

## Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology

To relate the nature and functions of systematic theology and biblical theology respectively proves distractingly difficult because various scholarly camps operate with highly divergent definitions of both disciplines, and therefore also entertain assumptions and adopt methods that cannot be reconciled with those of other scholarly camps. The permutations from these intertwined variables ensure the widest diversity of opinion; no analysis of the relations between systematic and biblical theology can sweep the field. Some of these difficulties must be explored before useful connections between the two disciplines can be drawn. Because more debate attaches to

biblical theology than to systematic theology, and because biblical theology is the focus of this volume, that is where we must direct primary attention.

### **Biblical theology**

Before attempting to sort out the conflicting definitions of biblical theology, we shall do well to consider the bearing of a number of topics on the discipline.

### *History of biblical theology*

Because the history of biblical theology is surveyed elsewhere in this volume, here we may restrict ourselves to a mere listing of some of

the turning points that have given rise to different apprehensions of biblical theology.

In one sense, wherever there has been disciplined theological reflection on the Bible, there has been a *de facto* biblical theology. The first occurrence of the expression itself, however, is in 1607, in the title of a book by W. J. Christmann, *Teutsche [sic] Biblische Theologie* (no longer extant). The work was apparently a short compilation of proof texts supporting Protestant systematic theology. This usage enjoyed long life; it was alive and well a century and a half later in the more rigorous four-volume work by G. T. Zachariae (1771–75). A century earlier, however, the German pietist P. J. Spener, in his famous *Pia Desideria* (1675), distinguished *theologia biblica* (his own use of Scripture, suffused with reverence and piety) with the *theologica scholastica* that prevailed in Protestant orthodoxy.

By the second half of the 18th century, the influence of the European Enlightenment and the rise of English Deism generated a small but influential group of theologians who sought to extract from the Bible timeless truths in accord with reason, truths that were largely still acceptable to the established orthodoxies but increasingly removed from the various confessional orthodoxies. The most influential of these figures was J. P. Gabler, whose inaugural lecture at the University of Altdorf (1787) captured this rising mood and proved seminal: 'An Oration on the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each'. Contrary to what is commonly asserted about this address, Gabler only marginally called for what might today be called salvation-historical study of the biblical texts (*i.e.* the understanding and exposition of the texts along their chronological line of development). His fundamental appeal was to circumvent the endless debates among systematicians whose emphasis on diverse confessions and philosophical analysis kept them not only arguing but also several steps removed from the Bible. Gabler argued that close inductive work on the biblical texts themselves would bring about much greater unanimity among scholars, as all would be controlled by the same data. Systematic theology could then properly be built on this base.

The first part of the call was largely heeded (owing, no doubt, to many factors far removed from Gabler); the second part, the

fresh reconstruction of systematic theology, was by and large ignored, or pursued by others with little interest in this new 'biblical theology'. With more and more emphasis on close study of individual texts, and with less and less emphasis on serious reflection on the relationship of these findings to historic Christian faith, the tendency was toward atomization. Thus G. L. Bauer produced not a biblical theology but an OT theology (1796) followed by a two-volume NT theology (1800–1802). What might be called 'whole Bible' biblical theologies continued to be written for the next century (with a handful in the 20th century), the most influential being that of J. C. K. von Hofmann (1886), whose work greatly influenced Adolf Schlatter. Nevertheless, the tendency was away from whole-Bible biblical theology, and towards OT theology and NT theology. By the 20th century, these works most commonly divided up their subject matter into smaller corpora (Pauline theology; Matthean theology; Q-theology; theology of the major prophets; *etc.*) or into organizing structures (the covenant for W. Eichrodt; a specialized understanding of salvation history for G. von Rad; a form of existentialism for R. Bultmann; *etc.*).

We will shortly mention some of the efforts to re-establish some form of whole-Bible unity. Within the so-called 'Biblical Theology Movement' in the middle of the 20th century, emphasis was often laid on 'the mighty acts of God' in history. Divorced from the rigour of adherence to exegesis of authoritative texts, however, it was soon perceived to be too ethereal, too insubstantial, to support the weight that was being placed on it.

Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, the situation is extraordinarily diverse. On the one hand, there is in Germany a renewed interest in *eine gesamtbiblische Theologie* ('a whole-biblical theology'), what James Barr calls 'a pan-biblical theology'. The journal *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* celebrated its fifteenth anniversary in 2000. Similar developments in Britain and America testify to mushrooming interest in biblical theology; *Horizons in Biblical Theology* has published now for more than twenty years. Not least significant is the 'whole Bible' biblical theology expressed most dramatically in the competing proposals of Brevard Childs and J. A. Sanders (see below). On the other hand, rising voices provide stern criticisms of

these movements and provide detailed reasons for rejecting them or firmly domesticating them, while others continue to use the expression 'biblical theology' for approaches to the OT or NT that are radically atomistic or that are the product of highly creative, imaginative, allusive structures that self-consciously depend on a postmodern epistemology.

In short, the history of 'biblical theology' is extraordinarily diverse. Everyone does that which is right in his or her own eyes, and calls it biblical theology. In a situation so fluid it is necessary to state and justify what one means by 'biblical theology' before analysing its relation to systematic theology.

### *Exegesis*

Barr has pointed out that in contemporary usage 'biblical theology' is largely contrastive: *i.e.* a substantial part of the definition, on any reading, is taken up with explaining how biblical theology is *not* exegesis, is *not* systematic theology, is *not* historical theology, and so forth. For Barr, that is a sign of its intrinsic weakness; biblical theology is not so much something in itself, he avers, as a distinction from a lot of other things with which it holds much in common. It might be argued, however, that the contrastive nature of biblical theology is not so much a weakness as a strength. True, biblical theology must be differentiated from other disciplines, but the fact that it can be is precisely what gives it its distinctiveness, while the fact that it must be is precisely what makes it such an excellent bridge discipline, building links among the associated disciplines and in certain respects holding them together.

