Graeme Goldsworthy

Christ-Centered Biblical Theology
HERMENEUTICAL FOUNDATIONS AND PRINCIPLES

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This book is dedicated as a tribute to Donald Robinson

I wish to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to Donald William Bradley Robinson who, though being a leading Australian New Testament scholar, lectured me in Old Testament when I was a student at Moore Theological College. This book is my attempt to spell out the rationale for the method of biblical theology that Robinson taught me, which galvanized my enthusiasm for the subject. It is my tribute to him and his tireless endeavours to make the Bible more accessible to generations of students and, through them, to ordinary Christians. It is impossible to say how my thinking and practice in biblical theology would have developed if Donald Robinson had not been my teacher. But this I do believe: a great debt is owed to him for the considerable influence on many Christians that has resulted from his teaching and writing, and from that of some of his former students. The Robinson schema has not only found much acceptance here in Australia, but also in the UK, USA, Europe and in churches in Asia and Latin America.

Donald William Bradley Robinson

Born in Sydney 1922
Graduated BA University of Sydney 1946
University of Cambridge 1947–50
Ordination by Archbishop of Sydney 1950
Lecturer, Moore College 1952–73
Vice Principal, Moore College 1959–73
Bishop of Parramatta 1973–82
Archbishop of Sydney 1982–93
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I have written this book, and write this preface, reflecting on my heritage in evangelical Anglicanism, which began in Australia with the arrival of the first fleet at Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788. With it came an evangelical minister of the Church of England as Chaplain, Richard Johnson. He preached the first Christian sermon in Australia on 3 February of the same year. A monument in the Sydney central business district marks the place and commemorates the date of this sermon and the preacher’s text: Psalm 116:12. Johnson was succeeded by another evangelical chaplain, Samuel Marsden. In 1792 a devoutly evangelical layman, Thomas Moore, arrived on board the ship *Britannia* as its carpenter. In 1796 he became the official Boat Builder of the Colony of New South Wales, and later went on to establish a prosperous pastoral venture.

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1. Johnson’s successors were officially under the oversight of the Bishop of Calcutta from 1825 until 1835. In that year Australia was removed from this oversight and the Diocese of Australia was formed with William Grant Broughton as its first, and only, bishop. During Broughton’s episcopate, Australia was divided into four dioceses in 1847 and Broughton became the first Bishop of Sydney.

at Liverpool, 20 miles south-west of Sydney. When Moore died in 1840 his
will directed that his considerable wealth should benefit the church in the
colony. " Specifically he directed that a substantial amount should be used to
establish a college ‘for the education of young men of the Protestant persua-
sion in the principles of Christian Knowledge’. In 1856 the second bishop
of Sydney, Frederic Barker, applied Moore’s will to establish a theological
college at the Moore property in Liverpool. Moore College, one of the oldest
tertiary institutions in Australia, began with three students and, at the time of
writing, had increased one hundredfold. In 1891 it moved to premises adja-
cent to the University of Sydney in the inner suburb of Newtown. Barker was
a convinced evangelical who had been greatly influenced by Charles Simeon
during his time in Cambridge. The development of evangelical Christianity in
Sydney was not always smooth. But in 1934 the evangelical missionary bishop
to western China, Howard Mowll, was appointed Archbishop of Sydney. He
worked tirelessly to consolidate the evangelical character of Sydney Diocese.
In 1935 Thomas Chatterton Hammond, director of the Irish Church Missions
in Dublin, was appointed Principal of Moore College. Although Hammond
was distinctive as to his emphasis and style, his determined evangelical stance
has left an indelible mark on the College and the Diocese.

This heritage I have shared with generations of laity and clergy in Sydney.
It is the heritage I share with Donald Robinson, to whom this volume is
dedicated. I have watched its development under the leadership of the
Archbishops who succeeded Mowll, and the Principals who succeeded
Hammond. Archbishop Mowll ordained me to the Anglican ministry in
1958 and, in my time at Moore College as a student and junior tutor, I was
privileged to sit under Hammond at the end of his ministry there. Donald
Robinson and I share not only this ethos of Sydney Diocese but also that of
the theology faculty at Cambridge. My debt to Robinson is the motive for this
study of his approach to biblical theology as a distinct discipline. He was my
teacher in theological college, became my colleague on the faculty and has
remained a mentor and friend ever since.

It is fitting that I should also acknowledge my debt to other leaders and
teachers who shaped my Christian thinking and living, and thus my writing.
These include those who impacted me in Sydney: Marcus Loane, Broughton
Knox, Alan Cole, Bruce Smith, Graham Delbridge, John Chapman and many
others. In Cambridge I was privileged to be taught by Peter Ackroyd, Charlie

3. His wife and stepson had both predeceased him and he had no other immediate
relatives.
Moule, David Winton-Thomas and Henry Hart. In later graduate studies at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia I greatly benefitted from the supervision of John Bright and Patrick D. Miller.

In 1973 and 1974 I was a visiting lecturer in biblical theology at Moore College. This gave me the opportunity to think through the Robinson schema and to apply it to an introductory course in the subject. The urging of the students that I should put it all in writing, a project I initially thought to be bordering on the ludicrous, finally prevailed and Gospel and Kingdom (1981) was the outcome. Paternoster published this and two further studies. My relationship with IVP began with the publication of According to Plan (1991), and I have been delighted to be able to maintain that relationship ever since.

