

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE



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The Present and Future of Biblical Theology

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As a journal editor, I sometimes wonder if we should make it a rule that only those who have actually written a book may write book reviews; that only those who have written at least one commentary may review commentaries; and so forth. If that standard were applied to my topic today, I may not perfectly qualify, because even though I've written a Johannine theology and contributed several essays on Biblical-theological topics, I have yet to write a full-fledged Biblical or NT theology. Nevertheless, I appreciate the gracious invitation of the steering committee of this conference and will gladly pontificate for a few minutes on what I see to be the present and future of the discipline. Perhaps some of you will find my survey and summary assessment of recent Biblical theologies stimulating in your own work, and, who knows, maybe one day I might be able to put some of the insights I gained from reviewing Biblical theologies into further use myself.

In his influential address, "Discourse on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology, and the Right Determination of the Aims of Each," Johann Philipp Gabler (1753–1826) lodged the programmatic proposal that scholars ought to distinguish between Biblical and systematic theology.¹ In his lecture, delivered at the University of Altdorf in 1787 (the year the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia), Gabler urged his colleagues to place their theological edifice more overtly on a scriptural foundation, stating, "There is truly a biblical theology, of historical origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matters."² Gabler claimed that a Biblical theology conceived along these lines would provide

¹The Latin title was *Oratio de iusto discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus*. For an excellent summary of Gabler's contribution, see William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, Volume One: *From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 184–87.

²J. P. Gabler, "An Oration on the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic theology and the Specific Objectives of Each," in Ben C. Ollenburger, ed., *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future*, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study, vol.1 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 501. Note, however, that what distinguishes Gabler's proposal from most recent evangelical works in Biblical theology is the belief in history's unified story and the unified story of Scripture rooted in that history.

the historical and rational scientific framework enabling systematic theology to relate Biblical truths to contemporary life and thought.³

At its core, Gabler's distinction between Biblical and systematic theology marks an important foundation stone to this day. Biblical theology is an essentially historical discipline calling for an inductive and descriptive method. A distinction between Biblical and systematic theology needs to be maintained carefully if we are to provide an accurate description of the theology of the Biblical writers themselves. Some of us may find this to be a truism hardly worth stating. But as a survey of the last decade of Biblical-theological research will show, the need to ground Biblical theology in careful historical work; to conceive of the discipline as essentially inductive and descriptive; and to distinguish Biblical from systematic theology continues to be relevant, even urgent, if the discipline is to continue its viability.⁴ In what follows, I will first survey the present state of Biblical theology, gauged by a selective survey of evangelical works produced during the past decade or so, and then discuss ramifications of this survey for the future of the discipline.

The Present State of Biblical Theology⁵

In one of his many important contributions to the subject, D. A. Carson remarked that how one navigates the tension between Scripture's unity and its diversity is the "most pressing" issue in Biblical theology.⁶ As the subtitle

³For a brief analysis of Gabler's address and its relevance for the present discussion, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 9–10.

⁴For a useful treatment of the history and nature of Biblical theology, see Peter Balla, *Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998). More briefly, see Hendrikus Boers, *What is New Testament Theology? The Rise of Criticism and the Problem of a Theology of the New Testament* (Phialdelphia: Fortress, 1979).

⁵For our present purposes, the focus will be on the most important works in whole-Bible theology over the last decade. This limitation will preclude coverage of works that focus on only one Testament. Noteworthy OT theologies include Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, vol. 15 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003); Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2006); and Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007). Significant NT theologies include I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004); Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); and Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). Owing to space and time constraints, we will limit ourselves to English-language works.

⁶D. A. Carson, "New Testament Theology," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, eds. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 810. In Carson's own words: "The most pressing of these [issues] is how simultaneously to expound the unity of NT theology (and of the larger canon of which it is a part) while doing justice to the manifest diversity; or, to put it the other way, how simultaneously to trace the diversity and peculiar emphases and historical developments inherent in the various NT (and biblical) books while doing justice to their unifying thrusts."

of the sequel to *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, a volume entitled *Central Themes in Biblical Theology*, has it, our challenge is that of “Mapping Unity in Diversity.”⁷ Virtually all evangelical Biblical theologians start their work with the assumption of essential Biblical unity. Most also realize that, within this unity, Scripture displays a certain amount of legitimate diversity.⁸ How to come to terms with this interplay between unity and diversity, is the challenge. In what follows, I will look at recent Biblical-theological works under four rubrics: (1) classic approaches; (2) central theme approaches; (3) single-center approaches; and (4) story or metanarrative approaches.⁹ Each of these seeks to navigate the unity-diversity question in its own distinctive way (though there are commonalities as well).¹⁰

Classic Approaches

New Dictionary of Biblical Theology. First in our taxonomy of Biblical theologies is what G. K. Beale recently called “the classic approach.”¹¹ This classic approach involves studying first the message and theological content of individual Biblical books, followed by an attempt at synthesis tracing overarching themes across various corpora. An example of this model is the

⁷Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House, eds., *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

⁸Regarding the term “legitimate diversity,” see chapter 3 in Andreas J. Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture’s Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

⁹Cf. Gerhard Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), who in his section on methodology in NT theology lists the thematic approach; the existentialist approach; the historical approach; and the salvation history approach. Under basic proposals toward a NT theology, he discusses NT theology as a historical-theological discipline; NT theology based on the NT writings; NT theology presented on the basis of books and blocks of material; and NT theology presented on the basis of longitudinal themes.

¹⁰For a helpful assessment of the discipline almost two decades ago, see D. A. Carson, “Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective,” *BBR* 5 (1995): 17–41, originally an address delivered to the Institute of Biblical Research. After noting the need for definitional clarity, Carson suggested the following valid approaches to Biblical theology: (1) the theology of the whole Bible, descriptively and historically considered; (2) the theology of the various Biblical corpora or strata (e.g. OT and NT theologies); and (3) the theology of a particular theme across the Scriptures. He also urged the use of the following criteria for Biblical theology: (1) it should read the Bible as a historically developing collection of documents; (2) it should presuppose a coherent and agreed-upon canon; and (3) it should utilize an inductive approach to the individual books and the canon as a whole, making clear connections among the various corpora, and calling all people to a knowledge of the living God (pp. 27–32).

¹¹G. K. Beale, “A New Testament Biblical Theology: Interview by John Starke,” http://thegospelcoalition.org/book-reviews/interview/A_New_Testament_Biblical_Theology. Actually, Beale says that a number of “classic New Testament theologies ... conduct a consecutive theological analysis of each New Testament book within its corpus, usually in the canonical order of each corpus, and then draw up a final comparison of each of the theological emphases of each of the books. In so doing, at the end of the project sometimes a major theological thrust is attempted to be found” (e.g. Marshall’s *New Testament Theology* identifies mission as such a thrust, which Beale does not find comprehensive enough).