Nowhere is the overlap more striking than between exegesis and biblical theology. Both are concerned to understand texts. It is impossible to have any sort of responsible biblical theology apart from careful, responsible exegesis. Moreover, responsible exegesis of entire texts (as opposed to a merely mechanical or atomistic approach) is the working material of biblical theology (on almost any definition of the latter). But exegesis tends to focus on analysis, and may therefore drift to details and specialized interests (source criticism, for instance) of little use to the biblical theologian; biblical theology tends towards synthesis: the theology of the book, the corpus, the canon, constructed out of the detailed exegesis of the book, the corpus, the

canon. Inevitably, the exegesis largely controls the biblical theology, though not every detail is taken up in the theology; on the other hand, the biblical theology, so far as it has been constructed, inevitably influences the exegesis, perhaps more so than is commonly recognized. Yet this circle is not vicious, provided the exegete and the biblical theologian share the common vision of trying to explicate the text.

### *Historical theology*

Historical theology has been broadly understood to be the diachronic study of theology, *i.e.* the study of the changing face of theology across time. Insofar as biblical theology studies the changing face of the accumulating biblical documents across time, should it not be construed as nothing more than historical theology pushed back into the period before the 'closing' of the canon?

There is insight here, of course. The parallels between the two disciplines are striking. Yet before they are pushed too far, two observations are necessary.

*First*, those who want to demolish all distinctions between biblical theology and historical theology (save the obvious one of the range of material studied) are those who are most uncomfortable with notions of canon. To those for whom the distinctions presupposed by the canon are purely accidental and arbitrary, historical theology is merely a temporal extension of biblical theology; or, otherwise put, biblical theology is little more than an earlier version of historical theology, when all the assessments of earlier theological documents took place within documents which themselves came to be included (for whatever reasons) in the canon. But if the notion of canon is bound up with authority, or if a claim of revelation attaches to the documents judged canonical, then there is a fundamental distinction between biblical theology and historical theology, apart from the obvious distinctions in the time and place of the documents being studied. For under these assumptions historical theology, however much it builds upon or corrects or interacts with earlier theological reflections, draws the line at self-consciously correcting or abandoning the biblical documents. They are part of the given. By the same token, under these assumptions the internal developments within the canon will be seen in a different light, in

comparison with, say, internal developments in the history of theology from the late medieval period to the early Reformation period, or from the early Reformation period to the Counter-Reformation. The former developments will be seen as part of the God-directed transformations that ultimately constituted the fundamental given; the latter developments will be seen as part of the ongoing task of coming to grips with the foundation documents, and being corrected by them.

*Secondly*, the point just made will prove persuasive only to those who, for whatever reasons, accept the authoritative uniqueness of the canonical books. But many scholars find that such a notion of the canon is precisely the problem. They are convinced that the NT documents themselves betray divergent and mutually contradictory theologies. To speak of a canonical wholeness or a canonical authority is to speak of a chimera. Very often such scholars have been influenced by one or both of two highly influential works. In *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (1934), Walter Bauer argued that heresy preceded orthodoxy, that earliest Christianity was far more diverse than its later forms, and that to read unified theology into the earliest decades is sheer anachronism. Despite telling responses, Bauer's thesis still has many followers. Helmut Köster's 1957 dissertation, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern*, argued that, judging by the pattern of quotations among the Apostolic Fathers, the synoptic tradition enjoyed no fixed wording until well into the second century, thereby demonstrating that the tradition itself is late and historically unfounded. Building on an array of criticisms of these books, Peter Balla has shown that Köster's arguments are without foundation, and that Bauer's thesis, once the sources are carefully examined in location after location (Edessa, Egypt, Asia Minor, Rome), is simply invalid.

The functional parallels between biblical theology and historical theology need not be denied. Nevertheless they should not be developed beyond the evidence, and must not be permitted to stand against the abundant interlocking considerations (canon, revelation, authority) that demand distinctions.

### *Historical criticism*

The interplay between biblical theology and

the historical criticism of the last two centuries or so is extraordinarily convoluted. But here, five observations must suffice.

*First*, as intimated by the historical survey of the changing meanings of 'biblical theology' across the last four centuries, the major impulse has been toward fragmentation and atomization. In this century, the number of whole-Bible biblical theologies has been small and their content frail and hesitant, compared with the number of OT theologies and NT theologies. Moreover, most of the NT theologies do not offer us a theology of the NT, but a treatment of the distinctive theology that the scholar finds in each NT corpus, with the shape and contents of that corpus determined by the scholar's historical-critical conclusions. (Something similar could be said of OT theologies.) To take one recent example, Georg Strecker's NT theology, after examining various influences on Paul and other NT writers, devotes chapters to Paul, the Synoptics as a whole, Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, 2-3 John, 1 John, John, and so forth. The influence of more-or-less standard historical criticism is obvious. Moreover, parts of his book read less like a theology, biblical or classical, than a theological introduction to the NT: he devotes 106 pages to an overview of the historical John the Baptist, the historical Jesus, the early Palestinian church, the Hellenistic church, and Q-material. None of this leads towards whole-NT biblical theology, still less towards whole-Bible biblical theology.

The *second* observation shows that the issue lies deeper. The historical-critical method exemplified by Strecker presupposes that this approach is capable, in principle, of uncovering assured results grounded in unassailable premises. Rational arguments and appropriate historical-critical methods generate neutral results that can be tested by other workers in the field. The fact that historical criticism has generated a wide diversity of results merely leaves scope for further work, in the hope of achieving greater scholarly unanimity. But postmodern thought, whatever difficulties it has cast up (see below), has effectively exploded the myth of neutrality in studies in the humanities. Daniel Patte argues convincingly that historical-critical studies presuppose a worldview not itself a result of critical biblical exegesis but rather its foundation. Though not all their arguments and

analogies are convincing, R. A. Harrisville and W. Sundberg trace the rise of 'rationalist biblical criticism' and fault it for thinking it can 'go beyond the reach of cultural presuppositions and philosophical commitments to establish the historical meaning of biblical texts once and for all' (*The Bible in Modern Culture*, p. 263). Thus another set of scholars, using the same historical-critical tools deployed by Strecker, may emerge with very different historical-critical reconstructions, and therefore with very different biblical-theological conclusions. For instance, if one historical-critical construction sees Paul as the author of seven NT letters, the shape of 'Pauline theology' may be rather different from the work of a scholar who thinks Paul wrote ten of the NT letters that bear his name, or all thirteen. A scholar who thinks the canonical evangelists, while betraying their own theology, nevertheless bear faithful witness to the teachings and deeds of Jesus, will not only interpret the Synoptics rather differently from his or her more sceptical colleagues, but will develop the chronology of dominant influence rather differently; Jesus himself will be seen to be the fountainhead of NT thought (P. Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*).

