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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

WHAT IS OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL THEOLOGY ?

by EDWARD J. YOUNG

IN our January-March number a review appeared of Dr. Young's London Bible College lectures, "The Study of Old Testament Theology Today". We invited Dr. Young to comment on the review, and the points which he made in response to our invitation were printed as an appendix to the review. He promised, however, to deal with the subject more adequately in a full-length article, which we are now glad to publish below.

ACCORDING to many writers, we are today witnessing a revival of Biblical Theology.¹ The Bible, we are told, is being rediscovered and we now see that it has a permanent and abiding message.² Our task is to expound that message and to exhibit its relevancy for the contemporary generation. We have come to see, so the argument runs, that during the nineteenth century Biblical study was too one-sided. We engaged in the analysis of books, the partitioning of passages and their subsequent assignment to various documents, and in so doing neglected the Bible's abiding message. Now we have learned better. Barth and others have really caused us to see the importance of theology.³

Biblical Theology, therefore, is supposedly coming into its own. Its study has been revived, and the resurgence is hailed in many quarters with great delight. Books on the subject are appearing with great frequency. Not all of them agree in their definitions, but there appears to be general recognition that this subject, supposedly neglected for so long, has at last come into the forefront of Biblical discussion.

¹ In this article we shall restrict the designation Biblical Theology to the Old Testament field. What we have to say would also apply *mutatis mutandis*, to New Testament Biblical Theology, but in this article it is the Old Testament which is our principal concern.

² E.g., William Neil, *The Rediscovery of the Bible* (London, 1954).

³ I have sought to elaborate this theme in *Thy Word is Truth* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1957).

Not all are happy about this so-called revival. The plain, everyday Christian may be puzzled at talk about a rediscovery of the Bible. For him the Bible never was a lost book. While the whole school of Wellhausen was undermining the foundation of Old Testament authority the simple Christian was blessed by believing the promises made to Abraham. The present emphasis upon a permanent message of the Bible is likely to make little impression upon the humble, devout Christian.

Nor are all Christian scholars happy about this so-called revival. J. I. Packer, who has written one of the grandest books on the contemporary religious situation to appear in many a day, says: "The exponents of 'Biblical Theology' have yet to convince Evangelicals that they are completely sincere in saying that they desire to see the Bible 'from within', and to break with the arbitrary subjectivism of the older Liberals. If they wish to gain the confidence of Evangelicals, they must show an attitude to the Bible more earnestly Biblical than that which they adopt at present".⁴

With these words the present writer whole-heartedly aligns himself. Dr. Packer's charge cannot be evaded. Is Biblical Theology, in the sense in which it is generally advocated today, truly Biblical or is it not? That it is not genuine Biblical Theology will become more apparent if we consider what true Biblical Theology is.

I. HOW SHALL WE APPROACH THE QUESTION ?

If one examines various definitions which are offered he will discover that there are different and even conflicting opinions as to the identity and nature of Biblical Theology. Inasmuch as this is the case, we cannot very well say whether or no there is a revival of such a study until we first ascertain what that study is. In what manner, however, are we to do this? May we bring to the Bible our own conception of what Biblical Theology is, and then compel the Bible to fit into our pattern? E. Jacob, for example, in his thorough work on the subject offers the following definition: "The theology of the Old Testament can be defined as the systematic exposition of the specific religious ideas which are found in the whole Old Testament and which constitute its profound unity".⁵

⁴ J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Tyndale Press, London, 1958).

⁵ Edmond Jacob, *Théologie de L'Ancien Testament* (Neuchatel & Paris, 1955): "La Théologie de l'Ancien Testament peut être définie comme l'exposé systématique des notions religieuses spécifiques qui se retrouvent dans l'ensemble de l'Ancien Testament et qui en constituent l'unité profonde" (p. 10).

This definition envisions theology as a study or science which systematically expounds certain ideas found in the Old Testament. Before we consider the definition's correctness we may ask what credentials it can bring. Is it a definition that is justifiable?

