the need to engage with one's own tradition for determining the questions that one will bring to a given text.[28] Reading the text through the eyes of Gadamer, Kim nods towards his own Korean background and focuses on Jesus's remark that Mary chose the better portion, raising the question of what the better portion is. Historically, interpreters have given different answers, ranging from the prioritization of preaching over practical ministry to the life of a monk being preferred to that of general society. For Kim, this better portion is one's personal relationship with God, which must come before other people and personal comfort; these things must not be distractions from direct divine communion.[29]

Conversely, his Habermasian reading is skeptical about the historical accuracy of the text and suggests it is a projection from a later time, and criticizes it for its potential to be used in ways that would restrict the role of women.[30] When Kim adopts Ricoeur's structuralist orientation, he probes its "projected world," and identifies some foundational binaries, of active versus passive women and teaching males versus receptive females. His application is thus that dualities in the understanding of loving and serving God should be abolished, and that "ecclesial leadership" should be a "discipleship of equals."[31]

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[25] Pearson, *Corresponding Sense*, 294–295.

[26] Anthony Thiselton, review of *Corresponding Sense: Paul, Dialectic and Gadamer*, by Brook W. R. Pearson, *Biblical Interpretation* 12, no. 2 (2004): 221–224.

[27] Junghyung Kim, "Three Different Readings of Luke 10:38-42: Gadamer, Habermas, and Ricoeur in Dialogue," *Expository Times* 123, no. 5 (2012): 218–224.

[28] Ibid., 219–220.

[29] Ibid., 220.

[30] Ibid., 221.

[31] Ibid., 223.

Hentschel argues that the hermeneutics of Luther are still relevant today,[32] using Gadamer to clarify his process and intentions. The substance of her argument is covered below, but her accompanying example stands well on its own. As she looks at the Gospel of John, she notes the contrasting horizons of the original historical context of the life of Jesus and the later ecclesial setting of the composition of the Gospel of John.[33] Accordingly, the author is interested in the import of Jesus for his audience. The first significant act of re-interpretation happens as the resurrection legitimated Jesus' claim to be God's son, thus enabling his life to be understood in a new way (such as in John 2:22). Regarding this dialogue, Hentschel states, "It combines two temporal horizons—that of the time of Jesus and that of the time of John and his community. . . . The two horizons cannot be separated because events and interpretation are intermingled."[34] Throughout John, the ministry of the Spirit is often present to confirm these interpretations of Jesus' life. Truth is repeatedly referred to in connection with the ministry of the Spirit, who confirms their faith. The locus of truth is thus in Jesus and the witness to him, not in a written text. Hentschel links this observation back to Gadamer, arguing that every act of reading opens the possibility for a new fusion of horizons, in which faith can be created and hope can be given.[35]

While the examples above mostly invoke Gadamerian principles (in various ways) between the reader and the text, it is also possible to apply these concepts to the relations between different texts. Ko performs a "theological exegesis of Saul's rejection in light of the Shema (Deut 6:4–9), understood as the rule of faith."[36] Acknowledging the anachronism of speaking of a rule of faith in the Hebrew Bible, Ko argues that the Shema served a function comparable to that of confessions in Christian contexts, and thus exegesis performed in both traditions can follow it as a guide. This confession thus can be understood as a "prejudgment" in Gadamer's terminology. Ko further interprets the Shema as being a paradigmatic prophetic word (based on its context) and as being an expression of devoted love.[37] The framework of the Deuteronomistic History can likewise be understood as an "effective history" that places any individual episode

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[32] Anni Hentschel, "Luther's Relevance for Contemporary Hermeneutics," in *"You Have the Words of Eternal Life": Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran Perspective*, ed. Kenneth Mtata (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2012), 47–68.

[33] Ibid., 59–60.

[34] Ibid., 61.

[35] Ibid., 63.

[36] Ming Him Ko, "Fusion-Point Hermeneutics: A Theological Interpretation of Saul's Rejection in Light of the Shema as the Rule of Faith," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 7, no. 1 (2013): 57–78.

[37] Ibid., 61–62.

(such as the story of Saul) in a larger framework of values. Within the Deuteronomistic History, the continued mandate to destroy the high places testifies to the program of the Shema.

The body of his analysis identifies certain "fusion-points" between the story of the rejection of Saul and the Shema in 1 Samuel 13, 15, and 28. As an example of his conclusions, in 1 Samuel 13 Saul disobeys Samuel's command to wait a prescribed amount of time before offering the sacrifices. Part of what instigated Saul's act of disobedience was his "seeing" of the people scattering, Samuel's absence, and the Philistine presence (1 Samuel 13:5–8). Thus, he failed to follow God with his whole heart (Deuteronomy 6:5), as he was quickly led off course by what he saw with his eyes.[38] As Samuel chastises Saul for disobeying the command (1 Samuel 13:13–14), this likewise points to a transgression of Shema and offence against God on the part of Saul. Saul will be replaced by one who follows the Lord with a devoted heart (1 Samuel 13:14). Overall, Ko concludes that the various points of "fusion" between this story and the Shema indicate that Saul's rejection "is best understood as a relational crisis between Saul and YHWH in the context of the Deuteronomistic History and the Shema."[39]

Wheaton provides a sustained engagement into the "moral vision"[40] of the Gospel of Mark using a methodology that synthesizes both Gadamer and the moral philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (*Postmodern Ethics*).[41] Wheaton particularly seeks to follow Gadamer's dictum that "application" is intrinsic to, and not an appendix to, interpretation, and that true dialogue must take place between the text and the reader.[42] He additionally notes that Gadamer viewed temporal distance as helpful instead of problematic. Before laying out the full methodology, he exposits the relevant texts, starting with the call for disciples to think of themselves as slaves in Mark 10:44. He also includes discussion of the use of slavery as a metaphor in the ancient world. Significantly, one of the frequent applications of this metaphor was the concept of "devotion,"[43] to which was frequently appended "suffering" and "pain."[44] Integrating this with the context of Mark 10:44, Wheaton states, "The basic import of the slave metaphor of Mark 10:44 is the idea of *devoting oneself to the best interest of all even beyond what is in one's own best interest*."[45] He finds it curious that Jesus would

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[38] Ko, "Fusion-Point Hermeneutics," 71.

[39] Ibid., 78.

[40] Gerry Wheaton, "The Shape of Morality in the Gospel of Mark: An Experiment in Hermeneutics," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 37, no. 2 (2015): 117–41.

[41] Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (London: Blackwell, 1993).

[42] Wheaton, "Shape of Morality," 119.

[43] Ibid., 124.

[44] Ibid., 125.

[45] Ibid., 125. Italics in original.

take a metaphor that generally carried pejorative connotations in its day and make it the basis of the relations of his disciples.

