

Biblical Theology and
the Wholeness of Scripture
Steps Toward a Program for the Future



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The premise for the 2000 Wheaton Theology Conference was exciting. The notion that scholars holding various theological commitments should come together to ponder how, not if, biblical theology ought to proceed indicates that the work of our predecessors has not been in vain. Frankly, it also offers the hope that our work is not without significant purpose. But this excitement must not lead to complacency, for much remains to be done if gains are to be made in the next several years. Still, without question it is a good time to note valuable work that has appeared and to determine how sound, effective theology may be written in the future. Specifically, we are to develop what Elmer Martens defines as

that approach to Scripture which attempts to see Biblical material holistically and to describe this wholeness or synthesis in Biblical categories. Biblical theology attempts to embrace the message of the Bible and to arrive at an intelligible coherence of the whole despite the great diversity of the parts. Or, put another way: Biblical theology investigates the themes presented in Scripture and defines their inter-relationships. Biblical theology is an attempt to get to the theological heart of the Bible.¹

¹Elmer A. Martens, "Tackling Old Testament Theology," *JETS* 20 (1977): 123.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES FOR BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

One's presuppositions inevitably drive one's writing. Of course, by presuppositions I mean studied foundational conclusions or underlying principles, not uninformed opinions. It is important for interpreters to reveal their presuppositions so that the myth of neutrality will not be perpetuated. That is not to say that there is no way to know whose presuppositions are true or false. It is to state that those who assess scholarship have as much right to dispute an author's foundational principles as they do to dispute an author's conclusions. Through twenty years of academic study (in literature and theology), teaching and writing I have come to certain conclusions about literature, the canon, interpretation and the practical work of producing theological prose. It is only fair and right to reveal some of them that affect my approach to biblical theology.

First, based on the study of secular texts (a strict designation many of my literature teachers would not accept) I am convinced of the importance of the text being the main focus of interpretation.² John H. Sailhamer makes the same point in his *Introduction to Old Testament Theology*,³ but I first became convinced of this fact while studying literary theory. An interpreter should know as much as possible about historical settings, the author's life, reading audiences, and so forth, but the text is the interpreter's ultimate concern. I also have learned the importance of grasping how authors and written works influence subsequent authors and works. Simply stated, I have realized the importance of intertextuality. Intertextuality means that authors and texts influence one another directly through a later writer reading the works of his or her predecessor. Further, it means that authors and texts influence one another by creating common literary types, devices, themes and schools of thought. Finally, it means that authors and texts influence one another by how they deal with specific social or literary problems. This type of influence is related to the first, yet is significant enough to merit separate mention, since it demonstrates, for example, how a twentieth-century author may attack a perceived evil in the same manner that a nineteenth-century author might.

²See Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976); Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1975); and Cleanth Brooks, *Community, Religion and Literature: Essays by Cleanth Brooks* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995).

³John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 36-85.

Second, from the reading of Scripture I have become convinced that the Bible's main (though not sole) concern is to reveal the character of God. It does so by describing the works of God and by making clear propositional statements about the Lord. As it does so, a distinct portrait of the triune God emerges. Moreover, given the challenges of a pluralistic, polytheistic world, it is not too simplistic a point to make to recall that the Scriptures stress the uniqueness of the one living God of the Bible. Today's global village reminds us that our situation is more like the prophets' and Paul's than it has ever been.

Third, from the reading of sacred texts I am convinced that the Bible is a connected, canonical, theological whole. This emphasis on canonical wholeness leads me to believe that it is possible to use the shape of the canon as a structuring device for biblical theology.⁴ My *Old Testament Theology* is an example of how one could use the Law, Prophets and Writings as a natural outline for theological reflection.⁵ Certainly other legitimate structuring devices may be discerned and employed, but the canonical order of books is a particularly attractive option because it can be viewed as an inherent part of the text.