I wish to express my grateful thanks for the sensitive suggestions, comments and other help I received first from David Kingdon and, in more recent times, from Dr Philip Duce, who is Senior Commissioning Editor for theological books at IVP. My earlier Christian life was shaped by two main influences: my parish church in the Sydney Diocese, and the Sydney University Evangelical Union, an affiliate of the Australian arm of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. The latter had its beginnings in the Inter-Varsity Fellowship to which IVP is related. IVP, and the evangelicalism of both Sydney Diocese and Moore College, all have common roots in British evangelicalism. It is very satisfying to me to have a good working relationship with a publisher that shares my spiritual roots, my doctrinal convictions and Christian ethos. I have been encouraged to complete this present project by numbers of friends and colleagues who share my respect for Donald Robinson. To all of these I owe my gratitude, and especially to Miriam, my wife and partner in the gospel for forty-seven years, who has constantly stood by me and supported my endeavours.

Graeme Goldsworthy
Bilambil Heights, NSW

4. Now named Union Presbyterian Seminary.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABR</td>
<td>Australian Biblical Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUSS</td>
<td>Andrews University Seminary Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BST</td>
<td>The Bible Speaks Today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTM</td>
<td>Concordia Theological Monthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>English Standard Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gk.</td>
<td>Greek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCC</td>
<td>Library of Christian Classics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>Septuagint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NICOT</td>
<td>New International Commentary on the Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSBT</td>
<td>New Studies in Biblical Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTR</td>
<td>Reformed Theological Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SB/JT</td>
<td>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBT</td>
<td>Studies in Biblical Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHS</td>
<td>Scripture and Hermeneutics Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>SJT</em></td>
<td>Scottish Journal of Theology</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>TB</em></td>
<td>Tyndale Bulletin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tr.</td>
<td>translated by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>WBC</em></td>
<td>Word Biblical Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>WTJ</em></td>
<td>Westminster Theological Journal</td>
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1. BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: LAME DUCK OR EAGLES’ WINGS?

Confessions of a biblical theology addict

The immediate appeal of biblical theology to preachers, teachers and ordinary Christians is that it provides a ‘big picture’ that makes sense out of the bewildering bulk and variety of the biblical literature. It seeks to view the whole scene of God’s revelation from the heights – to mount up with eagles’ wings and allow God to show us his one mighty plan from creation to new creation. When the Bible ceases to be a mass of unconnected stories and other bits of writing, and begins to look like a unity that connects the narratives of Israel with those of the four Gospels, that shows up the progression from the creation to the new creation, and that highlights the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the prime focus of the whole Bible, people usually sit up and take notice. If the Bible is indeed the one word of the one God about the one way of salvation through the one saviour, Jesus Christ, it is biblical theology that will reveal this to us. Yet, for some, this exercise in biblical theology is considered to be a lame duck or, worse, a delusion.

Since the 1960s or so I have worked to refine my understanding of biblical theology that came about as a result of my experiences as a student, pastor and teacher in theological education. This approach, which is now expressed in a number of books, evokes a whole range of responses from opposition to indifference and to enthusiastic endorsement. Opposition causes me to reconsider...
my theory and practice and to try to understand on what grounds the rejection of my position is mounted. Indifference causes me to renew my attempts to convince people of the value of evangelical biblical theology. And endorsement encourages me to persevere without becoming self-satisfied or complacent. There are, of course, some more nuanced responses of people who do not reject the idea out of hand but may have some problems with the way I handle it. I am grateful to those who have identified aspects of my biblical theology that have caused them concern even if, in the end, I have not always felt that their criticisms warranted any radical change to my position. Nevertheless I have learned much from those who differ from me in basic approach.

I first wrote and expounded my seminal views of biblical theology in *Gospel and Kingdom*, which was in essence a first-year course in biblical theology that I taught at Moore College in the early 1970s. Later, while in parish ministry, I wrote a more comprehensive outline of biblical theology for both lay people and pastors. I developed it as a course that I taught to successive groups of church members over some five years. The course was eventually published under the title *According to Plan.* The schema I pursued in those two books has been the basis for my further explorations into biblical theology. Although my approach has been welcomed in some circles, it has not been without its evangelical critics. Furthermore, that which has seemed to me to be a fairly obvious way of dealing with the structure of Scripture has not found much place in the literature, though, in more recent times, this situation seems to be changing.

