

To our wives: Laura Klink and Nicole Lockett

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*Understanding Biblical Theology*

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# BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AS HISTORICAL DESCRIPTION: DEFINITION

The first type of biblical theology (BT1) has many similarities to the influential History of Religions School<sup>1</sup> in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, in which a new picture emerged of the people, ideas, and institutions of the ancient world. This new picture resulted in a purely descriptive study of the Bible. The most important advocate for making the descriptive approach a dominant type of biblical theology is Krister Stendahl. In 1962, Stendahl provided what has become a definitive statement of what we are calling BT1.<sup>2</sup> According to him, this new picture of the Bible was rooted in a growing empathy for the Bible's own patterns of thought:

It became a scholarly ideal to creep out of one's Western and twentieth-century skin and identify oneself with the feelings and thought patterns of the past. The distance between biblical times and modern times was stressed, and the difference between biblical thought and systematic theology became much more than that of diversification over against systematization or of concrete exemplification over against abstract propositions. What emerged was a descriptive study of biblical thought.<sup>3</sup>

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1. The History of Religions School is the name given to a group of Protestant scholars in Germany over a century ago who intended to understand the OT and NT as religion(s) within the context of their historical environments, including a comparison with other religions of that time and region. Cf. Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (2nd ed.; Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 167–68.
  2. Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *IDB*, 1:418–32.
  3. *Ibid.*, 418.

Stendahl calls this new phenomenon a “mature outgrowth of the historical and critical study of the Scriptures.”<sup>4</sup> The descriptive approach waived—or intentionally kept out of sight—any concern for present-day religion and faith. The History of Religions School had emphasized the widening of the gap “between our time and the time of the Bible, between West and East, between the questions self-evidently raised in modern minds and those presupposed, raised, and answered in the Scriptures.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, Stendahl, employing a method similar to a History of Religions approach, explicated this divide between two poles—past and present—with the following qualifying methodological questions: “What *did* it mean?” and “What *does* it mean?” (Or more simply, “what it meant” and “what it means”). The former, “what it meant,” is alone the task of biblical theology; “what it means” is the task of dogmatics (systematic theology).

The key difference between BT1 and other theological approaches was the question of relevance for today. Neither “liberals” nor “conservatives” had allowed for a gap between the times, for both were methodologically ignorant of the contemporary limitations of the Bible’s content. Both were convinced that the Bible contained revelation that was in the form of eternal truth, with little concern for the Bible’s historical limitations. The disagreement between liberals and conservatives up to that point concerned the *results* of translating revelation, not whether such a translation was historically possible or appropriate. It was BT1, and its definitive presentation by Stendahl, that desired to free itself from the anachronistic interpretations of its predecessors, and to force itself to accept the hiatus between the time and ideas of the Bible and the time and ideas of the modern world.

Thus, BT1 made certain that history—the specific biblical history—is the sole, mediating category. We are entitling BT1 “Biblical Theology as Historical Description,” since its method is entirely controlled by a historical-critical methodology that is descriptive in nature.

## THE TASK OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

What is most certain for BT1 is that biblical theology is *not* the same as doctrinal (systematic) theology. This distinction is important and must be maintained. The reason this is important is because for most “the very idea of ‘biblical theology’ seems to hang uncertainly in the middle air, somewhere between actual exegesis and systematic theology.”<sup>6</sup> This middle position has

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4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 419.

6. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM, 1999), 3.

often allowed it to be a sort of hybrid—part exegetical and part theological—and even more, has allowed biblical theology to be utilized and claimed by both sides. Hence, most proponents of BT1 quickly separate their biblical theology from a more doctrinal or confessional biblical theology. Stated succinctly, *the task of BT1 is to affirm the exegetical or descriptive nature of biblical theology and deny the theological or normative nature of biblical theology*. This can be supported by several necessary explanations.

First, biblical theology is the theology of the Bible as it existed within the time, languages, and cultures of the Bible itself. It is the theology of the Bible “in its own terms.”<sup>7</sup> Biblical theology is past-tense theology, not present-tense or contemporary theology. But even if we speak of a biblical “theology,” we speak not of a universal theology, or what Stendahl called a “normative” theology,<sup>8</sup> but a theology that has a specific social location: the Bible’s social location. That is, we speak of the theology of the Bible as the religion of the Bible’s earliest recipients.

BT1, therefore, is entirely controlled by a context far removed from the present context; it is looking not for a theology for today, but for the theology that existed back there and then. Truth statements (or normative judgments) from theology are left for the systematic theologian of contemporary Christianity (religion). Since we are looking for a biblical theology that existed in the context of ancient minds regarding an ancient text, the task of biblical theology can usually be done only by biblical scholars—and almost always is. Even more, because the task is necessarily attentive to original social locations, a further division is commonly created between the two Testaments, or the two Bibles, one Hebrew and one Christian. It is for this reason that most proponents of BT1 reject a two-Testament biblical theology. There can be no pan-biblical theology simply because the “pan” obliterates two very different social-historical-religious contexts.

