# Biblical Theology as a Nexus of Christian Intellectual Disciplines

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Bible Faculty Summit, BJU, Greenville, SC, 7/29/25

## I. Introduction

"Biblical theology," like "Salvation History" or "bless your heart," remains one of those flexible expressions that can possess radically different meanings depending on who is saying it and why. To some, biblical theology is nothing more than the history of the radically divergent voices and trajectories of two religions, Judaism and Christianity, and their intermingling. The discipline is nothing more than a "history of religion," no different from the practice of that discipline in Buddhism or Islam.[1] On the more conservative end of the spectrum, the practice of "biblical theology" can at times be indistinct from what we generally mean by "systematic theology." While the end result can certainly be helpful, the lack of the historical authorial emphasis can deprive the community of faith of a key tool in the hermeneutical toolbox.[2]

Yet another key problem exists: the relationship between biblical theology and systematic theology and practical theology, rather than being mutually beneficial, is often nonexistent or downright hostile. William Wrede infamously declared,

> Biblical Theology has to investigate something from given documents . . . It tries to grasp it as objectively, correctly and sharply as possible. That is all. How the systematic theologian gets on with its results and deals with them—that is his own affair. Like every other real science, New Testament theology has its goal simply in itself, and is totally indifferent to all dogma and systematic theology. What could dogmatics offer it? Could dogmatics teach New Testament theology to see the facts correctly? At most it could color them.[3]

Even when a biblical theologian recognizes that he has a relationship with the dogmatician or preacher, that relationship may resemble an old married couple in need of counselling, as Alexander Deeg humorously illustrates: "After all, I know what the text says, and you're doing something different with it!", the exegete [biblical theologian] says to the preacher, who responds, "I know what the text *really* wants to do—to move, to change, to adjudicate—yet you're content with your supposed historical and philosophical correctness!"[4]

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[1] See, e.g., William Wrede, "The Task and Method of Biblical Theology," in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter*, ed. and trans. By Robert Morgan, SBT[2] 25 (Naperville, IL: SCM, 1973), 86, 90, 101, 108, and 116. Similarly, James Barr argues for "the substantial overlap between historical description and biblical theology" ("Trends and Prospects in Biblical Theology," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 25, no. 2 [1974]: 272).

[2] For example, the following two articles, while containing helpful material, use "biblical theology" in the sense of either "systematic theology" or "theology from the Bible": Jeffrey H. Boyd, "A Biblical Theology of Chronic Illness," *TrinJ* 24, no. 2 (2003): 189–206, and Jenise T. Stewart, "The Biblical Theology Regarding Homosexuality," *Faith and Mission* 20, no. 3 (2003): 14–21.

[3] Wrede, "Task and Method of Biblical Theology," 69. Similarly, Gerhard Ebeling well summarizes the modern attitude of mainstream "biblical theology" towards systematic theology: "Its attitude to dogmatics remains that of a detached spectator, often not without compassionate amusement at the embarrassment in which dogmatic theology finds itself. . . . Dogmatics must render account of its use of scripture before the judgment seat of historical study of the Bible" (Gerhard Ebeling, "The Meaning of 'Biblical Theology,'" *JTS* 6, no. 2 (1955): 218.

[4] Alexander Deeg, "Mehr Altes Testament und immer weniger Exegese? Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Exegese und Homiletik und zu einer enzyklopädisch erneuerten Biblischen Theologie," in *Biblische Theologie—*

Such things need not be so! The premise of this paper is that biblical theology, properly defined, can function as a nexus for both the exegetical disciplines and the practical disciplines of the Christian faith.[5] Furthermore, the relationship is not one-sided. Biblical theology should not merely impart its wisdom to systematic theology and the practical disciplines; it should also benefit from them and constantly improve herself. Biblical theology stands to grow, indeed, it *must* grow, from its interaction with those disciplines, if it is to remain relevant to both the individual Christian life and the growth of the community of faith. The proper practice of biblical theology must put aside any sense of what Richard Gaffin called "theological elitism" and open itself up to dialogue with, and even occasionally correction by, the practical disciplines.[6] "It might be refreshing for the pastor to be told that the interaction between the university and the parish is not a one-way street."[7]

## II. History, Definition, and Core Principles

### *A. History*

Many, if not most, discussions of biblical theology begin with some mention of Johann Philipp Gabler's famous inaugural address in 1787 at the University of Altdorf. To be sure, his influence remains unparalleled, clearly manifesting itself in two polar opposites, both Wrede and the much more conservative Geerhardus Vos. What Gabler is responsible for, however, is not so much the development of biblical theology as a methodology, but a resounding cry for its clarification as a distinct discipline (a bit *too* distinct, as we shall see).

Both the Old Testament and New Testament authors were biblical theologians, in the sense that they could take previously written, divinely inspired books and trace key themes both at the individual level and the canonical level. In the Old Testament, for example, we see the great theme of God's compassion in Exodus 34:6 developed by later authors as "intrabiblical theological reflection" (Neh 9:17, Psalm 86:15, 103:8; Joel 2:13), and this had practical ramifications—"Jonah confesses that it was his very knowledge of these qualities that moved him to flee from the call to prophesy against Nineveh (Jonah 4:2)."[8] Hebrews probably remains the example *par excellence* for how a New Testament writer can rely heavily on the Old Testament for the development of various theological themes, e.g., Jesus Christ as the superior

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*multiperspektivisch, interdisziplinär und interreligiös*, eds. Wolfgang Kraus, Siegfried Kreuzer, and Martin Rösel, Biblisch-Theologische Studien 195 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2024), 358 (Deeg seems to be using "biblical theologian" synonymously with "exegete" in this essay): "Da könnten Exeget: innen ihren homiletischen Partner: innen zurufen: »Ich weiß (letztlich ja doch), was der Text sagt – und du machst irgendetwas anderes mit ihm!« Und Prediger: innen könnten entgegen: »Und ich weiß, was der Text eigentlich (bewegen, verändern, zusprechen etc.) will – und du begnügst dich mit deinen vermeintlichen historischen oder philologischen Richtigkeiten!«" Indeed, a few years earlier, Kevin J. Vanhoozer had suggested the need for "marriage counselling" between biblical theology and systematic theology! ("Staurology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Narrative: Once More unto the Biblical Theological Breach," *SBJT* 23, no. 2 [2019]: 20).

[5] The online *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* offers the following glosses for "nexus": "1. connection, link; 2. a connected group or series; 3. center, focus." Online: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nexus, accessed 7/24/25. I am using the word in the sense of the glosses in both #1 and #3.

[6] Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," *WTJ* 38, no. 3 (1976): 294.

[7] Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 94.

[8] James K. Mead, *Biblical Theology: Issues, Methods, and Themes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 15–6; cf. Ben Witherington III, *Biblical Theology: The Convergence of the Canon* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 11.

priest.[9] Similarly, Revelation relies heavily on Psalm 2, not to mention the entire metanarrative of the entirety of the canon before it, to bring us full circle to a new wedding in a new garden, under the governance of the new Adam, with the crushed serpent never more threatening to crash the party.[10]

The concept behind our term "biblical theology" existed to various degrees within the church fathers as well, though this has been underappreciated. Tertullian, for example, in his refutation of Marcion, met the heretic on his own terms, at one point focusing primarily on the Gospel of Luke and its theology as the antidote for the latter's venom: "Luke's Gospel (so far as its being the common property of ourselves and Marcion enables it to be decisive of the truth,) . . ." (*The Five Books Against Marcion*, 4.4, cf. also 4.1, 4.3, and 4.7–9).[11]

The Reformation, with its focus on *Sola Scriptura*, certainly facilitated the modern idea of biblical theology; Ebeling even goes so far as to suggest, "In all that is to be said further on the problem of 'biblical theology' this must be kept in view: we are dealing with a road which the Reformation made possible, towards which it pointed, and indeed which it made necessary, even though it was to become a dangerous threat even for the theology beholden to the Reformation."[12]

Consequently, when we approach Gabler's address, we must acknowledge various streams of influence, not merely the enlightenment. To say "Gabler is clearly a rationalist" and that "[N]ew Testament theology, along with biblical theology, emerged out of rationalist thought, . . .",[13] is not the entire story. Gabler spoke at the outset of those (including himself) who were devoted "to the sacred faith of Christianity," who "profess with one united voice that the sacred books, especially of the New Testament, are the one clear source from which all true knowledge of the Christian religion is drawn," those who "profess too that these books are the only secure sanctuary to which we can flee in the face of the ambiguity and vicissitude of human knowledge, if we aspire to a solid understanding of divine matters and if we wish to obtain a firm and certain hope of salvation."[14] John Sandys-Wunsch is correct that Gabler's acceptance of divine revelation distinguished him from thoroughgoing rationalists like Gotthold Lessing.[15] Nonetheless, as is widely acknowledged, Gabler certainly allowed enlightenment philosophy into

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[9] See, e.g., William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, WBC 47a (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1991), cxxx–cxxxi.

