

INVITATION TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

*Exploring the Shape, Storyline,
and Themes of Scripture*

INVITATION TO THEOLOGICAL STUDIES SERIES

INVITATION TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

*Exploring the Shape, Storyline,
and Themes of Scripture*

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CHED SPELLMAN



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ACADEMIC

Invitation to Biblical Theology: Exploring the Shape, Storyline, and Themes of Scripture

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For our teachers and our students

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INTRODUCTION



A Word about the Purpose of This Book

In writing this volume, we took seriously the task of providing an *invitation* to the discipline and practice of biblical theology. Accordingly, this book is neither a full-scale or exhaustive account of these areas of inquiry, nor only a surface-level introduction to basic elements. Rather, we seek to introduce some of the central aspects of biblical theology as a discipline, explain some of the strategic tools that are used in the practice of biblical theology, and provide a series of studies that highlight the payoff to this approach for understanding the Scriptures. In these discussions, we do take certain positions and make several specific proposals, but the overall aim of the endeavor is to orient you to this type of study and way of thinking about the Bible's message as a whole.

In chapter one, we explore a working definition of biblical theology, provide a brief history of the discipline, and survey contemporary approaches to the discipline. In light of this orienting discussion, in chapter two we propose an approach to biblical theology that centers on the canon, the covenants, and the Christ. We also explore the biblical-theological tools that support this type of framework. In chapter three, we discuss some of the issues involved in seeing that the whole Bible is about Christ. In chapter four, we examine some of the theological commitments we make about Scripture that enable us to approach the study of biblical theology in the way that we have.

In chapters five through ten, we outline of the grand storyline of the Bible from beginning to end. In these chapters, we consider both the basic structure of each major grouping of the canon and also some of the canonical considerations that might impact the way we understand the shape of the narrative storyline that appears in these groupings. Accordingly, the focus of these chapters is the narration and interpretation of redemptive history

that the biblical authors provide in their narratives. This focal point is not an explicit or implicit argument that the narrative portions of the biblical canon are more significant than the non-narrative portions (e.g., the psalms, proverbs, or epistles) for the study of biblical theology. Rather than being a feature of this volume's space constraints (though this is a factor!), part of the purpose of this section is to demonstrate the unique role that the many narratives of the biblical collection play in articulating and shaping the big picture of the Bible. Here, we explore "The Grand Storyline of the Bible" as a biblical-theological tool alongside other tools we can employ in the study of biblical theology.

In the next major section (chapters eleven through twenty), we pursue the biblical-theological tool of "tracing a central theme across the canon." In these chapters, we discuss some of the significant biblical-theological topics that are prompted by a reading of the biblical storyline. Whereas "The Bible's Grand Storyline" is tightly focused on biblical narratives, each theme developed in "The Bible's Significant Themes" includes an overview of any relevant texts from the other biblical genres. For example, in examining the storyline of the New Testament, we do not outline the theological themes found in Paul's letters; however, in the development of each central theme, a discussion of Paul's letters is included. This observation will help you see the design of the chapters of this book and also the interconnected nature of biblical theology as a discipline.

The book ends, in chapters twenty-one and twenty-two, with brief reflections on how the study of biblical theology can serve both the church and the academy. In the major parts of this book, then, we endeavor to provide an invitation to the different ways you might approach the biblical-theological task. Our hope is that this volume will be a resource for pastors and students who are seeking to engage in the study of biblical theology and its application in the ministry of the churches.

As an aid to those using this book in a classroom setting, each chapter concludes with a set of discussion questions and a brief list of resources for further study. These reflective questions highlight some of the key issues examined within a given chapter and can also serve as prompts for small group or larger class discussion times. The final chapter also includes a series of case studies and exercises that might be used as small reflective assignments or as parameters for larger research papers. Moreover, the major sections of this volume are designed to complement the usual shape of an academic course. The book unfolds in a way that might structure a class on biblical theology (moving from method to practice to application). In this model, each new section would mark a new phase of the class. Each section could also function as a resource for a particular component of a course. The method chapters (1–4, 11, and 21–22), for example, might be utilized in the first part of a class in order to discuss the discipline and practice of biblical theology. The sections examining the grand storyline and central themes of the Bible could then be

utilized as further phases of a course or as resources for students as they develop culminating research projects.

In terms of the production of the book, Ched wrote chapters one through three, five through eleven, and twenty-two. Jeremy wrote chapters four and twelve through twenty-one. Any first-person pronouns in these chapters refer to these authors.

