

NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course aims to introduce to the major issues raised by the nature of what is called "New Testament Theology". After learning about the history and methodology of this type of theology and its situation in relation to Biblical Theology, the student will be able to identify the major theological themes of the New Testament, book by book, corpus by corpus, before judging whether a synthesis is possible for the entire New Testament. He will be able to ask himself whether there are really transversal theologies, and if so, to give examples of them (the kingdom of God according to the synoptic Gospels, the Christology of the Gospels, the theology of Luke and Acts, Johannine theology, Pauline theology, that of the Epistle to the Hebrews, general epistles, and finally). The first two chapters will serve to define the biblical theology of the New Testament, and to situate this approach in relation to other approaches (exegesis, systematic theology).

OBJECTIVES

At the end of the course, the student should be able to accomplish the following:

- Give the different definitions of Biblical Theology and the difficulties they raise (approaches, relationships with other theologies, etc.).
- Understand the issues of continuity/discontinuity between the two Testaments
- Explain briefly the state of research in New Testament theology.
- Situating the NT in the development of salvation history
- To have the main theological axes of each NT Book and to develop the main lines of the essential doctrines of the NT
- Linking NT biblical theology to other theological disciplines

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NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

Introduction

In the preface to the book *The nature of NTT* (2006), Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett described New Testament Theology as "a discipline which is not without its critics and the articulation of which is a very much contested area"¹. Even if there is disagreement and contestations about the nature of this discipline that some call 'The theology of the New Testament', the topic has generally a potentially central position within New Testament studies.

To read :

J. R. DONAHUE, « The changing shape of New Testament Theology », *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), p. 314-335.

Despite the complexity of issues surrounding NT theology and the lack of consensus on either its task or its method, it has been called "the summit, as it were, to which the arduous mountain paths of New Testament exegesis lead, and the vantage point from which one can look back upon them." NT theology presents a number of paradoxes. Articles multiply on the problems of the discipline; it is routinely pronounced dead. Yet, new journals and series of books emerge dedicated to the study of biblical theology. Comprehensive NT theologies continue to be produced, and monographs appear on particular aspects of NT theology [...]

Surveying a number of theologies produced in the last 40 years, Gerhard Hasel divides them according to approaches that are "thematic" (or descriptive), "existentialist" (Bultmann and his successors), "historical," and "salvation historical." The majority of NT theologies and the most significant ones are by Protestant scholars. The work of Max Meinertz published in 1950 is often called the first modern NT theology by a Catholic.

J. R. DONAHUE, « The changing shape of New Testament Theology », *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), p. 315-317.

¹ *The nature of NTT* (2006), p. xi.

I. History, method and nature of the New Testament Theology

1. Basic definitions and questions

Several definitions have been proposed. Many of them complement each other, others tend to contradict each other...Precisely because of the complexity of the discipline in question. I give here two examples of "operational" definitions from which we will try to understand this complexity and to enter progressively into the subject. It will then deal with several questions that the authors ask in an attempt to expose the difficult identity of the Theology of the New Testament. Yes, asking questions is very important to understand any subject!

We will assume and consider in advance both names, **New Testament theology** and **(The) theology of the New Testament**, as equivalent.

- After John Ashton, **New Testament theology** means "an interpretation of the NT designed to be religiously significant to present-day readers"².

- If we follow what is said in *Compelling Truth*, "**the theology of the New Testament** reveals God's planned revelation to people of Himself, His character, His attributes, and what He is doing in the world. This revelation began in Genesis, in the Old Testament, and continues through Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament, God reveals Himself as wholly man and wholly God in Jesus and as a dweller in the lives of His people in the Holy Spirit"³

Apart from the question of definition, the NTT asks other questions such as:

- which canon to consider? Is it necessary to include in this study the extra-canonical writings that are important for the understanding of the NT?

² John Ashton, "History and Theology in New Testament Studies", in C. Rawland – C. Tuckett, *The nature of NTT* (2006), p. 2.

³See "New Testament theology – What is it? ", on <https://www.compellingtruth.org/New-Testament-theology.html> (2 december 2020)

- Theology or Theologies of the NT? Hence the perplexity of using the definite article "The" in the title of the course.

- Would it be a theology or theologies to be drawn from NT documents as understood by biblical authors or an attempt by authors (theologians), throughout history, to understand what is said in the Bible from their own contexts, other sciences (social, human, etc.) and experiences? In other words, theology(ies) - from the NT - or theologization/ theologizing?

To read:

J.D.G. Dunn, *New Testament Theology: An Introduction*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2009 (*Introduction; *Ch. I: What is New Testament Theology?)

