

B. S. CHILDS, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, Minneapolis 1992. *Prologomena*

The Developing of the Discipline of Biblical Theology

1. The Developing of the Discipline

It has long been recognized that the term 'Biblical Theology' is ambiguous. It can either denote a theology contained within the Bible, or a theology which accords with the Bible (Ebeling, 'The Meaning', 79). The first definition understands the task of Biblical Theology to be a descriptive, historical one which seeks to determine what was the theology of the biblical authors themselves. The second understands the task of Biblical Theology to be a constructive, theological one which attempts to formulate a modern theology compatible in some sense with the Bible. From one perspective the entire modern history of the discipline of Biblical Theology can be interpreted as the effort to distinguish between these two definitions and to explore the important implications of the distinction.

The history of the discipline began to be first outlined in the nineteenth century in monographs and in essays (Diestel, Kähler, Holtzmann); however, within the last few decades several detailed and highly informative studies have broken fresh ground in tracing the rise of this modern biblical discipline (cf. Kraus, Merk, Zimmerli, Frei, Stuhlmacher, Gunneweg). In addition, important books and articles have pursued the individual contributions of key figures (e.g. Hornig on Semler; Smend on de Wette and Ewald; Morgan on Wrede and Schlatter, etc.). Finally, several comprehensive bibliographies of the modern debate over Biblical Theology have recently appeared which serve as valuable guides into the present status of the discussion (Reventlow; *JBTh* I). For these reasons it does not seem necessary once again to review in detail this history of scholarship, but rather to summarize the consensus and to focus on the hermeneutical and theological implications which derive from the history.

There is general agreement that Biblical Theology as a discrete discipline within the field of biblical studies is a post-Reformation development. Although the Bible was much studied earlier, it is argued that during the period of the early

and mediaeval church the Bible functioned within a dogmatic ecclesiastical framework in a subservient role in order to support various traditional theological systems. The Reformation signalled a change in emphasis by its appeal to the Bible as the sole authority in matters of faith, nevertheless the Reformers provided only the necessary context for the subsequent developments without themselves making the decisive move toward complete independence from ecclesial tradition. Only in the post-Reformation period did the true beginnings of a new approach emerge.

Kraus (18ff.) has made the interesting case that already at the end of the sixteenth century there had appeared a form of 'dogmatic biblicism' (e.g. Flacius), but the actual term 'Biblical Theology' was first used in the seventeenth century (cf. the debate in Ebeling, Kraus, Merk). The adjectival use of the term biblical, which at first seems tautological when defining Christian theology, derives from the polemical context out of which a new understanding of the Bible emerged. On the one hand, German pietists objected to the dominance of scholasticism and they appealed rather to a theology based solely on the Bible, that is, to a Biblical Theology. On the other hand, rationalists called for a return to the 'simple' and 'historical' religion of the Bible apart from complex ecclesiastical formulations, that is, to a Biblical Theology. It is hardly surprising therefore that in a four volume *Biblische Theologie* (1771f.) G. T. Zachariä fused the elements of pietism with rationalism, and struggled for a historical interpretation while still assuming the church's doctrine of scriptural inspiration.

The widely recognized significance of J. P. Gabler lies in his attempt to establish methodological clarity respecting the subject matter of Biblical Theology. In his now famous *oratio* of 1787 he set out in the title his basic concern: 'A discourse on the proper distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology and the correct delimitation of their boundaries' (cf. the ET). Gabler began by sharply distinguishing Biblical Theology which he characterized as a historical discipline (*e genere historico*) from dogmatic theology which he described as didactic in nature. He argued that much of the confusion regarding the Bible had arisen by mixing religion which was transparent and simple with theology which was subtle, subjective and changeable. Gabler then proceeded to set forth various exegetical steps for properly handling the Bible as a historical discipline.

First, the text was to be carefully studied and classified according to its

historical period, authorship, and linguistic conventions. A second step involved a comparison of the various parts in order to discern the agreement or disagreement of the different biblical authors much as one would handle

any other system of philosophy. Only when the interpreter had filtered the biblical material through these two stages was he prepared for the crucial third step of distinguishing in the material that which was universally true (*notiones universae*) from the temporal. This 'pure Biblical theology' was then in a form suitable for reflection by dogmatic theology. It was fully consistent with Gabler's hermeneutics when he subsequently made specific the distinction between '*auslegen*' which was a philological historical interpretation of the text and '*erklären*' which was an attempt to determine the true causes lying behind the particular construals.

In spite of the clarity of Gabler's appeal for a historical reading of the Bible, other factors shortly entered which blurred the developments of the discipline. Seen from Gabler's perspective, the next generation of scholars such as Ammon and de Wette confused his historical criterion by introducing a heavily philosophical reading under the influence of Kant and de Fries which again focussed on symbolic interpretation of ethical concepts from the Bible. The first serious application of Gabler's hermeneutical system emerged in the two volume Biblical Theology of G. L. Bauer who for the first time separated the discipline into an Old Testament and a New Testament theology. The significance of this move not only reflected the growing complexity of the discipline, but far more importantly the growing conviction that the historical discontinuities between the testaments defied all attempts to maintain a traditional canonical unity.

The history of Biblical Theology throughout the nineteenth century and well into the early twentieth century shows clearly the effect of the emancipation of the discipline from its dependency on ecclesiastical doctrine. First of all, with few exceptions the field divided into two separate disciplines of Old and New Testament theologies, which at first continued to retain the term Biblical Theology. Even M. Kähler conceded that this division was inevitable. In his article on Biblical Theology in the *TRE* Zimmerli pursued the history of Old Testament and Biblical Theology by tracing a line from Bauer, Vatke, Ewald, Oehler, and Schultz into the twentieth century, while O. Merk, in his companion article, followed a New Testament trajectory from Baur, Hofmann, Weiss, Holtzmann, Kähler, and Wrede into the twentieth century. Significantly, Gabler's legacy of an historical approach as constitutive of Biblical Theology was almost universally assumed by both conservative (Oehler, Weiss) and

liberal scholars (Schultz, Holtzmann).