[10] For Revelation's reliance on Psalm 2, see especially Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), 69. The method in which Revelation comes full circle back to Genesis and reverses the curse has been discussed by a number of scholars; helpful treatments include Kimble and Spellman, *Invitation to Biblical Theology*, 223–7; Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Revelation*, Christ-Centered Exposition (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2016), 326; Buist M. Fanning, *Revelation*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 553–554.

[11] Tertullian, *The Five Books Against Marcion*, Book 4, translated by Peter Holmes, pages 345–428 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol, 3, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905). Note also the discussion in Charles H. H. Scobie, "The Challenge of Biblical Theology," *TynB* 42, no. 1 (1991): 37–38, as well as Stephen O. Presley, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2025), though having taken a look at Presley's introduction, I am not totally sure that what he is calling "biblical theology" is the same as what we are grappling with in this paper.

[12] Ebeling, "The Meaning of 'Biblical Theology,'" 212.

[13] Stanley E. Porter, *New Testament Theology and the Greek Language: A Linguistic Reconceptualization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 43 and 45.

[14] Gabler, "An Oration on the Proper Distinction . . .," embedded in John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33, no. 2 (1980): 134.

[15] Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology," 147.

his perspective, most especially with his idea that scientific study could help distinguish what within the biblical authors' writings constituted universal truths relevant for all ages, and thus a stable foundation for systematic theology ("dogmatics") to build upon, and what should be discarded as irrelevant or not as truly inspired as the other material.[16]

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, William Wrede represents the liberal development of Gabler's views, with a complete denial of the doctrine of inspiration and of the unity of Scripture.[17] Conversely, Geehardus Vos and Adolf Schlatter show us the conservative refinement.[18] While recognizing the influence of rationalism on the discipline, indeed, that "Her very birth took place under an evil start," Vos rejected Gabler's bifurcation "between what was purely human . . . and what was eternally valid, divine truth."[19] Yet Vos trumpeted the benefits of biblical theology properly developed, when the *historical* nature of supernatural revelation is acknowledged: "Biblical theology, rightly defined, is nothing else than *the exhibition of the organic progress of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity*."[20]

A hundred years later, we have even gone through what has been termed "the rise and fall of the biblical theology movement" in the middle of the 20th century.[21] Yet today we see ourselves surrounded by a bounty of publications of various degrees of quality on the theory and practice of biblical theology. The discipline is here to stay; it only remains for us to maintain its relevance for the person in the pew and clearly distinguish faith-filled biblical theology from that mired in the quicksands of artificial secular neutrality.[22]

### *B. Definition*

The definitions of biblical theology are myriad, and generally not that far removed from each other within their own conservative, liberal, or neo-orthodox circles. We will not, then, attempt to reinvent the wheel, but simply set a few of which we approve on display. Sandys-Wunsch mentions G. T. Zachariae in the late 1700s as being responsible for granting the term "biblical theology" the clearer definition "the description of the theology of the Bible in the Bible's own terms."[23] For Vos, in addition to the definition already quoted, "Biblical Theology" represents "that part of Exegetical Theology which deals with the revelation of God in its historic continuity."[24] More recent authors Jeremy M. Kimble and Ched Spellman state that it is "the

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[16] See, for example, Gabler, "Oration," in "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction," 142–144.

[17] Wrede, "Task and Method of Biblical Theology," esp. 69, 108

[18] Geerhardus Vos, *The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline: Inaugural Address of the Rev. Geerhardus Vos, Ph.D., D.D., as Professor of Biblical Theology* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph and Company, 1894), GoogleBooks; Adolf Schlatter, "The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics," in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter,* ed. and trans. with an introduction by Robert Morgan, SBT[2] 25 (Naperville, IL: SCM, 1973), 68–116.

[19] Vos, *Idea of Biblical Theology*, 25.

[20] Vos, *Idea of Biblical Theology*, 24 (emphasis original).

[21] See Johnn Wivell, "The Rise and Fall of the Biblical Theology Movement," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 25, no. 2 (2021): 74–110; Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, especially the chapter entitled "The Beginning of a Movement."

[22] The so-called secular neutrality of modern, mainstream biblical theology has doomed it to nearly complete irrelevance in modern theological education. See the discussion in Bernd Schröder, "Biblische Theologie und Religionspädagogik: Schnittmengen, Unterscheidungen und Herausforderungen," in *Biblische Theologie—multiperspektivisch, interdisziplinär und interreligiös*, 334. Here and elsewhere I am grateful to my wife Franziska for assisting me with the German. Any errors remain my own responsibility, however.

[23] Gabler, "Oration," in "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction," 149; cf. p. 137.

[24] Vos, *Idea of Biblical Theology*, 16.

study of the whole Bible on its own terms."[25] Similarly, Andreas J. Köstenberger and Gregory Goswell declare, "*Biblical Theology is not our own theology, or that of our church or denomination; it is the theology of the biblical writers themselves*. . . . Above all, biblical theology is concerned with the theology of the biblical writers themselves."[26] James M. Hamilton, Jr. defines it as "the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors."[27] Charles H. H. Scobie states, "Biblical Theology must be defined as the ordered study of the understanding of the revelation of God contained in the canonical scriptures of the Old and New Testaments."[28] The above overlapping definitions provide us with enough material to next unpack some core principles that will govern how biblical theology relates to other disciplines.

### *C. Core Principles*

Biblical theology first and foremost remains an examination of the *individual* inspired authors' messages, with the understanding that each of them has a unique message that is nonetheless complementary to the other messages.[29] As G. B. Caird famously illustrated, "To write a New Testament theology is to preside at a conference of faith and order. Around the table sit the authors of the New Testament, and it is the presider's task to engage them in a colloquium about theological matters which *they themselves* have placed on the agenda."[30] This comes with the recognition that Jude, for example, may not wish to talk about the same topics as Paul in his letter to the Romans, and that Luke may have some unique perspectives on Jesus' life and significance lacking in (though not contradictory to) Mark. This does not mean that practicing biblical theology necessitates laying aside our own questions and concerns, an impossible task; it simply means not superimposing them onto the biblical text and being patient that somehow they will be answered the more we immerse ourselves in Scripture.

The second core tenant of biblical theology for our purposes is its *historical* character. Yet not merely its historical character, but its historical character understood within the framework of progressive revelation.[31] To recognize the historical character of biblical theology is to recognize that each of the individual authors wrote within his own time, with his own agendas, and his own theological trajectory complementary to the other writers. Yet it cannot stop there. Each writer, from Moses to John, is part of a *historical* progression, a continuing saga of prophetic redemption with each canonical part built upon the other until it culminated in a sacred, textual

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[25] Jeremy M. Kimble and Ched Spellman, *Invitation to Biblical Theology: Exploring the Shape, Storyline, and Themes of Scripture*, Invitation to Theological Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2020), 16.

[26] Andreas J. Köstenberger and Gregory Goswell, *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 2 and 7, emphasis original.

[27] James M. Hamilton, Jr., *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible's Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 15.

[28] Charles H. H. Scobie, "The Challenge of Biblical Theology," *TynB* 42, no. 1 (1991): 36.

