

Biblical Theology and the Authority of Scripture¹

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1. What is “Biblical Theology”?

“What is biblical theology?” This question is not easily answered, for “biblical theology” has been variously understood:

- as a branch of the theological disciplines of exegesis, systematics, or practical theology; or
- as a complex interdisciplinary theological program that takes up the impetus of the Reformation and of the Second Vatican Council; or
- as the regulative idea of a theology in accordance with the Bible, that is, a scripturally appropriate theology; or
- as the idea of a theology found in the Bible, and its -- at least latent -- realization.²

These four concepts are connected with each other in a variety of ways. On the one side, this gives the impression of conceptual confusion; but on the other side, this brings with it inner- and inter-disciplinary tensions which can be very constructive and fruitful.

“Biblical theology,” whether understood as a branch of the theological disciplines or as an interdisciplinary theological program, is always confronted not only with the suspicion of conceptual unclarity, but also with the following never-ending problem: if “biblical theology” is to be understood as “theology” in the sense of an abstracted or ultimately ascertainable, comprehensive framework for thought and conviction,³ that is, in the sense of a specific system, then it is impossible. This type of biblical theology would contradict not only the variety and vitality of the biblical witness and record, which developed over a 1500 year

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2 For a distinction between the two key ideas, cf. G. Ebeling, “The Meaning of Biblical Theology” in idem, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 79-97; J. Ph. Gabler, *De iusto discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus 1787*; relevant portions translated and published by J. H. Sandys-Wunsch and L. Eldredge, “J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980): 133-58; cf. also R. Smend, “Johann Philipp Gablers Begründung der Biblische Theologie,” *Evangelische Theologie* 22 (1962): 345-357.

3 For the larger theological concept presupposed here and in the following, cf. M. Welker, “Theology in Public Discourse Outside Communities of Faith?” in: *The Abraham Kuyper Centennial*, M. L. Stackhouse, ed. (Princeton, 1998).

period; above all, it would obstruct the vitality of the revelation of God to which the various biblical records testify from their particular perspectives.

There is a theological and scientific consensus -- outside of a few exceptions -- that it is misleading to “abstract from the Bible some concealed historical or conceptual system, an economy of salvation or a Christian view of things. There can be no biblical theology in this sense, either of the Old or New Testament, or of the Bible as a whole.”⁴ But if “theology” is understood not as talk of God in a comprehensive, fully developed framework for thought, but rather as “God-talk” that is genuinely capable of development with regards to content, comprehension and subject matter, and is accompanied by certainty and directed towards truth, which, however modest and fragmentary, serves to strengthen the certainty of faith in the development of the knowledge of God⁵ -- then talk of a biblical theology appears to limit itself to the trivial insight that the biblical texts are filled and saturated with theology. In so far as all ponderable Christian theology ultimately claims to have biblical warrant and to be in accordance with scripture in one sense or another, there appears to remain no obvious place for the concept of a biblical theology. The expression “biblical theology” appears either to propagate a theologically and scientifically problematic notion of unity or a system⁶, or however, to stress the simple fact -- but with a skewed emphasis -- that the biblical texts speak of God in a qualified manner and that Christian theology is oriented scripturally.

Yet between these two extremes, which make all talk and further development of biblical theology skeptical, the notion of biblical theology has gained a sharpened profile in the course of the 20th century as an inner disciplinary and interdisciplinary programmatic concept and a concept for reform. Already in the 1920s and 30s, opposition to the critical historical study of the Bible intensified with the reservations that it “divides up the Bible into disconnected layers, emphasizes too strongly the similarities between the Bible and its cultural environment, over-emphasizes the developmental process, and forgoes the task of delivering an actual theological interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.”⁷ This opposition and the

4 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I/2, trans. G. T. Thomson and H. Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978), §§ 19-21, 483.

5 Cf. note 2 above.

6 For a critique of this view, cf. J. D. Levenson, “Warum sich Juden nicht für Biblische Theologie interessieren,” *Evangelische Theologie* 51 (1991): 402-430; D. Ritschl, “‘Wahre’, oder ‘neue’ Biblische Theologie? Einige Anfragen zur neueren Diskussion um ‘Biblische Theologie’,” *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 1 (1986): 135-150.

