

**Caribbean Graduate School of Theology**  
**Biblical Theology**

**Lecture 6 – Criteria for New BT**

**January 2021 - Sheldon Campbell**

Criteria for New BT - Werner G. Jeanrond 1996, 233-249

Theology vs Biblical Theology (BT)

There was a belief that BT was purely scientific, while theology was philosophical speculation or ecclesiastical interpretation (p. 233).

The “methodology of historical-critical scholarship was, of course, to provide the life raft even for theologians” (p. 233).

Jeanrond (1996:233) notes, “There have been increasing signs that a new awakening is happening in biblical studies which may result in a rather different self-understanding of that discipline and of its relationship to other disciplines, including theological studies”.

Theology is becoming “more hermeneutically conscious of late” (p. 233). Also, “theology is rediscovering the larger spectrum of theologies within the Bible” (p. 234).

However, as soon as the term "biblical theology" is mentioned, everybody seems to run for cover (p. 234).

First of all, for any critical-minded scholar biblical theology smells foul (p. 234).

Second, biblical theology has become known as an ideological effort by Christian biblical scholars who aim at integrating and harmonizing the often very diverse theological orientations of the various biblical texts, at times even with a certain anti-Jewish bias (p. 234).

Third, biblical theology has often been considered an outpost of church interests in academic theological contexts (p. 234).

Jeanrond (1996, 234-235) argues that,

Biblical Theology ought to be one among the many critical ways of approaching the biblical texts, because it deals with an important aspect of these texts' communication, namely, how some people experienced God, reflected on God's presence in the history of Israel and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and organized their lives accordingly. However, not every biblical theology is good theology, and not every biblical theology, as is well known, has been an appropriate reading of the Bible.

#### I. THE CASE AGAINST BIBLICAL THEOLOGY (pp. 235-239)

#### II. THE NEED FOR NEW BIBLICAL THEOLOGIES (pp. 239-

##### A. The Biblical Texts Call for Biblical Theologies

The discussion of hermeneutics, literary criticism, and text linguistics during the last few decades has enlarged the horizon of biblical text interpretation far beyond the narrow confines of a purely historical examination of texts. Of course, all the different approaches to the biblical texts are benefiting from the groundbreaking achievements of historical criticism in freeing biblical interpretation from any kind of external tutelage (p. 239).

Jeanrond (1995, 241) notes,

I would like to stress that the question of biblical theology not only arises from external expectations brought to the biblical texts, but emerges first and foremost in the act of reading as a semantic necessity from within the biblical texts themselves. Most of these texts which come to us embedded in the editorial format of the biblical canon deal more or less explicitly with the possibilities and actualities of a complex set of interconnected relationships, namely, the relationships between different people, between people and God, between people and their cosmos, and between individuals and their own inner selves. Thus, whichever way one turns this thematic phenomenon, no reading perspective seems adequate which does not include some sort of a theological dimension. But this discovery of the theological dimension of the biblical texts must not be confused with the ongoing projects of a Christian reading of the biblical texts through a confessional, though ecumenically informed, theological perspective, as for instance, in the works of Peter Stuhlmacher and Brevard Childs.

Jeanrond (1995, 241) notes,

Moreover, every reader of biblical texts always approaches these texts already through some genre of reading mediated to him or her by the community or network of communities in which he or she encounters these texts. The more interesting question, therefore, is not whether or not people read the biblical texts theologically, but which inherited or otherwise suggested genres of reading promise to disclose the theological dimensions of the text's own communicative potential best at any given time. The necessity of coming to terms with these theological dimensions present in the biblical texts suggests the development of biblical theologies. I use the plural because previous readings of the biblical texts have suggested the great variety, plurality, and at times even conflictual potential of theological communications from these texts.

The first call for some sort of inventory of communications about divine self-manifestations in the different, though interlinked, relationships emerges then from the process of adequate biblical interpretation itself. To that extent the related call for some form of biblical theology is one of the consequences of adequate biblical interpretation. But there is also another call for biblical theology, and that comes from systematic theology that is interested in biblical interpretation.

#### B. The Theological Need for Biblical Theologies

Theology "is always more than textual science, but never less. All depends on the respective definition of theology" (p. 242).

Jeanrond (1995, 242) indicates that,

The widespread agreement on the theological necessity of engaging in biblical interpretation calls for a mutually critical and constructive cooperation between biblical scholars and systematic theologians, but cooperation is not to be confused with identification. Rather, exegete and theologian are both necessary on the way to appropriating the biblical texts critically and constructively today.

Jeanrond (1995, 243-244) suggests that,

Our discussion so far has shown that Christian theologians reflect on human experiences of God in the closely related religious traditions of Israel and the church. The consideration whether these traditions both are witnessing to one monotheistic movement, though with a great many different trajectories, does not yet betray an ideological attitude or ecclesial dogmatism, as long as this consideration remains open to critique and correction by biblical scholars from any background, but particularly by Jewish scholars.

