

THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: RECENT TRENDS AND ISSUES¹

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1. Introduction

There is today unprecedented interest in biblical theology as a discipline separate from OT and NT theology. Biblical scholars and systematic theologians are engaged in biblical theology as theological reflection on the entire Bible.² Negative assessments regarding the future of biblical theology made in fairly recent times appear to stand in need of revision. Contrary to what is happening today, John J. Collins wrote in 1990, "Biblical theology is a subject in decline."³ About a decade ago Paul Hanson stated, "Most assessments [of the future of biblical theology] these days are marked by deep pessimism."⁴ Henning Graf Reventlow noted at about the same time that "a 'biblical

¹The material in this article, as well as the two succeeding ones, was first presented in the Adolf Olson Memorial Lectures, Bethel Theological Seminary, Minneapolis, MN, April 27-29, 1993.

²The designation "biblical theology" has been open to various interpretations: (1) At times it designates a Christian theology (systematics) based on Scripture; (2) biblical theology may also refer to a discipline of biblical studies in which the inner biblical connections between the testaments are investigated and elaborated; (3) this designation is also used in the sense of building theological bridges from historical-philological exegesis to theological and ethical issues in church and society (see Klaus Haacker, *Biblische Theologie als engagierte Exegese: Theologische Grundfragen und thematische Studien* [Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1993]).

³John J. Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*, ed. W. H. Propp, Baruch Halpern, and David Noel Freedman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 1.

⁴Paul D. Hanson, "The Future of Biblical Theology," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 6 (1984): 13.

theology' has yet to be written. The way towards it is not only one of high hopes; it is also beset by a good deal of skepticism."⁵

Whatever skepticism may exist among some scholars, the "high hopes" toward biblical theology are being realized, at least in part, by an unprecedented number of new publications. Today we find reflections on the discipline and presentations never encountered before in the two hundred years since Johann P. Gabler (1787), the so-called "'father' of biblical theology,"⁶ or more precisely, the "father" of historical biblical theology, defined the discipline as purely historical and descriptive.⁷ His seminal essay set a new direction for the nature, role, and function of biblical theology in distinction from systematic theology,⁸ designated by Gabler as "dogmatic theology."⁹

Gabler's definition of biblical theology as a historical discipline is now being redirected. The history of biblical theology after Gabler, and as a result of his influence, "was to be governed essentially by the juxtaposition and contrast of the two principles of a historical [biblical theology] and a systematic [dogmatic theology] discipline."¹⁰ The current direction of biblical theology allows it to be precisely what its name designates. It is not simply and singularly a historical discipline but a fully theological one, firmly rooted in biblical and theological studies, based on sound exegetical work and careful systematic reflection.

In this three-part article it is impossible to focus on every angle of rethinking and the redirection suggested in recent years. We will,

⁵Henning Graf Reventlow, *Problems of Biblical Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Atlanta: Fortress, 1986), vii. This book is an English translation and expansion of the German *Hauptprobleme der Biblischen Theologie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983).

⁶Ben C. Ollenburger, "Theological Synopsis [Johann Philipp Gabler]," in *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens, Gerhard F. Hasel (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 490.

⁷Johann Philipp Gabler, "An Oration on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each (March 30, 1787)," in *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, 492-502, excerpted from John Sandy-Wunsch and Lawrence Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *SJTH* 33 (1980): 133-144. A complete German translation is provided in Otto Merk, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments in ihrer Anfangszeit* (Marburg: Elwert, 1972), 273-284.

⁸John H. Hayes and Frederick C. Prussner, *Old Testament Theology: Its History and Development* (Philadelphia: John Knox, 1985), 2: ". . . Gabler argued for drawing a clear distinction between biblical theology and dogmatic theology."

⁹See Magne Saebø, "Johann Philipp Gablers Bedeutung für die biblische Theologie," *ZAW* 99 (1987): 1-16; Robert Morgan, "Gabler's Bicentenary," *ExpTim* 98 (1987): 164-168.

