BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AS DIALOGUE: CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION ON MIKHAIL BAKHTIN AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

L. JULIANA M. CLAASSENS
juliana.claassens@snc.edu
St. Norbert College, De Pere, WI 54115

The work of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin exhibits a far-reaching influence in a number of areas. Bakhtin has been called the father of intertextuality. His thought was introduced to the West and employed by Julia Kristeva, who coined the term "intertextuality." This was further developed in theories by French (post) structuralists like Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, and American postmodernists such as Stanley Fish and Harold Bloom.[1] In addition, feminist theory (and other postmodern methods) has embraced especially Bakhtin's concept of dialogue. Dale Bauer and Susan McKinstry note that "dialogism, Bakhtin's theory about encountering otherness through the potential of dialogue," is valued by feminism because it creates an opportunity for "recognizing competing voices without making any single voice normative."[2]

In recent years, biblical scholarship has shown a growing interest in

[1] One good overview of the relation of Bakhtin to the broader field of intertextuality is by Ellen von Wolde, "Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar," in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 426–51.

[2] Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry, "Introduction," in *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic* (ed. Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 2, 6.

Bakhtin's work.[3] Barbara Green gives a helpful survey of how Bakhtin has been utilized by biblical scholars in the past, as well as what Bakhtin has to offer to the discipline of biblical scholarship in the future. She identifies a number of areas where Bakhtin's thought might be especially valuable, for instance, questions concerning history and genre.[4] In this article, I will focus on the area that Green calls questions concerning the construction of meaning.[5] In this regard, I seek to continue the conversation initiated by Carol Newsom and Dennis Olson, both of whom have made some suggestions of how Bakhtin's dialogical model could be of value for conceiving a biblical theology.[6] In light of Bakhtin's own work, I will expand and appropriate their proposals to provide a model for biblical theology.

Before I come to this model, I will first highlight a number of key points concerning Bakhtin's theory of dialogue. One should immediately add that these points are hardly exhaustive of Bakhtin's rich legacy, but are directed toward the goals of this article.

I. Bakhtin in a Nutshell

Mikhail Bakhtin bases his theory of the dialogical nature of language, literature, and truth on his reading of the writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky.[7] In his earlier work, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin argues that "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels."[8] In Bakhtin's later work, the collection of essays in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* and his essay, "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin develops these ideas into a more comprehensive theory of literature.[9] Bakhtin further

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[3] The list of scholars employing Bakhtin in biblical studies is long and growing. For a comprehensive list, see Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* (SemeiaSt 38; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 193–205.

[4] Ibid., 60–65.

[5] Ibid., 62.

[6] Carol A Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *JR* 76 (1996): 292–94; Dennis Olson, "Biblical Theology as Provisional Monologization: A Dialogue with Childs, Brueggemann, and Bakhtin," *BibInt* 6 (1998): 171.

[7] The most helpful secondary works are Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); and Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990).

[8] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson; Theory and History of Literature 8; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6.

[9] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; trans. Vern W. McGee; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986); "Discourse in

maintains that his notion of dialogue is not only limited to literature but also provides a model for truth and life itself. He says: "Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth."[10]

Within this theory of dialogue, Bakhtin declares, first, that the word or utterance is integrally *dialogical* in nature.[11] This means that no word or text can be heard or read in isolation. Each word or utterance responds in one form or another to utterances that precede it.[12] In this regard, Bakhtin notes that since "the speaker is not Adam," his or her utterances are inevitably in relation to preceding words or texts. Moreover, the word or utterance is related also to subsequent responses. Bakhtin argues that the speaker is constructing an utterance in anticipation of possible responses, something he calls the "act of responsive understanding."[13] Thus, no word or utterance or text is ever spoken in isolation. It always calls to mind other words, utterances, or texts pertaining to the same theme.

The dialogical character of the word or utterance has a profound effect on the discourses involved in the interaction. Bakhtin describes this as follows:

> The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils

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the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; trans. Michael Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259–422.

[10] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky's Book," in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson; Theory and History of Literature 8; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 293; Holquist, *Dialogism*, 35.

[11] Related to Bakhtin's concept of the dialogical nature of texts are his concepts of heteroglossia and polyphony. Emerson notes that "polyphony" is the term that Bakhtin applied initially to Dostoevsky's novels and that it was only later that he created the related terms "dialogism" and "heteroglossia" to apply to novels in general. For definitions of these terms, see Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 129; Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 53–54; Mary S. Pollock, "What Is Left Out: Bakhtin, Feminism, and the Culture of Boundaries," in *Bakhtin: Carnival and Other Subjects* (ed. David Shepherd; Critical Studies 3–4; Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 235; Susan Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 6, 18.

