

**Caribbean Graduate School of Theology**  
**Biblical Theology**  
**Lecture 4 – BT Relationship to Other Disciplines,**  
**Problem Areas & Methodology**

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**Biblical Theology Definition Revisited**

We may define biblical theology as “that branch of theological inquiry concerned with tracing themes through the diverse sections of the Bible (such as the wisdom writings or the epistles of Paul) and then with seeking the unifying themes that draw the Bible together.” (Osborne 2006, 349).

Marshall (2004, 23) says, the aim is “to explore the New Testament writer’s developing understanding of God and the world, more particularly the world of people and their relationship to one another.”

Motyer (1997, 158) defines it as “that creative theological discipline whereby the church seeks to hear the integrated voice of the whole Bible addressing us today.”

Scobie (2003, 46–47) asserts that BT is a “bridge discipline” that brings together the historical meaning of the biblical text and its use in the faith and life of the church.

Osborne (2006, 349) suggests that “there are two types of inquiry: the search for unifying or central theme(s) behind the Testaments or Bible (the task of the scholar) and the attempt to trace a particular theme (such as the Holy Spirit or perseverance) through the various stages of the biblical period (the task of every Bible student)”.

Osborne (2006, 349) explains that, “while biblical theology provides a bridge to systematic theology and the contextualization of Scripture, it remains primarily within the sphere of exegetical research because its major goal is to discover the views of the biblical period. Still, it bridges to systematic theology because it too is meant for the confessional needs of the church”.

Osborne (2006, 347) notes,

Biblical theology constitutes the first step away from the exegesis of individual passages and toward the delineation of their significance for the church today. At this level we collect and arrange the themes that unite the passages and can be traced through a book or author as a whole. This is done in three steps: first, we study the theological themes in terms of individual books, then we explore the theology of an author, and finally we trace the progress of revelation that unites a Testament and even the Bible as a whole (that is, the historical development of these themes throughout the biblical period). In this way biblical theology collates the results of exegesis and provides the data for the systematic theologian to contextualize in developing theological dogma for the church today.

## 1. BT Relationship to Other Disciplines

“A continual tension exists within the biblical theology movement between diversity and unity, between historical-critical concerns and historical-grammatical exegesis” (Osborne 2006, 350).

The major types of **biblical criticism** are: (1) **textual criticism**, which is concerned with establishing the original or most authoritative text, (2) **philological criticism**, which is the study of the biblical languages for an accurate knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and style of the period, (3) **literary criticism**, which focuses on the various literary genres embedded in the text in order to uncover evidence concerning date of composition, authorship, and original function of the various types of writing that constitute the Bible, (4) **tradition criticism**, which attempts to trace the development of the oral traditions that preceded written texts, and (5) **form criticism**, which classifies the written material according to the preliterate forms, such as parable or hymn. Other schools of biblical criticism that are more exegetical in intent—that is, concerned with recovering original meanings of texts—include **redaction criticism**, which studies how the documents were assembled by their final authors and editors, and **historical criticism**, which seeks to interpret biblical writings in the context of their historical settings (Britannica).

**Form criticism**, “a method of biblical criticism that seeks to classify units of scripture into literary patterns (such as love poems, parables, sayings, elegies, legends) and that attempts to trace each type to its period of oral transmission. The purpose is to determine the original form and the relationship of the life and thought of the period to the development of the literary tradition” (Britannica).

**Textual criticism**, “the technique of restoring texts as nearly as possible to their original form. Texts in this connection are defined as writings other than formal documents, inscribed or printed on paper, parchment, papyrus, or similar materials” (Britannica).

### **Historical-Grammatical**

This is primarily a product of the Reformation and post-Reformation periods of Western European Christianity.' While certain aspects of it were known and occasionally spasmodically utilized prior to Luther, the historical-grammatical method is a development of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, John Knox and other Protestant reformers.' After Luther's death it was the method used during the 17th and 18th centuries in Lutheranism, Calvinism and Arminianism (Surburg 1974, 278).

Historical-Grammatical challenged “the allegorical method which had more or less dominated the history of the Church of Latin Christianity for over a thousand years” (p. 278).