7 J. Barr, “Biblische Theologie,” *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon*, Vol. 1, ed. E. Fahlbusch et al. (3d ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 488-494, 489.

endeavor to develop alternatives came to be understood (in part) in terms of the programmatic and reforming concept of “biblical theology”. Beginning in the 1970s this programmatic and reforming concept has been taken up with increasing vigor by systematic theology as well, and employed finally to characterize interdisciplinary theological approaches for thought and research.⁸

2. Biblical Theology as a Branch of the Theological Disciplines

Above all in the Anglo-Saxon world, biblical theology in the 20th century has been understood as a branch of the exegetical disciplines (Old Testament and New Testament), which -- in contrast to those branches oriented towards history and the history of religions -- attempts to bring out the theological messages of the biblical texts. In this regard biblical theology attaches special importance to the “unity” of this message, also to grasping the “unity” of the Old Testament, of the New Testament and of both testaments,⁹ and to understanding and presenting the uniqueness and special nature of the biblical message(s) over against the religious-historical contexts. Given this project biblical theology is thrust out of the exegetical context and is faced with problems such as developing various concepts of “unity” in view of the multitude of texts, justifying them over against the historical and historically proceeding sub-disciplines, as well as the problem of conflagrating concepts as: “middle of the scripture”, “unity of the testaments”, and the “*proprium* of the biblical message”. Moreover, biblical theology is faced with the question regarding the connection and difference between the theological disciplines,¹⁰ as well as with the problem of distinguishing itself from a biblical theology that comes out of systematic theology and occasionally out of practical theology as well. Finally, biblical theology is faced with the

8 In this regard, cf. the following journals and series: *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (1971-); *Overtures in Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977-); *Biblich-Theologische Studien* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1977-); *Horizons in Biblical Theology* (1979-); *Ex Auditu: An Annual of the Frederick Neumann Symposium on Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Princeton, NJ, 1985-); *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* (1986-); also, cf. esp. F. Mildenerger, *Biblische Dogmatik. Eine Biblische Theologie in dogmatischer Perspektive*, Vol. 1-3 (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1991-1993); Ch. Schroeder, “Macht und Gerechtigkeit: Ansätze des nordamerikanischen Forschungsprojekts “Bible and Theology” zur Neukonzeption einer Biblischen Theologie,” *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 11 (1996): 183-196; W. Schweiker and M. Welker, “A New Paradigm of Theological and Biblical Inquiry” in *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine. New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. C. L. Rigby (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997); B. Oberdorfer, “Biblich-realistische Theologie: Methodologische Überlegungen zu einem dogmatischen Programm” in S. Brandt, ed., *Resonanzen: Theologische Beiträge. Festschrift für M. Welker zum 50. Geburtstag* (Bovenden: Foedus Verlag, 1997), 63-83.

9 Cf. H. -J. Kraus, *Die Biblische Theologie: Ihre Geschichte und Problematik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 1970); M. Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische Theologien der Gegenwart. Das Verhältnis von AT und NT in der hermeneutischen Diskussion seit Gerhard von Rad*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1987).

10 E. Jüngel, “Das Verhältnis der theologischen Disziplinen untereinander” in idem, *Unterwegs zur Sache: Theologische Bemerkungen* (2d ed.; Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1988), 34-59.

challenge to clarify the differences between the church and Israel in their understanding and interpretation of scripture.¹¹