[12] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 71–72, 94. Bakhtin employs the terms "word," "discourse," and "utterance" interchangeably. For Bakhtin, the utterance is the real unit in speech communication. The utterance, which might be represented by a word, discourse, or text, is marked by a change of speaking subjects. Each utterance has a sense of completion as it expresses the particular position of the speaker, to which one is invited to respond. Morson and Emerson note that an utterance may be "as short as a grunt and as long as *War and Peace*" (Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 125–26; Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 52–53). For the purpose of our study, an utterance might be conceived of as a particular text or discourse that forms a distinctive unit and puts forward a particular voice.

[13] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 94.

from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile.[14]

Bakhtin maintains that the words or utterances involved in the dialogical relation are not left untouched by the interaction. He argues that the text comes alive only by coming into contact with another text (with context). At this point of contact between texts, it is as if a light flashes that illuminates both the posterior and the anterior. Thus, Bakhtin is of the opinion that the real meaning of the text, "its true essence," develops on the boundary of two texts or "consciousnesses," as Bakhtin calls it.[15] "The word lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context."[16] One could thus argue that meaning is to be found not in one text alone, but in the midst of the dialogue of interacting voices. The meaning created by this dialogical interaction is entirely new. As Bakhtin notes, "it always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable."[17] At the same time, "what is given is completely transformed in what is created."[18] The effect of hearing these texts together or simultaneously is that the meaning of both texts is altered.

Second, an important question to ask is who the *designer* of this dialogue is. Bakhtin's argument concerning Dostoevsky's work is that the author is the artist who creates within a polyphonic novel the space where various voices or consciousnesses can interact. In Bakhtin's opinion, Dostoevsky was a master in this regard, and his novels are polyphonic in the true sense of the word. Hence, Green concludes that Bakhtin theorized more about the author than about the reader. However, Bakhtin does concede that "authoring" occurs on various levels.[19] Bakhtin argues that besides the author who created the text, "listeners or readers who recreate and in so doing renew the text—participate equally in the creation of the represented world in the text." Thus, the reader becomes an active participant in the authoring process.[20]

Bakhtin also notes that all words, utterances, and discourse have a dialogical quality. In light of this, the emphasis then shifts to the reader, who notices these dialogical overtones associated with the utterance and who constructs, so

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[14] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 276.

[15] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 106, 162.

[16] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 284; see also idem, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 88.

[17] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 119–20, 124.

[18] Ibid., 120; Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 152.

[19] Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 33, 62; Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 232.

[20] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," in *Dialogic Imagination,* ed. Emerson and Holquist, 253; Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 63.

to speak, this imaginary dialogue. Bakhtin argues that it is from the viewpoint of the third person, one who does not participate in the dialogue but observes it, that the utterance is dialogic. This observer, however, or in the case of texts, the reader, is not completely dissociated from the ensuing dialogue. Bakhtin notes that this observer becomes a participant in the dialogue, although in a special way. Although the reader calls to mind related utterances while reading, and thus observes these texts interacting, the reader is also drawn into the dialogue and responds to the utterance in a variety of ways, such as, "response, agreement, sympathy, objection," and "execution."[21] The product of this interactive dialogue is the creation of a whole new meaning.

Third, Bakhtin describes this potential for creating new meaning in terms of the notion of *"great time."* Bakhtin defines "great time" as the "infinite and unfinalized dialogue in which no meaning dies."[22] According to this principle, great works such as Shakespeare continue to live in the distant future. Bakhtin argues that "in the process of their posthumous life they are enriched with new meanings, new significance: it is as though these works outgrow what they were in the epoch of their creation." Bakhtin states that Shakespeare "has grown because of that which actually has been and continues to be found in his works, but which neither he himself nor his contemporaries could consciously perceive and evaluate in the context of the culture of their epoch." The fullness of these works is revealed only in great time.[23] Bakhtin formulates this principle as follows:

> There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all)—they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming.[24]

This notion is based on Bakhtin's understanding of the dialogical nature of language, according to which words, texts, and utterances cannot help but enter into dialogue with other words, texts, and utterances. As this dialogue is to be viewed from the standpoint of the third-person observer or the reader,

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[21] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 69. 125.
[22] Ibid., 169.
[23] Ibid., 4–5.
[24] Ibid., 170.

one can well imagine that as readers differ over time and space, so also the dialogues will be different.

