Balla, 'Challenges to Biblical Theology'

Introduction

The discipline of biblical theology has faced challenges of various kinds since the end of the 19th century. In 1897, William Wrede published an essay entitled *Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten Neutestamentlichen Theologie* in which he argued that the discipline of NT theology should be replaced by study of 'the history of early Christian religion and theology' (ET; in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, p. 116). Heikki Räisänen's programmatic study, *Beyond New Testament Theology* (1990), and his numerous subsequent articles have revived Wrede's proposal. Although these works focus primarily on NT theology, their effect is to undermine biblical theology as a whole.

Biblical theology is also challenged implicitly by those who do not want to move 'beyond' the discipline but rather to modify it to such an extent that its traditional name can hardly be justified. For example, there is a widespread view that the diversity of the Bible's theological ideas rules out any unified biblical theology (see e.g. P. Pokorný, 'The Problem of Biblical Theology', *HBT* 15, 1993, pp. 83–94, esp. 87).

Thus, there are two main challenges to biblical theology: first, the argument against confining study to the 'Bible' as defined in the canon; and secondly, the argument against the basic theological unity of the biblical authors and books.

There are also challenges which do not question the discipline of biblical theology as such, but which criticize some of the ways it has been practised. For example, in his article 'Revelation through history in the Old Testament and in modern theology', James Barr argues that the idea of revelation through history should not be overemphasized against other forms of revelation in the Bible, for example, the 'verbal self-declaration of Yahweh' (*Int 17, 1963, pp. 193–205, quote from p. 197). He does not deny that salvation-history, Heilsgeschichte, is a central theme of the Bible, but stresses 'that there are other axes through the biblical material which are equally pervasive and important' (p. 201).

Similarly, Barr repeatedly criticizes the biblical theology movement that lay behind Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, for grounding the unity and distinctiveness of the Bible in the alleged theological distinction between Hebrew and Greek thought and in the supposed rejection by the biblical writers of natural theology. However, even in his major work, The Semantics of Biblical Language (Oxford, 1961), Barr affirms that his purpose 'is not to criticize biblical theology or

any other kind of theology as such, but to criticize certain methods in the handling of linguistic evidence in theological discussion' (p. 6). His main criticism is that Kittel's Dictionary places too much emphasis on single words at the expense of combinations of words or sentences. Barr has put forward his thesis as follows (p. 263): 'It is the sentence (and of course the still larger literary complex such as the complete speech or poem) which is the linguistic bearer of the usual theological statement, and not the word (the lexical unit) or the morphological and syntactical connection.'

Scholars engaging in biblical theology ought to learn from such criticism in order to improve their methods; rather than abandoning the enterprise altogether they should attempt to write better biblical theological works.

In the present article we survey and attempt to answer some of the challenges to biblical theology. Many of these are related to hypotheses which, by virtue of their having become a majority view, are often presented as assured results of biblical scholarship. Our focus will be on NT theology. We shall briefly state the major challenges relating to the development of the NT canon and to the unity of its basic theology, and marshal some arguments in favour of studying biblical theology at the level of historical, descriptive inquiry.

Religious Experience Instead of Doctrine?

The history-of-religion approach presents a challenge to biblical theology in its emphasis on experience over doctrine. Wrede argued against the dominant approach to NT theology in his day, i.e. the attempt to isolate doctrinal concepts, Lehrbegriffe (in The Nature of New Testament Theology, p. 73).

Räisänen has taken up this argument, claiming that 'religious thought is only one, relatively small, part of religion' (*Beyond, p. 105). Although he suggests that for pragmatic reasons a 'comprehensive history of early Christian religion' should begin with the study of religious thought, he qualifies his statement (p. 106): 'A history of early Christian thought as I see it ought to make abundantly clear the connections of the thoughts and ideas with the experiences of individuals and groups. The development of thought is to be analysed precisely in the light of the interaction between experiences and interpretations.'

In response, it should be said that the theology of the Bible and its doctrinal concepts are not identical. Theology should be defined more widely as affirmations and actions involved in relationships between God and humans.