The term biblical theology, however, is also used as a designation for a sub-discipline or specific presentation of systematic and dogmatic theology. In this regard the programmatic concept of biblical theology does not simply represent a rhetorical claim by theology as scripturally appropriate in contrast to philosophical theology or other theologies with a looser or hardly comprehensible connection to the scriptures. Already Schleiermacher had considered the internal differentiation between a scientific [*wissenschaftliche*], symbolic, and “scriptural” dogmatic, the latter of which he also called a “biblical dogmatic”. Likely with the work of M. W. L. DeWette in front of him,¹² Schleiermacher connected to this notion the concept of a dogmatic in which “the reference to Scripture predominates throughout.”¹³ In contrast to a systematic-theological approach which “stresses individual passages torn out of their context” in order to support one’s own idea, construct, or train of thought, he recommended “a large-viewed use of Scripture” which takes “account of larger sections, and these particularly fruitful ones, so as to exhibit in the trains of thought of the sacred writers those same combinations on which the dogmatic results also are based.”¹⁴ Yet more significant than impulses from the history of theology¹⁵ is a whole syndrome of developments -- which have problematized many well-rehearsed forms of systematic theology -- that have increasingly heightened interest in differentiating and developing a biblical theology in the last third of the twentieth century.

The decreasing formative influence of the confessional writings, together with the intensified effort towards constructive ecumenical understanding, as well as the decreasing formative influence of philosophical theories -- both in terms of delivering capable models for thought

11 Cf. B. Janowski, “Biblische Theologie I,” *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Vol. 1 (4th ed.; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1998); E. Zenger, ed., *Die Tora als Kanon für Juden und Christen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder Verlag, 1996).

12 Above all, see: W. M. L. DeWette, *Die Biblische Dogmatik Alten und Neuen Testaments; Oder kritische Darstellung der Religionslehre des Hebraismus* (1813) in idem, *Lehrbuch der christlichen Dogmatik* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1831).

13 F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, Vol. 1, eds. H. R. MacKintosh and J. S. Stewart (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), § 27, 116; cf. also the work by Oberdorfer, “Biblich-realistische Theologie” noted above (fn. 7).

14 Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith I*, § 27, 116.

15 Cf. J. T. Beck, *Die Christliche Lehr-Wissenschaft nach den biblischen Urkunden* (Stuttgart: Belser, 1840/41); J. L. S. Lutz, *Bibische Dogmatik*, ed. R. Rüetschi (Pforzheim, 1847); M. Kähler, “Biblische Theologie,” *Realenzyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, Vol. III, ed. A. Hauck (3d ed.; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1898), 192-200; H. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1974).

as well as in their cultural-diagnostic competence --, have generated a stronger fundamental orientation of systematic and also practical theology in the historical, cultural, and social sciences. This has occurred without regard to the differences in weight or influence between the German and English speaking realms,¹⁶ and the other regions of the world as well.¹⁷ This new fundamental orientation, as well as the exemplary systematic fecundity of many thematic contributions by exegetes, and also the efforts to correct the canonical-theoretical demotion of the Old Testament in the systematic and New Testament theologies of the 19th and 20th centuries, and finally the concern to enter (once again) into dialogue with wide-spread styles of piety -- which cannot place themselves in a fruitful relationship with conventional academic theology --, have led to two very different expressions of biblical theology.

Common to both is the need constantly to scrutinize and correct the systematic-theological selection of themes and thought forms, on the basis of what Schleiermacher called “a large-viewed use of Scripture”. They are at different points in the search for a “plain talk of God” which is in proximity to the language of proclamation¹⁸ -- in contrast to a systematic theology which constantly approaches faith from outer perspectives --, that is, in the search for a “critique of abstraction” which measures systematic-theological and dogmatic forms of thought against the biblical texts to which they refer explicitly or implicitly. In this regard the concern, of course, is not to call into question all models of thought and basic abstractions as such, but to correct reductionistic forms of thought with forms and styles of thought that are both more functional exegetically and more powerful as well in their time- and cultural-diagnostic capabilities.¹⁹

3. Biblical Theology as an Interdisciplinary Theological Program

16 B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1970); J. D. Smart, *The Past, Present, and Future of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1979); R. Morgan, “Biblical Theology,” *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, eds. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 86-89; H. Seebaß, “Biblische Theologie,” *Verkündigung und Forschung* 27 (1982): 28-45; H. Graf Reventlow, *Problems of Biblical Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986).

17 E. Fahlbusch, J. Mbiti, S. Yagi, U. Schoenborn, L. Schottroff, “Biblische Theologie im Kontext,” *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon*, Vol. I, ed. E. Fahlbusch (3d ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 494-503.