[29] I am more or less starting what Andreas J. Köstenberger calls the "classic approach" here (the term "classic" apparently originating with G. K. Beale), with the understanding that the "classic approach" supplements, rather than negates all the other approaches. See Köstenberger, "The Present and Future of Biblical Theology," *Themelios* 37, no. 3 (2012): 447–9, esp. 447.

[30] G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, edited and completed by L. D. Hurst (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 19.

[31] Witherington, *Biblical Theology*, 3 (cf. also pp. 438–439).

antithesis of Babel. Yet as Köstenberger notes, "the history or redemption" is *not* "merely textual"; rather, "it is the very history in which the church has a vital, even indispensable, part."[32]

This double sense of historical progression offers us two key benefits. First, we recognize that such an emphasis decisively eliminates the practice of theology as *merely* abstract.[33] Biblical Theology cannot be merely "a mythical 'what never was and always is,' but rather the 'here and now of the Word of God'"; it reflects not merely a "timeless truth" but an "ongoing significance," since "what God spoke formerly always has validity," even "today," as Hebrews emphasizes.[34] Second, we recognize that the significance of the earlier parts of the word of God become clearer the further we go along in the progression (e.g., 1 Pet 1:10–12, 20b). Jesus' statements on divorce very clearly illustrate this.[35] The entire book of Hebrews also has something to say on this matter.

Although we celebrate the diversity of Scripture, and quite appropriately welcome specialists in First Peter, or Deuteronomy, or Pauline theology, our third core tenant for biblical theology must be a belief in the unity and superior quality of the entire canon of Scripture in the practice of biblical theology (and so we begin to see the indispensable role that systematic theology plays in delineating biblical theology). Here, then, is the opportunity for fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals to unapologetically distinguish ourselves from all other practitioners. With Gerhard Maier, we declare,

> The unity of Scripture finds its most secure basis in the One who ultimately brought it forth: God. . . . The case for contradictions in the Bible depends on making the human witnesses to faith the primary authors of Scripture and supplanting the Divine Author. The argument for such contradictions brings a contradiction into God himself—of whom, however, it's rightly said, "Unity is God's characteristic feature."[36]

We take this as our presupposition and we reject, then, the idea that biblical theology can be practiced with some sort of "scientific," unbiased neutrality.[37] Schlatter states,

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[32] Köstenberger, "Present and Future of Biblical Theology," 462. We must not, of course, *stop* with history; that would make the biblical theologian "comparable to that of a painter who is decorating the walls of a house with frescoes while flames burst out of the roof" (Schlatter, *Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics*, 124–125).

[33] See Vos, *Idea of Biblical Theology*, 9, "God has not communicated to us the knowledge of the truth as it appears in the calm light of eternity to His own timeless vision. He has not given it in the form of abstract propositions logically correlated and systematized."

[34] Thomas Söding, "Der Biblische Kanon: Geschichte und Theologie," *ZKTh* 128, no. 4 (2006): 420—"'Alles hat seine Zeit' (Koh 3,1) - auch die Entstehung der Heiligen Schrift. Es gilt nicht das mythische ‚was niemals war und immer ist' (Sallust, De diis et mundo 4,4), sondern das *hic et nunc* des Wortes Gottes. Der Hebräerbrief, der freilich die unbedingte Gewissheit nicht ans geschriebene, sondern ans gesprochene Wort knüpft, betont das ‚Heute' (Hebr 1,5; 5,5 [Ps 2,7]; 3,7-19; 4,7 (Ps 95,7-11]), das keine zeitlose Wahrheit bezeichnet, sondern eine dauernde Gültigkeit und je neue Aktualität dessen, was Gott einmal gesagt hat und das deshalb immer gilt." "Der Biblische Kanon: Geschichte und Theologie," *ZKTh* 128, no. 4 (2006): 420.

[35] Witherington, *Biblical Theology*, 3.

[36] Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, translated from the German edition, *Biblische Hermeneutik*, by Robert W. Yarbrough (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 191. Cf. Floyd V Filson, who asserts that "the affirmation of unity" is "essential to the conception of Biblical theology" ("A New Testament Student's Approach to Biblical Theology," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 14, no. 1 [1946]: 23). For a refutation of the accusation that a New Testament theology by definition contains contradictions, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Diversity and Unity in the New Testament," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 144–158.

[37] Contra Wrede, "Task and Method of Biblical Theology," 69–70. Conversely, Filson ("New Testament Student's Approach," 23) argues that "It is not possible to carry on historical study without assuming an attitude toward the nature of the world in which we live. An element of interpretation is inherent in all historical study, . . ."

> According to the skeptical position, it is true that the historical explains; he observes the New Testament neutrally. But in reality this is to begin at once with a determined struggle against it. The word with which the New Testament confronts us intends to be believed, and so rules out once and for all any sort of neutral treatment. As soon as the historian sets aside or brackets the question of faith, he is making his concern with the New Testament and his presentation of it into a radical and total polemic against it.[38]

Indeed, "The word does not let hovering on the fence go on indefinitely"![39]

Furthermore, we accept the canon *as is*. Whatever excuses Luther may have had for his perspectives on James and Esther have no place here.[40] Neither can we entertain for a moment the more recent suggestion by James Dunn that "in not a few compositions Martin Luther and Charles Wesley, for example, were as, if not more inspired, than the author of II Peter."[41] We unashamedly accept a theological presupposition (at least as far as our methodology for Biblical Theology is concerned) that God's Spirit has been quite effective in leading the modern church into accepting the correct canon, notwithstanding some inconsistencies throughout history. As Childs notes, "To suggest that the task of theological reflection takes place from within a canonical context assumes not only a received tradition, but a faithful disposition by hearers who await the illumination of God's Spirit."[42]

This means that while the Jewish Scriptures progressively lead into, and are amplified and clarified by, the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles, and are unapologetically read by us as we identify *as Christians*[43], the Jewish Scriptures are by no means *replaced* by the apostolic writings.[44] The Jewish Scriptures continue to function *as Scripture* not only for the apostles but for us today, even as we acknowledge that Gentile Christians are clearly not under the law.[45]

This does raise the question of the canonical Septuagint's role in biblical theology, a question uniquely addressed by W. Edward Glenny and almost nobody else.[46] While the biblical theologian should acknowledge the primacy of the Hebrew as inspired Scripture, too many examples exist of NT authors relying on the LXX for a unique point not present in the Hebrew

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[38] Schlatter, "Theology of New Testament and Dogmatics,", 122.

[39] Schlatter, "Theology of New Testament and Dogmatics," 129.

[40] Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, trans. William Hazlitt, (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 27. Online: https://www.ccel.org/ccel/l/luther/tabletalk/cache/tabletalk.pdf.

[41] James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 1990), 386.

[42] Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 12.

[43] As Childs notes, "To suggest that the Christian should read the Old Testament as if he were living before the coming of Christ is an historical anachronism which also fails to take seriously the literature's present function with the Christian Bible for a practicing community of faith." Childs, *Old Testament Theology*, 9.

[44] As Hartmut Gese states, "Nicht das Alte Testament hat sich gegenüber dem Neuen zu rechtfertigen, sondern umgekehrt, das Neue Testament bezieht sich auf das Alte zurück. Das Neue Testament hat die alttestamentliche Traditionsbildung zum Ende, zum Abschluß geführt, die biblische Traditionsbildung ist damit als Ganzes abgeschlossen und damit erst in einem tieferen Sinne kanonisch" (Gese, *Vom Sinai zum Zion: Alttestamentliche Beiträge zur biblischen Theologie*, Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie 64 (München, Germany: Chr. Kaiser, 1974), 17.

[45] For the role of the Law even in the Gentile Christian life, see the helpful discussions in William W. Combs, "Paul, the Law, and Dispensationalism," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 18 (2013): 19–39; William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. and updated (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 482–501; Elmer A. Martens, "How Is the Christian to Construe Old Testament Law?" *BBR* 12, no. 2 (2002): 208; Köstenberger and Goswell, *Biblical Theology*, 60.