I think that it is time to set out in more detail the rationale for this approach and thereby to seek to advance the cause of evangelical biblical theology. I hasten to add that my approach came about initially from a brief description of the structure of biblical revelation by one of my teachers when I was a theological student. Donald Robinson, a leading Australian New Testament scholar, was at that time my teacher in Old Testament. He expounded his

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3. The mainstream of liberal-critical scholarship has, on the whole, ignored it, which is not altogether surprising.
4. After we both had attended a meeting of the Fellowship for Biblical Studies in Sydney at which a paper on some aspect of the Old Testament was read, Robinson rather wistfully wondered if he should not have stayed with the Old Testament.
view in response to a student’s question about how the whole diverse body of Scripture fitted together. My memory of what he said in response to the question goes something like this:

God revealed his kingdom and the way into it in three stages: first, in the history of God’s people particularly from Abraham to Solomon’s dedication of the temple; second, in the eschatology of the prophets; and third, in the fulfillment of all these Old Testament expectations in the person and work of Christ.5

Donald Robinson more recently has set out something of his own odyssey in biblical theology.6 He expresses some indebtedness to various theologians including three non-evangelicals: C. H. Dodd, Oscar Cullmann and Gabriel Hebert.7 Robinson describes how Hebert in 1957 gave lectures to the Clergy School of the Anglican Diocese of Brisbane on the subject of ‘Christ the Fulfiller’.8 He comments, ‘In these he propounded an outline of the contents of the Bible in three stages somewhat similar to that which I was developing in the Moore College course.’ In an earlier work Hebert attributes this schema to Dr W. J. Phythian-Adams.9 Robinson explains that in the development of his

That surely was a comment that reflected the problem of specialization in one or other Testament for any biblical theologian who loves the whole Bible.

5. I stress that this is my memory of what was said over fifty years ago. It does, however, agree with some more recent statements and writings of Robinson. Though not an exact quote, I have put it as a quote to emphasize its importance for me. Robinson’s own version of this basic idea is quoted in chapter 9 and below on pp. 22–23.


7. Gabriel Hebert was an English Anglo-Catholic monk who taught for a while in St Michael’s House seminary, South Australia. During that time he developed a friendship with Robinson and was an occasional visitor to Moore College. All of these men, while not perhaps identifiable as evangelicals, had a high view of the authority of Scripture.


9. Robinson, ‘Origins’, p. 5. Hebert’s analysis in Christ the Fulfiller was to identify three confessions of faith: (1) A pre-exilic confession of Israel’s main story based on the election of Abraham. This main story runs from the exodus to the sanctuary in
course, ‘[t]he aim was to assist [the students] in their approach to theological study in general, and to the study of the Bible in particular.’ He further comments that ‘A distinction was drawn between the study of the Christian religion in its various aspects (including credal doctrines, church history, Prayer Book) and the study of the Bible in its own terms to discover what it is all about.’ This phrase ‘the study of the Bible in its own terms’ (italics mine) is, I believe, the key to Robinson’s approach to biblical theology. What those terms are, to be sure, is not a matter of total agreement among biblical scholars.

Robinson developed his course into a treatment of seven main issues:

1. The character of the Bible: its scope and structure.
2. The people of God; including a study of the biblical covenants.
3. The significance of Abraham and his seed. This dealt with the biblical story of the outworking of the promises to Abraham as it reached its climax with David and Solomon.
4. A treatment of the two great themes of exodus/redemption, and land/inheritance.
5. The prophetic view of promise and fulfilment.
6. The New Testament claim that all this is fulfilled in Christ.

Here Robinson comments significantly:

Based on the foregoing understanding of what the Bible is ‘about’, we enunciated a biblical ‘typology’ using the three stages in the outworking of God’s promise to Abraham, that is, (a) the historical experience of the fulfilment of God’s promise

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Footnote 9 (cont.)

Jerusalem. (2) A post-exilic confession based on the works of the writing prophets that reaffirms the first confession but adds to it the fact that God ‘has a future for his chosen people’ (p. 11). Hebert refers here to a second and greater exodus, and a restored temple at Jerusalem. (3) The Christian confession that reaffirms the previous two confessions and declares them fulfilled in Christ. See pp. 9–13. In his work *The Authority of the Old Testament* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), pp. 51–52, Hebert sets out this same thesis with the footnote ‘I owe the idea of this threefold scheme to Dr. Phyhtian-Adams, in the *Church Quarterly Review*, No. cclxix (Oct. 1942), p. 3f.’

11. Ibid., p. 7.
12. Ibid., pp. 7–9.
to Abraham through the exodus to the kingdom of David’s son in the land of inheritance, (b) the projection of this fulfilment into the future of the day of the Lord, by the prophets, during the period of decline, fall, exile and return, and (c) the true fulfilment in Christ and the Spirit in Jesus’ incarnation, death, resurrection, exaltation and in his parousia as judge and saviour in a new heaven and new earth.13

It is this understanding of the ‘big picture’ and the role of typology that captured my imagination over fifty years ago, and that has been at the centre of my preoccupation with biblical theology ever since. It is this schema that I explore and seek to defend in this book. Any refinements I may have applied to this basic schema are, in my opinion, nothing more than fine tuning at the edges. The basic structure remains.

My purpose in writing this account is to try to establish a valid rationale for the approach to biblical theology outlined above. I am aware that some evangelical exegetes and theologians are not entirely convinced of the usefulness of such a discipline. Others are more cautious about the way to pursue and apply it. Some doubt the very basic assumptions upon which the method is based. Criticisms must be taken seriously and the doubters listened to. I am, however, far from convinced that biblical theology is a lame duck. Rather I believe that it is at the heart of evangelical hermeneutics and is absolutely indispensable in expository preaching. I also believe that it is the heartbeat of effective pastoral ministry.14

The big questions about the big picture

The attempt to summarize the overall message of Scripture as a ‘big picture’ raises certain questions we must try to answer. If we assume the unity of Scripture, on whatever basis, the obvious question is: can we represent this unity without distortion in one schematic proposal? Is an overall structure

13. Ibid., p. 9.
discernible in such a way that it can be represented, for example, by a diagram without being hopelessly reductionist? The schema that developed from my encounter with Donald Robinson’s brief exposition appealed to me in a quite dramatic way. It radically changed my view of the Bible and how to read it. Very soon after this first encounter I was already trying to refine my ideas of it and to test its validity against Scripture.

