

RECENT MODELS OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: THREE MAJOR PERSPECTIVES

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This study of the most recent developments of biblical theology as practiced in the 1990s relates to the investigation of three major models of biblical theology. The first is that of John J. Collins, now of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. It is presented as a proposal which has not yet been translated into the form of a book. The second is that of Brevard S. Childs, the foremost proponent of biblical theology in the twentieth century, who has laid out his views in a massive tome. The third is that of Hans Hübner, who has presented his model in a multivolume biblical theology of the NT. The approach followed in this article consists of: (1) descriptions of each model, and (2) evaluations in terms of how each one relates to certain major concerns in the present debate on biblical theology.

1. Collins's Model of a "Critical Biblical Theology"

John J. Collins has developed a "critical biblical theology."¹ His model is in some sense related to the earlier "synthetic modern biblical theology" of James Barr,² but should not be confused with it. Both

¹This is the designation used in the title and throughout the article by John J. Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*, Biblical and Judaic Studies, vol. 1, ed. W. H. Propp, B. Halpern, and D. N. Freedman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 1-17.

²See Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (4th rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 94-98; James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); idem, "Trends and Prospects in Biblical Theology," *JTS* 25 (1974): 265-282; idem, "Story and History in Biblical Theology," *JR* 56 (1976): 1-17; idem, "Biblical Theology," *IDBSup* (1976): 104-111; idem, "Biblische Theologie," *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon* 1/2 (1985): 488-494; idem, "The Theological Case against Biblical Theology," in *Canon, Theology and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. G. M. Tucker, D. L. Petersen, and R. R. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 3-19.

Collins and Barr continue to argue that biblical theology is a singularly historical enterprise.

Collins belongs to those scholars (along with G. Strecker³ and Heikki Räisänen⁴) who base their conceptions of biblical theology on a strict use of the historical-critical method. Collins explicitly endorses the three foundational principles of the historical-critical method: (1) the principle of criticism, (2) the principle of analogy, and (3) the principle of correlation as defined by Ernst Troeltsch.⁵ He also explicitly affirms Troeltsch's claim that "the historical method, once it is applied to biblical science, . . . is a leaven which transforms everything and finally explodes the whole form of theological methods."⁶

The suggested fourth principle posited by Peter Stuhlmacher, designed to enlarge the three principles of the historical-critical method, "the principle of consent [*Einverständnis*]," which is intended to allow the scholar to be "open to transcendence,"⁷ Collins forcefully rejects. Instead of "a 'hermeneutic of consent,' . . . we need," states Collins, "a model of theology that provides for critical correlation between the various traditions in which we stand. . . . It cannot be a mere recital of sacred history or submission to a canonical text."⁸ The "recital of sacred history" is an oblique reference to the proposal of G. Ernest Wright⁹ and the denial of a "submission to a canonical context" is hardly anything other than a rejection of the proposal for which Brevard S. Childs has become famous, which will receive attention later.

³Georg Strecker, ed., *Das Problem der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975); idem, "Biblische Theologie? Kritische Bemerkungen zu den Entwürfen von Hartmut Gese und Peter Stuhlmacher," in *Kirche: Festschrift für Günter Bornkamm zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. D. Lührmann and G. Strecker (Tübingen: Kohlhammer, 1980), 425-445.

⁴Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990).

⁵Collins, 2-3.

⁶Ernst Troeltsch, "Über historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1913), 730, as cited and translated by Collins, 9.

⁷Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 84.

⁸Collins, 8.

⁹G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology* ((New York: Harper & Row, 1969); idem, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*, Studies in Biblical Theology 8 (London: SCM, 1952).

Collins insists, as have other scholars of earlier times, that historical criticism as practiced with the historical-critical method does not produce facts, but only probabilities. Here too he remains fully indebted to Ernst Troeltsch and his view of modern historiography. Collins attempts to solve the problem of "facticity" in history through a shift to the literary notion of "story," along lines similar to those of Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg. For Alter the sacred history of the Bible is to be read as "prose fiction,"¹⁰ while Sternberg understands the Bible to contain fiction from the literary point of view.¹¹ The "story" notion in the view of biblical theology, as Collins sees it, suggests that there is a move from an interest in facticity in history to poetic imagination.¹² But what about the "literal reading" of biblical narrative?¹³

Collins gives evidence of supporting a functional approach to Scripture,¹⁴ claiming "that the assertions about God or the supernatural [in Scripture] are most easily explained as rhetorical devices to motivate behavior."¹⁵ These assertions have nothing to do with normative truth in any traditional sense. It seems that Collins understands Scripture as

¹⁰Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1980), 23-40.

¹¹M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1985), 25.

¹²Collins, 10-12.

¹³Hans Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition," in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. F. McConnell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). See George Lindbeck, "Scripture, Consensus, and Community," in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 82, n. 3.

¹⁴For an elucidation of the functional approach of Scripture, see David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

¹⁵Collins, 14.

some form of nonnormative poetry¹⁶ or as fictional history¹⁷ which could have a core of facts.

The major elements of the Collins model of a "critical biblical theology" as he outlines it appear to be as follows:

(1) It is grounded in historical criticism's presuppositions of the principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation as specified by E. Troeltsch.