What follows is an exposition of the relevant thought of Bauman, who was specifically critical of the modernist ethical project, as he believed it was chiefly responsible for the horrors of the Holocaust. From his perspective, the emphasis on universal ethical systems led to the collapse of morality (which he defines as intrinsic to the motivations of the individual), as it sought solutions in laws rather than genuine interpersonal care or concern. In his system, morality is "taking responsibility for the Other."[46] As opposed to a posture of mere "being-aside" or "being-with," Bauman advocates togetherness in a "being-for" manner, which is "the work of selfless love,"[47] even the willingness to die for the other.

Wheaton finds considerable common ground between Bauman's "being-for" and the Markan Jesus' paradigm for humanity (note the phrase "slave of all" in Mark 10:44). This theme was foreshadowed earlier in Mark, as Jesus gives as the requirements of discipleship the denial of oneself, and the taking up of one's cross (Mark 8:34). These factors lay the groundwork for being fully committed to Jesus by being a servant of others. Jesus' unusual use of a familiar metaphor would serve to "*re-awaken* in the disciples sensitivity to the primal moral impulse which, when embraced, constitutes human beings as fully moral subjects."[48] Wheaton then notes that for Bauman, morality is "anterior," prior to thought and relationships themselves. As opposed to objectifying the Other, Bauman advocates a "participatory-empathetic stance," which views the other as a "partner."[49]

It is exactly this attitude of empathy that Wheaton finds in the many instances throughout Mark where Jesus shows compassion. This consistent theme shows that compassion is "the driving force behind the entire public ministry of Jesus."[50] For the disciple, an emotional care for others must precede all other commitments. The next key point from Bauman is that our full humanity is revealed in our orientation towards the other. As Jesus, in various places, rebukes the disciples for seeking their own status or position, he is pleading with them to live in such a way that captures the essence of what humanity is meant to be. As a result, Jesus' teaching of "costly devotion"[51] presents a shock to the self-centered impulse and recalibrates one's expectation of the nature of personhood.

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[46] Wheaton, "Shape of Morality," 128.
[47] Ibid., 129.
[48] Ibid., 133.
[49] Ibid., 134.
[50] Ibid., 135.
[51] Ibid., 141.

Worthington approaches the perennially thorny issue of the authority of the state in Romans 13:1–7 with the premise in mind that in the world today, the true locus of power is global capital, not individuals holding political office.[52] He states at the beginning of the study that he employs Gadamer and Habermas[53] to enable a new interpretation of this passage that transcends the usual historicist or ideologically predetermined readings.

Due to Gadamer's positive appraisal of tradition, Worthington begins by organizing previous treatments of Romans 13:1–7 into three different categories. First, conservative scholars have taken the text more or less at face value, reading it as supporting the notion that God has appointed earthly political authority in a form that is analogous to cosmic authorities. Secondly, other scholars have conversely highlighted places in the Pauline corpus where Paul seems to openly challenge both heavenly and civic authorities, opening the possibility that Paul's tone here is "ironic"[54] rather than straightforward. A third, more speculative option simply reads Romans 13:1–7 as a late, post-Pauline interpolation, thus removing it from the genuine content of the letter. Worthington suggests that the existence of this third option testifies to the scholarly tendency to create readings that are palatable to the Western consciousness, even when they are less than plausible. Returning to Gadamer, Worthington notes that this range of interpretations (and certain prejudices) enables the understanding of the passage, rather than complicating it.

Drawing on Gadamer's "historically effected consciousness,"[55] it is evident that most inhabitants of the modern West do not share the assumption of the text that civil authority reflects cosmic authority. Furthermore, efforts constricted to the historical critical dimension are limited to a flawed "subject-centered rationality."[56] The strangeness of the thought world underlying this text helps the modern interpreter to better recognize their own horizon of understanding. Turning to the ideological insights of Habermas, Worthington observes that Romans 13:4 notes that the rulers bear a sword, which means that "the reification of civic authority can always and only be justified through imperial violence,"[57] or more specifically, that claims to divine sanction always require a physical appendage. With this cosmic parallel exposed as inadequate in and of itself,

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[52] Bruce Worthington, "Romans 13:1–7 With an Eye to Global Capital," in *Reading the Bible in an Age of Crisis: Political Exegesis for a New Day*, ed. Bruce Worthington (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 245–64.

[53] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1984).

[54] Worthington, "Romans 13:1–7," 250.

[55] Ibid., 252.

[56] Ibid., 253.

[57] Ibid., 257.

Worthington states, "Here Paul reveals political oppression to be a property immanent to the 'state of affairs' as such, and exposes the fraudulent character of Roman propaganda."[58] Paul's admonition for oppressed believers to pay their taxes is thus a realistic injunction in light of a given situation, not an order for Christians to automatically revere the state.

In light of the above, most modern interpretations of Paul are bound to privatized understandings of political choice. In light of the generally unquestioned hegemony of global capital, the practice of biblical interpretation continues to ask many questions, except for the legitimacy of capital itself. There is no neutral language for one to express this critique. Turning back to Romans 13:1–7, Paul is simply acknowledging the power structures that exist and admitting that his only choice is to participate as to avoid punishment. In light of the present-day situation, Worthington states that "the subjective position fashioned by capital as a universal, totalizing system of meaning is not an obstacle to biblical interpretation, but rather a similar subjectivity fashioned by a familiar political deadlock."[59]

Direct Use for Exegesis: Conclusions

With the above examples of exegesis in mind, some trends can be identified and some conclusions can be drawn. These studies can be grouped into two broad categories: (1) the use of Gadamer to facilitate interaction between the text and the modern-day reader; and (2) the use of Gadamer to understand some intra-textual phenomenon. In the case of the former, this generally involves the acknowledgement that a purely historical meaning is insufficient, and thus a mediating device is used to better probe the text and foster authentic fusion. For Schneiders, this was the concept of service; for Kim, the exposition of the "better portion" in a particular cultural context; and for Wheaton, the integration of the moral theology of Bauman. Worthington stayed perhaps more closely with Gadamer in the sense that he tried to use the text to interrogate the presuppositions of the modern Western reader. The first two test cases of Pearson fall into the minority here, as they, in a somewhat less sophisticated fashion, essentially amount to appeals for more careful self-reflection on the part of interpreters.

The second category of these studies looks at types of fusion that take place within the text itself. For Hentschel, this happened between the author of the Gospel of John and his or her source material; for Ko, the intersection was

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[58] Worthington, "Romans 13:1–7," 258.
[59] Ibid., 263–64.

between the Shema and the final redaction of a particular account in the Deuteronomistic History; and for Pearson, it happened between Paul and James, and Paul and Egyptian beliefs.

These promising studies demonstrate that many exciting possibilities exist within these frameworks. Much ground remains to be explored by using different theoretical frameworks to bring the horizons of the text and the interpreter into dialogue, and by bringing a Gadamerian lens to various types of dialogue within the texts themselves.

