

Biblical Theology and (Dispensational) Theological Method

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For dispensational theology to get underway properly there needs to be a methodology which comports with the progress of revelation as recorded in the outworking of the covenants of God in history. This introduces “Biblical Theology”; a tried and true definition of which, as well as an agreed upon methodology, has been elusive,¹ so we must familiarize ourselves with the debate.

The Contribution of Biblical Theology

Taking the usual starting point as J. H. Gabler’s inaugural address at the University of Altdorf (1787),² we encounter a strongly rationalist approach to the discipline, which focuses on the scientific character of history. Biblical theology was not concerned with being doctrinal (which was for the dogmatists). Its area of concern was in the accurate representation of the beliefs of the people who left us these historical religious pieces.³ For Gabler, the historical outlook of the age from which a passage or book sprang was what needed to be discovered.⁴ Biblical theology was for him a purely descriptive subject.

Particularly important for Gabler was the belief that there was no necessary connection between the religion of the Old Testament and that of the New. As history changes so do beliefs and practices (although truth is constant).⁵ This means that the truths within the Bible are arrived at by an excavation process, wherein each writing (or writer) is studied and his conceptual contribution analyzed. The evaluation methods were held to produce truth, which could then be utilized by the systematicians. Hence, biblical theology was thought to be an independent *historical* enterprise, and normative in its own right.⁶ Dogmatic (Systematic) theology was a different animal, delivering up normative teachings to the Church.⁷ Another way to put the difference is that biblical theology is active and processional while systematics is logical cum organizational.⁸

From the time of Gabler up until nearly cusp of the twentieth century biblical theology and systematic theology were viewed in utter contrast the one to the other. In 1894, at his Installment address as first Professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, Geerhardus Vos tried to demonstrate how the two could coexist.⁹ Although Herman Bavinck had made a few noteworthy comments,¹⁰ “within the Reformed tradition Vos has no predecessors for his conception of biblical theology.”¹¹ Vos has been all but ignored by most scholars, but he has done some of the most conspicuously biblical and exegetical work in the whole field. We shall return to him presently.

Biblical Theology Beyond Evangelicalism

Beyond evangelicalism a major step forward was made by Eichrodt in his three volume *Theology of the Old Testament*.¹² Eichrodt first rejected any scheme that he felt forced dogmatic guardrails around the Old Testament’s story. He believed, in fact, that it

“contained very little actual *doctrine*.”¹³ He replaced it with a unifying, or better, a controlling concept – that of “covenant” (*berith*), principally the Mosaic covenant.¹⁴ This was and remains very influential,¹⁵ although the present leaders in the non-evangelical wing of biblical theology, men like Brevard Childs, have developed new approaches that emphasize the witness of both Testaments. Childs’ *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*¹⁶ is an attempt to bring about a resolution of 1. the discrete testimony or “witness” of the Old Testament; 2. the discrete witness of the New Testament; 3. the theological value of the Christian Bible.¹⁷ This seems to us to be a good scheme (although Childs’s lack of strong belief in inspiration infects his work).

Back in the evangelical world there have been some encouraging signs of late that biblical theology is seeing a bit of a resurgence. This is headlined by the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*,¹⁸ which seems to have triggered projects such as the work of a team of scholars at Ouachita Baptist University called, *The Story of Israel*.¹⁹ This book tracks “Israel” through both Testaments, although in Paul and the Apocalypse the distinction between the nation of Israel and the Church is basically forgotten.²⁰ Another interesting work following a literary-historical framework, is Dempster’s *Dominion and Dynasty*.²¹

A better approach to the discipline has been demonstrated (albeit somewhat unevenly) by the recent faculty at Dallas Theological Seminary.²² In two volumes, these scholars have tried to, “survey the Bible as a whole from an analytical and inductive stance and to extract from it those themes and emphases that are inherent to it and that recur with such regularity and in such evident patterns as to generate their own theological rubrics.”²³

In following this line there is the danger of constructing a biblical theology based on the number of times a particular thing is mentioned, which would be a fallacious pursuit. Still, if such a danger is guarded against (by, for example, realizing that a biblical author may be assuming a particular theme without actually mentioning it explicitly) this looks like a helpful approach. It is also arguable that this way of doing biblical theology may miss the *canonical* aspects of the discipline.²⁴ If Biblical theology is going to be anything more than the analysis of the contributions of individual biblical writers it must consider the whole biblical canon as given by the Holy Spirit. If it does this it cannot be merely exegetical theology but must establish itself as both a diachronic and, to a greater extent, a synthetic study. It is only in this way that it really can function as a bridge to systematic theology.²⁵ This is where Vos again is helpful.