Fourth, central to Bakhtin's notion of great time is what he calls the concept of *"re-accentuation."* Bakhtin argues that within the dialogue where various utterances interact, an open-ended dialogue begins within the image itself. As contexts change and as one brings different texts and points of view together, the potential is there to create new meaning and insights by re-accentuating the image. However, Bakhtin is of the opinion that this re-accentuation is not a crude violation of the author's will. This process takes place within the image itself, when changed conditions actualize the potential already embedded in the image.[25]

Fifth, within this re-accentuation, Bakhtin's notion of the *"outsider"* plays a crucial role. Bakhtin argues that "a meaning reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning." Bakhtin maintains that within this dialogue, the foreign culture or unfamiliar text has the function of challenging us to ask new questions that we have not thought of raising.[26] In this regard, Morson and Emerson argue that "the result of these dialogues is to enrich both the text and its interpreter. The exchange creates new and valuable meanings possessed by neither at the outset."[27] To illustrate this principle, Bakhtin uses the example of two people looking over each other's shoulders. As both people occupy a different position, they look at the same thing in a different way, thus complementing each other's perspective.[28] This example leads to the conception that in order to reveal the hidden potential meanings in a text, it is crucial to have an outside voice to show us what we ourselves do not see. Despite the fact that there is an intimate exchange between the two conversation partners, one should note that the two sides are not somehow collapsed. Bakhtin critiques the notion that "in order better to understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one's own, and view the world through the eye of this foreign culture." For Bakhtin,

> creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture.[29]

Both sides of the dialogue are active and stay separate. As Bakhtin notes,

[25] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 409–10, 420–22; Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 364–65.

[26] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 7; Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 289.

[27] Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 289.

[28] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 21; Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 41.

[29] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 6–7; Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 230, 289.

"each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched."[30]

Finally, this dialogue has what Bakhtin calls an *unfinalizable* character. The dialogical nature of words or texts presumes that new voices are continually recalled and added to the dialogue.[31] This relates to Bakhtin's view of history as an open-ended process in which new attempts to move to the future are constantly necessary. For Bakhtin, there can never be a first or a last word, for every word or text is only one in a chain of utterances that stretches back to the beginning of history and forward to its end.[32] Emerson notes, however, that the fact that Bakhtin believes in the unfinalizability of dialogues does not mean that he rejects the notion of "wholes." She argues that, for Bakhtin, "the whole of something can only be seen from a position that is outside of it in space after it in time."[33] Once again the observer plays a crucial role, as it is from her standpoint that a sense of wholeness is bestowed on the dialogue. Therefore, at some point frozen in time, the observer, so to speak, "freeze-frames" the dialogue and observes the interaction. This is grounded in the assumption that the dialogue still continues, thus harmonizing the open-endedness of the dialogue with the unity of the event.[34]

II. Dialogue as Model for a Biblical Theology

In light of the above-mentioned points from Bakhtin's work, I would like to make the following suggestions as to the shape of a biblical theology. Both Olson and Newsom have suggested that Bakhtin and his notion of the dialogical quality of reality offer a good model for doing biblical theology.[35] This dialogical model functions on at least two levels. On the first level, such a model seeks to bring the diversity of voices within the biblical text into a dialogue. Immediately

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[30] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 7; Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 289.

[31] Bakhtin, "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky's Book," 293; Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 60, 241.

[32] William D. Lindsey, "'The Problem of Great Time:' A Bakhtinian Ethics of Discourse," *JR* 73 (1993): 317; Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Emerson and Holquist, 30; idem, *Speech Genres*, 136–37.

[33] Emerson, *First Hundred Years*, 220–21.

[34] Bakhtin, *Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 166; Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 228. Dennis Olson's concept of provisional monologization provides a helpful way to describe something of this "open unity of the dialogue" ("Biblical Theology," 172, 174).

[35] Olson, "Biblical Theology," 171–72; Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," 292–94. See also Walter Brueggemann, who has acknowledged the dialogical and dialectical character of the OT. Although Brueggemann does not employ Bakhtin's work directly, he admits that Bakhtin's work "will be crucial for future work in this direction in Old Testament study" (*Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997], 83 n. 57).

one has to agree with Newsom's point that the Bible is not a polyphonic text in the Bakhtinian sense, that is, an "intentional artistic representation" with a single author who propounds a plurality of voices. However, Newsom argues rightly that when one juxtaposes various voices in the biblical text, they become dialogical. This understanding of a biblical theology relates to Bakhtin's notion of the dialogical nature of all words, texts, or utterances. As Newsom notes, every word, text, or utterance is "dialogized by its orientation to the already said and the yet to be said."[36] The second level relates to the Bakhtinian notion of the dialogical sense of truth. In light of Bakhtin's assertion that all life and truth is dialogic, Newsom maintains that the truth about God, human nature, and the world cannot be uttered in one single utterance, thus the "open and unfinalized nature" of a theological claim.[37] One sees this notion well illustrated in the variety of theological claims within the Bible itself, but also in the never-ending theological task of trying to speak about God.[38]

Within this model, one may well ask who the designer of this dialogue is. One could make a diachronic argument that the creators of the biblical texts have responded to previously uttered words or discourses.[39] For instance, Michael Fishbane argues that the Bible is already an interpreted document. He describes the Bible as demonstrating "an imagination which responds to and is deeply dependent upon received traditions; an imagination whose creativity is never entirely a new creation, but one founded upon older and authoritative words and images."[40] In her book *Remember the Former Things: The Recollection of Previous Texts in Second Isaiah,* Patricia Tull Willey names these assumptions in terms of Bakhtin's theory of dialogue. She investigates how "Second Isaiah, by recollecting the voices of others, organizes and manages the variety of viewpoints present at the end of the exile."[41]

Such a diachronic understanding of the creators of the dialogue demon-

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[36] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," 297–99, 302; Bakhtin, *Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 89–90.