New Dictionary of Biblical Theology edited by T. D. Alexander and Brian Rosner, a reference work published in the year 2000.¹² In the introductory article, Brian Rosner describes the task of Biblical theology as follows:

Biblical theology is principally concerned with the overall message of the whole Bible. It seeks to understand the parts in relation to the whole and, to achieve this, it must work with the mutual interaction of the literary, historical, and theological dimensions of the various corpora, and with the interrelationships of these within the whole canon of Scripture.¹³

Only in this way that can we properly account for what God has spoken to us in the Scriptures. In summary, Rosner defines Biblical theology as theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. More specifically, "It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyze and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus."¹⁴ With this definition and analysis in place, the rest of the dictionary proceeds accordingly.¹⁵

Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect. Another edited work that contributes to the discussion of properly characterizing the discipline is the volume, *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, featuring selected addresses

¹²T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 2000).

¹³B. S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 3. Thus Biblical theology avoids an atemporal approach to the Bible and pays close attention to the Bible's overarching story (see *ibid.*, 4). See also Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011).

¹⁴Rosner, "Biblical Theology," 10. While one notes a bifurcation of Biblical theology into OT and NT theologies over the past couple centuries, it seems there is a growing trend toward the pursuit of a unified Biblical theology along the lines of Rosner's definition. For a brief survey of this phenomenon and of the history of the discipline, see C. H. H. Scobie, "History of Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 18–20. See also Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 867–88; Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Salvation Historical Fallacy? Reassessing the History of New Testament Theology* (Leiden: Deo, 2004); and H. G. Reventlow, "Theology (Biblical), History of," *Abingdon Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, trans. Frederick H. Cryer (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 498–509.

¹⁵Two additional introductory articles deal with the NT use of the OT and the relationship between the Testaments. Both authors stress the continuity of the Scriptures without neglecting its diversity. Craig Evans avers, "One of the most important assumptions underlying the NT's use of the OT is that of fulfillment and continuity. ... This means that Christian biblical theology must take fully into account the theology of the OT and never develop NT theology apart from it" ("New Testament Use of the Old Testament," 79–80). Graeme Goldsworthy concurs, stating, "Understanding the relationship of the two Testaments involves understanding that the God who has revealed himself finally in Jesus has also revealed himself in the OT in a way that foreshadows both the structure and content of the Christian gospel" ("Relationship of Old Testament and New Testament," 89).

from the 2000 Wheaton Conference for Theology.¹⁶ In the first chapter, the editor, Scott Hafemann, discusses the issue of canonical unity and diversity. He believes that, in moving forward, scholars should focus on three central realities. First, they should look at each book of Scripture independently and take it *on its own terms* while affirming the unity of the structure of the Bible. Second, they should come to terms with the *eschatological* nature of the Bible, with the first and second coming of Christ serving as the midpoint and endpoint of redemptive history. Third, Biblical theology must be *rooted in history*, lest we replace the message of Scripture with our own experience.¹⁷ These three basic affirmations serve as general principles keeping interpreters grounded as they pursue their Biblical-theological work.

Later in the volume, Paul House offers a helpful perspective on the method of working toward a coherent Biblical theology that does justice to the text of Scripture. He begins by affirming that canonical Biblical theology requires a unitary reading strategy of the OT and NT canon which allows the Bible to be treated as one book of Scripture. Second, this unitary reading should proceed on a book-by-book basis in order to derive the specific message from each piece of writing. Third, this analysis should lead to the identification and collection of vital central themes allowing an overarching synthesis. Fourth, there must be a commitment to intertextuality, that is, to discerning instances where later passages in Scripture refer to earlier texts. Fifth, interpreters should treat major Biblical themes as they emerge from the whole of Scripture. Sixth and finally, Biblical theology ought to have as its goal the presentation of the whole counsel of God in various settings.¹⁸ Thus, Biblical theology has the potential of encouraging believers toward understanding and applying the coherent message of Scripture to their lives and ministry.

Assessment. The strength of the classic approach is that it takes into consideration the contribution of each individual book in the canon of Scripture while at the same time seeking to discern major themes across the canon. Another strength of this approach is that it allows specialists in various fields to contribute. As Biblical and theological studies become increasingly specialized, collaborative work is a growing necessity. A potential weakness of the classic approach is that unless book-by-book analysis and the identification of scriptural themes are related to Scripture's larger storyline, the needed synthesis remains incomplete. While, as I will seek to demonstrate below, positing a single center is precarious, the scriptural metanarrative provides a promising avenue of exploring the Biblical writers' message which involves unity as well as diversity.

¹⁶Scott J. Hafemann, ed., *Biblical Theology: Retrospect & Prospect* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

¹⁷Scott J. Hafemann, "Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Ibid.*, 20–21.

¹⁸Paul R. House, "Biblical Theology and the Wholeness of Scripture: Steps Toward a Program for the Future," in *Ibid.*, 271–78.

Central Themes Approaches

The Ways of Our God. Many have taken one important aspect of the classic approach to Biblical theology, the quest for major scriptural motifs, and sought to orient the whole Bible around a few central themes that can be traced across the canon. One of the most prolific, and in my judgment most successful, Biblical-theological works of the past decade exhibiting a central themes approach is Charles Scobie's massive work *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*.¹⁹ Discussing the history, definition, and task of Biblical theology, Scobie believed that "[i]f progress is to be made in the study of Biblical Theology, the question of definition is clearly crucial."²⁰ Scobie sided with many others in the field in maintaining that Biblical theology is "the theology contained in the Bible, the theology of the Bible itself."²¹ Moreover, Scobie proposed what he called an "intermediate biblical theology," contending that Biblical theology is a bridge discipline between the historical study of the Bible and the use of the Bible as authoritative Scripture by the church.²² Scobie further suggested that Biblical theology ought to be concerned fundamentally with the horizon of the text and as such should attempt to provide an overview and interpretation of the shape and structure of the Bible as a whole. Along these lines, he wrote of his own work that "[i]t will seek the unity and continuity of Scripture, but without sacrificing the richness of its diversity. It will focus not on exegetical details but on the broad interrelationships between the major themes of the Bible, and above all on the interrelationship between the Testaments."²³

In seeking to delineate the structure of Biblical theology, Scobie cau-

¹⁹Charles H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

²⁰Ibid., 3. Scobie believes that necessary presuppositions for a coherent Biblical theology include "belief that the Bible conveys a divine revelation, that the word of God in Scripture constitutes the norm of Christian faith and life, and that all the varied material of the OT and NT can in some way be related to the plan and purpose of the one God of the whole Bible" (47).

