“SPEAKING OF GOD AS HE WAS ABLE”;¹
A RESPONSE TO LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON
AND JERRY L. SUMNEY

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My task is to respond to two different interpretations of the theology
of one early Christian text, a letter that now goes under the name
1 Timothy. Although both Luke Timothy Johnson and Jerry L. Sumney
share a belief that this text has a coherent theology which is capable of
comprehension and some degree of systematization, they have inten-
tionally done so from different perspectives about what can be known of
the document itself (its provenance, authorship, and date), and about the
modes of analysis by which a text's theological vision may be revealed.
From critical interaction with these two juxtaposed papers we can
appreciate many of the crucial issues—both of method and of substance—
involved in theological analysis of ancient Christian epistolary documents.

At the outset it is important to note that both papers straightforwardly
identify and address the central question which faces one who inquires
into the theology of 1 Timothy: the relationship between theology and
ethics. Both see the link as integral. Johnson's theory is more complex
and expansive, seeing in oikonomia theou hé en pistei the theological

¹My title comes from John Chrysostom, Hom. in 1 Tim. 18.1 [PG 62.597], who
remarked on 3:16: houtó theologíasas hós én autò dynaton. I shall discuss this passage
below in the conclusion to this response.
theme of the letter: God's ordering of reality, built into the very fabric of nature, pervades and is given expression in the social and ecclesial orders. Thus the "living God" is the one who ordered creation and who worked for its salvation. Paul writes a complex combination of theological argument and ethical directives which call the Ephesians, through Timothy, to live, both at home and in the church, in conformity with this ordered intention of God, through assuming their proper place in the order. Sumney's thesis is that there is a key linkage formed in the letter between God as savior and the requirement for human eusebeia by way of response. “The contention here is that the identification of God as Savior is the basis of this letter’s thought, the foundation of its argumentation and its ethical and communal instructions.” This theological position “serves as the framework from which the false teaching [of Torah observance of some kind] is to be rejected.” The positions of Sumney and Johnson are quite close to one another—both see the purpose of this theological argument to be to forge a link between a doctrine of God (as savior or as living creator) and human social and ecclesial behavior (piety or faith and good conscience), and both think that the author (Paul or whoever) did this with some sophistication and theological acumen. For Sumney theology is the basis for ethics, for Johnson it appears to be the conceptual field within which ethics participates (he does not use Sumney’s “basis” or “foundation” language).

I. The Effect of Authorship Assumptions on the Theological Analyses

Did the authorship hypotheses of these authors affect their interpretations of the theology of this letter? Only Johnson addresses the question directly, at the end of his paper: “This sketch of the theological perspective of 1 Timothy has assumed Pauline authorship of the letter, but has not relied on that assumption to establish its reading, except insofar as the self-presentation of the letter and the circumstances it addresses have been taken seriously, and the literary texture of the composition has provided the basis for analysis” (emphasis added). One doesn’t know whether to take this as a yes or a no. The plan and program of the