¹⁰Reventlow, *Problems of Old Testament Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 4.

therefore, concentrate on some of the most vexing issues confronted in recent biblical theology. Our investigations attempt (1) to present briefly major studies in biblical theology, mostly published since 1990; (2) to outline the changes in the nature and function of biblical theology in its historical and theological conceptions in relation to the "Biblical Theology Movement"; (3) to depict several major types of biblical theology, two from American OT scholars (John J. Collins, Brevard S. Childs) and one from a German NT scholar (Hans Hübner), with a focus on methodology, especially on the relationship between the testaments; and (4) to present reflections regarding a new model of canonical biblical theology.

2. Major Recent Publications on Biblical Theology

The 1990s have seen an unprecedented surge of publications on biblical theology. However, the discussion of a "paradigm shift" to free biblical theology from its bondage to historiography is not new. Ulrich Mauser states that there has been a "resurgence of concern for biblical theology, especially in Germany but also in this country [U.S.A.]"¹¹ The survey offered here contains reference to earlier documents as well as more recent publications.

In 1970 Brevard S. Childs wrote *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, a book considered by many to contain the obituary of the Biblical Theology Movement of the generation of the 1940s to the late 1960s. In it he made a number of innovative and controversial proposals.¹² In this volume Childs stated one of his key themes: ". . . the canon of the Christian church is the most appropriate context from which to do

¹¹Ulrich Mauser, "Historical Criticism: Liberator or Foe of Biblical Theology?" in *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, ed. John Reumann (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 99-100.

¹²Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970). See the now dated reactions by Manfred Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische Theologien der Gegenwart: Die Verhältnis von AT und NT in der hermeneutischen Diskussion seit Gerhard von Rad* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1985), 186-209; John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 77-88; James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 75-104, 130-171, and others. On the important distinction between the "canonical criticism" of James Sanders (see his recent essay, "Canon as Shape and Function," in *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, 87-97) and the "canonical approach" of Brevard Childs (which Sanders says James Barr has failed to grasp [Sanders, 88]), see F. A. Spina, "Canonical Criticism: Childs versus Sanders," in *Interpreting God's Word for Today: An Inquiry into Hermeneutics from a Biblical Theology Perspective*, ed. J. E. Hartley and R. Larry Shelton, Wesleyan Theological Perspectives, 2 (Anderson, IN: Warner, 1982), 165-194.

biblical theology.”¹³ James D. Smart responded to the alleged demise of biblical theology with a well-argued defense of the movement in general and of biblical theology as he perceived it in particular.¹⁴

Later in the 1970s other voices were added. In a sense *Biblische Theologie heute* was a forerunner of later developments.¹⁵ In 1979 Ulrich Mauser started the biannual journal, *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, of which he is the main editor. It is the flagship of innovative explorations in biblical theology. In Germany a new series began in 1986: *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*. The first title was *Einheit und Vielfalt Biblischer Theologie*.¹⁶ Subsequent issues have taken up basic concerns related to new directions in biblical theology.

Manfred Oeming published his dissertation, *Gesamtbiblische Theologien der Gegenwart* in 1986.¹⁷ The subtitle, “The Relationship of the Old and New Testaments in the Hermeneutical Discussions Since Gerhard von Rad,” reveals the focus of this work and indicates in a special way a major problem in current biblical theology.

In 1986 Reventlow’s enlarged English version of his previous German work saw publication. In a highly useful bibliographical essay he describes in a few pages the Anglo-Saxon “Biblical Theology Movement,” unfortunately without showing the movement’s continental proponents and their configurations.¹⁸ A 120-page second chapter, which is the body of his book, treats the core issue, “The Relationship of the Old Testament and the New.”

Both Reventlow and Oeming, each with his own emphasis, reveal what may be considered by most scholars the central issue in biblical theology today, namely, how the OT and NT relate to each other.

Hans Hübner has published two volumes on the topic, with a third announced to appear shortly.¹⁹ Peter Stuhlmacher has written on

¹³Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 99.

¹⁴James D. Smart, *The Past, Present, and Future of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979).

