

In critically appropriating Paul Capetz's "Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Old Testament," I've had occasion to re-read my discussion in *On Theology*: 65-68, as well as such more recent discussions as that in the syllabus for my lectures on "The Authority of Scripture for Christian Existence Today": 18-20, 22 f.

I've been struck by the fact that, in the first discussion, I in effect ignore the distinction I have learned to make between "presuppositions" and "assumptions," by using the first term so loosely that it is, for all practical purposes, synonymous with the second. Thus I say:

The key to an answer [sc. to the question of how the Old Testament is to be used as a theological authority] . . . is the insight that the writings of the Old Testament contain the most fundamental presuppositions, and thus provide all the main concepts, of the Jesus-kerygma of the earliest church. Put differently, the Old Testament writings document the particular linguistic form of the question of human existence—more exactly, of the ultimate meaning of human existence—to which the Jesus-kerygma presents itself as the answer (66).

If speaking of "the particular linguistic form of the question of human existence . . . to which the Jesus-kerygma presents itself as the answer" is simply a verbally different way of talking about "the most fundamental presuppositions, and thus . . . all the main concepts" of the Jesus-kerygma, then, clearly, "presuppositions," etc. is simply another way of talking about what I have learned to distinguish as "assumptions."

The other thing that has struck me, however, is that, even in this earlier discussion, I seem to show a definite preference for speaking of the distinction between "question and answer," rather than "presuppositions and assertion." Thus I conclude by saying:

I trust it is now reasonably clear how the Old Testament as well as the New is to be used as a theological authority. Even though the Old Testament writings, unlike those of the New, do not expressly have Jesus as their subject, they do document the particular form of the existential question to which the Jesus-kerygma is the answer and, to this extent, are authoritative for determining the appropriateness of theological assertions (68).

Significantly, in the more recent discussion referred to above, I no longer talk about “presuppositions,” but speak solely and consistently of “assumptions.” Thus I argue:

[T]here’s yet another, significantly different way of understanding and using [the Old Testament] as authoritative, assuming the answer I’ve given to our question about formally authoritative Christian witness. That answer means . . . that the New Testament canon as such becomes, in effect, the primary historical source from which we today have to reconstruct the canon *before* the canon of the earliest Christian witness. But in an analogous—partly similar, partly different—way, the Old Testament canon as such may be said to become, in effect, the primary historical source in the light of which we alone can understand the main religious and theological assumptions of that same earliest Christian witness.

To be sure, the more immediate historical source of what the earliest Christians simply assumed was not the Hebrew scriptures as such, but the Judaism contemporary with them themselves—not only Pharisaic Judaism, but also, and especially, the so-called apocalyptic Judaism of the sort considerably illumined by the Dead Sea scrolls. Nevertheless, the primary source to which one finally has to look in order to understand both Judaism generally and Jewish apocalypticism in particular is precisely the Hebrew scriptures. So, in its own way, the Old Testament canon becomes—or remains—the primary historical source for understanding the assumptions of the earliest Christian witness, even as the New Testament canon, in its different way, is our primary source for historically reconstructing that earliest Christian witness itself. . . .

Just as the New Testament writings provide the primary historical source for reconstructing the apostolic witness itself, so the Old Testament writings provide the primary historical source—not for reconstructing, but—for understanding the historical origins of the most fundamental religious and theological assumptions of the apostolic witness (19 f., 22 f.).

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