Secondly, along with the concern to maintain the independence of Biblical Theology from dogmatic theology, there went a search for a new

philosophical framework by which to integrate the biblical material over and above a straightforward historical reading. Various forms of philosophical idealism dominated the early nineteenth century, such as the Hegelianism of Baur and Vatke. Even the quite fresh construals of von Hofmann and Ewald reflected a heavy mixture of romantic and idealistic tendencies which often continued to be filtered through systematic theologies such as Schleiermacher's. By the end of the nineteenth century the impact of various concepts of historical evolution became pervasive (cf. Schultz) and were joined with the earlier philosophical theories of the growth of mankind through organic stages (C. F. Heyne). Ironically, even those scholars who strove for a more objective description of the diversity within the Bible, often fell back into portraying different doctrinal systems (Weiss) which satisfied neither the demands of historical nor theological coherence.

Thirdly, among many critical scholars there was a growing assumption that Biblical Theology as an academic discipline was largely anachronistic and was an unfortunate vestige from a past era. Gunkel expressed this general attitude toward Biblical Theology in a classic essay when he summarized all the history- of-religion's arguments against Biblical Theology and concluded:

The recently experienced phenomenon of Biblical Theology's being replaced by the history of Israelite religion is to be explained from the fact that the spirit of historical investigation has now taken the place of a

traditional doctrine of inspiration (*RGG²*, I, 1090f.). At least for a time which extended well into the twentieth century, it looked as if

Gunkel's characterization was being confirmed.

2. Ebeling's Suggestions for Redefining the Discipline

By the end of the nineteenth century the full problematic of Biblical Theology had emerged with great clarity. On the one hand, Gabler's case for the independence of Biblical Theology from dogmatic constraints appeared to many to be fully justified. On the other hand, the pursuit of Biblical Theology as a historical discipline had resulted in the dissolution of the very discipline itself. In the light of this situation, it was a major contribution of G. Ebeling in the 1950s

to have clarified the full dimensions of the problems which confronted Biblical Theology in the wake of the historical study of the Bible by means of a classic essay ('Meaning').

Ebeling makes the following points. First, the theological unity of the Old and New Testaments has become extremely fragile and it seems now impossible to combine the testaments on the same level in order to produce a unified theology. Secondly, the inner unity of each of the respective testaments has been cast into such doubt that a theology of the New Testament consists largely in classifying the discrete theologies of its different authors. Thirdly, the study of the Old and New Testaments as a historical discipline can no longer be limited to the so-called canonical scriptures since this category is ultimately dogmatic and ecclesiastical. Rather, the use of all historical sources which are pertinent to the subject is required without distinction. Finally, the strongest objection has arisen even to the application of the term 'theology' in describing the contents of the Bible. At least the term 'religion' should be substituted and the traditional terminology of revelation eschewed within the historical enterprise.

In sum, the basic question which has emerged in the aftermath of Gabler's defining of the enterprise as a historical discipline is to what extent the subject matter has been so dismantled as to call into question its very existence and viability. Before this challenge Ebeling has then attempted to address the problem in a programmatic fashion by redefining the discipline of Biblical Theology (96). He writes:

Its task would accordingly be defined thus: In 'biblical theology' the theologian who devotes himself specially to studying the connection between the Old and New Testaments has to give an account of his understanding of the Bible as a whole, *i.e.* above all of the theological problems that come of inquiring into the inner unity of the manifold testimony of the Bible.

Ebeling's redefining of the task of Biblical Theology has, in my opinion, made a valuable start toward reconstituting the field. However, because Ebeling has not in fact pursued his proposal further since its publication in 1955, I would like to explore his proposal according to my own concept of the field. I am aware that Ebeling would have developed this definition in a different fashion, but I am grateful for his stimulus and initial insight.

First, Ebeling's definition is, in one sense, a return to a pre-Gabler position in so far as he once again joins the historical and theological elements. The task of

Biblical Theology is defined as a modern theologian's reflection on various aspects of the Bible. The task is not confined simply to a historical description of the original author's intention. It is not surprising that recently others who have sought to reconstitute Biblical Theology, have also attacked the Gabler legacy of a sharp separation between the historical and the theological components (cf. Kraus, Breukelman, Ollenburger). Already in 1965 when K. Stendahl defended once again his earlier position of the sharp distinction between the historical and the theological aspects of Biblical Theology ('Method'), his respondent, Avery Dulles, expressed his deep methodological misgivings. 'Theology in its completeness is an undivided whole, in which biblical and systematic elements are inextricably intertwined' (216). Obviously, just how the two elements relate must be further debated, but the need for the two aspects to interact from the start seems basic for any new Biblical Theology.

Secondly, there is an important aspect in which Gabler's original proposal has been fully sustained by Ebeling. The task of Biblical Theology does contain an essential, descriptive component in which Old and New Testament specialists continue to make clear 'the manifold testimony of the Bible'. Any new approach to the discipline must extend and indeed develop the Enlightenment's discovery that the task of the responsible exegete is to hear each testament's own voice, and both to recognize and pursue the nature of the Bible's diversity. However, an important post-Enlightenment correction is needed which rejects the widespread historicist's assumption that this historical goal is only objectively realized when the interpreter distances himself from all theology.

