

CHAPTER 8

Two Testaments, One Biblical Theology

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There is no question mark after the title above, a fact that gives this essay a programmatic quality. Many regard as an open question whether there is one “biblical theology” that holds together all the literature of the Bible. This essay proceeds from the assumption that, despite the grand variety of biblical texts and themes, there is a unified “theology” to be discerned and affirmed in the Bible.

But what is it? And how is it discerned? We need to explore the implications of the confession of the Bible as Christian Scripture. Let us, in effect, put an unprinted question mark at the end of the title, and ask: (1) What are the difficulties in the way of that affirmation? (2) In the light of these difficulties, what are the different ways of formulating a “biblical theology”? (and what are their pitfalls?), and finally (3) What really is the best option? How may we think ourselves forward, and be confident in our affirmation?

1. Challenges to a Unified Biblical Theology

In a nutshell, challenges arise from the *historical particularity* of the different writings that make up our Bible. At the most basic level, we must recognize that, from a Christian point of view, most of this “book” (or collection of “books”) is not “about” Jesus Christ, even though we want to recognize him as the supreme Word of God. The contrast between Jesus as

the Word and the many "words of God" that preceded him opens the letter to the Hebrews (1:1-2), and thus raises within the NT itself the paradox that, as Graham Hughes puts it, "previous forms of God's Word were and remain God's Word and yet can now be obsolete."¹

Historical criticism is not bothered by the theological problems raised by this, but biblical theology can hardly be sanguine about it. For instance, between the covers of the Bible, there is one line of thought that regards the covenant with Israel as secure forever (e.g., Gen. 17:7; 2 Sam. 7:14-16; Rom. 11:28-29), another that proclaims its end because of Israel's sin (e.g., Amos 8:1-3; 9:7-8; Matt. 21:33-44), another that marginalizes covenant and law in favor of "wisdom" (the wisdom tradition), and another that proclaims the covenant with Israel "obsolete" (Heb. 8:13) because God has now acted to create a new people for himself in Christ — including Gentiles (e.g., Gal. 3:28). How can we come to terms *theologically* with such diversity?

So historical criticism and biblical theology have usually been at daggers drawn with each other. Gerhard Ebeling locates the origin of biblical theology as a distinct discipline in the seventeenth century, when it arose in reaction to scholasticism (both medieval and Protestant) by reasserting the simplicity and originality of the biblical message over against the complexities of orthodox systematics. But gradually, he suggests, biblical theology was undermined by a growing awareness of the problems inherent in seeking a unified statement of the message of the Bible, and of the historical inappropriateness of studying only the books within the canon as specially related to each other — and indeed of the unsuitability of the word "theology" to describe the content of the Bible at all (for theology was taken to be the scientific explication of the biblical revelation, to be distinguished from the *content* of the Bible, theology's raw material).²

In the history of the relationship between biblical theology and the historical criticism of the Bible, William Wrede's 1897 lecture, "The Task and Methods of So-called 'New Testament Theology,'" is notorious.³

1. Graham Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics: The Epistle to the Hebrews as a New Testament Example of Biblical Interpretation*, SNTSMS 36 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 28.

2. Gerhard Ebeling, "The Meaning of 'Biblical Theology,'" in *Word and Faith* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), pp. 79-97.

3. William Wrede, "The Task and Methods of So-called 'New Testament Theology,'" in Robert Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter*, SBT, 2nd ser., 25 (London: SCM, 1973), pp. 68-116.

Wrede argued that the only proper, scientific object of study was "early Christian history of religion" — which dissolves both "New Testament" and "Theology": "New Testament," because the collection of writings to which we give that name is a dogmatic creation of the church, and is only a selection from the wider literature relevant to the study of early Christian religion; and "Theology," because the dogmatic tradition of the church only began *after* the NT period, and early Christian religion shows such variety both in form and ideology.

Wrede thus left NT theologians with a severe identity crisis. The historical criticism accepted as legitimate by almost everyone seemed to deny them the right to exist. And if that were true for the NT, then how much more for the Bible as a whole?

The problem remains. None of us can deny that the Bible comes to us as a series of texts rooted in history — in many different times, circumstances, and cultures (as reflected in its various genres). The Bible we hold in our hands points in two apparently incompatible directions. On the one hand, it oozes history — the history of each of its separate periods, in which its various books arose out of complex circumstances and relationships with other writings. On the other hand, it oozes theology — simply by the collection of *these* writings (and not others), and by the names of the two parts that bring them into deep relationship with each other. The first part is not "the Hebrew Bible," to be distinguished from "the Christian Bible" in the second part. These names would actually drive them apart, recognizing (implicitly) that the first part is properly *Jewish* rather than Christian. Rather, they are for us "Old Testament" and "New Testament," names that assert a mutual belonging as two parts of *one* literature claiming as a whole to be "testament" (witness) from God, divided into two sequential sections.⁴

The question that teases us is this: Granted the history of biblical criticism over the last two hundred years, in which the study of the Bible as *history* has seemed to undermine any claim to unified theological testimony, how are we to make sense of the Bibles in our hands, which present us with both history and a claim to unity?

4. For an excellent reflection on this, see Christopher R. Seitz, "Old Testament or Hebrew Bible? Some Theological Considerations," in *Word without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 61-74.