I am a person who tends to think visually. If I can represent something or some concept with a diagram I shall do it. I am well aware that this runs the risk of avoiding details that might challenge the simplicity. Nevertheless it was not long after I was pointed in the direction of this three-stage understanding of biblical revelation that I was drawing diagrams to represent it as I came to understand it better. Once the basic shape was in place I began to use diagrams as teaching aids. It is impossible for me to estimate how many times and in what different situations I have used the basic shape of my diagrams to introduce people to the overall picture of the biblical message. To me a diagram’s greatest justification lies in its explanatory power, provided it is not distorting the biblical message. To be able to feel one has got hold of some way of linking the whole diverse range of biblical documents into a coherent unity was almost overwhelming. But therein lay its danger. It would always be open to the criticism of being either simplistic or simply wrong. I found that many people responded with enthusiasm to this way of showing how the whole Bible fitted together as the one word of God. I was, of course, aware that people’s enthusiasm for a schema did not necessarily mean it was accurate or defensible. But when people who had been Bible readers for years began to wonder aloud why they had not been shown years before something like this approach, it did encourage me all the more to investigate its validity. The true test of any diagrammatic, reductionist big-picture approach is whether or not it can stand up to detailed analysis derived from the close reading of the texts.

The Robinson–Hebert schema

What does this Robinson schema look like as I have understood it and developed my own version of it? It seems Robinson and Hebert initially developed their ideas independently of one another and only later compared notes. Hebert acknowledges his debt in turn to W. J. Phythian-Adams for this threefold structure.15 Both Robinson and Hebert went on to develop

15. See n. 9 above.
their ideas of typology based on the threefold structure of revelation.\textsuperscript{16} I followed their lead and began with the basic biblical timeline from creation to the new creation and marked it with the three main stages of revelation: biblical history from creation, and especially from Abraham, to Solomon; the eschatology of the writing prophets; and the fulfilment of all things in Christ. The prophetic ministry and, in particular, the eschatological pronouncements of the prophets, took place within the history of Israel. Specifically such prophetic ministry coincided with the post-Solomonic decline of Israel’s fortunes due to rebellion and disobedience. Whereas the history from Abraham to Solomon’s temple showed an overall advance or development in the revelation of the blessings of God’s covenant made with Abraham, the history from Solomon’s apostasy (1 Kgs 11) to the exile showed an overall manifestation of the curses of the covenant. Even the return from the Babylonian exile did not bring the true blessings that were expected, and the nation limped on under the judgment of God while the faithful were sustained only by his promises.

The Old Testament, then, can be represented as a manifestation of promise and blessing reaching a high point in David’s Jerusalem as the focal point of the land of inheritance, in Solomon as David’s heir, and in the temple representing the presence of God to dwell among and bless his people. After Solomon’s apostasy it is history primarily as a manifestation of judgment that is overlaid with the prophetic promises that the Day of the Lord will come and bring ultimate blessing and judgment. The story may seem to end in failure, especially as the four hundred years between the Testaments perpetuates the scenario of judgment with Israel’s fortunes at a low ebb. It takes the person of Jesus, his teaching and the proclamation of his apostles to restore hope in the original promise of God.

Figure 1 below represents the most basic outline of the revelation of the Bible. The biblical story begins with creation and ends with the new creation. Somewhere between the two is the person and work of Jesus. If it does nothing else, this representation expresses the essential parameters of revelation within history and the unity of the story within which revelation is given. On its own this diagram is no more than a pointer to the potential of biblical theology. We must then move on to the structure of this revelation.

The basic structure of revelation as represented in Figure 2 has the further advantage of representing each stage as related to the others. A summary

\vspace{1em}

\textsuperscript{16} Hebert, \textit{Christ the Fulfiller}, pp. 13–17, where he outlines the typology of the exodus as an example.
of the major theological moments in each will show that the second stage (prophetic eschatology) recapitulates the first, and the third (fulfilment in Christ) recapitulates both the first and the second. Each successive level, however, is more than a mere recapitulation in that it moves the revelation to a higher level of reality. Thus the structures within the history of Israel give way to the prophetic eschatological perspective of the Day of the Lord, and this, in turn, gives way to the ultimate reality as fulfilled in Christ. The nature of the recapitulation can be seen in the juxtaposition of the key moments of redemptive revelation in each stage as shown in Table 1. Other aspects could be added, but this suffices to show the general shape of the biblical pattern.