The Nature of Hermeneutics: Rejections of Gadamer and Evaluation of Previous Interpretations

By far the most common use of Gadamer in biblical studies has not been in hands-on interpretation (surveyed above), but in discussions of methodology itself, in abstract reflections about the limits and goals of the interpretive enterprise. Some of this discussion spills beyond the boundaries of biblical studies proper and intrudes into the domain of theology as, naturally, discussion of pre-conceptions and goals in a confessional context will inevitably involve theology. Additionally, this can involve discussion of the relationship of the tasks of exegesis and systematic theology.

Before working through the bulk of the studies that fall under this rubric, two smaller sub-categories will be identified and dealt with. They are (1) studies that proclaim the irrelevance of Gadamer for biblical hermeneutics, and (2) studies based around using Gadamer to process the insights or shortcomings of previous acts of interpretation.

Some conservatives have judged Gadamer as inadequate based on his failure to provide a rigorous method that guarantees results with scientific objectivity. More broadly, anyone either implicitly or explicitly committed to a metaphysic that holds to a rigid distinction between subject and object will likely find Gadamer's hermeneutics unconvincing. In this vein, Kaiser begins by raising the question of the relationship between interpretation and application, as different thinkers have variously separated or combined these steps.[60] However, it seems that his conclusions have been decided in advance, for in his explication of Gadamer he merely provides two brief quotations from Gadamer relating to the necessity of understanding texts in light of the situation of the interpreter. He even agrees that an important part of the interpreter's job is "finding the proper

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[60] Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Inner Biblical Exegesis as a Model for Bridging the 'Then' and 'Now' Gap: Hos 12:1-6," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28, no. 1 (1985): 33-46.

alignment between the universal and the particular."[61] However, without making any attempt to unpack the larger context of Gadamer's thought, he immediately rejects this platform by quoting from Hirsch: "It is precisely because the meaning of the text is always the same that its relationship to a different situation is a different relationship."[62]

In saying this, not only does Kaiser reject any possibility of the interpreter's context being instructive (other than its being an appendage that can apparently be set aside during a process of neutral exegesis), but he is also completely lacking in specificity regarding this stable meaning of a text. It is even more curious that in the very next paragraph he states that "the control must rest in the truth-intentions laid out by the writers of Scripture as symbolized by the grammar and syntax of their texts of Scripture."[63] However, near the end of the article, he uses historical (rather than strictly grammatical) criteria to argue that Hosea 12 interprets the story of Jacob completely literally.[64] Gadamer would certainly not dispute that there is a stable core of grammatical meaning,[65] but generally, when interpreters discuss meaning, this transcends mere lexis and syntax and involves a main point of interpretation or a historical (or existential) significance.[66] The remainder of Kaiser's article proceeds to use inner-biblical exegesis as an analogy for how to respect the distinctions of interpretation and application.

Similarly, Yilpet begins with the problem of how the Bible can be accurately interpreted given the substantial temporal and worldview gap between it and a modern audience.[67] He then spends the bulk of his essay surveying "some proposed solutions to the problem of distanciation,"[68] which in succession covers Gadamer, Ricoeur, and James Barr. It is unclear why he bundles two figures known mostly for philosophical hermeneutics with a biblical scholar who largely championed historical exegesis. His survey of Gadamer covers his positive appraisal of temporal distance, the intrinsic depth of language, and the consequent fusion of horizons and multivalency of the text.

Yilpet then subjects Gadamer to some criticisms.[69] First, he questions whether it is possible for an interpreter to let go of inaccurate pre-judgments

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[61] Kaiser, "Inner Biblical Exegesis," 33.

[62] E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 255.

[63] Kaiser, "Inner Biblical Exegesis," 34.

[64] Ibid., 43–44.

[65] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 412.

[66] Ibid., 160.

[67] Yoilah K. Yilpet, "Knowing the Biblical Author's Intention: The Problem of Distanciation," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 19, no. 2 (2000): 166.

[68] Ibid., 169.

[69] Ibid., 172–73.

unless this is done deliberately. Second, he suggests that tradition can often be wrong. Third, he believes that Gadamer's claim that meaning outstrips mere authorial intent opens the door to subjectivity. He finds Gadamer's framework inadequate for discerning correct or incorrect interpretations, and he disagrees with Gadamer's understanding of the connection between language and reality.[70] His conclusion simply reinforces the superiority of historical-grammatical exegesis.[71]

The second sub-category identified above was studies that devoted significant attention to using Gadamer to make sense of certain acts of interpretation. Although the main point of these studies is always the nature of interpretation in general (in keeping with this larger section), this leveraging of Gadamer is fascinating and worth exploring in isolation.

Earley examines the general problem of the latent anti-Judaism tendencies in Christianity that culminated in the Holocaust, and the subsequent proliferation of interpretations of the New Testament's attitude towards Judaism in the period following World War II.[72] His first example is that of Stendahl (in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*),[73] who sought to defuse potentially anti-Semitic interpretations of Paul by working descriptively and emphasizing historical context (putting him in line with Schleiermacher's approach to hermeneutics). Stendahl clearly diverges from Gadamer in his quest for objective meaning and knowledge of the author's intent. Earley suggests that Stendahl is mistaken to think he can entirely escape his own subjectivity, particularly as he openly admits that his work (which heavily involves dissolving the Lutheran lens that dominates much Pauline scholarship) is driven by the desire to foster Jewish-Christian relations in a post-Holocaust context. Earley further argues that Stendahl's ability to read Paul in the way he does (as supporting the mutual existence of Christianity and Judaism) comes from the similarities between the concerns of the post-Holocaust church and Paul's context.

Earley's second major example is the work of van Buren.[74] In a manner similar to that of Stendahl, van Buren assumes that proper, historically informed biblical interpretation will solve the problem of Christian anti-Judaism. Earley

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[70] Yilpet, "Knowing the Biblical," 172–73.

[71] Ibid., 183.

[72] Glenn David Earley, "The Radical Hermeneutical Shift in Post-Holocaust Christian Thought," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 18, no. 1 (1981): 16–32.

[73] Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

[74] Paul M. van Buren, "Affirmation of the Jewish People: A Condition of Theological Coherence," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45, no. 3 (1977): 1075–1100; "How Shall We Now Exegete the Apostolic Writings?" in *International Theological Symposium on the Holocaust, October 1978*, ed. Josephine Knopp (Philadelphia: National Institute on the Holocaust, 1979), 102–16.

observes that certain theologians are now advocating the "affirmation"[75] of the Jewish people. As van Buren notes that within the canon certain writings were reinterpreted on the basis of historical events, the continued existence of the Jewish people after the Holocaust testifies to "God's continuing faithfulness to and affirmation for the covenant people,"[76] a mandate that must be followed by the church. Thus, rather than viewing Jesus as the Messiah in the traditional sense, Jesus is "the Christ of the church, that is, the Jew through whom God has chosen to be revealed to the Gentiles, making available to them, through Jesus, participation in the one unending covenant with God's people, the Jews."[77] In his concluding thoughts, Earley suggests that while Gadamer's model of the fusing of horizons is helpful, he would rather see the particularity of each element maintained as they together form a universality. Nevertheless, he concludes with a set of principles for interreligious dialogue derived from Gadamer.