2. Attempts at a Unified Biblical Theology

Among the chief exponents of "biblical theology" in this century we can distinguish five ways in which, as Christians, they have sought to come to terms with this dilemma. A brief review and analysis of these approaches will help to set the scene for our own constructive proposals.

2.1. *Biblical Theology apart from Historical Criticism*

The first approach solves the problem by discounting the whole historical-critical project for biblical theology. We find an example in Geerhardus Vos, who adopted a highly systematic approach, defining biblical theology as "that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible."⁵ He presupposes the full inspiration and infallibility of the biblical texts, because they are bound up with God's revelatory acts as their essential interpretation, and therefore lifts the Bible out of the realm of historical criticism. Our access to biblical history is fully guaranteed by the biblical texts, which not only *report* it, but also *interpret* it authoritatively. For Vos, then, doing biblical theology means retelling the story of the Bible, tracing the acts of God behind and within its texts. Wilhelm Vischer adopts a similar approach in his famous book, *The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ*.⁶ Writing in a strongly Lutheran tradition, Vischer attempts to show how the whole OT is preparatory for Christ, by retelling the story in such a way as to make Jesus its necessary climax and fulfillment.

Vos insists that "Exegetical Theology" comes first, before systematics,⁷ yet he and Vischer clearly work out of strong systematic presuppositions. We cannot say this is wrong in principle, but the way in which this works out in their case faces grave difficulties. First, we must in honesty ask at what point the doctrine of inspiration from which they work comes under criticism. Second, historical criticism, in some form, is surely unavoidable on any conception of the nature of "biblical theology." Vos appeals to historical-critical work in order to illumine (for instance) the in-

5. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), p. 13.

6. Wilhelm Vischer, *The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ* (London: Lutterworth, 1949).

7. Vos, p. 12.

ner dynamic of the purity laws,⁸ and the nature of prophecy in Israel.⁹ Opening the door to historical criticism where it can be helpful while excluding it where it might undermine one's fundamental assumptions creates an inescapable tension within the work.

Third, this approach tends to value the texts not for their sparkling *variety* in themselves, but for their infallible testimony to the history behind them. As it happens, however, not all biblical texts claim to be infallible records inspired by God. Fourth, and most significantly, the very nature of the OT compels us to ask, To what extent do these texts have validity for us, as Christians, apart from their testimony to God's "acts" or their "foreshadowing" of Jesus Christ? Large segments of the OT are not concerned with God's acts in history — e.g., many of the legal texts and psalms, the whole wisdom tradition, and all of the undated prophetic oracles. Moreover, much of the history writing found in the OT neither relates to the *central* saving acts of God nor foreshadows Jesus. Surely such texts must have a role in "biblical theology." But what?

2.2. *Biblical Theology Arising out of Historical Criticism*

This approach is the exact opposite of the last. Gerhard von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* represents a sustained attempt to build biblical theology out of historical criticism, and thus to solve the dilemma of their relationship.¹⁰

Von Rad started from the standard historical-critical reconstruction of OT history — briefly, that we know nothing of the ultimate origins of Israel; that something involving a journey from Egypt to Palestine must lie behind the exodus stories but we cannot know exactly what; that Israel's shaping into a twelve-tribe federation took place within the Promised Land, not before; and that the Deuteronomistic history is a fundamental rereading of events according to later principles. Similarly, the prophets represented a radical new departure in Israel's history, challenging the very basis on which the tribes belonged together in covenant with God.

8. Vos, pp. 190-200.

9. Vos, pp. 216-29.

10. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (London: Oliver & Boyd; New York: Harper & Row, 1962/65).

Von Rad brilliantly turned this standard historical-critical picture into the basis of a biblical theology. The proper subject of OT theology, he suggested, was not the actual history underlying Israel's existence, but rather the *confessions* by which Israel told its story and thus made sense of its existence. This confessional history, of course, focused upon "the mighty acts of Yahweh" and the relationship he had thereby entered with Israel.

When the history of Israel's confessions was traced, von Rad maintained that a typological pattern emerged, whereby earlier traditions were taken up and reread in later situations, thus creating new traditions in line with the old, and yet transformed. For example, the prophets reread and reapplied the exodus traditions in the light of the Babylonian exile. They turned the old traditions into something like predictions, and "looked for a new David, a new Exodus, a new covenant, a new city of God: the old had thus become a type of the new."¹¹

In line with this typological pattern of constant rereading and development, von Rad suggested that the NT simply follows on in the same process. "A new name was once again proclaimed over the ancient tradition of Israel: like one who enters into an ancient heritage, Christ the Kyrios claimed the ancient writings for himself."¹² Here the word "writings" is important. By its writings Israel explained itself to itself in ever fresh ways, in light of its ongoing experience. Now, in the light of Jesus, the traditions are reread yet again.

This dramatic theory has had profound influence on biblical scholarship. Oscar Cullmann builds upon it in his notion of "salvation history" as crucial to NT theology.¹³ G. Ernest Wright's *God Who Acts* popularized it for several generations of students.¹⁴ Krister Stendahl's famous essay on biblical theology in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* also builds upon von Rad's model.¹⁵

Nevertheless, critics have drawn attention to at least four problems with this approach. (1) Can we really live with this marginalizing of "real"

11. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:323.

12. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:327.

13. Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (London: SCM, 1967) — anticipated in his *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951).

14. G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM, 1952).

15. Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *IDB*, 1:418-32.

history, and its substitution by *confessed* history? No, says Walther Eichrodt, who takes an altogether different path in his discussion of OT theology.¹⁶ If we cannot dissolve the real history of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ into mere "confession," no more can we allow Israel's real history to disappear down the tubes of historical skepticism.

(2) If *historical recital* is at the heart of biblical theology, as von Rad suggests, does this not marginalize the whole wisdom tradition? Walter Brueggemann makes this criticism in his recent reevaluation of von Rad.¹⁷ The wisdom tradition makes little of "the mighty acts of God" by which Israel's existence was secured, and to some extent even blurs the distinction between Israel and the surrounding cultures by drawing upon "international" wisdom themes and texts. But since the wisdom tradition is so important for NT Christology, it would seem vital to involve it, somehow, in whatever "center" we find for biblical theology.

(3) Is von Rad's typological model able to cope with discontinuity, as well as continuity, between the Testaments? In a penetrating analysis Christopher Seitz probes the famous essay in which von Rad tried to defend his historical-typological model by resting it upon Troeltsch's principle of analogy.¹⁸ Analogy depends on a fundamental similarity between type and antitype, but von Rad himself recognizes the great extent to which discontinuity is a feature of the relation of the New to the Old.¹⁹ Finally, the connection between the Testaments is theological, as well as historical. (4) On what grounds does this typological model permit a limitation to the texts of "Old Testament" and "New Testament," and to the typological appropriation of the OT by the first Christian community? Jewish appropriation of the Tanakh in the Mishnaic traditions must be allowed, by historical criticism, to be an *antitype* on von Rad's model just as much as the NT. Similarly, on what historical-critical grounds does the

16. Walther Eichrodt, "The Problem of Old Testament Theology," in *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961/67), 1:512-20.

17. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), pp. 36-37.

18. Von Rad, "Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament," in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann (Atlanta: John Knox, 1963), pp. 17-39; critiqued by Seitz, "The Historical-Critical Endeavor as Theology: The Legacy of Gerhard von Rad," in *Word without End*, pp. 28-40.

19. See, e.g., von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:330; von Rad, "Typological Interpretation," p. 36.

story stop with the Christian texts of the "New Testament" and not continue into the rest of Christian history? Von Rad's typological model provides no justification for a limitation of purview to the books of the Christian canon, although that is the extent of his own application of it. Again, his theological substratum is revealed.

2.3. *Biblical Theology Abstracted from History*

Vos and von Rad are united in seeking the focus, or organizing center, of biblical theology in the history of Israel, either confessed (von Rad) or revealed (Vos). But should the focus be sought rather behind Israel's history, perhaps in an idea or experience that serves to hold the OT texts together in all their variety? If the texts of the Christian canon really do belong together in some ultimate sense, then it might be possible to discern in them an integrating principle, something by which their uniqueness together really is signaled. There are three scholars who have made significant contributions along these lines, two from OT studies, one from NT study.

Walther Eichrodt's *Theology of the Old Testament* was published in the 1930s but was not translated for thirty years. Though writing before von Rad, he could almost be replying to him when he writes that OT theology needs to move beyond "the historical method" in the direction of "systematic analysis, if we are to make more progress toward an interpretation of the outstanding religious phenomena of the OT in their deepest significance."²⁰ By "systematic analysis" of the "deepest significance" of the "religious phenomena" of the OT, he means a kind of "clipstick" approach that measures the inner, spiritual life of Israel at various points in its history. What was the quality of its relationship with Yahweh in the cult, under the kings, under the prophets, after the exile, etc.?

Eichrodt has often been described as organizing OT theology around the idea of "covenant." It is not covenant as an idea that matters for him, however, but "the covenant relationship" — something that exists throughout the OT, even where the term "covenant" is not mentioned. He seeks to show that Israel enjoyed a unique relationship with God, and thus displayed a unique quality of religious experience, although its depth varied. It was at its most profound under and through the ministry of the

20. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1:27-28.

great prophets, but then tailed off in the exile and postexilic period as the vibrancy of the prophets' relationship with Yahweh was lost.

This is how Eichrodt seeks to build the bridge into the NT — which he announces as one of the chief aims of his *Theology*,²¹ but to which in fact he devotes little space. He makes experience of God the vital, behind-the-text factor that constitutes the focus of biblical theology, an experience traceable through all the ups and downs of Israel's history until finally Jesus brings it to its climax.

At first this is very suggestive. If it is really possible to show that both Testaments point to a unique, and (relatively) consistent, experience of God, reaching a climax in the Christian experience of the Spirit through Christ, then we might have found the key to "biblical theology."

But flaws soon appear. How does one measure the "quality" of religious experience? Against what objective scale? Even if we had such a scale, do these texts provide sufficient information to allow us accurately to discern the underlying experience of God? Most damaging of all, from a biblical-theological perspective, what does this approach do to Christ? At best, it makes him the supreme example of a God-conscious individual (shades of Schleiermacher), experiencing God more deeply than any other. In fact, Eichrodt had already found the "religious confidence, capable of overcoming the world" (an allusion to John 16:33 and 1 John 5:4!) in the OT prophets.²² We could also find it reflected in the Qumran Hymns, wonderful expressions of trusting piety. But if this is true, where is the need for Jesus, the Word become flesh?²³ On this analysis the Judaizers were right, and Paul was wrong!