17. This figure is similar to that in Goldsworthy, Gospel and Kingdom, in Goldsworthy Trilogy, p. 124.
Table 1: The content of the three-stage structure of revelation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biblical history from creation to Solomon</th>
<th>Eschatology of the prophets</th>
<th>Fulfilment in Christ</th>
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<tr>
<td>Creation</td>
<td>New creation</td>
<td>Jesus is new creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covenant with Abraham</td>
<td>New covenant</td>
<td>New covenant in Jesus’ blood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captivity and exodus redemption</td>
<td>New captivity and new exodus redemption</td>
<td>Jesus is the Passover lamb and new exodus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabernacle and temple as dwelling of God</td>
<td>New temple as dwelling of God</td>
<td>Jesus is where God and humanity dwell: the word ‘tabernacles’ with us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possession of the land</td>
<td>Possession of the new land</td>
<td>Jesus fulfils the land as the dwelling place of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingship of David</td>
<td>New Davidic king</td>
<td>Jesus is new David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerusalem (Zion)</td>
<td>New Jerusalem</td>
<td>Jesus is new temple, the new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temple</td>
<td>New temple</td>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The role of Genesis 1–11

That the three-stage schema concentrates on events from Genesis 12 onward should not be taken to mean that Genesis 1–11 is neglected. This would be a serious mistake given that so much of biblical theology has its foundation in these chapters. It could even be suggested that all of the theology of the Bible has its foundations in these chapters. The doctrines of creation, the Fall, judgment, the progress of evil, the exhibition of God’s grace, election, covenant, sovereignty and salvation history all have their beginnings here. I shall take this up in more detail when I consider the notion of salvation history. Suffice it to say at this point that Genesis 1–11 provides the rationale and backdrop to the calling of Abraham and the covenant of grace that God establishes with the patriarch of Israel. The terms of God’s covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 do not make a lot of sense apart from the account in the previous chapters.

There is also a deliberate and important structuring in these early chapters that clearly shows the grace of God at work in the election of a line from

18. Creation and Fall are the presuppositions of the history of Abraham and the covenant. See the discussion of the role of Gen. 1–11 below.
Adam, through Seth, Noah and Shem to Abraham. This contrasts with the ‘line’ that exhibits the godlessness of fallen humanity: from Cain through Lamech to the humanity that is destroyed in Noah’s flood. A second godless line proceeds from Noah’s son Ham and comes to an important climax in the generation that builds the tower of Babel. That the people of the godly line are nevertheless fallen is always clear and provides the dynamics of typology as the shadow of salvation that cannot become the solid reality until Christ.

The question of reductionism

There are some obvious questions that will need to be addressed if this approach is to be sustained. Not least is the charge of reductionism or of being simplistic. One way to avoid facing such challenges would be to treat each section, book or corpus in isolation from the others. Such could hardly be referred to as a biblical theology but only a collection of fragmented studies in biblical theology. This is not without its proponents who see the diversity of Scripture and, in particular, that of its message as too strong to permit any real sense of unity. I maintain that reductionism is not inherently bad. It is merely a way of representing the underlying structure, which is overlaid with the rich diversity of literary genres and theological themes. It should be clear from these comments that I conceive of biblical theology as the study of the Bible done in such a way as to take account of the unity of its message within its diversity. Such a study recognizes a historical time line running through the Scriptures so that we can speak of its storyline as both explicit in the narrative sections, and implicit in the non-narrative material. The quest for an evangelical biblical theology begins with the presupposition that the biblical literature and its historical storyline together provide the vehicle for God’s revelation of himself and his purposes for creation.

If we can argue for a reductionist approach that is valid in much the same way that an X-ray image is a valid representation of the structure of the body, it will only stand if the details can be fitted in without special pleading. If the reduction is on such a grand scale that it does not even raise the question of details – such as when we schematize the entire contents of the Bible merely as promise (Old Testament) and fulfilment (New Testament) without any specifics – it has only minimal value. Our schema must be detailed enough to explain what is there, and simple enough to allow its use in teaching and in personal understanding of the Bible. If, for example, a particular salvation-

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historical schema simply cannot accommodate the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, something is lacking in the understanding of either or both.20 Those who find wisdom problematic point to the almost complete absence of salvation history in the wisdom books.21 They seem to have overlooked the fact that, while there is little explicit salvation history in the wisdom corpora, there is much wisdom material embedded in salvation history. Thus, for example, 1 Kings 3 – 10 is a significant wisdom pericope as it relates Solomon’s getting of wisdom and its expression in his rule and the temple at a high point of salvation history.

Among evangelicals there is a certain ambivalence regarding the propriety and usefulness of biblical theology. Some seem to doubt or to deny the validity of the discipline; others give it qualified endorsement but see certain dangers. Still others, including me, regard it as simply the necessary response to the way the Bible is. Among evangelical Christians the lack of a coherent biblical theology is usually by default. Many have learned one particular way of dealing with the Bible and have not been exposed to a comprehensive biblical theology as an alternative. Some acknowledge that the Bible is a unity and that the heart of it is the gospel of Christ. But they have never been shown, or have tried to work out for themselves, the way the various parts of the Bible fit together. Reading the Bible then easily becomes the search for today’s personal word from God, which is often far from what the text, within its context, is really saying.22 The unity is then more of an existential experience that lies in the individual believer rather than an objective unity in the text.23

20. While many biblical theologians have found difficulty in incorporating the wisdom literature into the salvation-historical pattern, I believe it can be done given an adequate understanding of both salvation history and wisdom. See my Gospel and Wisdom: Israel’s Wisdom Literature in the Christian Life, in Goldsworthy Trilogy, and The Tree of Life: Reading Proverbs Today (Sydney: Anglican Information Office, 1993; rev. ed., Sydney: Aquila, 2011).