[37] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," 301, 304.

[38] Cf. Johanna W. H. Van Wijk-Bos's assertion that the multitude of images suggests the realization of the biblical writers that no one image could adequately capture the "I am who I am" (Exod 3:14) (*Reimagining God: The Case for Scriptural Diversity* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995], 99–101).

[39] See the helpful discussion concerning intertextuality as "text production" and intertextuality as "text reception" in von Wolde, "Intertextuality," 429–32. This relates to the diachronic and synchronic understanding of the creation of the dialogue that I have described above.

[40] Michael Fishbane, "Inner-Biblical Exegesis: Types and Strategies of Interpretation in Ancient Israel," in *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 3, 4, 12. See also Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 435.

[41] Patricia Tull Willey, *Remember the Former Things: The Recollection of Previous Texts in*

strates both possibilities and problems. For instance, some of the above-mentioned works show well how the biblical traditions have been appropriated and reappropriated in new circumstances, thus illustrating the continuing value these traditions had for each new generation. Walter Reed notes that the advantage of such a diachronic understanding of Bakhtin's concept of dialogue is that it "encourages the perception of more that one kind of formal ordering and more than one level of significant shaping in the canonical text."[42] Thus, such an approach picks up on the reality that there already is in the text itself a dialogue at work. On the other hand, this diachronic approach also runs into a number of problems. For instance, it is in many cases quite difficult to determine the chronological succession of some biblical texts. This is especially a problem with the texts from the Pentateuch. Moreover, within a diachronic understanding of the text, the dialogical relationship between these utterances is only unidirectional. Thus, Fishbane and Willey are only interested in how later material such as Second Isaiah uses earlier biblical material. I argue that in terms of a true Bakhtinian notion of dialogue, such a dialogical relation should be reciprocal. Within a dialogue, the different voices should be able to respond mutually to one another.

An alternative proposal would regard the creator of the dialogue quite differently. Within a synchronic understanding of the dialogical nature of texts, one's focus would shift to the role of what Bakhtin calls the third-person observer. This observer finds herself outside the ensuing dialogue, and it is from her perspective that the dialogue is created and can be observed. This relates to Newsom's suggestion that the biblical theologian should create a conversation where the various biblical voices converse on equal footing. She says:

> the biblical theologian's role would not be to inhabit the voice [*sic*], as the novelist does, but rather to pick out the assumptions, experiences, entailments, embedded metaphors, and so on, which shape each perspective and to attempt to trace the dotted line to a point at which it intersects the claims of the other.[43]

Instead of focusing on how the biblical text developed diachronically, the biblical theologian acts as the orchestrator of this dialogue, bringing various

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Second Isaiah (SBLDS 161; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 3, 7. In her discussion, Willey includes only texts that show verbal similarities and are relatively sure to predate Second Isaiah, thus exhibiting a clear diachronic understanding of the dialogical nature of the text. See also Benjamin Sommer, *A Prophet Reading Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[42] Walter L. Reed, *Dialogues of the Word: The Bible as Literature According to Bakhtin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.

[43] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," 304–5; Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 89.

biblical voices on the same theme together on a synchronic level, thereby creating the space where a dialogue might ensue. In such a model, participants are able to make provisional judgments about truth and value, which are set into dialogue with other viewpoints.[44] Important to note is that the synchronic nature of the conversation does not mean that no attention is given to the historical and cultural particularity of each voice.[45] This relates to Bakhtin's notion that the two sides of a dialogue are not somehow collapsed, renouncing their respective places in time.[46] Each text comes to the conversation with its own distinctive perspective, which includes its particular historical and literary context.[47]

This dialogue is mutual, so that the texts influence each other reciprocally. The consequence of this is that neither text is left untouched by the interaction. According to Bakhtin, the real meaning of these texts is found not in any singular text but on the boundary of the intersecting texts. The meaning that is created out of the dialogue between the given texts is totally new. At the same time, this interaction has the effect of altering the way in which the original texts are heard.[48]

Bakhtin's notion of "great time" is especially significant for composing a model for biblical theology. It is in great time that new meaning is disclosed. The potential of this new meaning is already embedded in the text itself.[49] This concept is particularly significant for questions concerning the reimagining of God. In great time, the "newcomers" to the theological debate such as women, liberation theologians, and others, ask new questions concerning how God should be imagined. These "outsiders" ask questions that have not been asked before and thus serve the function of re-accentuating the traditional imagery found in the biblical texts. Bakhtin points out that this is not a crude violation of the writer's will, as there already is potential embedded within the text, which is disclosed in great time.