The other two scholars to mention here are Peter Stuhlmacher and Brevard Childs.²⁴ They both seek to locate the subject matter of biblical theology in core ideas that lie both after and behind the texts — after, because they are essentially related to the church's dogmatic tradition; and behind, because these ideas are the essential content of the Scriptures, even where they do not come to explicit expression.

Stuhlmacher's two-volume *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*

21. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1:26.

22. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2:228.

23. This criticism is powerfully voiced by Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Rethinking Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 196-97.

24. We could also classify here the recent contribution of Christopher Seitz, who confesses his indebtedness to Childs (see "We Are Not Prophets or Apostles": *The Biblical Theology of B. S. Childs*, in *Word without End*, pp. 102-9).

is still in the process of production, but we know enough about it to be able to judge its main lines.²⁵ For Stuhlmacher, the task of biblical theology is to identify “the center of Scripture” [*die Mitte der Schrift*], which he defines as the ideas that form the unifying heart not just of the NT but of the whole Bible. In seeking this “center,” he starts from dogmatic presuppositions, recognizing that, for Christians, the canon forms a given which we identify as containing “the truth of the Gospel, as God’s redeeming revelation.”²⁶

For Stuhlmacher this vital “center of Scripture” is soteriological. It is essentially the gospel and its testimony to the nature of “the one God, who made the world, chose Israel for his special people, and has acted sufficiently for the salvation of Jews and Gentiles in the sending of Jesus as the Christ.”²⁷ So it is the gospel as the story of salvation that forms the heart of biblical theology. Stuhlmacher recognizes that this means choosing between texts — highlighting the significance of those that are especially important for telling the story, downgrading those that are not.

Childs does not make such a distinction between texts in his massive *Biblical Theology* published in 1993.²⁸ This is because, more than Stuhlmacher, he wants to emphasize the independent, self-standing “witness” of each of the Testaments in its own right. But, like Stuhlmacher, he starts from dogmatic presuppositions concerning the role of the canon within the Christian church, so that the goal of biblical theology is “to understand the various voices within the whole Christian Bible, New and Old Testament alike, as a witness to the one Lord Jesus Christ, the selfsame divine reality.”²⁹ He recognizes the tension between these two impulses — on the one hand wanting the texts to preserve their independence and variety, on the other seeing Jesus Christ as in some sense their real subject. How can they be reconciled? One of Childs’s most recent critics, Francis Watson, suggests that they are in fact irreconcilable, and that a Christian

25. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, vol. 1, *Grundlegung: Von Jesus zu Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992). The second volume has not yet been published. See also his *How to Do Biblical Theology*, PTMS 38 (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1995).

26. Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie*, pp. 2–4.

27. Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie*, p. 38. Stuhlmacher gives a slightly fuller statement of the “center” in *How to Do Biblical Theology*, p. 63.

28. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

29. Childs, p. 85.

approach to the OT cannot make sense of a biblical testimony independent of Christ.³⁰

Whether it is Jesus Christ, or the gospel of salvation, or the covenant relationship with God, what are we to make of this approach which seeks the focus of biblical theology in an abstraction from the text? John Goldingay fires some acute criticisms at it. Such abstractions are “one step removed from a living reality” — the actual life reflected within the texts themselves. By this means, he suggests, the problem of theological diversity within the Bible is bypassed, because the variations become inessential. This approach ends up looking for the lowest common denominator (i.e., the chief, most pertinent texts) and ignoring the rest. And the fact that several different centers have been identified rather undermines the whole approach.³¹

From a Christian theological perspective, it is something of a truism to say that the Bible tells the story of God’s plan of salvation, climaxing in Jesus Christ. This is biblical theology done simply from the perspective of the use of the OT by the NT writers. But if biblical theology is, as Ebeling says, reflection upon the biblical tradition, then it must move beyond merely retelling the story. It must probe it with questions. Why is the story in two parts? What does this imply for our understanding of God, and for our relations with Jews? How do we conceive the relation between the two parts? What of the many sections of both Testaments that do not relate directly to that overarching story? What do they contribute to biblical theology? And how do they contribute? How do we handle diversity within the Bible? And — perhaps the biggest question of all — what role in biblical theology do our contemporary interests play? We wrestle with issues of power and powerlessness, poverty and injustice, wealth and paternalism; and questions of gender, race and culture, religious and ideological pluralism, sexual morality, globalism, consumerism, individualism — to name but a few! These are all issues not specifically (or only tangentially) addressed by the biblical “story” of salvation in the Bible. Can biblical theology help us to hear the voice of the Bible on these issues, too?