2. History and methods

- **Johann Philipp GABLER:** considered as founder of modern Biblical Theology, in his inaugural lecture to the Faculty of Altdorf, Germany, 1787⁴.

✓ Goal: to distinguish Scriptures and Dogma

Biblical theology has to be “pure and unmixed with foreign elements” that would provide dogmatic theology with the universal and unchanging truths of Scriptures.

✓ Biblical theology is historical in origin;

Dogmatic theology is didactic in nature, “teaching what each theologian philosophises rationally about divine things, according to the measure of his ability or of the times, age, place, sect, school, and other similar factors”.

✓ Biblical theology as befits its historical approach, is “always in accord with itself”, even though it may be elaborated in different ways, whereas Dogmatic theology is subject to change.

✓ Biblical theology has two tasks (for Gabler):

- (1) To provide an accurate historical description of the ideas found in the sacred writings
- (2) To compare these ideas with each other in order to determine which are universal and enduring. In this way, biblical theology can provide dogmatic theology with the enduring and universal truths of Scriptures.

N.B: Most of scholars followed the first Gabler's project (task), a historical presentation of the theology in Scriptures, abandoning the second one – providing dogmatic theology with the universal truths of Scriptures.

- **Georg Lorenz Bauer:** marked the beginning of NT Theology as an independent discipline: *Biblical Theology of New Testament*, a Four-volume work, 1800-1802.

- **Bernhard Weiss** (1868) and Heinrich Julius Holtzmann (1896-1897): wrote comprehensive handbooks of NT theology that meticulously examined the doctrinal system of the various NT writings.

- **William Wrede**, in his essay *The Task and Method of NT Theology* (1897) called for a purely historical approach, but with different note. For him, NTT should be “totally indifferent to all dogma and systematic theology” no longer confined by the limit of the canon of the doctrine of inspiration. Whereas Holtzmann's NTT sought to set forth “in a Scientific way the religious and ethical content of the canonical writings of the NT”, Wrede advocated “the history of early Christian religion and theology”. For him, NT Theology is about “*what was believed, thought, taught, hoped, required and striven for* the earliest period of Christianity, not what certain writings say about faith, doctrine, hope, etc.

Conclusion of Wrede: to change the name of the discipline, from “NTT” to “Early Christian history of religion”, or “the history of early Christian religion and theology”

=== No restriction to the canonical writings of the NT

- **Rudolf Bultmann's** *Theology of the NT* (1948-1953): a kind of marriage of existential philosophy and history of religion approach (beyond the canon, as Wrede, but a really theological work, because kerygmatic theology....Even he is essentially theology of Paul and John.

- 1990: a new period in NT Theology

- **Heikki Raisanen**, *Beyond NT Theology*: return to Wrede's proposal but in a modified form:

NTT should be replaced with 2 different projects:

- (1) The history of early Christian thought, and
- (2) Critical, philosophical ethical and/or theological reflection on the NT as well as on its influence on our history and its significance for contemporary life

- **Gerd Theissen**, *The religion of the Earliest Churches*, 1999: NT Theology describes the Christian faith or primitive Christian religion for those who are not necessary believers.

-Against Raisanen and Wrede,

Peter Balla (1997) defended the discipline of NTT, clarifying the following points:

- (1) that historical study does not exclude the study of theology if the definition of theology is understood broadly enough;
- (2) that there are important arguments rooted in history for limiting NT Theology to the writings of the canon;
- (3) that the formation of the canon was not an arbitrary ecclesiastical decision;
- (4) and that there is an unifying theology in the NT rooted in early creedal formulas. Accordingly, New Testament Theology is a descriptive, historical enterprise that deals with the canonical writings of the NT. It is not a normative discipline, nor should it try to prove the claims of the NT. One need not be a believer to practice it.

- **A.K.M. Adams** (1995), against all aspects of the modern projects of NTT, challenging this modernity:

- (1) an opposition to tradition;
- (2) a concern with questions of chronology;
- (3) a commitment to a rationalized scholarly practice, and
- (4) a stance that is intellectually elitist and antipopulist;

He proposes a **postmodern NT Theology** which would formulate “an interpretation that begins with the sense one makes of the NT” and then restate it in different way (canonized texts + theologian or audiences sense of the NT).

The task is neither the history of early Christianity (Wrede, Räisänen) nor a historical description of the Theology in the NT (Balla), but a theological interpretation that makes sense of the NT.

3. Recent approaches

A. Diachronic approaches

This approaches investigate the theology of individual writings or blocks of material in a chronological order.

- **Redactional history** : structure of thought, in relation to their own historical and literary contexts ; NT conceptions on the basis of the theological (church) traditions they had received ; theology of the NT writers in light of their editorial activity.

