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## Francis Watson and Stephen E. Fowl as Theological Interpreters of Scripture

PATRICK S. FRANKLIN

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### INTRODUCTION

THE THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF Scripture has become a significant topic of scholarly discussion and debate in recent years. While this contemporary conversation may be more broadly conceived as being an heir to the Biblical Theology movement, Daniel J. Treier notes that “theological hermeneutics . . . is fast becoming a term with its own history.”<sup>1</sup> While representatives of this emerging movement frequently address common themes, such as the role of faith and the ecclesial community in interpretation, their particular approaches and methodologies are diverse. This paper focuses on two scholars considered to be among the leading advocates of the theological interpretation of Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

### FRANCIS WATSON

Francis Watson received his DPhil from the University of Oxford. He currently teaches in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University (UK) and previously held positions at Aberdeen (as Chair of New Testament Exegesis) and King’s College in London (as Reader in Biblical Theology). Watson’s primary area of expertise is New Testament studies, but he also has diverse interests in theological hermeneutics and the history of biblical interpretation. His approach to theological interpretation

1. Treier, “Theological Hermeneutics,” 787. Treier also notes that theological hermeneutics is inspired by pre-modern exegesis and reacts against modern (post-Reformation) tendencies toward individualism, foundationalism, and a preoccupation with method (*ibid.*, 787–88).

2. For other examples, see Adam et al., *Reading Scripture with the Church*. See also the following commentary series for different approaches to theological interpretation: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Brazos/Baker), the Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Eerdmans), the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (IVP), and the NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan).

is difficult to summarize without doing violence to the depth and breadth of his academic writing. Watson does not begin with a set of strict methodological rules, but with a broad theological orientation that defines his purpose and sets boundaries for the rules and strategies he chooses to employ. I will begin my discussion of Watson by outlining his general theological orientation and then proceed to explore the methodological implications stemming from that orientation.

## The Orientation of a Theological Interpreter

### *An Explicitly Theological Orientation*

A common feature of all approaches to the theological interpretation of Scripture is the acknowledgement of an explicitly *theological* orientation on the part of the reader. Watson argues that this distinguishes theological interpretation from a purely historical-critical approach that presumes to operate from a theologically neutral position of objectivity.<sup>3</sup> This latter position rests on a prior commitment to a clear distinction between exegesis, as a purely descriptive task, and theology, which requires reflection, synthesis, and application to contemporary concerns.<sup>4</sup> Interpretive methods based on this commitment usually also follow Krister Stendahl's sharp distinction between "what a text meant" and "what the text means."<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Watson agrees with Brevard Childs that true scriptural interpretation begins from an explicit framework of faith; otherwise the gap between the descriptive and theological tasks could never be bridged.<sup>6</sup> Only a framework of faith properly attends to the true subject matter of the biblical texts, namely the words and actions of the Triune God to which they testify.<sup>7</sup> Scripture is unique literature and cannot be read just like any other.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, a theological orientation means openness toward the voice of the Living God and a sincere desire to know and worship God.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, while Watson resists the historical-critical method's presumption of neutrality, he is equally critical of self-enclosed literary or narrative approaches to scriptural interpretation that dis-

3. Watson, *Text and Truth*, 33–41.

4. Many scholars attribute the prominence of this distinction to Johann P. Gabler's inaugural lecture at the University of Altdorf in 1787. See his "Oration." For Watson's critique of this distinction, see *Text, Church and World*, 30–33, and *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, 531–32.

5. See Hasel, "Relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology," 116.

6. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 31. Furthermore, a neutral orientation based on this distinction rules out the possibility of encountering God *in the text*. It seems to imply that theology is something subsequent to and outside of the text, and is therefore left to construct its own God out of the exegetical gaps.

7. Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, x.

8. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 2.

9. Thus, Watson asserts that the primary function of Holy Scripture is to be read publicly in the church during communal worship (*ibid.*, 4). Later in the book, Watson suggests that the theological readings of Scripture he provides share a common pneumatological thread located in a broad Trinitarian perspective (*ibid.*, 221).

miss historical concerns or fail to address the claims that Scripture makes concerning reality. While he applauds Childs's critique of the purely descriptive approach and his affirmation of the role of faith in the context of the ecclesial community, he critiques Childs's tendency to isolate the biblical text from the real world.<sup>10</sup>

Theological interpretation of Scripture means, for Watson, that theological concerns are primary. Interpreters should concern themselves primarily with the theological issues that the Scriptures raise, not just within a self-enclosed biblical canon but more broadly in contemporary ecclesial, cultural, and socio-political contexts.<sup>11</sup> The point is *to do theology itself*, and exegetical and hermeneutical methods are helpful insofar as they serve to facilitate that end.<sup>12</sup> Theological interpreters do not, therefore, study texts merely as ends in themselves, but rather as a means to stimulate and refine theological reflection and articulation. As Watson puts it, "Ascertaining what the texts say is indeed a necessary first step, and at this point standard exegetical methods are indispensable. But in the last resort, to interpret is *to use the texts to think with*" (emphasis original).<sup>13</sup> The goal of theological interpretation is not merely to understand the biblical texts, but to think theologically about God, the world, human nature, and indeed all of reality on the basis of those texts. In saying this, Watson does not intend to devalue the importance of texts in any way. Indeed, for Watson, truth is textually mediated. Moreover, Christ himself is textually mediated, which means that God is textually mediated!<sup>14</sup> This means that careful attention to texts and skill in analyzing them is crucial. However it also means that one can esteem the biblical texts appropriately only when one recognizes their *telos* as Holy Scripture, which is bearing witness to the divine Word.

10. Ibid., 44–45. Watson directs similar charges at Hans Frei's synchronic literary perspective (ibid., 22–24, 46–59) and George Lindbeck's "cultural linguistic model" (ibid., 133–36).

