

**Caribbean Graduate School of Theology**  
**Biblical Theology**  
**Lecture 3 – History & Challenges of Biblical Theology**  
**January 2021 - Sheldon Campbell**

## **1. History of Biblical Theology**

Whereas, J.P. Gabler in 1787 is credited with BT becoming a field of study, to some extent it was already undertaken by the Apostle Paul and the author of Hebrews in the first century. Shortly before the third century Irenaeus became a proponent of BT and the unity of the Scriptures when he tackled Marcion who disregarded all of the Old Testament (OT) and some of the New Testament (NT) (Scobie 2000:11-12). Marcion thought his approach would bring agreement to the NT; both Tertullian and Irenaeus saw it as a blunder (Osborne 2006:347). Origen's allegorical approach to the Scriptures also facilitated unity, but often disregarded the literal meaning. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century (medieval times), Thomas Aquinas advocated for the historical approach. During the reformation period (16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century), Luther placed emphasis on grammar and the literal approach. During the thousand years between Irenaeus and Luther's time, scriptural passages were mostly used to maintain already narrowly-shaped views of theology and church traditions. As a result, the works of Calvin with some aid of Luther helped to realign the teachings in the church to focus on Scripture and the holistic way in which there is agreement. Johannes Cocceius through his view of covenants argued for unity of the OT and NT, too. Notwithstanding, BT as a field of study apart from dogmatic and systematic theology finally occurred in late 18<sup>th</sup> century when Gabler made the distinction in an inaugural speech. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Pietists rejected dogmatic theology and intellectualism for seeking intimate experiential knowledge of God. This same era saw the 'historical-critical' methodology contending that biblical books must be examined in their right context and not be restricted to following a particular school of thought. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, BT mostly excluded the importance of church and was mostly academic and rationalistic. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, G.L. Bauer scholarly works disagreed with the unity of the OT and NT, and influenced many theologians up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to view the two testaments differently (Scobie 2000:12-14). As the 21<sup>st</sup> century was drawing close there was a renewed passion for BT where the objectivity of the historical-critical approach was challenged and a growing appreciation seen for the unity of Scripture and literary methodologies (Scobie 2000:17-19; Osborne 2006:349).

## **2. Challenges of Biblical Theology**

In 1897, William Wrede argued that “the discipline of NT Theology should be replaced by study of ‘the history of early Christian religion and theology’” (Balla 2001, 20). This has led to an undermining of BT.

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” (p. 20).

### **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)” (Balla 2001, 21).

However, Balla suggests “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” (p. 21).

### **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” (p. 21).

### **Is ‘orthodoxy’ a late phenomenon?**

Walter Bauer argues, “‘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” (p. 22).

Thomas A. Robinson has presented a convincing refutation of Bauer's and Koester's thesis. He demonstrated that 'Bauer Thesis' was not justified regarding western Asia Minor where much evidence about orthodoxy and heresy existed. Robinson arguments were even stronger in places with little evidence. Therefore, in the early Christian church heresy came in after orthodoxy (p. 22).

### **Different groups identified themselves by 'canons'**

"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'" (p. 23).

### **Is the Canon a Late Decision of the Church?**

"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" (p. 23).

### **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" (p. 24).

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" (p. 24).

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" (p. 24).

### **Credal formulae**

“The most widely held view among scholars is that the credal elements in the NT developed from simple to more complex forms” (p. 25). Balla notes that, the existence of early creeds therefore points to the unity of NT theology”.

### **Nomina sacra**

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’” (p. 25).

### **Literary and Social Sciences – Or a Historical Enterprise?**

“Some argue for complementing, others for replacing, the historical approach with alternatives based on the literary and social sciences” (pp. 25-26).