Second, biblical theology is something new in the sense that it is the result of contemporary research methods. Biblical theology is not, therefore, something already laid down in a past or ancient tradition—the creeds or confessions of the church. “The theology of the Bible, as most modern biblical scholarship has envisaged it, is something that *has still to be discovered*.”<sup>9</sup> The biblical theologian is not rehearsing what is already known, but is exploring what can be found. Its foundation and its mode of scholarly identification are different in kind from the foundation and mode of scholarly identification of any one of the traditional theological positions or parties.

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7. This is the oft-stated phrase of Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” 430.

8. Krister Stendahl, “Method in the Study of Biblical Theology,” in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship* (ed. J. Philip Hyatt; Nashville: Abingdon, 1965), 196–209.

9. Barr, *Concept*, 3.

In a sense, biblical theology transcends the traditional theologies, not merely between different theological parties and denominations within Protestant Christianity, but also between Protestant and Catholic theologies, even Christian and Jewish theologies. A true theology of the Bible—a true biblical theology—is not confined to one tradition, but absorbs them all without bias or limited foundation. In the end, it becomes a uniting force, a stabilizer, not a proponent of one of the competing traditions. The reason for this is that it does not work from the end of the religious trajectory (today, with all of its different parties), but from the beginning (the past, from the womb of the religion itself). Since BT1 is purely descriptive, it is always working at more accurate descriptions of the theology of the Hebrews or Christians, and it is benefited by each new discovery and each new theory that explains what is unclear or unknown. It is the antithesis of the creed or confession.

Third, biblical theology is an exegetical project. Stated another way, according to BT1 advocates, biblical theology is something that is done by biblical scholars, not by theologians. By holding firmly to the exegetical nature of biblical theology, BT1 makes the determinative factor of its definition the question of historical criticism.<sup>10</sup> John J. Collins explains it this way:

Whether or not one can conceive of a biblical theology grounded in historical criticism obviously depends on whether one insists on a faith commitment that exempts some positions from criticism, or whether one is willing to regard biblical theology as an extension of the critical enterprise that deals with truth-claims and values in open-ended engagements with the text.<sup>11</sup>

It is the latter definition of biblical theology that BT1 endorses: a biblical theology that is grounded in historical criticism in such a way that faith commitments are off the table, and a biblical theology that is an extension of the critical enterprise. For this reason some avoid altogether calling the enterprise “biblical theology.” John Barton, for example, though adopting the same descriptive method as Stendahl, does not refer to the theology of the Bible as “biblical theology.” As Barton explains, “I would rather characterize the kind of theology that is associated with biblical criticism [his alternative title for historical criticism] as *critical theology*.”<sup>12</sup> By “critical,” Barton helpfully guides the understanding of BT1 as a task rooted in the historical-critical

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10. Robert Morgan, “New Testament Theology,” in *Biblical Theology: Problems and Perspectives: In Honor of J. Christiaan Beker* (ed. Steven J. Kraftchick, Charles D. Myers Jr., and Ben C. Ollenburger (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 105, considers it fortunate “for the integrity of the discipline” that most NT theologians are trained in historical criticism.

11. John J. Collins, *Encounters with Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 3.

12. John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007),

method and controlled by the historical-critical agenda. Once one leaves a “critical theology,” they have left the first part of a two-part process. And the two parts are “what it meant” and “what it means.” As Barton explains:

Assimilating any text, the Bible included, is a two-stage operation. The first stage is a perception of the text’s meaning; the second, an evaluation of that meaning in relation to what one already believes to be the case. This process cannot be collapsed into a single process, in which meaning is perceived and evaluated at one and the same time and by the same operation.<sup>13</sup>

BT1 is not dealing with truth, the determination of contemporary meaning, but with text, the determination of ancient meaning. While the former is the task of the theologian, the latter is the task of the historian. The truth question is (and can only be) asked once the text has been critically analyzed; and the results of the truth question are unimportant to the task of the first-order historical critic. For, according to proponents of BT1, the task of biblical theology is to be descriptive, not prescriptive.

## THE USE OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

If the task of biblical theology for BT1 is historical and critical, the use of biblical theology is the object of the academy, not the church. Biblical theology of this sort cannot be ruled by prior faith commitments, nor can it be laden with creeds and confessions. It must be “a subject for public discussion regardless of faith commitments.”<sup>14</sup> Thus it must fit universal standards of objectivity, not limited by religious communities or tainted by religious commitments. Even more, “it is concerned with truth-claims and ethical values presented by the biblical text, and in any critical biblical theology these claims and values are open to question.”<sup>15</sup>

While several proponents of BT1 are hesitant to consider a place for biblical theology outside of the academy, there are those who do give some guidelines for its use in the church. For example, according to Stendahl, maintaining a “what it meant/what it means” distinction has “considerable

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185. For a similar designation see Gerd Theissen, *On Having a Critical Faith* (trans. John Stephen Bowden; London: SCM, 1979).