[46] W. Edward Glenny, "The Septuagint and Biblical Theology," *Themelios* vol. 41, no. 2 (2016): 263–278; See also the discussion in Childs, *Old Testament Theology in Canonical Context*, 10.

that one may have to appeal to a systematic theology of providence to inform their exegesis and biblical theology.[47]

## III. Biblical Theology and the Other Disciplines: Input, Output, and Mutual Edification

### *A. Introductory Considerations*

A "bridge" metaphor has been suggested for biblical theology, situating it between the more exegetical disciplines on the one hand and systematic and practical theologies on the other.[48] This has merit, so long as those on the bridge don't forget those on the opposing shores. What I am proposing here is a bit different, however. As a nexus, biblical theology not only connects the various disciplines, it serves as a center point where they can sit down and talk. Biblical theology in this paper is not so much a "bridge" as "Grand Central Station," or, if you will, the food court in your local shopping mall.

In other words, biblical theology is not one location on the theological journey. It is a hub where not only the experts in various academic disciplines but also the practitioners come to congregate, trade ideas, and admonish each other.[49] The biblical theologian does not simply give the systematic theologian, or the preacher, information, the raw historical data. He also *listens* to them, receives information back from them, rethinks some of his own assumptions, and constantly refines his material. The biblical theologian does not merely receive information from the Hebrew scholar, the literary critic, the specialist in the Synoptic Problem, the discoverer of ancient Hittite suzerain-vassal treaties. He has the right to admonish them, if necessary, or even offer guidance on their trajectories of study.[50] This privilege is mutual, of course; the exegete may correct an over-zealous biblical theologian[51], and the biblical theologian, along with his systematic colleague, may correct a pedantic exegete who has lost sight of the big picture.[52]

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[47] One is tempted to suggest that the time is ripe for a "biblical theology of the NT author's use of the LXX translation for Bible translation studies." The problem is that the LXX (and the texts cite by the NT authors) evidence no consistency of style, ranging on the one hand from a woodenly literal style that makes the NASB look like Good New for Modern Man to points on the other extreme where the translator felt the freedom to *invent* material to make the story more palatable to his target audience (specifically, LXX Esther).

[48] Scobie, "Challenge of Biblical Theology," 47, 49; Scobie credits Graeme Goldsworthy for creating this metaphor.

[49] Thus Scobie suggests that "Biblical Theology must increasingly become a cooperative venture . . ." (Scobie, "Challenge of Biblical Theology," 58).

[50] Carl Trueman argues that if systematic theology is not allowed to inform and correct biblical theology, then ". . . the theological unity of the Bible will be swallowed up and destroyed by its diversity because it has no foundation in the one God who speaks; and Christian exclusivism will be sacrificed to a meaningless pluralism as the church's narrative is reduced to having significance only within the bounds of the Christian community" ("Editorial: A Revolutionary Balancing Act," *Themelios* 27, no. 3 [2002]: 3).

[51] A good example of this is Josh Chatraw, "Balancing Out (W)Right: Jesus' Theology of Individual and Corporate Repentance and Forgiveness in the Gospel of Luke," *JETS* 55, no. 2 (2012): 299–321. Cf. also Vanhoozer, "Staurology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Narrative," 19.

[52] And, of course, the biblical theologian maintains the right to urge his systematic friend to allow the individual authors to speak on their own terms.

Having said that, a natural progression of sorts does occur. One must first read Scripture, verse by verse, and exegete to some degree before one can begin biblical theology, even if such reading is at the very basic level of a church Sunday School Bible study. Ideally, systematic theology will then have access to the exegesis of individual books and the theologies of individual authors which can be sculpted into immediately relevant theological discussions. Even the historical theologian benefits from having access to, say, a raw "Pauline theology of justification," drawn from the text of Paul's letters, before considering 3rd century articulations of justification. This natural progression, however, does not preclude working backwards at times.

### *B. Biblical Theology, Canonical Biblical Theology, and Their Relationship to Systematic Theology*

Before we can begin discussing how biblical theology interacts with the other disciplines, we must first highlight its relationship to systematic theology; confusion over this issue, after all, is what caused Gabler to deliver his address in the first place.[53]

We have already noted how Biblical Theology encompasses both the individual authors and the canon as a whole. For those of us who believe in the unity of Scripture, the individual authors must be situated within "the total canonical context."[54] In other words, merely studying a Pauline pneumatology is not enough. We must ask how that Pauline pneumatology fits in and complements the other "pneumatologies" in Scripture.

This provides the biblical theologian with two key opportunities. First, he can trace pneumatology canonically, beginning with Gen 1:2 all the way through Rev 22:17. By doing so, he incorporates material from as many individual authors as possible, but does not leave them sequestered. No book is deliberately left behind, if it has something to offer on the topic; otherwise personal theological convictions or idiosyncratic readings can alter the testimony of Scripture.[55] In addition, no book, or authorial voice, remains isolated: they are all meant to fit into the grand choir, though with their own part, to borrow from Caird's choir analogy.[56]

At this point, the biblical theologian has appropriately moved beyond individual authors in their historical contexts and can begin to focus on theological themes in their own right. As study continues, various themes will certainly show themselves more prominent than others, though each plays an important role and the quest for an overriding, supremely important solitary theme should probably be abandoned (other than the general sense in which all Scripture speaks of Christ, Luke 24:27).[57] The biblical theologian can also at this point consider the different theological (and practical) emphases that are developed with differing orderings of the canon, e.g., whether or not Ruth appears after Judges and before 1 Samuel (the normal Septuagint ordering) or after Proverbs and before Song of Solomon (the normal Hebrew ordering).[58]

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[53] Gabler, "Oration," in "J. B. Gabler and the Distinction," 137–40.

[54] Scobie, "Challenge of Biblical Theology," 60.

[55] Paul R. House, "Biblical Theology and the Wholeness of Scripture: Steps Toward a Program for the Future," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Scoff J. Hafemann (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 274.

[56] Caird, *New Testament Theology*, 23.

[57] See, e.g., Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology," *TrinJ* 5, no. 2 (1984): 126; Charles H. H. Scobie, "The Structure of Biblical Theology," *TynB* 42, no. 2 (1991): 178–179; Paul R. House, essay, 275–276.

[58] See the discussions in Gregory Goswell, "The Order of the Books in the Hebrew Bible," *JETS* 51, no. 4 (2008): 673–88 (esp. 675, 679, 685–7, for a discussion of Ruth's placement), and Gregory Goswell, "The Order of the Books of the Greek Old Testament," *JETS* 52, no. 3 (2009): 449–465 (esp. 460–62 for a discussion of Ruth).

Second, in keeping with the idea of historical progression, the biblical theologian can begin to emphasize the storyline of Scripture.[59] Care must be exercised, since some subjectivity exists and "there are multiple ways to connect the dots."[60] Nonetheless, both theological musing and preaching can be enriched by remembering that the story of faith is a *story*, a historical narrative even more compelling than anything by David McCullough or Neal Bascomb.[61]

At this point systematic theology has already begun to interact with biblical theology. After all, to affirm the unity and coherence and superior quality of the inspired authors is to make theological judgments. Tracing a theological theme, even in canonical progression, embraces systematic terminology and could at that point even gain input from the great theologians of the church (historical theology).[62] Even affirming a storyline in Scripture and the historical nature of biblical theology assumes something about God, that He has not merely wound up the clock and let it run, but continues to interject Himself into the storyline and guide it to its completion. Indeed, a truly biblical approach to hermeneutics (and thus biblical theology) will derive from the Bible the material to craft the theological lenses through which to appropriately study the Bible.[63]

I do not here deny the value of clearly distinguishing between biblical theology and systematic theology, as numerous scholars throughout the past decades have emphasized. The former focuses on the historical, the latter is more abstract and practically minded; the former deals with the apostles' questions, the latter deals with ours; the former is progressive, the latter distills universal truths that are meant to deal with immediately relevant, day-to-day matters, etc., etc.[64] Gabler's address was far from perfect yet remains true in its core conviction of the distinction between the two disciplines.