A third observation about the influence of historical criticism on biblical theology depends on a distinction between a 'narrow' view of history and a 'wider' view of history (this terminology is Balla's, but many writers develop the same distinction using different categories). A 'narrow' definition of history (so, for instance, H. Räisänen) excludes even the possibility of accepting as true any biblical affirmation of God acting in history. It operates, in fact, on naturalistic assumptions. In other words, it does not deny the possibility of the existence of God, but denies that history can find any evidence of him. History is a closed continuum. A 'wider' definition of history allows that God may well have operated in the domain of what 'really happened' in space and time, observable to human witnesses (e.g. the resurrection). Adherents to the former definition call for a 'purely historical' approach to the study of the NT documents; the latter definition is prepared to blend history and theology.

Of course, what it means to blend history and theology is itself rather elusive. It means more than to study what happened and what

1st-century participants *believed* to have happened (the latter being cast in theological terms); such study may still be narrowly 'historical'. The blending of history and theology in any useful sense presupposes two things: first, that the Christianity portrayed in the NT documents is inescapably historical, *i.e.* its entire structure depends on the veracity of its claims that certain events actually took place in history, and therefore these events are in principle open to historical investigation; and secondly, that the theological beliefs espoused and advanced by the NT writers belong to a matrix of thought that corresponds to reality, *i.e.* these writers are telling us true things about God, about Jesus, about his resurrection, about the significance of his cross, and so forth. Similar points could be made about OT theology.

*Fourthly*, just as historical-critical judgments, as we have seen, shape the outcome of one's attempts to do biblical theology, so also one's conclusions regarding biblical theology can shape one's historical-critical conclusions. If years of studying, say, NT Christology, or Paul's use of the OT, have shaped one's conclusions about who the historical Jesus is and how the church came to ascribe an array of titles to him, or how the NT documents are related to the Old, inevitably such judgments will influence one's historical-critical stances. That is not necessarily a bad thing; it is frequently an unacknowledged thing.

*Fifthly*, there is one place where the interests of historical criticism and the interests of biblical theology tend to part company. Historical criticism includes in its purview research into sources, extra-canonical influences, and the like; biblical theology in almost all of its forms focuses on the final form of the biblical texts, and may then ask how these texts cohere and complement one another theologically.

### *The history-of-religions movement*

The history-of-religions movement that flourished at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th aspired to an ostensible neutrality that was frequently 'narrowly' historical, but which was also usually comparative, synchronically descriptive, and interested as well in diachronic development. By and large the movement was eclipsed by the influence of Barth and Bultmann. Bultmann in particular insisted that faith, and with it

biblical theology, was necessarily divorced from all historical claims. Faith could never become contingent on the probabilities of historical probing.

Apart from some pockets of resistance, however, Bultmann's view, which held sway for almost half a century, has itself been eclipsed. Barr, depending in part on the work of Rainer Albertz, is entirely right to argue that any biblical theology worthy of the name (*i.e.* theology that purports to reflect the biblical texts at all) must be grounded in history. Christian theology, including biblical theology, is in this respect unlike Buddhism; its essential theological structures depend absolutely on claims about God's activity in history. Biblical theology will always be attracted to historical questions precisely because of the nature of the biblical documents. After making allowances for 1st-century conceptual structures, many passages in the NT (*e.g.* Luke 1:1–4; 1 Cor. 15:6) are close to what we mean by 'scientific history', tightly joining the textual witness to what happened. Contemporary scholars may believe that witness to be true, and advance their reasons, or they may believe that witness to be false, and justify their unbelief; in the latter case Christianity is no longer (for them) credible. But biblical theologians do not have the right to disallow historical reflections. Moreover, insofar as the history-of-religions movement focuses on diachronic development, it has obvious links with biblical theology. In short, history-of-religions study need not be 'narrowly' historical; biblical theology dare not be narrowly 'theological', understood in some exclusively non-historical or even anti-historical sense.

### *Literary genre and speech-act*

Most systematic theologies that have tried to be biblically based have sought first and foremost to be faithful to biblical truth. At one level, this is highly commendable. But the search for theological truths to be integrated into a *system* may unwittingly ride roughshod over two related realities. First, Scripture is written in many different literary genres, and the way these genres carry their message is highly diverse; secondly, speech-act theory has taught us that texts (oral or written) actually do many different things apart from conveying truth, so that a focus on extracting truth or truths in order to build a system may

unwittingly blind the reader to a large part of what is actually there. (Moreover, the notion of 'truth' has itself become slippery, but I shall deal briefly with that point below.)

We may begin with the latter point. Speech (oral or written text) may provide truths, but it may rebuke the reader/listener, complain, offer a lament, serve as a private soliloquy, ask a question, pronounce a curse, pronounce forgiveness, tell a story (true or made up; with or without extra-textual referents), and so forth. Of course, some of these speech-acts may, in addition to whatever else they are accomplishing (effectively or otherwise), presuppose certain truths, or convey certain truth, even though to do so is not their primary intent. Further, such utterances may betray, say, the 'truth' of a fractured personality exploring the apparent meaninglessness of the universe (*e.g.* Qoheleth), the substance of which can be put into a propositional truth. But that propositional truth has nothing of the power of the original text. Thus there is a sense in which all systematic theology, for all its strengths and legitimacy (on which more below), is necessarily in some measure a distortion of the biblical texts.

To a lesser degree, the same is doubtless true of biblical theology; it easily distorts the very texts it seeks to explicate. But it is intrinsically less distorting, because methodologically it stands closer to the text than systematic theology, aims to achieve genuine sensitivity with respect to the distinctiveness of each corpus, and seeks to connect the diverse corpora using their own categories. Ideally, therefore, biblical theology stands as a kind of bridge discipline between responsible exegesis and responsible systematic theology (even though each of these inevitably influences the other two).

