

Analytic Perspectives on Method and Authority in Theology

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Analytic Theology as Sapiential Theology: A Response to Jordan Wessling

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Abstract: This article responds to Jordan Wessling’s paper that engages a concern I expressed about analytic theology not doing justice to the sapiential requirements of theology. I examine Wessling’s summary of my paper, conclude that his description is accurate and fair, appreciate his proposed solution, then go on to restate why I think he may not have fully allayed my concern. I suggest that analytic theology is a vital tool in the theologian’s toolkit, but that ultimately more is needed in order to interpret Scripture theologically.

Keywords: sapientia; analytic theology; wisdom; Bible; theological interpretation

1 Introduction: the *other* ancient quarrel

Plato referred to the “ancient quarrel” between poets and philosophers.¹ It concerns not only the significance of rhetorical and literary forms in apprehending propositions but, more basically, our conception of what it means to be rational. My Cambridge doctoral supervisor, Nicholas Lash, made it an ancient-present quarrel by insisting that the imagination, instead of contrasting with reason, is actually “*the intellect in quest of appropriate precision*.”² His point is that poets are as impatient of imprecision in their own way as are analytic philosophers. However, the precision of the poet is not quite the precision of the philosopher, and “appropriate” underlines the point that human discourse serves different purposes in different situations.

Lesser known, perhaps, is a related quarrel, this time among theologians. Ever since Augustine distinguished the intellectual activity characteristic of theology in terms of *scientia* (knowing about some object) and *sapientia* (wise use of or loving response to that object), medieval, post-Reformation, and modern theologians have debated their relative merits and right relationship. The debate has at times been lopsided. For example, Ellen Charry laments the tendency of modern academic theology to limit itself to *scientia*.³ T. S. Eliot eloquently laments the spiritual wasteland that results: “Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?”⁴ As Charry notes, theology has nothing to gain from this great epistemological divorce: “While it is essential for pointing seekers in the right direction, in Augustine’s view, *scientia* alone is unable to heal us. The goal of *scientia* is to move the seeker to *sapientia*, wisdom.”⁵

1 Plato, *Republic*, 607b5–6.

2 Lash, “Interpretation and Imagination,” 21–22.

3 Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 133.

4 Eliot, “Choruses from the Rock,” 96.

5 Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 133. Charry defines sapience as “engaged knowledge that emotionally connects the knower to the known” (Ibid., 4).

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No doubt it is both anachronistic and somewhat inaccurate to identify, and thus burden, analytic theology with all the negative associations of what has passed for *scientia*.⁶ Nevertheless, it may be worth pondering whether and to what extent there are certain parallels between the two, particularly if, as Wessling⁷ suggests, Thomas Aquinas can indeed be reckoned a proto-analytic theologian. Is analytic theology a contemporary species, version, or descendent of Medieval forms of *scientia*?⁸ Do analytic theologians see themselves as representatives of either a Medieval or modern approach that could rightly claim the prestige of a “scientific” method? Such were the impertinent questions I posed aloud in my essay “Love’s Wisdom.”

I have nothing against science, rationality, modernity, or method per se. I nevertheless resonate with Charry’s concern that much modern theology has overdeveloped its cognitive muscle, perhaps at the expense of its affective and practical counterparts, which have atrophied, to the detriment of the body of Christ. Charry laments the pursuit of theology (true theory) apart from the Christian life (right practice): “Knowing the truth no longer implied loving it, wanting it, and being transformed by it.”⁹ What is at stake in this question is the *kind* of knowledge and understanding we seek as Christian theologians. I believe that theology ought ultimately to lead to wisdom and that it therefore directs others kinds of knowledge to a higher end: living to God the Father in God the Son through God the Spirit.

2 Analyzing Wessling’s wisdom

I welcome Jordan Wessling’s thoughtful engagement with and response to a concern I raised about analytic theology. I particularly appreciate his attempt to mediate, perchance to reconcile, what he perceives to be an unnecessary opposition between analysis and wisdom (blessed are the peacemakers). One of the marks of wisdom is knowing when “both-and” is more appropriate, under the circumstances, than “either-or.” In my opinion, Wessling’s decision to pursue the former option in this case is indeed a wise one. He quotes extensively from my essay “Love’s Wisdom” not, as Derrida might, with the deconstructive purpose of exposing internal tensions, contradictions, or indeterminacies, but rather for the thoroughly constructive purposes of displaying his understanding, and then responding to, my concern. His essay is a model of what a charitable and edifying response ought to look like.

