

The Teaching of Biblical Theology in India Today

M. V. ABRAHAM*

Biblical theology is quite a young discipline as far as India is concerned. In the early fifties, during my seminary days, we were never told of such a thing and only a few years later, when I had to go out of India for further studies, did I have my first exposure to this "new" phenomenon, which by then had become already an "old" topic in the West.

Though biblical theology could be thought of as a consequence of the Reformation, there was no biblical theology as such during the Reformation but the reformers stressed the centrality of the Bible (*sola Scriptura*). Calvin's theology had more biblical content than philosophical, though he and Luther were not anti-philosophical in their methodology. Post-Reformation Protestant theology became more systematic, dry and technical, and it was in this situation that biblical theology was born. The Pietistic Movement and historical criticism provided the right context for its growth.

It was Johann Philipp Gabler, in his inaugural address at Altdorf in 1787, who, for the first time, made a clear distinction between biblical theology and dogmatic theology.

According to Gabler, biblical theology has a historical character and consequently does not share at all in the changes that overtake dogmatic theology as it accommodates itself to a given time. The task of research into biblical theology is therefore the collection and differentiation of the ideas of biblical writers and only on the basis of this collection can the permanently valuable and consequently dogmatically usable content be separated from the categories determined wholly by the historical situation of the time.¹

By Gabler's time the difference and possible gulf between the meaning of the Bible as the writer wrote and as God intended had become crucial. In the Nineteenth Century quite a number of books on biblical theology appeared which must have been prompted by

* The Revd. Dr M. V. Abraham is Professor of New Testament and Dean of Theology at the Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur.

¹ W. G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems* (trans. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard Kee), London, SCM Press, 1973, p. 98.

the rising tide in favour of the historical critical method popularised by the "History of Religions School" (*Religionsgeschichtlich Schule*). But this trend was slowed down and even reversed by the works of Albert Schweitzer and Johannes Weiss (thoroughgoing eschatology) to begin with and later by the "Kerygma theologians" (Rudolf Bultmann) as well as by the rise of "Neo-Orthodoxy" (Karl Barth, being pre-eminent).

A generally acceptable definition of biblical theology is far from easy. Biblical theology can mean either "the theology contained in the Bible, the theology of the Bible itself" or "the theology that accords with the Bible, Scriptural theology." "The name 'Biblical theology,' says William Wrede, originally means not a theology which the Bible has, but the theology which has biblical character and is drawn from the Bible."² The definition of biblical theology has swung back and forth between its characterisation as a historical-descriptive discipline (Gabler-Wrede-Stendahl) and a theological discipline (Hoffmann-Bultmann-Ebeling). This dilemma expresses itself in the debate on "the historical Jesus" and "the Christ of faith." According to Ebeling,³ the biblical theologian who devotes himself specially to Old or New Testament research has to give an inclusive account of his understanding of the Old or New Testament, that is, the Bible as a whole. For Ebeling, biblical theology has to be closely related to systematic theology (a unity consisting in the right theological use of the different disciplines—historical and systematic).

In the thirties of this century with the rise of Barthianism we get a biblical theology of a different type. Barthian theology is a sort of overlapping between dogmatic theology and biblical theology (a kind of going back to the style of Calvin). In a broad sense, even Paul Tillich's theology can be called biblical theology—though he used very little verse by verse exegesis compared with Barth—because all kinds of dogmatics include some sort of interpretation of the Bible.

One of the positive contributions of biblical theology is the equal emphasis given to both Old and New Testaments. The extreme Christocentric approach to the Bible was mellowed by seeing the God of the Old Testament as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Old and the New Testaments were seen as one continuum in the history of salvation, thereby setting aside the notion of seeing the Old Testament as a scaffolding set up for the construction of the New Testament edifice.

The advantage of stressing the unity of the Bible had its own disadvantages as well: for example, the theological unity of the Bible became problematic and therefore very soon it became necessary to divide the one discipline of biblical theology into two—a theology of the Old Testament and a theology of the New Testament; such a

² G. Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (trans. James W. Leitch), London, SCM Press, 1963, pp. 79-80; citing W. Wrede, *Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten Neutestamentlichen Theologie* (1897).