Professor Terry describes the Grammatico-Historical,

As the methods which most fully commends itself to the judgment and conscience of Christian scholars. Its fundamental principle is to gather from the Scriptures themselves the precise meaning which the writers intended to convey. It applies to the sacred books the same principles, the same grammatical process and exercise of common sense and reason, which we apply to other books. 'The grammatico-historical exegete, furnished with suitable qualifications, intellectual, educational, and moral, will accept the claims of the Bible without prejudice or adverse pre-possession, and, with no ambition to prove them false, will investigate the language and import of each book with fearless independence. He will master the language of the writer, the particular dialect which he used, and his peculiar style and manner of expression. He will inquire into the circumstances under which he wrote, the manners and customs of his age, and the purpose or object which he had in view. He has a right to assume that no sensible author

will be knowingly inconsistent with himself, or seek to bewilder and mislead his readers (280).

### **Exegetical Theology and Biblical Theology**

Osborne (2006, 350-351) notes,

There is a two-way relationship between biblical theology and exegesis. The former provides the categories and overall scriptural unity behind one's interpretation of individual passages, while exegesis provides the data collated into a biblical theology. In other words, the two are interdependent. The exegete studies the author's meaning on the basis of literary considerations (grammar and thought development) and historical background (socioeconomic), then the biblical theologian works with the results and compiles patterns of unity behind the individual statements.

### **Historical theology and Biblical Theology**

"The importance of church history for hermeneutics is threefold: we can (1) see how passages have been interpreted throughout the history of the church, (2) see how a doctrine has developed through the periods of the church, and (3) trace the origins and belief structure behind our own confessional tradition" (pp. 351-352).

"Historical theology technically belongs between biblical and systematic theology. It studies the way later paradigm communities understood the biblical doctrines and enables us better to understand current theological debates by placing them in bold relief within the history of dogma" (p. 352).

### **Biblical theology and systematic theology.**

Both "biblical and systematic theology collate the revelation of God in his Word (see Sailhammer 1995:12-16), so they are two parts of the larger task of an understanding and applying the Word" (p. 353).

Biblical theology studies the themes behind the individual books and traditions within the Bible, seeking covering laws that integrate them into a holistic pattern. Systematic theology then contextualizes these into a logical and conceptual whole that reconstructs dogma for the modern period" (pp. 353-354).

## **2. Problem Areas**

### **1. Unity and diversity.**

Osborne 2006:357 indicates that,

There is indeed tremendous diversity between the biblical books. The differing genres and purposes have originated from a plethora of situations and problems faced by Israel and the early church. Most of the New Testament books were written to defend apostolic Christianity against various aberrations, and there is a great variety of expressions and perspectives between the writers.

We “dare not assume unity or diversity without noting such factors as background, semantic field, community influence or the sociological development of Israel and the church” (p. 358).

### **2. Tradition history.**

The “biblical theologian must be aware of the traditioning process in Israel and the early church, but it is one factor among many in the exegetical arsenal and not the key component in the formation of the history of dogma in the biblical period” (p. 359).

### **3. Theology and canon.**

The canon “must be taken as a whole; it demands a perspective on the unity of Scripture that allows neither community nor scholar to predominate over the canonical text itself” (p. 361).

### **4. The analogia fidei and progressive revelation.**

The “analogy of faith”

This also can lead to an overemphasis on the unity of biblical texts, resulting in what Carson calls an “artificial conformity” that ignores the diversity of expression and emphasis between divergent statements in the Bible (p. 361).

The “danger of our ‘faith’ rather than Scripture controlling our interpretation is very real” (p. 361).

We should “control our theological presuppositions in two ways: change the concept to the *analogia scriptura* (Scripture rather than our faith as the final arbiter), and allow ‘community exegesis’ (dialogue with the past community via commentaries and so forth and with the present communities via constant interaction) to challenge our interpretation” (p. 361).

### **5. Authority.**

Critical scholars “denigrate the authority of biblical theology since it is perceived as a purely descriptive science” (p. 362).

The “argument is that biblical theology, dealing only with ‘what it meant,’ is descriptive; systematic theology, telling ‘what it means,’ presents the normative element in Christian truth (and even here it is normative only for that particular community of faith)” (p. 362).

The biblical revelation “is not so relative or culturally conditioned as to be inaccessible to modern people. The science of hermeneutics enables us to get back to the intended meaning of the original propositions, and biblical theology is part of the process whereby we allow that authoritative message to address us today” (pp. 362-363).