Furthermore, there is no need to exclude from the field of 'theology' what Räisänen calls 'aspects' or 'branches' of religion: 'cult, rite, myth, communality' including 'historical, psychological and social realities' (*Beyond, p. 105). Inasmuch as these were part of the early church's beliefs about God they belong to a biblical theology.

In other words, such a theology can include a wide range of religious phenomena; it is not limited to doctrine.

Thus it seems that the study of experience does not pose a challenge to biblical theology if we accept a wider definition of that theology, one which includes experiences relating to religious beliefs. Biblical theology should describe the experiences of God recorded in the Bible as well as the doctrine contained therein.

No Distinction Between Canonical and Non-Canonical Early Christian Literature?

The claim that there is no historical justification for distinguishing a 'canon' of Scripture from other early Christian writings is a serious challenge to biblical theology.

According to Wrede and Räisänen, one particularly problematic issue is the relationship between early Christianity and Christianity as reflected in the canonical NT. They argue that NT theology should not be confined to the canonical writings. We shall focus on the problem of distinguishing between early Christian literature in general and the NT canon in particular; for discussion of the OT canon, see The canon of Scripture.

Is 'orthodoxy' a late phenomenon?

One major argument against the separation of canonical writings from non-canonical ones is drawn from the (supposed) history of the process whereby orthodoxy was distinguished from heresy. In what follows we retain the usual meaning of the terms 'heresy' and 'orthodoxy', as defined by the 2nd century church.

Walter Bauer, renowned for his Greek lexicon, wrote an important study in 1934 entitled Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum. Georg Strecker summarizes Bauer's thesis in the preface to the second edition of Bauer's work, as follows: 'In earliest Christianity, orthodoxy and heresy do not stand in relation to one another as primary to secondary, but in many regions heresy is the original manifestation of Christianity' (ET, p. xi). This thesis would render the distinction between heresy and orthodoxy irrelevant for the historian, and undermine the distinction between canonical and non-canonical writings.

Bauer argues that heresy in Edessa, Egypt and some parts of Asia Minor (especially central and eastern Asia Minor) was earlier and stronger than orthodoxy. However, he concedes that in some other parts of Asia Minor (*e.g. Ephesus) and in Rome, orthodoxy was early and strong.

In his essays published in 1971 under the title Trajectories through Early Christianity, Helmut Koester revived and further developed the thesis of Bauer. He agrees with

Bauer that 'Christian groups later labelled heretical actually predominated in the first two or three centuries, both geographically and theologically' ('GNOMAI DIAPHOROI: The origin and nature of diversification in the history of early Christianity', in Trajectories, pp. 114–157, quote from p. 114). Koester focuses 'on those developments which begin in the earliest period' (p. 119), that is, in 'the apostolic age', which 'is seldom considered in Walter Bauer's study'.

Koester's aim is to show how certain lines of development can be drawn in the history of early Christian traditions. These trajectories often start outside early Christianity and go beyond it. For example, in 'One Jesus and four primitive Gospels' (in Trajectories, pp. 158–204), Koester analyses the stage of gospel tradition prior to the writing of our four canonical Gospels. His detailed study of 'prophetic and apocalyptic sayings' (pp. 168–175), 'parables' (pp. 175–177), 'I-sayings' (pp. 177–179), 'wisdom sayings and proverbs' (pp. 179–184), etc. (in all of which he claims to find heretical developments), clarifies the various genres. But it does not prove that there can be no distinction made, among writings dependent on these sources, between canonical and non-canonical. It is possible that the oldest examples of these genres were thoroughly orthodox. Koester has not proved his thesis that the canonical Gospels were constructed on one pattern only, i.e. the kerygma of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Thomas A. Robinson has presented a convincing refutation of Bauer's and Koester's thesis. In The Bauer Thesis Examined: The Geography of Heresy in the Early Christian Church (Queenston, 1988), he shows that the 'Bauer Thesis' proves to be indefensible with reference to western Asia Minor – an area from which there is plenty of evidence concerning orthodoxy and heresy. Robinson also argues that Bauer's thesis may be even more insecure with reference to areas from which we have little evidence. Thus the traditional view may be maintained, that heresy was later than orthodoxy in the early Christian church.