(2) It is devoid of any confessional aspect or theological interest. It is a historical enterprise from start to finish.

(3) It is a subdiscipline of "historical theology"¹⁸ (similar to that suggested by William Wrede nearly one hundred years ago).¹⁹

(4) It is also part of "narrative theology" or "symbolic theology."²⁰ "The significance of the paradigm shift from history to story is that it abandons the claim of biblical theology to certain knowledge of objective reality."²¹

(5) It is a functional theology, clarifying "what claims are being made, the basis on which they are made, and the various functions they serve."²²

(6) It is based on "some canon of scripture" without any "qualitative difference over against other ancient literature but only a

¹⁶In this regard Collins seems to be closely related to various modern forms of literary approaches to the Bible, such as those found in Western literary theories. If past generations of scholars superimposed a Western historical model on the Bible, could not today's scholars superimpose other Western forms of literary theories on the biblical text? In either case one wonders whether the biblical text can be read on its own terms.

¹⁷This position is largely adopted by Gösta W. Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 19-55; Philip R. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992); Thomas L. Thompson, *The Early History of the Israelite People* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); R. B. Coote, *Early Israel: A New Horizon* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

¹⁸Collins, 9.

¹⁹William Wrede published his influential essay, "Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten Neutestamentlichen Theologie," in 1897. It was reprinted in Strecker, *Das Problem der Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 81-154, and is translated by Robert Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1973), 68-116.

²⁰Collins, 12.

²¹Ibid., 11.

²²Ibid., 13.

recognition of the historical importance of these texts within the tradition."²³

Collins's "critical biblical theology" model raises significant issues. As it is not possible to engage in all of its ramifications, we limit ourselves to a few essential points.

First, if this model uses "some canon of scripture," then one needs to ask, Which one is used? Is it the Roman Catholic canon, which includes the deuterocanonical books? Could it be the Jewish-Protestant canon of the Hebrew Bible? Is it a so-called Alexandrian canon allegedly reflected in the Septuagint? Or, is it a canon made up on the basis of the scholar's own modern post-Enlightenment understanding?

Why stay within the framework of any canon, for that matter, since there is no "qualitative difference" between canonical Scripture and other ancient literatures? For Collins the "canon" can only be one in harmony with the presuppositions of historical criticism and the tradition acceptable within a given academic community. The matter of the canon highlights the issue of the authority of Scripture in Collins's "critical biblical theology" proposal. Collins has not adequately explained why he should have "some canon of scripture" and how it should function in his model.

Second, if there is any "historical importance of these texts within the tradition," why should there be an appeal to that tradition in the first place? If any such appeal were granted, it would seem to follow that a "confessional" or "dogmatic" aspect, which is highly eschewed in Collins's model, is reintroduced on historical grounds. The question remains unresolved as to why one tradition, in this case the Enlightenment tradition of historical criticism, should have preference over any other, such as the tradition of a particular theology or the tradition of a given community of faith. In the end, the issue of which tradition has priority and why it should have authority is left open.

Third, Collins's model admittedly goes beyond the proposal of Johann P. Gabler (1787) but stops short of that of William Wrede of 1897, who suggested a history-of-religions theology. The word "critical" in this proposal reveals its indebtedness to the classical form of the Troeltschian definition of the historical-critical method. Historical criticism, however, has many "unexamined commitments" which reveal that "the very value-neutrality of this [historical-critical] method of study puts its practitioners at a loss to defend the *value* of the enterprise

²³Ibid., 8.

itself," writes Jon D. Levenson insightfully.²⁴ Collins's model completely ignores increasing reservations and criticisms leveled against historical criticism by major contemporary scholars.²⁵

It is pointed out by a growing number of scholars that (a) the "what it meant"/"what it means" dichotomy is no longer adequate, (b) theological dimensions can no longer be suppressed or pushed aside, and (c) "historical-critical work on the Bible cannot simply be the friend of biblical theology."²⁶ Biblical theology has to take the "servant" role. Scripture is more than a collection of human documents of the past, because it is "the address of God"²⁷ still in the present.

Fourth, Collins himself points out that the "critical" model is not value-neutral nor neutral from an ideological perspective. He admits that historical criticism does not provide uninterpreted facts, because, as he points out, historical criticism "too is a tradition, with its own values and assumptions, derived in large part from the Enlightenment and western humanism."²⁸ About this Levenson notes,

This concession is vastly more devastating to Collins' argument than he seems to recognize, for the Enlightenment method to which he refers sought to *replace* tradition with reason and science and not simply to stand beside them as another option. When the legacy of the Enlightenment becomes just another *tradition*, it inevitably suffers the same deflation that Marxism suffers when it becomes another ideology. We are left with the discomfoting question, why this tradition and not another? Why follow Troeltsch's three axioms, augmented by Collins' principle of autonomy, if they are not intrinsic to human rationality but themselves partake of historical and cultural particularity?²⁹

²⁴Jon D. Levenson, "The Bible: Unexamined Commitments of Criticism," *First Things* 30 (1993): 26.