Thirdly, the biblical theologian's reflection is directed to the connection between the Old and New Testaments in an effort 'to give an account of his understanding of the Bible as a whole ... inquiring into its inner unity'. Biblical Theology has as its proper context the canonical scriptures of the Christian church, not because only this literature influenced its history, but because of the peculiar reception of this corpus by a community of faith and practice. The Christian church responded to this literature as the authoritative word of God, and it remains existentially committed to an inquiry into its inner unity because of its confession of the one gospel of Jesus Christ which it proclaims to the world. It was therefore a fatal methodological mistake when the nature of the Bible was described solely in categories of the history of religion, a move which could only develop in the direction of contesting the integrity of the canon and of denying the legitimacy of its content as theology.

Finally, it is highly significant that Ebeling still speaks of the ‘testimony’ of the Bible. The implications of describing the subject matter of the Bible as witness are crucial in any redefining of the discipline. The role of the Bible is not being understood simply as a cultural expression of ancient peoples, but as a testimony pointing beyond itself to a divine reality to which it bears witness. To speak of the Bible now as scripture further extends this insight because it implies its continuing role for the church as a vehicle of God’s will. Such an approach to the Bible is obviously confessional. Yet the Enlightenment’s alternative proposal which was to confine the Bible solely to the arena of human experience is just as much a philosophical commitment. In sum, the paradox of much of Biblical Theology was its attempt to pursue a theological discipline within a framework of Enlightenment’s assumptions which necessarily resulted in its frustration and dissolution.

As part of our reflection on the history of the discipline, it seems appropriate to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the current models for doing Biblical Theology. Only after this task has been done will there be an appeal made to earlier classic theological models as a means of enriching any new attempt of reconstituting the field of Biblical Theology.

Current Models for Biblical Theology

The intention of this section is not to review the various modern attempts at Biblical Theology in any exhaustive manner. A variety of recent monographs and articles has already performed in part this task (Reventlow, Goldingay, Stuhlmacher, Seebass, etc.) Rather, I hope to chart the range of methods which are currently being used and to offer a brief evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses in order to establish a context for my own methodological suggestions. At the outset it is important to understand that the divisions between approaches remain somewhat artificial and that often an author will make use of several different models.

1. Biblical Theology within the Categories of Dogmatic Theology

Even before Gabler’s definitive essay there had been a growing tendency of some biblical scholars to launch attacks against dogmatic theology with an appeal for a return to the historical roots of Christianity (e.g. already in the seventeenth century: Grotius, LeClerc, etc.). Dissatisfaction focussed on the imposition of dogmatic rubrics which were foreign to the biblical text, and the use of scripture in the form of *dicta probantia* which served largely to

buttress traditional dogmatic systems, Gabler's call for separating biblical studies as a descriptive, historical discipline from dogmatic theology as a philosophical, constructive discipline struck a welcome note for many and served to initiate a process of emancipating biblical studies from ecclesiastical restraints. There is today a widespread modern consensus that it was absolutely necessary for biblical studies to seek its independence in achieving its own integrity as a discipline, and it has become common for biblical scholars to focus on the goal of independent, historically objective description of the biblical literature.

Nevertheless, traditional dogmatic rubrics continued to be used by some scholars, especially in the English-speaking world, throughout the nineteenth century, largely impervious to the earlier criticism (e.g. Alexander). What might seem even more surprising is that vestiges of Christian dogmatics continued

unabated throughout the twentieth century by critical scholars who were often far removed in orientation from traditional theology. One thinks, for example, of the systematic rubrics of L. Koehler in his *Old Testament Theology*, or of A. Richardson in his *New Testament Theology*, which in both cases seriously affected the interpretation of the biblical content.

Yet upon further reflection, the issue of the use of dogmatic categories in the study of the Bible is far more complex than often assumed and touches on difficult philosophical and hermeneutical problems. Can one actually read a text meaningfully without some sort of conceptual framework? Indeed it has become obvious that much of the most profound and critical reflection on the Bible operated with various philosophical and theological categories, often as a vehicle for the critical, descriptive task (e.g. Schlatter). The great giants of biblical study from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (de Wette, Baur, Wellhausen, Bultmann, Käsemann, von Rad) all worked within certain dogmatic and philosophical traditions.

In my judgment, the issue of the use of dogmatic categories for Biblical Theology calls for a careful reformulation. The often used cliché of 'freedom from dogma' seems now largely rhetorical. Nor can the categories of historical versus dogmatic be seen as intractable rivals. Rather, the issue turns on the quality of the dogmatic construal. It is undoubtedly true that in the history of the discipline traditional dogmatic rubrics have often stifled the close hearing of the biblical text, but it is equally true that exegesis done in conscious opposition to dogmatics can be equally stifling and superficial (cf. G. Steiner's devastating review of the Alter-Kermode volume). Nor is it helpful to suggest that the use of a more 'liberal' dogmatic system would

resolve the problem as was unfortunately illustrated by M. Burrows' unsuccessful volume on Biblical Theology.

In sum, the use of dogmatic theological categories in the task of Biblical Theology touches on a basic problem of all interpretation and carries with it both the risk of obfuscation and the potential of genuine illumination. This balance between promise and threat cannot be adequately assessed by a general dismissal of all dogmatics, but must be tested in terms of adequate response to the continuing coercion of the biblical text itself.

2. Allegorical or Typological Approaches

Throughout the early and mediaeval periods of the Christian church the appeal to

an allegorical or typological sense of scripture was an essential part of biblical interpretation (cf. Lubac). As is well-known, the Reformers increasingly attacked the use of allegory as obscuring the Word of God, and emphasized the literal sense of the text. Since the Enlightenment the developing historical critical method laid stress on recovering the historical sense and generally dismissed the allegorical as fanciful. Occasionally in the nineteenth century a defence of the applicative senses was attempted, but the approach remained suspect to most critical scholarship.

