

EDITORIAL

Yesterday, as part of my preparation for a couple of plenary addresses on biblical theology at regional ETS meetings this spring, I read through Johann P. Gabler's *De justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus* over a cup of Starbucks coffee. (I wish I could say I did it in the original Latin, but it was just in English translation.) It had been a while since I'd looked at Gabler's address, and reading it again, and perhaps more thoroughly than before, I was struck by its relevance. (Gabler originally gave his address in 1787, the same year the U.S. Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia, and just two years prior to the French Revolution.) To be sure, at the end of his address Gabler seems to fall short of a fully evangelical view of the Bible's inspiration, opining that "we must investigate what in the sayings of the Apostles is truly divine, and what perchance merely human." And there may be other shortcomings as well. But on the whole, I found Gabler's proposal hermeneutically sound, theologically astute, well argued, and altogether timely. Indeed, it's quite remarkable that Gabler's inaugural address, delivered to a group of colleagues and students at the University of Altdorf, a small German university town, is still read 225 years later in English translation.

The discipline of biblical theology, which many say Gabler inaugurated that day (March 30, 1787), despite a rather checkered history has shown remarkable resilience and today represents one of the most promising fields in biblical and theological studies. This was not always a foregone conclusion. After Gabler, the discipline split into Old and New Testament theology. Later, scholars found not one, but many theologies in the respective Testaments. Later still, William Wrede delivered his well-known lecture "Task and Method of *So-called* New Testament Theology," contending that the very pursuit of the theology of the New Testament was misguided and ought to be replaced with a history-of-religions approach. Talk about a slippery slope: from Biblical to Old and New Testament theology; from Old and New Testament theology to Old and New Testament *theologies*; and finally to no Old or New Testament theology at all! At that point, clearly the discipline had no place to go but up. The years that followed saw a variety of salvation-historical approaches, including that of Adolf Schlatter, whose grasp of the essence of New Testament (and Biblical) Theology à la Gabler was second to none.

In the Foreword to *Das Wort Jesu* (1909), Schlatter wrote, "The New Testament writings present us with the task of identifying their teaching and of clarifying their origin. We customarily call this branch of historical research 'New Testament theology.' By calling this field of *historical* work

‘theology,’ we affirm that its object of scrutiny is the statements about God and God’s work contained in the New Testament.” He continued, “In speaking of ‘New Testament’ theology, we are saying that it is not the interpreter’s own theology or that of his church and times that is examined but rather the theology expressed by the New Testament itself.” According to Schlatter, “It is the historical objective that should govern our conceptual work exclusively and completely, stretching our perceptive faculties to the limit. We turn away decisively from ourselves and our time to what was found in the men through whom the church came into being. 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. . . .”

Undaunted by Wrede’s negativism, and in the tradition of Gabler, Schlatter ventured to investigate the New Testament’s theology in a 2-volume New Testament Theology, eventually titled respectively, *The History of the Christ* and *The Theology of the Apostles*. Despite such efforts, and the contributions of the so-called “Biblical Theology movement” later in the last century, Brevard Childs (in his 1970 work *Biblical Theology in Crisis*) diagnosed that not all was well with the patient who had refused to die when Dr. Wrede sought to relegate it to pseudo-status if not utter oblivion. The last couple decades, however, have witnessed an unusual degree of vibrancy, epitomized, for example, by the revival of the time-honored Studies in Biblical Theology (SBT) series in the New Studies in Biblical Theology (NSBT) series edited by D. A. Carson. As I hope to elaborate in my plenary addresses, recent evangelical biblical-theological work can roughly be placed in the following four categories: (1) classic approaches; (2) central theme approaches; (3) single-center approaches; and (4) storyline or metanarrative approaches.

The classic approach, which entails investigating the Bible’s theology book by book, as well as studying major scriptural themes, is epitomized by works such as the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (2000). It is also found in I. Howard Marshall’s magisterial *New Testament Theology* and in Frank Thielman’s *Theology of the New Testament*. (Incidentally, the titles of New Testament theologies I perused for writing this editorial are not characterized by creative ingenuity: each and every one of them was titled either *New Testament Theology* or *Theology of the New Testament*, with the exception of Beale’s work and, of course, Jim Hamilton’s). Normally, such studies conclude with a more or less detailed synthesis, showing, as the subtitle of Marshall’s work puts it, that the New Testament is “Many Witnesses, One Gospel.” Gabler would be happy, I believe, with the practice of studying the biblical writings book by book, urging interpreters as he did to “carefully collect and classify each of the ideas of each patriarch . . . and of each prophet” as well as “the ideas from the epoch of the New Testament, those of Jesus, Paul, Peter, John, and James,” issuing in a comparison “in such a way that for each author his own work

remains unimpaired, and it is clearly revealed wherein the separate authors agree in a friendly fashion, or differ among themselves” (though evangelical authors may not agree with Gabler on how to construe these differences).