Seasoned readers of academic journals will at this point now expect one of the familiar contrarian conjunctions (e.g., “but,” “however,” “nonetheless,” etc.). Sorry to disappoint! Wessling’s description of my concern is not only charitable, but essentially accurate. The only demurral I want to make at the outset is this: my essay posed a concern and asked a question about analytic theology. It was not a *J’accuse*. I still believe the question to be legitimate, and I am grateful to Wessling for taking it seriously enough to respond. Has he allayed my worry? Not entirely, though he has made a good start.

2.1 On biblical authority and its implications

Wessling rightly notes that the goal of my essay was to commend a “robust conception of biblical authority that has implications ... for how theology should be done.” Analytic theology excels in clarifying content; no objection there. However, it is not self-evident to me that its style of analysis is the best way to handle complex literary forms, especially when its preferred mode of discourse privileges sentence-long examples and sentence-long theses (see Rea’s principles). For the Bible is composed of many kinds of literature, and only some of its texts are in what philosophers would describe as proper propositional form. Most biblical texts require readers to do some work extracting the relevant proposition(s) before analysis can really get going. Is analytic theology a mode of exegesis or a second step that kicks in only after one has decided on other grounds what propositions a given biblical text expresses? I’ll return to this vital point below.

⁶ For more on theology as a form of *scientia* and *sapientia*, see Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God*, 5-11.

⁷ Wessling, “Analytic Theology as Sapiential Theology.”

⁸ See Evans, *Old Arts and New Theology*.

⁹ Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 236.

I was pleased to see that Wessling judges my account of biblical authority “plausible.” This does not unsettle him, however, because there is nothing about my proposal that the analytic theologian need feel any pressure to resist. To be sure, *not resisting* the significance of the forms of biblical discourse is not quite the same thing as actively engaging them in interpretation. Wessling claims that analytic thinkers have done fine work on wisdom and literary genre. Perhaps. However, thinking *about* these things is not quite the same as thinking *along* them.¹⁰ To think *about* things, even analytically, is to maintain a certain critical distance and does not require personal engagement. I think Eleonore Stump’s *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* serves as a better example of the point Wessling wants to make. Stump here considers narrative as a means of knowledge, and contrasts “Franciscan” and “Dominican” (i.e., analytic) approaches to knowledge. She says that analytic thinkers tend to categorize by means of “sets of abstract properties,” whereas Franciscans categorize by means of stories and their characters (as Stump does here with Francis and Dominic).¹¹ Stump is a shining example of an analytic thinker with poetic sensibilities. Interestingly, she also shares my concern about analytic thinking: “But left to itself, because it values intricate, technically expert argument, the analytic approach has a tendency to focus more and more on less and less; and so, at its worst, it can become plodding, pedestrian, sterile, and inadequate to its task.”¹²

Stump could probably be called as a witness for the prosecution or the defense of analytic theology. The testimony just cited is damning, but it is not the end of the story, for Stump’s work also provides evidence of Wessling’s claim that there is no reason to suppose that analytic theology could not be married to more literary-attuned ways of reading. Stump appears to agree with me about how biblical texts not only inform but form readers in habits of good theological judgment. If there were more analytic theologians like Stump, who were actually engaging the Bible at the level of its literary discourse, with genres other than narrative as well, then my concern would be overblown. As Wessling says, there is no reason why this could not be done. If I raise the concern, then, it is because I think books like Stump’s make up only a minority report among the cloud of analytic witnesses.

2.2 On analysis and sapience

One place in Wessling’s essay that did provoke a raised eyebrow was his paraphrase of my description of the analytic *modus operandi* as a “piecemeal demolition process.” I want to say for the record that I do not associate analytic theology’s “breaking down” with deconstruction’s “taking apart.” True, the etymology of *analysis* (from the Greek *ana* + *luein* = “to unloose”) is susceptible of a Derridean subversion, but I never suggested that the motivation, or effect, of analysis was anything other than clarification, not obfuscation.