30. Watson, *Text and Truth*, pp. 213–16.

31. John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 169–72.

2.4. *Biblical Theology Founded upon a New "History"*

Here we draw on some very recent contributions. Francis Watson is putting us in his debt with some creative and stimulating reflections on biblical theology and its relation to the church's dogmatic tradition, on the one hand, and to biblical history on the other.³² He too suggests, like Childs and Stuhlmacher, that biblical theology must be conceived as a discipline undertaken within the church by Christians, for whom a priori the whole Bible is Christian Scripture. He too thinks that this commits us, a priori, to seeing the whole Scripture as testimony to Jesus Christ, although he has not as yet shown how this may be done in any detail.³³

Watson starts to address the vexed issue of the relationship between biblical theology and history with the essay "The Gospels as Narrated History."³⁴ Here he begins to feel his way, building upon Frei and Ricoeur, toward a view of history that avoids a sharp dichotomy between history writing as a (true or untrue) record of events and fiction as an imaginative construct bearing no necessary relation to the "real" world. Watson proposes that the Gospels can be regarded as "narrated history," that is, as imaginative presentations of Jesus that, for all their quality as literary products, can yet exert a powerful truth claim upon us as descriptions of the "real" Jesus.

Jesus, he says, is for us inescapably textual. The search for the real Jesus "behind" the text always leaves us prey to the vagaries of historical reconstruction, and thus provides no secure basis for Christian access to him. But why should we wish away the Jesus before us, resident in the Gospel texts themselves?

Watson's reflections parallel those of Christopher Seitz on the nature of authorship within biblical theology. Discussing the authorship of Isaiah, Seitz seeks to move away from the old search for a historical Isaiah which was motivated by a desire to distinguish between original and secondary parts of the Isaianic corpus. This search has left its legacy, he suggests, in recent unitary readings of the book which approach it "as if" it were of single authorship and thus written from a single perspective. Rather, in the case of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, "single authorship is linked

32. Watson, *Text and Truth*, building on his earlier work, *Text, Church, and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994).

33. For some preliminary theses, see Watson, *Text and Truth*, pp. 216-18.

34. Watson, *Text and Truth*, pp. 33-69.

[in Jewish thinking] to an expectation of larger coherence despite a complex and varied range of texts and perspectives" — and a similar approach can be fruitful in the case of Isaiah. Seitz recognizes that this is a theological view of authorship drawing on Childs's canonical perspective, and building upon the recognition given by the receiving community within which the texts were inspired.³⁵

In Watson and Seitz we are finding new workings of an older approach. Indeed, Watson recognizes that his proposal is a restatement, in terms of modern literary theory, of Martin Kähler's refusal to distinguish between "the historical Jesus" and "the real, biblical Christ."³⁶ Against nineteenth-century attempts to reconstruct the psychology of Jesus (and thus to domesticate him), Kähler powerfully insisted that, for us as Christians, the "historical" Jesus is the Jesus presented to us by the Gospels. Similarly, Adolf Schlatter famously sought to circumscribe the power of so-called historical investigation to create imaginative reconstructions that run contrary to the flow of the NT texts and their own natural relationships among themselves. His 1909 essay³⁷ anticipates many of the emphases of the "critical realism" for which Ben Meyer and Tom Wright have powerfully argued.³⁸ This seeks to tread a careful path between the Scylla of positivism (meaning is "out there" and can be objectively determined) and the Charybdis of subjectivism (meaning is a function of readers and reading-effects only).

Building on all of this, Watson proposes a view of the Gospels that, in theory, could allow biblical history generally to function in a new way within biblical theology. Christians (apart from Marcion and his followers) have always claimed biblical history as "their" story — or rather, have believed that it exerted a powerful claim over them. It tells us who we are

35. Seitz, "Isaiah and the Search for a New Paradigm," in *Word without End*, pp. 113-29 (128).

36. Watson, *Text and Truth*, p. 64 n. 5. Martin Kähler's 1892 lecture, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1969), has exercised considerable influence and fascination in twentieth-century NT scholarship. I think it is appropriate to translate *geschichtlich* as "real" in this context.

37. Adolf Schlatter, "The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics," in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, pp. 117-66.

38. Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, PTMS 17 (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1989); N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 61-65.

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by revealing *our* past. We do not regard the written deposits of the OT as “someone else’s mail,” to allude to the evocative title of Paul van Buren’s fundamentally wrongheaded article.³⁹ They are *ours*. And therefore we are not finally dependent upon a historical reconstruction of that history before we can truly inhabit it.

At the heart of this sense of self-identification with Israel’s history lies the historical Jesus. We belong, because he belongs. The God whom he teaches us to call “Father” is the God of Israel. And therefore — whatever the implications may be for our relations with Jews — we regard ourselves as the people of that God, and those Scriptures as ours.

2.5. *Biblical Theology in Engagement and Dialogue*

Finally we review an approach associated with two names in particular, John Goldingay and Walter Brueggemann. Goldingay’s *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* is a profound work, reviewing various approaches to the diversity of the OT and then making positive proposals for a “unifying or constructive approach.” His Christian starting point is clear throughout, and so inevitably he sets his discussion of OT diversity within a *biblical* context. “A Christian writing OT *theology* cannot avoid writing in the light of the NT, because he cannot make *theological* judgments without reference to the NT.”⁴⁰ Christians therefore may rightly presuppose the canon as the context of the texts and of their work. At the same time, they must take great care to allow each part to be its distinctive and diverse self. Differences within the OT must be faced, and not blurred. This makes OT theology “a constructive, not merely a reconstructive, task.”⁴¹ By “doing” OT theology, we put the varied building blocks of the literature into new, constructive shape, and thus say *more* than each of the biblical authors was individually saying. By this means, Goldingay turns the diversity of the OT into a positive thing: Biblical theology is the task by which the diverse presentations within Scripture are seen as complementary to each other, and not finally contradictory.