²¹Ibid., 5. See also the discussion of the work of Adolf Schlatter below.

²²This intermediate Biblical theology stands in contrast to what Scobie describes as integrated Biblical theology, which, prior to Gabler's address, showed no distinction between what the Bible "meant" and what it "means," and independent Biblical theology, which is a Biblical theology dominated by historical criticism and pursued in radical independence from the church (See Ibid., 7–8).

²³Ibid., 47. Scobie speaks specifically to the distinctiveness and relationship between the Testaments in relation to Biblical theology. As for the OT canon, Scobie acknowledges the Christian stance regarding its importance: "[Christians] see in the [OT] the record of the period of preparation and promise that culminates in the Christ event. It is that Christ event, and not the Torah, that constitutes the supreme revelation of God for Christians.... Thus, whatever may be the case historically, theologically for Christians it is the Christ event that closes the canon of the Old Testament" (55). Regarding the NT canon, Scobie again asserts, "BT is not concerned with the details of the complex process of the development of the canon of the NT. But it is vitally concerned with the theology of the canon. From a theological point of view it is clear that the all-important factor in the closing of the canon of the NT was the belief that the Christ event constitutes the supreme, unique, and final revelation of God" (57).

tioned that scholars avoid imposing alien conceptual patterns onto Scripture and instead allow the structure of their Biblical theology to arise from the Biblical material itself, asserting, “The structure that is proposed here is one in which the major themes of the OT and NT are correlated with each other.” In Scobie’s approach, “Each theme is first traced through the OT. Although on the one hand the material is discussed with an eye to the way [in which] the theme is developed in the NT, on the other hand, every effort is made to listen to what the OT says on its own terms.”²⁴

Thus, Scobie believed that the procedure that seems to offer the most promise and the least risk of distorting the Biblical material is that of identifying a limited number of major Biblical themes, grouped around associated subthemes, and of tracing each theme and related subtheme(s) through the OT and into the NT, following the scheme of proclamation, promise/ fulfillment, and consummation.²⁵ These themes, isolated in interaction with various centers that have been proposed through the course of the discipline, are broken up into four categories: (1) God’s order; (2) God’s servant; (3) God’s people; and (4) God’s way.²⁶ Engaging with Biblical theology in this fashion allows one to trace demonstrably important themes across the canon with a view toward analysis and synthesis.²⁷

Central Themes in Biblical Theology. As mentioned, Scott Hafemann, subsequent to the publication of his edited work *Biblical Theology: Retrospect & Prospect*, partnered with Paul House and others to produce a sequel, entitled *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity*.²⁸ In Hafemann’s words, this book represents an attempt to “explore Biblical themes that contribute to the wholeness of the Bible.”²⁹ In this regard, the volume moves beyond a classic approach to a central themes model. The contributors share three convictions regarding scriptural unity. First, the Bible is a unity because it is the word of God who is a unified and coherent being. Second, Biblical theology should seek not only to unpack the content of Scripture but also to establish the conceptual unity of the Bible as a whole as it unfolds in human events. Third and last, doing whole-Bible theology should be a collaborative effort owing to the complexity of the discipline.³⁰ Once again, as with the works already discussed, we see specific principles guiding these

²⁴Ibid., 91–92. In this regard, Scobie anticipates the work of G. K. Beale, on which see the discussion below.

²⁵See Ibid., 93.

²⁶See Ibid., 94–99. See also Scobie’s chart on page 99 that helpfully illustrates these major categories and how they fit into the proclamation/promise: fulfillment/consummation rubric.

²⁷For an insightful summary and analysis of Scobie’s work, see Karl Möller, “The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology: Some Reflections in the Light of Charles H. H. Scobie’s ‘Prolegomena to Biblical Theology,’” in Craig G. Bartholomew et al., eds., *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, Scripture and Hermeneutics, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 41–64.

²⁸Hafemann and House, *Central Themes in Biblical Theology*.

²⁹Ibid., 15.

³⁰See Ibid., 16–18.

authors in delineating the unity and diversity characterizing the canon.

Perhaps most pertinent to the task at hand is Roy Ciampa's essay on the history of redemption. The author states that a central themes approach to Scripture "seeks to uncover the biblical authors' own understanding of the events and their significance within the unfolding narrative context in which they are found."³¹ Ciampa agrees with those who have argued for a creation-sin-exile-restoration motif³² and seeks to trace this pattern throughout the various corpora of Scripture. In so doing, Ciampa argues that the main structure of the Biblical narrative consists essentially of two creation-sin-exile-restoration structures whereby the second of these, which is national in nature (seen in the Israel narrative), is embedded within the first, which is global (seen in the Adam-Eve narrative and its accompanying consequences). The national creation-sin-exile-restoration pattern serves as the key to the resolution of the plot conflict of the global structure, and in the interplay between these two structures, God's kingdom intervention and promises are rightly understood.³³ This essay thus contributes a useful application of Biblical theology demonstrating the saving purposes of God throughout the canon.

Assessment. Central themes approaches can be helpful in tracing important motifs across the canon, but the organization of these central themes still requires further synthesis, in particular in relation to Scripture's overarching storyline. Hafemann's discussion of the covenant structure or Ciampa's treatment of the creation-sin-exile-restoration theme both constitute attempts to provide such a metanarrative framework in an effort to relate these central themes to one another. The central themes approach is a useful component of Biblical theology if one recognizes the place of central themes within the framework of the macrostructure of the entire canon.

Single-Center Approaches

Over the course of the discipline, there have been scholars who have sought to identify a single center of Scripture that constitutes *the* major theme around which the entire canon revolves. In effect, therefore, the single-center approach selects one from among a number of central themes and designates it as the sole center of Biblical theology. The fact that such an approach is fraught with considerable difficulty at the very outset has not kept at least one scholar in recent years from exploring the notion of a central organizing theme within the scope of Biblical theology.³⁴ In his

³¹Roy E. Ciampa, "The History of Redemption," in *Ibid.*, 255.

³²For an example of a Biblical theology that engages with this theme as the integrative motif for understanding the whole of Scripture, see C. Marvin Pate et al., *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

³³See Ciampa, "The History of Redemption," 257.