Thus the biblical theologian urges the systematic theologian to embrace the objective, concrete, historical nature of theology. Yet rather than a relationship based on a one-sided system of giving and receiving, the two must cordially interact. The systematic theologian, for his part,

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[59] See, e.g., the discussion in Kimble and Spellman, *Invitation to Biblical Theology*, 60.

[60] Köstenberger and Goswell, *Biblical Theology*, 30–31.

[61] Söding well states, "Zweitens gehört es zur Weisheit der Kirche, als Urkunde ihres Glaubens keinen Katechismus, keine theologische Formelsammlung, auch keinen *Codex Iuris Canonici* erkannt zu haben, sondern die atemberaubende Gottes- und Weltgeschichte, die mit Adam und Eva beginnt und trotz des Sündenfalls im himmlischen Jerusalem endet, weil Gottes Sohn Mensch geworden ist, um in seinem Leben, seinem Sterben und seiner Auferstehung für alle einzutreten." ("Biblische Kanon," 407–408).

[62] Cf. Michael Hüttenhoff, "Vernunft, Irrtum, und Freiheit: Über das Verhältnis vo Exegese und Systematischer Theologie," in *Biblische Theologie—multiperspektivisch, interdisziplinär und interreligiös*, 268.

[63] I am paraphrasing and adapting Söding's statement, "Ziel schriftgemäßer Hermeneutik besteht darin, die theologischen Begriffe, die zur Interpretation der Schrift herangezogen werden, der Schrift selbst abzuleiten." ("Biblische Kanon," 413).

[64] A variety of authors speak to these issues. E.g., Vern Sheridan Poythress, "Kinds of Biblical Theology," *WTJ* 70, no. 1 (2008): 139—"Systematic theology typically aims at addressing both he issues of past generations of systematic reflection and the questions being raised in contemporary cultures. By contrast, biblical theology aims more at historical understanding . . ."; Gaffin, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 293 (drawing from the work of John Murray Geerhardus Vos)—"Biblical theology focuses on revelation as an historical activity and so challenges systematic theology to do justice to the historical character of revealed truth"; Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology," *TrinJ* 5, no. 2 (1984): 12; Otta A. Piper, "Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology," 109–111; Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 39—"Few tenets lay closer to the heart of the Biblical Theology Movement than the conviction that revelation was mediated through history"; Witherington, *Biblical Theology*, 4; Köstenberger and Goswell, *Biblical Theology*, 8–13, 25; Layton Talbert, "Levels of Systematic Theology and the Role of Logic," *JBTW* 1, no. 2 (2021): 10 and 14.

gives the biblical theologian (and exegete) a theological conscience.[65] Biblical theologians can make mistakes, especially when their work becomes detached from the faith "once for all given to the saints."[66] Even self-identifying evangelicals (or former evangelicals) may need to be firmly corrected. For example, any suggestion from biblical theology that Matthew's Gospel depicts the Apostle Peter as irredeemably lost, an enemy of the cross, should immediately be shot down with the flack gun of systematics and buried under a stack of Strongs' *Theology*, large-print edition.[67]

Thus the two types of theologians need each other and can help each other think beyond the narrow confines of their specialty: ". . . the historian must also be a systematic theologian if he is to be an historian, and the systematic theologian must also be an historian if he is to be a systematic theologian."[68] Biblical theology and systematic theology, then, should pursue what Layton Talbert calls a "symbiotic and mutually informative relationship."[69] The former receives the exegetical data but processes it in consultation with his systematic friend. The latter eagerly sets about discovering universal truths that will be relevant to the man and women in the pew, always listening to his friendly biblical theologian's reminders to include *all* the books of Scripture in his musings. Not even Esther and Jude should be snubbed! Together they constantly discuss what relevance their data has for the church at large, and then invite in both the exegetes and the homileticians to contribute.

*C. Input: The Exegetical Disciplines*

Each of the exegetical disciplines directly impact biblical theology and, by extension, systematic theology in their own right. We start with the obvious: lexical semantics, grammatical analysis, and syntactical analysis. What words mean, how sentences are constructed, and knowledge of the various uses of participles or the significance of verb tenses, for example, all play an important role in merely *reading* an author.

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[65] Vern Sheridan Poythress tells the following story: "Some years ago at one evangelical seminary, a professor was asked in class how his teachings about one NT writer could possibly be harmonized with other NT writings. He replied that he was a biblical theologian; that was not his concern. In other words, his biblical theological research could be conducted in independence not only of systematic theology but even of the authority of the rest of the NT" (Poythress, "Kinds of Biblical Theology," 133).

[66] Stephen E. Fowl speaks of Irenaeus' "rule of faith" that can function "as the framework within which the diversity of Scripture can be rightly ordered so that it can be directed toward advancing the apostolic faith in the life, teaching and worship of the church, . . . (*Against Heresies* 1.10.1–3)" (Fowl, "The Conceptual Structure of New Testament Theology," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, 233).

[67] I am speaking, of course, about the book by Robert H. Gundry, *Peter: False Disciple and Apostate According to the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015). Timothy Wiarda, though not a systematic theologian, nonetheless speaks aptly as one when states, "It is one thing to affirm theological paradox or even (as some may wish) the presence of out-and-out contradictory theological principles that nevertheless serve a necessary pastoral function within the canon; but it is something quite different to say that *one person*—and a universally known leader at that—is both damned and saved, both a completely deceived false sheep and the greatest of Christ's under-shepherds. That could not possibly have worked in the first century and it cannot work today" (Timothy Wiarda, "Review of *Peter: False Disciple and Apostate according to the Gospel of Matthew*," *JETS* 59, no. 2 (2016): 394.

[68] Ebeling, "Meaning of 'Biblical Theology,'" 225.

[69] Talbert, "Levels of Systematic Theology," 10. Cf. Filson, "New Testament Student's Approach to Biblical Theology," 22—"One thing greatly needed today is the development of lines of study which deal with the full range of biblical teaching" (i.e., as opposed to the bifurcation of various disciplines concentrating on their own niche). Conversely, as Francis Watson notes, to allow "the lines of demarcation" to stand between biblical and systematic theology would give credence to the perspective "that the biblical texts are to be construed as something other than Christian scripture" (Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997], 6).

Certainly those disciplines have come along way, especially since the late 19th century confirmation that the language of the New Testament, more often than not, was indeed the *Koine* language created by Alexander's conquest. Having said that, sometimes it seems that informed scholars today cannot agree on the significance of virtually *anything* regarding the Greek verbs, except that apparently deponency is dead with a stake through its heart. Consequently, while Stanley Porter laments with some justification that biblical theologians have not paid enough attention to modern linguistics in the practice of their discipline,[70] it is hard to take this criticism too seriously when modern linguistics, not to mention the controversies surrounding the *Koine* Greek verb, offer no end in sight to the various disputations. Obviously one should pursue basic competency in Greek and Hebrew clause structure and basic lexical semantics and so forth, and certainly the *pistis Christou* debate has serious ramifications biblical theology (and even systematic theology). Nonetheless I believe that the major theological themes of each inspired writer are generally quite clear without a knowledge of verbal aspect theory or the capability to accurately identify if each genitive is subjective or objective.

Literary analysis naturally offers much benefit to biblical theology precisely because the biblical theologian must understand what the author is doing and how he is doing it. Literary criticism offers us "an appreciation for the sophisticated artistry and aesthetic quality of the text" while showing "a preoccupation with the *form* of the text."[71] Defined in that way, literary criticism focuses on what the author does in developing his own personal theological emphases as well as his overall message, since even in the narrative books story and theology are intertwined.[72]

Literary analysis also overlaps with both discourse analysis and rhetorical analysis. The former focuses on the "pragmatic effect" of an author's choice of words, while the latter is concerned primarily with the attempt to persuade one's audience.[73] In all three of these cases, we go beyond the mere analysis of words, clauses, and sentences and focus on the big picture of what the author is accomplishing, or trying to accomplish, with his work. Since the biblical theologian is concerned with the development of the author's thought, he should pay special attention to these disciplines. Nobody, for example, can fully grasp the author of Hebrews'

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[70] Porter, *New Testament Theology and the Greek Language*, 2 (this is Porter's point for basically the entirety of chapter 6).