²⁵See Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 106-126; David R. Hall, *The Seven Pillories of Wisdom* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990); Thomas C. Oden, *Agenda for Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

²⁶Ulrich Mauser, "Historical Criticism: Liberator or Foe of Biblical Theology?" in *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, ed. John Revmann (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 111.

²⁷Robert Bornemann, "Toward a Biblical Theology," in *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, 127.

²⁸Collins, 7.

²⁹Levenson, "The Bible: Unexamined Commitments of Criticism," 30, 31; see also idem, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*, 119-120.

These searching questions reveal the need for biblical theology to free itself from the grip of an "unqualified historicism"³⁰ evident in Collins's model for a "critical biblical theology." George Lindbeck recently noted a general hermeneutical dilemma:

Theologians start with historical reconstructions of the biblical message which are inescapably diverse, tentative, and changing; and then seek to translate the reconstructions into contemporary conceptualities which are also diverse and variable. Not surprisingly, the results are often mutually unintelligible. There is no single overarching universe of biblical discourse within which differences can be discussed.³¹

It appears that the model of a "critical Biblical Theology" as presented by Collins does not seem to give evidence of overcoming the issue of unintelligibility of which Lindbeck speaks. Nevertheless, he has provided one of the most recent elaborate defenses for a "critical biblical theology."

2. Childs's Model of a "Canonical Approach to Biblical Theology"

Brevard S. Childs's *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* carries the subtitle *Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible*.³² Our focus cannot be on all aspects of the proposals of Childs. Our interest is in what ways his model relates the Testaments to each other. What is its contribution to the issue of a "center" and the unity of the OT and NT in biblical theology as a discipline?

Childs's voice is to be contrasted with voices such as those of theologian David Kelsey,³³ who is known as the chief proponent of a functional approach to Scripture. The functional approach argues that the authority of Scripture does not derive "in the first instance from their 'content,'" or the property of the text itself, but in the way Scripture is employed "to empower new human identities"³⁴ within the Christian community. As is evident to the reader knowledgeable in

³⁰This charge is made against Collins by Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism*, 120.

³¹George Lindbeck, "Scripture, Consensus, and Community," in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, 88.

³²Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

³³Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*.

³⁴David H. Kelsey, "The Bible and Christian Theology," *JAAR* 48 (1980): 396.

theology, the functional approach to Scripture is used and promoted by a significant number of contemporary theologians.³⁵

Childs is opposed to any notion or idea which does not hold Christology as the key to the interrelationship and unifying concept of the Testaments. Ben C. Ollenburger seems to consider biblical theology's major task as "guarding, enabling and critiquing the church's self-conscious reflection on its praxis."³⁶ He holds that "biblical theology [could be seen] . . . as an activity helping the church in critical reflection on its praxis through a self-critical reading of its canonical texts. . . ."³⁷ Here ecclesiology in praxis seems to be the driving force for reading the text. Childs, however, is "highly critical of any theological position in which ecclesiology takes precedence over Christology."³⁸ The claim of the importance of "Christology" over ecclesiology is significant, because it gives us the first hint of a center and unifying principle for biblical theology in Childs's new tome. He goes on to maintain that "both testaments make a discrete witness to Jesus Christ which must be heard, both separately and in concert."³⁹ He affirms that "the challenge of Biblical Theology is to engage in the continual activity of theological reflection which studies the canonical text in detailed exegesis, and seeks to do justice to the witness of both testaments in the light of its subject matter who is Jesus Christ."⁴⁰

The christological focus of Childs's *Biblical Theology* comes to the fore in full force in his concluding chapter, "The Holistic Reading of Christian Scripture."⁴¹ Rolf Rendtorff also speaks of a "holistic

³⁵George A. Lindbeck, "The Bible as Realistic Narrative," in *Consensus in Theology?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 81-85; idem, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); idem, "Barth and Textuality," *Today* 43 (1986/87): 361-377; E. Farley and Peter C. Hodgson, "Scripture and Tradition," *Christian Theology*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 35-61; and others.

³⁶Ben C. Ollenburger, "Biblical Theology: Situating the Discipline," in *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard W. Anderson*, ed. James T. Butler, Edgar W. Conrad, and Ben C. Ollenburger (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 53.

³⁷Ibid., 51.

³⁸Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 23.

³⁹Ibid., 78.

⁴⁰Ibid., 78, 79. This runs counter to the attempts of Rolf Rendtorff, who argues against the writing of OT theology as a first volume of biblical theology (*Kanon und Theologie: Vorarbeiten zu einer Theologie des Alten Testaments* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991], 46-48).

⁴¹Childs, 719-727.

interpretation."⁴² But Rendtorff's idea of "holistic interpretation" is quite different from that of Childs, to whom he is heavily indebted on many points. Rendtorff means by "holistic interpretation" a contextual interpretation of an individual text within the total canonical context. While for Rendtorff the "canonical context" is the Hebrew Bible, for Childs's "canonical approach to Biblical Theology," the "canonical context" is both Testaments of the Christian Bible.

We read of a "theocentric centre of scripture"⁴³ and learn that "the task of theological reflection of Biblical Theology arises from its confession of one Lord and Saviour, but as testified to in the differing notes sounded by Israel and the church."⁴⁴ This could give the impression that the center of a biblical theology is indeed theocentric and not christocentric.