This alternative proposal does not suggest that one should not appropriate Bakhtin in diachronic studies.[50] My proposal serves as an alternative that might allow interaction between texts that seem inclined to be joined together, even though it may be difficult or even impossible to show a historical connection. A wonderful example in this regard is the work of Reed, who identifies on a liter-

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[44] Olson, "Biblical Theology," 172.

[45] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," 305; see also Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin,* 27, 61.

[46] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres,* 7.

[47] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," 305.

[48] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres,* 119–20, 124.

[49] Ibid., 4–5.

[50] See Green's explanation of how Bakhtin could be helpful in the field of the Bible and history (*Mikhail Bakhtin,* 61–62).

ary level some of these imaginative dialogues in the biblical text, for example, how the narrative of Joseph responds to that of Noah.[51] He also shows masterfully how reading the story of Ishmael and the sacrifice of Isaac as parallel stories "generates meanings and values for both episodes together."[52]

A further advantage is that this proposed model for biblical theology emphasizes the role of the reader in the interpretation process—something often overlooked by traditional historical studies.[53] The reader sees connections between texts by identifying similarities in words, images, and themes. In some sense, the reader is fashioning the dialogue. A question one may well ask in this regard is how one determines which texts are put into a dialogical relationship? What are the criteria for putting some texts together and not others? Bakhtin notes that "dialogical relationships are absolutely impossible without logical relationships" between the different texts. These logical relationships are not only on the level of syntactic and lexical-semantic similarities, but also on a metalinguistic level, where language is used and embodied in the form of an utterance. Bakhtin describes these various connections in terms of the logical relationships of agreement/disagreement, affirmation/supplementation, and question/answer.[54]

In this regard, one should acknowledge the subjective nature of this pursuit. It is the reader who sees these logical connections between texts. However, the success of this undertaking is dependent on the reader's ability to persuade others of these connections. These connections cannot be totally random, but should be guided by signs in the text. As Ellen von Wolde argues:

> If sufficient repetition does not exist, then there is no basis for arguing for intertextuality. . . . This proves that intertextuality is not just the idea a reader has made up in his or her mind, but that the markers in the text have made this linking possible.[55]

Moreover, the reader brings her own self to the dialogue, which has a distinctive influence on the way the dialogue proceeds. This "self" is shaped by a variety of concurrent dialogues of which the reader forms part.[56] In this regard,

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[51] Reed, *Dialogues of the Word*, 24–25.

[52] Ibid., 7–12.

[53] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," *JBL* 107 (1988): 13. See also Brueggemann (*Theology of the Old Testament*, 52, 62), who maintains that there is no innocent or objective reading.

[54] Bakhtin, *Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 182–84, 188; see also von Wolde, "Intertextuality," 432–33. These relationships are based on the assumption that there are points of both similarity and difference within these dialogical relationships. The similarities allow one to see connections, while the differences add to the discussion.

[55] Von Wolde, "Intertextuality," 433.

[56] Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 63. For a discussion of the differentiated nature of a person's

Olson notes that in the dialogical encounter with the text, the reader should come to the text with her interpretative framework intact.[57] Again this relates to Bakhtin's idea that in a "dialogic encounter of two cultures . . . each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched."[58] The reader is not only observing the dialogue in the text, but is also participating in the dialogue herself. In the process, the reader is shaped by the dialogical encounter with the text, as all participants are changed by the encounter.

Following from this, the dialogue envisioned by the biblical theologian is much richer than the interaction of voices within the biblical text itself. Olson proposes that it would be valuable to introduce an assortment of dialogue partners from various times and places to enrich the ongoing dialogue.[59] This is echoed by a number of scholars who have emphasized that we are not the first readers of the biblical text. We form part of a long line of both Jewish and Christian communities who have, as Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones put it, "asked questions, found answers, formulated texts and given readings of those texts which provide us with resources for our own lives."[60]

Such an understanding relates to the efforts of a number of biblical theologians, led by Brevard Childs, to introduce interpretations of premodern interpreters into the exegetical conversation, providing, as Olson argues "'fruitful prejudices' (Gadamer) and analogies to consider. . . ."[61] Childs's commentary on Exodus is a wonderful example of putting this into practice, as he consistently pays careful attention to the interpretation history of the biblical text.[62] Similarly, in his well-known article "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," David Steinmetz highlights the value of the precritical exegetical tradition. He is of the opinion that modern readers who try to find the one "original" meaning of the text can learn a great deal from the medieval exegetes. The latter believed that the original meaning, the meaning Scripture had within the his-

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social location, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 100, 108.

[57] Olson, "Biblical Theology," 175.

[58] Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 7; Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 56.

[59] Olson, "Biblical Theology," 176.