13. Barton, *Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 159. Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” who institutionalized this two-part process (“meant/means”), actually divides the second part into two halves: interpretive translation and normative relevance. As we will see below, these two halves still function to answer the dogmatic question of “what it means” (for today), which is entirely distinct from the “what it meant” question of biblical theology.

14. Collins, *Encounters with Biblical Theology*, 3.

15. *Ibid.*



ramifications” for the preacher, “if he in any sense sees it as his task to communicate the message of the Bible to the congregation whose shepherd he is.” Such a statement brings sharp focus to the topic of preaching: the message *of the Bible*. Of course, Stendahl is well aware of the difference—the hiatus—between the message of the Bible in its ancient social location and the message(s) of contemporary social locations. Thus, Stendahl compares the preacher’s task to that of a translator—a bilingual translator, who is capable of thinking in two languages (not Greek and Hebrew, but the language of both an ancient and modern social location):

His familiarity with the biblical world and patterns of thought should, through his work in descriptive biblical theology, have reached the point where he is capable of moving around in his Bible with idiomatic ease. His familiarity with the “language” of the contemporary world should reach a similar degree of perception and genuine understanding. Only so could he avoid the rhetorical truisms of much homiletic activity, where the message is expressed in a strange—sometimes even beautiful—mixed tongue, a homiletical Yiddish which cannot be really understood outside the walls of the Christian ghetto.<sup>16</sup>

This vision for preaching is propelled by a concern *for the Bible*. For “a mere repetition and affirmation of the biblical language, or even a translation which mechanically substitutes contemporary terms—often with a psychological slant—for those of the original, has little chance to communicate the true intention of the biblical text.”<sup>17</sup> The vision for preaching promoted by BT1 demands, for biblical reasons, that the two contexts be separated. A consistent descriptive approach gives to the church an exposure to the Bible in its original intention (in its own terms), “as an ever new challenge to thought, faith, and response.”<sup>18</sup> This is no theology of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, or Schleiermacher; rather, it is much more: a true theology of the Bible.

## THE SCOPE AND SOURCES OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Since the descriptive task of BT1 demands that the social location of the Bible is the only viable context from which to draw forth the Bible’s true theology, the context of the Bible becomes the guide to its scope. The theol-

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16. Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” 430.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 431.

ogy of BT1 is not determined by the meaning known and implied by the church or by any other period outside of the Bible's own social-historical context. As Barr explains, the "scope is determined by the meanings as known and implied within the time and culture of the Bible."<sup>19</sup> Thus, at the most basic level, the sources of biblical theology are any and all religious materials used by the Hebrew or Christian believers to explain or express their God-religion. This raises two important questions. First, since many of the religious books were used by numerous "faiths," does this mean that BT1 is really the same thing as the History of Religions School? Second, what about the canon, Hebrew or Christian? We will deal with each of these in turn.

Since BT1 applies a rigid descriptive approach to biblical theology, it does have many similarities to the History of Religions School. John H. Collins has admitted that "scholars have often found it hard to distinguish between biblical theology and the history of Israelite religion."<sup>20</sup> The History of Religions School was fueled by the discovery of ancient texts, giving extracanonical insight into biblical religion. This was also a central feature of biblical theology, for it provided new information to assist with the descriptive task: exploration of remoter parts of the world, discoveries of unknown civilizations, the beginnings of anthropology, the decipherment of ancient languages, the discovery of papyri and scrolls, and the reading of inscriptions—things which, unlike the Bible, "had not been handed down through long ages of interpretation but still existed as they had lain for thousands of years."<sup>21</sup>

Thus, as we return to our question—Is BT1 the same as the History of Religions School?—the answer must be negative. Even those like Rainer Albertz and John Barton, who link them so closely together, are not willing

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19. Barr, *Concept*, 74.

20. John H. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Post-Modern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 99. Collins does not think they are indistinguishable. While he does see similarities between Israelite religion and Near Eastern religion, he is convinced that "there seems to have been an exclusivistic strain in Yahwistic religion from very early times, even if it did not always dominate. The point here is not that any particular feature was entirely unique to Israel, but that differences in degree and emphasis give the religion a configuration that becomes quite distinct over time" (128). Cf. Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), who argues for a sharp distinction between "pagan religion" and "Israelite religion." For a method seeking less distinction, see Patrick D. Miller, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* (JSOTSup 267; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), who unites the History of Religions School and biblical theology by allowing for "the interplay of continuity and discontinuity that is always going on" (376).

21. Barr, *Concept*, 101.