### III. CRITERIA FOR NEW BIBLICAL THEOLOGIES (pp. 246 -.247)

In the light of the preceding discussion I would like to propose for discussion the following minimalist set of criteria for any critical attempt to develop biblical theologies today:

1. Biblical theology is a multidisciplinary theological exercise that aims at retrieving the theological dimensions of" the biblical texts as part of the larger project of interpreting the communicative potential of these texts.
2. Biblical theology is not necessarily an ecclesial exercise controlled by any particular church or religious community/institution or inspired by any particular doctrine or faith. Rather, in the first instance, it is provoked by aspects of the communicative potential of the biblical texts themselves in the act of reading.
3. Biblical theology is interested in discovering the diversity of theologies operative within the biblical texts. Hence it includes intertextual investigations.
4. Biblical theology is a challenge to all systematic theologies insofar as it calls for an always new test of any preconceived or traditionally assumed concept of the God to whose revelation the texts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament witness in various ways.
5. Biblical theology operates on the basis of a hermeneutical consciousness. That means biblical theology respects the textuality of the biblical texts and the requirements and implications of text interpretation.
6. Biblical theology as one among many theological activities is fully accountable according to the usual academic standards, that is, it yields results that are subject to intersubjective perception and critique.
7. Biblical theology encourages all nondogmatic models and paradigms of describing continuities and discontinuities in the complex development and religious challenge of biblical monotheism. It calls for an ongoing ideology critique of any systematizing attempt.
8. By definition, biblical theology begins its work by interpreting the canonical texts of the Bible, but its concern is not limited to these texts (against Childs). Rather the continuities and

discontinuities of the monotheistic movement may be grasped more sharply through additional intertextual comparisons with texts documenting other religious movements of experience of and reflection on the divine.

9. Biblical theology encourages not only the critique of hidden or open ideologies in the act of interpretation, but also the critique of ideologies in the biblical texts themselves. It welcomes especially the feminist critique of ideologies in the composition and reception of biblical texts.

10. Biblical theology wishes to serve all readers interested in the diverse theological potential of the biblical texts. It seeks the mutually critical dialogue with all users of the Bible, including those Jews and Christians who use the Bible as Scripture within their respective religious communities and faith traditions.

11. As a cooperative project biblical theology seeks the contributions and critical challenges of all critical theories within the academy, for example, literary criticism, historical criticism, cultural criticism, and social criticism. Biblical theology thus could become an example for a critical and open ended cooperation between different branches of knowledge from within theological faculties and beyond.

#### IV. THE POTENTIAL OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY (pp. 247-248)

Biblical theology as envisaged here is only a part, though a very important one, of the larger Christian theological project. Theology as a second-order activity serves all those who have an interest in the critical reflection on God's self-disclosure in human history. Biblical theology offers such a reflection with regard to the development of monotheism within the social, literary, and religious context of Israel, the prophetic critique of certain forms of theology, the liturgical, historical, liberationist, sapiential, and providential reflection on God in the texts of the Hebrew Bible, and the diverse reflections on the experience of God in the ministry, passion, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and of his followers in the texts of the New Testament. As such, biblical theology serves the larger project of reflecting on human experiences of God's presence and absence in this universe. Benefiting from the rich hermeneutical tradition, from feminist, philosophical, political, liberationist, ecological, and cosmological critiques of Jewish and Christian traditions, it seems to many theologians today a promising risk to raise again the question of God. Although thoroughly conscious of the ideological baggage that this question carries, we may nevertheless be able to discuss the traces of God in our universe, and as part of this task attend anew to the reflection on God by our biblical, nonbiblical, and postbiblical fellow humans, past and present. Instead of violating the texts of the Bible once more by imposing on them well-known or new theological ideologies, we may be able to reread these texts within the larger framework of an interdisciplinary scholarly community. Instead of looking for proofs to suggest that our confessional ideologies and preferred social or moral concerns were always right, we may

look again for the manifestations of God beyond these ideological obsessions. The fact that so many of the existing biblical theologies are unsatisfactory must not be used as an excuse from attending to the challenge of cultivating a new sense for the development, continuities, and discontinuities of the various strands of biblical reflection on God. Even the "misuse" of hermeneutics by theologians in the past does not offer sufficient reason to discourage biblical and theological interpreters of the Bible from developing common research projects on the question which seems to matter to most people, namely, the question of God."

New Biblical Theologies (p. 249)

Thirty centuries of patriarchal, confessional, colonial, authoritarian, and other ideological distortions of references to God point to a very discouraging legacy. But then there are the prophets old and new; there are the women and men who, like Jesus, have resisted religious tyranny and ideology and have searched for God's mysterious presence beyond the control of religious, theistic, and atheistic systems. I am therefore convinced that new, open, interdisciplinary, critical, and self-critical reflections on this mystery will find much encouragement and challenge from an equally open, interdisciplinary, critical, and self-critical theological reading of the Bible.