¹⁵Klaus Haacker et al, eds., *Biblische Theologie heute* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1977).

¹⁶Ingo Baldermann et al., eds., *Einheit und Vielfalt Biblischer Theologie*, *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*, 1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986).

¹⁷Manfred Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische Theologien der Gegenwart: Das Verhältnis von AT und NT in der hermeneutischen Diskussion seit Gerhard von Rad* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1985).

¹⁸Reventlow, *Problems of Biblical Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 1-9.

¹⁹Hans Hübner, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Band 1, *Prolegomena* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1990); idem, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Band 2, *Die Theologie des Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1993).

the biblical theology of the NT. His first volume, dealing with the foundations, was published in 1992. A second volume is expected soon.²⁰ In a 1991 volume, Hans Klein has sketched a biblical theology.²¹ The two volumes by NT scholar Gisela Kittel, dealing with NT and OT respectively, are masterful presentations of biblical theology for informed lay readers and scholars.²² Christoph Dohmen and Franz Mussner, OT and NT scholars respectively, present their reflections for a theology of the entire Bible in a 1993 volume.²³ Contrary to former practice, all but the last work use the phrase "biblical theology" in their titles.

In the United States, a tome of essays on OT biblical theology, prepared by faculty members of Dallas Theological Seminary, was published in 1991.²⁴ Programmatic essays by major experts are presented in another 1991 volume edited by John Reumann; in it most of the writers call for new directions for biblical theology.²⁵

Yale Divinity School professor Brevard S. Childs presented his *magnum opus* on biblical theology in 1993. In this seminal work he proposed a paradigm shift for biblical theology.²⁶ Childs had already written on the topic. In 1985 he published his *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*,²⁷ a somewhat modest presentation compared to his earlier introductions to the OT²⁸ and the NT²⁹ and his already-

²⁰Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Band 1, *Grundlegung: Von Jesus zu Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1992).

²¹Hans Klein, *Leben neu entdecken: Entwurf einer Biblischen Theologie* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1991).

²²Gisela Kittel, *Der Name über alle Namen I: Biblische Theologie/AT* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1989); idem, *Der Name über alle Namen II: Biblische Theologie/NT* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1990).

²³Christoph Dohmen and Franz Mussner, *Nur die halbe Wahrheit? Für die Einheit der ganzen Bibel* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1993).

²⁴Roy B. Zuck, ed., *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1991).

²⁵John Reumann, ed., *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991). Among the authors are Georg Strecker, Phyllis Trible, Daniel Harrington, James A. Sanders, Ulrich Mauser, Robert Bornemann, and Robert Kysar.

²⁶Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

²⁷Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

²⁸Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

²⁹Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

mentioned *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (1970). His emphasis on the "final form" of the text, that is, on the primary authority of the canonical form of the text, remains the foundation for his latest work.

These publications grant a glimpse into current major written materials on biblical theology.³⁰ Written by scholars from both Europe and North America, these volumes reveal much activity in biblical theology.

It is particularly noteworthy that certain systematicians have based their dogmatic/systematic theologies on what they consider to be biblical theology. The German systematic theologian Friedrich Mildenerger published such a volume in 1991.³¹ In it he maintains that biblical theology is more than a historical discipline; it is a theological undertaking. Mildenerger argues forcefully against the sharp distinction between biblical theology and dogmatic/systematic theology introduced by Gabler over 200 years ago.³²

Hans-Joachim Kraus, a Reformed scholar of international reputation and fully at home in biblical studies while teaching dogmatic/systematic theology, produced a magisterial tome on the history and development of biblical theology some years ago.³³ More recently he published a systematic theology "within the context of biblical history and eschatology."³⁴ The assessment of Kraus's work by Childs seems somewhat harsh: "Kraus' art of biblical theology often appears dominated by a form of Liberation Theology which seems to flatten everything in its path and to level the whole of the Bible to one

³⁰See also Jutta Hausmann und Hans-Jürgen Zobel, eds., *Alttestamentlicher Glaube und Biblische Theologie: Festschrift für Horst Dietrich Preuss zum 65. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1992). *Altes Testament und christliche Verkündigung: Festschrift für Antonius H. J. Gunneweg zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Manfred Oeming and Axel Graupner (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1987), contains essays under the heading "Biblical Theology" by Peter Höffken, Otto Kaiser, Horst Dietrich Preuss, Georg Sauer, Werner H. Schmidt, and Henning Schröer.