Crouch begins by recounting Augustine's famous allegorical interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan.[78] Crouch explains that the historical-critical orientation of his graduate studies tended towards being entirely dismissive of the validity and present-day utility of the exegesis of Augustine and much of the early church. Then, he describes the impact of reading Gadamer, which caused him to question his dependence on method alone and seek a thoughtful mediation between his context and that of the text. He isolates three points from Gadamer: "an emphasis on the interpreter's own finitude"; that "the interpreter has pre-understandings"; and "effective-history," or "the ongoing life of a text."[79] With these principles in mind, it is possible to return to Augustine's allegory and find much to appreciate—if for no other reasons than that it is part of the lineage through which modern interpreters receive the text, and it is an example of how it was treated in a given historical context.

Zimmerman addresses recent philosophical interpretations of Paul, specifically those of the continental tradition after the religious turn.[80] His concern is that the blatantly secular orientation of many of these thinkers (Agamben, Badiou, Žižek) may render it impossible for them to properly appreciate Paul's worldview. He provides his thesis at the outset: "By neglecting Paul's incarnational and participatory high Christology, philosophical

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[75] Earley, "Radical Hermeneutical Shift," 26.

[76] Ibid., 27.

[77] Ibid., 27.

[78] James E. Crouch, "Augustine and Gadamer: An Essay on *Wirkungsgeschichte*," *Encounter* 68, no. 4 (2007): 1–14.

[79] Ibid., 9–10.

[80] Jens Zimmerman, "Hermeneutics of Unbelief: Philosophical Readings of Paul," in *Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical Vision: Critical Engagements with Agamben, Badiou, Žižek and Others*, ed. Douglas Harink (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 227–53.

interpreters fail to let the Pauline horizon confront their own, and thus they fall short of a productive hermeneutical engagement with theology."[81] A common denominator of these recent interpretations of Paul is their intense focus on the nature of subjectivity. However, their failure to adequately consider Paul's incorporation of transcendence or the mechanics of the incarnation renders them a one-way conversation.

He then expounds on Paul's theology of the incarnation, noting that it involves both the individual and the cosmos being made right with God in Christ. This exposes the work of many philosophical interpreters as rigidly impersonal.[82] Thus, in Gadamer's terminology, authentic dialogue has not taken place. Zimmerman suggests that Paul has much to offer modern philosophers. For example, his understanding of subjectivity can help recapture participation in the transcendent, but in a personal way, and he offers similar insights in the areas of universality and particularity as well as ethics and politics. He concludes by reiterating that for true understanding to take place, Paul must be given a voice and allowed to offer a challenge to modern philosophers.

Abstract Reflections on the Nature of Hermeneutics

With the anomalous studies covered above, this section will proceed to work chronologically through the extant sources utilizing Gadamer for general reflections on the process of interpretation in biblical studies. The first major sustained treatment of Gadamer in the field of biblical studies proper was that of Thiselton (*The Two Horizons*).[83] Along with extended meditations on Heidegger, Bultmann, and Wittgenstein, Thiselton provided a thorough summary of *Truth and Method* along with his evaluation of its applicability to the interpretation of the New Testament.[84] While rehashing this survey material is not germane to the purposes of the present study, Thiselton's appraisal of the implications of Gadamer are worth noting. Thiselton initially raises the obvious concerns of the possibility of false pre-understandings and the lack of control for unpredictable interpretations, before noting that for the confessional exegete, some kind of systematic theology generally serves as a pre-understanding.[85] Thiselton then notes that tradition completely muted Scripture during the medieval period, and

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[81] Zimmerman, "Hermeneutics of Unbelief," 230.

[82] Ibid., 241.

[83] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980).

[84] Ibid., 293–319.

[85] Ibid., 315.

that the Reformers did somewhat fuse their horizons with that of the Bible, although from today's perspective much of this was badly mistaken (such as "equating the problem of the Judaizers and the Torah in Paul with the problems of late mediaeval religious piety").[86] As a result, Stendahl argued that the clash, rather than fusion, of the horizons must be respected,[87] and Thiselton agrees that an overemphasis on fusion can harm the goal of objectivity. He concludes the section by raising the question of how the modern interpreter can follow Luther's example of being "under" Scripture, yet still being authentically "addressed."[88]

Marshall leverages Gadamer to address some of the questions raised by reader-response criticism.[89] After considering the nature of response, he suggests that reading should become a "reply which is marked out in advance by what calls for it."[90] This posture of being prepared to listen contrasts with a reader who simply dominates a text with a predetermined method. Through language, readers allow themselves to become part of a larger conversation and experience transformation.

Jeanrond argues that theologians need to pay careful attention to the nature of interpretation,[91] as the theological task involves the three key sources: (1) interpretation of the Bible, (2) theological works themselves, and (3) human experience. He rejects Gadamer's avoidance of method and finds preferable Ricoeur's model of a text mediating the reader to himself or herself,[92] although he still states Ricoeur does not adequately address the problem of conflicting interpretations. Following Ricoeur, he advocates a spiral-like process of reading, which "includes all human projections of sense in order to return always again with new questions to the primary texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition."[93] As his primary interest is theology, he views his taxonomy of three key sources through the lens of his interest in tracing out the relationship with the divine and deeper consideration of the self.[94]

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[86] Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 317.

[87] Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 1:418–32.

[88] Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 319.

[89] Donald G. Marshall, "Reading as Understanding: Hermeneutics and Reader-Response Criticism," *Christianity and Literature* 33, no. 1 (1983): 37–48.

[90] Ibid., 39.

[91] Werner G. Jeanrond, "The Theological Understanding of Texts and Linguistic Explication," *Modern Theology* 1, no. 1 (1984): 55-66.

[92] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

[93] Jeanrond, "Theological Understanding," 64.

[94] Ibid., 63–64.