11. Ibid., vii. According to Watson, the tendency to operate within a self-enclosed world of the canon was one of the weaknesses of the Biblical Theology movement. Watson seeks to correct this tendency and redefines biblical theology as "a theological, hermeneutical, and exegetical discipline" in which "hermeneutical and exegetical dimensions are placed at the service of its overriding theological concern" (Watson, *Text and Truth*, vii).

12. Ibid., 13.

13. Watson, *Agape, Eros, Gender*, viii. Elsewhere, Watson notes that Paul's interpretive practices raise questions about the modern ideal of "pure exegesis." Rather than simply duplicating the text, Paul seems to reflect and speak from a position of textual indwelling, being "immersed in the vocabulary and cadences of Scripture" (*Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, 17, 22).

14. Watson's position that our access to Jesus Christ is textually mediated derives both from his understanding of the incarnation (and its implications) and from his insight that Jesus explicitly placed himself within the scriptural (Old Testament) narrative of God's promises and saving action. In his words and actions, Jesus referred and alluded to the Old Testament to explain and demonstrate his own identity and mission. See Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 223, 250; *Text and Truth*, 27; and *Agape, Eros, Gender*, ix.

*An Ecclesial Orientation*

According to Watson, the church is the preliminary reading community within which Holy Scripture is located.<sup>15</sup> Biblical interpretation, then, is primarily a church practice.<sup>16</sup> Its purpose is to foster communal worship and stimulate self-critical reflection on Christian truth claims within the church.<sup>17</sup> To a certain extent, this ecclesial context protects theological interpretation from secular assumptions and methods that distort the true subject matter of Scripture. Watson writes, “[T]he claims of modern biblical scholarship are to be resisted insofar as they prove incompatible with the claims of the ecclesial community, its canon, and its interpretive tradition.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Watson believes that “secular” insights can sometimes illuminate aspects of Scripture and thus aid theological interpretation. For example, new insights in science or anthropology could potentially shed light on the doctrine of creation or the doctrine of humanity. Accordingly, Watson rejects postliberal approaches that regard truth claims as being merely intra-systematic, particular to certain communities and incommensurable with others.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the Christian faith makes universal truth claims even while resisting the totalizing tendencies of modern metanarratives feared by postmodern critics.<sup>20</sup>

Watson’s ecclesial orientation derives, at least in part, from his relational view of humanity, which in turn derives from his relational view of the Triune God. In his early work, Watson followed Alistair McFadyen (and Barth) in grounding his relational understanding of humanity in the *imago Dei*.<sup>21</sup> This view maintains that humanity bears the divine image because in its basic differentiation of being male and female, it mirrors the inner-Trinitarian relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit. The emphasis here is not on the gender distinction per se (as if only male-female relationships image God), but on the inter-subjectivity and reciprocity of distinct persons in relationship. Individual distinctiveness does not threaten the unity of relationship and oneness in relationship does not reduce the uniqueness of persons. Unity and diversity, particularity and universality, are held in dialogical tension as both subjects remain a “Thou” and neither is reduced to an “It.”<sup>22</sup> From this perspective, human persons are always and irreducibly persons-in-relationship. Relationships are consti-

15. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 13.

16. Watson, “Authors, Readers, Hermeneutics,” 119.

17. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 79.

18. Watson, “Authors, Readers, Hermeneutics,” 120.

19. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 83, 236.

20. For Watson, an eschatological orientation mitigates the danger of employing Christian universal truth claims in the service of totalizing metanarratives. Although Christianity is a metanarrative (in a certain sense), it is never totally disclosed to the thinking subject. It is eschatological, disclosed not in triumphalist glory, but in the cross and forsakenness of Christ (*ibid.*, 263).

21. *Ibid.*, 107–8.

22. Watson’s discussion is reminiscent of Buber’s account of I-Thou relations, but more directly explores Jürgen Habermas’s notions of persons formed by socio-linguistic forces (*ibid.*, 108).

tutive of being human; they are not a secondary or peripheral influence. While Watson later abandons his earlier interpretation of the *imago Dei* on exegetical grounds, he nevertheless retains a relational understanding of both God and humanity.<sup>23</sup> In *Text and Truth*, he connects the *imago Dei* much more closely with Christology, on the grounds that several New Testament passages describe Christ as the true image of God and the fulfillment of the New Creation (i.e., Col 1:15; 2 Cor 4:4; Col 3:9–11; 2 Cor 5:17). He argues that the implication of the *imago Dei* is that God conforms human being and acting to that of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, who is operative in Christian community.<sup>24</sup> In *Agape, Eros, Gender*, Watson argues that human beings participate through Jesus and the Spirit in the inner-Trinitarian *agape* love, which is the beginning and end of Christian faith and living.<sup>25</sup> Thus, while Watson refines and modifies his exegesis over time, he retains an emphasis on a relational understanding of humanity as participating in some way in the life of the Triune God.

The hermeneutical significance of this is that divine truth is always mediated relationally by other human beings, first in the person of the incarnate Christ and secondarily in the form of human community. The church exists as the particular community called to demonstrate God's love for the world in its preaching and sacraments, life and praxis.<sup>26</sup> It receives the Scriptures as a communication from God and through the Scriptures it is drawn to speak with God and about God both in its communal life and in the world. The church is therefore a crucial context for the theological interpretation of Scripture.

#### *An Orientation toward the World*

It has already been noted that Watson is critical of canonical and postliberal approaches that tend to confine the scope of biblical interpretation to a self-enclosed narrative (the biblical canon) or to intra-systematic, community-specific truth claims. Both of these approaches, while protecting important theological concerns, ultimately neglect the hermeneutical significance of the dialogical relationship between Scripture and reality.<sup>27</sup> For Watson, a theological approach to the interpretation of Scripture must be oriented also toward the world. Watson's theological basis for this orientation is the doctrine of the Trinity, with a particular emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit both in the creation of the world and in human society. Following John Owen, Watson sees the Spirit actively involved in the creation of all living things as well as in the continual

23. See Watson, *Text and Truth*, 304 n. 26.

24. *Ibid.*, 277–300.