³¹Friedrich Mildenerger, *Biblische Dogmatik: Eine Biblische Theologie in dogmatischer Perspektive*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena: Verstehen und Geltung der Bibel* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1991).

³²See above notes 8-10.

³³Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Die Biblische Theologie: Ihre Geschichte und Problematik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970).

³⁴Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Systematische Theologie im Kontext biblischer Geschichte und Eschatologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1983). This work was developed from his 1975 book, *Reich Gottes: Reich der Freiheit*, also published by Neukirchener Verlag.

refrain."³⁵ Regardless of this unique interest, Kraus's volume is a systematic theology within the context of a major theme of Scripture.

Both Mildenerger's and Kraus's works indicate, each in its own way, a return to some type of a biblical model for doing systematic theology. In this context, we do well to remember that in its beginnings, biblical theology was formulated and derived its own existence in separation from dogmatic/systematic theology.³⁶

The "paradigm shift" advocated presently would free the discipline of biblical theology from its incarceration within the paradigm of historiography which has separated it from the theological enterprise at large.

It would go beyond the parameters of this essay to refer to the large numbers of articles published in recent years regarding the directions biblical theology is to take. At the risk of being too selective, I refer to some major authors, among whom are John J. Collins,³⁷ Christoph Dohmen,³⁸ Peter Höffken,³⁹ Klaus Koch,⁴⁰ Rolf Rendtorff,⁴¹ John Reumann,⁴² Ulrich Mauser,⁴³ Paul D. Hanson,⁴⁴

³⁵Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 25.

³⁶Rolf Rendtorff states correctly, "Die 'Theologie des Alten Testaments' ist aus der christlichen Dogmatik hervorgegangen." This applies more directly to biblical theology (*Kanon und Theologie: Vorarbeiten zu einer Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991), 12.

³⁷Collins, 1-18.

³⁸Christoph Dohmen, "Gesamtbiblische Theologie: Wissenschaftliche Diskussion und pastorale Notwendigkeit einer christlichen Grundfrage," *Pastoralblatt* 41 (1989): 354-361.

³⁹Peter Höffken, "Anmerkungen zum Thema biblische Theologie," in *Altes Testament und christliche Verkündigung: Festschrift für Antonius H. J. Gunneweg*, 13-29.

⁴⁰Klaus Koch, "Rezeptionsgeschichte als notwendige Voraussetzung einer biblischen Theologie—oder: Protestantische Verlegenheit angesichts der Geschichtlichkeit des Kanons," in *Sola Scriptura: Das reformatorische Schriftprinzip in der säkularen Welt*, ed. H. H. Schmidt and J. Mehlhausen (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1991), 143-155.

⁴¹Rolf Rendtorff, "Theologie des Alten Testaments: Überlegungen zu einem Neuanatz," in his *Kanon und Theologie*, 1-14; idem, "Must 'Biblical Theology' Be Christian Theology?" *Bible Review* 4 (1988): 40-43.

⁴²John Reumann, "Whither Biblical Theology?" in *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, 1-31.

⁴³Ulrich Mauser, "Historical Criticism: Liberator or Foe of Biblical Theology?" in *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, 99-113.

⁴⁴Paul D. Hanson, "Theology, Old Testament," *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 1057-1062.