39. Paul M. van Buren, “On Reading Someone Else’s Mail: The Church and Israel’s Scriptures,” in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte: Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 63. Geburtstag*, ed. Erhard Blum et al. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990), pp. 595–606.

40. Goldingay, pp. 186–87; Goldingay’s emphasis.

41. Goldingay, p. 183.

This is fundamentally the approach adopted also by Walter Brueggemann, although he does not have the same integrative motivation. Brueggemann’s recent *Theology of the Old Testament* will surely be one of the major biblical works of this century — or perhaps we should say, of the next — for Brueggemann’s approach represents a radical departure from the traditions of von Rad and Eichrodt. He too writes explicitly as a Christian, referring throughout to “the Old Testament,” although he nowhere discusses explicitly how the presence of the NT shapes “the Old Testament” for Christians. Perhaps this is because, within the postmodern world he inhabits, diversity is the furniture of the living space — not a problem to overcome, but a colorful quality to be enjoyed.

For Brueggemann (as for Goldingay), the proper subject matter of OT theology is simply the text within which Israel’s “testimony” comes to voice. He adopts a largely synchronic treatment, not ignoring the sweep of OT history but moving it to the theological sidelines. It is through this synchronic approach that he is able to escape Ebeling’s charge that the Bible does not contain “theology.”⁴² By reading the OT “flat,” he is able to set Israel’s “testimony” over against its own “counter-testimony” and let these perspectives debate with each other. For instance, the fact of Yahweh’s self-revelation, so fundamental to Israel’s existence, is subverted by Yahweh’s hiddenness, a prominent theme in Psalms and prophecy. “I want to insist,” he writes, “against any unilateral rendering of Yahweh’s life, or against any systematic portrayal of Yahweh, that Yahweh in the horizon and utterance of Israel is inescapably disputatious and disjunctive.”⁴³

He finds this “disjunction” not between rival texts in different parts of the OT, but within Israel’s central confessions, especially Exodus 34:6–7. Here Israel confesses Yahweh to be unpredictable. On the one hand his “steadfast love” seems to be absolute, but no one can tell when suddenly Yahweh may switch to mode B and start “visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children. . . .” David still received grace after many sins, but Saul was rejected after one.

Brueggemann builds many links between the OT and the world of today, as he allows each perspective and text to challenge not just other OT perspectives, but also the ideologies and assumptions of the modern world. This gives his work much freshness. But we need to ask, From the perspective of Christian theology, where is Christ in this vivid to-and-fro

42. See Ebeling, “The Meaning of ‘Biblical Theology.’”

43. Brueggemann, p. 715.

between rival perspectives on Israel's God and his dealings with his people and the world? At the very least, we may comment that Exodus 34:6-7 is crucially re-rendered in the NT, not least in the prologue of John's Gospel. Romans 1-3 has a lot to say about the integration of wrath and mercy within the one God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But to ask this question is potentially to subvert Brueggemann's postmodern perspective, which resists all attempts to resolve disjunctions and to seek normative (Christian) readings of disputed texts and OT tensions.

3. What Is "Biblical Theology"? How May We Do It?

Finally we focus our review and reflections in a definition of "biblical theology," five theses about its nature and practice, and then a brief example.

We may define biblical theology as *that creative theological discipline whereby the church seeks to hear the integrated voice of the whole Bible addressing us today*. It arises from the self-consciousness of the Christian church as the people of the God of Abraham. We make this claim in full awareness of the parallel Jewish claim, but we can do no other, because of the nature of Jesus and the NT. He interpreted his mission in OT terms, and built his self-understanding on the categories made available to him by first-century Judaism. Similarly the NT authors lived out of "the Scriptures," wrestling with the relation of new to old as they sought to integrate their experience of forgiveness, new life, and the Spirit, given through Jesus, with their prior understanding of God, covenant, kingdom, and law.

This integration was built into Christian identity from the first. It was not "bolted on" at the time of the "parting of the ways" between church and synagogue (contra van Buren). For us, inescapably, the whole Scripture is word of God, and therefore we stand alongside the author to the Hebrews in seeking its unity around "the Son."

How can we do this? There now follow five theses about the process of "biblical theology." It is important to underscore that the hermeneutical process continues, as it always has. Von Rad, Eichrodt, and Brueggemann all emphasize the constant recontextualization of earlier traditions within the biblical process. God's people are prepared by the past to live responsively and creatively in the present. And so we engage with the texts in the light of the challenges that face us today:

1. *Biblical theology needs an explicit Christian starting point*. For us,

the texts of the OT have a different identity from the texts of the Tanakh, because of their friendship with the NT, and the role they play in enabling the NT writers to formulate their understanding of Christ. However, a Christian starting point for biblical theology does not imply that biblical theology can only be conducted through a study of the use of the OT in the New. Far from it.