23. A reader-response hermeneutic was in vogue among pietists and other evangelicals long before it was formalized in hermeneutical theory.
Scepticism about biblical theology is not confined to liberal theologians who play down the unity of Scripture. A former student of mine, now in ministry, contacted me asking for advice and comment on a sermon he had preached on 1 Samuel 17 (David and Goliath). He had endeavoured to approach the sermon with the perspective of biblical theology by dealing with the event in question as typological of Christ. Some time later an elderly retired minister, a definite evangelical, commented to the preacher about the sermon and indicated some reserve concerning the typological approach and about biblical theology in general. The issue was in essence whether or not the sermon should emphasize David’s saving of the impotent and frightened Israelites as a type of Christ’s saving activity, or David as an example of Christian faith trusting in the power of God. Of course, to pose the question in either–or terms is not the most helpful approach. The retired minister insisted that passages such as Hebrews 11 show that exemplary preaching is the acceptable way to go. But, it seems to me that such exemplary exposition is nevertheless a form of typology in that David is now made to be a type of every Christian believer. The problem with this approach is that it plays down the mediatorial role of Jesus.

My reply to my former student was that I did not think it was necessarily an either–or situation, but that the overwhelming evidence of the New Testament is that the testimony of the Old Testament to Christ has priority over its testimony to the authentic Christian life in today’s world. Furthermore, when we use biblical characters as examples to us, there is always the problem of whether the example is good, questionable, ambiguous or bad. This is not always clear cut. This approach is also problematic in that it tends to sever the text in question from the centrality of Christ and to lead to moralism, even legalism. Even if we follow the narrative of redemptive history, within the framework of which the non-narrative parts of Scripture are also to be found, it is a mistake to regard Jesus Christ as merely the foretold One who makes the fulfilment of promises and prophecies possible for us in the here and now. Rather the contention of this present study is that the pathway of the narrative

24. He also commented that he considered biblical theology to be the scourge of all recent Moore College graduates.

25. A classic example would be Gideon’s fleece as an instrument of guidance (Judg. 6:36–40). This is often spiritualized so that a ‘fleece’ becomes any way of testing God for a sign. What is often ignored is that it is not at all obvious that God was pleased with Gideon’s approach, or that this event can be made a pattern for Christian behaviour.
foreshadows and leads to Jesus as the fulfiller. There is a world of difference between Jesus making fulfilment possible and in Jesus himself being the fulfilment. Jesus is thus the primary goal of all the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament. It has been one of the mistakes of some Reformed theologians to emphasize the role of the church as the new Israel and the new people of God without first highlighting Jesus as the new Israel. The individualistic form of this perspective is to regard ourselves as the primary subject matter of all Scripture. Yet Jesus indicated that the Old Testament was about him, and thus it is not first and foremost about us. The lack of a Christocentric perspective leads to some uncertainty about eschatology and, in particular, to the eclipsing of Christ as the centre of biblical theology. It also emboldens the still considerable number of Dispensationalists who dismiss the commonly held notion that the church is the new Israel as an illegitimate ‘replacement theology’. In this they do have a valid point, but the term replacement is somewhat pejorative and clouds the issue. I would rather see the emphasis on ‘fulfilment theology’, with Christ at the centre as the true Israel.

The assertion of the biblical theology doubter that Hebrews 11 establishes the exemplary connection between the Testaments as primary is problematic. Hebrews 11:39–12:2a makes it clear that there is something lacking in the exemplary nature of the saints of old:

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. (Italics mine)

By removing the intrusive chapter heading we find the wider context of the examples of faith in the Old Testament. In other words, although faith was the operative principle throughout the old dispensation, it is incomplete without the principle that operates in the New Testament, which is faith in

26. The question of whether or not the church can be called the new Israel will be considered later in this study; see especially chapter 10.
28. The related issues of the relationship of Jew and Gentile and of Israel to the church are among Donald Robinson’s central concerns and will be examined in greater detail in chapter 10.
Christ; looking to Jesus and his gospel. Jesus is the author and the finisher of our faith. An exemplary sermon on David’s faith is incomplete and misleading if it does not bring us to great David’s greater Son, who is both the subject and object of true faith. It is not legitimate for a Christian simply to imitate an Old Testament character unless this character’s significance is in some way refracted through the prism of the gospel. The New Testament’s primary call to Christians is that we should become more like Christ, not more like any of the Old Testament heroes. But even the imitation of Christ can be a destructive concept if it is removed from its foundation in the unique substitutionary and representative role of Christ.

Notwithstanding this emphasis, it is important not to overreact to exemplary preaching and teaching. The Bible is full of examples. Evangelical Christians may react rightly to the kind of liberal teaching that reduces Jesus’ life and death to the merely exemplary. When Jesus is relegated to the role of ‘good teacher’ and his death is seen only as a supreme example of self-sacrificing love, we do well to object. We recognize that being imitators of Christ is a significant aspect of New Testament teaching, but Christ as the example is derivative of Christ as the unique author and finisher of our salvation. The work of Christ for us is the heart of the gospel and the mainspring of the Christian life. The work of Christ in us by his Spirit stems from that gospel and cannot operate without it.