Different groups identified themselves by 'canons'

We may further argue for a legitimate distinction between the NT canon and other early Christian literature by pointing to different groups in early Christianity which identified themselves by their own group of sacred writings, i.e. by their 'canons'. There are three such groups apart from the 'orthodox'. These Christian groups – later labelled heretics – produced and treasured sacred writings which they regarded as Scripture.

First, Marcion produced a collection of writings (a Gospel and ten Pauline letters) which he and his followers held to be Scripture. Secondly, whilst it is uncertain as to whether the Montanists' canon presupposes the existence of the orthodox Christian canon, there is no doubt that they regarded their writings as 'Holy Scriptures'. Thirdly, Bardesanes wrote his own Psalms and had his own congregation with its

own place of worship and order of service. Even Walter Bauer acknowledged that Bardesanes' congregation used its own 'Scripture'.

These three examples from the 2nd century point to the development by different Christian groups of their own sacred writings – their own 'canonical' Scripture – as an expression of their identity. It was through these 'canonical' writings that they could show how they differed from other groups. Since there were various groups in early Christianity that identified themselves by their 'canons', it is legitimate to study the theology of one particular group and its sacred writings. NT theology is justified in focusing its attention on one particular canon, that of the 'orthodox' group.

Is the Canon a Late Decision of the Church?

There is a widespread view that the canon was created by the decision of certain theologians and bishops of the earliest Christian centuries. It is also often claimed that their decision cannot be binding upon later generations. Such a claim challenges the focus of biblical theology on the canonical writings. For example, Wrede wrote that 'anyone who accepts without question the idea of the canon places himself under the authority of the bishops and theologians' of the first four Christian centuries (in The Nature of New Testament Theology, p. 71). Räisänen claims that it is 'arbitrary' to limit the scholar's work of interpretation to the NT canon (*Beyond, p. 100).

In response to this challenge, arguments may be advanced for an early beginning to the process of 'canonization', and for a 'canonical awareness' on the part of the early Christians long before the 4th century, even if they did not use the term 'canon' to refer to a list of sacred writings until then.

Is the 'orthodox' canon an answer to Marcion's canon?

There is a widely accepted view that in the middle of the 2nd century the church found itself in a critical position because of the emergence of false teachers and sects. Thus it was necessary for the 'catholic' church to take action. Marcion produced his canon; the 'orthodox' section of the church created its own canon in response.

Against this view it is worth noting the case put forward by Theodor Zahn at the end of the 19th century. In his Geschichte des Neutestamentlichen Kanons (vol. 1.2, Leipzig, 1889), he argued as follows. Marcion held that the message of the gospel was distorted (p. 650) and that this distortion had already happened in the time of Paul (pp. 593, 652). He opposed Christian tradition and the church's Scripture, but from this it is clear that he acknowledged the existence of a church canon (pp. 595, 626–671 passim). Recently, G. N. Stanton has argued that the very fact of four canonical gospels suggests they were not 'canonized' in response to Marcion; one gospel would have been a more effective answer ('The Fourfold Gospel', NTS 43,

1997, pp. 317–346, see esp. 336). Furthermore, we can argue for a 'canonical process' going on prior to Marcion's time (*i.e. before the middle of the 2nd century), if we can show that the NT writers thought they were writing with an authority similar to that of the OT prophets.

The authority of apostolic writings

The apostles were 'sent' by Jesus, and their letters carried his authority (see e.g. P. Balla, Challenges to New Testament Theology, pp. 121–129). The early church believed that the gospels were written by apostles or followers of apostles. Paul, though not one of the Twelve, wrote with apostolic authority, as can be seen from the introductions to his letters. (For his awareness of the authority he shared with the Lord who sent him, see e.g. 1 Cor. 7:17, 25, 40; 2 Cor. 13:10; 1 Thess. 2:6–7.) For example, in the opening verses of Romans there are possible indications that Paul thought his writing was in some sense related to that of the OT prophets. In Romans 1:2, the phrase 'which he promised beforehand' (RSV) may well express Paul's belief that he was being used by God to declare the fulfilment of promises made long before. Again, the expression 'through his prophets in the holy scriptures' may indicate that Paul stands in the line of the prophets, inasmuch as there is a connection between a promise and its fulfilment. If a promise made by God was recorded in a sacred writing, then the witness to the fulfilment of the promise may also claim to be penning a sacred writing. If teaching about the Son of God made a writing sacred in the OT period, the same should be true in the new era (v. 3; cf. also 16:25–26; 1 Pet. 1:10–12).