2. *Biblical theology needs to operate with a clear text-focus*, one that allows the texts of both Testaments to "be themselves," within their own historical setting, taking that history seriously but not allowing it to be a straitjacket. Eichrodt and Brueggemann help us here with their encouragement to employ a sensitive synchronic approach. Text sensitivity allows real connections of substance to be made across considerable time gaps. And Seitz helpfully traces how the "per se witness" of the OT may continue to speak powerfully even when it is *not* taken up by the NT.⁴⁴

3. *Biblical theology needs to adopt a "trajectory" approach to tradition history*. The "trajectory" model is more helpful than the "typology" model in allowing real developmental links to be discerned without having to demonstrate an actual causal pathway. Trajectories have a point of origin, a high point, and a point of touchdown. In relation to some biblical themes (e.g., creation and social justice), the high point may well lie within the OT, rather than in the New.⁴⁵ Biblical symbolism can be a creative center of study here, generating further reflections today as we see how symbols function and expand within the biblical tradition.

4. *Biblical theology needs to be conceived as a bright focus within systematic theology* — that is to say, within that process of sustained intellectual and spiritual dialogue by which Christians seek to achieve an integrated understanding of God, of themselves, and of the world. In this process biblical theology plays a vital role because of what the Bible is for us — "the oracles of God." We come to the Bible out of our theological agenda — with the questions and motivations that impel us as Christians today — and we "do" biblical theology as we engage the text with these questions. We do not force the texts anachronistically into our agenda, but allow them to address us on the basis of our shared humanity and our shared knowledge of God.

This is the proper basis on which Troeltsch's principle of analogy

44. Seitz, *Word without End*, pp. 213-28.

45. I am indebted to my London Bible College colleague Deryck Sheriffs for this observation.

plays a role within biblical theology. The difficulties, ambiguity, and contradictions of our experience today, with which theology wrestles, become the basis for our handling of the diversities we discover within the Bible.

5. So the *proper center or focus of biblical theology* is not to be found behind the text in its history, nor is it any abstracted experience or theme, nor any "canon within the canon" (not even Jesus Christ, central though he is to Christian Scripture), but it is the *contemporary theological agenda*, motivating us in our engagement with the texts of both Testaments in their historical relatedness and particularity. The raw material is, of course, these texts. But we encounter the texts with our probing questions, as faith seeks understanding. And therefore inevitably our questions become the focus of this particular exercise.

I believe that, applied together as a coherent set, these principles work creatively, and with integrity. For examples of the kind of study they generate, I mention Chris Wright's *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, or Alan Kreider's *Journey towards Holiness*, or Deryck Sheriffs's recent study of OT spirituality, or Christopher Seitz's discussions of the homosexual issue in *Word without End*.⁴⁶

Finally we briefly propose an application of this approach to a particular text. Studies on this model can be thematic or text focused, though they must always retain an integrative, whole-Scripture awareness of diversity and development. I follow the lead of Brevard Childs and take the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22:1-19.⁴⁷ It is interesting to see how this model of exegesis in the context of biblical theology extends his.⁴⁸

Childs pursues his emphasis on the "discreet" testimony of OT and NT, and then summarizes the main lines of the history of exegesis before his concluding "biblical-theological" reflections. He notes the privileging of the reader, who knows from the outset what Abraham does not — namely, that this is a test (22:1). He treats the tradition history within the OT and into the NT in a standard way — noting the special position of

46. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Leicester: Apolllos; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995); Alan Kreider, *Journey towards Holiness: A Way of Living for God's Nation* (London: Marshall Pickering; Scottdale, Pa.: Herald, 1986); Deryck C. I. Sheriffs, *The Friendship of the Lord: An Old Testament Spirituality* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996); Seitz, *Word without End*, pp. 263-75 (esp. pp. 319-39).

47. Childs, pp. 325-36.

48. "Exegesis in the Context of Biblical Theology" is the title of the section of Childs's book in which his treatment of Gen. 22 is set.

this narrative within the Genesis story, the use of "revelation" terms (22:14), the intertextual echo with the sacrificial terminology of Leviticus, and the allusions to the story in Romans 8:32 and Hebrews 11:17-19.⁴⁹ In his summary of the history of exegesis, he notes the typological treatment of the wood as prefiguring the cross, common until the Reformation when the emphasis fell on the testing of Abraham and his justifying faith.⁵⁰

In his final, "biblical-theological" reflection, Childs exercises great caution because of the need to avoid "a biblicist, external appropriation" of the text like the typological treatment of the wood carried by Isaac.⁵¹ He thus tentatively comments on the faithfulness of God (whose provision of the ram points ahead to the cult), on the theme of testing, on the dialectic of reward and grace that emerges when Genesis 22:15-18 and Romans 4:2 are set alongside each other, and on the ultimate need for a Christian "reader response" to the passage (which he does not illustrate). In spite of the perspective provided by Hebrews 11:17-19, Childs makes no comments about resurrection, presumably because this is not within the horizon of Genesis 22.

The approach suggested in this essay is ready to be more adventurous, because of the role it gives to our *dialogue* with the text. We seek to let the text be fully itself, as part of Christian Scripture, but to probe it with our concerns. What might this produce? I offer four reflections.