Similarly, the sheer diversity of the Bible's literary forms demands a sensitivity to more than (though certainly not less than) propositional truth, and to the diverse ways that different genres convey meaning (*cf.* K. J. Vanhoozer, *Is There A Meaning in This Text?*). The point is not that all literary genres simply convey truth plus something else, as if it were a matter of quantity or percentage. Rather, some genres focus their priorities rather differently. Narrative, for instance, over against the more discursive forms of Scripture, focuses on plot, character development, themes and subthemes. It has a capacity

to follow change in characters, to maintain certain competing or complementary themes in tension, to leave some questions open. Simply to reduce the significance of an extended narrative to a number of propositions, or to ignore the narrative almost entirely, is an interpretative failure. Similar things could be said about wisdom and other genres. Moreover, building on the work of M. Bakhtin (*The Dialogic Imagination and Speech Genres*), it is now widely recognized that genre is not a closed, abstract, linguistic phenomenon (like the grammatical notion of a genitive absolute), but an historically and culturally conditioned way of producing and interpreting texts in specific contexts. This bespeaks not only the need for literary sensitivity, but also the importance of historical criticism.

Once again, biblical theology is admirably suited to build a bridge between the texts of Scripture and the larger synthesis of systematic theology. Precisely because it overlaps with the relevant disciplines, ideally it enables them to hear one another a little better. Moreover, its commitment to unpacking the texts of Scripture along the historical axis of the Bible's plot-line makes it eager to reflect on what it means to be historically and culturally conditioned, in a way that the synchronic emphasis of systematic theology tends to ignore.

Strictly speaking, of course, both biblical theology and systematic theology carry a moral obligation to grasp the nettle of the Bible's literary genres. Working so closely and inductively from the texts, however, responsible biblical theology necessarily attempts to grasp the communicative genius or rationality of each genre, *i.e.* the rules of each 'language game' and the way in which each genre conveys meaning, and thus what the meaning of a passage is, all of this set within the twin frameworks of, on the one hand, the emphases of the particular corpus and, on the other, the plot-line of the entire canon. In contrast, systematic theology tends to focus on the relationships among these various rationalities in its pursuit of the large-scale synthesis.

This is not to suggest that legitimate influence runs only one way, from exegesis to biblical theology to systematic theology. For instance, insofar as systematic theology accurately summarizes some important things that the Bible as a whole actually does say, it may

serve as a helpful grid that disciplines the task of the interpretation of, say, narrative. Narrative stripped from its context and thrown open to an active imagination is patient of far more uncontrolled interpretations than narrative safely embedded in its literary, historical, and canonical context. The insistence of many postmodern interpreters that individual narratives (*e.g.* the fall, Gen. 3) must be interpreted independently of the rest of the book of Genesis, let alone the rest of the storyline in the entire canon, fuels the imagination and produces articles and books for publication, but cannot serve the interests of biblical theology or systematic theology, or even, in the long run, responsible exegesis. Competent systematic theology usefully curbs such excesses.

### Unity

The definition of biblical theology is profoundly tied to the way in which its unity is perceived. Nothing controls one's perception of the entire discipline more than this point, and yet no point is more controverted. The recent studies of D. L. Baker and of Christoph Dohmen and Thomas Söding disclose the main lines of debate and the intricacy of many of the issues. The bearing of these debates on one's approach to biblical theology may be clarified if a few of the competing positions are identified.

1. Philip Davies may be taken as a rigorous example of those who think that biblical theology in any sense is impossible for those who are not confessionally committed. He argues that there are two quite different strategies for reading biblical texts, the confessional method and the non-confessional method. The task of the interpreter who adopts the former is to affirm the values and claims made by the text; the task of the interpreter who adopts the latter is to accept or reject claims made by the text at his or her own discretion. Clearly the former assumes or finds some sort of internal coherence; the latter does not. Davies insists that the two methods are mutually incompatible. They should never be intermingled. They generate opposed polarities: Scripture versus biblical literature; Bible study versus biblical studies; and theology versus non-theology.

As stimulating as is his work, the fundamental bifurcation is not convincing. Every human being engaged in study of any sort

operates with some sort of framework, a confessional stance. In practice, there are countless scholars who do not think that everything in the Bible is to be affirmed, but are broadly 'confessional' with respect to its main emphases. Davies may consider this a hopeless methodological mess, but that, after all, is a reflection of his own 'non-confessional' confessional stance.

2. A second group, often highly influenced by postmodern epistemology, finds the unity of biblical theology in the discipline itself, not in the texts, in the results, or in communitarian interests. Dennis Olson, for instance, argues (along with most biblical theologians) that the primary starting point of biblical theology is the present form of the biblical text, but the discipline must then proceed, he asserts, by appreciating and explicating 'the wide diversity of biblical witnesses as a first step'. It then engages in some 'thematizing, summarizing, generalizing, and analogizing', inevitably succumbing to a degree of reductionism. The discipline is further enhanced by engagement, dialogue, and debate with co-readers of the texts from different backgrounds: Christian, Jewish, secular, ancient, modern, *etc.* Completely missing from Olson's treatment is any sense of moving towards wholeness (however provisional), or of unity of content. Thus the unity of biblical theology becomes the unity of the methods of the discipline, so much so that he can, rather amazingly, put Childs and Brueggemann in the same camp.

3. Canonical unity has been understood in four distinguishable ways.

*First*, whatever the legitimacy or otherwise of the canonical boundaries, some scholars develop their biblical theologies by observing those boundaries for no other reason than that they are traditional. This much could be said for the majority of OT and NT theologies produced in the past century. Their writers do not attempt a 'whole-Bible' biblical theology; indeed, most are profoundly suspicious of such attempts. For many, even their NT theologies (for instance) focus attention on what they perceive to be irreconcilable differences among the NT corpora, or even within each corpus. Thus for these scholars the unity of the enterprise of biblical theology is formal. It is bound up with the canon as the collection of documents on which they are focusing attention. Whether or not their

theological analyses (only rarely is there much synthesis) conform to the shape of historic orthodoxy, or any other unity, is thus independent of their views on the canon.