A Word from Jeremy

It has been a joy to work on this book, as it has functioned as a continual invitation to increasingly know, love, and delight in God by means of his Word. There is no greater book than the Bible, and no greater object of meditation than the living God. What a pleasure it is to study, write, teach, and preach about our great God. My prayer is that this work will prove to be of help to readers and that it would be glorifying to the Lord. I give him thanks that he has used his Word and the work of the Holy Spirit to open my blind eyes to “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

I am grateful to our friends at Kregel. To Herb Bateman, thanks so much for listening to the initial ideas for this volume. To Dennis and Paul Hillman, thank you for your encouragement and answering of questions throughout the process. To Shawn Vander Lugt and Robert Hand, I want to express appreciation for your careful eye attending to the details of the manuscript.

To Cedarville University, the administration as well as the School of Biblical and Theological Studies, I am indebted. It is a joy to work in a university setting so dedicated to the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. I am grateful for an institution that supports faculty engaging in scholarship for the sake of the church. A particular note of thanks to JR Gilhooly, who read and attentively commented on my chapters from this volume. Mom and Dad, you are also constant in your encouragement and prayers; thank you so much for all you do.

And finally, to my amazing family. Hannah and Jonathan, you bring me more delight than you can possibly know. Watching you grow in stature and, more importantly, godliness is a testament to the goodness and grace of God. Always seek to know God by means of his Word, infinite treasures await you! To my wife Rachel, you are one of the greatest kindnesses God has ever bestowed upon me. Thank you for reading through this manuscript several times with a keen eye. More importantly, thank you for your constant desire to follow Jesus wherever he leads. I am constantly instructed as you pursue him day by day. I continue to pray that our marriage is a picture of the Christ-church relationship that we will enjoy in full someday. Until that time, may we endeavor to be a Psalm 1 people, delightfully and constantly meditating on his Word.

A Word from Ched

I'm thankful for the faithful love and support of my wife Leigh Anne; my daughters Hope, Kate, and Claire; and my son Luke. Each of you motivate and inspire me. No book is more important than y'all. I'm also thankful for my mom, who has encouraged me through the whole writing process (and who first taught me to love the Scriptures). I'm grateful for friends and colleagues who have read portions of this manuscript, provided valuable feedback, prayed for me, and encouraged me along the way: Zach Bowden (TX is forever), Billy Marsh (for band of brothers), JR Gilhooly (for cheery optimism), Josh Kira (for Apex Legends carries), Jonathan Watson (for 1. e4), Madison Grace (for milk in a glass), and Matthew Millsap (for ludonarrative dissonance). Joel Wasserstein and Kevin Symonette also took breaks from trolling one another to read and comment on several chapters. I also warmly acknowledge the value of the questions, comments, and discussions with students in my Biblical Theology courses at Cedarville University who have thought carefully about "BT moves" with me over the last several years.

A special word of thanks to Jason Lee. At many points during the composition of these chapters, I recognized the abiding effect of his teaching, scholarship, and approach to the Scriptures. If you have ever sat under his teaching, you will hear echoes of his influence at several points in the chapters that I have written. In the academic community there is often a tendency for scholars to guard their material or hold back some "proprietary insights" in the classroom for later personal publications. This is not Jason's approach to the task of theological education. In many ways, my contribution in this book is a result of his contribution to me through his teaching, guidance, and dialogue in graduate, doctoral, professional, and collegial interactions. It was in his Hermeneutics course years ago that I was first introduced to the idea that the best theology is to be done for the churches and that what God is doing in the world is directly connected to what God is doing in his Word. What I offer in this volume, then, comes with a deep appreciation for what I myself have received.

SECTION I

STUDYING THE BIBLE'S THEOLOGY



CHAPTER I

DEFINING BIBLICAL THEOLOGY



The Need for Biblical Theology

ONE OF THE GOALS OF THIS BOOK IS to increase the number of people who are interested in doing biblical theology. We want you to be biblical theologians, but we also want you to be well-equipped and well-informed biblical theologians. We need a generation of students, teachers, pastors, church leaders, missionaries, and church members who care deeply about biblical theology.

Whether or not you share this vision and passion for biblical theology might very well depend on how you define biblical theology. Just what do we mean when we refer to *biblical theology*? How is this type of study any different than simply reading the Bible? How is this practice different than preaching or systematic theology? What are the prevailing questions that arise in this particular discipline? Answering these preliminary questions helps orient our study, demonstrate its value for pastoral ministry, and justify its place within the academic study of the Bible.

“Do You Understand What You Are Reading?”