Fourth, from reading secular and sacred texts I am convinced that it makes a good bit of difference in what order one reads and studies the Scriptures. It remakes students' minds to read Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings as the Former Prophets rather than as the Historical Books. It alters one's perception of Ruth if one reads Ruth as the successor to Proverbs or Judges. Reading strategies do matter.⁶

Fifth, from spending some years teaching and writing about the Scriptures I am convinced that theology and exegesis must be as closely wed as possible. Walter Kaiser was right a generation ago to stress exegetical theology, and he remains correct today.⁷ Biblical theology ought to arise from careful analysis of the Hebrew and Greek texts. It ought to utilize the best results of historical research. At the same time, it must not be captive to reconstructed histories of how theology emerged in Israel and

⁴On the necessity for a structure for biblical theology see Charles H. H. Scobie, "The Structure of Biblical Theology," *TynB* 42 (1991): 163-94.

⁵Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

⁶Cf. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology*, p. 213, and Richard Schultz, "Integrating Old Testament Theology and Exegesis: Literary, Thematic and Canonical Issues," in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *NIDOTTE I* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), p. 199.

⁷Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981).

the early church. History must support theology, not the other way around. Exegesis should keep biblical theology biblical in the sense that it will keep scholars from imposing theological systems on texts that cannot bear their weight.

Sixth, from reading ecumenical creeds, denominational confessions of faith and theological works based on sacred texts I have become convinced that a biblical theologian must be committed to interpreting the Bible as a coherent whole because it is the word of an inherently coherent God. As Carl F. H. Henry writes, "The very fact of disclosure by the one living God assures the comprehensive unity of divine revelation."⁸ In other words, unitary biblical theology is possible because a united Trinity has breathed out these texts (2 Tim 3.16-17).

Seventh, from positive collaboration with biblical, dogmatic, philosophical and practical scholars I am convinced that unitary biblical theology is the best venue for experts in these fields to share their best insights with one another.⁹ Without question, my academic and pastoral work has convinced me that fragmented readings of Scripture, whether practiced by conservatives, moderates or liberals, do not offer the best interpretation of the Bible and therefore cannot lead to the best obedience to biblical teaching. By contrast, I have discovered that when scholars from different fields work together keen insights can develop. A competitive, combative, turf-oriented approach to scholarship honors neither the unity of Christ in the bond of love nor the practical goals of Christian scholarship.

Given these presuppositions, I think the future of biblical theology lies in unitary reading that will lead to canonical interpretation that will reveal a doctrine of God that will guide systematic theology that will inform and empower church doctrine and practice. This approach will be largely thematic, yet it will not cast off history, archaeology, linguistics, or other related disciplines. Instead, it will use these legitimate academic exercises as ways to inform, correct, enlarge and shape thematic analysis. This approach will refuse to pit the OT against the NT, or biblical theology against systematic theology, or the academy against the church. Steps will be taken so that in the future scholars will not be tempted to define biblical theology over against other disciplines but will stress its

positive, unifying function.¹⁰ At the same time, this method will not gloss over sharp edges in the biblical material. This approach will always be a work in progress, since we will never expound the nature of God and God's revelation fully.¹¹ Still, the attempt must be made if we are to be faithful to the faithful God who gave us a faithful revelation.

UNITARY READING FOR CANONICAL BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

First, canonical biblical theology requires a unitary reading strategy that is based on the main sections of the OT and NT canons. As is well known, there was a time when the unity of the Bible was a viable academic topic in nonevangelical circles. Scholars such as H. H. Rowley, Millar Burrows, G. Ernest Wright, and many others wrote openly about ways that the Scriptures might be construed as a historical, thematic whole.¹² As is equally well known, the so-called biblical theology movement decreased in popularity in the 1970s.¹³ It seemed clear to most interpreters that the biblical theology movement had failed to reach broad consensus on the most vital unifying themes in Scripture, on the correlation between history and Scripture, or on the relationship between the academic study of Scripture and the use of the Bible in the church.

Though biblical theology did fall on hard times among mainline authors, the situation was somewhat different among evangelicals during the 1970s and 1980s. Walker C. Kaiser Jr., Elmer Martens, William J. Dumbrell, and others wrote OT theological works.¹⁴ George Eldon Ladd, F. F. Bruce, Donald Guthrie, and others penned volumes on NT theology.¹⁵ Numerous scholarly articles devoted to the subject appeared. Despite all

¹⁰See the contrastive definitions of biblical theology in James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), pp. 5-17.

¹¹On the limits of human knowledge of God, see Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 2:47-68.

¹²In particular, see H. H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel: Aspects of Old Testament Thought* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956); Millar Burrows, *An Outline of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946); and G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM Press, 1952).