18 F. Mildenerger, “Biblische theologie als kirchliche Schriftauslegung,” *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 1 (1986): 151-162; idem, *Biblische Dogmatik*, Vol. 1-3; J. Rohloff and H. G. Ulrich, eds., *Einfach von Gott Reden: Ein theologischer Diskurs. Festschrift für Friedrich Mildenerger zum 65. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1994).

19 Cf. Schweiker and Welker, “A New Paradigm of Theological and Biblical Inquiry”; M. Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. J. F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), esp. 40ff.; idem, *Schöpfung und Wirklichkeit* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1995), esp. 32ff.; Oberdorfer, “Biblich-realistische Theologie”.

On the one hand, the exegetical disciplines work in the name of biblical theology primarily against the disassociation and secularization of their discipline, and search for a unity and *proprium* of the biblical records amidst an explosive fullness of detailed historical and religious-historical research. On the other hand, in the name of biblical theology systematic and practical theological disciplines primarily seek to establish a unique identity in distinction from forms that have failed to be optimized, for example, specific philosophical or other extra-theological rationalities and forms of systematics that follow their own primary interests -- and the religiosity shaped by them. Starting with the achievements of *loci*-structured dogmatics, they work at examining and, if necessary, transforming basic theological ideas and forms of thought that are reductionistic or too wooden and simplistic, with constant reference back to the respective relevant biblical texts and with a concern constantly to refine and intensify these references in conversation with the exegetical research. It is precisely in following these opposite concerns²⁰ and biblical-theological intentions that the exegetical, systematic, and practical theological disciplines are directed toward and dependant upon each other.²¹

Whereas exegetics, with its historical-critical competency, must protect systematic theology from over-hasty analogies and biblicistic “fusions of horizons,” systematic theology has the task to help test those concepts employed by exegetes, such as “unity”, “*proprium*”, and “middle of the scriptures”, that is, in terms of their systematic power in view of the history of doctrine and of contemporary history. The fruit of this critical discussion includes experiential gains, both in view of a variety of inadequate conceptions of unity²² (“covenant”, “the mighty acts of God”, “reconciliation”, etc.) and of concepts in need of further examination, but also including a high sensitization for the context-bounded nature of basic biblical-theological ideas and modes of operation.²³ Finally, theological disciplines that adopt the programmatic title of “biblical theology” have the common task of grasping theologically the limits of the canonical records and constantly to express anew and in a theologically

20 In contrast cf. C. Westermann, “Aufgaben einer zukünftigen Biblische Theologie” in idem, *Erträge der Forschung am Alten Testament; Gesammelte Studien*, Vol. III, R Albertz, ed. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1984), 203-211; for a critique of Westermann, cf. Ritschl, “‘Wahre’, ‘reine’ oder ‘neue’ Biblische Theologie?”.

21 K. Haaker et al., *Biblische Theologie heute (BthSt 1)* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997); Graf Reventlow, *Problems of Biblical Theology*.

22 H. H. Schmid, “Schöpfung, Gerechtigkeit und Heil,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 70 (1973): 1-19; P. Stuhlmacher, *How to do Biblical Theology* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publishing, 1995).

23 Cf. Fahlbusch, et al., “Biblische Theologie im Kontext”; esp. also the work of leading feminist-theological exegetes as in E. Schlüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Searching the Scriptures*, Vol. I-II (New York: Crossroad, 1993- 94); Ph. Tribble, *Feminist Approaches to the Bible* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archeology Society, 1995).

sound manner the continuity of the trinitarian God's revelatory agency in the biblical texts -- which ultimately leads toward trinitarian-theological questions.²⁴

4. Biblical Theology as a Basic Regulative Idea for a Theology Immanent to and Appropriate to the Biblical Texts, and the Authority of Scripture