Be that as it may, Wessling presses his case home, arguing that the view of analytic thinkers as taking things apart is woefully behind the times. He cites Oliver Crisp to the effect that, today, analytic thinkers are just as likely to be building metaphysical worldviews than analyzing linguistic puzzles. The analytic ambition is more like David Blain’s large-scale feats (“Did you see that airplane disappear?”) than close-up magic. My concern apparently rests on an outmoded view of analytic philosophy as it was practiced in the 1950s, when ordinary language philosophers like J. L. Austin focused on small-scale problems, such as examining uses of the term “excuses” to grasp the nature of responsibility.¹³ To think that analytic theology only breaks things down into their smaller components is as out of date as Gregory Peck’s grey flannel suit.

It’s quite possible that my understanding of the metaphysical ambitions of contemporary analytic theology are behind the times (as is my wardrobe), in which case my criticism rests upon a mistake (anachronism). However, it’s one thing to say that analytic theology has a metaphysical rather than merely

¹⁰ I am here alluding to C. S. Lewis’s distinction between looking *at* and looking *along* a beam of light in “Meditations in a Toolshed,” 230–34.

¹¹ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 40–1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³ Austin, “A Plea for Excuses.”

linguistic concern, but quite another to claim that it is “more concerned with building metaphysical worldviews than analyzing problems.” Wessling admits that analytic theologians do tend to be preoccupied with building models of *particular doctrines*. I have not seen much evidence of analytic theologians doing the synthetic work of relating doctrines to one another. While the prospect of an analytic systematics greatly intrigues me, I am hard pressed to indicate any tokens of this type, unless one counts Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*. It’s therefore not clear to me that Rea and Crisp are calling for the *same* imaginative skills that I think systematic theology requires, though I’m happy to be corrected on this.¹⁴

Rea acknowledges that analytic theology is “the wrong place” to look for wisdom. Game, set, and match Vanhoozer? Not quite, for he suggests that no approach to academic theology is necessarily more conducive to getting wisdom than another. Crisp agrees: “Theology itself cannot *make* one wise; but it can give one the tools with which to pursue wisdom.” I concur: analytic theology is a useful theological tool. Let me therefore restate my concern: in order to construct a theology, and to build up the house of God, we need several tools in our toolkit, not a saw only (i.e., conceptual analysis).

2.3 The wisdom of analysis

Towards the end of his essay, Wessling makes a positive case for analytic theology as sapiential. He rightly reminds us that wisdom contains a theoretical knowledge component, a point with which both Augustine and I readily agree. Disciples display wisdom when they see, judge, and act on the basis of what they know in ways that accord with the created order and glorify God. Knowing certain things about God and Jesus Christ – for example, what it means to say that God is three persons in one nature and that Jesus Christ is one person with two natures – are necessary but not sufficient conditions for understanding what God was doing in Christ. Theoretical knowledge is good, yet even the demons believe (James 2:19). Moreover, (theoretical) knowledge puffs up (1 Cor. 8:1). I conclude that theoretical knowledge is necessary, but not sufficient, for Christian wisdom. As a theologian, I am concerned that the knowledge of God not merely idle in my students’ minds. The telos of theological reflection is obedience, and doxology. Still, I agree with Wessling: no form of academic theology can guarantee wisdom, obedience, or doxology. I’ll return to this below when I discuss the role of knowledge, and analysis, in the “theological arc.”

Wessling saves his strongest argument, and best positive recommendation, until last. He observes, correctly in my opinion, that the building of wise Christian communities requires a division of labor to which analytic theology contributes important tools. In particular, analytic theology encourages certain intellectual dispositions and fosters certain habits that are conducive to wisdom: attentiveness, patience, clarity, and charity – against such things there is no law (Gal. 5:23). Stated more positively: analytic theology cultivates an intellectual culture that is intellectually virtuous, and conducive of wisdom. I believe this is often the case. My concern is simply that theologians not be formed as technical analysts who value clarity, logical argument, conceptual precision and problem-solving *to the exclusion* of other kinds of attention to and appreciation of biblical language and literature.¹⁵

3 My original concern restated: Non-reductive interpretivism

Let’s take stock. Thus far, I’ve conceded to Wessling almost every point. This should come as no surprise for those who read my original essay, which was assuredly *not* an all-out assault on the monstrous regimen of analysis. On the contrary, both Wessling and I believe that there is an important place for analytic theology in the project of building cathedrals of the mind, as well as the project of building up the body of Christ.