³⁴See Hasel, *New Testament Theology*, 140–78. See also Carson, "NT Theology," 810: "The pursuit of the center is chimerical. NT theology is so interwoven that one can move from any one topic to any other topic. We will make better progress by pursuing clusters of broadly common themes, which may not be common to all NT books"; and Andreas J. Köstenberger,

publication *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology*,³⁵ James Hamilton, as suggested by the title of his work, endeavors to show that God's glory in salvation through judgment serves as a Biblical center, that is, as a particularly prominent theme that holds the canon together. Invoking the systematians David Wells and Kevin Vanhoozer,³⁶ Hamilton states the purpose of his book as follows:

The purpose of this book, quixotic as it may seem, is to seek to do for biblical theology what Kevin Vanhoozer has done for hermeneutics and David Wells has done for evangelical theology. The goal is not a return to an imaginary golden age but to help people know God. The quest to know God is clarified by a diagnosis of the problem (Wells), the vindication of interpretation (Vanhoozer), and, hopefully, a clear presentation of the main point of God's revelation of himself, that is, a clear presentation of the center of biblical theology.³⁷

Hamilton, as mentioned, contends that the saving and judging glory of God³⁸ is the center of Biblical theology and as such is the primary theme uniting all of Scripture.

Hamilton describes his methodology as follows. First, he sets out to pursue a Biblical theology that highlights the central theme of God's glory in salvation through judgment by describing the literary contours of individual books in their canonical context with sensitivity to the unfolding metanarrative. Hamilton believes that this metanarrative presents a unified story with a discernible main point or center.³⁹ In defining a center in Biblical theology, a crucial part of his methodology, Hamilton states, with reference to Jonathan Edwards, "If it can be shown that the Bible's description of God's

"Diversity and Unity in the New Testament," in Scott Hafemann, *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, 154: "the search for a single center of the NT should be abandoned."

³⁵James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

³⁶As will be seen further below, it may not be a coincidence that it is two systematians that serve as Hamilton's point of departure. In the same vein, Hamilton awards central place to Jonathan Edwards as mediated by John Piper, both of whose primary field is likewise systematic theology.

³⁷Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, 38.

³⁸While my focus here is the general methodology of deriving a particular theology of the Bible, it is important to understand what exactly Hamilton means by his phrase "God's glory in salvation through judgment." He asserts that God's glory refers to the weight and majestic goodness of who God is, as well as the resulting fame or renown that he gains from the revelation of himself (see *Ibid.*, 56–57). Regarding the latter part of the phrase, Hamilton suggests that "salvation always comes through judgment." Israel was saved through the judgment of Egypt; believers are saved through the judgment that falls on Jesus; and people repent of their sin as prophets and apostles vocalize the truths of God's justice: "All of this reveals God as righteous and merciful, loving and just, holy and forgiving, for his own glory, forever" (58).

³⁹See the story or metanarrative approaches discussed below.

ultimate end produces, informs, organizes, and is expositied by all the other themes in the Bible, and if this can be demonstrated from the Bible's own salvation-historical narrative and in its own terms, then the conclusion will follow that the ultimate end ascribed to God in the Bible is the center of biblical theology."⁴⁰ Thus one can identify the center of Biblical theology by identifying the theme that is prevalent, even pervasive, in all parts of the Bible and that serves as its ultimate end. Hamilton claims that this theme will be the demonstrable centerpiece of the theology contained in the Bible itself.⁴¹ Hamilton then moves into textual analysis, seeking to demonstrate the centrality of God's glory in salvation through judgment in the Torah,⁴² the Prophets,⁴³ the Writings,⁴⁴ the Gospels and Acts,⁴⁵ the New Testament Letters,⁴⁶ and Revelation.⁴⁷

Assessment. While it is instructive to see how Hamilton delves into the exegetical details to substantiate his thesis, the feasibility of trying to find a single center for the entire Biblical witness remains fraught with difficulty.⁴⁸ In the end, Hamilton's proposal fails to convince, because it proves unduly monolithic and frequently appears to be imposed artificially onto individual writings (e.g. Esther, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Matthew, Philemon). As a result, the canon of Scripture in its entirety is unable to bear the weight of "God's glory in salvation through judgment" serving as a single center. As D. A. Carson wisely observed with regard to single-center approaches, "How shall one avoid the tendency to elevate one book or corpus of the NT and

⁴⁰Ibid., 48. Hamilton appears to be influenced in his method for finding a center by Jonathan Edwards and how he speaks of "ends" in his "The End for which God Created the World," in John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 125–251. See especially *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 48–49.

⁴¹Anticipating the objection of some scholars who believe that a center is not attainable, Hamilton responds, "In spite of the judgment of these respected scholars, it must be observed that their statements do not seem to take into account one theme that has only recently been put forward as the center of biblical theology: the glory of God.... Anticipating the charge that it might be too broad to be useful, I am sharpening the proposal to focus specifically on the glory of God manifested in salvation through judgment" (52–53). For a brief survey of other proposed centers in OT, NT, and Biblical theology, see James M. Hamilton, "The Glory of God in Salvation Through Judgment: The Centre of Biblical Theology?," *TynB* 57 (2006): 65–69. See also idem, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 52–53.

⁴²See Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 67–137.

⁴³Ibid., 139–269.

⁴⁴Ibid., 271–353.

⁴⁵Ibid., 355–441.

⁴⁶Ibid., 443–559.

⁴⁷Ibid., 541–51.

⁴⁸See Dempster's appreciate review of Hamilton's work in which he states, "All our best efforts can be described as seeing through a glass darkly. The fact that no theological centre has been found does not mean that there is none.... While God and his word are inerrant, all our theology partakes of errancy. As Hamilton has come back from his quest, in stressing the glory of God in salvation through judgment he has certainly pointed us all in the right direction." Stephen Dempster, "Book Review: God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment," 9Marks Articles and Reviews, available online at <http://www.9marks.org/books/book-review-gods-glory-salvation-through-judgment>.

domesticate the rest, putting them on a leash held by the themes of the one, usually the book or corpus on which the biblical theologian has invested most scholarly energy?”⁴⁹

At closer scrutiny, Hamilton’s center seems to work best in the prophetic literature which is replete with oracles of salvation and judgment. The opening chapters of Genesis, on the other hand, are virtually ignored. Strikingly, God’s glory *in creation* is excluded from Hamilton’s center, and thus the bookends of Biblical revelation remain unaccounted for. Another weakness of Hamilton’s proposal is that he uses pivotal terms such as “glory,” “judgment,” or “salvation” in multiple senses and then moves back and forth between various definitions of these key terms to establish his single center. The conclusion seems close at hand that “God’s glory in salvation through judgment” may well be one of Scripture’s central themes, perhaps even one that was underappreciated prior to Hamilton’s work, but that calling this theme the “single center” of Scripture overstates the case, because, as mentioned, other important themes such as God’s glory in creation and new creation are not included.