For Childs the "theocentric" aspect has its focus in Jesus Christ, so that theocentric really means christocentric. He does not wish us to understand the unity of Scripture in theocentric terms. He speaks of "the essential unity of scripture as a witness to a living Lord"⁴⁵ and affirms that "there is a single, unified voice in scripture,"⁴⁶ that of Jesus Christ.⁴⁷

Childs does not wish to use the typical categories of unity and diversity when describing the multiple voices that are heard in both Testaments. He goes back to Matthias Flacius (1520-1575) of the sixteenth century and the idea of the "scope of scripture": "The recognition of the one scope of scripture," writes Childs, "which is Jesus Christ, does not function to restrict the full range of biblical voices."⁴⁸

Such an approach is unique in our time when there is much emphasis on the alleged twofold direction left open by the OT,⁴⁹ the development of Judaism and that of Christianity. In a recent article,

⁴²Rendtorff, *Kanon und Theologie*, 23-28.

⁴³Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 723.

⁴⁴Ibid., 722.

⁴⁵Ibid., 724.

⁴⁶Ibid., 725.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹See Klaus Koch, "Der doppelte Ausgang des Alten Testaments in Judentum und Christentum," in *Altes Testament und christlicher Glaube*, ed. Ingo Baldermann et al. *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*, Band 6 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991), 215-242; Rendtorff, *Kanon und Theologie*, 40-53.

"Notes Concerning the Topic of Biblical Theology," Peter Höffken argues against Gerhard von Rad that the Old Testament does not have a "center"⁵⁰ and that, therefore, the Old Testament has found its center outside itself in Jesus Christ.⁵¹ For Höffken this is based on the Pauline novelty of replacing the Torah with a new reality, Jesus Christ. Höffken finds that in and of itself the OT does not witness to Jesus Christ; this is a reading of Paul superimposed on the OT.

Not so Childs. He maintains steadfastly that the "oneness of scripture's scope" of both Testaments is Jesus Christ. Did Childs have a precursor in Otto Procksch, who opened his massive *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (1950) with the programmatic sentence, "Every theology is christology"?⁵²

Childs opposes an interpretation of the OT by the NT. He sees the flow or movement in only one direction, that is, from the OT to the NT. This is particularly significant because "the focus of Biblical Theology lies in the relationship between the two testaments in respect to the messianic hope, . . ." ⁵³ But "to speak of a 'messianic hope' seems to impose a unity and a systematization which is not reflected in the sources themselves."⁵⁴ More precisely stated, "There is widespread agreement among Christian theologians that the centre of Biblical Theology, in some sense, must be christology, the biblical witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ."⁵⁵ Childs admits that in this claim there are hosts of literary, historical, and theological problems which "reach to the heart of the biblical theological enterprise."⁵⁶

It appears that Childs claims more for the current scholarly opinion than can be substantiated. It is hardly correct to state that most Christian theologians perceive the "center" of biblical theology as christology. It is entirely correct that most NT scholars see the "center"

⁵⁰Peter Höffken, "Anmerkungen zum Thema Biblische Theologie," *Altes Testament und christliche Verkündigung: Festschrift für Antonius H. J. Gunneweg zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Manfred Oeming und Axel Graupner (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1987), 21, 22.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵²Otto Procksch, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1950), 1.

⁵³Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 453.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 455.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 452.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

of the NT in christology, or Jesus Christ,⁵⁷ but this is not the case in models of biblical theology of both Testaments.

Childs cuts the Gordian knot with the claim that “the entire New Testament centres its faith in the confession of Jesus Christ. His name unites indissolubly the New Testament with the Old Testament.”⁵⁸ Does Childs in his model read the OT from the perspective of the NT or, to say the least, from the perspective of christology? Is this not something he eschews?

The theological and historical question that arises at this crucial juncture of Childs’s approach to biblical theology, which has its center in christology, is whether the NT is correct in its claim that the predicted Messiah of the OT is indeed the Christ of the NT. Is the schema of prediction and fulfillment evident? For Childs this question does not seem to have the importance it had for other scholars,⁵⁹ because his lines of connection are different. He affirms that “all New Testament writers came to the Old Testament from the perspective of faith in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament was consistently read as a witness to the Christian faith.”⁶⁰

Childs does not support a direct promise-fulfillment line of connection, not even in Luke-Acts. He affirms that the goal of the OT promises “was made known in Jesus Christ.”⁶¹ Thus, there is a goal but no direct line of promise leading to a specific fulfillment. To the contrary, the OT is read from the perspective of the Christ event. The faith of the NT writers becomes the key for the understanding of the OT.

Evidently Childs does not support or recognize messianic promise/prediction as proof of prophecy fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Christ only “from the perspective of faith” and from the view that the OT is “a witness to the Christian faith.” In his view the faith event comes first, and then the OT is read from the perspective of that faith event.⁶²

⁵⁷So among others, H. Schlier, H. U. von Balthasar, A. Vögtle, K. H. Schelkle, W. Marxsen, G. E. Ladd, E. Lohse, K. Haacker. See especially Alfons Weiser, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments II: Theologie der Evangelien* (Stuttgart; Kohlhammer, 1993), 217-226.