³ G. Ebeling, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

division was necessitated by the historical criticism of the Bible which made the theological unity of the Bible problematic. Even the theological unity within each Testament has become problematical. The historical-critical method, when strictly applied to the Biblical books, highlighted the differences within both Testaments and thus the Old and New Testaments became a compendium of a variety of theologies in historical succession. Even while granting an inner unity of the Old and the New Testaments (which is by no means a uniform theology), one has to recognise the particularity between theologies (e.g. the difference between Paul and John in the New Testament).

Another related problem is the canonical limits of Scripture. A study of the Old and the New Testaments cannot avoid considering the religio-historical background and its effect on them: for example, an Old Testament theology can hardly refrain from extending its range beyond the canonical Scriptures into pre-Christian Judaism, while a New Testament theology can ill afford to overlook the extra-canonical literature of early Christianity belonging to the same period as the canonical Scriptures.

Still another factor that may be considered problematical is the use of the term "theology" for the actual content of the Bible. This use of the term is the common heritage of medieval and Protestant scholasticism, according to which revelation consists in the communication of revealed truths, and the Word of God is therefore identical with theological propositions. This, of course, is not to deny that the Bible contains theology. The question is: What exactly in the Bible is to be classified as theology, and what is our definition of theology when we approach the Bible? For example, can we place St Paul's arguments in Romans or St John's discourse on the Holy Spirit alongside an Old Testament prophet's call for justice, and call the prophet's sermon also theology? Of course, the prophet's message is capable of theological explication. This shows that there is no such finished product as Old Testament theology or New Testament theology and both Testaments have to be unceasingly studied ever anew, though a new insight will not necessarily peep out every time.

This leads to a related question: Are there different levels (superior or inferior) of theology within the Bible? Is every part of Scripture a potential quarry of theological insights? How valid is the concept of "canon within the canon" in biblical theology? While we recognise theological pluriformity and diversity within the Bible, it can be a dangerous and counter-productive exercise to dive for theological pearls or to play one theology/theologian against another. Such trends were seen during the Post-Reformation and Post-Tridentine centuries where the major concern was "biblical polemics" rather than "biblical hermeneutics." Biblical theology presupposes a "holistic" approach to the Bible, notwithstanding the theological diversities within it. As Ebeling puts it: "In 'Biblical theology' the theologian who devotes himself specially to studying the connection between the Old and New Testaments has to give an account of his understanding of the Bible as a whole, that is above all of the theological problems that come

of inquiring into the inner unity of the manifold testimony of the Bible."⁴

Methodology

Krister Stendahl, in his excellent article on "Biblical Theology" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Vol. I, pp. 418-431) distinguishes two clear stages in biblical theology: (1) Descriptive Task; (2) Hermeneutical Question. At the first level pure objectivity is possible, according to Stendahl, because it is only a question of using tools and skills to look at what the text meant "then" to the writer and the first readers. Stendahl argues that "The descriptive task can be carried out by the believer and the agnostic alike."⁵ But the question is: Can a Twentieth Century exegete identify himself with the subjectivity of the author of an ancient text and still keep the historical distance between himself and the original author? Even scientists now admit that pure objectivity is an impossibility because a scientist can work only on a previous datum while looking for new discoveries.⁶ Another related question is: In an attempt for a unilateral objectivity in locating the meaning of the text, keeping the past away from the present, does the biblical critic have to be totally separated from his theological colleague? Or does the theologian come in only at a later stage (hermeneutical task)?

How is biblical theology related to apologetics? There is a difference between interpretation in the Bible (biblical theology) and what I believe today. The biblical writer wrote in quite a different conceptual world than my own. In that case, do I really get at the original meaning of the text (even with the so-called "demythologising")? Karl Barth would argue that there is a "transparency" through which the meaning of the Word is seen, the historical distance notwithstanding (e.g. St Paul of the First Century was rightly understood by Calvin in the Sixteenth Century). But the problem is to know precisely what Paul meant in his time and how Calvin understood it in his time, and how I understand both Paul and Calvin in my time. However, the attempt to look for the original meaning should not be given up because without it biblical theology will have no biblical content.