This proposal is not unlikely historically; there are analogies. Slight but nevertheless significant pieces of evidence suggest there were Jews at the time of Jesus who believed that in the final days new sacred writings would be revealed and added to the 'canonical' OT. For example, the Qumran community most probably thought of one of their writings (the Temple Scroll) as a 'second Torah' (see Balla, Challenges, pp. 106–109). It could be argued that 4 Ezra also witnesses to a belief in the emergence of a 'second canon' in the end times. Ezra is inspired by God to dictate the Law (which had been burnt some time before). Twenty-four books (the then 'canonical' OT) are to be made public, and seventy others are to be kept secret for the use of the wise (4 Ezra 14:19–48; see Balla, Challenges, pp. 112–114; cf. also Deut. 29:29). Thus the apostles, who saw themselves as living in the end times, inaugurated by the coming of the Messiah, may have thought that they were writing sacred books that would become a 'second canon'.

The adoption of the codex in the process of canonization

A further argument in favour of an early beginning to the process of canonization can be based on the early adoption by Christians of the form of the codex, as opposed to the (then more favoured) roll. The emergence of the codex made it possible for

certain writings to be bound or 'published' together. For example, the four Gospels could not be written on a single roll, but, as the manuscript evidence shows, they could be bound conveniently together in codices.

C. H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat have argued that 'it is impossible to believe that the Christian adoption of the codex can have taken place any later than circ. A.D. 100 (it may, of course have been earlier) … ' (*The Birth of the Codex, London, 1987, p. 61). Unfortunately, we probably do not have any NT manuscripts from the 1st century, but on the basis of the use by Christians of the codex form in the 2nd century we may hold that 'Christians adopted the codex for their writings from the outset' (p. 45). The manuscript evidence shows that some codices contained groups of writings, for example, the four Gospels, the catholic (general) epistles, or the Pauline corpus. The adoption of the codex would have helped to promote the books which were held to be 'canonical' (to use the term anachronistically; see also J. K. Elliott, 'Manuscripts, the Codex and the Canon', JSNT 63, 1996, pp. 105–123).

Thus, early Christians could have put short collections of writings into single codices even by the end of the 1st century. Such writings were published together because they were treasured as authoritative, perhaps even sacred, writings.

To sum up, the church did not 'create' the canon by some late 'decisions' of synods and bishops, but recognized the authority of the NT writings in a process that began in the 1st century. The focus of NT theology on the canonical writings can therefore be justified historically.

Biblical Theology or Biblical Theologies?

Biblical theology is strongly challenged by a large number of scholars who argue that there is no theological unity in the Bible. In the 19th century, F. C. Baur claimed that there was radical disagreement in the early church between the parties of Peter and Paul, before the development of the NT canon. If this is true, NT theology represents the synthesis of a former antithesis.

More recently, Räisänen has argued that there is no single 'theology "of" the early Christian sources, for these sources contain divergent theological standpoints' (*Beyond, p. 137). He implies that due to these divergences it is not possible to summarize the theology of the early Christians; hence the task should not even be attempted.

This challenge, when applied to the whole Bible, can be put as follows: biblical theology cannot be maintained if there is no (at least underlying) unity in the Bible's theology. The question of diversity and alleged contradictions in Scripture is addressed elsewhere (see Unity and diversity of Scripture), so it suffices here to advance some positive arguments in favour of the basic unity of NT. (Concerning the theology of both Testaments, see Relationship of Old Testament and New

Testament.) It is appropriate to advance these arguments, because the task of writing biblical theology should not be based on blind faith in the theological unity of the text. In principle, a writer could discover that such unity does not exist and consequently give up the enterprise. It is sometimes argued that a true historian cannot write a biblical theology. Yet there is evidence to suggest that the task can be historically justified.

