

## **A SUMMARY OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**

The discipline of biblical theology affirms the theological unity of the Old and New Testaments, while recognizing the diversity of the biblical books. Biblical theology focuses on the coherence of the biblical story of redemptive history. Biblical theology explores the relationship between the Old and New Testaments by drawing on such concepts as promise-fulfilment, typology, etc.

Biblical Theology refers to “the overall theological message of the whole Bible.” This understanding presupposes that the books that comprise the Bible are sufficiently unified that together they provide a coherent theology.

We often think of the Bible as a single book, but it is actually a collection of shorter writings that were composed in different languages, by different authors, using different literary genres over many centuries. The very nature of the Bible presents an immediate challenge for those who contend that it has a unified theological outlook. Yet, it is the Bible’s own testimony that although different human authors composed these writings, they were so influenced by God that the whole collection of writings has an authority and unity that comes from its divine author. Understanding the Bible to be God-breathed Scripture (2Tim 3:16) provides legitimacy to the idea of a single theology that encompasses the whole Bible.

## **UNITY IN DIVERSITY**

When assessing the variety of books that comprise the Bible it may be helpful to compare the Bible to a human body. As a functioning organism a body displays unity in diversity. A hand is very different from an eye, yet both are important components within the body. One contributes towards the sense of touch; the other provides the sense of sight. The body requires both to be complete. In the same way, the theology of the Bible is enriched by diversity that is complementary. Sometimes, like the cogwheels in a clock, biblical texts may even appear to move in opposite directions. The book of Proverbs strongly implies that righteous behavior will be rewarded by God. In marked contrast, the book of Job offers a stark reminder that even the most righteous of men may suffer terribly. Job appears to contradict the teaching of Proverbs, yet the different perspectives provided by both books balance one another. Despite claims to the contrary, when correctly interpreted the Bible provides an amazing single theology.

## **AN OVERARCHING STORY**

In recent years interest in biblical theology has increased with the recognition that it plays a vital role in helping Christians understand better the whole Bible as the Word of God. While systematic theology offers a distillation of biblical truth organized under specific categories, biblical theology focuses on the big story that unfolds from Genesis to Revelation, attempting to explain how the Bible may be best understood in the light of its literary diversity and the historical developments that it records. Whereas systematic theology gives prominence to dogmatic assertions or propositional truths, biblical theology adopts a narrative approach as it seeks to describe the contours of biblical revelation, uncovering the story of how God has interacted with human beings

in the past and of how he will act in the future. This narrative approach has the benefit of explaining the diversity within the Bible by showing how things develop and change through time. It provides an understanding of redemptive history. It is an interpretation of history that presupposes the historical reality of the events recorded throughout Scripture.

In his book, *The Mission of God*, Chris Wright emphasizes the importance of the Bible as story. He observes that we live in a “storied universe.” The stories we tell shape our understanding of the world around us. Truth comes through stories. Stories, however, are about much more than cold facts. They impact our emotions and shape our imaginations. They can influence our behavior. In the light of this, it is hardly surprising that much of Scripture is in the form of stories and the Bible, in its entirety, tells a compelling story or meta-narrative about humanity’s relationship with God. Importantly, this overarching story establishes a Christian worldview, addressing such fundamental questions as: Where are we? Who are we? What’s gone wrong? What is the solution?

Recognizing the narrative dimension of biblical theology, various scholars have sought to identify suitable themes that bind together the biblical texts in a meaningful way.

## **PROMISE AND FULFILLMENT**

Every story has a beginning. The opening chapters of Genesis set the scene. They describe how the divine-human relationship established by God at creation becomes fractured. Adam and Eve’s betrayal of God in the Garden of Eden has life-changing consequences for the whole world. Failing to exercise authority over the mysterious serpent, who stand in opposition to God, they heed the creature rather than the Creator. For disobeying God, they are punished, as is the one who instigated the rebellion. With appropriate irony, God pronounces that the serpent, elsewhere identified as the devil or Satan, will ultimately be defeated by an offspring of the woman (Gen 3:15). This solemn promise marks the start of a story that in Genesis traces a unique lineage of descendants that will eventually lead to the serpent-slayer. As the line of Eve’s offspring is followed, further divine promises are introduced, creating future expectations about a unique king who will mediate God’s blessing to the nations. The ongoing narrative in the books of Genesis to Samuel links these promises to the Davidic dynasty. Ultimately, they find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Approached in this way, the Old and New Testament are linked together by the concept of promise-fulfillment.

## **TYPOLOGY**

From another perspective, the overarching biblical story has a typological dimension. Graeme Goldsworthy provides a helpful introduction to the typological dimension of the big story in his book, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles*. According to Goldsworthy, biblical history begins with creation and, after the tragic consequences of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden, has a new beginning with the call of Abraham and the covenant that God makes with him. This covenant underpins the Israelites’ exodus from captivity in Egypt and the binding of the redeemed people to the covenant instructions given by God through Moses at Mount

Sinai. This, in turn, underpins the responsibility of the people of Israel towards their God as he brings them to the Promised Land, gives them possession of it, raises up a king and establishes Zion and its temple as the focal point of God's presence among his people.

Importantly, Goldsworthy observes how the events from creation to the building of the temple in Jerusalem provide a pattern for the eschatological hopes of the prophets. The prophets expect a second exodus that will lead eventually to people living with God in an extraordinary, new Jerusalem. With this in view, Goldsworthy interprets the post exilic writings as indicating that the return from Babylon at the end of the 6th century BC did not fulfill the utopian expectations of the prophets. Prophetic expectations point towards the advent of a unique Davidic king who will rule on God's behalf as a second Adam. This king will eventually rule over all the nations, bringing to fulfillment God's redemptive plan. All of this will climax in the re-creation of the earth, resulting in God dwelling with redeemed humanity drawn from all the nations.

Goldsworthy's typological approach enables readers of the Bible to see how the events associated with God's rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and their subsequent settlement in the land of Canaan provide a type for the greater salvation that comes through Jesus Christ. Using typology, the author of Hebrews compares the new covenant that Jesus inaugurates with the old covenant at Mount Sinai. He contends, among other things, that Jesus is a better high priest compared to the Levitical high priest because Jesus has entered the heavenly temple, of which the earthly tabernacle is only a "copy and shadow" (Heb 8:1-13).

## CONCLUSION

The study of biblical theology is not an end in itself. It is rather a tool for understanding better the Bible as the inspired Word of God. Biblical theology helps us see the big picture, appreciate the themes that hold the Bible together, understand how the story develops, see how the promises of the Old Testament, sometimes expressed through covenants, are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, as witnessed in the New Testament, and appreciate how the Old Testament provides patterns or types that explain later developments in the story.

The study of biblical theology is about understanding how each part of the Bible contributes in a distinctive way to the overarching story of the Bible and how an awareness of this story informs our understanding of each part of the Bible. When this is achieved, biblical theology is strongly Christ-centered.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is an abridged version of TD Alexander's article Biblical Theology. The full version can be found here: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/biblical-theology/>