Robert Bornemann,⁴⁵ and Phyllis Tribble,⁴⁶ among many others.⁴⁷ Among the multitude of methodological, theological, and procedural issues, the following should be mentioned: (1) the role and function of the historical-critical method in biblical theology with a forceful defense for its use (Collins) and reservations about its value (Reumann, Mauser, Bornemann); (2) the use of the canon and its extent for doing biblical theology (Childs, Rendtorff, Hanson); (3) the use of philosophy in explicating the message of Scripture in biblical theology (Hanson, Müller⁴⁸); (4) the nature of the starting points for biblical theology (Collins, Rendtorff, Reumann, Hanson, Bornemann); (5) overtures for a "feminist biblical theology" (Tribble) within the tradition of the larger rubric of liberation theologies; (6) biblical theology as a Christian enterprise as compared with Tanakh theology within its own canonical context (Rendtorff,⁴⁹ Goshen-Gottstein,⁵⁰ Levenson⁵¹); (7) the nature of biblical theology as descriptive and/or normative, or a dialectical move between the descriptive and the normative (Childs, Hanson, Collins).

This list of issues is but an indication of the varieties of matters covered by current discussions. They reveal time and again reflections on biblical theology that are far from static.⁵² It is evident that new

⁴⁵Robert Bornemann, "Toward a Biblical Theology," in *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, 117-128.

⁴⁶Phyllis Tribble, "Five Loaves and Two Fishes: Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology," in *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, 51-70.

⁴⁷See the survey by Otto Merk, "Gesamtbiblische Theologie: Zum Fortgang der Diskussion in den 80er Jahren," *Verkündigung und Forschung* 33 (1988): 19-40.

⁴⁸Hanson, "Theology, Old Testament," 1062; Hans-Peter Müller, "Bedarf die Alttestamentliche Theologie einer philosophischen Grundlage?" in *Alttestamentlicher Glaube und Biblische Theologie: Festschrift für Horst Dietrich Preuss*, 342-351.

⁴⁹Rendtorff, *Kanon und Theologie*, 40-63.

⁵⁰M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, "Tanakh Theology: The Religion of the Old Testament and the Place of Jewish Biblical Theology," in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. P. D. Miller, Jr., et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 617-644; idem, "Modern Jewish Bible Exegesis and Biblical Theology," in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, August 16-24, 1989* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1990), 39-50.

⁵¹J. D. Levenson, "Warum sich Juden nicht für biblische Theologie interessieren," *EvTh* 51 (1991): 402-430; idem, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. J. Neusner, B. A. Levine, and E. S. Frerichs (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 281-307; idem, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 33-61.

⁵²See here the reflections on the issue in the 1970s and 1980s as surveyed by Reventlow, who describes "New Approaches to a Biblical Theology," especially from a continental perspective (*Problems in Biblical Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 145-178).

horizons have opened and much creative thinking is taking place. While we can recognize trends and new directions, it would be too precarious to conclude that a consensus has developed on any of the major areas of discussion.

3. *The Rise and Wane of the Biblical Theology Movement and Recent Biblical Theology*

Present developments in biblical theology cannot be fully appreciated without an understanding and appreciation of the Biblical Theology Movement which flourished between the 1940s and 1960s. For a time it was believed that the demise of the movement had arrived. The event was described by Childs in 1970, but it was still not entirely clear whether the obituary could, in fact, be written.⁵³

The Biblical Theology Movement, as it functioned mainly in North America, contained a number of key elements.⁵⁴ These are summarized below.⁵⁵

1. It shared with general biblical study the hermeneutical basis of the historical-critical method, although attempting to avoid the extremes of that method and moving thereby beyond the older liberal position while still staying solidly within the liberal framework of the study of the Bible.

2. It was fostered and inspired by the neoorthodox movement, largely adopting that movement's view of revelation in which Christ is the supreme revelation of God. It accepted Scripture as a "witness" to the revelation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ. On that basis the members of the Biblical Theology Movement believed they could fight both extreme liberalism and fundamentalism.

3. It emphasized biblical "categories" (J. Muilenburg), "the world of the Bible" (B. W. Anderson), Hebrew thought and mentality (T. Boman), the OT "against its ancient Near Eastern environment" (G. E. Wright), over against the domineering effect of modern philosophy and other Western-dominated influences. It shared to a large degree the suspicion regarding the function of philosophy in doing theology.