What, then, is the alternative to an overemphasis on exemplary preaching and teaching of the Old Testament? If the characters of the Old Testament are more than examples to follow or, alternatively, to avoid, what are they and how do we penetrate to their significance? Sidney Greidanus in his treatment of the matter indicates that one alternative is the redemptive-historical approach.29 I would stress again that the redemptive-historical does not exclude the exemplary, but rather provides the context that controls it. It is essentially canonical in the truest sense of the word in that it acknowledges quite explicitly the overall canonical context of any text of the Bible. Once that context is understood, the primacy of the Christ-centred approach is readily seen. This raises the important question of the nature of the Bible’s unity within diversity, and the role of Jesus Christ as the centre to which all Scripture leads. It is my aim in this book to open out these questions.

Why is biblical theology so neglected?

When I set out to write *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, I researched the role of biblical theology in the literature on preaching. I surveyed a considerable number of books on preaching, looking for any indication that biblical theology was regarded as significant for the sermon. Even in evangelical books emphasizing the importance of expository preaching there was little to be found that suggested that biblical theology should have a key place in the preparation of a sermon. While there has been a great revival of interest in biblical theology, especially among evangelicals of the Reformed persuasion, it seems to me that we still have a long way to go. It makes me wonder how many seminaries and Bible colleges provide basic instruction in biblical theology as a subject distinct from biblical studies in Old and New Testaments. I cannot answer this question especially with regard to the American or British theological scene. I believe that my own Alma Mater, Moore College, was for some time the only college in Australia with such a course, though this is not the case now. I suspect that the ambivalence regarding biblical theology among evangelical and Reformed preachers and teachers, and the neglect of basic introductory courses in biblical theology in seminaries is at least partly driven by several factors, including the following.

**Assumptions about biblical studies curricula**

First, if it is assumed that instruction in biblical theology will take place in the established courses in biblical studies, it is left to individual teachers to include it in their curricula. This assumption, in my opinion, is not always well founded. Courses in biblical studies are usually mainly concerned with questions of introduction (literary matters including dating and authorship of the documents), and with exegesis and close reading of the text. This is as it should be, but the exegesis of any text implies its canonical context and, thus, its biblical-theological function. But the more division of labour there is, and the greater the concentration on individual books or corpora, the less likely it is that an overall biblical theology will be in view. The assumption needs to be replaced by the prescription. In other words, biblical studies curricula would

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31. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘Exegesis and Hermeneutics’, *NDBT*, pp. 52–64; especially p. 62, where he proposes ‘a series of expanding interpretative frameworks’.

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need to have issues of biblical theology made explicit. I do not think this can be done effectively without some attention to the method and application of biblical theology, preferably as a distinct subject.

**Separation of Old and New Testament studies**

The second reason for neglect of biblical theology is closely related to the former. The usually accepted division of labour between Old and New Testament teaching means that questions of the relationship of the Testaments are not likely to be closely considered. Theological curricula have, at least since the nineteenth century, divided the courses in a way that allows for scholarly specialization in one or other Testament. This is reflected in the fact that most of the biblical theologies written since then have been either of the Old Testament or the New Testament. Theologies of the whole Bible are rare, though some useful contributions have been made in recent times. The division of labour is at times ideological, especially when the principles of historical criticism are shaped by philosophical perspectives that happen to be in vogue at the time. The idea that God himself has a purpose that is accurately revealed in the redemptive-historical narrative of the Bible as a whole has been under attack since the seventeenth century. Biblical theology comes to be regarded by many as a futile exercise on the basis that there is no discernible theological unity to the canon. Evangelical seminaries tend to be either reactionary against, or carefully critical of, presuppositions in biblical studies that tend to reduce biblical theology to questions of the history of religious ideas. Yet many, perhaps most, are heirs to the conventional theological curricula that impose a hermeneutical barrier between the Testaments that is more like the Berlin Wall than a freely negotiable border crossing.

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33. Harrington, *Path*, p. 260, comments, ‘[T]here are practically no theologies of the whole Bible. This state of affairs is significant and is not wholly explained by the fact that scholars tend to specialise in one Testament or the other. It would seem, rather, that the complex relationship between the Testaments has not been satisfactorily worked out.’
Lack of agreement about principles and method
Thirdly, in evangelical seminaries there is the lack of consensus about the nature, the principles and the method of biblical theology. How do we design, say, a one-year introductory curriculum that will cover these matters and provide the practical guidance necessary for preachers and teachers? We shall spend some time looking at a variety of evangelical and more conservative approaches to biblical theology to try to assess their methods and the differences between them. It would be quite arrogant to suggest that there is only one valid approach to the subject or even that important insights are not also to be gained from non-evangelical biblical theologians. However, my main purpose in this investigation is to try to establish an approach that is consistent with biblical presuppositions and that is ultimately Christ-centred.

