

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: A CHALLENGE TO BIBLICAL SCHOLARS

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Abstract

The term 'biblical theology' is used differently in different contexts. In this paper it is applied to the field of Old and New Testament studies. The view presented is to move away from the idea of a centre for writing Old or New Testament theology and rather to work with themes or topics within different contexts without the pretension of presenting the centre. It is suggested that such themes or topics should be investigated in both testaments leaving room for a variety of perspectives on the subject under discussion. Matters such as the canon and the relationship between the two testaments obvious come into play. One of the main benefits of such an approach, is interdisciplinary co-operation. A few suggestions are made for future endeavours in practising biblical theology.

1. The term 'biblical theology'

The immediate response to a title like the one above I would imagine, would be that a biblical theological perspective is a perspective that views the theological endeavour from the biblical texts as a point of departure. In a sense that would be a logical deduction. However, when reading how this term is applied in literature from different parts of the world and in the different disciplines of theology, it soon becomes clear that one has to define one's own understanding of the term.

Before attempting to present a definition for the use of the term in this paper, a short survey of the different applications of the term deems necessary. In the English-speaking countries the expression has several different meanings. Some scholars refer to a theological discipline which has as its aim, the presentation of major themes and trends in the biblical literature. Others interpret 'biblical theology' as the exegesis of biblical texts, while still others refer to a 'theological movement with a strong 'biblical' and partly 'neo-orthodox' orientation', especially in post-war American biblical studies (Høgenhaven 1987:73). The continental use of the expression relates to the first option. It is a branch of scholarship within the fields of Old and New Testament studies which systematizes the results of exegetical work around a specific theme or trend which is common in the biblical literature (cf Deist

1984:20). This approach goes back as far as 1787 when Johann Phillip Gabler gave an inaugural lecture at the University of Altdorf. It was important to Gabler to draw a clear distinction between biblical theology and dogmatic theology. According to his view, biblical theology is the doctrine of the Scriptures which Christians should know and in which they should believe, whereas dogmatic theology is acquired knowledge derived from Scripture and other sources, like philosophy and history. He was convinced that only by means of a proper method could one arrive at the religion of the Bible or biblical theology. To him it was a historical discipline (Hayes & Prussner 1985:2-3). Since Gabler the expression seemed to be the commonly used name for the mutually independent disciplines 'Old Testament Theology' and 'New Testament Theology'. In 1955 Ebeling posed the question whether the meaning of the term 'biblical theology' is 'the theology contained in the Bible' or 'theology in accordance with the Bible'? Is it a historical or normative concept (Høgenhaven 1987:74)? Some scholars are of the opinion that a consequent historical viewpoint would dissolve the unity of the Bible, while others insist that a historical approach is a necessity to really get behind the theology of the Bible.

In the 17th century 'biblical theology' was used as a slogan by Pietist movements in its criticism of Protestant Orthodoxy. In the Enlightenment period it was applied to designate an alternative dogmatic theology in opposition to traditional dogmatic theology. An ambiguous identity developed, for on the one hand it was an historical discipline conscious of its independence from dogmatic theology, while on the other hand functioning as a critical and normative discipline over and above dogmatic theology. According to Ebeling the idea of 'biblical theology' seemed problematic. Two of the main problems were the so-called unity of the Bible and the idea of an authoritative canon (cf Høgenhoven 1987:74). We will refer to these and other issues at a later stage.

2. A modern-day 'biblical theological' movement

In Germany today there is a group of scholars who regard themselves as members of a biblical theological movement. They publish their views in a series called *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie*, of which the third volume is in print. A far-reaching goal of this approach would be to work with theology as a unit, which would imply the co-operation of various theological disciplines, including church history (cf Westermann 1988:13). In a confined sense, as I wish to use the expression, 'biblical theology' should be seen as a discipline whose object is the study of the whole Bible, that is, Old and New Testaments. Working from the presupposition that the Bible, consisting of the two Testaments, is part of the Christian heritage, biblical theology takes the whole Bible seriously when doing theology (cf Prinsloo 1987:35). Whereas much of our theological endeavour on the Old and New Testaments resulted in the fragmentation of the texts, biblical theology wishes to bridge this by approaching the Bible holistically.

3. Personal views and aims

The aim of this paper is to commit my views to paper without the pretension of having completely digested every possible consequence or having refined my every statement.

It should be obvious that my views are formed by others endeavouring to do theology, and I do not wish to claim the contrary.