Credal formulae

The most widely held view among scholars is that the credal elements in the NT developed from simple to more complex forms. For example, H. Lietzmann classified the credal elements in this way (*Kleine Schriften III: Studien zur Liturgie- und Symbolgeschichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Berlin, 1962, esp. pp. 230ff.).

1. Simple Jesus-creeds which state that Jesus is Lord or the Son of God; e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:3; Romans 10:9; 1 John 4:15; Acts 8:37 mg. (in some Gk. MSS only). These formulae were later developed into the ichthys formula. (*Ichthys is the Greek word for 'fish'; in the early church it was an acrostic for 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour'.)

2. Christ-creeds of more complex form, e.g. Romans 1:3; 2 Timothy 2:8; 1 Corinthians 15:3–5; 1 Peter 3:18–22; Philippians 2:5–11 (*cf. also Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians 18:2; Letter to the Trallians 9; Letter to the Smyrneans 1:1–2).

3. Creeds referring to God and to Christ, e.g. 1 Corinthians 8:6; 1 Timothy 6:13; 2 Timothy 4:1.

4. The trinitarian creed (which became dominant), e.g. Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:13.

The dates of the passages mentioned by Lietzmann under his various headings do not correspond to the projected development from simple to complex forms. For example, Romans is mentioned under both 'simple Jesus creeds' and more developed Christ-creeds. The trinitarian confession is thought to be late because it is complex, but 2 Corinthians is probably one of the earlier NT documents.

Some scholars argue that the end of the Gospel of Matthew was added by the early church. However, the saying as it stands is attributed to Jesus; many scholars believe that he spoke about the Spirit of God, and at least some that he believed God was his 'Father'. Thus a 'trinitarian' saying can be dated to the time of Jesus. (For a detailed argument for the view that 'trinitarian' theology is not a late development, see J. C. O'Neill, Who Did Jesus Think He Was?, esp. pp. 77ff. and 94ff.)

Moreover, it is possible that confessions of different types ('classes') existed in parallel, and do not necessarily represent various stages of a temporal development.

So credal elements may have formed part of the 'basic theology' of the early Christians, and been a unifying factor in their communities and among the NT writers. The existence of early creeds therefore points to the unity of NT theology.

Nomina sacra

Further evidence for the theological unity of early Christianity may be found in C. H. Roberts' study of nomina sacra (*Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt, London, 1979). Roberts has shown that 'a strictly limited number of words, at most fifteen', are abbreviated in Greek and Latin (biblical as well as non-biblical) religious writings (p. 26). Scholars call these words nomina sacra. Roberts classifies them in three groups (p. 27): four words (Jesus, Christ, Lord and God) 'the abbreviation of which in their sacral meaning may be said to be invariable'; three words (spirit, man and cross) 'of which the contracted form is found relatively early and relatively frequently'; and eight words (father, son, saviour, mother, heaven, Israel, David and Jerusalem) of which 'the contraction is irregular'.

Roberts argues that the abbreviations of these words have a Christian origin (p. 34). Behind the list 'lies a quite unmistakeable, if implicit, theology' (p. 41). He emphasizes that 'the system of nomina sacra presupposes a degree of control and organization' (p. 45). The Christian practice of abbreviating the nomina sacra may have originated in the Jewish Christian community of Jerusalem, 'probably before A.D. 70' (p. 46). Thus 'the nomina sacra may be plausibly viewed as the creation of the primitive Christian community, representing what might be regarded as the embryonic creed of the first Church' (p. 46).

If Roberts is right in seeing 'a summary outline of theology' (p. 47), or an implicit theology (p. 72) in the nomina sacra, then this is further evidence for the early origin of creeds and for the basic unity of early Christian theology. It is therefore a legitimate exercise to search for a single NT theology.

Literary and Social Sciences – Or a Historical Enterprise?