In Acts 8:26–40, the Spirit leads Philip to encounter an Ethiopian official departing from Jerusalem. This official was riding home in a chariot while “reading the prophet Isaiah” (8:28). The Spirit tells Philip to go over and join the chariot. At this point, Philip hears the official reading from the book of Isaiah and asks him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (8:30). The official responds, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” and invites Philip to sit with him (8:31). As Luke recounts, “Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: ‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its

shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken from the earth” (8:32–33).

After reading Isaiah 53:7–8, the official questions Philip regarding the identity of the suffering servant described in this passage, saying, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” (8:34). Philip responds to the official and “beginning with this Scripture [i.e., Isaiah 53] he told him the good news about Jesus” (8:35). In what follows, Philip baptizes the official along the roadside before being carried away by the Spirit to the city of Azotus where he continues preaching the gospel (8:36–40). This rather minor historical episode serves an important role in Luke’s narrative in the book of Acts and its account of the Spirit spreading the gospel across geographic and ethnic boundaries. However, this brief but fascinating story also encapsulates several of the themes and distinctive goals of biblical theology.

The official recognizes he needs help interpreting the Scriptures. As Acts 8 emphasizes, this includes not only the details of the passage under investigation (Isaiah 53) but also its broader literary context. The preaching of the gospel is connected to the close reading of the Scriptures. The two questions presented in Acts 8:30–31—“Do you understand what you are reading?” and “How can I, unless someone guides me?”—also highlight what is at stake in biblical theology and deserve enduring consideration.

Several other questions are raised by the details of this scene. What is the message of the Scriptures when considered as a whole? In light of the Bible’s overarching message, how do individual passages relate to that broader textual horizon? While Acts 8 provides only a summary of Philip’s conversation with the official, Luke does give us a glimpse into Philip’s interpretive methodology. According to Acts 8:35, Philip preached the gospel by starting with his interpretation of Isaiah 53. This interpretive approach not only considers the words of the prophet, but also connects these words to the gospel. How are the Prophets related to the Gospels? Do the words of Isaiah really lead to the good news about Jesus? If so, *how* do they do this? What is Philip on about here? These are the types of questions biblical theology seeks to consider.

Defining Biblical Theology

A Working Definition

We begin with a working definition of *biblical theology*, which we define as *the study of the whole Bible on its own terms*. Having a “working definition” of biblical theology is helpful because scholars still debate the precise meaning of the term. A working definition is intentionally brief, easy to understand, and focused on the essential aspects of the term in question. While a working definition may be tentative (or not fully formed), it is also flexible and broad enough to initially *work with*. These features make a working definition

useful for orienting someone to a particular discussion or discipline. However, this also means that a working definition must be *unpacked* to provide further definitional clarity. In order to unpack our working definition of biblical theology as the study of the whole Bible on its own terms, we can first think about its relationship to biblical exegesis and systematic theology, and then observe its prevailing concern for the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

A Tale of Two Senses

The study of biblical theology works within the electrifying dynamic generated by the two poles of biblical and theological studies. These two main components of biblical theology are of course embedded in the expression *biblical theology*, making it both a descriptive yet easily misunderstood term.

On the one hand, the term biblical theology can denote *a theology that is biblical*.¹ In this broad sense, biblical theology describes whether one's reflections about God and all things in relation to God *accord with the Scriptures*. Much as Paul instructs Titus to "teach what accords with sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1), the term here indicates whether a theology is "sound" and agrees with what we find in Scripture. This type of theological correspondence is an important and crucial goal for those who are in ministry.

On the other hand, a more specific or narrow understanding of the phrase biblical theology is *the theology presented in the Scriptures*. In this sense, biblical theology represents "the Bible's theology," or the "theology that we find in the Bible." In other words, when doing biblical theology, the goal is to first *present* the theological reflection that *occurs within* the Scriptures before *producing* theological reflection that *accords with* the Scriptures.

These two senses of biblical theology generate a level of ambiguity that some have said haunts the field.² Although failure to recognize this distinction can cause confusion and misunderstanding, the distinction itself can prove helpful as we pursue our study of the