Lack of clarity about different theological disciplines
A fourth reason for the neglect of biblical theology is that in modern times it emerged on the scene as something of a novelty. The fact that Johann Philipp Gabler is usually credited with having first defined the discipline in contrast to dogmatic theology is indicative of this. His 1787 Altdorf address may have pointed up some important distinctions, but his particular brand of biblical theology was born of the Enlightenment and not really the biblical theology we are concerned with as evangelicals. Nevertheless it is true to say that the self-conscious distinctions between dogmatics and biblical theology are not so evident before Gabler. It could be argued that the distinction has not always been helpful. The early and later medieval theologians, and the reformers such as Luther and Calvin, would not have made the distinctions in the way we do today. But it is also clear that from earliest times the questions of the way the Old Testament should function for Christians as a witness to Christ were constantly raised and debated. It would seem that once Gabler’s distinctions were accepted and once the philosophical presuppositions of the Enlightenment began to dominate biblical studies, the kind of biblical theology that had always been a part of biblical studies was largely eclipsed.

Failed approaches to biblical theology
A fifth reason for this neglect may well lie in the influence of neo-orthodoxy, which, in America, led to the so-called American Biblical Theology Movement. Modern evangelical biblical theology no doubt owes much to this movement. But, as Brevard Childs demonstrated, the failure of Barth and his followers really to deal with the problem of liberalism and its rejection of the Bible as the word of God was to remain a problem. Neo-orthodoxy’s attempt to provide a way out of the stalemate between liberalism and evangelicalism,
especially so-called fundamentalism, did not succeed. The demise of the American school was not really answered by Childs’s own proposed solution in his canonical biblical theology.\textsuperscript{34} As important as Childs’s contribution is to the wider scene of biblical theology, it is nevertheless influenced by his acceptance of many of the less helpful tenets of the historical-critical method. When James Barr and others put the American school to rest it seemed to many scholars to sound the death knell for biblical theology as a whole.\textsuperscript{35} It did seem to some that G. E. Wright and John Bright had left us with a lame duck that could have little to contribute to serious biblical studies. However, Barr does not have the last say, and the American School was certainly not devoid of merit. John Bright’s extraordinary classic \textit{The Kingdom of God} is ample proof of how much we owe to it.\textsuperscript{36}

Obviously in the investigation of such a large and complex body of literature as the Bible there are a number of perspectives and ways of organizing the material. Some may be equally valid in being true to the Bible, but that does not make them equally useful in uncovering the inner structures of biblical revelation. There is always the danger of imposing preconceived ideas that come from our own training or our denominational subculture. It is clear that not all evangelical biblical theologies turn out the same. When we compare a Reformed covenantal biblical theology with Dispensationalism we can easily see the disparities. They are both biblical theologies, both evangelical, but poles apart in many of the conclusions reached and in the view of redemptive history constructed. This raises hermeneutical issues, particularly those of the relationship of the Old to the New Testament, and of the basic presuppositions in interpretation.

\textsuperscript{34} Childs’s contribution is significant. I was a graduate student at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia when, in January 1972, Childs delivered the annual James Sprunt Lectures entitled ‘Canon and Criticism: The Old Testament as Scripture of the Church’. In these lectures he made a preliminary statement of his Canonical Biblical Theology. Since Donald Robinson and Childs had been acquainted for some time, I sent Robinson a copy of the lectures. He had always expressed a high regard for Childs and his work. I received the following letter in reply: ‘Dear Graeme, Many thanks for this. In principle, it seems to me that BSC is saying something very important. It would be good to have a staff [Moore College faculty] seminar on O.T. understanding next year. I have written to Bard Childs to express appreciation and to cheer him up. Every good wish, Don.’


\textsuperscript{36} John Bright, \textit{The Kingdom of God} (New York: Abingdon, 1955).
If the biblical theology Childs described as in crisis is seen by some to have bequeathed to us a lame duck, is there yet a robust and viable biblical theology? If there is, and if it is true to the very nature of God’s revelation, then it has the potential to be a formidable weapon in the hands of preachers and teachers of the Bible. Furthermore, it will return the Bible as the One Word of God to ordinary Christians, many of whom seem to regard it as a very mixed collection of texts of differing value to the Christian. Too many Christians go through life with a theoretically unified canon of Scripture and a practical canon consisting of favourite and familiar snippets and extracts removed from their real canonical context.

The task, then, facing evangelical biblical theology is to endeavour to make progress in the following aspects:

- Establishing a set of acceptable working presuppositions about the nature of the Bible.
- Defining what we mean by biblical theology.
- Understanding what the nature of the Bible means for how we do biblical theology.
- Determining the hermeneutical procedures that stem from the supremacy of Christ and his gospel.
- Clarifying the theoretical considerations of the relationship of biblical theology to systematics and other theological disciplines.

Some of the practical issues that flow from such an endeavour would include:

- The role of biblical theology in Christian education at all levels.
- The shape of a basic academic curriculum of biblical theology.
- The pastoral applications of biblical theology in the home and local church.

I hope that the following discussions will make some small contribution to these matters. I also hope that this study will show that the Robinson–Hebert schema has great potential for the pursuit of a biblical theology that is robust in providing a firm foundation for both doctrinal formulation and practical theology of all kinds.