Lash similarly probes the relationship between the biblical scholar and the theologian.[95] In contrast to those who would view the theological task as a linear progression from exegesis to biblical theology to systematic theology (a model that he calls a process of "consumption"),[96] he instead relates exegesis and systematic theology dialectically. A mature, responsible framework for hermeneutics must accordingly treat not just meaning but also truth, raising the question of the place of faith in interpretation. Channeling Gadamer, he argues that the crucial gap is not between temporally distant meanings, but rather between acts of testimony of then and now. In regards to the question of martyrdom (which was the initial impetus for these reflections) he states that rather than inquiring into the significance of martyrdom in the modern world, it would be preferable to ask, "What form might contemporary fidelity to the 'testimony of Jesus' take?"[97]

Schneiders has invoked Gadamer in the context of contemporary interpretation problems in a number of places.[98] Her application of Gadamer to an exegetical example has been covered above.[99] In the first of these, she notes the challenges faced by biblical scholars in the Catholic world in the wake of the 1943 approval of historical/philological research.[100] She identifies three different ways the Bible can be used in the church: (1) simplistic proof-texting; (2) historical criticism followed by theological implications; and (3) hermeneutics in the Gadamer/Ricoeur tradition. She faults the second model for inevitably alienating scholars and pastors from each other. Following Gadamer and Ricoeur, she states that the questions of the modern reader must be kept in mind throughout the process of interpretation, and that ancient meaning alone is insufficient.

Elsewhere, Schneiders uses Gadamer to isolate four areas in which the church and the academy should cooperate in the task of interpretation.[101] Regarding the nature of the text, the two camps can mutually benefit from sharing their respective appraisals of the Bible as a work that speaks directly to life today versus a museum piece. While scholars may be more interested in authorial intent than the questions asked by people in the modern world, paying

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[95] Nicholas Lash, "What Might Martyrdom Mean," *Ex Auditu* 1 (1985): 14–24.

[96] Ibid., 20.

[97] Ibid., 24.

[98] Sandra M. Schneiders, "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics: The Problem of the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture," *Horizons* 8, no. 1 (1981): 23–39; "Church and Biblical Scholarship in Dialogue," *Theology Today* 42, no. 3 (1985): 353–58; "Feminist Ideology Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19, no. 1 (1989): 3–10.

[99] Schneiders, "The Foot Washing."

[100] Schneiders, "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics," 23–39.

[101] Schneiders, "Church and Biblical Scholarship," 353–58.

attention to the latter can help them broaden their horizons. Methodologies are helpful for certain academic tasks, but a dialogical model is necessary for conveying the message to the believer. Finally, while believers are more likely to appreciate tradition than scholars, both are necessary for the life of the church.

Schneiders also tackles feminist concerns in hermeneutics,[102] starting with the question of how an oppressive text (the New Testament) can function in a liberating way. She chastises historical criticism as failing to provide answers to these issues. Following Gadamer she views a text as a "dynamic medium" rather than a "static object," and thus, rather than a historical record, she "interprets the Second Testament witness to the Christ-event in terms of the whole of that mystery, the whole experience of the Church, and current perceptions of Christian discipleship."[103] Thus the Bible can be salvaged with a teleological understanding that looks for the reality projected rather than described in the text.

The Reformed approach of Poythress is dramatically different than that of Schneiders, as his greatest interest is expositing the place of "God's Lordship" in interpretation.[104] He discloses that his confessional perspective mandates that "the purpose of interpretation must be to receive and respond properly to the word of God."[105] He speaks positively of Gadamer's fusion of horizons, as within his framework this will result in the divine author of Scripture transforming the reader. (He additionally cites 1 Corinthians 2:16 and Ephesians 4:23 as evidence.) Referencing the theological concept of sin, he argues that interpretation will be faulty when one of the horizons is that of a "blasphemer."[106] He uses Gadamer to note that critical frameworks can easily mute the text itself. Poythress concludes that true interpretation is only possible for those committed to a theological framework in which God is known through Christ and the Bible is viewed as infallible.[107]

Scroggs starts with the problem of the difficulty of formulating a coherent New Testament theology in an age when contextualization of various sorts dominates the hermeneutical landscape.[108] As a result, the actual thought of the New Testament itself can easily be overlooked. Scroggs turns to Gadamer's model of a conversation between the interpreter and the text and decides that New

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[102] Schneiders, "Feminist Ideology Criticism," 3–10.

[103] Ibid., 6.

[104] Vern Sheridan Poythress, "God's Lordship in Interpretation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 50, no. 1 (1988): 27.

[105] Ibid., 32.

[106] Ibid., 45.

[107] Ibid., 63–64.

[108] Robin Scroggs, "Can New Testament Theology Be Saved: The Threat of Contextualisms," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 42, no. 1-2 (1988): 17–31.

Testament theology should seek to model "a conversation in which the text can remain free from the imposition of dogmatics, and yet one which does not destroy the truth claim of a text."[109] He considers the secular solution of simply abandoning biblical authority altogether and rejects it in favor of focusing on the "intentionality" of the text, which includes the lexicogrammar as well as the tradition in which it stands.[110]

Eberhard is chiefly concerned with "the simultaneous activity and passivity of our being,"[111] but his article is still relevant due to its substantial interaction with the Bible. He finds substantial parallels between Gadamer's development of the middle voice and Philippians 2:12–13, where Paul commands his audience to work out their salvation, even as God works in them for their growth. The tension between activity and passivity can be overcome if one, following Gadamer, abandons a subject/object dualism. Eberhard further states he appreciates the insight of Tillich that freedom is an aspect of a person that develops in relationship to environment and destiny. Returning to Gadamer's dialogism, he suggests that textual understanding can be viewed as a "standing under" as the interpreter allows the material to transform himself or herself.[112]

Curkpatrick studies the issues of biblical interpretation and biblical authority through the lens of Ricoeur, Heidegger, and Gadamer.[113] He begins by reviewing Ricoeur's principle that human temporality denies objective textual interpretation, and that experience of the world is always mediated through language and inner reflection. After discussing Heidegger's concept of the thrown-ness of his *Dasein,* he moves on to Gadamer's prejudice and effective history, which lead him to argue that experiencing tradition through language can develop the prejudices of the interpreter. Although all interpretations are finite, divine authority can still function in a negative role. He finishes by returning to Ricoeur's suggestions of how the Bible can project possibilities and thus be authoritative by enabling the reader to understand himself or herself and develop ethically.

Mootz[114] summons Gadamer in the context of evaluating Pelikan,[115] who sought to evaluate the continuities and discontinuities between biblical and legal

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[109] Scroggs, "Can New Testament Theology," 25.

[110] Ibid., 27–28.

[111] Phillipe Eberhard, "The Mediality of Our Condition: A Christian Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 2 (1999): 411–434.

[112] Ibid., 430–431.

[113] Stephen Curkpatrick, "Authority of the Text: The Hermeneutical Question," *Colloquium* 33, no. 2 (2001): 135–52.

[114] Francis Joseph Mootz III, "Belief and Interpretation: Meditations on Pelikan's 'Interpreting the Bible and the Constitution,'" *Journal of Law and Religion* 21, no. 2 (2005): 385–399.

hermeneutics. Specifically, Pelikan argued that there is no neat methodological way to differentiate between earnest and self-serving interpretations. This leads Mootz to inquire into what extent personal involvement is necessary for interpretation: "Can healthy and valid developments of a textual tradition be recognized only by believers?"[116] After conducting a reflection on Gadamer to seek further insight, Mootz is unconvinced that readers have the self-awareness to know when genuine dialogue between their horizon and that of the text is taking place. To supplement Gadamer, he turns to the "weak thought" of Vattimo,[117] who accepts the death of method, and postulates that both law and religion are based on a "leap of faith."[118] Therefore, within a never-ending "thrown-ness" (in the Heideggerian sense), the central imperative is to adopt a posture of charity towards the other.