In light of such difficulties (and more programmatic underlying concerns that will be noted later on), the concluding verdict of Gerhard Hasel’s monograph *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, written decades ago, still stands: “The variety of problems to which scholars have pointed in their discussions of the center of the NT, one that functions as ‘a canon within the canon’ and serves as material principle of canon criticism, are apparently insurmountable. An approach to NT theology that seeks to be adequate to the totality of the NT cannot afford the arbitrariness, subjectivity, and reductionism inherent in the choice of a selective principle in the form of a center either from without Scripture (tradition) or from within Scripture on the basis of which value judgments are made with regard to the content of Scripture as a whole or in its parts.”⁵⁰

Story/Metanarrative Approaches

From Eden to the New Jerusalem. While the single-center approach has some obvious flaws, a related centering model is the metanarrative approach to Biblical theology. This approach does not identify one theme as

⁴⁹Carson, “NT Theology,” 810. As we will see further below, G. K. Beale is therefore wise to eschew the notion of a single center in favor of tethering his proposal to a broader construct, that of the Biblical storyline. This allows Beale to see a red thread running through the scriptural narrative without being equally vulnerable to the charge of being monochromatic and reductionistic. See the discussion in chapter 6 of G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); and idem, “Interview,” 8: “I do not attempt to see a central theme in NT biblical theology.” Beale continues, “On the other hand, I don’t think the NT is composed of multiple themes that are merely unrelated to one another. I try to sail a middle course between these two perspectives.” It should be noted, however, that few evangelicals would say that the “NT is composed of multiple themes that are merely unrelated to one another.” For this reason, Beale’s claim to steer a “middle course between these two perspectives” is a bit curious.

⁵⁰Hasel, *NT Theology*, 177–78.

the the central idea but argues that there is an overarching metanarrative that unifies the Scriptures. One fairly recent exemplar of such an approach is T. D. Alexander's *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology*.⁵¹ In this work, Alexander, one of the editors of the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, sought to explore the unfolding canonical trajectory of Scripture. In so doing, Alexander grounded his attempt to describe the content of the Biblical metanarrative in the conviction that the Word of God is in fact a unified story: "Produced over many centuries, the differing texts that comprise this library are amazingly diverse in terms of genre, authorship and even language. Nonetheless, they produce a remarkably unified story that addresses two of life's most fundamental questions: (1) Why was the earth created? (2) What is the reason for human existence?"⁵²

Alexander's overall method is thematic in nature as he seeks to demonstrate (similar to the central themes approach) that the Bible is essentially unified and held together by several overarching motifs. In defense of this approach, he asserts:

There is something of value in seeing the big picture, for it frequently enables us to appreciate the details more clearly. The scholarly tendency to "atomize" biblical texts is often detrimental to understanding them. By stripping passages out of their literary contexts meanings are imposed upon them that were never intended by their authors. I hope this study goes a little way to redressing this imbalance, for biblical scholarship as a whole has not articulated clearly the major themes that run throughout Scripture. Since these themes were an integral part of the thought world of the biblical authors, an appreciation of them may significantly alter our reading of individual books.⁵³

In a rather unique fashion, Alexander takes as his starting point the two final chapters of the book of Revelation, in the conviction that these chapters sustain a distinct connection with Genesis 1–3 and that these two portions of Scripture frame the entire Biblical narrative, providing the reader with an overarching framework for what the Bible is seeking to communicate throughout.⁵⁴ In this way, the reader looks at the end of the story to make better sense of the beginning, and in so doing traces a theme from its point of departure to its fulfillment in Christ and ultimately its consummation in the New Jerusalem. Alexander recognizes that while "there are limitations to this approach, it is nevertheless one way of attempting to determine the main

⁵¹T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008).

⁵²Ibid., 10

⁵³Ibid., 11.

⁵⁴Although Alexander sees direct parallels between Genesis 1–3 and Revelation 20–22, he notes that one finds significant progression as well as elements of continuity and discontinuity as the canon moves toward its completion (see Ibid., 14).

elements of the meta-story.”⁵⁵ Thus the study is not exhaustive but rather suggestive, seeking to outline some of the main themes running through Scripture. The contours of Alexander’s book adhere closely to the standard approach of summarizing the overarching narrative of the Bible in terms of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation.⁵⁶ While Alexander does not tease out every detail of his proposal, his work serves as a helpful guide to some of the most significant themes in the Bible and the canonical weight they carry in our interpretive efforts.

Christ-Centered Biblical Theology. Another instance of a story or metanarrative approach is Graeme Goldsworthy’s new book *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles*.⁵⁷ Goldsworthy seeks to contribute a measure of coherence to the discipline by formulating a Biblical-theological schema in accordance with the work of Donald Robinson and Gabriel Hebert.⁵⁸ He begins by pointing out some of the difficulties involved in defining the essence and nature of Biblical theology.⁵⁹ Goldsworthy defines Biblical theology as “the study of how every text in the Bible relates to every other text in the Bible” and as “the study of the matrix of divine revelation in the Bible as a whole.”⁶⁰ He further refines the definition by stating that Biblical theology is the study of how every text relates to Christ and the gospel.⁶¹ Goldsworthy also links his proposal with salvation history, underscoring the importance of Biblical revelation and its unified progression.⁶² In understanding Christ to be at the center of Biblical theology, Goldsworthy seeks to show how the incarnation of Jesus is the link between the Testaments and at the center of God’s plan begun at creation and to be completed in the new creation, epitomized by God’s presence with his people.⁶³ In keeping with this Christ-centered understanding, Goldsworthy posits the kingdom of God, “defined simply as God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule,” as the central theme in Scripture.⁶⁴

Unlike some of the other authors we have considered, Goldsworthy does not spend much time discussing method—though he affirms that there are a number of different approaches to the task of Biblical theology—but instead focuses on demonstrating what he believes is the essential structure of Biblical revelation to be captured by Biblical theology, properly conduct-

⁵⁵Ibid., 10.

⁵⁶See the above discussion of Roy Ciampa’s chapter in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology*.

⁵⁷Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2012).

⁵⁸For an elaboration of Robinson’s impact on Goldsworthy, see Ibid., chapter 10.

⁵⁹Ibid., 39.

⁶⁰Ibid., 40.

⁶¹See Ibid. Goldsworthy also helpfully notes that one’s approach to Biblical theology will be affected by the degree to which a given scholar holds to the authority and inerrancy of Scripture.

⁶²See the discussion of salvation-history approaches in Hasel, *NT Theology*, 111–32.

⁶³See Ibid., 56–75.