⁵⁸Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 459.

⁵⁹Ibid., 220, 226-229.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., 220-229.

If this position were the one which the NT portrays, could an early Christian believer demonstrate to a Jew that Jesus of Nazareth was truly and irrefutably the predicted Messiah of the Hebrew Bible, in whose life, mission, death, and resurrection the OT messianic predictions found their fulfillment?⁶³ If Childs is correctly understood on this vital point, and he can hardly be misunderstood, since he has restated his position time and again throughout his tome, a person in NT times needed to experience first of all faith in Jesus Christ, and only subsequent to this experience would the OT be a “witness” to the Christ of faith.⁶⁴

The “witness” nature of Scripture emerges as a core issue in the exposition of Childs. Thus, the “essential unity of scripture,” in the view of Childs, is its function “as a witness to the Living Lord.”⁶⁵ Does Childs remain indebted to neoorthodoxy and its “witness” model of Scripture which characterized the older biblical theology of the Biblical Theology Movement? He seems to remain steeped in the neoorthodox model of modern theology and its views of revelation as well as its understanding of Scripture. If this is the case, then we need to ask whether the starting point of his model of biblical theology is not indeed in systematic theology and not the canonical text of Scripture, for which he argues so intently.

Another issue relates to the recovery of the meaning of the text of Scripture. Childs’s emphasis on the “canonical approach” does not make him deny any aspect of the historical-critical method. He insists on the reconstruction of biblical texts by means of submethods of historical criticism. Based on these reconstructions, most of the traditionally messianic passages of the OT are interpreted in nonmessianic ways.⁶⁶ The NT writers, on the other hand, quote the OT messianically. From the perspective of historical criticism, these are conditioned quotations, dependent on the methods and approaches of the NT writers, which are not identical with those of modern scientific methods (viz., the methods of historical criticism). To quote John Reumann, “No one would propose Matthew’s development of ‘formula quotations’ or Paul’s

⁶³This is precisely the argument presented in Matthew. See Weiser, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments II*, 87-90.

⁶⁴Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 460, with reference to Luke 24:25ff.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 724.

⁶⁶Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 453-456.

application of the Septuagint as 'what was written for our admonition' as the way to do exegesis today."⁶⁷

The question relates to how we get from this modern reading of the text to the real meaning of Scripture. And how do we get from the ancient text to our time and situation in the community of faith? Thus, the earlier issue of the Biblical Theology Movement with regard to where the meaning of the text is to be sought is still with us. Is the meaning *in* the text, *behind* the text, or *above* the text?⁶⁸ It has been pointed out quite correctly that the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* and its ancillary principle, *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, are in conflict with modern scientific methods of reading the biblical text.⁶⁹ In other words, the reading of the Bible is determined by an Enlightenment tradition, at least in the scholarly world of the academy and through it in a broader public.

The Reformation had freed the Bible from the widely accepted reading of the text through tradition, a reading of a different structure of authority. Another authority based in tradition, the Western Enlightenment tradition, has replaced the earlier ecclesiastical authority which the Reformation had rejected.

The problem of tradition encountered in the model proposed by Collins emerges here as a problem for Childs as well. It is the issue of which "tradition" the biblical scholar is to work with or function in. If the biblical theologian is to function in more than one tradition, how will these relate to each other and which should have priority? Or should the biblical theologian function within the biblical model itself?

At this point the "canonical approach" of Childs could have a significant bearing. Childs argues time and again that a "canonical approach" to biblical theology is a theological undertaking.⁷⁰ He holds that Paul is not as much in discontinuity with the OT as is often claimed and should not be measured "by the norms of post-Enlightenment historical-critical standards."⁷¹ The Christ event "has

⁶⁷John Reumann, "Whither Biblical Theology?" in *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, 12.

⁶⁸See the discussion by Robert B. Robinson, "Narrative Theology and Biblical Theology," *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, 129-142.

⁶⁹Peter Stuhlmacher, *Schriftauslegung auf dem Wege zur biblischen Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 59-127.

⁷⁰Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 85-88.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 240.

provided him [Paul] with a radically new starting point";⁷² thus he draws the text of the OT into his present without "recognizing the Old Testament as having a voice separate from that of the New Testament." In this sense Paul is "actualizing" the past "through the living voice of scripture."⁷³ The matter of "actualizing" is a key hermeneutical concept in the model presented by Childs.⁷⁴ "Paul's approach to scripture as one controlled by the freedom of the Spirit apart from tradition remains an attractive modern option."⁷⁵ This "freedom of the Spirit" is essential to Childs's own theological approach.⁷⁶ Does the "freedom of the Spirit" allow the biblical theologian/scholar to depart from the literal meaning of the text? This question remains at the heart of the matter.

At the very end of his stimulating book Childs addresses once more "the church's continual struggle in understanding the literal sense of the text as providing the biblical grounds for its testimony. . . ." He distinguishes between the linguistic meaning of the text, "the textual meaning," and "the actual content of the biblical texts which are being interpreted by communities of faith and practice."⁷⁷ The tension between these "two dimensions of scripture," that is, the "textual meaning" and the actualization of the content by the community of faith, is resolved by Childs's appeal to the "multiple senses" of Scripture.⁷⁸

⁷²Ibid., 240, 241.