However, beginning in the twentieth century there was a powerful rebirth of interest in the subject, spurred in part by Goppelt's dissertation in 1938 (*Typos*), and a reappraisal of traditional patristic usage of allegory by Roman Catholic and Anglican scholars (e.g. Daniélou, Hebert, Lampe and Woollcombe). In addition, interest in typology gained new prestige by a new sophisticated defence of such leading scholars as von Rad, Eichrodt, and H.W. Wolff. At the height of the debate over its legitimate role in Biblical Theology during the 50s and 60s, there arose an equally strong voice of opposition which rejected it completely in the name of critical scholarship (Bultmann, Baumgärtel, Hesse).

A basic feature in the defence of typology was the sharp distinction which its defenders drew between allegory and typology. It was argued that allegory deprecated the role of history and imposed an arbitrary, philosophical reading of the biblical text akin to Philo. W. Vischer's exegesis (*Witness*) was severely attacked by both Eichrodt and von Rad for being allegorical. In contrast, typology was viewed as an extension of the literal sense of historical events in a subsequent adumbration and served to signal the correspondence between redemptive events in a single history of salvation.

Typology was considered closely akin to prophecy and fulfilment and thought to be a major New Testament category in relating to the Old Testament. In a book such as Grelot's *Sens Chrétien de l'Ancien Testament*, the typological approach was developed into a full-blown Biblical Theology, but among most critically trained Protestants, even when favourably disposed in principle to the method, typology tended to remain strictly on the periphery, affecting hermeneutical theory rather than actual exegesis (cf. the essays of von Rad and Wolff in Westermann (ed.), *Essays*).

Certainly the sharpest attack against the typological approach within the modern debate was that launched by James Barr ('Typology and Allegory'). Barr was at pains to demonstrate that in terms of method there was no basic

difference between allegory and typology. Both derive from a 'resultant system' in which the text is construed from the perspective of an outside system brought to bear upon it, and that the difference between allegory and typology depends largely upon the content of the resultant system being applied. Further Barr argued that the New Testament seemed unaware of a distinction between typology and allegory on the grounds of history-relatedness. He concluded that the distinction arose largely from a modern event-orientated Biblical Theology —God acts in history—and could not be sustained. In sum, Barr characterized the New Testament's use of the Old as a different sort of operation from exegesis, and no modern approach such as typology could bridge the discrepancy.

In my opinion, Barr has mounted a strong case against the sharp methodological separation of typology and allegory and demonstrated its relation to a peculiar modern theology of divine acts in history. Yet I am far from convinced that Barr's analysis has really touched to the heart of the theological problem related to biblical typology. The issue turns on the nature of the biblical referent and the effort of both the Old Testament and the New Testament authors to extend their experience of God through figuration in order to depict the unity of God's one purpose. (cf. especially H. Frei's illuminating discussion in *Eclipse*, 2ff.). Barr's own treatment of the relation of the testaments (*Old and New in Interpretation*, 149ff.), correctly emphasizes the role of the Old Testament as a testimony to the time before Christ's coming, but fails to deal adequately with the theological claim of an ontological as well as soteriological unity of the two testaments, which lies at the heart of the New Testament's application of the Old (cf. [John 1. 1-5](#); [Col. 1. 15-20](#); [Heb. 1. 2-3](#)). Barr speaks of his 'Trinitarian' approach, but seems to confine himself to the 'economic' rather than also to the 'immanent' Trinity as well.

In sum, the problems of interpretation with which typology and allegory wrestled, even if poorly formulated, touch on basic theological issues of the Christian faith which have not been satisfactorily resolved. Certainly the conformity of the two testaments cannot be correctly understood as merely lying on the level of culture, tradition, and religion.

3. Great Ideas or Themes

In his initial proposal Gabler sought to filter the time-conditioned ideas of the various biblical authors in such a way that one could distil from the biblical

material those ‘universal ideas’ which were ‘pure and unmixed with foreign things’. These timeless ideas could then be appropriated into a new dogmatic theology. It is hardly surprising that this legacy of idealistic philosophy which contrasted the particular with the general, the temporal with the eternal, the peripheral with the essential, should continue to find adherents. Particularly for a Christian theology which envisioned Jesus’ message as one which transcended the particularity of Judaism and which summarized the essence of true religion, the Old Testament appeared to be on a lower level of a national cult much in need of filtering. To be sure, this misreading of the two testaments underwent major criticism already in the early decades of the twentieth century, both from the side of radical historical criticism (Wrede, Schweitzer), as well as from kerygmatic theology (Barth, Bultmann). As a result, very few modern biblical scholars were completely comfortable with the static categories of this idealistic philosophical tradition.

Nevertheless, the concern to isolate particular ideas or themes from the Bible, when stripped of their overt philosophical overtones, continued to have a certain attraction. First, to select a central theme from both testaments provides the scholar with a far more manageable area for study and when done well, serves to illuminate theologically a wide area. One thinks, for example, of Schlatter’s remarkable study of faith (*Der Glaube im Neuen Testament*). Secondly, most modern thematic studies attempt to structure in an historical dimension within an initially topical selection of material and resolutely resist any appeal to timeless ideas (cf. Buber on *Kingship*, or Clavier, *Les Variétés*). Thirdly, there are certain biblical warrants for the theological focus on themes within the redactional process which often strove to summarize and unify disparate traditions for a paraenetic application (e.g. the Dtr. redaction of II Kings).