⁶⁴Ibid., 75.

ed.⁶⁵ Goldsworthy urges that an exegete's presuppositions must be taken into account as he or she approaches the text.⁶⁶ With this in mind, Goldsworthy asserts, "Given our evangelical presupposition of the unity of Scripture with its central focus on Christ, we should expect that the different acceptable approaches will reflect that unity."⁶⁷ The methods for conducting this kind of Biblical theology include careful thematic or word study; contextual studies of individual texts, books, or corpora, OT or NT theologies; and theologies of the whole Bible as canon.⁶⁸ All of these investigations, Goldsworthy asserts, are performed in order to edify the people of God and to help them grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.⁶⁹

A New Testament Biblical Theology. A final work following a story or metanarrative approach to Biblical theology is G. K. Beale's recent tome *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New*.⁷⁰ As to his purpose, Beale asserts, "My attempt in this book is not to write a NT theology, but rather a NT *biblical* theology."⁷¹ Beale's distinctive approach to Biblical theology is to identify the storyline that unfolds as one moves from the OT to the NT. In so doing, he engages in the exegetical analysis of key words, crucial passages, OT quotations, allusions, and prominent themes in order to elaborate on the main plotline categories. This specific approach to NT Biblical theology, according to Beale, is "canonical," "organically developmental," "exegetical," and "inter-textual."⁷² In this way, Beale is seeking to set his work apart as unique from the proliferation of NT theologies that have appeared in the last century.⁷³

Rather than postulating a center, Beale seeks to identify a particular

⁶⁵This may be due in part to the fact that Goldsworthy has already been developing his Biblical-theological approach to the text in previous works. See, e.g., *Graeme Goldsworthy, According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002).

⁶⁶See Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, 217.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., 217–27.

⁶⁹Ibid., 227.

⁷⁰Beale, *New Testament Biblical Theology*.

⁷¹Ibid., 19.

⁷²See Ibid., 19–33, for further details on this summary. Hamilton takes issue with these items being distinctive and unique in the world of NT theology. He maintains, "It may be that Beale's book incorporates more of the things that he enumerates here than other New Testament theologies, but the difference is one of degree not kind. ... My point is that New Testament theology is a subset of biblical theology, and adding the word biblical to the title and then laying out the ways one seeks to combine existing approaches and bring in unique emphases to contribute to the discipline does not mean that one is doing something different from what everyone else writing in the field has done. ... So I do not want to minimize the real contribution Beale's book makes, but again, the difference between his book and other NT theologies is one of degree and emphasis not kind. Perhaps Schreiner's work is closest in terms of outlook, method, and conclusions, but Thielman's perspective is not that different, and N. T. Wright is at least moving in a similar stream." See James M. Hamilton, "Appreciation, Agreement, and a Few Minor Quibbles: A Response to G. K. Beale," *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 10/1 (2011): 66–67.

⁷³Beale, *New Testament Biblical Theology*, 1–25. See also idem, "Interview."

storyline arising from the Scriptures that can serve as a point of reference. His primary thesis is that in order to understand the NT in its richness, one must have a keen acquaintance with how the Biblical authors viewed the end times, since this topic forms an essential part of the NT story.⁷⁴ Building on this thesis, Beale delineates the specific ways in which the OT and NT articulate this kind of narrative. The OT storyline that Beale posits as the basis for the NT storyline is this: “The Old Testament is the story of God, who progressively reestablishes his new-creational kingdom out of chaos over a sinful people by his word and Spirit through promise, covenant, and redemption, resulting in worldwide commission to the faithful to advance this kingdom and judgment (defeat or exile) for the unfaithful, unto his glory.”⁷⁵

He follows this with the storyline of the NT, showing the transformation of the OT storyline: “Jesus’ life, trials, death for sinners, and especially resurrection by the Spirit have launched the fulfillment of the eschatological already-not yet new-creational reign, bestowed by grace through faith resulting in worldwide commission to the faithful to advance this new-creational reign and resulting in judgment for the unbelieving, unto the triune God’s glory.”⁷⁶ In this way, one can see in a brief description the way in which the OT is the basis *for* the NT storyline while at the same time being subject to transformation *by* the NT. While it is impossible to appraise Beale’s contribution in detail, it should be noted that by working from a reconstructed storyline of the OT and the NT Beale sets himself apart from the classic and central themes approaches and significantly advances the field both formally (in terms of method) and materially (in terms of content).⁷⁷

Assessment. In contrast to single-center approaches, Beale wisely avoids speaking of a “center” in his Biblical-theological proposal, attaching significance instead to the OT storyline as modified and transformed in the NT. This is certainly creative, and very likely more satisfying than a rigid application of a book-by-book approach (though care should be taken that the overall storyline does not completely crowd out more minor motifs). Beale’s approach also seems preferable to a more heavy-handed procedure in which a writer posits a center that he subsequently tries to validate by tying it to the message of every individual Biblical book.

Nevertheless, a couple of concerns may be noted. First, making the Biblical storyline central runs the danger of marginalizing Biblical material that is not central to the metanarrative of Scripture but nonetheless present in the canon. Its inductive and descriptive nature and its ability to synthesize not only major but also minor motifs is rightly considered to be one of the greatest strengths of Biblical theology. Care should be taken not to lose sight

⁷⁴See *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷⁵*Ibid.* Beale’s summary of the OT storyline bears some affinities with James Hamilton’s “single center.” I owe this observation to Mark Catlin.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷For a helpful review that is both complimentary and critical, see James M. Hamilton, “Appreciation, Agreement, and a Few Minor Quibbles,” 58–70.

of minor (or not to minor) motifs simply because they do not seem to relate directly to the central storyline of Scripture.

Second, and related to the first, is a doctrinal concern. Evangelicals such as Beale believe that it is every word of Scripture that is inspired, not merely the Biblical storyline.⁷⁸ If so, what in practice helps us to avoid privileging the Biblical storyline (as construed by us) to the extent that less prominent portions of Scripture are unduly neglected? Here we must take care not to be similar in practice (though not in theory) to the approach of scholars such as N. T. Wright (not an inerrantist) in his work *The Last Word* or German content criticism which has also had a notable impact on the work of some British and other evangelicals.⁷⁹

The Future of Biblical Theology

What insights can we derive from this all-too-brief survey of recent contributions to the discipline of Biblical theology? Several observations may be noted. On the whole, it is evident that the discipline has come a long way in the last decade or so. G. K. Beale's recent work, in particular, shows a level of sophistication and creativity that is impressive and bodes well for the future of Biblical theology. On the shoulders of foundational efforts such as the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, the compendium *Biblical Theology: Retrospect & Prospect* edited by Scott Hafemann, and programmatic studies such as T. D. Alexander's *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, a new generation of scholars will be able to produce Biblical theologies that are theoretically responsible, methodologically nuanced, and theologically refined.