Biblical theology is an exercise in "content-criticism" (*Sachkritik*) in relation to the variety of ways in which the "kerygma" comes to expression. "Biblical theology as content criticism participates in the same dialectic or hermeneutical circle. The norm implicit in Scripture is not self-evidently something which can be laid hold of and reduced to a verbal formulation valid for all time ... Historical

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁵ K. Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. I, p. 422.

⁶ R. Bultmann, *Existence and Faith* (trans. Schubert M. Ogden), Cleveland, Meridian, 1960. In his last essay in this collection of shorter writings, Bultmann argues that exegesis without presuppositions is not possible.

criticism helps to expose the historicity of both the Word which has occurred and the interpreter who is striving to hear anew ..."⁷

Robert Funk is right in saying that biblical theology cannot remain in isolation as a discipline by itself. It has to be related to other theological disciplines. Since it takes historical criticism seriously, it has to be related to historical theology in that it has to observe and interpret the development of tradition in the New Testament; it has to be related to systematic theology in that it must engage in content-criticism in its interpretation of the tradition in the New Testament. It has also to be related to practical theology in that biblical theology forms an integral element in the movement from text to proclamation. All these disciplines belong to the same hermeneutical circle, and, while each carries out its special task, each is involved in the tension between the past and the present, the text and the interpreter.⁸

A Biblical Theology for India

In the first part of this essay I was trying to outline the origin, development and the present state of biblical theology in the West as well as some of the problems that biblical theology poses. In this section of the essay I am attempting to state briefly, perhaps inadequately, how relevant biblical theology is for India and how it should address itself to the Indian context. Let me identify the two major contexts in India which are there (given) and which have to be reckoned with when we speak of developing and teaching biblical theology in India: (1) the religio-cultural context; (2) the socio-economic context. Probably, there may be other minor factors which also could be thought of. But I wish to limit myself to these two to restrict myself to the limits of space laid out for me by the editor.

I. *The Religio-Cultural Context*

India has at least six major religions, and the overwhelming majority of Indians are adherents of Hinduism. For that reason, one is led to equate the Indian religio-cultural ethos with the Hindu ethos, though this is an over-simplification. However, one cannot help being confronted by the reality of Hinduism, again and again, in any exercise of trying to relate the Christian faith to India. I do not attempt to chart the areas of correspondence between Christianity and Hinduism; but will mention only one major aspect in this direction, namely the understanding of history in these two religions.

Biblical religion is a historical religion. It is the history of a certain people expressing their understanding of God and his relations with them. For the biblical writers, history is sacred history because it reveals God's saving acts for them (*Heilsgeschichte*) culminating in the "Christ-event." So the historicity of Christian faith is rooted in the "Jesus of history" and this forms an essential aspect of Christian

⁷ R. Funk, "Creating and Opening," *Interpretation*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4 (1964), p. 405.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 404-405.

religion. It is this very same Jesus of history who became the Christ of Christian faith. On the other hand, the origin of the belief in "the Krishna of faith" is not based on any historical data. Because of its *ahistorical* origin, the understanding of man, world and God is different in Hinduism. In Hindu understanding, history is not "salvation-history" but "damnation-history" in which it is the destruction of evil (*adharma*), rather than its transformation that dominates. By making this distinction between the Christ of faith, rooted in Jesus of history, and the Krishna of faith rooted in *ahistorical* myths, I am not trying to show the superiority of Christianity over Hinduism but only highlighting the specificity of biblical religion which has to be taken seriously in projecting a biblical theology in the Indian religious context. The problem is not simply historical religion verses mythical religion. Even a historical message (*kerygma*) needs some kind of a "myth" to make it acceptable and believable in any cultural context, certainly so in the Indian context. The real problem is to use the right myth, without being misunderstood or incorrectly understood.

Christianity is often considered (though erroneously) as a western religion, more so by the "non-Christians" in India. Though it originated in Palestine (Asia), Christ was not limited to the messianic categories of Palestinian Judaism. He was interpreted to the Graeco-Roman world by St Paul, St John and others, and later to the larger world by the Alexandrians and Antiochenes, and the Latin and Greek Fathers. In this process the Gospel was culturally conditioned and adapted. Therefore, such a process is not at all unwarranted but essential in India as well.