[71] Jeffrey A. D. Weima, "Literary Criticism," in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, eds. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 160–161. Emphasis added.

[72] A good example of literary criticism intersecting with both biblical theology and systematic theology can be found in Layton Talbert's article on Song of Solomon, specifically the literary emphasis on the voice of the woman expressing praise for her husband as "analogically" and theologically relevant for us today. Layton Talbert, "Adoring Shulamite as Foil to Adulterous Israel: A Canonical Theology of the Song of Songs," *JBTW* 5, no. 1 (2024): 58–84.

[73] Regarding "pragmatic effect," see the discussion in Steven R. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 2010), p. 7–9. Regarding rhetorical criticism and "persuasion," see George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric & Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 1–2; Margaret M. Mitchell, 'Rhetorical and New Literary Criticism', in J. W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 617. Virtually nobody discusses the relationship between discourse analysis and rhetorical criticism, though a notable exception is Alan Kam-Yau Chan, *Melchizedek Passages in the Bible: A Case Study for Inner-Biblical and Inter-Biblical Interpretation* (Warsaw: de Gruyter, 2016), p. 31. For a discussion of the difference between literary criticism and rhetorical criticism, see George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 4–5.

theological trajectory until they first grapple with the function of alliteration in 1:1—what is it meant to accomplish, and why? In other words, the *methodology* of the inspired author is assumed to be connected to his *purpose* and *emphasis*. Conversely, the biblical theologian and his systematic friend can in turn admonish the practitioners of these arts to think *theologically*, not just *socio-rhetorically*, in their practice.

Background studies and social scientific criticism both provide a helpful framework with which to practice exegesis and then biblical theology. No author writes in a vacuum. Though each author is certainly guided by the Holy Spirit, he is also guided by own social and historical setting (which, in turn, was ordained by a sovereign God; again, systematic theology has her say). Consequently, knowledge of historical matters (e.g., Alexander the Great's conquest of most of the known world) facilitates the biblical theologian's commitment to theology bound up with history.

Social scientific criticism, on the other hand, focuses on "the ordinary and everyday . . . interrelationships, values, and symbols which characterized the early Christian communities."[74] SSC runs the risk of overgeneralization[75], but it still complements background and historical studies when it helpfully articulates how people, *in general*, thought and acted. Its value lies, however, not in telling the biblical theologian how Paul or Peter or Hosea thought, but in offering a point of contrast in how the inspired authors functioned to promote a *counter*cultural message to the thought currents or social tendencies of the day.[76] In addition, occasionally the social scientific critic must be reminded that the Jewish life, especially as expressed by the Scriptures, remains the *primary* background data by which to understand all the apostles.[77]

Amongst the other exegetical disciplines, literary analysis and form criticism overlap somewhat, and thus the former has some limited value.[78] Source criticism, however, becomes basically irrelevant. As argued above, biblical theology must be focused on the canon as we have it; the hypothetical existence of "Q," the even more dubious existence of a "priestly" source for the Pentateuch, or even whether Mark was using Matthew or Matthew was using Mark (a

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[74] Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds: Social-scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

[75] For criticism of this tendency of SSC, see David G. Horrell, "Models and Methods in Social-Scientific Interpretation: A Response to Philip Esler," *JSNT* 22, no. 78 (2000): 84, and Kenneth Berding, "The Hermeneutical Framework of Social-Scientific Criticism: How Much Can Evangelicals Get Involved?," *EvQ* 75, no. 1 (2003): 15–16.

[76] For further discussion, see Paul A. Himes, "First Peter's Identity Theology and the Community of Faith: A Test-Case in How Social Scientific Criticism Can Assist with Theological Ethics Via Biblical Theology," *EvQ* 89, no. 2 (2018): 121–124.

[77] Peter Stuhlmacher well states, "Not only Jesus, but also the apostles, above all Peter and Paul, would have resisted vigorously the claim that their Jewish origin and religious convictions were only one phenomenon of their environment, alongside of which Greco-Roman traditions could be equally ranked. For the main witnesses of the NT, ancient Judaism—with all its diversity—was the life-world in which they had bee placed as a result of divine election" (Stuhlmacher, "My Experience with Biblical Theology," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, 176). I would even add that even the apparently Gentile Luke (Col 4:14 in light of Col 4:11), as evidenced by his occasionally semitic style in Luke and positive portrayal of Judaism, remains highly indebted to Jewish background matters than any other factor, though he certainly has no problem portraying Paul as quoting pagan Greek poets (Acts 17:28).

[78] See the discussion in Darrell L. Bock, "Form Criticism," in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, eds. David Alan Black & David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2001), 106–8.

legitimate question), are all about as relevant to biblical theology as underwater basket weaving.[79]

Conversely, and somewhat ironically, redaction criticism may contain some value.[80] Regardless of which came first, if Matthew or Mark is accomplishing something differently with the material they received compared to Luke, or if 2 Peter or Jude is deliberately altering material received from the other, the biblical theologian naturally wants to ask *why*, and whether or not this constitutes a different theological emphasis. At all times, however, he should be prepared to consider the voices in his ears from his systematic and homiletical friends asking, "*So what*?!" To the degree that such a question is not adequately answered, redaction criticism becomes irrelevant to biblical theology.

Finally, we come to textual criticism. A relationship can and should exist between this discipline and biblical theology, yet it can be overemphasized, and the last thing a preacher needs to do is fret about textual variants from the pulpit or lend too much credence to the theological significance of a particular variant.[81] Nonetheless, at times a particular variant stands out with the potential to make a specific contribution to our understanding of the author's theological emphases. In John 20:21, whether or not the verb for "believe" is an aorist subjunctive or a present subjunctive and whether or not *Iēsous* contains the definite article may both be relevant to understanding the purpose of John's Gospel and thus its theological emphasis.[82]

Yet caution is warranted against using the supposed biblical theology of the author as a tool to determine a specific textual reading. This can skate dangerously close to special pleading ("This *can't* be the right reading because that's not what John would have said") not to mention potentially opposing the (admittedly overused) principle of *lectio difficilior*. The inspired authors must retain the right to surprise us with their word choices and sudden shifts in theological emphasis.[83]

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[79] Granted, "source criticism is a prerequisite for redaction criticism" (Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. [Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016], 190). Nonetheless, my point is that source criticism has no *direct* bearing on biblical theology and may even prove harmful to it.

[80] Grant R. Osborne defines redaction criticism as "a historical discipline that seeks to uncover the theology and setting of a writing by studying the ways the redactor or editor changed the traditions he inherited and t4he seams or transitions that the redactor used to link those traditions together" ("Redaction Criticism," in *Interpreting the New Testament*, 128).

[81] Having said that, we must *not* check our theological brains at the door, so to speak, when studying textual variants. As fundamentalists we can unashamedly embrace the doctrine of God's preservation of inspired Scripture See the helpful discussions by William W. Combs, "The Preservation of Scripture," *DBSJ* 5 (2000): 3–44, and Maurice A. Robinson, "The Letter and the Spirit," *Text & Canon Institute*, published 11/11/2021, online: https://textandcanon.org/the-letter-and-the-spirit/. On the other side of the coin, for a discussion of the theological relevance of textual criticism for systematic theology, see the recent discussion by Dirk Jongkind, "'It Does Not Make a Difference': The Fraught Relation between the Textual Criticism of the New Testament and Theology," *Presbyterion* 49, no. 1 (2023): 38–53.

[82] See the interesting debate that ensued with D. A. Carson, "The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20:21 Reconsidered," *JBL* 106, no. 4 (1987): 640–41 and 648–9, then Gordon D. Fee, "On the Text and Meaning of John 20:30–31," in *To What End Exegesis? Essays Textual, Exegetical, and Theological* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 29–42 (note also fn 29), then D. A. Carson, "Syntactical and Text-Critical Observations on John 20:30–31: One More Round on the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel," *JBL* 124, no. 4 (2005): 703–13.