⁵³Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. See also Reventlow, "The Anglo-Saxon 'Biblical Theology Movement,'" in *Problems in Biblical Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 1-9.

⁵⁴See also James Barr, "Biblical Theology," *IDBSup* (1976):104-106; he correctly notes the international scope of the movement.

⁵⁵The six points are dependent on Gerhard F. Hasel, "Biblical Theology Movement," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 149-152.

4. It suggested that there is a "unity of Divine revelation given in the context of history" (H. H. Rowley), or simply a "higher unity" (R. C. Dentan) or a "kerygmatic unity" (J. S. Glenn). It revealed that the issue of the unity of the Bible had been heightened by historical criticism, which drove an ever-increasing and irremovable wedge between the theology of the various biblical texts, layers of texts, or books of the Bible, and the Bible itself.

5. It emphasized that the history of Israel became the church's history and subsequently our modern history. Revelation took place in history without propositional content.

6. It worked hand-in-glove with biblical archaeology, using archaeology for historical confirmation of biblical persons and events.⁵⁶ Such confirmation proved to be increasingly illusive as archaeologists interpreted the Bible more and more in terms of ancient Near Eastern culture and religion with the aid of anthropological and sociological methods without calling on the biblical picture as a normative guide.⁵⁷

Among the major factors that contributed to the alleged demise of the Biblical Theology Movement were perennial problems in hermeneutics.⁵⁸ The use of the historical-critical method, with its foundation in a naturalistic-evolutionary world view, was another focus. It called for the meshing of what Adolf Schlatter called an "atheistic" method,⁵⁹ with the picture of a God who gives meaning and coherence to this world by means of his personal acts in history and his ultimate guidance of history. Langdon Gilkey called this intertwining "at best only an uneasy dualism."⁶⁰

A second major factor that has remained unresolved relates to the issue of whether the element of revelation claimed for the Bible lay *in*

⁵⁶See William G. Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 21, 22.

⁵⁷David Noel Freedman summarizes the situation effectively: "Albright's great plan and expectation to set the Bible firmly on the foundation of archaeology buttressed by verifiable data seems to have foundered or at least floundered. . . . Archaeology has not proved decisive or even greatly helpful in answering the questions most often asked and has failed to prove the historicity of biblical persons and events, especially in the early period" ("The Relationship of Archaeology to the Bible," *BAR* 11 [Jan.-Feb. 1985]: 6).

⁵⁸See here the insightful comments by Peter Stuhlmacher, *Schriftauslegung auf dem Wege zur biblischen Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1975), 59-127.

⁵⁹In 1905 A. Schlatter wrote the article, "Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie," in *Zur Theologie des Neuen Testaments und zur Dogmatik, Kleine Schriften*, ed. Ulrich Luck, Theologische Bücherei, 41 (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1969), 134-150.

⁶⁰Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 91; idem, "Cosmology, Ontology and the Travail of Biblical Language," *JR* 41 (1961): 194-205.

the text, *behind* the text, *above* the text, in text *and* event, or in some other mode of expression and understanding. The locus of divine revelation remained elusive.

A third major issue which led to the decline and the so-called demise of the Biblical Theology Movement as previously known relates to the modes of unity within the testaments and specifically between the testaments as expounded by major leaders of the Biblical Theology Movement (H. H. Rowley, G. E. Wright, R. C. Dentan, O. Cullmann, F. V. Filson and others⁶¹). A consensus regarding the suggested modes of unity has never been reached.

Finally, the entire concept of revelation in history as an alternative to content revelation in orthodoxy and the general revelation of natural theology in Enlightenment liberal theology did not prove successful.

These major factors presented themselves from within the movement or were forced on the members of the movement from without. They threatened the very essence of the Biblical Theology Movement in such a way that it could not survive as it had been known. Whether the Biblical Theology Movement has experienced a full demise, or whether it has had its zenith in the generation of the 1940s through the 1960s, or to what degree it has a present or future life, is not fully settled.