¹⁴ Wessling indicates that he knows of two well-published analytic theologians who are seriously contemplating such a project. At present, perhaps the best example of a synthetic work of analytic theology is Oliver Crisp’s *The Word Enfleshed*, which seeks not only to clarify Christology but also to relate it to other doctrines, such as the *imago Dei*, pneumatology, and the atonement.

¹⁵ Lurking behind some of my concerns about analytic theology are Charles Taylor’s similar concerns about the designative theory of language that he believes dominates much modern philosophy. See his *The Language Animal*.

My only caveat is that analytic theology, while an important tool, is best deployed for certain specific tasks. Indeed, like a Swiss army knife, it can be used to do several things, but not everything (you can't drill holes with it). We also agree that a tool is only as effective as the person wielding it, hence the importance of having the right dispositions, habits, and virtues.

Let me now name the deeper concern that lay behind my concern about analytic theology. It is a concern I have about any approach to theology or reading Scripture: methodological reductionism. As I understand the task of theology, it involves seeking understanding of God's Word and then demonstrating that understanding in forms of individual and corporate life. Inasmuch as Scripture is testimony to the Word of God and itself a form of God's Word, it follows that theology is deeply invested in biblical interpretation. My concern with methodological reductionism has to do with my desire to enable people to read the Bible theologically, that is, as the Word of God, in ways that build up the knowledge of God and the love for God among the people of God.

Martha Nussbaum was the first to alert me to the danger of overlooking the cognitive significance of literary form in the zeal to clarify propositional content. It was also from her *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, that I took my title, "Love's Wisdom." While her focus is ethics and mine theology, we share a number of concerns. Where she thinks that moral reasoning requires a certain literary sensitivity both to what is said (content) and how it is said (form), I think that biblical reasoning (i.e., theology) requires these two sensibilities too. Where Nussbaum thinks that novels not only exemplify but engender practical wisdom in their readers, I think Scripture does this even more for its readers when the Spirit is at work ministering truth to (i.e., illumining) darkened minds and hardened hearts. Nussbaum is an example of a philosopher who has both analytic and imaginative dispositions, but by her own admission the guild of professional philosophers is not finely aware and richly attuned to the nuances of the language and literature of human love.

The question I posed to myself – and it remains an open question – concerned the extent to which analytic theology is a help rather than a hindrance in the theological interpretation of Scripture, and to the understanding of the *divine* love communicated therein. Mind you, I have the same question about biblical studies. When exegesis becomes no more than syntactical analysis, it too short-circuits the process of understanding. In order to do justice to biblical authority, I believe we have to respond to everything the authors (human and divine) are doing: we have to clarify the sense (grammar) and explore the reference (ontology). I therefore advocate the use of a plurality of methods in biblical interpretation in order to give thick descriptions of what the biblical authors were doing with their words – call it non-reductive interpretivism.

"Interpretivism" (also known as antipositivism, not to be confused with perspectivism) is a term associated with the social sciences, where it names the belief that the social world cannot be understood by the methods used to investigate the natural world. I am here using the term in a slightly different sense, in connection with the hermeneutical sciences, where it names the belief that the world of the biblical text cannot be completely understood using only methods suited to investigating the background historical context (much biblical studies) or sentence-long stretches of non-biblical discourse (some biblical studies, and much analytic theology).