In terms of content, there seems to be an emerging consensus that stresses Christological and eschatological fulfillment (whether in terms of creation–new creation, consummation, or restoration). Several of the works we surveyed contend that Christ is the centerpoint and pivotal figure of redemptive history. What is more, the underlying conviction in virtually all of these works is that the Bible constitutes a unity and therefore also exhibits a unified theology. Despite these similarities, however, there are still significant differences among the Biblical theologies written during the past decade. Most importantly, the question of the definition of Biblical theology requires urgent reassessment. Some recent works are more rigorously inductive while

⁷⁸See, e.g., G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

⁷⁹N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005). See the discussion in Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Gender Passages in the NT: Hermeneutical Fallacies Critiqued," *WTJ* 56 (1994): 273–79, and the reference to works such as I. H. Marshall, "An Evangelical Approach to 'Theological Criticism,'" in *The Best in Theology*, Vol. 3, ed. J. I. Packer (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1989), 45–60 (the article first appeared in *Themelios*). On the positive side, we should mention N. T. Wright's excellent inaugural volume in his quintology *Christian Origins and the Question of God, The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

others proceed from a systematic or confessional framework in exploring the teachings of Scripture. Also, the specific proposals made by various scholars differ as to what the theology of the Bible actually is and how it coheres. In part, this is a matter of setting different emphases or privileging a particular overall framework, whether the glory of God, eschatology, salvation history, or some other central topic.

The Definition of Biblical Theology

On the question of definition, Adolf Schlatter provided the following classic formulation of the nature of the discipline over a century ago:

We turn away decisively from ourselves and our time to what was found in the men through whom the church came into being [i.e. the New Testament writers]. Our main interest should be the thought as it was conceived by them and the truth that was valid for them. We want to see and obtain a thorough grasp of what happened historically and existed in another time. This is the internal disposition upon which the success of the work depends, the commitment which must consistently be renewed as the work proceeds.⁸⁰

This kind of definition can serve as a standard by which we measure the Biblical-theological work we produce in order to ensure that we are staying within the parameters of the field. Before addressing our own questions, we must first listen to the OT and NT writers and documents in order to understand the message of the Bible on its own terms, in its own language, and in its original cultural, historical, and ecclesial contexts.

The Distinction between Biblical and Systematic Theology

Another continuing need is that scholars give careful consideration to the unique characteristics of Biblical theology in relation to other fields, particularly systematic theology. David Clark asserts that each particular dis-

⁸⁰Adolf Schlatter, *The History of the Christ*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 18. Gentry and Wellum also offer a helpful summary definition of the discipline of Biblical theology: "The hermeneutical discipline which seeks to do justice to what Scripture claims to be and what it actually is. In terms of its claim, Scripture is nothing less than God's Word written and as such, it is a unified revelation of his gracious plan of redemption. In terms of what it actually is, it is a progressive unfolding of God's plan, rooted in history, and unpacked along a specific redemptive-historical plot line primarily demarcated by biblical covenants. Biblical theology as a hermeneutical discipline attempts to exegete texts in their own context and then, in light of the entire canon, to examine the unfolding nature of God's plan and carefully think through the relationship between before and after in that plan which culminates in Christ. As such, biblical theology provides the basis for understanding how texts in one part of the Bible relate to all the other texts so that they will be read correctly, according to God's intention, which is discovered through human authors, but ultimately at the canonical level. In the end, biblical theology is the attempt to unpack 'the whole counsel of God' and 'to think God's thoughts after him' and it provides the basis and underpinning for all theology and doctrine." See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 15–16.

cipline—Biblical theology, systematic theology, historical theology, and so-called practical theology—“is a microperspective that limits its view of the object of study to a particular aspect or dimensions of the whole.”⁸¹ In other words, there is a unity of the theological disciplines in that they all contribute to a proper understanding of the larger macroperspective of Scripture, providing unity to the individual pieces by constituting them as a “symphonic theology.”⁸² While Clark’s comments are helpful, however, one must be careful to avoid a blurring of the lines between the disciplines so as to allow them to contribute to the Christian faith in their own distinctive ways.⁸³

Seeking to navigate the tension between an inductive and a preconceived conceptual approach, Hamilton affirms that Biblical theology is inductive in nature but cannot be divorced from one’s existing theological framework: “Our biblical-theological understanding will line up—implicitly or explicitly—with our systematic conclusions. This cannot be denied, and it should be embraced, with the two disciplines of biblical and systematic theology functioning to further our understanding of God and his word.”⁸⁴ He continues, “Some today are referring to biblical theology as a ‘bridge discipline’ that connects exegesis and systematic theology, but we can also view biblical theology, systematic theology, and historical theology as equal tools, each of which can be used to sharpen our exegesis and theology.”⁸⁵

Whatever the merits of Hamilton’s proposal, however, clearly this is no longer Biblical theology in the vein of Gabler’s distinction. Not only is the distinction between Biblical and systematic theology lost, in the end all theology is systematic theology. According to Hamilton, “[T]he reality is that all these methods are used in teaching Christians, which makes them

⁸¹David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 182.

⁸²See *Ibid.*, 192.

⁸³A helpful article on this topic is Trevor Hart, “Systematic—In What Sense?” in *Out of Egypt*, 341–51.

⁸⁴Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, 46.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 47. Similar sentiments are made by Vern Poythress, who asserts, “One must get one’s framework of assumptions—one’s presuppositions—from somewhere. If one does not get them from healthy, biblical grounded systematic theology, one will most likely get them from the spirit of the age, whether that be Enlightenment rationalism or postmodern relativism or historicism.” Vern Sheridan Poythress, “Kinds of Biblical Theology,” *WTJ* 70 (2008): 134. Similarly to Hamilton and Poythress, Goldsworthy also presses his readers concerning the relationship between dogmatic and Biblical theology. “For a theologian to pursue a biblical theology implies some kind of already existing dogmatic framework regarding the Bible. Biblical theologians who insist that we do not need dogmatics simply have not examined their own presuppositions about the Bible. The issue is not really that of which comes first, dogmatics or biblical theology, because they are interrelated and involve the hermeneutical spiral. Because of the symbiotic relationship between them, I do not think it is possible to be competent in one without the other. A similar symbiosis exists between dogmatics and historical theology since dogmaticians cannot ignore the history of the discipline. Evangelical biblical-theological presuppositions will include some cognizance of the dogmas discussed below as the structure for progress in theologizing.” Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, 42.

all dogmatic theology.”⁸⁶ In accentuating the ecclesial thrust of Biblical theology, Hamilton, whether consciously or not, is picking up on an implicit distinction made by Gabler who did, in fact, seek to separate the academy from the church when urging a distinction between Biblical and dogmatic theology. The fact that history matters, however, does not necessarily imply that in historical investigation the church is set aside. Rather, it is historical investigation that shows the church to be the central focus in God’s redemptive plan. History is not the exclusive domain of historical research (whether historical-critical or otherwise) set off from the ecclesiastical realm, nor is the history of redemption merely textual; it is the very history in which the church has a vital, even indispensable, part.⁸⁷