3.1

Theologies written on the Old Testament can be categorised into two main categories, namely the more conservative, evangelical and fundamentalistic approach, and a so-called liberal or historical approach. I favour the last, because it takes the historical aspects of the biblical texts seriously and opens one's eyes to the complexity of the transmitted traditions of faith we have in the documents of the Old Testament. Often historic critics are blamed for fragmenting the Old Testament, but through careful and thorough analysis of documents, we became aware of the diversity of the Old Testament faith. This historic approach implies that expressions of faith should first and foremost be viewed against a specific historical background, this entails an awareness of a specific society, economy and the development of political affairs. The implication is that serious thought is given to a specific context and it is realised that a proper understanding of a text depends on that specific context. Careful analysis of for instance the book of Jeremiah has revealed that the 52 chapters contain various traditions of faith or strands of faith (cf Carroll 1986:79; Seitz 1989; Nicholson 1970). Some of these traditions originated amongst the Gola group in exile, while others came from those remaining behind in Palestine. One cannot therefore, approach the book of Jeremiah with the preconceived idea that there is a single unifying tradition of faith running through the book, as derived from the prophet himself. The Gola group would for instance have thought about 'hope' differently from the Palestine group. Those in exile hoped for the day of their return to their homeland and the re-establishment of their religion and practices there, while those staying behind hoped for independence and freedom to practise and cultivate their beliefs. There might therefore even be conflicting views on an issue such as hope, within one broad religious tradition. To insist therefore that we have a unitary view of faith for instance in the book of Jeremiah, is not valid. This should signify to us, that to work with such an assumption of unity of tradition when dealing with the prophets, is foolish. This is certainly also true when dealing with the Pentateuch, historical books or the whole of the Old Testament.

It should be clear by now that I am convinced of the diversity of the traditions of faith in the Old Testament. I would therefore not support any approach pretending to work with a *Mitte* or centre or unifying idea running through Israel's tradition of faith (cf Ackroyd 1987:16) This would be a major point of criticism launched against Eichrodt's monumental Old Testament theology dealing with the covenant as the basic unifying or underlining message of the Old Testament faith (Eichrodt 1975:13,18). This is not to say that Eichrodt and others working with the idea of a centre did not make a real contribution to the study of the Old Testament, but their

basic assumption of the existence of such a unifying theme or centre, I regard as false.

3.2

There were many scholars who followed Eichrodt's and other approaches and until approximately 1978 we had several Old Testament theologies in print (cf Clemens 1978; Terrien 1978; Westermann 1978; Kaiser 1978 etc), but since then scholars have shown greater caution in writing extensive theologies. This was caused amongst others by a lack of consensus on methodology (cf Hasel 1985:32-34; van Leeuwen 1986:211-227) but also by the extensive research recently done on societies, socio-anthropology and its relevance for the Bible. The insights gained has greatly complicated the task of writing an Old Testament theology, making it virtually impossible. Some even questioned the existence of such a phenomenon as Old Testament theology (Whybray 1987:168-179). The challenge however still remains.

The burning question is how we should go about solving this problem. There are differing views on this, but I agree in principle with Hasel (1984) that one should commence the endeavour writing theology by taking smaller units of the biblical text as a point of departure. For example, take a specific prophet or section within a prophetic book, then establish the different theological streams or traditions within the one book or unit, that is to say if such traditions exist. One would for instance find a strong emphasis on hope or expectation for a better future in a specific section of a prophetic book. Then move on to the wider context, that is the corpus of literature, for example the prophets or wisdom literature, to which that unit belongs. In support of a biblical theological point of view, one would be interested in the interrelation of such a topic from a specific context to other similar contexts on the same topic. Determine whether it is a matter of continuation or discontinuation or even reinterpretation or disputation of a particular view. To clarify the matter further, we can again make use of the example of hope or expectation in Jeremiah. One should first determine the specific passages within the book that deal with the issue, then determine to what specific tradition-stream of the book they belong. From there on one should try and form a chronological synopsis of the features of this presentation. The next step would be to see how the results of exegesis fit together within the salvation tradition in the book Jeremiah. This could then be traced further by relating it to similar contexts in other prophetic books where the same steps of analysis had been pursued. As a result, one should now be able to form an overall impression of how hope/expectation was presented in the salvation traditions of the prophetic literature and then within the salvation traditions of the whole of the Old Testament. One should not expect one view, but different, even conflicting views. Perceptions of faith differ due to differences in socio-economic, political and cultural situations (cf Weber 1989:1). From here on the research should pass through the literature of the intertestamental period and then move on to the New Testament literature. I have previously stated that 'biblical theology' is a Christian endeavour and that it has in aim the relevance of topics or trends in the Bible for Christians reading this Bible. Whereas the Old Testament scholar working

descriptively with Old Testament texts would use the Hebrew Bible alone, biblical theologians make use of both the Old and New Testaments due to their relevance for the Christian church.