In spite of these reasons, some inherent difficulties remain which call for constant critical attention when structuring a Biblical Theology. By making a topical selection one runs the danger of distorting the whole by dividing material which belongs together or joining elements which do not organically cohere. Then again, in terms of a Biblical Theology of both testaments, a theme which seems appropriate for one testament can seriously distort the other. For example, Terrien's rubric of 'elusive presence' may illuminate the Old Testament to some degree, but, in my judgment, seriously obfuscates the New. Finally, it is somewhat ironical to note that there is a certain affinity between some of Bultmann's existential categories (e.g. *Entweltlichung*) and the timeless

categories of idealism which he so vigorously rejects. In sum, the thematic approach to Biblical Theology cannot be dismissed categorically, but its success depends largely on how critically and skilfully it is employed.

4. Heilsgeschichte or History of Redemption

Although the use of *Heilsgeschichte* as a technical term stems from the nineteenth century, the theological appeal to history as the arena of salvation has deep roots within Christian theology, extending as far back as Irenaeus. Of course, it is often argued that its roots are actually biblical, appearing in both testaments, and thus constitutive for Biblical Theology (cf. the recent discussion by Gnuse).

The initial problem in evaluating the claim lies in the wide diversity of opinion regarding the sense of the term and its role within the redemptive economy. For some older biblical theologians (e.g. Vos) the history of revelation was simply the objective events reported in the Bible which were thought congruent with any other occurrences of world history, and which developed organically in a procession of revelation (*Biblical Theology*, 14ff.). However, more recently *Heilsgeschichte* has usually been described as a special form of history, often depicted as intertwined but distinct from ordinary history (Cullmann). Thus the distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie*, which was first developed by M. Kähler was held by many to be essential.

In his very creative book *Eyes of Faith*, Paul Minear was fully aware of the centrality of the historical dimension; however, biblical history was envisioned by him as a special quality of time, a *kairos*, captured in memory and expectation which defied all systematization. For others, the distinctive feature of *Heilsgeschichte* lay in its traditio-historical trajectory which spanned both testaments. Von Rad appeared to construe it as a history of

continuing actualization of Israel's sacred tradition through which dynamic events divine reality emerged ('Typological Interpretation'). Most recently H. Gese, followed by P. Stuhlmacher, has further extended the category to include a single traditio- historical trajectory encompassing both testaments in one unified movement.

The great strength of an appeal to *Heilsgeschichte* lies in its concern to deal seriously with the particularity and the dynamic movement of history as an essential feature of Biblical Theology. It was not by chance that scholars like Cocceius appealed to an unfolding sequence of Israel's covenants in an effort to break out of the static categories of scholastic orthodoxy. Or again, von

Hofmann developed his understanding of history as prophecy in an attempt to escape the atomization of scripture found in a rigid, rationalistic system of prediction and fulfilment. Finally, there is something intrinsically Christian in seeing the coming of Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of the promises made to historical Israel and only realized in the last days after a long anticipation. Certainly something important is lost when the Old Testament message is interpreted as a static propositional formula as suggested, for example, by Baumgärtel.

Nevertheless, the appeal to the various forms of *Heilsgeschichte* as a category by which to organize a Biblical Theology has continued to encounter some major problems. First of all, the difficulty in defining the term with precision continues to plague this approach. Often the term reflects a heavy philosophical component such as the Hegelian flavour of von Hofmann's usage, or it becomes a palid abstraction which is devoid of the concrete historical events in the life of Israel (cf. Gunneweg's criticism, 'Theologie', 44). Then again, the attempt to use the concept as a major means of linking the testaments finds no warrant in many parts of the New Testament. When Conzelmann successfully isolated a form of *Heilsgeschichte* in Luke/Acts, the general effect was to undercut Cullmann's theological approach which had sought to encompass all of the New Testament witness, including Paul, within this rubric.

There is an additional problem which is equally serious. Usually the appeal to a *Heilsgeschichte* found the theological continuity between the testaments to lie in events behind the biblical text, and it required a process of critical reconstruction to extract the real theological data from the biblical text. This assumption is characteristic of C. Westermann's approach (*Das Alte Testament und Jesus Christus*), but of many others as well. Yet for the New Testament the vehicle for the witness to God's redemptive will is most

frequently found in the biblical text itself and the interpretation of the scripture is central to the disclosure of this divine purpose.

Then again, there is the important issue as to whether an emphasis on *Heilsgeschichte* tends to imply that theological reflection on the Bible always proceeds in one direction, namely, from the Old to the New. At times one gains the impression that for some biblical scholars Biblical Theology is New Testament theology which retains a certain 'openness' to the Old Testament as the origin of certain traditions and the source of New Testament imagery. Yet a strong case can be made that Biblical Theology of both testaments must issue in

theological reflection which also moves in the reverse direction from the New Testament back to the Old, and that such crucial theological dialectic is threatened by any uncritical appeal to a unilinear, one-directional trajectory into the future.

Finally, my strongest reservation regarding the use of a concept of *Heilsgeschichte* focusses on the recent attempt by Paul Hanson to reformulate the concept in the service of a new Biblical Theology (*Dynamic Transcendence* and *The People Called*). Within the concrete historical development of Israel which he reconstructs, Hanson envisions a continuing strand of tradition embracing a vision of human liberation which he entitles 'dynamic transcendence'. Alongside this enlightened movement runs other rival and competitive tendencies which Hanson regards as secondary. What emerges is a history of value judgments in which Israel's true witness 'in community' is identified with such features as aid to the oppressed, formation of an egalitarian society, and the spontaneous freedom of the spirit, whereas those groups supporting any form of social hierarchy, legal, ecclesiastical or ritual structures are deemed oppressive and retrograde. The ironical feature in this form of Biblical Theology is that in the name of objective, socio-historical analysis such a highly ideological construal of theology could emerge which frequently turns into unabashed propaganda for modern liberal Protestant theology.