We cannot teach biblical theology as if it is an outdated discipline (of special interest only to a few, such as Assyriology and Egyptology): we must teach it as something worthwhile and relevant for our culture. This calls for drastic adaptations: but how far (the limits) can we adapt and subject the Bible to our religious and cultural context is the real problem. There are those who argue for Indian Christian theology and are prepared to borrow terms from any religion (which is no problem to me personally) without checking whether those terms adequately and faithfully convey and communicate the Christian message. This might be true of our own Christian theological terms which we have taken from western theological writers. Do those terms make sense to us as Christians in the Indian context? It is equally problematic to adopt certain Hindu categories to convey what we mean and believe in our religion. The criterion should not be whether the terms we use are palatable to the "others," rather, would they communicate what we mean and believe. Sometimes, probably often, we may not succeed in coining theological terms which might be agreeable to all; the risk of being misunderstood is also there; for example, the *logos* concept used in the Fourth Gospel, though an excellent term in the Greek religio-cultural milieu, failed to click when the evangelist used it to express the theology of Incarnation ("the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory as the glory of the only Son of the Father"—John 1:14). But, on the other hand, if the evangelist

had deliberately left out the fact of Incarnation, his Gospel would not have been the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The statement of the late philosopher-President of India, Dr S. Radhakrishnan, that to say that God became man is an insult to human reason, only confirms the risk and deepens the agony of taking the risk towards an Indian biblical theology. Still the exercise is necessary.

Another suggestion that is being mooted by some Christians is to consider using the Hindu Scriptures in the place of the Old Testament, in Indian churches. One has to rule this out straightaway because no hotchpotch of religious writings can become a substitute for the Bible. As we have already seen, the continuity between the Old and New Testaments, the problems notwithstanding, is the basis and prolegomenon for biblical theology.

At the same time one cannot develop biblical theology in India unless the Scriptures of other religions in India are taken as an integral part of the Indian reality which the Christians also share. In one sense, for Christians in India the Scriptures of other religions are related to the Bible as a single continuum forming the larger religious heritage of India. But the Bible has its special significance for Christians even in India because of the Christian's faith-commitment to the Bible. Sacrificing or even toning down this specificity of the Christian Scriptures will not be the best way to make the Bible relevant to India. I do not mean a retaining of all idioms and myths of the Bible *verbatim*, but to retain the essential relationship with Jesus Christ, an experience which was intimately real to the New Testament writers and the early witnesses. Perhaps I could call this "a recapturing of the biblical experience."

A biblical theology which does not transmit the "biblical experience," which I have described above can be an exercise in futility, be it in India or in Palestine. Biblical history is not to be equated with biblical theology, though there is a vital connection between the two. There has been a tendency to create theological clichés which do not have sufficient correlation with the meaning of the biblical text or reflect the experience of the biblical people. To quote J. C. Beker: "The crisis of biblical theology is exactly the crisis of a condensed category which has lost its symbolic value and referent and thus becomes a verbal abstraction."⁹ The historical context of the *kerygma* is as important as the *kerygma* itself just as the language in which the *kerygma* was expressed soon became part of the *kerygma*.¹⁰ The "Christ-event" is an event which happened at a particular time and place in history and the response of the first believers to it also took place in history. This fact not only lends credibility to it but also opens up the possibility of the same experience to other people in other

* J. C. Beker, "Reflections on Biblical Theology," *Interpretation*, Vol. XXIV, No. 3 (1970), p. 305.

¹⁰ J. M. Robinson, "Kerygma and History in the New Testament," in *The Bible and Modern Scholarship* (ed. Philip Hyatt), New York and Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1965, p. 131.

generations. Thus the "revelatory-event" in Jesus, while being once for all, becomes also a continuous process in history in so far as it is a real experience to people in every generation. The perennial "quest of the historical Jesus" is a quest for a religious experience within the world of human reality.

The relation between experience and interpretation is the key to biblical theology. Biblical theology has to reckon with the problem of continuity and discontinuity, the problem of abiding experience within changing categories.