3.3

At this stage the following question should perhaps be posed. Should one work with specific themes and trends, or with aspects that continue from the Old to the New Testament? Since the whole matter of writing biblical theology in the sense of the foregoing explanation is still a recent development, one should perhaps commence with a basic element or issue that is common to both testaments, like the God who reveals himself. Horst Seebass (1982), one of the leading figures in this movement wrote a monograph entitled 'Der Gott der Ganzen Bibel'. I consider this a sensible point of departure, for it is perhaps the mutual theme that is least disputed. One can also search for dominant traditions and trace their development and application in new and changing circumstances from the Old to the New Testament. Examples of this would be, God's liberating acts, his royal rule, his enlightening wisdom, his holy presence, his vindication of the poor and his renewing judgement. Hans Rudi Weber in his book entitled *Power* (1989) takes these traditions of biblical faith as the basic traditions of faith and then focuses on the topic of power within these traditions. He then determines the role and function the concept power plays within each of these traditions.

It seems to me possible to work with traditions or even with themes viewed within a tradition or with major trends detected in the biblical literature. Such a tradition, theme or trend could then serve as a focus point in writing 'biblical theology'. One condition remains however, and that is that none of these should be regarded as the basic or unifying theme underlying all of biblical literature.

3.4

By now two matters should have come to notice and these are the relationship between the Old and the New Testament and the question of the canon.

3.4.1 The relationship between the Old and the New Testaments

This is a much debated issue in theology and although many Old and New Testament theologians have already discussed the issue, we only have partial answers and there is no consensus (cf Scheffler 1983:38-51; Høgenhaven 1988:44-67). It is however an important issue for biblical theology and one has to have a measure of clarity on the subject. Some Old Testament scholars see the New Testament only as an appendix to the real Bible, which to them is the Old Testament, and they are convinced that they learn about God and his revelation (acts) in history only through the Old Testament. Others see in the Old Testament a foreshadow for the New and search the Old Testament for types of the real revelation of Jesus Christ in the New Testament era. The Old Testament is therefore tolerated inasmuch as it supports the New Testament. The most popular approach on the relationship between the

two testaments is to work with the categories of promise and fulfillment (cf Von Rad 1975:319-387). The Old Testament promises, prepares and anticipates for example by its series of covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. The New Testament brings the fulfillment of these promises through Jesus Christ by means of the new and final covenant (Weber 1989:21). There are many different opinions, even among those who prefer this scheme, what is to be regarded as fulfilled and what not. Is it Scriptures, time, the law or the promises? The question arises whether the accent should be on the continuity or the discontinuity between the two testaments.

For biblical theology one should take both testaments seriously and award them equal status. There is a definite continuity between the two testaments which should be emphasised, but there are also extra elements which Weber (1989:21) calls 'plus factors', which have to be acknowledged. It is the task of biblical theologians to explore and present these 'plus factors' as well. Instead of applying the category of promise and fulfillment, it would be more appropriate to examine how biblical faith or aspects thereof have developed, and constantly been transmitted and reaccentuated in different periods of biblical history. I see it as an obligation of Old Testament scholars to enrich the present day believers by presenting to them aspects of faith not developed or reaffirmed by the New Testament authors. The Old Testament is just as integral a part of our biblical heritage as the New Testament and should be allowed to exercise a critical function in the way in which we practise our faith and belief in God. There are themes that run through from the Old Testament to the New, but none of them as previously mentioned, can be regarded as the theme or unifying factor.

Ultimately it is the living God who holds the biblical testimonies together (Weber 1989:22).

3.4.2 The canon, as used for biblical theology

This is an extremely difficult matter to define. The first question arising is, which canon are we talking about? The Orthodox version, the Roman Catholic or the Protestant canon? In the canon of the Septuagint deutero-canonical books such as Tobit, Judith, Sirach, the Wisdom of Solomon and first and second Maccabees are included. It is also necessary to enquire after the measure of importance attached to the material dating from the intertestamental period (that is the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha such as the Jubilees, the Psalms of Solomon, Enoch etc, and the writings of Philo and Josephus) and even the writings of the early Christian church such as the apostolic fathers? Perhaps we should therefore also address the question of an open or closed canon.

Without going into the history of the formation of the canon (cf the discussion by Ackroyd 1987:214-219) it remains a fact that for more than a century the Christian church existed with an open canon. It is also a historical fact that at some stage in history the church decided to canonise a limited number of books containing biblical traditions of faith. Those interested in doing biblical theology attach great importance to the Christian canon and depending from which theological tradition