Central themes approaches typically are predicated upon the classic approach but go beyond it in that they are concerned with identifying motifs running through both Testaments in an effort to delineate Scripture’s unity along a progressively revealed storyline. The book *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (edited by Scott Hafemann and Paul House) is a useful example in this regard, though it should be noted that some of the contributors to the volume, Roy Ciampa in particular, go beyond a mere central themes approach and move toward a narrative model. A variation of this central themes approach is the effort to narrow down such themes to a single center, as recently attempted by James Hamilton in *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment*. Hamilton’s effort is remarkable in that it comes decades after many (if not most) have pronounced the pursuit of a single center in Biblical Theology an impossibility (see, e.g., Gerhard Hasel in *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* [1978]; see also D. A. Carson, “New Testament Theology,” in the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*). Space does not permit a full appraisal of Hamilton’s work, though it should be noted that Hamilton’s brand of Biblical Theology is in fact a hybrid of Biblical and Systematic Theology—Hamilton calls the two disciplines “equal tools”—and takes its cue from both theologians such as Jonathan Edwards and direct study of the biblical texts. Hamilton’s approach thus differs from “The Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology” urged by Gabler. If a systematic framework is presupposed at the very outset, and the single center is found in every book of Scripture, there is no synthesis left to be done. What is more, a single center or unfettered diversity are not the only alternatives, and neither the unity of God nor the unity of Scripture requires a unitary reading of Scripture that reduces the one story of Scripture to a single center.

Finally, there are storyline or metanarrative approaches. On a more basic level, T. D. Alexander’s *From Eden to Jerusalem* comes to mind. On a very high level of sophistication, one thinks of G. K. Beale’s recent work *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, in which Beale posits an Old and a New Testament storyline that resemble each other but evince continual development. Clearly, I believe, Beale’s work culminates a decade and a half of remarkable progress in evangelical biblical theology. It is creative, shows thorough awareness of the field, and avoids numerous landmines that have inflicted serious damage to the proposals of many of Beale’s predecessors. Informed by an understanding of the message of individual books of Scripture and by an appraisal of central biblical themes, Beale’s effort to solidify storylines unique to each Testament that show

progressive development is an important step forward. My only concern is that less prominent themes not be lost sight of when pursuing the main storyline. After all, all of the words of Scripture are inspired, not just its storyline.

It is encouraging to know that as evangelical scholars, we are not confined to recycling old ideas, reacting against liberal, critical scholarship, or rearranging the deck furniture in more or (more often than not) less creative ways. In the field of Biblical Theology, at least, real progress is being made. There continues to be a need for detailed study of individual themes and clusters of themes with careful attention given to authorial intent and exegetical detail, and plenty of breathing space allowed for the fullness of scriptural diversity to express itself within the overarching context of the Bible's unity. Clearly, a brief editorial is not the place for a full-fledged assessment of the discipline. What is more, I haven't even said anything about the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (though fortunately, Don Carson has now given us his assessment: "Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But . . .," included in a collection of essays edited by R. Michael Allen, *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives* [New York: T&T Clark, 2011] and already posted on the Gospel Coalition website).

As Carson notes with regard to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (which he calls "partly a serious enterprise and partly . . . a fad"), there are four levels of interpreting biblical texts (the categories are actually those of Graham Cole, one of Carson's former colleagues at Trinity). First comes the exegesis of biblical texts in their literary and historical contexts, with proper attention being given to literary genre, attempting to discern authorial 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 considered 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 be helpful to note that the best biblical-theological work 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 appraised. There is no getting beyond Gabler, I am afraid. We must be careful to maintain the proper distinction between Biblical and Systematic Theology.

As Charles Scobie put it in his work *The Ways of Our God* (incidentally, one of the more successful attempts at a Biblical Theology of which I am aware), at one level Biblical Theology is simply “the theology of the Bible” (rather than our own theology, as Schlatter noted years ago). While this (to some extent, at least) seems to beg the question—aren’t we all concerned to discover the theology of the Bible?—discerning the Bible’s own theology remains the proper aim of Biblical Theology, descriptively and inductively conceived. I conclude, with apologies to the apostle Paul: “Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus. Therefore, all who are mature should think this way. And if you think differently about anything, God will reveal this also to you.”

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