*Secondly*, a more communitarian unity is displayed in the 'canon criticism' of J. A. Sanders and his disciples. Sanders is not content to restrict himself to the final form of the biblical texts. It is precisely their growth and development, and the changing communitarian experiences and interests that such changes reflect, that interest him, and shape his approach to biblical interpretation. All sides recognize, of course, that such study is intrinsically less secure and more speculative than that which focuses on the final documents. Continuing the study of such change beyond the canonical documents holds similar interest, but historical limitations on the canon provides some sort of a boundary, *at least for the individual scholar*. For after all, there are other scholarly communities that adopt a slightly different canon (Roman Catholic and Protestant disparities on this point are merely the most obvious).

*Thirdly*, the 'canon criticism' of Childs (though he does not use the expression of his own work) is currently far more influential than that of Sanders, and, inevitably, attracts the most systematic criticism (especially Barr). While Childs adopts more-or-less standard critical positions with respect to the biblical documents, they influence relatively little of his biblical theology because he allows only the final form to shape his theological synthesis. The Christian church has recognized a restricted canon (whose borders are a little blurred), and if we are Christians that must be the framework in which we do our theological reflection. Unlike Sanders, Childs is not much interested in trying to delineate the communitarian interests that produced the documents, and not at all interested in ostensible extra-canonical influences. To some extent he deals with how the documents relate to each other (*i.e.* how later ones use earlier ones and reshape what they have received), but he is most interested in using the canonical documents to show how, together, they ground and justify a more-or-less traditional, orthodox theology, as judged by post-biblical categories. Much of his work is stimulating and refreshing. Nevertheless, because he completely rejects any traditional view of Scriptural authority, his reason for



using the canon as his boundary is not well defended, and has led to some critics charging him with 'canonical fundamentalism'. Because Childs is happy to admit a diversity of historical-critical perspectives, but can scarcely tolerate *theological* criticism, Barr prefers to charge him with 'theological inerrancy'. In any case, as useful and stimulating as many parts of his work are, many suspect it is not epistemologically consistent or secure (see especially P. R. Noble, *The Canonical Approach*). Childs emerges with a unity of result, but it is less than clear how he gets there as long as the unity of the foundation documents is affirmed by little more than the results, and is more or less adopted by assuming ecclesiastical tradition regarding the boundaries of the canon.

*Fourthly*, those with a high view of Scripture insist that what gives the canonical documents their unity is that, for all their enormous diversity, one Mind, one Actor, stands behind them; they constitute a truly revelatory base. Inevitably there are differences of opinion about how this revelation interacts with other material (*e.g.* natural revelation, providential leading, tradition). Whatever the outcome of such debates, however, the unity here envisaged is a unity of substance in the source documents themselves. The efforts of 'whole-Bible' biblical theology may sometimes be thwarted by the complexities of the task, and sometimes mocked by inadequate work, but they are not intrinsically doomed to frustration; there is an intrinsic unity that is to be pursued and explored. In the final analysis, those who cannot agree to some kind of intrinsic unity in the Scriptures will always find their attempts at 'whole-Bible' biblical theology, however admirable, to be the fruit of either accident or pragmatism.

4. A rather different kind of unity is a kind of *ad hoc* subscription to certain post-biblical confessional bases, which are then found to have adequate support in Scripture, such that this support then functions as the appropriate unity of Scripture and thus of biblical theology. This stance may overlap with two or three of the options already listed. Many biblical theologians operate with this view, but only rarely with the self-critical awareness of Robert Morgan. He seeks to show, for instance, that for all the diversity of the NT documents, visible not least in their Chris-

tological pluralism, 'there is also a Christian doctrinal unity, encapsulated in some words from Chalcedon' (in *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed*). To justify this stance is to write a NT theology. This 'relatively loose version of traditional Christianity' allows 'a legitimate theological pluralism without abandoning doctrinal boundaries as some forms of this religion do'. On this view, however, one cannot escape the conclusion that the adopted theological synthesis is finally warranted by the accidental historical adoption of certain themes in the Bible, while others may be safely discarded. The view provides comfort to those who want to be broadly orthodox without providing greater justification for their orthodoxy than the commitments of other Christians at another time. Under this perspective it is difficult to imagine how biblical theology has any authority to reform certain views. This vision of unity will inevitably prove unstable.

One may in fact analyse the importance of canon for biblical theology along a slightly different set of axes. Some biblical theologians tend to adopt what might be called a linear hermeneutic, a developmental hermeneutic. They may disagree on whether the results sanction or refute a 'whole-Bible' biblical theology, but they tend to operate in the temporal framework of the history-of-religions school, or of the history of tradition, or of salvation-history. Other biblical theologians adopt the canon as a starting point, and the divisions of the canon become the controlling hermeneutic: law, prophets, gospels, *etc.* Once again, this group of scholars disagree as to whether the results tend toward unity or disunity. Among those who acknowledge the revelatory nature of the scriptural documents, however, these two axes run parallel to each other and are mutually supportive.

### *Use of the OT in the New*

The questions surrounding the unity of the canon can be explored a little further by examining one subset of this topic, *viz.* the use of the OT in the New. During the last four decades, a vast quantity of work has been done in this area. Here we may merely identify three aspects of this work that have a bearing on biblical theology, without probing any of them very deeply.

1. One of the most intriguing aspects of this subject is the warrant provided, if any, by

the NT writers, when they draw theological conclusions from the OT. While many scholars have shown that the NT writers' appropriation techniques find parallels in the Jewish writers of the second temple period when they use the Hebrew canon, such observations do not adequately account for the different conclusions reached by Christian Jews like Paul and by non-Christian Jews. Some scholars (e.g. D. J. Moo) have advanced the debate by distinguishing between appropriation techniques and hermeneutical axioms; the former may be shared by Christians who wrote the NT and by Jews, but disjunctions surface when the latter are studied closely. For instance, many conservative Jews saw in the law given at Sinai not only a body of instruction but a hermeneutical key to the rest of Scripture. In contrast, some NT writers insist that the proper place of the law-covenant can be grasped only when it is properly located in the stream of redemptive history (hence Paul's argument in Gal. 3, or the argument of Heb. 7). It follows that the kind of biblical theology that is profoundly grounded in tracing out the Bible's plot-line is intrinsically more likely to pick up this kind of inner-canonical hermeneutical distinctive than either systematic theology or those kinds of biblical theology that rarely ask diachronic questions.