Only the Bible can teach us what true Biblical Theology is. The Bible teaches us what we are to believe about God and what duty God requires of us. Insofar as she has been faithful to her Lord the Church of Jesus Christ has throughout her history sought to define her doctrine upon the basis of what the Bible taught. Luther, for example, did not seek to discover a doctrine of justification that would be relevant to the men of the sixteenth century. He sought rather to discover what the Bible taught about justification and then he fearlessly proclaimed that doctrine. If the question of relevance entered into the picture at all, Luther was far more concerned that the men of his day become "relevant" to Scripture than that Scripture be relevant to them.

The Bible then must teach us what we are to believe, for the Bible is God's Word. A consistent Christian will seek to maintain the same view of Scripture that was held by the Lord Jesus Christ and the New Testament writers. What that view was is not difficult to discover, and it is not our purpose to say more at this point other than to point out that they regarded Scripture as God-breathed, infallible, and written by holy men who were borne by the Holy Spirit. This point need not be labored. That our Lord held the doctrine commonly known as plenary and verbal inspiration is a fact that cannot be gainsaid.⁶

Today however there are those who claim that the Bible is the Word of God, but not in the sense that the actual words of Scripture are revelation. Rather the Bible is said to be merely a witness or pointer to the Word of God. This position, of course, is widespread today, and in a brief article such as this we cannot refute it in any detail.⁷ Suffice it to say that this position is not Biblical, and that is the strongest objection that can be raised

⁶ One who desires to understand the Scriptural doctrine of its own "God-breathed" character, may read Packer, *op. cit.*, or Young, *op. cit.* Among the older treatises reference should be made to the writings of B. B. Warfield. It is encouraging to note that the Tyndale Press has recently made available some of his articles under the title *Biblical Foundations* (1958). The doctrine of inspiration is discussed in the first two chapters. What a blessing would come to the Church of Christ if evangelicals would study Warfield.

⁷ I have sought to discuss this position in *Thy Word Is Truth* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1957).

against it. It was not the view of Scripture held by our Lord, and it is utterly without Scriptural support.

The very words of the Bible are the words of God. They are themselves revelation and they are themselves teaching. The supposed distinction that is sometimes made between everything written in Scripture and everything taught in Scripture is really not valid, for the very words are themselves teaching. If, then, we are properly to define Old Testament Theology we must be guided by what authoritative Scripture teaches.

II. WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ?

According to its etymology, theology is the doctrine or study of God, and this is a thoroughly Biblical concept. If the Bible is a revelation from God, then it follows that there must be an underlying unity to its message. It is like a symphony orchestra of sixty-six pieces. Each has its own part to play, but all together present one stupendous, harmonious theme. When we seek to study in systematic fashion all that the Bible says on one particular topic we are engaged in the study of Systematic Theology or Dogmatics.

In his definition Jacob mentions the "systematic exposition of the specific religious notions" of the old Testament and so Jacob is really presenting us with a work in Old Testament Systematic Theology.

At this point however, we must note again the etymology of the word "theology". According to the etymology of this word the object of our study is really God Himself. And this is in perfect harmony with what the Bible itself teaches. God is the Object that we study. In so saying, we mean of course that we are studying the revelation which God has given us concerning Himself. We learn of God—and we learn to know God—through the words which He has caused to be inscripturated.

Theology therefore cannot be merely a study of ideas—even unifying ideas—which are found in the Old Testament. It is a study rather of God in His self-revelation. A consideration merely of the unifying ideas of the Old Testament might proceed upon the assumption that these ideas were simply examples of what the ancient Hebrews thought. If so, such a study would be a study of the ancient Hebrews, and not of God. It would not be theology. True Systematic Theology is a systematic study of the revelation of God. It is therefore, profoundly and essentially Biblical.

Today there is much depreciation of the significance of Systematic Theology. Sometimes this may be due to ignorance of what

the discipline really is.⁸ But many are influenced, whether consciously or not, by the irrationalism of the day. They have drunk, not at the springs of Luther, Calvin, Hodge, Warfield and Machen, but at those of Kierkegaard, Barth and Brunner. It is today popular to depreciate reason. Logic is overthrown, and the idol of irrationalism has many who bow before it. The modern emphasis upon Biblical Theology fits this mood. Unpalatable is the very term "systematic". Somehow the impression has been created that the idea of system is not Biblical, and there is a tendency today to label the modern mood as Biblical. But, to reject Systematic Theology in the interests of a supposed Biblical Theology is really to render impossible the study of true Biblical Theology.