¹³For a chronicle of its deficiencies and his resultant call for canonical criticism, see Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

¹⁴See Kaiser, *Exegetical Theology*; Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981); and William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984).

¹⁵See George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974); F. F. Bruce, *New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1968); and Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology: A Thematic Study* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1981).

⁸Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1976), 2:69.

⁹See Paul R. House and Gregory A. Thornbury, eds., *Who Will Be Saved? Defending the Biblical Understanding of God, Salvation and Evangelism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000).

this productive activity, however, it is fair to say that none of these scholars produced a thorough volume on biblical theology that paid close, sustained attention to the wholeness of Scripture as it unfolds in all the books of the Bible. They did not do so because they shared many of the same goals and methods as their nonevangelical colleagues. Thus they shared many of the same frustrations.

It is important to note that the biblical theology movement and evangelical scholars were correct to seek the unity of the Scriptures as a means of uniting theology, academy and the church. Though they sought proper goals, however, they did not always use methodologies that would allow them to succeed. They rightly believed that vital themes would emerge from an honest reading of the entire Bible, yet they did not always recommend a particular order in which to read and interpret the text. Thus their theories of unity often came unraveled when new historical approaches to the primary sources arose or when vital themes were added to their discussions.

As was discussed throughout the conference, in Luke 24:44 Jesus mentions a three-part canon that includes the Law, Prophets and Psalms. In Matthew 23:29-36 he reflects a Genesis—Chronicles canonical frame of reference when accusing the Pharisees of participating in the tradition of killing the prophets. In Matthew 19:1-7 he follows canonical order when discussing divorce. Though some scholars dispute the significance of these references, and although Jesus often utilizes a variety of Scriptures from a number of places when he speaks, it remains a matter of note that in the small number of texts where he addresses a matter of biblical theology he tends to follow the canonical order found in Palestinian Judaism. Paul reflects the same type of exegesis when dealing with justification by faith in Romans 4, as does the author of Hebrews when discussing faith in Hebrews 11. Though it is impossible to determine with certainty the exact order of the books in the NT writers' canon, it is hard to dispute that they inherited and interpreted a tripartite list of books.¹⁶ Of course, NT writers use the OT in a variety of ways, depending on the context of their argu-

¹⁶For a thorough analysis of this issue, see Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985). For my conclusions on the propriety of using the Palestinian canon as a base for OT theology, see Paul R. House, "Canon of the Old Testament," in *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation: A Complete Library of Tools and Resources*, ed. David S. Dockery, Kenneth A. Mathews and Robert B. Sloan (Nashville: Broadman, 1994), pp. 134-55.

ments. Still, they conceived of the Bible as the Law, Prophets and other books, as the book of Sirach indicates had been the case for some time.

Theological, practical and exegetical statements in the NT should therefore be interpreted in light of its authors' basic reading orientation. We must enter their canonical world if we are to think their thoughts after them. This strategy is as appropriate as trying to understand Paul in light of Palestinian or rabbinic Judaism¹⁷ or attempting to understand Jesus in light of his historical setting.¹⁸ Reading the OT the way the NT writers did is but one more important link to the ancient world of the biblical writers. Moreover, interpreters seeking to understand how NT writers used OT texts to construct their own theology may wish to read and conceive of the canon as they did. This reading strategy does not cast off historical analysis. It recognizes the importance of insights gained from legitimate historical research, yet at the same time refuses to accept theories built on a series of unsustainable hypotheses. At the very least it follows the broad historical framework that the OT portrays.

Without question, it is easier to discern a reading strategy for the OT canon than it is to assert one for the NT. After all, the basic shape of the OT canon that I have suggested is attested in the OT, the Apocrypha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, extrabiblical texts, the NT and rabbinical writings.¹⁹ The NT, however, has no subsequent canonical segment to state its contents or order. Still, the church has long accepted the twenty-seven books of the NT as Scripture, and although there remains disagreement on the contents of the OT, there is no marked disagreement among the major Christian traditions on the contents of the NT canon.²⁰ It is also true that there is wide agreement on the shape of the NT canon. Virtually all Christians believe the NT consists of Gospels and Acts, Pauline epistles, the Catholic Epistles and Revelation. Thus there is an accepted threefold NT canon that complements the threefold OT canon.