What is more, while it is doubtless correct that interpreters approach the text of Scripture with a set of presuppositions, the goal of Biblical theology, as mentioned, must continue to be the accurate perception of the convictions of the OT and NT writers. Despite the fact that the majority of scholars in both fields (Biblical and systematic theology) continue to support a distinction of the respective disciplines, drawing such distinctions is not always hard and fast. The need remains for definitional clarity and methodological vigilance lest Biblical theology becomes systematic theology in disguise, the lines between Biblical and systematic theology become unduly blurred, or the disciplines illegitimately collapse into one. If Biblical theology is systematic theology by another name, and systematic presuppositions, conscious or not, control one’s Biblical-theological work to such an extent that the end product bears more the imprint of the contemporary interpreter than that of the original Biblical writers, a line has been crossed.⁸⁸

There thus remains a need for a procedure by which interpreters move from exegeting individual texts in their original historical setting to a placement of the results of such exegesis into their proper canonical context before moving on to a systematization in light of contemporary concerns.

⁸⁶Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 47.

⁸⁷I owe this keen point to Mark Catlin.

⁸⁸Though seeking to carve out its own particular niche, one example of this blurring of the lines can be located in the more recent discipline known as the theological interpretation of Scripture. For examples of the literature in this field see J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entrway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). One should also take note of the project known as the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, a set of commentaries written by “leading theologians” who “read and interpret Scripture creedally for the twenty-first century.” For helpful assessments and critiques of the movement as a whole, see Gregg R. Allison, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: An Introduction and Preliminary Evaluation,” in *SBJT* 2 (2010): 28–37; Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Of Professors and Madmen: Currents in Contemporary New Testament Scholarship,” 2–6, http://www.BiblicalFoundations.org/pdf/professor_madman.pdf and now D. A. Carson, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But ...,” in R. Michael Allen, ed., *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011); see below.

Along those lines, Grant Osborne, citing R. T. France, calls for “the priority in biblical interpretation of what has come to be called ‘the first horizon,’ i.e. of understanding biblical language within its own context before we start exploring its relevance to our own concerns, and of keeping the essential biblical context in view as a control on the way we apply biblical language to current issues.”⁸⁹ By reaffirming the distinction between the first and second horizons of Scripture, I do not intend to issue a call for the various Biblical and theological disciplines to separate even further—indeed, more dialogue needs to occur between Biblical scholars and theologians. Instead, my purpose is to register a plea for recognizing the place of each discipline in the overall process of interpreting and applying God’s Word.⁹⁰

In his recent assessment of the theological interpretation of Scripture, D. A. Carson, citing Graham Cole, distinguishes between four levels of Biblical and theological scholarship.⁹¹ First comes the exegesis of Biblical texts in their literary and historical contexts, with proper attention being given to literary genre, attempting to discern authority intent to the extent that this is possible. Second, the interpreter endeavors to understand the text within the entirety of Biblical theology, determining what it contributes to the unfolding storyline. Third, theological structures in a given text are sought to be understood in concert with other major theological scriptural themes. Fourth, all teachings derived from the Biblical writings are both subjected to and modified by the interpreter’s larger hermeneutical proposal. Carson notes that traditional interpreters have operated mostly on the first two levels, while many (if not most) recent practitioners of the theological interpretation of Scripture operate on levels 3 and 4.

I am content to let Carson appraise this latter movement. For our present purposes, it will suffice to note that the best Biblical-theological work

⁸⁹Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 415, citing R. T. France, “The Church and the Kingdom of God,” in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problem of Contextualization*, ed. D. A. Carson (Nashville: Nelson, 1984), 42. Schlatter likewise argues, “Apart from the historical task there remains, constantly and necessarily, a second one, the doctrinal task, through which we align ourselves with the teachings of the New Testament and clarify whether or not and how and why we accept those teachings into our own spiritual lives, so that they are not only truth for the New Testament community, but also for us personally. The distinction between these two activities thus turns out to be beneficial for both. Distortions in the perception of the subject also harm its appropriation, just as conversely improper procedures in the appropriation of the subject muddy its perception” (*History of the Christ*, 18).

⁹⁰Scobie, *Ways of Our God*, 66–67. Scobie helpfully comments on the needed distinction between BT and ST, along with any other ancillary discipline. He asserts, “Dogmatic [or systematic] theology is the final stage in the movement from the horizon of the text to the horizon of the interpreter. Professional theologians ought to be the servants of the church, continually aiding it in its thought and reflection on how biblical norms are to be applied in the contemporary situation.” Scobie also believes that the ever-increasing degree of specialization in the discipline of Biblical theology is good to a degree, but if Biblical theology is to serve as a legitimate bridge discipline, then more work needs to be done in opening up communication between the various theological disciplines.

⁹¹Carson, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But”

operates on all four levels (or at least the first three). On the one hand, Biblical theologians must not skip levels 1 and 2 in their haste to progress to the third and fourth levels. On the other hand, scholars should not stop at level 2, or even 3. Cole's model (as explicated by Carson) does not merely serve as a proper basis for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the theological interpretation of Scripture; it also provides a helpful grid against which a proper definition and method of Biblical theology can be assessed. There is no getting beyond Gabler's distinction, I am afraid. We must be careful to maintain the proper distinction between Biblical and systematic theology.

Conclusion

The past decade and a half has witnessed a tremendous amount of progress in evangelical scholarship on Biblical theology. Works such as G. K. Beale's *New Testament Biblical Theology* bear witness to the considerable degree of sophistication to which at least some of the evangelical practitioners of Biblical theology have attained. At the same time, there remains a need for scholars to be precise in defining what they mean when they claim to engage in Biblical-theological work and to distinguish carefully between Biblical and systematic theology. The notion of the Biblical metanarrative, in particular, holds considerable promise in anchoring the future of Biblical theology. At the same time, it will be important not to lose sight of the contribution of individual books of the Bible and of the variety of interrelated major and minor scriptural motifs. Biblical theology should remain a discipline where we would rather leave some loose ends untied than forcing them into a straitjacket and where interpreters are willing to heed the motto attributed to Albert Einstein, one of the most famous scientists of the past century: "Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler." Thank you very much.⁹²

⁹²Thanks are due Jeremy Kimble for his diligent note-taking and argument-condensing assistance; and Mark Catlin for his help in grouping and categorizing recent Biblical-theological works. Thanks also to the students in the New Testament theology seminar at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary for many stimulating discussions on the subject in general and on the Biblical theologies by Hamilton and Beale in particular.