Ex. : Georg Strecker : NTT= Theologies of Paul ; The Synoptic Gospels, the Johannine school (including Revelation) ; the deutero-Pauline writings, and the Catholic letters (Hb, 1 P, Jude and 2 P, and James)

- **Salvation/Redemption History** (19th and 20th century):

Cullmann never wrote a comprehensive NT theology, in three major works he defended salvation history as the hermeneutical key to NT theology.

Salvation history was one of the leading motifs of the "biblical-theology movement" and had immense influence in Roman Catholicism, especially in religious education.

B. Thematic approaches

== Identifying and linking different themes or sub-domains, even, sometimes, considering the historically line.

- G.B. Caird

+ NTT : historical discipline whose puprose is **descriptive** rather than dogmatic and apologetic.

+ NTT : reconstruction of the past, a past accessible to us through the interrogation of witnesses.

It deals with questions of revelation, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, eshatology, and christology.

- François Vouga

+ NTT : theological and hermeneutical interpretation that concentrates on the human subject in light of God's revelation in Christ.

+The writings of the NT are concerned with a new understanding of human existance and demand to be read and understood as if written *for us*.

+ Two consequences

(1) A NT Theology is not an introduction to the NT or a history of its literature.

(2)The discipline should investigate the relevance of the NT writings for the Christian faith

+ Unity and diversity of NT theology : two moments of the same dialectic moment of unique self-definition of christianity. We find in the sema NT, the diaologue and contreversy over the great themes of Christian theology (what is the gospel, the kingdom, salvation, life, faith, hope, love ?)

+ Vouga : dialogue of the writings about different themes.

C. Both chronological and Thematic approches

== Mixing history issues (traditions, chronology, redaction) and topics in their litterary linking

D. Social Sciences approaches

- Eduard Schillebeeckx'

"Social-scientific methods" is an umbrella phrase for a host of emergent subdisciplines: study of social facts in early Christian texts, social history involving "political history and theology within an informed theoretical framework," study of social organization, forces, and institutions, and probing of the social world—"what it felt like to live in a world described by the symbols, rituals, and language of early Christianity."

This description shows clearly the value of these methods for disclosing "the world within which and from which" the biblical texts emerged. They also enable interpreters to speak more concretely about early Christian "experience."

4. The nature of the New Testament Theology

To illustrate some of the problems involved in this issue, it may be helpful to set out the following questions, as posed by Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett⁵:

- Is there such an entity as 'New Testament theology'?
- If so, how does it differ from study of the thought of early Christianity?
- Is New Testament theology inherently confessional?
- What is/should be included in a New Testament theology (anything in the New Testament? Or only particular elements, e.g. 'highlights' such as Paul and John)?
- Does the teaching of the historical Jesus belong within a New Testament theology?
- Is a New Testament theology a theology of texts or of historical authors?
- Is 'the' theology of the New Testament a single entity, or a collection of different theologies?
- Is the search for a unity in possible diversity desirable and/or justifiable?
- Is New Testament theology an attempt to systematize what the text meant or an attempt to illuminate faith and practice in the contemporary world?

⁵ Cf. C. ROWLAND & C. TUCKETT, eds. *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan*. Oxford, England: Blackwell, 2006, preface, p. xi.

We can summarize all these questions concerning the identity of the NTT by considering two main points: **the task** of the NTT; then, **its method**

A. The task of the NTT

As we have seen above, the task of NTT has been described in variety of ways, being delimited from historical reconstruction to kerygmatic proclamation⁶:

- (1) as a history of early Christian religion or thought;
- (2) as a descriptive presentation of the diverse theologies in the NT;
- (3) as a thematic statement of the theology of the NT;
- (4) as a theological interpretation of the NT intended to engage the contemporary believer.

Frank Matera criticized these tasks. He gives a specifically theological task of NTT which he clarifies in two points.

- (1) The history of early Christian religion or thought (Wrede, Räisänen) is most helpful for NTT, but it is not theology. “A theology of the NT ought to be a literary and theological analysis of the NT writings rather than a history of early Christian thought”⁷.
- (2) The description of diverse theologies in the writings of the NT (e.g. Gnllka, Strecker) is rather than exposition of theologies than theologies of the NT. These works are the indispensable *prelogomena* to NTT, but they do not offer a theology of the NTT.

For Matera, whoever seeks to detect NTT must avoid any kind of segmentation of the Scripture. He must be sensitive to the *internal coherence* of the different writings, i.e. different witnesses of divine revelation. That is why, for him, “NTT...should seek to provide a theological interpretation of the NT that integrates and relates the diverse theologies of the NT into a unified whole without harmonizing them, as elusive as this task may be”⁸. One way to achieve this goal is to take in account the implied narrative that underlies what the NT

⁶ *Id est* the sharing and explanation of the essentials of the Christian faith.