[60] Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 1991), 39–40; Stephen E. Fowl, "Introduction," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), xvii.

[61] See Childs's proposal in "The Shape of a New Biblical Theology," in *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 97–122; see also Donald E. Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), xv; Olson, "Biblical Theology," 176; Fowl, "Introduction," xvii.

[62] Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974).

torical context in which it was first uttered, is only one of its possible meanings, and it may not even be its primary or most important meaning.[63] Moreover, there is a growing appreciation for the Jewish interpretative tradition.[64] Walter Brueggemann has strongly critiqued the huge chasm between Christian and Jewish interpreters. He contends that "what Jews and Christians share is much more extensive, much more important, much more definitional than what divides us."[65] As a result, there has been a movement toward recognizing the rabbis as skillful exegetes who deserve to be heard.[66] For instance, Renée Bloch proposed that the midrashic genre and method, and particularly the exegetical midrash, can be quite fruitful for the exegesis of the Old and New Testaments. She notes that especially NT studies have realized the Jewishness of the Christian Scriptures, resulting in the awareness that knowledge of the Jewish tradition and its writings is indispensable.[67]

In light of this, I argue that within the dialogical model for a biblical theology, the biblical theologian has the task of inviting Jewish and Christian interpreters to join the discussion. In this regard, I want to call to mind the Bakhtinian notion of the "outsider." Bakhtin argues that a foreign culture or an unfamiliar text has the function of providing a different perspective that may prove to be enriching to the dialogue. The "outsider" may offer the impetus to develop the potential present in an image so that it may be heard differently, thus re-accentuating the traditional image. Within modern biblical interpretation, the voices of Christian and Jewish precritical interpreters have often not

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[63] David Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *ThTo* 37 (1980): 28, 30, 32. See also Karlfried Froehlich's insightful discussion in "The Significance of Medieval Biblical Interpretation," *LQ* 9 (1995): 139–50.

[64] Ronald E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1978), 22. See also Wim Beuken, "De Hemelse Herkomst van Het Manna en Zijn Betekenis," in *Brood uit de Hemel: Lijnen van Exodus 16 naar Johannes 6 tegen de Achtergrond van de Rabbijnse Literatuur* (ed. Wim Beuken et al.; Kampen: Kok, 1985), 69.

[65] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 108–12; Joel Kaminsky, "A Review of Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament*: A Jewish Response" (paper presented at the annual national meeting of the SBL, Orlando, Florida, 23 November 1998).

[66] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 735. In light of Brueggemann's plea, it is ironic that he does not once refer to any Jewish source in his expositions. This may relate to his assumption that Jewish and Christian scholars should read together, each bringing her or his own expertise. On the other hand, scholars like Samuel Terrien and Brevard Childs have shown successfully in their biblical theologies how informative the employment of Jewish resources can be. See Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 343–47; Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 359–89.

[67] Renée Bloch, "Methodological Note for the Study of Rabbinic Literature," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice* (ed. William Scott Green; trans. William Scott Green and William J. Sullivan; BJS; 5 vols.; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press for Brown University, 1978), 1:51–52, 54. See also Göran Larsson, *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), xi.

been heard and can thus be classified in Bakhtinian terms as "outsiders." In similar fashion, Fowl and Jones argue that Jews and the Jewish interpretative tradition might be regarded as outsiders to the Christian tradition, but outsiders bearing a family resemblance and whose voices should be heard.[68]

But how can these "outsiders" be useful within a theological and exegetical study? These interpretative traditions represent quite a different way of perceiving texts, unfamiliar to modern Christian readers, who are sometimes skeptical about the validity of these interpretations. Even Bloch, who advocates the value of the rabbinic texts, argues that "pruned of its excesses of imagination and method," midrash "could throw light on many points regarding the genesis of the biblical writings."[69] Yet "the excesses of imagination" need not always be "pruned." It is exactly these "excesses" that might serve the function of sparking the reader's imagination, allowing one to read the biblical materials in a fresh way. Correspondingly, Ithamar Gruenwald contends that the midrashic interpretation provides the biblical text with a special dimension of meaning. According to him, meaning is not read out of the text but in reality is imposed on it.[70] The consequence of this is that "once a new meaning is accepted, it is incorporated into the thematic texture of the scriptural text." One can even say that it becomes part of people's conceptualization of the text, which has the effect of opening up ever new possibilities for the text and its meaning. Midrash thus becomes "a cognitive looking-glass through which a biblical story is viewed and a religious world constructed."[71]

This view of Gruenwald can be reformulated in terms of the proposed model. Within a dialogical encounter between texts as constructed by the biblical theologian, the premodern interpreters may stretch the boundaries of our imagination when we ourselves are interpreting texts.