Going back to Vos and his followers (John Murray and Richard Gaffin), it is interesting to see how they attempted to solve the nagging problem of the role of biblical theology. Gaffin²⁶ lists four characteristics of a true biblical theology:

1. Special revelation has an inherently progressive historical character.
2. This progress of revelation is differentiated and multiform in nature.
3. The progress is organic.²⁷
4. The main question is how the “historically differentiated character of revelation” contrasts and complements systematic theology.²⁸

Gaffin develops some intriguing pathways from these characteristics. First, biblical theology “challenges us to do justice to the historical character of revealed truth.”²⁹ This is notably the case with the covenantal aspects of Scripture with its reliance upon God’s acts.³⁰ In the second place, biblical theology should be allowed to regulate exegesis.³¹ We shall let Gaffin spell out his thinking before adding one or two observations from a dispensational perspective.

Exegesis itself is misunderstood if biblical theology is seen as no more than a step (even the most important) in the exegetical process. It does not appear to be going too far to say that in “biblical theology,” that is, in effective recognition of the redemptive-historical character of biblical revelation, the principle of context, of the analogy of Scripture, the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture, so central to the Reformation tradition of biblical interpretation, finds its most pointedly biblical realization and application. All exegesis ought to be biblical-theological. *To the extent that there is hesitation on this point the relationship between biblical and systematic theology will remain unresolved.*³² (Emphasis added).

When biblical theology is thought of as “biblical-theological exegesis” it has its closest ties with systematic theology because it provides a methodological guide which can “correct any exegesis of the text.” So then, “The indispensability of biblical theology to systematic theology is the indispensability of exegesis to systematic theology, no more and no less.”³³

What shall a dispensationalist say to this? Clearly when a Reformed covenant theologian states that biblical theology is the very hub of exegesis he is putting a strong case for a theologically driven hermeneutics. This a dispensationalist, if he is consistent, cannot condone. What is to be done then? Is the dispensationalist forced by his prior commitment to hermeneutical consistency to define biblical theology in such a way as to separate it far from systematic theology? Must it remain purely descriptive? Can it not dictate to systematic theology even a little about how it ought to formulate its prescriptions? We think it can.

There seems to be a growing consensus among evangelicals that biblical theology must take on a canonical aspect if it is to escape a submissive and functionary role in theological studies.³⁴ Wolters puts it well:

[A] strong case can be made for the view that the Scriptures themselves, taken together as a canonical whole, embody and promulgate a nondualistic worldview...If that is so, then in the dynamics of the hermeneutical circle, the Bible’s own worldview ought to inform the way it and its component parts are interpreted.³⁵

This we readily grant, but we do not see any necessity to jump straight *into* canonical exegesis and so drag theology into our hermeneutics. We must insist upon the integrity of the text in its *immediate* historical context. When attention is placed here the text

itself, especially driven by the biblical covenants, will promote progressive revelation, and thus by degrees one will arrive at a canonical biblical theology.

Nor does this abrogate all we have said in other places about the need for an *a priori*, or more accurately, a transcendental “revelational epistemology.” For we enthusiastically endorse the teaching that “Biblical theology should be done with a constant self-conscious effort to be consistent with biblical presuppositions.”³⁶ This does not make us fall into the trap of methodologically reading-in our theology into the text. We are Christian *believers* by God’s grace, but we must try hard to come to the text and first listen to what it is actually saying. Dispensationalists possess the right hermeneutical tools to do this.

¹ See the survey in Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Relationship Between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology,” *Trinity Journal* 5:2 (Fall 1984), 117-125.

² Hasel, 113.

³ James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 62.

⁴ Hasel, 114.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷ Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 16.

⁸ Richard B Gaffin, Jr., “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 38:3 (Sept. 76), 290.

⁹ Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 23.

¹⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1.82-83.

¹¹ Gaffin, 287.

¹² Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

¹³ Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, (London: SCM Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Barr, 417.

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- ¹⁸ T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D.A. Carson, Graeme Goldsworthy, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000).
- ¹⁹ C. Marvin Pate, J. Scott Duvall, J. Daniel Hays, E. Randolph Richards, W. Dennis Tucker and Preben Vang, *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004). The work seems to be headed up by Pate.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, 26-27, 266.
- ²¹ Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003). Dempster employs the rubric of geography (land) and genealogy, which is a fruitful direction in which to look. Unfortunately, I think he does not weave the covenant motif well into his treatment.
- ²² Roy B. Zuck, ed., *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), and, *idem.*, *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994).
- ²³ Eugene H. Merrill, "Introduction" to Zuck, ed., *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, 3.
- ²⁴ Cf. Hasel, 125-126.
- ²⁵ Hasel, 126.
- ²⁶ Gaffin, 289.
- ²⁷ One can also see this in the first Bampton lecture of Thomas Dehany Bernard's, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 44.
- ²⁸ This is seen in the work of Erich Sauer. See David J. Hesselgrave, *Scripture and Strategy: The Use of the Bible in Postmodern Church and Mission*, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1994), 35-51.
- ²⁹ Gaffin, 292.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*.
- ³¹ *Ibid*, 293.
- ³² *Ibid*, 294.
- ³³ *Ibid*, 295.
- ³⁴ Along with those already cited see, e.g., Paul R. House, "Biblical Theology and the Wholeness of Scripture," in Scott J. Hafemann, ed., *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), especially 268-270.
- ³⁵ Albert Wolters, "Worldview," in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Gen. ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 855.
- ³⁶ Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 45.