5. Literary Approaches to Biblical Theology

One of the most important aspects of biblical study during the last several decades, especially in the English-speaking world, has been a new focus on the literary approach to the Bible. Interest revolves about the study of the Bible as literature when it seeks to apply the common tools of comparative literature in understanding the text. This recent history of scholarship has been chronicled many times of late and need not be repeated (cf. Barton,

Poland, McKnight, etc.) The present concern is limited to pursuing this approach in relation to Biblical Theology.

Initially the appeal to the subject matter of the Bible as 'story' served to shift the focus away from the perplexing problem of historical referentiality which had plagued the earlier forms of Biblical Theology. However, to suggest that the new emphasis was simply a toned-down version of *Heilsgeschichte* would be to miss the very new dynamic of biblical interpretation which was being proposed. In his early essays, when arguing against the model of the 'acts of God', Barr

began to make use of the term 'story' as capturing those features which were essential to the Old Testament, especially the cumulative quality of the narrative ('Story and History', *Old and New*). Later he pursued in more detail the advantages of such an approach and defended a variety of 'non-informational' readings of the Bible as an important alternative to traditional emphasis on a theological focus (*The Bible in Modern World*, 75ff.; cf. also Ritschl).

Undoubtedly the most profound attempt to investigate the hermeneutics lying behind the various forms of so-called 'narrative theology' was offered by H. Frei in his book *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. Frei set up the central hermeneutical problem of the Bible in the wake of the Enlightenment by describing the growing inability to read the narrative dimension of the Bible because of a philosophical shift in the understanding of referentiality since the Reformation. Frei then proposed a way of viewing the Bible akin to a realistic novel, which shared a manner of rendering reality which was basically non-referential. Later he attempted to illustrate his approach in a study of the Gospels by pursuing the relation of Christ's identity to his presence (*The Identity of Jesus Christ*).

In retrospect, it is clear that Frei caught the imagination of a whole generation of North American scholars. He seemed to provide a most promising way of again linking Bible and theology. Many systematic theologians had long insisted it was a confusion of categories to imagine that the Bible contained doctrine or deposits of revealed truth (E. Farley and P. C. Hodgson, *Christian Theology*, 48). For many, narrative theology seemed to provide a way of construing the Bible religiously without concern for ideas of revelation or ontology. D. Patrick illustrated the new spirit when he sought to explore an understanding of God as a new form of Biblical Theology under the title *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament*. Only in the final chapters does he attempt, in a somewhat tortuous manner, to relate his literary characterization of God to the problem of God's reality.

A wide variety of different experiments in Biblical Theology have emerged in recent years, all of which fit loosely under the category of a literary approach. Prominent among these are the various kinds of structuralism, reader-oriented analysis, exegesis as intertextuality, and forms of comparative midrash. Perhaps one of the most important contributions of the focus on text as literature lies in the attempt to explore the nature of the 'poetic', that is, non-scientific language in its potential to construct a new vision of reality. Particularly fruitful has been

the adaptation of Ricoeur's insight into metaphorical language as a process of creating a new symbolic order which expands the scope of human experience of the transcendent (cf. for example, Crossen). The language itself, rather than some form of history, provides the realm in which the events occur through the medium of human experience.

An important effect of these literary methods has been the seriousness with which the biblical text itself has been handled. The contrast is often quite striking with, say, the *Heilsgeschichte* method whose interest was located behind the text. Again, the literary method has greatly increased the level of sophistication in which questions of meaning, sense, and reference are treated, and great insight has been derived from the help of so-called secular literary critics. Finally, the literary approach has served to liberate the study of the Bible from the paralysis which issued from the endless debates over 'faith and history' in the period after World War II. Clearly the study of biblical texts in their own right has greatly benefited.

The contribution of the literary approach to Biblical Theology has been less clear. In spite of James Barr's assurances that as 'those people come to experience the Bible as literature ... pressure for a "theological" reading of the Bible will begin to fade ...' (*Bible as Literature*, 61), the effects are far from clear. The challenge to read the Bible, not as sacred scripture but as a 'classic' devoid of an authoritative role, has not in fact resulted in any robust theological reflection which is even in the same league with Barth and Bultmann. M. Sternberg, whose own religious categories are avowedly Jewish, has sensed a basic genre issue when he comments: 'Were the (biblical) narratives written or read as fiction, then God would turn from the lord of history into a creature of the imagination with the most disastrous results ... Hence the Bible's determination to sanctify and compel literal belief in the past' (*Poetics*, 32). Therefore, even from a non-theological analysis of the literature's genre, the category of fiction appears strangely inappropriate when applied to the Bible.

It is one thing to suggest that biblical scholars have not adequately resolved the problem of biblical referentiality; it is quite another to suggest that it is a non-issue. Moreover, I would argue that the attempt of many literary critics to by-pass the problem of biblical reality and refuse to distinguish between the text and the reality of its subject matter severely cripples the theological enterprise of Biblical Theology. It is basic to Christian theology to reckon with an extra-biblical reality, namely with the resurrected Christ who evoked the New

Testament witness. When H. Frei, in one of his last essays, spoke of 'midrash' as a text-creating reality, he moved in a direction, in my opinion, which for Christian theology can only end in failure ('The Literal Reading').