2. More challenging, certainly more technical, are the countless quotations from, allusions to, and echoes of the OT found in the NT. Many, of course, are straightforward. But many raise fundamental questions. Psalm 2:7 is quoted three times in the NT, once to justify the claim that Jesus has been raised (Acts 13:32-33), once to prove that Jesus is superior to angels (Heb. 1:5), and once to demonstrate that Jesus did not take on himself the authority of high priest, but was appointed to the task by his Father (Heb. 5:5). At the surface level, Psalm 2:7 warrants none of these conclusions. Indeed, the disparity prompts many scholars to conclude that the NT writers frequently use the OT in an irresponsible proof-texting way that badly rips texts out of their contexts (e.g. B. Lindars). Others reverently appeal to the revelatory stance of the NT authors, who thus found more in the OT text than was actually there on the surface. The NT writers thus deployed an approach to textual citation that cannot be duplicated today by readers of the

OT (e.g. R. Longenecker). Still others hold that close scrutiny of these challenging passages discloses some profound assumptions, themselves grounded elsewhere in exegesis, regarding interlocking typologies having to do with David, the temple, the priesthood, and other subjects. If these latter approaches are valid, they have an enormous bearing on how one should properly read the Bible. Moreover, they are the very stuff of biblical theology that seeks to track the Bible's storyline and explore the significance of the canon.

3. During the last two decades many have come to speak of 'intertextuality' in preference to 'the use of the Old Testament in the New'. In some usages, the two expressions are roughly synonymous. More commonly, however, intertextuality refers to a broader phenomenon, not only because it includes in its purview the use of earlier texts by later texts *within* each Testament, but also because it explores how the later texts, duly absorbed by the contemporary interpreter, cast a shadow back on the meaning the interpreter finds in the earlier text. Among some exponents of intertextuality, this generates blatant anachronisms. Such anachronisms are inoffensive, however, to those with the strong postmodern conviction that meaning rests primarily with the interpreter and not with either the author or the text. Among more cautious exponents of intertextuality, anachronism is carefully avoided, while the interpreter seeks to identify textually based markers that attest an earlier passage as truly an adumbration of something that will develop only later, an anticipation of something still obscure, the beginnings of a typology that develops across the sweep of redemptive history. Carefully exploited, intertextuality proves to be one of the lashings that hold biblical theology together.

### *Postmodernism*

Notoriously difficult to define, postmodernism has many faces and many degrees. For our purposes, its focus is primarily the domain of epistemology, and it offers itself in part as a rejection of the epistemology of the Enlightenment, a rejection of approaches that are positivist, rationalistic, exclusive, certain.

Yet postmodernism has many degrees. In the first half of the last century, avant-garde thinkers argued, with great persuasiveness, that for finite human beings there can be no

uninterpreted facts. In the second half of the 20th century, many extrapolated this argument to conclude that there are no facts, only interpretations. The former reminds us of our finitude and contingency, even our fallenness, and checks our hubris; the latter insists we are confined to a quagmire of relativity, and exults in the disappearance of any possibility of objective truth.

It is not uncommon for postmodernists to criticize both the earlier 'biblical theology movement' and its critics for being too 'modernist' in epistemology (e.g. D. Penchansky). Perhaps the most articulate of those who define postmodern biblical theology is Werner Jeanrond. His multi-faceted definition is too complex to be probed very deeply here. Suffice it to say that for him biblical theology is 'a multi-disciplinary theological exercise which aims at retrieving the theological dimensions of the biblical texts as part of the larger project of interpreting the communicative potential of these texts' (BI 6, p. 245). It is interested in discovering 'the theological diversity within the biblical texts', and is thus a continuing 'challenge to all systematic theologies insofar as it calls for an always new test of any preconceived or traditionally assumed concept of the God to whose self-revelation in history the texts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament witness in various ways' (p. 246). It 'encourages all non-dogmatic models and paradigms of discussing continuities and discontinuities in the complex development and religious challenge of biblical monotheism' (p. 246). By definition, although it begins its work by interpreting the documents of the biblical canon, it is not limited to those texts. Moreover, it encourages 'not only the critique of hidden or open ideologies in the act of interpretation, but also the critique of ideologies in the biblical texts themselves' (p. 246). The only thing that Jeanrond will apparently not permit biblical theology to critique is his own far-reaching postmodern epistemology.

Similarly, it has been argued (e.g. by T. L. Thompson) that the true God (if there is one) must remain unknown; gods are created by our interpretations. The historicism which was tied to the biblical theology movement in the mid 20th century was more modern than biblical; the reality is that all we have are texts which we interpret in many different ways. The Bible itself gives us no access to

history, but only to a tradition.

Here we find a strange mix of the more radical wing of historical criticism combined with a postmodern definition of history that makes the discipline of history incapable in principle of saying anything true about extra-textual referents.

The degree to which these stances control the outcome varies considerably. Some members of the so-called Yale School write energetically and challengingly about being more 'biblical', but they find it difficult to confess to much extra-textual referentiality: i.e. there is a great deal of biblically informed God-talk, but it is less than clear that one is to think in terms of a God who is actually 'there', a God who is to be thought of in biblical terms. After all, it is what God has accomplished on the cross that saves us, not the biblical ideas about what God has accomplished on the cross. Similarly, Francis Watson's suggestion that the Gospels be regarded as 'narrated history' cries to be teased out a little further. At one level, of course, what he says is obvious. But to speak of the Gospels as imaginative presentations of Jesus which, for all their literary quality, may exert a powerful truth claim on us because they are *our* story, the story of our community, our only access to Jesus, is sooner or later to duck the toughest question of all: do these stories in some way *refer* to a real Jesus, an extra-textual Jesus, who is never reducible to the Jesus of the text but to whom the texts bear faithful and responsible witness? If not, in what sense is the substance of our proclamation anything more than the proclamation itself? This view really would be the most terrible bibliolatry. It would command adherence to the text, the story in the text, and not to the Jesus to whom the text bears witness. In a postmodern world, it is important to keep saying that we are not saved by ideas, not even biblical ideas, but by the Jesus whom God sent to the cross on our behalf.