25. Watson, *Agape, Eros, Gender*, xi.

26. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 243; *Text and Truth*, 27. This love is not limited to the church, nor is it complete within the church. Rather, the praxis of divine love in the church, limited as it is, is a sign and preview of the eschatological consummation of community in Christ.

27. Watson proposes instead an “intra-textual realism” (*Text, Church and World*, 230).

perfecting or completing of creation.<sup>28</sup> This implies that the Spirit's activity is universal, and not just restricted to the covenant people. Watson spells out the implication: "[T]he Spirit dwells within the created and human world as well as within the church, in which case truth may proceed from the world to the church as well as from the church to the world."<sup>29</sup> He goes on to explain that sometimes the Spirit poses critical questions to the church from beyond its ecclesial borders, in order to cleanse it of distorted interpretations of Scripture that justify oppressive actions.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Watson points out that all theological speech is linguistically and historically mediated.<sup>31</sup> We cannot help but use the medium of human speech to speak about God, but God graciously accommodates himself to human language and, by extension, to human learning, culture, reasoning, and empirical observation. Since God is active in all spheres of human activity (albeit to varying degrees), it is possible for human experience to illuminate the theological interpretation of Scripture. While Scripture remains the lens through which we interpret the world, the world also provides new insights and perspectives for reading Scripture.<sup>32</sup> For example, while theological reflection on gender and sexuality must be deeply informed by the canon, it can also be enriched by relevant contemporary insights from science, anthropology, and psychology.<sup>33</sup> While there is a possibility that contemporary discoveries might distort the interpretation of the text, they also might provide insights into aspects of the text that have previously been missed or neglected.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to these epistemological concerns, Jesus' command to love God and neighbor also motivates an orientation toward the world.<sup>35</sup> Such love, revealed in Jesus and awakened by the Holy Spirit, enables theological interpreters to see the world as the object of God's love and saving action. In light of this, theological interpretation strives to articulate the reality of God's love and saving action in contemporary contexts. In so doing, it equips the church to live out the gospel faithfully and credibly before the world in its doctrine and praxis. This means that theological interpretation

28. *Ibid.*, 236–40. Watson develops his pneumatological position with reference to John Owen's *Pneumatologia*, in which Owen discusses the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament as well as "in things natural, civil, moral, political, and artificial" (*ibid.*, 237, quoting Owen).

29. *Ibid.*, 237.

30. *Ibid.*, 240.

31. *Ibid.*, 9.

32. Watson notes that this perspective highlights the public nature of Christian truth claims, which the church makes on the basis of Scripture (*ibid.*, 10).

33. In *Agape, Eros, Gender*, Watson brings canonical biblical texts into conversation with important "secular" voices in philosophy, psychology, and feminist studies in a theological reflection on gender and sexual ethics.

34. Watson points out that while it is important to avoid "modernizing" Jesus, it is equally important to avoid "archaizing" him (*Text, Church and World*, 219).

35. For Watson's discussion of the hermeneutical significance of the praxis of neighbor love, see *ibid.*, 265–87.

has a missionary component.<sup>36</sup> It does not merely describe biblical ideas or Christian religious experience, but actually bears a message that is relevant and urgent for today. Thus, Watson appropriates Barth's assertion that the important issue for the theological interpreter is not what the apostles and prophets said, but rather *what we must say* on the basis of the apostles and prophets.<sup>37</sup>

### Methodological Implications

#### *An Incarnational Approach*

As previously mentioned, Watson's approach to interpreting Scripture theologically is difficult to summarize, because it is often richly complex and breathtaking in scope. Watson never simply applies exegetical rules or methods in a wooden, calculative manner, but interacts with texts in highly suggestive, creative, and thought-provoking ways. One element of his thought that consistently holds together his various interpretive strategies is Christology. Watson has an *incarnational* approach to interpretation, in which the reality of the Word made flesh orients the interpreter toward text, church, and world, and appropriate strategies of interpretation arise out of that threefold dialogical interaction. Watson writes, "Christian faith has a *center* . . . it is not a set of unconnected assertions about God, humankind and the world . . . this center is the self-disclosure in Jesus of the triune God." Therefore, "every assertion of Christian theology must be able to demonstrate a relationship to this center."<sup>38</sup> It is in Christ that text, church, and world hold together and become theologically meaningful.

#### *An Interdisciplinary Approach*

This incarnational center enables Watson to immerse himself in diverse themes and employ diverse methods without being totally absorbed in or confined by any of them.<sup>39</sup> Since the incarnation is a historical event, Watson makes use of historical-critical tools when they are helpful, but since it is also a theological event, he rejects idealistic notions of "pure" historical criticism that cannot sufficiently account for its significance and falls into reductionism. Similarly, since the incarnation is a textually mediated event, both preceded and followed by the biblical witnesses to God's saving activity, theological interpretation deeply indwells the canonical Scriptures. Yet, since the incarnation is a real event (in fact, *the most real event* in history) its claim on the reader and the world transcends the self-enclosed world of the text. Moreover, since the biblical text itself is relationally mediated by its preliminary reading community,

36. Ibid., 10–11.

37. Ibid., 13 (citing Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.1 [1932]).

38. Watson, *Text and Truth*, 209. In context, Watson makes this claim to justify reading the Old Testament as a Christian theological enterprise.

39. At one point, Watson uses the image of "conversation" to protect both text and interpreter from being absolutized, which would result in an authoritarian "monologue" (*Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, 23).

namely the church, theological interpretation is ecclesiocentric in its assumptions and objectives—its purpose is to form, edify, and equip the Body of Christ. However, since Christ is the transcendent Lord of the church and Savior of the world, theological interpretation must retain a component of self-critical realism and other-centered love. It must engage the world in sincere dialogue, because God speaks to the world through the church and God challenges and corrects the church through the world. In short, Watson's incarnational center leads him naturally toward an *interdisciplinary* approach to interpretation.