6. The Cultural-Linguistic Method

The modern appeal to language as a model for reconstituting Biblical Theology also takes a variety of different forms. German and French linguistic analysis has moved in directions quite distinct from the Anglo-Saxon world. The impact of Heidegger on Bultmann, or of Gadamer on von Rad has been well documented and cannot be pursued in this context (cf. Oeming). My concern is rather to focus on the stimulating proposal of George Lindbeck in his book, *The Nature of Doctrine* (cf. my *New Testament as Canon*, Excursus III, 541ff.). Lindbeck's proposal shares many features with those of Frei, especially that of 'intratextuality', but their emphases are distinct and not fully congruent.

Lindbeck's initial proposal of a 'cultural-linguistic' approach views religion as a kind of cultural or linguistic framework which shapes all of life and thought. Instead of deriving external features of religion from inner experience it reverses the direction and projects the former as derivative of the latter. The concern of the model lies in exploring the extent to which human experience is shaped, moulded, and constituted by cultural and linguistic forms as a means of construing reality. Doctrines function as rules for speech and action rather than as static propositions. Within the context of the Christian community scripture provided the 'lexical core' (81) for Christian discourse.

A central feature of Lindbeck's proposal in relation to the function of scripture is his emphasis on 'intratextuality'. The meaning of a text does not depend upon an outside referential verification, but scriptural meaning is understood only within a self-related whole. Intratextual theology 'redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating scripture into extra scriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which

absorbs the world, rather than the world the text. A scriptural world is thus able to absorb the universe' (117), and to become the self-interpreting guide for believing communities.

For my part, I am unconvinced that this is the way the Bible actually functions within the church. This proposal of the text creating its own world— some would call it fictive world—into which the reader is drawn has its origins far more in high church liturgical practice than from the Bible. Certainly throughout much of the mediaeval period, liturgy reflected a sharply dualistic

concept of reality comprising a realm of the sacred and the profane, and the Bible belonged to the former. However, what is so evident to any modern reader of the Bible is its very concrete, earthly quality which is not different from human experience. The sheer wonder of the gospel message is that into this real world of flesh and blood God has entered, and the call of Christian discipleship is to follow faithfully in this same world.

Lindbeck cites approvingly Karl Barth's phrase 'the strange new world within the Bible' as if to suggest that Barth also envisioned drawing a community of faith into the world of the Bible. However, this move hardly does justice to Barth. Rather for him the Bible above all bears witness to a reality outside the text, namely to God, and through the biblical text the reader is confronted with the Word of God who is Jesus Christ. In this regard, I fully agree with R. Thiemann's uneasiness with this proposal, when in a response to Lindbeck, he sees 'the real danger that in much of Lindbeck's essay talk about "text" stands in the place of talk about "God" ' (378).

In sum, to see the Bible as a type of symbol system construing reality into which the reader is invited to enter does not, in my opinion, accord with the model of biblical proclamation, whether by the Old Testament prophets or the New Testament apostles, in which God's word enters into our world to transform it. Once again as in the case with the literary model, the theological issue turns on doing full justice to both text and reality which remain dialectically related, neither to be separated nor fused.

7. Sociological Perspectives on Biblical Theology

It is difficult to subsume under one heading the wide variety of approaches to Biblical Theology which reflect a sociological interest. At least they all share a concern to take seriously the socio-cultural forces exerted on specific historical communities whose impact left a lasting mark on the shaping of

religious texts. These approaches vary greatly in respect to their attitude toward Biblical Theology.

There are some scholars who are overtly hostile to Biblical Theology and see the social approach as effectively undermining the traditional interest in the enterprise. N. Gottwald understands theology as a form of secondary ideological formulation which seeks to give expression to social phenomena in a conventional religious idiom, but which can be translated by sociological categories to establish material equivalents within a given social system. Biblical

Theology's demise has resulted from its failure to treat the religion of Israel as a social phenomenon (*Tribes*, 667). Equally as hostile is the position of Morton Smith who interprets the Old Testament largely as the product of self-serving political parties whose writings are mainly propaganda for a particular ideology. A theological dimension is ruled out of court by his initial socio-historical assumptions (*Palestinian Parties*, 11ff.) From the side of New Testament scholarship similar hostility to most forms of Biblical Theology, if for somewhat different reasons, has been voiced by both Strecker and by Räisänen.

This largely negative attitude, however, is by no means characteristic of the sociological approach in general which, on the contrary, is at pains to demonstrate the positive theological features of a socio-historical approach to the Bible. A very sophisticated statement of the hermeneutical issues at stake is offered by W. A. Meeks in which he seeks to establish a bridge between his own sociological study of the New Testament to the position of his Yale colleagues, H. Frei and G. Lindbeck. He argues that the emphasis upon the function of a biblical text in establishing a community's identity involves first of all understanding the text within a proper 'social embodiment' in which it serves as one part of a whole cultural symbol system for interpreting community existence. In my judgment, it remains a moot question to what extent trading on the functional theory of religion of such social historians as C. Geertz will contribute to a serious theological reflection on the Bible without a major threat of reductionism.

There is another very popular prominent approach to Biblical Theology which places the emphasis on the functional role of the Bible to shape, order, and critique the continuing life of the Christian community. A theologian, such as David Kelsey, argues that the authority of the Bible does not lie primarily in its content, but how it is used 'to empower new human identities' ('The Bible and Christian Theology', 395). Its meaning resides in its function to construe a Christian form of life. Another closely akin position

is that of B. Ollenburger who also describes Biblical Theology as a discipline which has its main responsibility 'for guarding, enabling and critiquing the church's self-conscious reflection on its praxis' ('Situating Biblical Theology', 53). For Ollenburger Biblical Theology does not mediate between text and systematic theological reflection but rather constitutes an activity directed specifically to Christian living.

My reaction to this ecclesiastically functional view of theology is to question whether one can speak meaningfully about faithful forms of life within the Christian community before first establishing the identity and will of God who in Jesus Christ calls the church into being, and whose purpose encompasses the entire creation. In sum, I remain highly critical of any theological position in which ecclesiology takes precedence over christology.