[83] I would suggest this is an issue in Luke 22:43–44. Bart Ehrman essentially uses the author's supposed biblical theology, in radical contrast and contradiction from the other Gospels, as proof that "Luke" (or whoever) could not have written those two verses and that they were added by later scribes. See Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 189. I have an article on this passage coming out in *Biblische*

### *D. Output: The Practical Disciplines*

"Our theologians have a pair of great tasks before them; they must elucidate a 'then' and a 'now.' They must understand what God once meant for others and what he now means for us."[84] So declared Adolf Schlatter about 100 years ago, and his statement remains equally apropos today. Consequently, authentic biblical theology must lend itself to the practical side of life. It "needs to be at the forefront of preaching, church renewal, advancement and mission," especially if future followers of Christ outside the ivory towers of academia are to benefit from it more than those in the 20th century did.[85]

Let us begin with homiletics. When preaching from a particular book, each homiletician does well to consider "where the book [he is] studying falls on the redemptive historical time line," to put some thought into its "antecedent theology," i.e., the theology of the immediately previous book, either canonically or historically.[86] When working on a particular passage, the preacher should be informed of the theological trajectories of the author he is drawing from (biblical theology) while also being sensitive to theological and ethical issues raised from the passage. Even topical preaching should not exclude how each particular passage fits into a broader theological framework of a particular author or even of the entire canon. A sermon on divorce, for example, while certainly free to pick a variety of passages to focus on, should not neglect the ethical development from the Old Testament to the New Testament and what Jesus has to say about it.[87]

Yet the relationship between theologian (biblical and systematic) and the preacher is not one-sided. As Deeg argues, there must be "mutual interest" as "homiletics reminds exegesis [and biblical theology] of its theological task," one that is both canonically guided and informed of the current needs the congregation in modern times.[88]

Biblical theology could also, in some cases, inspire one to preach a book in one setting, as Kerry McGonigal's presentation on Thursday will encourage us to consider. Indeed, perhaps some books of the Bible (and I am thinking here of Esther and Habakkuk) should be preached primarily in a single setting and only rarely in smaller fragments!

Not only the preacher but the average Joe and Josephine in the pew also stand to benefit from biblical theology, assuming they receive some basic training in it.[89] Understanding how

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*Notizen* (probably summer 2026) that critiques Ehrman (and others) on this passage. In the meanwhile, I would encourage the interested reader to read Brittany E. Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 213 and 217–218 as a competent response to Ehrman on this point.

[84] Adolf Schlatter, "The Significance of Method for Theological Work," trans. By Robert Yarbrough, *SBJT* 12 (1997): 68.

[85] House, "Biblical Theology and the Wholeness of Scripture," 278.

[86] Thomas R. Schreiner, "Preaching and Biblical Theology," *SBJT* 10, no. 2 (2006); 25. For the idea of "antecedent Theology," Schreiner is drawing from Walter Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 134–140.

[87] Again, see Witherington, *Biblical Theology*, 3.

[88] Deeg, "Mehr Altes Testament und immer weniger Exegese?", 370–1, "Das wechselseitige Interesse kann und wird auch zu einer immer neuen gegenseitigen Unterbrechung führen. Die Homiletik erinnert die Exegese an ihre theologische Aufgabe, zu der auch eine den biblischen Kanon insgesamt und seine gegenwärtigen Verwendungsformen bedenkende Reflexion gehört."

[89] A bleak, pessimistic view of the relevance of biblical theology for theological education in mainstream churches is articulated by Bernd Schröder, "Biblische Theologie und Religionspädagogik: Schnittmengen, Unterscheidungen und Herausforderungen," pages 329–350 in *Biblische Theologie—multiperspektivisch,*

biblical authors develop theological themes can help them understand in turn how theology always derives from history. In addition, the practice of "tracing a theological theme" could perhaps be incorporated into one's personal devotions. Finally, understanding which themes are highlighted majorly across the canon, and how, could help church members keep a sense of perspective as to what issues are worth leaving a church over, and which ones are most decidedly *not*.

When it comes to counselling, as practiced both by full-time vocational specialists and by the "Average Joe or Josephine" in the pew, biblical theology has much to offer. Paul's attack of sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians, not to mention factionist tendencies, can be situated within the broader theology of the epistle as a whole. Entire books of the Bible (e.g., Job, Lamentations) can be used to discuss sorrow. A theology of identity, beginning with Genesis 2's account of the creation of the *imago dei* and ending with Rev 22:3–5, could be relevant for helping those suffering with gender dysphoria, feelings of utter worthlessness, or other difficult circumstances. A recent article by Brian Hand fuses both biblical theology and systematic theology into a helpful discussion of "melancholia."[90] Although systematic theology and proof texting has often been the default setting for counselling, the time has come to think about how biblical theology can contribute a bit more rigorously.

Biblical theology must always consider its relevance to the ultimate question of the church, "How then shall we live?" As such, biblical theological themes like human identity, holiness, love, etc., traced canonically and progressively, all become indispensable to ethical questions, no matter how common (e.g., divorce) or esoteric (e.g., genetic modification).[91] Furthermore, *every* book of the Bible contains principles to contribute to ethics: "Behind the plethora of instructions provided in the Pentateuch and the Wisdom Books are certain basic moral principles that have no *use-by-a-certain-date* label (e.g., the fear of God: Deut. 6:2; Prov. 1:7)."[92] Even as obscure a text as Deut 22:5, when understood within Scripture's broader teaching on male and female distinction, has something to offer us today for both practical living and counselling.[93]

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*interdisziplinär und interreligiös*. Note especially page 336, "Im Licht dieser Vorklärungen haben sich Biblische Theologie als spezielles Forschungsgebiet exegetischer Disziplinen und Religionspädagogik als wissenschaftliche Disziplin zunächst wenig zu sagen – oder anders gesagt: Ihre Schnittmenge ist gering." Yet for educational contexts that begin with the assumption that the Scripture is God's holy word, equally relevant to life now as it was 2,000 years ago, no reason exists as to why biblical theology could not be profitably taught to the "average" person in the pew or even to a youth group (Positive Action for Christ is publishing a curriculum for teaching biblical theology to youth entitled *Biblical Theology: Twelve Themes Woven through Scripture*, written by this present writer).

[90] Brian R. Hand, "Feeling the Fall: A Biblical-Theological Examination of Melancholy as an Emotional Mirror of a Fallen World," *JBTW* 4, no. 1 (2023): 1–29.

[91] Indeed, ethically-minded biblical theological readings of specific books can become a cure for proof-texting designed to justify one's way of life. One lady in our church encountered a man on a bus who was using Deut 14:26 to justify his drinking habits. Yet Deut 14:26, situated within its broader context, has little to do with the right to drink alcoholic or non-alcoholic drinks and everything to do with the significance of the future Jerusalem as the center of Israel's life.

[92] Köstenberger and Goswell, *Biblical Theology*, 61.

[93] Jason S. DeRouchie, "Confronting the Transgender Storm: New Covenant Reflections on Deuteronomy 22:5," *JBMW* 21, no. 1 (2016): 58–68.

In addition, we must not forget the sad possibility that changing one's ethics, perhaps due to external social pressure, can in turn change one's biblical and systematic theology, which in turn can cause one to create theological justification for one's ethics. This, perhaps, may be what happened with Richard B. Hay's switch on homosexuality between *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* and the more recent *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality within the Biblical Story*.

Biblical theological approaches to both general church life and missions are quite numerous and do not need to be discussed much here.[94] I would simply suggest that such biblical theologies should also orient themselves towards offering practical value for the man or woman with "boots on the ground," so to speak. Even something as seemingly mundane as wedding vows can be informed by biblical theology.[95] The missionary already on the field may not gain much new benefit from grand narratives of God's purpose in missions, tracing the theme of mission from Abraham to Revelation (unless he is thinking of quitting), but he or she may very well benefit from a biblical theological study of God's love in missions, and the missionary as the instrument of that love, to keep from hating the very people he or she is called to reach (like Jonah).