Nathan mourns the collapse of much exegesis into mere historical exhumation, while at the same time the pre-understandings of scholars drive them to differing conclusions.[119] To address this situation, he turns to Gadamer's work on pre-understanding, as it "implies that truth is to be seen as *disclosed* in prejudice rather than *deciphered* by means of method alone and that this has ramifications for biblical studies."[120] With this in mind, he turns back to biblical studies, where the continued proliferation of differing interpretations can be seen as various attempts at filling gaps that exist in texts. The simultaneous revealing and concealing function of prejudices means that these prejudices must be evaluated and explored within the context of the believing community.

Awad[121] starts with Vanhoozer's[122] critique of postmodern theology; for Vanhoozer, postmodern theology subordinates Scripture entirely to tradition. Awad argues that many of the newer critiques of *sola scriptura* rest on a faulty understanding of the doctrine that does not take into account its historical incorporation of the enactment of the text, and he substantiates this claim with examples from both Luther and Schleiermacher. For example, for Luther, the concept of "God's Word" included both preaching and the performance of the

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[115] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Interpreting the Bible and the Constitution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

[116] Mootz, "Belief and Interpretation," 391.

[117] Giovanni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[118] Mootz, "Belief and Interpretation," 397.

[119] Emmanuel Nathan, "Truth and Prejudice: A Theological Reflection on Biblical Exegesis," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 83, no. 4 (2007): 281–318.

[120] Ibid., 290.

[121] Najeeb George Awad, "Should We Dispense with Sola Scriptura? Scripture, Tradition and Postmodern Theology," *Dialog* 47, no. 1 (2008): 64–79.

[122] Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

Gospel in the church,[123] thus freeing him from the charge that he was narrowly dependent on the Bible. To further expound this incorporation of tradition on the part of Luther and Schleiermacher, Awad turns to Gadamer's placement of interpretation with a given stream of tradition and acceptance of the *a priori* function of the authority.[124] Therefore, belief in *sola scriptura* is itself a result of participation in a certain Christian tradition.

Robertson uses Gadamer to analyze the polemical writings of Athanasius as he fought against Arius.[125] Foundationally, he observes Gadamer's dictum that understanding is only able to happen through, not in spite of, the interpreter's pre-understandings. In a manner similar to that of Gadamer, Athanasius grounded interpretation in a number of formative traditions. He believed that proper interpretation had to take place within the Christian community, and that the proper faith-perspective was formed through catechism, baptism, and prayer. From the standpoint of interpreters today, there may be comparatively less confidence in our having the correct tradition for interpretation or a trustworthy historical tradition. However, Robertson still agrees that today biblical interpretation should be rooted in participation in Christian community.[126]

Benson seeks to approach interpretation through the analogy of the simultaneously constrained yet free nature of musical improvisation (as opposed to the frequently invoked model of "performance"), which he relates to Gadamer's notion of "play" between a text and a community.[127] From a confessional perspective, these poles can be related to the illumination brought by the Holy Spirit and the *cantus firmus* of mutual divine-human love.[128] Applying this to the practice of the Christian community, Benson observes that while the inevitable productive disagreements only go so far, "difference" in the Derridean sense serves the purpose of "deferring" and thus pointing ahead to the eschatological state where all will be united.[129]

Meek explores the relevance of Gadamer's hermeneutics for conservatives.[130] He argues that the concepts of the hermeneutical circle,

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[123] Awad, "Should We Dispense," 69.

[124] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 281.

[125] Jon Robertson, "Hermeneutical Horizons: A Challenge to Moderns from Athanasius and Gadamer," *Cultural Encounters* 6, no. 2 (2010): 35–42.

[126] Ibid., 41–42.

[127] Bruce Ellis Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities: Jazz, Interpretation, Heterophony, and the *ekklēsia*," in *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology*, ed. Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 295–319.

[128] Ibid., 303–304.

[129] Ibid., 319.

[130] Russell Meek, "Hans-Georg Gadamer: His Philosophical Hermeneutics and its Importance for Evangelical Biblical Hermeneutics," *Eleutheria* 1, no. 2 (2011): 97–106.

prejudice, and tradition are highly applicable to the concerns of evangelicals and should be adopted.[131] He is less enthusiastic about Gadamer's definition of meaning, since the consequent fusing of interpretation and application results in significant difficulty in identifying incorrect or harmful uses of the text.[132]

While an interpretive example from Hentschel was covered above,[133] her general reflections on interpretation also deserve comment. She commends Luther's hermeneutics as still relevant today, as he paid attention to the literal sense, believed that the Holy Spirit can use Scripture to bring the reader to conversion, and believed that Scripture interprets itself. This can be fruitfully compared to Gadamer's emphases on the event-like nature of interpretation, the multivalence of texts, and means by which a text can help interpreters better under their own historical situations.[134] Gadamer's categories can help clarify Luther's claims that a given biblical text may manifest itself as either law or gospel depending on the circumstance, and that the Holy Spirit is necessary for proper reception.[135]

Khola, likewise operating in a Lutheran framework, explores theological hermeneutics,[136] or "how our theology forms us to hear the Scriptures in a certain way, thereby producing valid meaning."[137] Foundational for him is Gadamer's dictum about preaching, namely that its criteria is based on enactment and result for the hearers, not merely neutral facts. He notes the inevitability of pre-judgments by recounting an experiment in which students were asked to retell the story of Prodigal Son (Luke 15). One of the significant results was that American students generally omitted the famine, an element of the story that was foreign to their background. At the same time, students from impoverished parts of the developing world were generally disinterested in the theme of wasted money, an element taken to be self-evidently central by many Western readers.[138] In order to make possible the necessary personal impact of the preached word on its audience, Khola recommends the incorporation of theories drawn from narrative theology, translation, and performance.[139]

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[131] Meek, "Hans-Georg Gadamer," 97–100.
[132] Ibid., 102–104.
[133] Hentschel, "Luther's Relevance."
[134] Ibid., 51–53.
[135] Ibid., 54–57.
[136] Jeffrey J. Khola, "Theological Hermeneutics After Meaning," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 46, no. 1 (2012): 4–16.
[137] Ibid., 6.
[138] Ibid., 8.
[139] Ibid., 9–14.