### **6. History and theology.**

History and theology are not antithetical (see also Osborne 2003), and the student must find a theologically charged history mingled with a historically charged theology as the two draw the past text and the present church into “dialogue and communion” (Esler 2005:36, 37).

### **7. Language, text and meaning.**

Debate centers “on the interrelationship between the three aspects of meaning—author, text, and reader. Tremendous problems occur at each link; what is the exact relationship between an author and the reader, and how does one get back to the theology of the biblical author in light of the great gap between the original setting and that of the current age?” (p. 364).

### **8. Old Testament and New Testament.**

To “remove ‘fulfillment’ from “promise” is arbitrary and inadequate. In the final analysis it is impossible to separate the two Testaments, and any truly biblical theology must begin with the recognition of unity and demonstrate such” (p. 365).

The “simple fact that there are at least 257 quotes and over 1,100 allusions (according to the Nestle-Aland Greek text) of the Old Testament in the New (see chap. 14) shows the extent to which the latter built on the former. In terms of vocabulary, themes, religious emphases and worship, the two depend on one another” (p. 365).

In terms of “redemptive history a clear typological relationship of promise-fulfillment exists between the Testaments, and any concept of the progress of revelation in history (the backbone of biblical theology) must build on this deeper interdependence” (p. 365).

### **3. Methodology**

#### The Methods of Doing Biblical Theology

There are many different ways to undertake Biblical Theology. In this paper I will be considering three: i) the analytical approach; ii) the synthetic approach; and iii) the christological approach (Osborne 2006:366-370).

#### 3.1 Analytical Approach

This method attempts to understand individual biblical books with their own theological focus and progressive norms to learn and appreciate their distinctiveness (Osborne 2006:366-367). This BT approach sees the unique way God inspires the author to write and incorporates the writer's own input in presenting God's continued mission to save sinners. Notwithstanding, it carefully demonstrates the need to read, for instance, the Apostle John in a different manner than the author of Hebrews. Therefore, in this case the analytical methodology would not speedily seek to have a more joint comprehensive view of the writings of John and Hebrews in respect to the NT where they are contained, but to know them well separately first before attempting to do so broadly (Rosner 2001).

### 3.2 Synthetic Approach

This method seeks to build a united theological framework for Scripture on a whole. It recognises the diversity of Scripture even in the OT and NT but still seeks to amalgamate or bring them together in a faithful manner (Rosner 2001). This can be conducted by following themes throughout the Bible in accordance to different periods in history. There are two ways in which this methodology is usually carried out: i) where some individuals use the history of religion method which examines the data and varying circumstances in the theological landscape; and ii) when other individuals descriptions are made of the changing theological environments with almost no impetus to demonstrate progression (Osborne 2006:366-367).

Many individuals are of the view that by focusing on and explaining the biblical themes that the authors' customs may be observed as well. This type of methodology can show the links within the customs in a diagrammatic fashion. Walther Eichrodt used the synthetic approach as a means to demonstrate that the theme of covenant may be integrated by the process of selectively using points of time throughout the biblical period. This was to address the problems that tend to arise with historicism and systematics. Whereas, this approach has received credibility by many, its goal to consolidate themes were found lacking (Osborne 2006:367).

### 3.3 Christological Approach

The centrality of Jesus Christ in BT is an area that is emphasised as it reveals God's perfect plan and mission to continue to provide salvation or redemption to mankind throughout history, despite their shortcomings. However, it is careful not to try to seek Christ in every single passage in Scripture as this be seen as credulous and unconvincing. Both the OT and NT is in relation to Jesus. In the OT they were looking for the messiah and the righteous judge. Believers affirm that this and many other prophecies were and will be fulfilled by Jesus Christ as seen in the NT. Jesus lived the life that all persons after the fall - including Israel - sought to live in the OT. Christ revolutionized many of the biblical themes in the OT with a fresh perspective in the NT such as success, contentment and goodness. Many noted persons in the OT may be seen as a type of Christ. I believe this is clearly seen in the Bible in one or more respects with individuals such as, Adam, Abraham, Isaac, David, Elisha, Joseph, Joshua, Jonah, Melchizedek, Moses, Noah and Solomon (Osborne 2006:368-370).

## **Works Cited**

Surburg, Raymond F. 1974. "The Presuppositions of the Historical-Grammatical Method as Employed by Historic Lutheranism," 12.