Within such a model, arguments concerning the historical causality between texts do not necessarily have to be made.[72] The emphasis falls on the reader who brings these texts together. However, once again, this does not

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[68] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 109–16. In the rest of their chapter, Fowl and Jones propose strategies for how to listen to the outsider. For instance, one has to realize that the outsider is not us in disguise. Moreover, the outsider is not completely alien, for to recognize the outsider as such is already to have recognized the commonalities (pp. 123–26).

[69] Renée Bloch, "Midrash," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism,* ed. Green, 1:49.

[70] Ithamar Gruenwald, "Midrash and the 'Midrashic Condition': Preliminary Considerations," in *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History* (ed. Michael Fishbane; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 18.

[71] Ibid., 19.

[72] Donald H. Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 37–38. See also Peter Schäfer, "Research into Rabbinic Literature: An Attempt to Define the Status Quaestionis," *JJS* 37 (1986): 150; Beuken, "Hemelse Herkomst," 69.

mean that the texts are merely jumbled together without regard to each text's distinctiveness. In terms of Bakhtin's notion of a "dialogic encounter of two cultures," each text will come to the conversation with the unique literary and methodological issues involved in its interpretation.

Finally, in light of Bakhtin's notion of the unfinalizable nature of the dialogue, the number of conversation partners could indeed be unlimited. The Jewish and Christian interpretation history of the biblical texts stretches over two thousand years and is vast in its magnitude. For the purpose of creating a manageable dialogue, one therefore has to limit the number of participants. This is done with the understanding that the dialogue continues, that more could have been said—corresponding to Bakhtin's fusion of his notions of the open-endedness of the dialogue, as well as the unity of the event.

A number of questions might be raised concerning this model. First, does the emphasis on the reader or the plurality of interpretations of the text not lead to relativism, where any meaning becomes acceptable? In this regard, Emerson makes the important observation that one should not confuse *relativity* with *relativism*. In his revised Dostoevsky book, Bakhtin adds a sentence in which he says that the polyphonic approach has nothing to do with relativism. Bakhtin sees dialogue as the increased burden our world immersed in relativity has to endure; however, relativism will not be tolerated by Bakhtin's ethical system.[73] Green asserts that "Bakhtin's devotion to and skill at playing the many textual clues should dispel or discourage any reading that is arbitrary or irresponsible."[74] Steinmetz makes a similar argument that "the text cannot mean anything a later audience wants it to mean." Rather, "the language of the Bible opens up a field of possible meanings." Steinmetz considers "any interpretation which falls within that field" as "valid exegesis of the text, even though that interpretation was not intended by the author."[75] He says:

> The original text as spoken and heard limits a field of possible meanings. Those possible meanings are not dragged by the hair, willy-nilly, into the text, but belong to the life of the Bible in the encounter between author and reader as they belong to the life of any act of the human imagination.[76]

Thus, the proposed model for a biblical theology on the one hand stays close to the language of the biblical text, but at the same time it also realizes that the language of the text opens up a wide range of interpretative possibilities that might be reclaimed by subsequent readers.[77]

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[73] Emerson, *First Hundred Years*, 154–56; Bakhtin, *Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 69.

[74] Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 64.

[75] Steinmetz, "Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," 32.

[76] Ibid., 37.

[77] This does not mean that one should be uncritical about these interpretations. Fowl notes

Second, one has to realize that Bakhtin's promising model does not solve all of our problems. Feminist critics have pointed out that questions of power are central to whether it will be at all possible to create a benign encounter between uneven voices.[78] Mary Pollock notes that it is potentially problematic when a weaker voice (e.g., female language) allows a dominant voice (patriarchal language) into her space, as the engagement will not be equal.[79] This is also true of the model for biblical theology that I propose. Within this dialogical interaction, the voices simply are not equal. For instance, the reality remains that the number of biblical texts that present female metaphors for God is minute in terms of the overwhelming choir of male metaphors used to describe God. This places an important responsibility on the shoulders of the orchestrator of the dialogue. Green makes a notable comment concerning the role of the author, which I would like to extend to the role of the biblical theologian who orchestrates the dialogue, which consists of biblical voices as well as voices of biblical interpreters:

> To author respectfully precludes, avoids domination and control, neither requiring nor permitting the collapse of one into the other. To create in this way is to acknowledge the other with discipline, responsivity, and refinement, to negotiate rather than to bully.[80]

This, to be sure, is a tall order, but at least something to strive for. With this in mind, marginal voices have the potential to be heard, which will, in turn, enrich the whole debate.

III. Conclusion

A dialogical model for biblical theology shows promise in the following ways. First, such a model has potential to bring together the diverse and some-

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that "not all premodern exegesis is equally worthy of attention." Interpretations such as anti-Semitic or misogynist interpretations and the practices underlying these interpretations should always be criticized ("Introduction," xvii). See also A. K. M. Adam, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology: "Modern" Problems and Prospects* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 177–79. A number of criteria come into play, such as the role of various interpretive communities, the various voices within Scripture, and an ethical standpoint on the part of the reader to critique interpretations that are more harmful than good.