Paul Ricoeur has also influenced my thinking about textual interpretation. He was a philosopher who appreciated both Continental and analytic contributions to the task of understanding language and texts. In particular, I have been influenced by what he calls his "hermeneutical arc": "Understanding precedes, accompanies, closes and thus *envelops* explanation. In return, explanation *develops* understanding analytically."¹⁶ To understand God and God's word truly involves what I call a theological arc: it begins with an initial preunderstanding ("from faith"), is tested and refined by a host of critical tools, including biblical exegesis and conceptual analysis, and results in a personal appropriation of the world of the text into the world of the reader, that is, in an event of understanding oneself and one's situation in light of the text ("to faith" – Rom. 1:17).

¹⁶ Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 165.

My colleague Thomas McCall is doing encouraging work in attempting to relate analytic theology more directly to the task of exegesis. He clearly appreciates the scope of the problem of determining whether or not some proffered theological proposition *P* really is authorized by scriptural teaching.¹⁷ My hunch is that analytic theology comes into its own, and fairly shines, when it is put to work analyzing theological propositions and arguments once these have already been distilled from Scripture. Yet, as McCall says, analytic theology may help even in the task of exegesis itself, broadly conceived: “For while the biblical theologian can help us with the ‘narrative coherence,’ the analytic theologian can assist with logical coherence.”¹⁸ Anyone who has tried to make sense of some of Paul’s more convoluted arguments can appreciate that.

4 Conclusion: “Yes, and...”

Biblical interpretation and theology involve more, but not less, than conceptual analysis. Hence my final response to Wessling is not a rebuttal, or even “Yes, but” but rather, “Yes, *and*.”¹⁹ The “Yes” signals my basic affirmation of what analytic theology, at its best, is and does; the “and” signals my belief that ultimately more is required in order to reason biblically.²⁰

What prompts my “and” is my understanding of the task of theology as the project of forming disciples to live to God. Can wisdom be taught? Paul says that the sacred writings, the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, are “able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). The Bible enables wisdom by recounting the story that puts everything in its proper place. Imagination is an essential ingredient in wisdom inasmuch as it is the imagination that enables us to view the biblical story as a unified whole rather than as an assemblage of unrelated parts. The first essential imaginative move is seeing how the story of Jesus is the continuation and fulfillment of the history of Israel. It takes theological imagination – a synthetic, synoptic grasp of the big picture – to see that the God who brought Israel out of Egypt is also the Father who brought Jesus out of the grave. The Bible is a crucial element in the divine pedagogy – a canonical curriculum.

Wisdom is the ability to see, judge, and do the right thing in a particular situation. Doctrine, too, is an element in this pedagogy. Theological understanding of the Bible involves learning to think not simply about but *along* the biblical texts, the story-shaped framework for understanding God and ourselves. *Doctrine helps make disciples by fostering the ability to understand the realities that Scripture is about in order to discern, and then do what is required to embody the mind of Christ in specific situations.*

Can analytic theology aid and abet this endeavor? Most certainly! Sapiential is to analytic theology as Sara is to Hagar (to adapt Turretin’s imagery for describing the relationship of theology to philosophy): conceptual analysis, and analytic theology more generally, is servant to the broader project of sapiential theology, namely, living out what we know of God to the glory of God.

Instead of a concern, then, let me end with a comment. I think analytic theology works best as a moment in the theological arc of understanding biblical truth. Analysis is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a tool – a valuable tool – but saints cannot live by analysis alone. For analytic theology to become sapiential theology, it must be more than analytic. Like the characters in Narnia, it must go “further up and further in” – further, and deeper, into the world of the biblical text. It must contribute to the project of theological interpretation of Scripture, not replace it. I believe it has the potential to do so. Regretfully, I also think that it often fails to live up to its potential.

The last word on going further up and further in belongs to that great sapiential theologian Augustine: “we stretch through knowledge to wisdom; yet we do not withdraw from one and the same Christ, ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col. 2:1-3).”²¹

¹⁷ McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology*, 55.

¹⁸ Ibid., 80.

¹⁹ Theatrically literate readers will catch the allusion to the first rule of improvisation, on which see further, Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton, *Yes, And: How Improvisation Reverses “No, But” Thinking and Improves Creativity and Collaboration*. Elsewhere I have written on the connections between wisdom and improvisation (see Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 188-206).

²⁰ For a complementary view, see Webster, “Biblical Reasoning.”

²¹ Augustine, *On the Trinity* XIII.19.24.

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