When we study Biblical Theology we are not concerned to make a systematic investigation of all that the Bible teaches, for example, about God. But this does not mean that Systematic Theology is of no use to us in the discipline of Biblical Theology. It is of the utmost use.⁹

We note, however, that in the Old Testament God revealed Himself progressively and in stages. Not all the truth was made known at one time. We must take the individual periods and examine what God revealed during them. Thus we may proceed, period by period, until we have worked through the entire Old Testament. One of the greatest merits of Vos's work is that he recognizes what we may call the principle of periodicity.¹⁰

We must also study the revelation of God in its historical setting. To do this involves a knowledge of the languages and customs of Biblical times. God did not give His revelation in a vacuum but in history. At this point we must avoid a false

⁸ Systematic theology, if properly engaged in, must constantly be occupied with the exegesis of the Bible. It is exegesis, for example, which has led us to a deeper appreciation of the exact significance of the doctrine of justification than was true of pre-Reformation days. If the student of Systematic Theology does not constantly engage in exegesis, he is likely to fall into the error of merely parroting credal statements of a by-gone day.

⁹ Systematic Theology reminds us of the significance of the analogy of Scripture. And the student of Biblical Theology must always be reminded of this. This principle of the analogy of Scripture has been given classic expression, for example, in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (i.9): "The infallible rule of interpretation of scripture is the scripture itself; and, therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture (which is not manifold, but one) it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly."

¹⁰ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1948).

conception of sacred history. The great events of saving history, according to the Bible, took place upon this earth in history. They are definite events which occurred upon calendar days of our history. Indeed, if we remove the historical basis of God's revelation, there is no Christianity remaining.

Here we come head-on against a subtle error of the present day. It is an error which describes the saving events of history in Scriptural and in orthodox terms, but which removes those events from the sphere of history. We sometimes discover the word "history" employed in a strange sense in recent writing. And in this connection a German term, *Heilsgeschichte*, has become very prominent as a designation of a realm distinct from that of ordinary history. It is difficult to escape the conviction that, according to some modern writers, the events of Biblical history, particularly God's redeeming history, belong to the realm of *Heilsgeschichte*, but not to ordinary history. True Biblical theology will consider the revelation of God as having occurred in history.

In the light of the foregoing we may define Old Testament Biblical Theology as the study of God in His progressive self-revelation in history. Such a study challenges our best. As little children, we are humbly to approach the Sacred Scriptures waiting to hear what the Lord our God has to say. We are not to submit these Scriptures to the microscope of the human mind, thereby to judge them. Rather, we are to subject our minds to the judgement of Scripture, and from it we are to learn.

If this definition be correct, it goes without saying that much which today bears the name is really not Biblical Theology. A genuine Biblical Theology will reject those methods of approach which permit the human mind to accept or reject Scripture at will. When the Bible speaks on any subject, that is sufficient. In so far as what is being written today corresponds to and is consonant with genuine Biblical Theology there may be said to be a revival of the study. But the mere fact that a man writes a book and calls it a Biblical Theology is no evidence of a revival of the subject, or that the author in question has actually written a Biblical Theology. Perhaps the term is employed more frequently today than formerly. One need, however, but read Drechsler on Jeremiah's use of Isaiah or Calvin's commentaries to realize that the subject-matter of Biblical Theology was also very much alive with writers of a past day. Well may we pray that God will give to us too a similar profound insight into the teaching of Scripture. Well may we pray that God will bring a revulsion from the shallowness of so much of our modern religious life that men may once again see

God in His holiness and be willing to listen to the words of the living God. Then, indeed, there may come a true revival of Biblical Theology.

*Westminster Theological Seminary,
Philadelphia, Pa.*