⁷³Ibid., 241, 242.

⁷⁴See the dissertation written under Childs by Joseph W. Groves, *Actualization and Interpretation in the Old Testament*, SBLDS 86 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987).

⁷⁵Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 243.

⁷⁶The essay by the neoevangelical systematician Clark H. Pinnock, "The Role of the Spirit in Interpretation," *JETS* 36 (1993): 491-497, is here relevant. Pinnock warns of the reader's "interest in transforming the text rather than being transformed by it" (494).

⁷⁷Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 724.

⁷⁸Childs and Barr have debated the issue. Using Childs's model of the "canonical approach" as a foil, Barr ("The Literal, the Allegorical, and Modern Biblical Scholarship," *JOT* 44 [1989]: 3-17) argued that historical-critical scholarship did not work with "total commitment to the 'literal sense' of Scripture (7). Thus, events such as the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension to heaven are reinterpreted to mean something different from what "really happened" as the NT text portrays it. He concludes that "theology *does* stand 'behind' the text" (14). Furthermore, in historical-critical study, allegory has always been a part of the interpretation (16). Childs responded in "Critical Reflections on James Barr's Understanding of the Literal and the Allegorical," *JOT* 46 (1990): 3-9. He argues that Barr has "blurred" the "distinction between the historical-critical and the allegorical approach" (8).

When the figurative sense is grounded on the literal and is a faithful rendering of both the content and witness of the written word, there is no theological reason for denying the legitimacy of multiple senses within the ongoing life of the church.⁷⁹

This proposal of "multiple senses" of Scripture in Childs's attempt to pull together the verbal/literal sense and the figurative/interpreted sense, on which theology is based, is rather problematical. He agrees that there is an unresolved problem here: ". . . I would argue that the crucial problem of biblical theology remains largely unresolved, namely, the challenge of employing the common historical-critical tools of our age in the study of the Bible while at the same time doing full justice to the unique theological subject matter of Scripture as the self-revelation of God."⁸⁰ The unresolved issue in the Biblical Theology Movement, its attempt to seek theological meaning elsewhere than in the literal sense, was rightfully declared suspect. But why would Childs's attempt to seek theological meaning in the "figurative sense," which is open to "multiple senses within the ongoing life of the church," be less suspect? Who determines which "figurative sense" is correct and how is it arrived at? Who and what determine when the "figurative sense" is "a faithful rendering of both the content and witness of the written word"? In the view of Childs, this seems to be the task of each community of faith. If that is the case, and in view of the fact that there are a variety of Christian communities of faith, would this not imply that each of the varieties of communities of faith may find its own meaning and identity in one or more of the "multiple senses" of Scripture? Each sense would in the end be nothing more than each community of faith's reading of Scripture through the glasses of its own traditions.

In the biblical theology model of Childs the community of faith seems to have the role of theological Scripture legitimation. This means that Scripture legitimation has its locus in ecclesiastical tradition. This is exactly what the Protestant Reformation rejected. It guarded Scripture legitimation by the proposition of *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. In view of this issue, would it not be proper to suggest that a model for a biblical theology needs renewed reflection on Scripture legitimation so as to let Scripture speak within the framework of Scripture as canon?⁸¹ Would not the focus on Scripture as canon open new doors of canonical interpretation as the legitimate form of its total meaning?

⁷⁹Ibid., 725.

⁸⁰Childs, "Critical Reflections," 8.

⁸¹Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 70-73.

We are indebted to Childs for providing an unusually rich and rewarding work. His proposal of a "canonical approach of Biblical Theology" will continue to stimulate further reflection and discussion, assisting in the ongoing quest for an adequate biblical theology which can and will bring renewed life to the church.

3. Hübner's Model of a "Restricted Biblical Theology"

The publication of the first two of the three announced volumes of Hans Hübner's *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* was an important publishing event for biblical theology.⁸² The author is an internationally recognized NT scholar at the University of Göttingen who has published several earlier articles⁸³ in preparation for his three-volume biblical theology of the New Testament. The entire first volume is devoted to methodological issues and, therefore, claims our special attention.

Hübner's biblical theology goes far beyond the theology of the NT. He is quite conversant with church history and systematic theology. As a matter of fact, he intentionally incorporates reflections of systematic theology into his biblical theology. He engages in what modern systematic theology considers to be part of fundamental theology.

His lengthy chapter on revelation contains two systematic-theological reflections. The first, "Systematic-Theological Thoughts on Revelation in the Old Testament," comes at the end of his presentation of the concept of revelation in the OT.⁸⁴ The second appears at the end of the chapter with the heading, "Systematic-Theological Considerations Concerning Revelation in Holy Scripture."⁸⁵ He concludes with considerations on the question of the relationship of the OT and NT, specifically the relationship of God's revelation in both Testaments. Hübner maintains that the revelation of God in the OT is so differentiated even within the OT that it is hardly possible to unify it.

⁸²Vol. 1, *Prolegomena*; vol. 2, *Die Theologie des Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 1990, 1993.