they come, the canon would differ somewhat. This means that on some issues there might be a difference of opinion. To my mind, it is not a matter which should alarm us, because the majority of biblical material appears in whatever canon is utilised. A more comprehensive canon such as the Roman Catholic one, would have the advantage of providing additional material on a tradition or topic which one wishes to research. As far as the authority of Scriptures is concerned, material included in the Christian canon could be accepted as normative due to the long history of acceptance and testimony of sufficiency by the church (cf Høgenhaven 1987:84; Ackroyd 1987:214). From a descriptive point of view however, the above-mentioned extra-biblical material should be regarded as of equal importance (cf Ackroyd 1987:223). Extra-biblical material such as intertestamental literature could be extremely valuable in tracing the development and reinterpretation of traditions of faith from the Old Testament to the New. From the insights gained from the exegetical work done on the Old and New Testaments, biblical theology can only be presented as an ordered collection of biblical theologies (Weber 1989:22). Through the application of knowledge gathered from various sources, a more comprehensive insight is obtained of any ordered collection of biblical theology. When research is done on hope/expectation in the Bible, one seems to be presented with a number of conflicting perspectives or reinterpreted viewpoints or corrections of earlier views. One should therefore not necessarily expect to find a linear development of a tradition of faith or a trend, but sometimes a diversified presentation. To follow this development, extra-biblical sources might help us to bridge the gap between the two testaments.

For the sake of argument we should perhaps separate the descriptive endeavour from the question of authority or normativity of a tradition of faith and although it is an artificial separation, it is a separation done for academical purposes. Fact is, many of the traditions of faith underwent a process of transmission, reinterpretation and even critical evaluation in the successive periods of biblical history, and for our understanding of these traditions we should take note of these processes (cf Weber 1989:25). In the final analysis I believe a somewhat different canon would not make all that difference in the description of a tradition of faith. Weber (1989:25) raises an interesting and to my mind a very important issue when he maintains that 'the church has also canonized an interpretative process'.

Most of us would accept the fact that biblical traditions of faith underwent transmission and reinterpretation and we still regard them as normative. In changing historical situations and new social contexts, even in biblical times, an interpretative process took place. Should we not then, when interpreting biblical texts, show some sensitivity for new contexts which include the social context we find ourselves in? As Weber states, we are in the danger of becoming unbiblical if we simply transmit and repeat biblical affirmations in new contexts. Sound interpretation and application of biblical material requires a thorough understanding of our own context and the questions of our day, but also a willingness to be guided and corrected or challenged by the witness of the Christian canon. Serious study of the reinterpretation and changing emphasis that biblical traditions underwent in the process of remaining relevant to a new society, should in some way form our own way of thinking in the

process of applying them to our own context (cf Goldingay 1987:9). In this sense the Bible is by definition an open book,

... open to the ongoing process of transmission and interpretation (Weber 1989:25).

The proper understanding of the Bible, which in a sense is an ever changing understanding, the Christian canon plays a role of utmost importance, but so also does the community, the social context and not least of all the Holy Spirit, which is the spirit of truth. Biblical theology as I see it, therefore has an analytic phase, a phase of relating these analyses, a phase of stepping into serious dialogue with the text of the Bible from one's own context and a phase of making it relevant for modern-day readers (contextualisation).

4. The benefits of practising 'biblical theology'

The question of the relevance of doing biblical theology seems proper at this stage. To this several reasons may be presented.

- Biblical theology attaches great importance to a Christian canon, which should have relevance for the Christian community (Seebass 1982:32-33). It allows for a reciprocal dialogue to take place between the Christian and the context of his day (Goldingay 1987:34).

- It is sensitive and comprehends the theological diversity we have in the Bible and does not force an artificial unifying theme on biblical material.

- It reveals the complicated processes that biblical theologies of faith underwent over long periods of time, which is so important to help us in the process of seeing its relevance for our own time.

- It allows all the different contexts to speak for themselves and takes the witness of the Christian canon seriously. In theological thinking the canon comes into focus exercising a critical function (cf Seebass 1982:215-216; Weber 1989:25).

- It addresses matters like the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, canon, authority and relevance.

- It requires people from different disciplines (Old and New Testament) to work together in an effort to write biblical theology, which to my mind is beneficial to theology in general. An Old Testament scholar can therefore still concentrate on Old Testament theology but within a broader context of the Bible as a whole (cf Høgenhaven 1987:95).

- It does not pretend to present the theology of the Bible, but works in the direction of researching and developing themes and trends which form part of a biblical theology still in the process of formation.

- With its emphasis on context it offers scope for addressing issues such as the society, the economy and political matters.

- The importance of the intertestamental period is realised.

- Biblical theology works against the fragmentation which can be the result of exegetical endeavour and therefore makes the theological endeavour more accessible to the every-day Bible reader.

5. The way to the future

The challenge of doing biblical theology is a challenge for theologians in a specific context. What needs to be done in future?

- First of all we should realise that biblical theology is in a childhood phase and still exploring the way forward.
- It might be a greater benefit to concentrate firstly on major issues of mutual interest between the two testaments of the Bible.
- In a pragmatic sense, theological issues that are relevant for a particular context should be addressed
- Ways and means, such as seminars and work-shops, should be developed to cultivate the interdisciplinary side of this theological endeavour.
- Finally, perhaps a deliberate plan of action should be promoted amongst working groups.

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