If we are able to see the relation between biblical experience and its theological expressions in the New Testament, expressed in a different cultural context, we too should be able to relate our experience with Christ to our cultural context. At the same time we cannot make a radically new biblical theology, tailor-made for India, which has no moorings in the already existing biblical theology rooted in biblical history. There is an inherent "givenness" about the Bible and therefore any biblical theology has to be related to this.

II. *The Socio-Economic Context*

The socio-economic factor is part of the reality which has to be taken into account in any attempt to relate theology to the soil, be it in India, Latin America or Africa, or even in the affluent North America. It was biblical theology and not dogmatic theology which inspired the liberation theology in Latin America, black theology in South Africa and women's theology in North America. The Exodus-event which is the starting point and centre for Von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* is also the basis of liberation theology in Latin America and black theology in South Africa. It is also the motivating force behind the Zionist movement in modern Israel. Similarly, the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) which was a dominant theme in Martin Luther's theology, became the central force of Martin Luther King's Civil Rights Movement which was a non-violent movement, while the same theology of the cross inspired a guerilla-type of militant struggle by Camillo Torres, the Latin American priest.

The Latin American model or the African model might be good case studies but need not be the perfect model which biblical theology should take in India. In Latin America, South Africa or in Europe, both the oppressor and the oppressed are Christians while in India we have a broad spectrum of religious and cultural diversity which influences the socio-economic aspects of life. So importing the Latin American model or the African model can be as irrelevant as the western model. We have to interpret the Bible to our own situation and create a biblical theology of our own. In this age when "sloganitis" (the fad for slogans) seems to have become an epidemic, we hear expressions such as "changing the structures," "praxiological theology," and so on. It does not matter whether we borrow this slogan or that slogan as long as it makes sense in our context.

Before I close let me make one or two observations more. The first is my discomfort in equating "Indian" with "Hindu" as if nobody else matters in India. Islam, though much smaller than Hinduism (numerically), has also to be taken seriously in India which has the second largest Muslim population in the world (after Indonesia). Islam, Judaism and Christianity are the three "Abrahamic" religions (having Abraham as a common ancestor). Since Islam and Judaism have certain religious and ethnic affinities (Semitic), how could we ignore Islam when biblical theology takes the Old Testament as seriously as the New Testament? A second observation is this. Those who are first or second generation converts to Christianity from Hinduism may feel the reality and proximity of the Hindu culture and ethos much more than those Christians whose families have been Christians for centuries and for whom the "biblical" tradition and their own particular ancient Christian tradition is much more natural and real. This is understandable. But does that mean that it is the same case for all Christians in India? A third group of Christians in India are the tribal Christians who also make up a sizeable chunk of the Christian population in India. They had no formal religion as such before their conversion (they were Animists or had their own cults). What do we mean by "Indian culture" in their case? I just raise these issues to show how complicated a task it is to have a biblical theology to fit the Indian ethos. The tribal culture has to be taken note of in any serious attempt towards an Indian biblical theology. Changing socio-economic structures or relating theology to the religious-cultural heritage of India cannot be done in isolation or piecemeal. All these factors are so intertwined that we have the primary task of identifying the problems before fabricating a theology.

Lastly, but quite important all the same, is the fact of sin (I am conscious of being branded as a "Fundy" or old-fashioned if I speak of sin in theological circles nowadays). In India where the majority of the population speak of *karma* (a cause-effect relationship) or *kismet* (fate) to express the fallenness of man and the world, how would we communicate the Christian (biblical) understanding of sin (fall) and restoration? Could there be any biblical theology devoid of the centrality of the cross and the reality of sin? The themes of sin, judgement and redemption are central themes in both the Old and New Testaments, and therefore essential traits of biblical theology as well. The aspect of sin is the cutting edge and the stumbling block (*skandalon*) of the Bible. Does relating theology to the socio-economic situation of India alone fulfil the function of biblical theology without speaking about the reality of sin? Does meeting the socio-economic needs of man exhaust all his needs? If so, is such a theology commensurate with the biblical understanding of man? I have only raised certain issues but not given solutions. I wish I knew them! But I hope these and other issues will be kept in mind when we think of interpreting and teaching the Bible and biblical theology in India.