Watson's interdisciplinary approach is evident in all of his work. For example, in *Text, Church and World*, Watson engages both Old and New Testament studies, theologians like Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, postmodern theory (i.e., Lyotard, Derrida), feminist theory, and systematic theology, in order to demonstrate his three-fold orientation to text, church, and world. In *Text and Truth*, he redefines biblical theology as “an interdisciplinary approach to biblical interpretation which seeks to dismantle the barriers that at present separate biblical scholarship from Christian theology.”<sup>40</sup> He then endeavors, through his incarnational approach, to bridge and integrate several disciplines that are currently separated by false dichotomies, such as history vs. narrative, literal sense vs. authorial intent, and New vs. Old Testament theology.<sup>41</sup> In *Agape, Eros, Gender*, which Watson describes as his third attempt at an interdisciplinary approach to biblical interpretation, he critically engages thinkers as varied and diverse as Plato, Augustine, Freud, Luce Irigaray, Virginia Woolfe, Barth, and Von Balthasar to help him read and clarify several Pauline texts to construct a Pauline sexual ethic. In *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, Watson considers the Apostle Paul as a reader of Scripture and highlights his dialogical interaction with the Old Testament, traditional and contemporary Jewish interpretations, and theological implications of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In addition, Watson shows how a theological position can itself serve as a hermeneutical approach. In the case of Paul, the christological doctrine of justification by faith both derives from (in limited form) and qualifies his interpretation of the Old Testament and its theology.

### *A Canonical Approach*

Watson's incarnational grounding also leads him to accept a *canonical* approach to Scripture, which attempts to work with the biblical text in its final form.<sup>42</sup> I have al-

40. Watson, *Text and Truth*, vii.

41. For Watson's criticism of James Barr's opposition to an interdisciplinary and explicitly Christian approach to biblical interpretation (of both testaments), see *ibid.*, 17–28.

42. Watson believes that using the text in its final form is warranted (1) because of developments in literary studies that have exposed the reductionisms of the historical-critical method (as a pure ideal); (2) because the text has only ever functioned as authoritative for the church in its final form; and (3) because the final form is most suitable for theological use (the subject matter of the text is inseparable from its form as narrative). See *Text, Church and World*, 16–17. However, accepting

ready mentioned Watson's argument that every assertion of Christian theology must be able to demonstrate its relation to Christ, who is the center of Christian faith. In addition to this, Watson argues that the incarnation is the central event that unites the canon.<sup>43</sup> In particular, it justifies the interpretation of the Old Testament as a *Christian* theological enterprise. According to Watson, the advent of Christ shows that the Bible is irreducibly twofold. Moreover, there is a constitutive relationship between the two testaments, which takes the form of a preceding and a following (hence the justified use of the qualifying terms "Old" and "New"). In addition, what distinguishes the Old Testament from the New Testament is not simply temporality or chronology; rather, the incarnation establishes a qualitative distinction between the two. Finally, insofar as the New Testament constitutes the Old Testament as old, the latter is relativized.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, according to Watson, we receive the Old Testament with and from Jesus Christ.<sup>45</sup> In arguing this, Watson is not claiming (naïvely) that the Old Testament is always speaking about Christ. He is arguing that, on the basis of the incarnation, all things are relative to Christ. Thus, a *Christian* theological interpretation of the Old Testament is christocentric, but it is not christomonistic.<sup>46</sup> Watson's canonical methodology often leads him to interact theologically with the Old Testament. Some examples of this include his gender critique of Hebrew narratives in *Text, Church and World*, his christological interpretation of the *imago Dei* in *Text and Truth*, and his reading of the Pentateuch in *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*.<sup>47</sup>

### *Strategies of Resisting the Text*

A final methodological approach that I would like to mention is Watson's notion of *resisting the text*. In *Agape, Eros, Gender*, he observes that biblical texts often do not say what they ought to say or, alternatively, they say what they ought not to say.<sup>48</sup> The problem that Watson seeks to address is: how should a theological interpretation of Scripture treat aspects of texts that are oppressive or unjust? For example, what is one to do with the biblical texts that support patriarchy? One option that Watson rejects is "biblicism," which is a strict adherence to the prima-facie claims of such texts. Biblicism can express itself in both liberal and conservative forms.<sup>49</sup> In the former,

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the text in its final canonical form does not render the Bible immune from criticism (ibid., 223) or eliminate the necessity for "resisting the text" when justice requires it (see my comments on resisting the text in subsequent paragraphs).

43. Watson writes, "[I]n Jesus the Word has become flesh . . . this must constitute the center and the basis of all our thinking about the divine-human relationship" (*Text and Truth*, 197).

44. Ibid., 179–80.

45. Ibid., 182–83.

46. Ibid., 184.

47. Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 173–201; *Text and Truth*, 277–300; *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, *passim*.

48. Watson, *Agape, Eros, Gender*, vii.

49. For Watson's distinction between biblicism of the right and biblicism of the left, see *Text*,

the interpreter takes the passage at face-value but denies its authority and rejects its claims. In the latter, the interpreter takes the passage at face-value and accepts its authority along with its endorsement of oppression. Feminist interpreters who reject controversial Pauline texts as being misogynistic are an example of liberal biblicism, while complementarian interpreters are an example of conservative biblicism. Another option, which Watson also rejects, is to deny the oppressive nature of the texts by attempting to demonstrate their true (liberating) authorial intention from their supposed historical context. Many egalitarian interpreters with Evangelical faith commitments choose this option. What these positions have in common is that they all attempt to justify their interpretation on historical-critical grounds (though a radical feminist critique is often more explicitly ideological). In contrast to these options, Watson's strategy is a *both-and* approach. Watson acknowledges the oppressive nature of such texts, but also argues that the texts themselves encourage us to resist their oppressive claims (especially when read canonically) by pointing beyond themselves.<sup>50</sup> For example, at face value Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 11 that women should wear veils is an oppressive measure. However, Watson argues that the veil invites theological reflection neither on a gender hierarchy, nor on the possibility of an egalitarian alternative, but on the difference between *agape* and *eros* and the inappropriateness of the latter in the public gathering of the church.<sup>51</sup> Watson's approach makes use of historical-critical insights, but combines them with canonical, ecclesial, and interdisciplinary engagement. In sum, he interprets the text in question with the help of other relevant texts from Scripture, church tradition, and insights about human sexuality from the sciences and social sciences.<sup>52</sup>