The controlling question addressed by White is the possibility of recovering a unified, objective meaning in a given text of Scripture.[140] Following Gadamer's principle of the governing nature of the context of the interpreter, he develops a case for interpretive plurality by theologically locating truth in the person of Jesus Christ (as opposed to an abstract principle) and considering the examples of the necessary pluriformity of the Trinity and variety of perspectives found within the canon itself.[141] He recommends that believers understand biblical authority as involving both human interpretation and the work of the Holy Spirit, not either one in isolation.[142] Regarding the inevitable question of criteria for what constitutes acceptable interpretations, White argues that this is best discerned by those who participate in the practices of the church,[143] as it is this tradition that best attunes readers to handle the Bible in an appropriate manner.

Nature of Hermeneutics: Conclusions

Several recurring themes lend coherence to the diverse studies reviewed above. The first noticeable trend is the overtly critical stances taken by some. While Thiselton and Meeks were optimistic regarding the possibility of Gadamer's hermeneutics for biblical studies, they were concerned about the resultant lack of objectivity. Jeanrond and Mootz likewise find Gadamer's theories insufficient and prefer Ricoeur (for his retention of a place for method proper) and Vattimo (for his incorporation of dialogical charity), respectively. The second major theme is the idea of the transformation of the reader, which clearly resounds with confessional scholars, and is present in the studies of Marshall, Poythress, Eberhard, and Khola. A third trend that is prevalent in more recent confessional approaches is the necessity of the interpreter participating in the church and Christian community in order to interpret the Bible correctly. This reflects a certain appropriation of Gadamer's concept of tradition, and is advocated by Nathan, Robertson, Benson, Khola, and White.

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[140] C. Jason White, "Is It Possible to Discover 'The One' Intended Meaning of the Biblical Authors?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67, no. 2 (2014): 179.

[141] Ibid., 187–190.

[142] Ibid., 190–191.

[143] Ibid., 191–194.

Reception History

England and Lyons identify two key features of the discipline of reception history.[144] The first is "the series of 'events' generated by the historical journey/ies of the biblical texts down through the centuries," and the second is "the inherent limitation given to it because of the complications attached to researching evidence that has survived, but with various levels of success, within the multitudinous streams of a two-millennia-plus long journey down through history."[145] Naturally, within these broad strictures a diverse array of interdisciplinary inquiries have taken place. Gadamer's interest in tradition and its relevance for interpretation makes him a natural conversation partner for scholars looking for a theoretical basis upon which to conduct this kind of work.

In a series of articles,[146] O'Kane has explored the possibilities of utilizing Gadamer for reception history, particularly as it involves examining artistic interpretations of the Bible. In the first of these,[147] he asks the question of how paintings can contribute to the task of interpretation[148] and suggests that in a fashion parallel to the rise of interest in what the reader brings to the text, it is profitable to consider what the viewer brings to a work of art.[149] He notes the significant discussion within the field of art, wherein Gadamer posits that art has the potential to disclose truths (above and beyond the immediate subject matter) about the viewer's own situation.[150] Furthermore, art has the potential to instigate a "coming forth" (*Darstellung*) of the subject matter.[151]

In his application, he looks at four Italian painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who depicted the nativity scene and observes different emphases that their works brought forth: Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* portrays the respective gazes of the various characters, and "in depicting the characters' intense watchfulness, he conveys the text's preoccupation with sight

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[144] Emma England and William John Lyons, "Explorations in the Reception of the Bible," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, ed. Emma England and William John Lyons (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), 3–16.

[145] Ibid., 6.

[146] Martin O'Kane, "The Artist as Reader of the Bible: Visual Exegesis and the Adoration of the Magi," *Biblical Interpretation* 13, no. 4 (2005): 337–373; "*Wirkungsgeschichte* and Visual Exegesis: The Contribution of Hans-Georg Gadamer," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 2 (2010): 147–159; "Interpreting the Bible through the Visual Arts," *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 1, no. 3 (2012): 388–409.

[147] O'Kane, "The Artist as Reader."

[148] Ibid., 337.

[149] Ibid., 338.

[150] Ibid., 343.

[151] Ibid., 344.

and insight,"[152] which in turn brings the viewer into this environment of warm adulation. Conversely, Fra Filippo Lippi's *Adoration of the Magi* is an expansive scene that incorporates a number of supernatural themes influenced by messianic references in the Psalter, creating an immediate connection between the infant Jesus and the otherworldly hope of eternal life.[153] These and other examples illustrate that art is a means of contextualization and application, not just wooden translation. O'Kane concludes by reinforcing his main point that a Gadamerian understanding of visual exegesis reveals that art, as it brings into being an angle on a scene, functions to illuminate the viewer and broaden his or her perspectives.[154]

Elsewhere O'Kane reprises select examples of the visual depictions of the Magi for the purpose of expositing Gadamer's concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, which he defines as "how a work of art affects its viewer and is concerned with the work's capacity to draw the viewer, sometimes quite powerfully, into the visual world of the Bible."[155] Finally, O'Kane reiterates the need for biblical scholars to engage with the various ways artists have portrayed scenes from Scripture, and he discusses various artistic renditions of the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 27.[156] As opposed to text-oriented scholarship, which can quickly become caught up in theological questions, attention to visual exegesis can raise new interpretive questions.[157]

Knight sets out to compare the precise meanings of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, reception history, and reception theory.[158] He offers the caution that Gadamer would not have wanted some kind of history of interpretation to merely be an alternative to traditional exegesis.[159] Meanwhile, reception history proper he traces to the work of Jauss,[160] who was somewhat more methodologically deliberate than Gadamer, making him helpful for biblical studies. Reception theory is tied to Fish,[161] who was heavily involved with reader-response theory and thus was interested in "the interpretative power of the reader in a more

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[152] O'Kane, "The Artist as Reader," 357.

[153] Ibid., 361.

[154] Ibid., 373.

[155] O'Kane, "Contribution," 148.

[156] O'Kane, "Interpreting the Bible."

[157] Ibid., 409.

[158] Mark Knight, "*Wirkungsgeschichte*, Reception History, Reception Theory," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 2 (2010): 137–146.

[159] Ibid., 139.

[160] Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetics of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982).

[161] Stanley Fish, *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

abstract and philosophical sense."[162] Reflecting on how these lines of thought have played out within New Testament studies, Knight curiously states that the most straightforward (though not necessarily faithful) application of Gadamer's *Wirkungsgeschichte* has been the Blackwell commentary series. He concludes with a simple plea for attention to alternative interpretations.