With this as a background, James Barr, who has significantly contributed to the so-called demise of the Biblical Theology Movement,⁶² wrote in 1988 a challenging article, "The Theological Case against Biblical Theology," in a *Festschrift* for Childs, who is himself one of the foremost supporters of a new biblical theology.⁶³ While Barr avoids such strong language as that of Dietrich Ritschl ("fiction of . . . biblical theology"⁶⁴) or Robert A. Oden, Jr. ("Bible without theology"⁶⁵), he sees some "future progress in biblical theology" only if it does not "retreat from the modern world into a biblical myth" and if it keeps "its own solidarity with the entire range of biblical scholarship and

⁶¹For a concise survey of these authors, see Gerhard F. Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 140-203.

⁶²See Reventlow, *Problems in Biblical Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 9.

⁶³James Barr, "The Theological Case against Biblical Theology," in *Canon, Theology, and the Old Testament Interpretations: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Gene M. Tucker, David L. Petersen, and Robert R. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 3-19. See Gerhard F. Hasel, "Biblical Theology: Then, Now, and Tomorrow," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 4 (1982): 69-73.

⁶⁴Dietrich Ritschl, *The Logic of Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 68, 69.

⁶⁵Robert A. Oden, Jr., *The Bible without Theology*, New Voices in Biblical Studies (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

associated disciplines and its assurance that no useful work in biblical theology is attainable without that solidarity."⁶⁶

Barr seems worried that biblical theology after the Biblical Theology Movement may turn out to function in some form or another as normative or prescriptive.⁶⁷ And this is exactly what a fair number of scholars are now calling for because they believe that the community of faith needs to recover the meaning of biblical theology. Barr acknowledges that biblical theology is theological in nature, but he wants to keep it as close to the descriptive approach and the historical mode as possible.⁶⁸

This issue of the definition and nature of biblical theology as descriptive or prescriptive, as historical or theological, as nonnormative or normative, remains one of the key issues under discussion at present. In other words, the issue of the dichotomy of "what it meant" and "what it means" is very much alive⁶⁹ for those who argue that the theology of each of the testaments is to be written from a purely historical perspective, at least in the mind of one group of scholars. Others are convinced that the "meant/means" distinction is artificial and cannot be maintained because each scholar reads the text on the basis of his or her own presuppositions. The entire enterprise, which maintains the dichotomies of the descriptive/normative, "meant/means," historical/theological, is under criticism from a variety of scholarly points of view and perspectives (cf. A. Dulles, Ben C. Ollenburger, M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, Jon D. Levenson).⁷⁰

⁶⁶Barr, "The Theological Case against Biblical Theology," 17.

⁶⁷Ibid., 11.

⁶⁸Ibid., 3-5.

⁶⁹Krister Stendahl is to be credited with popularizing this distinction ("Biblical Theology, Contemporary," *IDB* [1962], 1:418-432). He has remained a firm defender of this distinction, in which the descriptive task is historical in nature. He was preceded by William Wrede (*Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten Neutestamentlichen Theologie* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1897], 8) and has been succeeded by the Finnish scholar Heiki Räisänen (*Beyond New Testament Theology* [London: SCM Press, 1990], 106-109).

⁷⁰Avery Dulles, "Response to Krister Stendahl's 'Method in Biblical Theology,'" in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, ed. J. P. Hyatt (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965), 210-219; Ben C. Ollenburger, "What Krister Stendahl 'Meant'—A Normative Critique of 'Descriptive Biblical Theology,'" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 8 (1986): 61-98; M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, "Tanakh Theology: The Religion of the Old Testament and the Place of Jewish Biblical Theology," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. P. D. Miller, P. D. Hanson and S. D. McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 617-644; Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Philadelphia: John Knox/Westminster, 1993), 81.

One of the other major issues, if not indeed the key area of biblical theology today, as was true of the Biblical Theology Movement's earlier experience, is the attempt to understand the Bible from the perspective of a unifying principle, regardless of how it is defined. Biblical theology as practiced in the 1990s remains concerned with the issue of a center, a unifying principle, an overarching category. This issue will be part of the discussion of major models and proposals for biblical theology to be presented in the second and third sections of this article.