Watson's strategies for resisting the text arise out of his central christological foundation. This is apparent in that one of the ways Watson resists the text is by distinguishing law from gospel within the same biblical passage (in both testaments), a strategy that Martin Luther also employed in his commentary on Galatians.<sup>53</sup> In *Text, Church and World*, Watson argues that the Pauline law/gospel antithesis asserts that the "gospel" (which points toward liberation) is more fundamental than "law" (which oppresses). This antithesis between law and gospel provides Watson with a basis for resisting or critiquing the biblical text on inner-biblical, theological grounds when its plain, literal sense is tyrannical.<sup>54</sup> This is because the authority of the gospel as a

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*Church and World*, 14.

50. *Ibid.*, 201.

51. Watson, *Agape, Eros, Gender*, 57.

52. Another example is Watson's treatment of husbands and wives in Ephesians 5. He argues that the text takes male dominance for granted; however, there are liberating aspects within the text that subtly and subversively transform its oppressive aspects. As with the 1 Corinthians passage, Watson does not deny the oppressive elements in the text, but argues that the passage itself points beyond such oppression (*Agape, Eros, Gender*, 222–34).

53. See Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 190–201, 231–35.

54. *Ibid.*, 231.

whole is greater than that of the particular text in question. Such decisions to resist the text cannot be made simplistically, in a linear and deductive manner; rather, the law–gospel dialectic has a circular and canonical movement reflecting the ongoing dialogue between parts and whole. In *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, Watson provides further insight into the law–gospel antithesis and its implications for resisting the text. He argues that in its positive, prophetic voice, Scripture speaks of God’s future saving action. In its negative, legal voice, Scripture speaks about the negative outcome of the human action that the law itself had previously promoted.<sup>55</sup> Applying this insight to the gender debate, we might say that Paul instructed women to be silent and submissive for reasons that are no longer totally clear to us (law), but over time this law encouraged the oppression of women. Conversely, the prophetic message of the gospel provides freedom from the Law and from the oppression that the Law now aids and abets (contrary to its original purpose).<sup>56</sup>

#### STEPHEN E. FOWL

Stephen Fowl earned his PhD in New Testament from Sheffield University under the supervision of Anthony Thiselton and Andrew Lincoln. He is currently a Professor of Theology and Chair of the Department at Loyola College (Maryland) and served previously as Lecturer in Christian Ethics at Lincoln Theological College (UK). Fowl’s basic expertise is in New Testament studies, but he also has interests in theology, ethics, and Christian community. We can summarize Fowl’s general approach to theological interpretation with reference to his central argument in *Engaging Scripture*. He writes, “given the ends towards which Christians interpret their scripture, Christian interpretation of scripture needs to involve a complex interaction in which Christian convictions, practices, and concerns are brought to bear on scriptural interpretation in ways that both shape that interpretation and are shaped by it.”<sup>57</sup>

Before discussing Fowl’s overall approach, I will comment briefly on key aspects of this central argument. First, the “ends towards which Christians interpret their scripture” are determinative for Fowl’s methodology. Fowl’s approach to theological interpretation is a *teleological* and ethical model. He has learned from virtue ethicists, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, that one can make factual evaluative judgments about something only if one understands its *telos*, its purpose or goal.<sup>58</sup> For example, one can make the evaluative judgment “this is a good watch” or “this is a bad watch” only if one understands that the purpose of a watch is to tell time. Similarly, one can distinguish good interpretation from bad interpretation only on the basis of a clearly de-

55. Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, 76–77.

56. For other examples of Watson’s strategy of resistance, see his reflections on political ideology in the Joseph narrative of Genesis and his interpretation of Ecclesiastes as counter-gospel in *Text, Church and World*, 60–77, 283–87. See also Watson, “Strategies of Recovery and Resistance.”

57. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 8.

58. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

finer purpose for interpreting. What, according to Fowl, is the purpose of theological interpretation? It is to facilitate faithful life and worship for Christians and their communities in their contemporary contexts, so that they can continually deepen their friendship and communion with God and each other.<sup>59</sup> For Fowl, interpreting the Bible theologically means keeping theological concerns primary, so that “theology becomes a form of scriptural interpretation, not simply its result.”<sup>60</sup> In addition, the aim of interpretation is not simply to gain the right kind of information about Scripture, but to form the right kind of people who embody its message.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the relationship between text and reader is a dialogical one. Christian formation does not occur in a one-directional, linear fashion from text to reader, as if good exegetical technique leads naturally to spiritual growth. Rather, good theological interpretation requires the cultivation of Christian character, the possession of which enables interpreters to exercise a form of practical reasoning that is appropriate to Christian faith and practice. Such character is formed in the context of Christian community, under the guidance of mentors and with the support of deep friendships. Fowl finds precedent for his emphasis on the interrelationship of Scripture, community, and character in pre-modern forms of interpretation, where “scriptural interpretation, worship, and Christian faith and life were all ordered and directed towards helping Christians achieve their proper end in God.”<sup>62</sup>

The importance of Fowl’s emphasis on character for interpretation is especially clear when one considers his understanding of the nature of the biblical text. To explain his own position, Fowl contrasts it with two other views. The first of these is a determinative approach to interpretation.<sup>63</sup> This approach ascribes determinate meaning to the biblical text, as a property of the text itself, and views the text as a problem to be mastered. Since meaning is determinate, the goal of this form of interpretation is to achieve wholeness, clarity, and closure. It proceeds always in a one-directional manner, assuming that doctrine and practice flow out of biblical interpretation and never the other way around. Fowl argues that the problem with this view is not its methods per se, but its fundamental lack of clarity about the *telos* or purpose of those methods. Furthermore, it mistakenly sees meaning as a property solely of the text and fails to acknowledge the importance of doctrine and community for forming faith and

59. Fowl, *Philippians*, 6. This flows from Fowl’s understanding of the nature and *telos* of Holy Scripture, which is a *theological one* (as opposed to one built upon some theory of meaning or textuality): “Scripture needs to be understood in the light of a doctrine of revelation that itself flows from Christian convictions about God’s triune life. Scripture is a gift from the triune God that both reflects and fits into God’s desire to bring us into ever deeper fellowship with God and each other” (Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 13).