In a rather different vein (but certainly this side of the postmodern divide), the recent OT theology by Brueggemann greatly stresses the virtue of imagination, eschews attempts at a broad 'fit', and organizes its material into core testimony, countertestimony, unsolicited testimony, and embodied testimony. The tension between the first two are nicely seen in his treatment of Exodus 34:6-7. This 'credo', according to Brueggemann, embraces a beset-

ting tension, not between opposing theological traditions, but in 'the very life, character, and person of Yahweh': between, on the one hand, Yahweh's solidarity with his people and gracious fidelity, and, on the other, his sovereign, sometimes excessive, and destructive self-regard.

Part of the problem here is that most postmodern work either tacitly assumes or robustly defends the legitimacy of one particular antithesis, *viz.*: either a finite knower can know some things absolutely and exhaustively, or such knowers are necessarily lost in a sea of relativity (D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*). If we buy into the legitimacy of that antithesis, we are lost, for it can always be shown that human beings, finite knowers all, cannot ever know anything absolutely and exhaustively. The only alternative, then, is some form or other of relativism. In fact, however, this antithesis must be rejected, for there are other options. Human beings may know some things truly, if nothing exhaustively. They may approach greater and more accurate knowledge, even though they can never gain absolute knowledge (omniscience is not a communicable attribute of God!).

Postmodernism does its most honourable work when it exposes the most arrogant epistemological claims of the 'modern' period, and especially the hollow pretensions of 'independent' or 'autonomous' reason. It functions honourably when it reminds us that we operate in contexts (linguistic, cultural, religious, racial, individual), and that these inevitably shape us. Precisely because of the worldview-forming power of systematic theology (see below), no biblical theology can be pursued apart from the 'systematic' stances already adopted by *every* person (including those who incessantly disparage 'systematic theology'). But postmodernism succumbs to a new arrogance when, misled by the antithesis outlined in the previous paragraph, it tells us we are nothing more than our contexts, and proclaims the absoluteness of the relative. There are alternatives. Biblical theology apart from such alternatives is in our time likely to sink into creative but undisciplined flights of fancy loosely tied to the texts of Scripture, supporting them or opposing them, in line with personal preference and current cultural agendas.

### *Definition*

The foregoing discussion was designed in part to set out the wide spectrum of opinion regarding the history, definition and roles of biblical theology. The discussion repeatedly hinted at the lines that must now be drawn.

'Biblical theology' is not usefully applied to all theological reflection on the Bible. It may still be used to refer generically to OT theology and NT theology, inductive disciplines that seek to articulate the theologies of the diverse books and corpora within their domains. But ideally, biblical theology, as its name implies, even as it works inductively from the diverse texts of the Bible, seeks to uncover and articulate the unity of *all* the biblical texts taken together, resorting primarily to the categories of those texts themselves. In this sense it is canonical biblical theology, 'whole-Bible' biblical theology; *i.e.* its content is a theology of the whole Bible, not a theology that merely has its roots in the Bible, or merely takes the Bible as the place to begin (Hasel). Such biblical theology is overtly theological, *i.e.* it makes synthetic assertions about the nature, will and plan of God in creation and redemption, including therefore also the nature, purpose and 'story' of humanity. But it is not narrowly theological. Rather, precisely because so many of the theological claims of Scripture are claims about revelation in history, biblical theology is committed to using rigorous and responsible historical methods. Equally, because the texts are literary pieces, diverse in genre and other features, biblical theology seeks to be sensitive to literary structures.

While acknowledging that it can never be autonomous, biblical theology focuses on the inductive study of the biblical texts in their final form, seeking progression towards greater and greater faithfulness. While some part of the biblical theological enterprise may focus on the theology of one corpus, or on one or two themes across the corpora of Scripture, the discipline as a whole must strive toward the elucidation of the biblical documents along the axis of redemptive history, the canon itself providing the boundaries of the primary source documents (however much we must be open to 'hear' how these documents have been understood and applied in later centuries). On the one hand, biblical theology will try to preserve the glorious di-

versity of the biblical documents; on the other, it will try to uncover all that holds them together, sacrificing neither historical particularity nor the unifying sweep of redemptive history. It will marshal the resources of rigorous exegesis, and it will try above all to uncover and understand how words and themes in earlier canonical texts are used in later canonical texts. Recognizing their finiteness, biblical theologians will want to pursue their calling not only in interaction with the work of twenty centuries of Christian witness, but in community with the living church. Moreover, insofar as the biblical theologian holds that the boundary of the canon is valid because the canonical documents are, finally, God-given and God-authorized, so far also must biblical theology become not only a descriptive enterprise (a description of the theology one finds in the Bible) but also a normative enterprise, a confessional enterprise.

Such considerations ensure that there will never be unanimity about the discipline; there are too many disputed variables. But that is no reason to retreat into endless discussions of definition and method. Rather it is a call to work out, among those who share this approach or something akin to it, a faithful, penetrating, self-correcting biblical theology.

### Systematic theology

Many, but not all, of the subtopics explored in connection with biblical theology could be usefully canvassed again with respect to systematic theology, doubling the length of this essay. Here we can attempt only the briefest probing of some of the definitional issues.

As its name suggests, systematic theology attempts to organize, to systematize, theological reflection. When the primary authoritative source for that theological synthesis and reflection is the Bible, systematic theology attempts to organize what the Bible says according to some system. The traditional tenfold division of topics is certainly not the only possibility. But even to choose topics, to hierarchialize them, is to impose a structure not transparently given in Scripture itself. In any case, such theological reflection inevitably emerges out of one epistemology or another, out of a particular cultural consciousness, and such matters will become correspondingly more influential in the system to the degree that the theologian is unaware of them or

holds, naively, that they have little or no influence.