Finally, a brief word is in order regarding the continuing role of 'Liberation Theology' in the interpretation of the Bible. The enormous diversity of approaches makes any generalizations difficult and precarious, but it does seem fair to suggest they share in common the concern to situate reflection on the Bible within the context of the actual struggle of concrete historical communities with primary attention on issues of poverty, oppression, and justice. Indeed, it would be hard to contest the statement that such issues are a central part of the proclamation of the gospel. The controversial issue arises when theological positions are formulated as to how one understands the message of 'liberation' in Jesus Christ in relation to a wide variety of political and economic programmes which are directed toward human emancipation. It is one thing to reject a sharp separation between the spiritual and profane realms of human life; it is quite another to fuse the two without distinction. Often one senses a strong ideological filtering when the social historical interpretation of the Bible is characterized as 'materialistic' (cf. Schottroff and Stegemann, *Der Gott der kleinen Leute*).

Within recent years a great variety of popular books have appeared which have pursued various social issues related to the Bible from the perspective of Liberation Theology. Typical of this genre is the above-mentioned book of Schottroff and Stegemann or R. McAfee Brown's *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes*. The force of these books lies chiefly on the rhetorical side rather than careful biblical interpretation, but they have exercised considerable influence in some ecclesiastical circles in forming a new vision of the role of the Bible for today's world.

New interest in Biblical Theology has also emerged from the side of Feminist Theology (cf. e.g. P. Tribble). Up to this point, much of this writing has been on

a popular level, but it is also obvious that very shortly a whole new generation of well-trained women scholars will begin to make a more substantial contribution on a serious, technical level. In terms of Biblical Theology one can only hope that Feminist Theology will break out of its initial identification with liberal Protestant theology, and distinguish 'the forgotten voices of women' from those of Schleiermacher and Freud. Would that God would raise up in the new

generation of the church's scholars a Ms Calvin or a Martina Luther!

Finally, one of the most serious studies of Biblical Theology in the context of Liberation Theology is that offered by H.-J. Kraus (*Systematische Theologie*). It is unfair to characterize this massive book in a few lines. Kraus has long established his reputation within the field as few others. He has proven himself as a highly competent scholar in both Old and New Testaments, as an expert in the history of biblical interpretation, and as a learned Reformed theologian. It thus remains a puzzlement why his elaborate Biblical Theology—I am aware he does not so describe it—has left little impact on the field. Although filled with invaluable information, one leaves its study with very mixed feelings. Perhaps some of the difficulty lies in the style and format. It is written with a continual series of apodeictic sentences, but almost devoid of any sustained exegesis. Here the contrast with his mentor, Karl Barth, is most striking. Above all, Kraus' art of Biblical Theology often appears dominated by a form of Liberation Theology which seems to flatten everything in its path and to level the whole of the Bible to one refrain. It is with great sadness that one must conclude that the future of the discipline does not seem to lie in this direction.

8. Jewish Biblical Theology

In one sense, it is contradictory even to speak of a Jewish Biblical Theology. Generally Jewish scholars reject the term out of hand as a Christian discipline in which they have little interest (cf. J. Levenson, 'Why Jews are not Interested in Biblical Theology'). In an earlier volume (*Old Testament Theology*, 8), I argued that Jewish disinterest in Biblical Theology does not derive merely from Biblical Theology's traditional use of the New Testament along with the Old, but that Jews have a basically different understanding of how the Hebrew scriptures are appropriated religiously without the need of Biblical Theology.

Nevertheless, the issue is far more complex than at first might appear. Jews continue to reflect theologically on the Bible in a variety of different and creative ways. Whether this reflection should be called Biblical Theology is

actually a secondary issue. Far more important is this contribution both in terms of its own integrity as well as to a common theological use of the Bible. For an earlier generation Martin Buber's biblical studies proved enormously illuminating, possibly more to a Christian audience than to a Jewish. A similar judgment could be made respecting the writings of Abraham Heschel. During several decades M. Goshen-Gottstein has appealed to Jews to develop a theology

of the Hebrew scriptures, of *Tanakh*, but he has remained quite isolated in his programme. A more traditional Jewish approach is reflected in E. E. Urbach's extensive study of the theology of the rabbis in which he often traces the biblical roots of later rabbinic tradition. Again, J. Neusner has dealt with certain biblical topics such as the purity laws of the Pentateuch as a background to the subsequent growth of the tradition. Finally, M. Greenberg offers some incisive theological reflection on the proper function of the Bible within the life of contemporary Israel.

Some of the most creative theological reflection on the Bible has recently been done by younger Jewish scholars. One thinks of the several volumes of J. Levenson, or of the essays of A. Cooper, to name but a few. A very different genre of theology is offered by M. Wyschograd, but one which holds promise for both Jews and Christians, especially in the light of the author's profound knowledge of philosophy and traditional Christian theology. At this stage one can only appeal for an increased understanding between Jews and Christians whose history and experience differ so widely. Christians tend to dismiss as 'Pelagian' Jewish treatments of man, sin, and free will which have no relation to the tradition of Augustine, whereas Jews find much of Christian Biblical Theology still enmeshed in German philosophical idealism and closely tied to Christian triumphalism.

To summarize this chapter, the effort to sketch the full range of current attempts at Biblical Theology is necessarily incomplete. Nevertheless one gets a picture of a wide variety of different approaches, often sharing both strengths and weaknesses. The issues are too complex to suggest that there is one simple solution to the discipline's dilemma. Yet it is to be sincerely hoped that any new attempts in the future can profit from the efforts of the past.