60. *Ibid.*, 39.

61. Thus, Fowl likens interpretation to prayer: “At their best, the disciplines of attention which lead to deep and faithful praying also apply to commentary writing as well” (Fowl, *Philippians*, 5).

62. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 16.

63. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 32–40.

practice. The second approach that Fowl rejects is an anti-determinative one.<sup>64</sup> This approach is parasitic upon determinate interpretation, its aim to upset, disrupt, and deconstruct interpretive certainties. In its most sophisticated forms, anti-determinate interpretation is motivated by a sense of moral responsibility to expose and dethrone totalizing and oppressive tendencies, which determinate readings inevitably produce due to their grounding in the metaphysics of presence.<sup>65</sup> Fowl criticizes anti-determinate approaches for fostering professional elitism, for mistakenly reducing all of Western philosophy and theology to a metaphysics of presence (which Fowl argues is more of a modern phenomenon), and for erecting instead a metaphysics of textuality that denies the otherness of the author as a human subject. In contrast to determinate and anti-determinate approaches, Fowl argues in favor of under-determined interpretation.<sup>66</sup> Such an approach avoids a general theory of meaning (or of indeterminacy) in order to allow distinctly Christian “convictions, practices, and concerns” to shape and be shaped by biblical interpretation. I will clarify what Fowl means by this later in this essay, but for now it is sufficient to say that an under-determined approach shifts the emphasis of interpretation from employing methodology (mastery over or resistance to the text) to character (exercising practical reasoning, which is both formed by the text and determines one’s approach to reading the text). If the meaning of the text is underdetermined, one cannot interpret it with sufficient depth merely by employing the right methods and rules.<sup>67</sup> While exegetical skills and techniques may be useful to the interpreter, they are not the most crucial thing.

Having summarized Fowl’s basic argument, I will now elucidate three of his central themes, including character, community, and pneumatology. Subsequently, I will provide some examples of how these themes guide Fowl’s interpretation of Scripture.

### Character

For Fowl, the character of the interpreter is crucial for theological interpretation.<sup>68</sup> In the fifth chapter of *Engaging Scripture*, fittingly titled “Who Can Read Abraham’s Story?” (emphasis mine), he notes the importance that Paul ascribes to character in

64. *Ibid.*, 33, 40–56.

65. Fowl explains that, as postmodern critics typically describe it, the metaphysics of presence seeks mastery over all external things including texts (thus depending on a clear subject-object distinction), favors speech over writing, reduces otherness to sameness through exclusion and reduction, and aims to put an end to the interpretive process by rendering texts absolutely clear (*ibid.*, 41).

66. *Ibid.*, 33, 56–61.

67. See Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 5–9, 14–21, where the authors compare the modern preoccupation with methodology in biblical studies with the failed Enlightenment quest for a purely rational and universal ethical method.

68. Knowing that this position flies in the face of the modern academy, Fowl facetiously writes that the importance of character is “an issue as vitally important for Christian interpretation of scripture as it is irrelevant for professional biblical scholars” (Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 129).

his letter to the Galatians.<sup>69</sup> Fowl contends that Paul bases his argument about the priority of faith over against works of the Law partly on his own integrity as an apostle. More to the point, Paul does not simply offer a more convincing argument based on better exegesis, but appeals to a dramatic change that God effected in his life, a change that altered his reading of the Old Testament and gave it credibility.<sup>70</sup> A fundamental transformation of his basic disposition, resulting from his conversion, made Paul a more faithful theological interpreter and practitioner of Scripture (and his calling as an apostle made him an authoritative one). In particular, Fowl highlights two aspects of Paul's character that stand out. First, Paul writes both as an apostle whom Jesus Christ personally called and as a member of the church. His character is based on a strong sense of identity in Christ that is neither defined in self-sufficient isolation nor absorbed in communal collectivity. Since his gospel is not of human origin, Paul is not at the mercy of human authorization and approval (Gal 1:1, 11–12). However, since the gospel is for “the churches” and leads to the creation of a reconciled community of God's children (Gal 3:26–29), Paul writes not just on his own behalf but from “all the members of God's family who are with me” (Gal 1:2 NRSV). Fowl points out that this aspect of Paul's character challenges modern notions of selfhood, which stress autonomy, individualism, unencumbered rationality, essential stability, and an absence of historical and social contingency.<sup>71</sup> Second, Paul writes as a participant in the drama of redemption. He narrates his own story within the larger context of God's saving purposes in history. His identification with this story is so great that he speaks as one who has been crucified with Christ; it is no longer Paul who lives, but Christ living in Paul (Gal 2:19–20).

The priority of character has significant implications for theological interpretation. In a character approach, rules, methods, and skills are not the central consideration. Rather, they are tools that interpreters with well-formed character employ through *phronēsis* or practical reasoning. Such reasoning is not the same as “pure” or “objective” rationalism, but is “a pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting” in appropriate ways. For Christians, such *phronēsis* is appropriate when it conforms to Christ, in particular to the pattern of his death and resurrection (Phil 2:5–11). Another implication is that since methods are subordinate to character and practical reasoning, theological interpreters can make use of professional biblical scholarship on an ad hoc basis when it is helpful (but consulting such scholarship is not necessary).<sup>72</sup> To explain this implication, Fowl appeals to the metaphor of “plundering the Egyptians” (from Exod 12:35–36), which theologians like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa employed with reference to borrowing the best of pagan philosophy for the service of theology. He explains that the metaphor should remind Christians “that their particular in-

69. *Ibid.*, 128–60.

70. *Ibid.*, 145–52.

71. *Ibid.*, 158.