⁸³Hans Hübner, "Das Gesetz als elementares Thema einer Biblischen Theologie," *KD* 22 (1976): 250-276; idem, "Pauli theologiae proprium," *NTS* 26 (1979/80): 445-473; idem, "Biblische Theologie und Theologie des Neuen Testaments: Eine programmatische Skizze," *KD* 27 (1981): 2-19; idem, "Methodologie und Theologie: Zu neuen methodischen Ansätzen in der Paulusforschung," *KD* 36 (1990): 181-208.

⁸⁴Hübner, 1:149-171.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 1:203-239.

"Only a few aspects of the Old Testament manifestation of God are able, in the way they were originally meant, to be incorporated into the theological system of coordination with the New Testament."⁸⁶

The question of the unity of the OT and NT is heightened in Hübner's presentation as hardly in any other work in our time. In his concluding chapter, "The One God and the Two Testaments," Hübner raises "the truly final question, which is ultimately the decisive question, *whether* indeed the Yahweh of Israel, the national God of this people, is indeed identical with the Father of Jesus Christ, the God of all humanity."⁸⁷

This radical differentiation of the pictures of God by Hübner is reminiscent of earlier German theologians. Emmanuel Hirsch, and before him at the turn of the century, Adolf von Harnack, are major figures to whom Hübner refers. Hübner reaches the conclusion that "the pre-Israelite Yahweh is not the Israelite Yahweh." In his perspective the two pictures of Yahweh cannot be reconciled with each other. Hübner's view is based on the understanding of religio-historical reconstructions which claim that "the redactional final form of the Old Testament with its monotheism offers a theological view which is incompatible with the original Old Testament traditions."⁸⁸ He does not investigate the canonical text as it stands but reconstructs it on the basis of standard religio-historical models along the lines of an evolutionary development.

Hübner speaks also of the "one God" of the OT and NT. He does so on the basis of an "emphasized reflection of the relationship of continuity and discontinuity."⁸⁹ Joined to this emphasis on continuity and discontinuity is his emphasis on the NT authors' use of the OT, because "the argumentation with the Old Testament belongs to the nature of the theological reflection of most New Testament authors." This brings Hübner to his understanding of biblical theology, which is "the presentation of the theological use of New Testament authors of the Old Testament. . . ."⁹⁰

The foundational definition of what is "biblical" in this conception of biblical theology is not the entire Bible of both Testaments but the

⁸⁶Ibid., 1:237.

⁸⁷Ibid., 1:240.

⁸⁸Ibid., 1:243.

⁸⁹Ibid., 7.

⁹⁰Ibid., 1:28.

theological use of the OT by NT writers. This approach involves the exclusion of large parts of the OT from Hübner's biblical theology enterprise. It rests on the fact that "almost all of the New Testament is included [in this conception of biblical theology], but not the entire Old Testament, and that this rests in the basic theological statement of the New Testament, and not in the methodology."⁹¹ For Hübner only those parts of the OT are included which are cited in the NT or to which the NT has allusions.⁹² In short, Hübner's biblical theology has a limited base, that is, the NT's reception of the OT. Furthermore, for Hübner the OT is that of the Septuagint, since this is what the NT authors most often cited.⁹³

Major points of this biblical theology model deserve consideration. The citation and allusion approach advocated by Hübner is reminiscent of, if not influenced by, an earlier proposal of Brevard S. Childs presented in 1970.⁹⁴ On this point, however, Childs has radically modified his earlier view⁹⁵ and maintains at present that "the function of the Old Testament in Biblical Theology cannot be restricted to the use which the New Testament makes [of the OT]."⁹⁶ The contrast between Childs's model of biblical theology and that of Hübner could not be more pronounced. Thus, Hübner presents a limited biblical theology model while Childs presents an inclusive one.

Hübner reacts strongly against the inclusive proposal of Childs, charging him with an "external form of an authoritative canon as a solution for the problem of the canon [which] seems to have failed."⁹⁷ Childs, in turn, has responded to this criticism, an essential criticism of Childs's entire "canonical approach of Biblical Theology," in an article published in 1992.⁹⁸ Childs does not accept the hypothesis that the canon of the OT was still open until the end of the first century A.D.

⁹¹Ibid., 1:29.

⁹²Ibid., 1:30.

⁹³Ibid., 1:64.

⁹⁴Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 114-118.

⁹⁵Brevard S. Childs, "Biblische Theologie und christlicher Kanon," *Zum Problem des biblischen Kanons*, ed. Ingo Baldermann et al., *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988), 13-27.

⁹⁶Ibid., 23.

⁹⁷Hübner, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 1:76.

⁹⁸Brevard S. Childs, "Die Bedeutung der hebräischen Bibel für die biblische Theologie," *TbZ* 48 (1992): 382-390.

He follows the conclusions of recent studies by S. Z. Leiman and others,⁹⁹ for the closing of the OT canon in pre-Christian times.