1. *The theology of God*. The narrative dramatically poses a question about God. Even the privileged reader, who knows it is a test, does not know why God wants to set this test. Pagan practices of child sacrifice are not specifically alluded to, but readers ancient and modern all make the connection. Suddenly Abraham's God looks like the pagan gods around, demanding human sacrifice.⁵² Brueggemann emphasizes the paradox of revelation and *hiddenness* within the OT,⁵³ and this story illustrates it as profoundly as any. It is not difficult to move to reflections on the way in which God requires us to testify to a faith that looks like self-deception, or like the mere product of our social background or psychology. We agonize too over the hiddenness of God in the suffering of the world, and the story

49. Childs, pp. 326-30.

50. Childs, pp. 330-32.

51. Childs, p. 336.

52. See Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

53. E.g., Brueggemann, pp. 333-58.

resonates strongly with the victimization of children by those whom they have a right to trust. Where is God in all of this?

From a Christian perspective, the story points to the answer at the End. Abraham's faith — and his questions and agony — are stretched to the very last moment. This thought of the postponement of the answer, so that our lives are structured around the need to hope, and believe, and persevere in love, takes us straight into NT eschatology.

2. *The theology of sacrifice.* There are intertextual echoes not just with cultic language in Leviticus but also with Jesus' call to his disciples to give up everything, including children, for his and the gospel's sake (e.g., Mark 10:29-30). The use of cultic sacrificial language ("ram," "burnt offering," and "appear" — cf. Lev. 9:1-7; 16:2-5) connects Abraham's private experience with the public worship of Israel, as Childs notes.⁵⁴ But Abraham is essentially called to *self-sacrifice*, as are Jesus' disciples. He must give up the thing he loves most (22:2), and the ram is no substitute for the sacrifice he has already made in mind and heart before it appears in the thicket. Within biblical theology, then, the provision of Christ actually makes it possible for God to call us to go the same way as Abraham.

We live in a world in which ghastly acts of self-sacrifice have brought grief to thousands. What is the difference between the self-sacrifice of a suicide bomber and that of Abraham? Chiefly, the absence of the promise of reward. Islam promises certainty of paradise to those who sacrifice themselves for Allah. But Abraham acts simply out of "fear" of God (22:12) — that is, his loyalty and love to God exceed everything else. He is then promised a reward (22:16-18), and similarly Jesus offers "eternal life" to those who give up everything for him (Mark 10:30). But the "reward" is what Abraham has already been promised, before ever the test took place (Gen. 17:5-8), and "eternal life" is given to all who believe (John 3:16). We are all called to the inner struggle for faithfulness and obedience, through which Abraham passes, irrespective of any particular reward (Rom. 6:17; 12:1-2).

3. *The theology of bereavement.* Here we have a father facing the death of his child, and even his own complicity in it. More broadly, many have to cope with anticipated bereavement, and then with agonizing questions afterward: If I had acted differently, would she have died? What does the story say, within biblical theology, to such situations? It encourages us to think of bereavement as sacrifice, as voluntary surrender, as willing gift —

chiefly because of the way in which this story is handled in the NT. "You have not withheld your son" (22:16) is echoed in Romans 8:32, with reference to God's gift of his Son "for us all." Similarly in Hebrews 11:17-19 and in James 2:21-23 the note of entrusting is clearly sounded. The severing of relationship in bereavement can be conceived as grave loss, or as great gift. The way in which Genesis 22 is caught up in the NT points us clearly in the latter direction. Bereavement can be a giving up in which we meet with the wonderful provision of God, at the End.

The author of Hebrews speculates that Abraham expected God to raise Isaac from death (Heb. 11:19). In so doing he follows the lead of the story, which makes no comments about Abraham's state of mind and thus leaves readers to fill this vital "narrative gap." Abraham's words to his two young men, "We will come back to you" (22:5), could well have prompted the speculation about resurrection. Granted that this line of thought is already present within the Bible, it lies to hand to extend it and to conceive of Christian bereavement as gift in hope of resurrection.

4. *The theology of testing.* The "now I know" of 22:12 inevitably makes us ask why God needed to discover the depth of Abraham's faithfulness, as if he did not know it already. But such questions arise from an understanding of the omniscience of God with which the passage is not working. The story tells us that we must think of our relationship to God not in terms of finite to infinite, but of person to person, servant to Lord. As in all intimate relationships, he needs to know how much we love him, and our lives need to be structured around opportunities to show how much we love him. Bereavement is such an opportunity. It is not difficult to trace a trajectory through the Bible on this issue, and to ask exactly what such experiences of testing contribute to our relationship with God. Paul addresses this with great suggestiveness in Romans 5:3-5, a passage in which quite possibly he is still thinking of Abraham, who has been the focus of his discussion in Romans 4.

4. Conclusion

We conclude where we began. What of that vision of a unified biblical theology — the fundamental conviction expressed in the title of this essay? If biblical theology is as I have argued, then this vision is *eschatological*: Like Abraham on the way to Moriah, we continue to seek that integrated understanding of God, of ourselves, and of the world that is the goal of all

54. Childs, pp. 327-28.

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Christian knowing, believing (with Paul in 1 Cor. 13) that such an understanding is there to be grasped, but that as yet all our knowing is provisional, subject to debate, and ripe for revision. We will not be enthralled by the postmodern fascination with incoherence, but neither will we blind ourselves to the ambiguity of human experience and the hiddenness of God. We will wrestle with these, and with the Scriptures, looking forward to the Day when “we will know, even as also we are known.”