72. See his defense of this position in *ibid.*, 179–90.

terests and concerns with scripture, as well as their specific interpretive convictions and habits, are not the same as, if not directly opposed to, those of the profession of biblical studies.<sup>73</sup> Thus, theological interpreters may garner insights from professional scholarship, but they should not be constrained by its assumptions and ultimate commitments.<sup>74</sup>

### Community

Christian character is formed and shaped in several ways through Christian community. First, Christian communities foster basic convictions in their members and encourage vigilant self- and communal-reflection regarding those convictions.<sup>75</sup> Essentially, these convictions help Christians maintain a single-minded focus on the person and teachings of *Jesus Christ*.<sup>76</sup> They also foster a self-critical awareness that helps Christians resist sinful attitudes and actions. Fowl maintains that it is these basic convictions, and not strategies for resisting or deconstructing supposedly oppressive texts, that safeguard Christians from reading and applying the Bible in oppressive ways. Second, Christian communities shape the character of their members through practices of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation.<sup>77</sup> Acute self-awareness and true perception of the world both require the ability to hear and accept criticism, to offer confession and receive forgiveness, and to extend the same gracious accountability and forgiveness to others. Third, Christian communities help their members cultivate Christian virtues, especially the central virtue of charity or love.<sup>78</sup> Fowl is careful to stress that these virtues do not eliminate interpretive disagreements in the church (which can be healthy), but they foster the kind of context in which disagreements can best be articulated, debated, and provisionally resolved. Finally, Christian communities both sustain and are

73. *Ibid.*, 183. See also Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 15–37.

74. The objection might arise: how will such interpreters protect themselves against sinful and self-deceptive interpretation? Is not the character approach too subjective? Fowl and Jones respond that to protect themselves from this, Christian interpreters must learn to read the Scriptures not just for themselves but also over against themselves. This becomes possible with the cultivation of appropriate virtues (like humility, contriteness over sin, and charity) and the development of appropriate habits and practices. All of this takes place within communities that form people of such character and that listen to the voice of “outsiders” or counter-voices both within and outside the community. Thus, Fowl and Jones see and appreciate the danger, but they insist that the basic issue is character: corrupt character and corrupt interpretation mutually reinforce each other. They devote their last chapter to the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as an example of faithful interpretation and performance of Scripture. See Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 29–55, 84–109, 135–64.

75. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 75–83.

76. In his discussion, Fowl appeals to Jesus’ words in Luke 11:34–35: “Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness” (NRSV). Fowl stresses the importance of accurate seeing and perceiving for ethical reasoning and acting.

77. *Ibid.*, 83–86.

78. *Ibid.*, 86–91.

sustained by the forming of specifically Christian friendships.<sup>79</sup> Fowl has much to say about Christian friendship, but some of his key ideas include the following: (1) friendship is related to Christian convictions, which tell us that we were made for friendship with God and each other; (2) friends do not simply choose each other, on the basis of social standing or like-mindedness, but are called into friendship because of their common bond in Christ; (3) friendship with God shapes the ways in which all other friendships and allegiances are ordered (e.g., in the early church, Christian friends supported each other in standing against the idolatrous claims of the Roman Empire); (4) friends help each other narrate their lives according to the ongoing drama of God's economy of salvation; (5) friends share in each other's suffering; (6) friends give to one another with generosity and receive from one another with gratitude, just as if they were giving to and receiving from the Lord; and (7) the byproduct of life and friendship in Christ is joy; Christian friendship is not motivated by pleasure, but the pursuit of Christian friendship produces profound joy.<sup>80</sup>

### Pneumatology

The Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in the formation of both character and community. First, the Holy Spirit enables that single-minded attention to Jesus Christ necessary for the formation of Christian character and the exercise of practical reasoning. One of the ways the Holy Spirit does this is by causing Christians to “remember” Jesus and his teachings (John 14:26). Fowl explains that such remembering is not the mere repetition of facts, but a theological form of remembering in light of the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>81</sup> Another way the Holy Spirit does this is by enabling Christians to respond faithfully to Jesus' teachings in new and diverse contexts. As an example, Fowl discusses the role of the Holy Spirit in Acts 10–15 in alerting the apostles to the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's salvific purposes. This new revelation opened the minds of the early Christians to new interpretations of the Old Testament from the perspective of Jesus' death and resurrection. In both ways (remembrance and new revelation), the Holy Spirit enables disciples to interpret Scripture in ways that equip them to respond appropriately to present circumstances. Fowl goes so far as to argue that the Holy Spirit's activity provides the lens through which Scripture is read—not vice versa.<sup>82</sup> Second, the Holy Spirit gifts the Christian community in diverse ways,

79. *Ibid.*, 155, 157, 159.

80. Fowl, *Philippians*, 209–35.

81. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 99–101. For example, when people asked Jesus to show by what authority he disrupted the merchants in the temple by turning over their tables, Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19 NRSV). At that time, nobody understood Jesus' words, but after the resurrection his disciples “remembered” that he had said this and they believed the Scripture (John 2:22).

82. *Ibid.*, 114. Fowl says this is a key point about the hermeneutical significance of the Spirit. He adds that understanding the Spirit's work is a matter of communal discernment and debate, which occurs over time and is often shaped by prior interpretations of Scripture as well as by beliefs and practices.

so that it can discern and respond to the voice and will of God. For example, Fowl points out that the Jerusalem Council's decision in Acts 15 concerning expectations for Gentile believers was not the prerogative of a single individual who alone was assumed to have special access to the voice of the Spirit. Conversely, the whole council decided on the basis of what "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). This judgment articulated for the community the council's sense of what the Spirit was saying and doing.