⁷ F.J. MATERA, “New Testament Theology: History, Method, and Identity”, *CBQ* 67 (2005), p. 15-16.

⁸ F.J. MATERA, “New Testament Theology”, p. 16.

writings claim about Israel, Jesus, and the church. Such a way (approach) allows NTT to communicate what the NT writings say about God through the narratives they tell or presuppose⁹. This task would be historical and literary, descriptive and interpretative, and ultimately theological. *Historical*, because it must respect the historical dimension of the writings; *literary* because it will treat the narrative and rhetorical dimensions of the writings; *descriptive* because it seeks to provide a faithful account of the implicit and explicit theological claims of the writings; *interpretative* because the act of describing is already a work of interpretation; and *theological* because it would be an expression of faith seeking to understand what it already believes about the God who reveals himself in the story of Israel, Jesus, and the church.

B. The method of NTT

Scholars have approached the NTT in one of two ways: Either they begin by analyzing individual writings or blocks of material with a view to describing the implicit or explicit theological claims the texts make, or they organize the material thematically according to the individual interpreter's understanding of how the various writings or blocks of material cohere with each other to disclose the inner theological unity and structure of the NT. The first approach (Strecker and Gnilka) is especially suited to highlighting the diverse theologies in the NT. The second (Caird, Vouga) is better adapted to showing the theological unity of the NT writings. It is very important that scholars find a way to deal with both *unity* and the *diversity* of the NT.

Like Marshall and Thielman, Matera seeks to do justice to the diverse contributions of the various NT texts while showing that within this diversity there is a core of theological unity. Also like Marshall and Thielman, he starts with diversity and moves toward unity.

His book (**Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity*, Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2007**), begins with an

⁹ Here, we could think about a work of understanding and linking of the explicit narratives about Jesus presented in the Gospel and implicit ones of Christ detected in other NT writings.

introductory chapter in which Matera places his work within the context of previous and current NTT scholarship. Here he also defines **the task of NTT** (cf ; above : rejecting a purely historical approach, he argues that NTT “should seek to provide a theological interpretation of the New Testament that integrates and relates the diverse theologies of the New Testament into a unified whole without harmonizing them).” The diversity within the NT should not surprise us, since its theologies “are the result of the diverse circumstances and situations that occasioned its writings.” Nevertheless, there exists an underlying unity in the NT authors’ description of “the experience of salvation that God has wrought in Christ.”

Following the introduction, Matera works **book-by-book through the NT**, dividing his work into four main sections: “**The Synoptic Tradition**,” “**The Pauline Tradition**,” “**The Johannine Tradition**,” and “**Other Voices**.” He begins each chapter with a *brief introduction* to the NT document being considered, emphasizing its *structure* and *theological purpose*. Next, he *summarizes the theology of the book thematically*, highlighting the author’s unique emphases.

Along the way, he raises issues related to *diversity and unity*. For example, in his discussion of the theology of Mark’s Gospel, he writes, “The Markan understanding of the gospel, then, is broader in scope than the Pauline notion.” This, of course, is debatable, but it is representative of his discussion throughout the book.

Matera waits until *the end of the book* to draw attention to *the unity of the theological message(s) of the NT*. The concluding chapter differs from what has gone before in that broad theological themes are shown to be present across the various NT texts. For believers, Matera notes, the unity of the NT is a given. He writes, “[I]nasmuch as the church identified these particular writings as Scriptures that witness to God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, the unity of the New Testament is a presupposition of faith.” Nevertheless, believing scholars must move beyond presupposition to proof, confirming this unity through careful study of the NT in “an example of faith seeking to understand what it believes.”

Matera identifies the **NT's key theological themes** as

- **humanity in need of salvation;**
- **the bringer of salvation;**
- **the community of the sanctified;**
- **the moral life of the sanctified;**
- **the hope of the sanctified.**

He traces each of these through the four main sections of the NT mentioned above. He holds that these themes are not independent but to be understood as five elements of “the implied master story to which these writings witness.” That is, the diverse NT writings are held together by a common presupposed narrative. Matera makes a valuable contribution to the discussion of unity and diversity by moving beyond merely identifying common themes seen throughout the NT to recognizing the common narrative glue that actually holds the NT together.

The following is **Chapter II**.

II. New Testament Theology and/within Biblical Theology

1. NT Theology and the Old Testament
2. NT Biblical Theology
3. The Central Subject Matter of a Biblical Theology of the NT
4. NT Theology = NT Biblical Theology ?