Finally, the disciplines of apologetics and evangelism would occasionally benefit from remembering, and learning how to present, the truths of the Christian faith within the framework of historical and progressive revelation. Vos well states, "Bibilcal Theology will also demonstrate that the fundamental doctrines of our faith do not rest, as many would fain believe, on an arbitrary exposition of some isolated prooftexts. It will not so much prove these doctrines, as it will do what is far better than proof—make them grow out organically before our eyes from the stem of revelation."[96] Conversely, though, the evangelist and apologist should be more than welcome to encourage the biblical theologian to consider biblical books and major theological themes in light of potential interaction with unbelievers. Revelation, after all, contains a very explicit invitation for lost sinners to come to Jesus (22:17); perhaps it is time for a "Revelation's Road" evangelistic methodology or training material, facilitated by the biblical theologian.[97]

### *E. Esther: A Brief Test Case*

I believe the neglected book of Esther offers us a brief opportunity to see how many of the Christian intellectual disciplines can collude and strengthen the final result: biblical preaching and teaching designed to change lives. Esther's well-known neglect and even hostile treatment at the hands of Christians throughout the centuries makes the book an especially appropriate focus.

First of all, the popular tendency for allegory and wild typology in Esther necessitates rigorous attention to the exegetical disciplines, especially literary criticism and rhetorical criticism, but without the need to get too technical. We can take Ahasuerus as an example. Even the most casual, common sense reading of Esther reveals that Ahasuerus is something of a "buffoon" who allows Haman to manipulate his "stupidity and mental laziness."[98] Even the

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[94] E.g., for the former, the various essays in *The Community of Jesus: A Theology of the Church*, eds. Kendell H. Easley and Christopher W. Morgan (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2013). Most of the chapters are oriented more towards biblical theology than systematic theology, though the latter occurs as well. For the latter, e.g., George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody, 1972).

[95] Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 200.

[96] Vos, *Idea of Biblical Theology*, 40.

[97] See the fascinating (and surprisingly practical) dissertation by Thomas Michael, "Evangelistic Motifs in the Book of Revelation," PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC (2000). For a discussion of Rev 22:17, see 188–190.

[98] Alexander Green, "Power, Deception, and Comedy: The Politics of Exile in the Book of Esther," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 23, no. 1–2 (2011), 65. For similar discussions of Ahasuerus as less of a villain and more of a comedic figure or an emotionally feeble figure, see also Elliot B. Gertel, "Divine and Human Anger and Grace: The Scroll of Esther and Exodus 32–34," *JBQ* 40, no. 3 (2012): 155; Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther*, TOTC (Downers

beginning of the story paints a picture of an emperor given to hysterical over-reaction over Vashti's refusal; no scholarly level understanding of Hebrew syntax is needed.[99] The ending of Esther (10:1–3) clearly paints Mordecai (and the Jewish people) living in harmony with Ahasuerus, with a mutually beneficial relationship. Mordecai, under Ahasuerus, is "seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his countrymen" (v. 3, NKJV). The ending is *happy*. A simple yet literarily conscious reading of Esther decisively rules out Ahasuerus as representing either God or the flawed worldly system with which the Jewish people are compromising.[100] This is not the message of the book.

A biblical theological reading of Esther, in contrast, provides us with two important themes. First, a theologically-informed literary and rhetorical focus on the alliteration and character labeling of 6:13b show us that true wisdom comes in realizing the indestructible nature of the Jewish people and the danger of foolishly trying to annihilate them.[101] This theme very strongly resonates with canonical theology *vis-à-vis* the Abraham Covenant and Romans 9–11.[102] In an age where many are still calling for the annihilation of the Jewish people, the homiletical application is obvious.

Second, the same reading informed by canonical, systematic theological naturally points us to God's hidden sovereignty; the sheer number of "coincidences" in Esther surely "strain the law of probability."[103] God's sovereign control and manipulation of circumstances, even when not directly obvious, is certainly relevant to both the homiletician and the Christian counselor.

Yet the flow of edification is not one-directional! One of the most interesting sermons I have ever heard in my life was a recording of an evangelical preacher performing a first-person narrative of the events of Esther from the perspective of one of Ahasuerus' bodyguards. This raises questions as to how the various people groups of the Persian empire might have viewed the Jewish people, as well as the nature of Israel's witness and testimony to the nations at large in the Diaspora. From a different angle, the Christian ethicist is certainly justified in asking the

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Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 71; Robert D. Bell, *The Theological Messages of the Old Testament Books* (Greenville, SC: Journeyforth Academic, 2010), 191.

[99] As Carey A. Moore states, "That the king should have been infuriated at his queen's defiance is just as understandable as his subsequent removal of her as queen; but that he should have brought into full play the communication system of the entire Persian empire for such a purpose is ridiculous. Then again, drunken men sometimes are ridiculous" (Moore, *Esther*, ABC [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971], 14).

[100] For the former, Michael G. Wechsler typologically relates Esther to Jesus and her approach to the Persian king as "the 'shadow" of the "substance" of Jesus' death approach to the heavenly Father ("Shadow and Fulfillment in the Book of Esther," *BibSac* 154, no. 615 (1997): 284). For the latter, Iaian Duguid argues that "the two kingdoms" in the book compete "for the loyalty of God's people," and the audience is invited to consider how Esther and Mordecai struggle to chose which kingdom deserves their principal allegiance ("But Did They Live Happily Ever After? The Eschatology of the Book of Esther," *WTJ* 68, no. 1 [2006]: 89–90).

[101] See my forthcoming article, "A Touch of Wisdom: The Literary Role of Esther 6:13 in Bridging to a Biblical Theology of Scripture's Least 'Theological' Book," *JETS* (forthcoming, tentatively scheduled for Fall 2025). This is a heavily revised version of the paper presented two years ago at the BFS, and I am very grateful for the feedback I received there. See also Gregory R. Goswell, Goswell, "Keeping God Out of the Book of Esther," *EvQ* 82, no. 2 (2010): 102, and Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 1979), 103–4.

[102] This also dovetails with the broader doctrine of election. I am fascinated here by R. W. L. Moberly's critique of treating God's election of Israel as merely "instrumental," neglecting election as an expression of love in its own right, but space precludes any further exploration at this point (see Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013], 47–48).

[103] Berg, *Book of Esther*, 104. Also helpful is Bell, *Theological Messages*, 192–3, where he demonstrates how the "coincidences" are so intertwined that "if even one link is missing, the plot would fall apart."

exegete and biblical theologian if the latter chapters of Esther have anything to teach us about "Just War Theory" and in urging us to keep such practical considerations in mind in our work.[104]

## IV. Conclusion

Biblical theology, properly understood, is not a creation of the enlightenment but a tool that has been utilized since the later Old Testament authors. Nor is biblical theology merely a waystation on the way to a sermon. Biblical theology functions as a nexus for the various Christian intellectual disciplines to dialogue and assist each other. Although a progression of sorts does exist (e.g., exegesis should precede biblical theology which in turn precedes preaching), this should not be considered an exclusively one-way street. The practical disciplines, not to mention systematic theology, have much to offer biblical theology and other forms of exegesis, even when the boundary markers around them are appropriately and clearly drawn.

The discipline of biblical theology is a great privilege that all Christians, to various degrees, can participate in. We must only keep in mind the words of Vos:

> . . . as of all theology, so of Biblical Theology, the highest aim cannot lie in man, or in anything that serves the creature. Its most excellent practical use is surely this, that it grants us a new vision of the glory of Him who has made all things to the praise of His own wonderful name. . . . since on our behalf and for our salvation He has condescended to work and speak in the form of time, and thus to make His works and His speech partake of that peculiar glory that attaches to all organic growth, let us also seek to know Him as the One that is, that was, and that is to come, in order that no note may be lacking in that psalm of praise to be sung by the Church into which all our Theology must issue.[105]

[104] The heavily debated syntax of Esther 8:11's expression "both little children and women" (NKJV), and how that fits within the Jewish counterattack, remains unresolved in this regard.

[105] Vos, *Idea of Biblical Theology*, 40.