What I have just outlined could be deemed simplistic in several ways. Perhaps the most glaring problem is the fact that many scholars question

¹⁷See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), and W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

¹⁸See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996).

¹⁹Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon*, pp. 16-62.

²⁰For an introductory discussion of these issues see F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

the authorship and date of some of the Pauline material. I would argue that those who dispute Pauline authorship still write about the books as being somehow Pauline, so the canonical designation still stands. Another problem is whether to read Acts as part of the Gospels or as part of the Pauline material. I opt for the former possibility because Luke-Acts seems to be a two-part book (Acts 1:1). Yet another difficulty is where to place Revelation in this scheme. Since the book addresses specific congregations, I do not think it impossible to interpret it alongside the Catholic Epistles. A final problem is the order of the NT books. At this point in time I would leave room for discussion of reading strategies within the three large blocks of material. Variations on this three-part scheme are possible, but without some means of specific thematic-historical reading there is little chance of producing a thorough whole-Bible theology.

This reading strategy could allow biblical theologians to pursue biblical theology by working carefully and systematically through the whole canon: Law, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, Pauline Epistles, and Catholic Epistles. The effect of this plan will be that the Bible will be treated as a book of Scripture, not as a group of texts that have some unifying principles. Christ will now be the literary and theological center of the book. The history of Israel and of redemption will move from earlier to later times as the exegete works forward. Connections between texts can be better noted, and one-of-a-kind contributions to theology rescued from oblivion.

BOOK-BY-BOOK EXEGESIS FOR CANONICAL THEOLOGY

Second, this unitary reading should proceed on a book-by-book exegetical basis so that each book's discrete message will be recognized.²¹ Unitary canonical biblical theology must be built through the sustained testimony of successive books; it must not be constructed at the expense of any part of Scripture. Difficulties have arisen in biblical theology in the past because some parts of the canon have not yet fit into authors' chosen patterns of analysis. In some ways this result is inevitable, but the goal must be to combat this problem. Perhaps the most evident example of books being neglected is the omission of the Writings in some OT theologies and biblical theologies. Many of the psalms, Job, Proverbs and Esther are not al-

ways included because they do not overtly address salvation history, covenant, or some other legitimate centering theme. The same could be said of some NT books, particularly portions of the Catholic Epistles.²² The result is the unfortunate loss of vibrant discussions of how these biblical books fit into the Bible's overall theology.

A related but quite different problem is the smoothing over of sharp edges in biblical theology. When seeking unity one can fail to deal with differing perspectives within the canon on the same issue. My work has been justly criticized at times for not dealing with such sharp edges. Perhaps subsequent scholars can learn from the example of Rolf Rendtorff, who projects two volumes on OT theology, one that states all the OT themes, regardless of how well he thinks they mesh immediately, and one that sketches unifying themes.²³

CENTERING THEMES FOR CANONICAL THEOLOGY

Third, this canonical book-by-book analysis will need to identify and collect vital centering themes so that a synthesis of data can be possible and so that the study can have order. Many of the best OT and NT theologies of the past have utilized central or centering themes to carry out their program. One thinks of Walther Eichrodt's stressing of covenant,²⁴ George Eldon Ladd's emphasis on the kingdom,²⁵ Geerhardus Vos's commitment to revelation,²⁶ G. B. Caird's tracing of salvation,²⁷ Samuel Terrien's focus on the presence of God,²⁸ Peter Stuhlmacher's highlighting of reconciliation and righteousness,²⁹ and the list could be extended. Elmer Martens effec-

²¹See, e.g., the neglect of 2 Peter (along with 1 Peter and James), as outlined by Robert W. Wall, "The Canonical Function of 2 Peter," *Biblical Interpretation* 9 (2001): 64-81.

²²The first of these volumes has been published. See Rolf Rendtorff, *Theologie des Alten Testaments: Ein kanonischer Entwurf*, Band 1, *Kanonische Grundlegung* (Neukircher-Vuyn: Neukircher, 1999). Note also his methodological statements in *Canon and Theology: Openures to an Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

²³Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961-1967).

²⁴Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*.

²⁵Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1948).