Other comparable studies in the area of reception history provide further methodological reflection and give some examples of usage. Riches approvingly contrasts Gadamer's situating of the reader within a given interpretive tradition with the ahistorical existentialism of Bultmann.[163] To illustrate the outworking of this model, he probes Luther's struggle with Romans 1:17, and notes how much of the readings were wrapped up in his prior understanding of work-righteousness and the confirmation he experienced upon reading Augustine. Thus, texts are rightly understood in the context of the real-world implications they have had for a multitude of reading communities.[164]

In a somewhat different vein, Wisse[165] uses Gadamer to identify the shortcomings of the Blackwell reception commentary on John (*John Through the Centuries*),[166] specifically, that it still adheres to a strictly modernist framework in that it is content to simply list previous interpretations of the Gospel of John, rather than attempting anything along the lines of a true merging of horizons. This criticism is ironic in light of Knight's (see above) advocacy for this commentary series. Similar propositions are made by Gunda,[167] who is particularly attracted to Gadamer's discussion of how "classic" texts function in "uniting the past, present, and the future." In identifying the ability of the biblical text to speak in some way to the present through this dialogue of contexts, Gunda shows that she likewise rejects any execution of reception history that amounts to mere cataloguing of previous interpretations.

A cautionary note is sounded by Fowl,[168] who argues that the connection often drawn between Gadamer's *Wirkungsgeschichte* and reception history is tenuous and sterile. He advocates the definition of *Wirkungsgeschichte* given in

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[162] Knight, "*Wirkungsgeschichte*," 141.

[163] John Riches, "Reception History as a Challenge to Biblical Theology," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (2013): 171–185.

[164] Ibid., 185.

[165] Maarten Wisse, "The Reception of John and the Modern Commentary Tradition," *Journal of Early Christian History* 4, no. 2 (2014): 181–188.

[166] Mark Edwards, *John through the Centuries* (Oxford: Wiley/Blackwell, 2004).

[167] Masiiwa Ragies Gunda, "Reception History of the Bible: Prospects of a New Frontier in African Biblical Studies," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, eds. Emma England and William John Lyons (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), 125–38.

[168] Stephen Fowl, "Effective History and the Cultivation of Wise Interpreters," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (2013): 153–161.

Warnke:[169] "the operative force of the tradition over those that belong to it, so that even in rejecting or reacting to it they remain conditioned by it."[170] Understood in this sense, it cannot be objectified and independently analyzed, nor does it commend biblical scholars to pay attention to premodern readings. As a more promising means of approaching the usual territory of reception, Fowl turns to MacIntyre[171] and his use of tradition as exemplified in a rehabilitated Aristotelian ethic. Applied to biblical studies, as one enters the practice of being a biblical interpreter, one realizes the highly contextual nature of the questions they bring to their task, thus situating oneself in a larger tradition. For those operating in a confessional framework, who see spiritual formation and worship as the ultimate end of their labors, premodern interpretation may prove instructive as a model for the integration of exegesis and theology.[172]

Possibly the most significant methodological discussion is Morse,[173] who surveys the thought of Gadamer, Jauss, and Iser, and argues that the term "Reception Criticism" is preferable to "Reception History," as the former

> describes a critical and creative practice that is concerned with the interpretation and influence of the Bible in the past as well as in the future. It designates an approach to biblical studies that asks how and why the Bible has been, and continues to be, made meaningful for individuals and communities throughout history.[174]

She further identifies three types of reception criticism: (1) "Historical Reception Criticism," which she faults for often lapsing into mere summary of previous interpretations and failing to achieve a true dialogue between the contexts of a given interpreter and the biblical text itself; (2) "Formalist Reception Criticism," which tends to devote itself to a particular medium, such as paintings or even modern advertising; and (3) "Ideological Reception Criticism," which incorporates the direct interrogation of the biblical text (and the major currents of its afterlives) from a particular ideological vantage point. Morse finds this lens particularly advantageous, as Gadamer's concept of the merging of horizons

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[169] Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Oxford: Polity, 1987).

[170] Fowl, "Effective History," 156.

[171] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988); *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

[172] Fowl, "Effective History," 160–161.

[173] Holly Morse, "What's in a Name? Analysing the Appellation 'Reception History' in Biblical Studies," *Biblical Reception* 3 (2014): 243–264.

[174] Ibid., 253. Italics in original.

would immediately critique the tendency of traditional histories of interpretation to mute minority perspectives.[175] She concludes by noting that reception criticism should not be antagonized with historical criticism, except in the instances that the latter focuses myopically upon original, "universal" meanings that both turn the Bible into a relic and fail to make sense of the diversity of ways it has influenced modern culture.[176]

Reception History: Conclusions

This review of the use of Gadamer within the field of reception history has revealed a somewhat fragmented landscape. O'Kane's driving interest in art, and how it can help interpreters think about the Bible in new ways, puts him in something of a class of his own. Knight and Morse are overwhelmingly concerned with the precise definitions and aims of related subdisciplines: Knight seeks to relate *Wirkungsgeschichte*, reception history, and reception theory, while Morse adopts a taxonomy of historical reception criticism, formalist reception criticism, and ideological reception criticism. Both of them advocate methodological rigor and offer the caution that reception history can never be reduced to the mere reviewing of previous interpretations. For the most part, the rest of the sources in this section not only seek to likewise go beyond simply cataloguing previous interpretations, but also see this kind of historical exercise as directly informative for practical matters today. This orientation is directly seen in Riches, Wisse, and Gunda, who demonstrate a concern for the transformation of the interpreter. The lone voice dismissive of Gadamer in this category is Fowl, who maintains that McIntyre's framework is superior to Gadamer's for the task of appropriating the reading strategies of the early church in the service of ecclesiastically oriented research and practice.

Conclusions

The above survey has sought to group previous applications of the thought of Gadamer to biblical studies under the following three categories: (1) the direct use of Gadamer for exegesis; (2) the use of Gadamer in abstract reflections on the hermeneutical endeavor; and (3) employment of Gadamer within the field of reception history. A striking observation of my analysis is that the bulk of studies employing Gadmer reside in category two—thereby relegating the exegetical task (category one) to more peripheral studies. This observation is striking given the

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[175] Morse, "What's in a Name," 258.

[176] Ibid., 259–262.

centrality of exegesis for Biblical studies in general. Future studies will no doubt profit from engagement with Gadamer in exegesis, especially as means of mediating modern-day conceptual categories with various textual phenomena, and understanding different kinds of intratextual engagement within the Bible itself. Furthermore, as the second section showed, the use of Gadamer in discussion of the task of interpretation has been largely restricted to select themes, with familiar recurring application points: concerns regarding lack of objectivity, utilization for the purpose of the transformation of the reader, and the application point of the necessity of the interpreter being meaningfully involved in Christian worship, sacramental practices, and discipleship.

This survey shows that Gadamer's thought has been utilized in biblical studies in a number of creative and productive ways. However, the majority of his most popularly referenced ideas (the fusion of horizons, positive appraisal of prejudice, effective history) occur in part two of *Truth and Method*, leaving significant portions of his platform potentially ripe for appropriation. The two areas that are most notably absent in the above survey are his thoughts on aesthetics (found in part one of *Truth and Method*) and his treatment of language (in part three). Thoughtful interaction with these and other concepts found in his corpus will most certainly prove to be both stimulating and directly applicable for a considerable variety of subtopics within biblical studies for years to come.

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