So, how does one recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit? Based on Acts 10–15, Fowl offers four observations.<sup>83</sup> First, the Spirit's voice is recognized by those who have already experienced the Spirit's presence and work. This implies that discerning the Spirit's voice takes practice and that some will be more proficient at it than others. Second, it is recognized by those who can testify to the Spirit's work in the lives of others. Those who are preoccupied with their own ability to give and receive of the Spirit lack the other-centeredness required for mature spiritual discernment (Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8 is a good example of this). Third, an ability to recognize the Spirit requires the existence of deep Christian friendships, an openness to one another that is rare in our modern individualistic culture. Finally, recognizing the activity of the Spirit requires time and patience. It takes time to await the Spirit's activity. It takes time to get to know people well enough to speak into their lives. The sort of consensus among believers depicted in Acts can be found only in communities that sustain and nurture deep friendships and exhibit such patience in discernment.

#### Examples of Fowl's Approach

To conclude my summary of Fowl's approach to theological interpretation, I will briefly mention three examples from his work. One example is his discussion of stealing and community in the book of Ephesians.<sup>84</sup> In the course of his discussion, many of his common themes emerge (in dialogue with character ethics). Proper care for words and for truth is cultivated through the shaping of character in Christian community. Stealing results from a sense of isolation and scarcity, and thus overcoming it requires forming deep friendships in Christian community, characterized by gracious *generosity and sharing in one another's burdens*. Such friendships are defined by the character and love of God as revealed in Christ, which enable Christians to speak the truth in charity.

A second example is his discussion of practical reasoning or *phronēsis* in the book of Philippians, where we encounter again Fowl's key themes.<sup>85</sup> Practical reasoning is shaped by a mind conformed to Christ's death in hope of his resurrection (Phil 2:5–11). By identifying with Christ's narrative, Christians learn to see the world

83. Ibid., 115–19.

84. Ibid., 161–77.

85. See Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 190–96.

in appropriate ways. Knowing the power of Christ's resurrection and sharing in his sufferings leads to a *phronēsis* of heavenly citizenship, as opposed to the *phronēsis* of those ruled by earthly concerns (Phil 3). Some concrete ways of cultivating this practical reasoning in community include participating in baptism and the Eucharist, joining in worship and meditation through the liturgy, and learning doctrine through Bible study and under the supervision of a mentor in catechism.<sup>86</sup>

A third example is Fowl's commentary on the book of Philippians. Throughout the commentary, Fowl aims to keep theological concerns primary but also interacts with biblical and historical scholarship when it helps elucidate his theological inquiry. For example, when he comments on Paul's greeting "Grace and peace," he spends very little time discussing the long history of debate over the origin and development of the greeting, electing instead to describe why Paul's greeting is a thoroughly Christian expression.<sup>87</sup> Another example is his discussion of 2:5–11, where he reflects on the two natures of Christ even though the passage does not expressly use such language.<sup>88</sup> Fowl also has a specific primary audience for his commentary in mind, for which he contextualizes his application.<sup>89</sup> In terms of the text, Fowl strives to be both intellectual (attending to the voice of the author) and theological (attending to the voice of God) thus reinforcing his statement of the book's *telos*, which is to encourage Christians toward ever deeper friendship with God and each other. To make the commentary accessible, he keeps the body of the text clear and engaging and explains key theological issues and decisions in simple language. Yet, he maintains intellectual rigor by interacting with historical and contemporary scholarship in his footnotes. Fowl operates with theological assumptions and interjects theological concerns and themes throughout his commentary, and toward the end of the book he constructs a focused theology of friendship based on Philippians.<sup>90</sup> Thus, his book offers two types of theological interpretation, including "commentary" and "theological horizons," both of which Fowl deems necessary for a healthy interpretation of Scripture.

### CONCLUDING SUMMARY

Watson and Fowl share several convictions concerning the theological interpretation of Scripture. Both agree that theological concerns must be primary.<sup>91</sup> Both stress the

86. *Ibid.*, 200–202.

87. Fowl, *Philippians*, 15.

88. Fowl writes, "It is [the] logic of salvation rather than strictly formal considerations that require Christians to read these verses in a way that is compatible with Christ's full humanity and full divinity. Straight-forward exegetical explication cannot substitute for the reflective theological logic required here. This is a good example of letting Christian theological convictions rather than sociological or historical-critical concerns govern a theological reading of Scripture" (*ibid.*, 98–99).

89. *Ibid.*, 5.

90. I mention many of his insights about friendship in the previous sections on community and pneumatology.

91. Fowl, *Philippians*, 5; Watson, *Text, Church and World*, vii.

role of the church community and the significance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, both work with the final canonical form of the biblical text. However, several differences are also apparent between the two interpreters, most of which concern their general orientation toward the text and their distinctive understanding of “meaning” in relation to text. While Watson believes that texts have determinate meaning and can possess ideologies, Fowl argues that texts themselves do not have these properties (readers do).<sup>93</sup> Thus, while Watson is conversant with deconstruction (though not uncritically) and argues for the necessity of resisting oppressive aspects of the biblical texts, Fowl distances himself from such measures. He argues instead that we should abandon claims about “meaning,” which are inevitably vague, and focus instead on interpretive aims, interests, and practices. A second difference is that Watson is committed to a broad interdisciplinary approach engaging biblical studies, systematic and historical theology, philosophy, literature, psychology, science, and so forth, while Fowl has a more limited interdisciplinary scope, focusing primarily on biblical studies, ethics, and systematic and historical theology. A third difference is that a christologically-grounded *epistemology* in dialogue with systematic theology guides Watson’s general orientation, while a christological *ethic* guides Fowl’s. Thus, Watson’s work tends to be theoretically complex, intellectually demanding, and thematically diverse, yet also concerned with Christian daily life. Fowl’s tends to be more accessible, practical, and systematic, yet also rigorous in scholarly engagement. Both Watson and Fowl care deeply about the integrity of Holy Scripture, particularly as it is embodied and proclaimed by Christians in the church and in the world. In the foreseeable future, they will both continue to be important voices in the ongoing discussion of the theological interpretation of Scripture.

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92. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 62–96, 97–127; Watson, “Authors, Readers, Hermeneutics,” 119; Watson, *Text, Church and World*, 236–40.

93. Watson, *Text and Truth*, 11; Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 56–59, 203; Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 41.

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