In recent decades, biblical theology has faced some challenges from scholars who are dissatisfied with its exclusively historical character. Some argue for complementing, others for replacing, the historical approach with alternatives based on the literary and social sciences.

Robert Morgan has reflected on the problems involved in biblical theology, and especially NT theology, in numerous works, the most comprehensive of which is Biblical Interpretation. According to Morgan, 'acts of God cannot be spoken of, let alone established, by historical research' (p. 70). Since history is not capable of

conveying theological judgments (*cf. also p. 119), other approaches are needed (*cf. also pp. 123, 197–198). According to Morgan's survey, recent developments in biblical interpretation suggest that the religious message of the text can be identified by interpreting the Bible within a literary framework (see e.g. pp. 143, 199). Sometimes the historical approach may even become 'subordinate' to the literary one (p. 287).

Morgan defines the literary approach as follows (p. 221): 'The literary frame of reference can be characterized as a shift in the focus of interest from past persons, events, traditions, literary forms, and conventions, to the now available texts and their impact upon present-day hearers and readers.'

However, there are good reasons for retaining a historical frame of reference for biblical theology. First, Morgan himself acknowledges that historical criticism has made 'positive contributions to constructive theological restatement' inasmuch as its 'negative theological role' forced theologians to 'restate the traditional faith' (p. 288). Secondly, historical study can control arbitrary interpretations. Consigning the historical approach to a secondary role and introducing non-historical approaches can undermine the accuracy of biblical interpretation. Morgan himself concedes that there may be occasions in theological work where 'the historical framework of research coordinates all the methods used' (p. 287). He also acknowledges that literary methods were used alongside historical ones in the past (*e.g. by Wellhausen, p. 82).

It follows that the historical and the literary approaches do not exclude one another. It is best to combine them in the way suggested by Morgan (*cf. p. 215).

In Biblical Interpretation Morgan identifies significant differences between the disciplines of history and sociology: 1. 'history attends to the individual and particular, sociology to what is general or typical' (p. 139); 2. history is diachronic, sociology is synchronic (pp. 139–140). For Morgan, these differences imply 'that the disciplines are complementary' (p. 140). Since in biblical theology we are more concerned with the 'unique' than with the 'typical', it follows 'that history rather than sociology should provide the framework for studying the biblical past'. A 'sociological theory', that is 'based on empirically grounded generalizations' such as might be discovered by 'observing many societies' may helpfully complement the insights of historical study. Morgan also argues that 'Since religion is a social phenomenon, the history of religion must be social history' (p. 140).

However, a distinction should be drawn between extending historical inquiry to include the societies of biblical times and using theories based on present-day sociological analysis. A historical framework for studying the Bible's theology may incorporate a social dimension without making use of modern sociological theories.

So it is possible to complement historical study with a sociological theory within the discipline of biblical theology, but this is only an option for the scholar. The validity of the historical approach to biblical theology is not dependent upon its being supplemented by sociology.

Conclusion

The foregoing argument suggests the term 'theology' can reasonably be retained as a description of the Bible's content. It may be used to refer to the biblical authors' (and characters') thoughts about God. Biblical theology is essentially historical, and may be justified as such, though the biblical theologian may also adopt frames of reference drawn from literary theory or the social sciences.

Judgments on the validity of the enterprise depend upon the presuppositions of scholars, the interpretation of key biblical passages and the exegetical reconstruction of historical events related in the Bible. For example, even if we find that much early Christianity shared a basic theology (perhaps expressed in short credal statements), we may still acknowledge diversity in the details with which early Christians filled out that theology.

It is likely that Christians with different theological views formed different canons from the 2nd century onwards. The orthodox group also formed a canon. The Christians of the 1st century may have written with a certain 'canonical awareness'. If as historians we find that the NT 'canon', in the form of a 'canonical process', is a historical fact of the first two Christian centuries (and not just the result of a decision made at a later date), and if we find that the NT claims authority for itself, perhaps even that of a 'canonical' text, then it is legitimate to look for the theology contained in the NT writings.

We do not have to move 'beyond' biblical theology. The discipline can be justified both in its focus on the canonical writings, and in its aim of describing the theology contained in the Bible.