²⁶G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, ed. L. D. Hurst (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

²⁷Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence, The Heart of Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

²⁸Peter Stuhlmacher, *Reconciliation, Law and Righteousness: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) and his two-volume work *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Band 1, *Grundlegung Von Jesus zu Paulus*, Band 2, *Von der Paulusschule bis zur Johannesoffenbarung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, 1999).

²¹For a discussion of the importance of each book and each Testament having its own separate (discrete) witness, see Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), pp. 70-79, and House, *Old Testament Theology*, pp. 53-54.

tively utilizes a cluster of themes in his OT theology.³⁰ Most of the themes these writers have chosen have been gleaned from the biblical texts, not from an external system used to explicate the texts, though biblical scholars such as Donald Guthrie have utilized categories drawn from dogmatics with good effect.³¹

Biblical theologians can agree on a lengthy enough list of major themes to do justice to the theological breadth of the Bible, yet short enough to give the discipline some recognizable continuity. We should give up arguing that one theme and one theme only is the central theme of the Bible and highlight major themes that allow other ideas as subpoints. Of course, we should never fail to assert that God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are at the center of any unitary biblical theology. Nor should we ever fail to assert that the Bible unfolds God's redemptive history, and the necessity of human response to God's gracious acts.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that salvation history, covenant, creation and messiah are necessarily broad themes that require elaboration and schematization. Any theme that links much of the Bible must be broad and must not be rejected for being broad. A broad theme is not the canon's only theme; it is a centering theme. As long as the major theme is clearly discernible in several parts of the canon, as long as it is charted alongside other major themes, as long as it is treated as an important part of a whole instead of being the whole, then it should be welcomed, used and critiqued.

INTERTEXTUALITY AND CANONICAL THEOLOGY

Fourth, for canonical, book-by-book, thematically sensitive, collection-minded analysis to occur it must be committed to intertextuality. D. A. Carson asserts that

*ideally biblical theology will not only work inductively in each of the biblical corpora but will seek to make clear the connections among the corpora. In other words, it is committed to intertextual study, not simply because as an accident of history some texts depend on others and it is worth sorting out those dependencies, but because biblical theology, at its most coherent, is a theology of the Bible.*³²

³⁰Martens, *God's Design*, pp. 11-24.

³¹Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*.

³²D. A. Carson, "Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 30.

Richard Schultz adds that "if canon is the context for OT theology, one can legitimately compare a theological theme, such as creation, with analogous presentations *anywhere* in the canonical OT Scriptures, not simply in what one considers to be chronologically *antecedent* texts."³³ Certainly the NT does not always take texts in chronological order when making theological arguments, and the OT canon, indeed several books within the canon (e.g., Jeremiah, Psalms), does not always proceed in strict chronological order. The canon produces a theologically united portrait within history, and for that and scores of other reasons history is vital to biblical theology, yet the canon was not ordered to give later readers a detailed report on the exact historical order in which the theology arose. Thus, as important as historical analysis is, it cannot dominate every facet of biblical theology. It must be a vital part of making theology relevant and understandable.

Intertextuality means several things in biblical theology. It means that later texts cite or allude to earlier texts. It means that themes develop as the books and major sections of the Bible unfold. It means that the canon presents some material that was likely written later than subsequent portions of the canon but that the later material serves as an introduction or theological foundation for what follows. The ways in which 1-2 Kings prepare readers for themes and events found in the Latter Prophets illustrates this principle. It also means that biblical theologians may legitimately collect data from the canon as a whole without always offering a reconstructed history of revelation. On the other hand, following the canonical order suggested above will help interpreters avoid theological hopscotching and illegitimate sorts of proof-texting.

CANONICAL SYNTHESIS AND CANONICAL THEOLOGY

Fifth, unitary canonical biblical theology should include canonical syntheses of major themes. After intertextual exegetical work has been done in book-by-book canonical order for the purpose of identifying and utilizing major themes it is necessary to produce clear treatments of major biblical themes as they emerge from the whole of Scripture. A systematic theology of the canonical Scriptures will result. This systematic theology will follow the themes of the Bible as they appear in Scripture, and it will trace those themes throughout the whole of the Scriptures. For example, such a theology would begin with creation, examining this theme as it proceeds, for

³³Schultz, "Integrating Old Testament Theology and Exegesis," p. 199.