On the theological level Childs seems to be correct in his claim that the early Christian church recognized the OT as its authoritative Scripture, not because of piety for tradition and not even to glean some interesting background material, but because Christians believed that it contained a witness to Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁰ Childs insists that "the true identity of Jesus Christ cannot be understood alone from the New Testament and outside of the Old Testament."¹⁰¹

Childs does not hesitate to charge Hübner with "the serious theological mistake" of attempting to understand Jesus merely from the NT.¹⁰² Childs sees the necessity of the entire OT for a true biblical theology. Any reductionism to mere NT citations and allusions of the OT is wrong. The OT was the only Bible of Christians in NT times, and thus the Bible of the early Christians must be considered in its entirety.

A second major issue in Hübner's model is the issue of the "one God" of both Testaments. How does the NT answer the question whether the God of the OT is the same God of the NT? Do we find evidence in the NT that Christians worshiped another God than the God known from the only Bible, the Hebrew Bible?

Peter Stuhlmacher also raises the question of the early Christian perception of God.

The question whether and how far the one God, who is the Creator of the world and the One who has elected Israel as his own people, is also the Father of Jesus Christ, is answered with a Yes through Jesus who called him *Abba* (cf. Lk 10:21-22/Mt 11:25-27), who presented Him in the opening of the Lord's Prayer (cf. Lk 11:2/Mt

⁹⁹S. Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1976); Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); cf. S. Talmon, "Holy Writings and Canonical Books in Jewish Perspective—Considerations Concerning the Formation of the Entity 'Scripture' in Judaism," in *Mitte der Schrift?* ed. M. Klopfenstein et al. (Bern: Lang, 1987), 45-79; David Noel Freedman, "How the Hebrew Bible and the Christian OT Differ," *BibRev* 9 (1993): 28-39, esp. 39.

¹⁰⁰Childs, "Die Bedeutung der hebräischen Bibel für die Biblische Theologie," 387.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 388.

¹⁰²Ibid., 387.

6:9-10) and in his teaching of the twofold commandment to love God and fellow human beings (cf. Mk 12:28-34).¹⁰³

He goes on to say that "the New Testament affirms the question raised by Hübner,"¹⁰⁴ regardless of the latter's denial. Stuhlmacher also notes that the scholar "who allows to let the contents and the questions of a Biblical theology derive from the New Testament itself, will hesitate to follow H. Hübner in his risky path of locking oneself into reconstruction and critical theological interpretation (after the example of Bultmann)."¹⁰⁵

A limited or restricted OT, one based on the Septuagint¹⁰⁶ and used only in citations and allusions,¹⁰⁷ hardly comprises the Bible the early Christians knew and used. Citations and allusions in the NT are in many cases reflective of and conditioned by certain circumstances and situations which confronted Jesus,¹⁰⁸ the disciples and apostles,¹⁰⁹ and other early Christians. They cannot be understood to reflect the complete Bible that was at the disposal of Jesus and the early Christians and whose message they followed.

In addition, according to each of the four Gospels, Jesus Christ affirmed the identity of the Father as the God revealed in the OT. The depreciation of one picture of Yahweh in the OT, and then the entire

¹⁰³Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, vol. 1, *Grundlegung: Von Jesus bis Paulus* (Göttingen; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 37.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶It is widely acknowledged that the predominant use of quotations comes from the LXX. However, there are many other texts or translations which have been used, and not simply the LXX. On that basis it would be precarious to refer to the LXX as the singular version for the wording of the NT citations or quotations of the NT from the OT. See Gleason L. Archer and Gregory Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), ix-x; E. Earle Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); idem, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1991).

¹⁰⁷A major difficulty is the definition of a citation or quotation as well as an allusion. See R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1971), 25-37, 259-623.

¹⁰⁸France (*Jesus and the Old Testament*, 259-263) provides 144 verbatim quotations or verbal allusions from 24 of the 39 books in the OT attributed to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. This does not include the prediction of "the third day" or of the resurrection in general (p. 53, notes 47-50).

¹⁰⁹See Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*, 150-187.

picture of Yahweh in the OT, followed by a different NT picture of God, was first drawn by Marcion in the second century and has been painted by his followers over the centuries.¹¹⁰ This dichotomy has never been inherent in Scripture in its canonical form, but comes from religio-historical reconstruction. It would seem best for the biblical theologian to be informed on how Jesus and the apostles presented canonical Scripture, and not adopt religio-historical reconstructions and theologically charged interpretations of post-NT times which have been rejected by normative Christianity.

There is no doubt that the reader of these innovative models of biblical theology will be constantly stimulated to reflection on the subject. While much effort and serious thought have been devoted to the development of these models, it is evident at the same time that biblical theology is by no means close to a consensus or major direction. This allows much room for further reflection and development of thought on the foundations, concepts, nature, and purpose of biblical theology.

Three models of Biblical theology were surveyed above, and they provide major stimuli for the development of an alternative model. In the next essay we will attempt to make foundational proposals toward what may be properly designated a "canonical biblical theology."

¹¹⁰There are a number of major studies on Marcion and his subsequent influence in Christianity into the present. The definitive treatment on Marcion is that of Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott*, 2d ed. (Leipzig: Hinrichs Verlag, 1924; reprinted in Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960). See also John Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942); E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London: SPCK, 1948); R. J. Hoffmann, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1984); John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Press, 1967), 60-72; John J. Clabeaux, "Marcion," *ABD*, 4:514-516.