Such systematic theology will seek to be faithful to Scripture. That means careful exegesis is essential, along with the panoply of the interpreter's tools. But because the ordering vision is not dictated by inductive study of the text within the categories of the text, corpus by corpus, the danger of simplistic proof-texting becomes proportionately greater, and the difficulty of deciding which ordering principles will control the system correspondingly greater and more disputable. Moreover, most systematic theology includes some sort of canvassing of earlier work by seminal theologians (Irenaeus, Anselm, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and so forth). That means that many of the categories, not to mention the priorities for discussion and reflection on how various theological strands cohere, have been laid down by the ecclesiastical tradition, and it is very hard work to be informed by them without being controlled by them. Further, systematic theology worthy of the name, more so than biblical theology, seeks to articulate what the Bible says in a way that is culturally telling, culturally prophetic. The alternative is to write a systematic theology that is of merely antiquarian interest, or that appeals to the most traditionalist voices in the culture. Such concerns for contemporaneity and relevance, entirely legitimate, may nevertheless cast more influence than is sometimes recognized on the shape of the systematic theology, such that the concern for relevance and prophetic voice may unwittingly distance it from a faithful portrayal of what the Bible says.

There are deeper issues. The Bible speaks in highly diverse literary genres that play upon our hearts and minds in a great variety of speech acts. To encapsulate this diversity and power within the form of a systematic theology is to demand too much of the discipline. But the systematic theologian can mitigate the most obvious dangers by wide reading in the literature of exegesis and by delving deeply into biblical theology as a mediating discipline. The systematist must recognize, further, the inherent limitations of systematic theology. For all its strengths, there are many things it cannot do. It can analyse a lament within the biblical corpus, but it cannot evoke a heart-felt lament in the way a lament itself can. It may expound the meanings of some parables, but it cannot ex-

plode the reader's worldview in the way the most striking of the narrative parables can.

Still more importantly, systematic theology, precisely by its efforts at systemic wholeness and by its engagement with the culture, openly attempts worldview formation, worldview transformation. (Something of the same can be accomplished by steady, thoughtful, repeated Bible reading, but in that case there is obviously no attempt in the text to address *this particular culture* as opposed to some other.) Thus unlike biblical theology, systematic theology is not so much a mediating discipline as a culminating discipline. Nevertheless, once a particular systematic theology has been deeply absorbed, precisely because it is worldview forming it is likely to exercise significant influence on the disciplines that nurture it: exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology. The hermeneutical circle is joined, but not vicious.

This discussion of systematic theology has so far assumed that the systematician is at least attempting to systematize what is found in the Bible. But it must be frankly admitted that the label 'systematic theology' has often been attached to approaches far removed from such commitments. Sometimes the Bible, ecclesiastical tradition, and an ostensibly autonomous reason have been understood to have equal authority in the discussion. Very commonly, the judgments of the more sceptical varieties of historical criticism have been adopted, not least the conviction that a systematic theology of the whole Bible is in principle impossible; there are too many intrinsic contradictions. In that case, the systematic theologian may self-consciously attempt a synthesis based on those parts of the Bible he or she is able to accept as valid. Systematic theology may also begin to overlap with historical theology, as competing positions are evaluated. Countless books that ostensibly belong to the domain of systematic theology are in fact an evaluation and critique of some theologian or of some theological position, based on criteria that are an interesting mix of tradition, Scripture, reason, philosophical structures and internal coherence.

So deep was the suspicion that what might be called 'whole Bible' systematic theology is in principle impossible that many theologians devoted most of their work to prolegomena, to hermeneutical and other methodological

questions, to evaluation and critique of other work. During the past decade and a half, however, a fresh interest has arisen in what has come to be called 'constructive theology', *i.e.* not merely interaction with and critique of the work of others, but attempts at articulating doctrine that is meant to be normative. One thinks, for instance, not only of the work of a handful of scholars such as Colin Gunton, but also of the new Edinburgh series.

What is transparently clear about all such systematic theology, however, is that its organizing principles do not encourage the exploration of the Bible's plot-line, except incidentally. The categories of systematic theology are logical and hierarchical, not temporal.

### Relationships between systematic theology and biblical theology

Most of the relationships between systematic theology and biblical theology have been teased out in the defining discussions of the previous pages. A summary will crystallize the conclusions.

As currently discussed in the literature, both 'systematic theology' and 'biblical theology' can refer to wildly diverse ideas of the nature of the respective disciplines. Ideally, however, the two expressions serve best when certain defining restrictions are adopted. Systematic theology and biblical theology enjoy a common base of authority, *viz.* canonical Scripture. This does not mean that other voices (*e.g.* historical theology) play no role. It means rather that the theologian cannot treat them as if they enjoyed the same revelatory status as Scripture. Both systematic theology and biblical theology are provisional and in principle correctible, as virtually all products of finite human enterprise must be. Although in terms of authority status there needs to be an outward-tracing line from Scripture through exegesis towards biblical theology to systematic theology (with historical theology providing some guidance along the way), in reality various 'back loops' are generated, each discipline influencing the others, and few disciplines influencing the others more than does systematic theology, precisely because it is so worldview forming.

The distinctions between systematic and biblical theology are perhaps more striking. Although both are text based, the ordering principles of the former are topical, logical,

hierarchical, and as synchronic as possible; the ordering principles of the latter trace out the history of redemption, and are (ideally) profoundly inductive, comparative and as diachronic as possible. Systematic theology seeks to rearticulate what the Bible says in self-conscious engagement with (including confrontation with) the culture; biblical theology, though it cannot escape cultural influences, aims to be first and foremost inductive and descriptive, earning its normative power by the credibility of its results. Thus systematic theology tends to be a little further removed from the biblical text than does biblical theology, but a little closer to cultural engagement. Biblical theology tends to seek out the rationality and communicative genius of each literary genre; systematic theology tends to integrate the diverse rationalities in its pursuit of a large-scale, worldview-forming synthesis. In this sense, systematic theology tends to be a culminating discipline; biblical theology, though it is a worthy end in itself, tends to be a bridge discipline.

See also: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY; HISTORY OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY; CHALLENGES TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY; UNITY AND DIVERSITY OF SCRIPTURE; NEW TESTAMENT USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

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