In 1951 Ernst Käsemann asked the question, "Does the New Testament canon give the foundation for the unity of the church?" which he answered negatively, with the claim that the canon gives a foundation for the multitude of confessions. Today, however, the dominant conviction is that the living unity of the church is based precisely on the multitude of confessions.²⁵ Dynamic concepts of unity are sought and developed -- not ones set abstractly over against difference, but rather concepts of unity that distinguish between fruitful and creative differences and unfruitful and destructive differences. The "conviction that the divine *Logos*, who comes to speech for believers in the biblical Word, is first heard when the Bible is made accessible as a whole, as an interconnected textual framework,"²⁶ goes along with the insight that this textual framework points to God and God's revelatory agency in a "contrastive"²⁷ and simultaneously complex and coherent manner.²⁸ Instead of searching to develop a simple -- inevitably reductionistic -- "scripture principle", there is the need to develop formal and internally appropriate forms of the "biblically faithful,"²⁹ that is, forms which take the scriptures seriously, not as a mechanical whole, but in reference to the wealth of its internal frames of reference, which for their part point to the living God.³⁰ In theological-historical perspective, the development of non-monoliner conceptions of "history" appropriate to this understanding of unity,³¹ and the exploration of the connection between "faith" and "cultural memory,"³² especially "living memory," as well as historical,

24 This is well expressed in Ritschl, "'Wahre', 'reine' oder 'neue' Biblische Theologie?."

25 E. Käsemann, "The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church," *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1964), 95-107; idem, *Das Neue Testament als Kanon: Dokumentation und kritische Analyse zur gegenwärtigen Diskussion* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980); and already in 1948 (German) K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I/2, §§ 19-21; also H. D. Betz, "Begründet der neutestamentliche Kanon eine Kirche in Fragmenten?," *Concilium* (1997): 322-333.

26 N. Lohfink, *Studien zur biblischen Theologie* (Stuttgart: Verlag Kath. Bibelwerk, 1993), 8.

27 Zenger, ed., *Die Tora als Kanon für Juden und Christen*, 18 and passim.

28 Schweiker and Welker, "A New Paradigm of Theological and Biblical Inquiry".

29 G. Sauter, *Grundlagen der Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), ch. 3.3.

30 H. Haag, "Biblische Theologie," *Mysterium Salutis: Grundriß heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, eds. J. Feiner and M. Löhrer (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1965), 440-459.

31 H. Gese, "Erwägungen zur Einheit der Biblische Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 67 (1970): 417-436; idem, "The Biblical View of Scripture" in idem, *Essays on Biblical Theology*, trans. K. Crim (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 9-33.

32 J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (2nd ed.; Munich: Beck, 1997).

cultural, and ecclesial learning and the development of a clear understanding of the “name” of the trinitarian God (including the knowledge of the variety of names for God in the Old Testament), still lies far ahead in the future.

The manifold biblical records, quite blatantly bound together and at the same time latently interwoven on many different levels, build a framework that connects the recognition of God’s activity among people,³³ the living memory of this activity, and the anticipation of this activity -- a framework that enables historical, cultural, and ecclesial learning and growing in this knowledge, yet keeps it from coming to an end.

Precisely in this respect does the self-referential nature of scripture show itself to be a living whole,³⁴ in that it points from a variety of perspectives giving witness to God and divine agency in and for the creation, through which it itself becomes a sources of living water. It is on the basis of this inner constitution and outer certainty that scripture acquires its authority. It is on the basis of this inner constitution and outer certainty that one can say of it: *scriptura “ipsa per sese certissima, facillima, apertissima, sui ispsius interpres, omnium omnia probans, iudicans et illuminans”* (scripture is “in itself the most certain, most easily understood, most plain, is its own interpreter, approving, judging and illuminating all human claims”).³⁵

33 R. Williams, “Der Literalsinn der Heiligen Schrift,” *Evangelische Theologie* 50 (1990): 55-71.

34 Cf. P. Walter, E. Haag, K. Kertelge, “Biblische Theologie,” *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Vol. II, ed. W. Kasper et al. (3d ed.; Freiburg: Herder, 1994), 426-435; Sauter, *Grundlagen der Theologie*.

35 M. Luther, “Assertio omnium articulorum (1520)” in *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimarer Ausgabe, 1883-), 7,97, 24f. [“Defence of All the Articles of Martin Luther Condemned by the Recent Bull of Leo X”].