[78] For a discussion of the feminist appropriation of Bakhtin's theory, as well as the challenges that feminists face, see Mary O'Connor, "Horror, Authors, and Heroes: Gendered Subjects and Objects in Bakhtin and Kristeva," in *Bakhtin*, ed. Shepherd, 242–58; Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow, "Introduction," in *A Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin* (ed. Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), viii; Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 58–59.

[79] Pollock, "What Is Left Out," 238.

[80] Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 36; Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 185.

times even contradictory voices in the Bible. The jury is still out on how to keep the unity as well as the diversity of the biblical witness together. In recent years, biblical theologians have suggested that the center of the biblical witness lies in the polarities and tensions themselves.[81] A good example of such an approach is Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament*, in which he goes to great lengths to bring what he calls the counter testimony of Israel into play. This provides him with a way of incorporating Wisdom, and particularly the unconventional witness of Job and Ecclesiastes into OT theology.[82] Second, such a model of biblical theology provides a means for crossing the great divide between the OT and the NT. Although scholars in principle agree that there is a unity between the two testaments, few dare to venture outside the safe confines of their own discipline.[83] The advantage of Bakhtin's model is that in this dialogue, the voices interact with one another and mutually enrich one another, while at the same time the individual voices retain their distinctiveness. Third, this model for biblical theology provides a means for creatively employing the wealth of Christian as well as Jewish interpretations of biblical texts—something that an increasing number of biblical theologians have deemed a valuable objective. One could imagine that such a model for biblical theology could be valuable in Jewish and Christian dialogue.[84] Fourth, such a model relates to a significant contribution of Bakhtin's model of dialogue. Bakhtin is concerned

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[81] See, e.g., Terrien, *Elusive Presence;* Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (trans. Douglas W. Stott; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982); Clements, *Old Testament Theology;* Paul Hanson, *The Diversity of Scripture: A Theological Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

[82] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament,* 386–99. The notion of "center" and "margin" raises the issue of who determines these categories. Ecclesiastes may be a marginal voice from the perspective of the traditional wisdom theology, but from a different point of view, Ecclesiastes' views are not all that strange.

[83] An exception is Brevard Childs, whose *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) is a classic attempt to incorporate both testaments into a biblical theology. See also R. W. L. Moberly, *Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For a dialogue between critical biblical exegesis and philosophical hermeneutics, see André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically, Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[84] See Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, *The Body of Faith: Israel and the Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), which is a good example of dialogue between a Jewish scholar and a NT scholar. James Kugel's *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) also brings together ancient Jewish and Christian interpretations of pentateuchal texts. In addition, see *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (ed. Kristen Kvam, Linda Schearing, and Valarie Ziegler; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). A book that helps facilitate dialogue among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is John Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur'an for Bible Readers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

not so much with large abstract schemes as with what Olson calls, "the small, ordinary and mundane events of everyday life among common people as the locus of real meaning and significance."[85] This modifies the traditional understanding of biblical theology in terms of large governing schemes, as proposed, for example, by Walter Eichrodt (covenant) and Gerhard von Rad (salvation history), where a central theme spans the whole of the Old and New Testaments. Bakhtin's model of dialogue provides a means whereby a biblical theology may be conceived of in terms of the everyday readings of texts. It occurs on a small scale in each event of bringing texts together and pondering their relationship and the meaning created in the midst of the interaction. Each dialogue is an ongoing event that always seeks to invite more voices to join the conversation.[86] These dialogues slowly grow and may merge with other concurrent dialogues. The similarities between texts generate discussion, but at the same time the differences bring new truths. Thus, within this model of biblical theology, there is also room for "the other," for divergent perspectives that serve to enrich the dialogue.

Finally, this model of biblical theology may indeed be refined and developed further. However, what is most needed is to put this model to the test by constructing dialogues around certain themes in the Old and New Testaments. I look forward to overhearing some of these conversations.

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[85] Olson, "Biblical Theology," 173; Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," 294; Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 93.

[86] One example of such a dialogue is the conversation I created in my dissertation, where I apply this model for biblical theology. In my dissertation, I brought together in dialogue a number of pentateuchal texts (Num 11:11–12 and Deut 32:13–16) and biblical interpreters (e.g., *b. Yoma* 75a; *Sifre Num.* 89; *Exod. Rab.* 1:12) dealing with the metaphor of the God who feeds. I introduced into this conversation texts that use the explicitly female metaphor of a mother nursing her child to describe the act of divine feeding, suggesting that these texts extend the traditional metaphor, encouraging us to think of the metaphor of the God who feeds in maternal terms. See also my current project, in which I am extending the metaphor of the God who feeds to the rest of the OT: *The God Who Feeds Her Children: An Old Testament Metaphor for God* (Nashville: Abingdon, forthcoming).