1. An often-cited discussion of these two senses of "biblical theology" is Gerhard Ebeling, "The Meaning of 'Biblical Theology,'" *Journal of Theological Studies* 6.2 (1955): 210–25. Noting that biblical theology is "in any event no simple idea," Ebeling observes the term means either "the theology contained in the Bible . . . the theology of the Bible itself" or "theology in accordance with the Bible, scriptural theology." However, Ebeling laments that "Both possible meanings are pregnant with a mass of problems." As Ebeling observes, these two senses represent two distinct disciplines: "In the latter sense, 'biblical theology' is a normative concept, in the former sense it is an historical concept. In the one 'biblical theology' means a theology of the right kind, in the other a theology of a particular stamp. Among theologians it is the dogmatic theologian who is concerned with one, the historical theologian who is concerned with the other" (210). Thus, Ebeling highlights the importance of reckoning with the issue of definition.
2. For example, Christine Helmer notes that "the famous definition of biblical theology that Gerhard Ebeling formulated in 1955 identified the fundamental ambiguity haunting the field" ("Introduction: Multivalence in Biblical Theology," in *The Multivalence of Biblical Texts and Theological Meanings*, ed. Christine Helmer, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 37 [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006], 1). For Helmer, "Ebeling's contrast has convincingly set the conceptual parameters for biblical theology. The contrast between historical

Scriptures. This distinction between the broad and narrow senses of biblical theology provides conceptual categories that separate different types of analysis. As Brevard Childs notes, “from one perspective the entire modern history of the discipline of Biblical Theology can be interpreted as the effort to distinguish between these two definitions and to explore the important implications of the distinction.”³

In broad terms, the process of understanding the Bible includes several areas of emphasis. An important preliminary step involves both *distinguishing* and *relating* biblical theology to the tasks of biblical exegesis and systematic theology. Both biblical theology and systematic theology involve exegetical analysis and also some level of abstraction. Consequently, it is probably inaccurate to say that one of these disciplines is closer to the biblical text than the other.⁴ However, we can nevertheless note the distinctive aims of each discipline. Their purpose, goals, and object of study explain why their presentations often seem more or less directly connected to the biblical material. As we will discuss at various points, this does not automatically entail that a given discipline pursues a task wholly disconnected from the biblical text. Rather, it could mean that the purpose of a particular study or presentation of research is more or less suited to an arrangement other than a strict exposition of the biblical writings.

In our focus on biblical theology as *the study of the whole Bible on its own terms*, we will be mindful of the way exegesis, systematic theology, and other disciplines relate to our area of study.

- A working definition of exegesis is *the study of an author's textual intention*.
- A working definition of systematic theology is *the study of God and all things in relation to God according to his Word*.

and theological methods, between the object as described historically and the object of theological construction, exposes the braided trajectories of biblical theology's two foundational disciplines” (2).

3. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 3.
4. For a helpful dialogue on this particular issue, see D. A. Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 89–104; and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Is the Theology of the New Testament One or Many? Between (the Rock of) Systematic Theology and (the Hard Place of) Historical Occasionalism,” in *Reconsidering the Relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology in the New Testament: Essays by Theologians and New Testament Scholars*, ed. Benjamin E. Reynolds, Brian Lugioyo, and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.369 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 17–38. Still helpful as well is the exchange between Carl Trueman (“Editorial: A Revolutionary Balancing Act,” *Themelios* 27.3 [2002]: 1–4) and Graeme Goldsworthy (“Ontology and Biblical Theology. A Response to Carl Trueman's Editorial: A Revolutionary Balancing Act,” *Themelios* 28.1 [2002]: 37–45). Cf. also the vision for interdisciplinary dialogue in C. Kevin Rowe, “For Future Generations: Worshipping Jesus and the Integration of the Theological Disciplines,” *Pro Ecclesia* 17.2 (2008): 186–209.

In some ways, biblical theology shares a family resemblance to exegesis and the close reading of individual biblical texts. Exegesis is the study of an author's textual intention. Recognizing that the mental state of an author is inaccessible to a reader, exegesis focuses upon what the author has in fact expressed in a particular act of written communication. The difference between doing exegesis and biblical theology is often one of scope. Whereas exegetical studies typically focus on individual passages and ask how specific words create meaning by forming sentences, paragraphs, and sections, biblical theology asks how those larger sections of text relate to one another and create book-level meaning. As such, biblical theology examines how the textual intention of one biblical author intersects and interacts with the writings of other biblical authors. When one biblical author draws directly upon another biblical text, we can clearly see just how close the exegetical and biblical-theological tasks are often related within the canon.

In other ways, biblical theology shares a family resemblance to systematic theology. As the study of God and all things in relation to God according to his Word, systematic theology resonates with the broad sense of biblical theology as a “theology that is biblical” and *accords* with the Scriptures.⁵ The theological task involves at least three types of activities. First, systematic theology aims to summarize and synthesize what the Bible says about a particular topic in an understandable way.⁶ Second, systematic theology seeks to demonstrate the basic coherence and logical connections between the many statements and teachings found in the biblical literature.⁷ Third, systematic theology strives to draw out the theological implications of the statements made by the biblical authors in their texts. Whereas part of systematic theology's goal is to summarize, synthesize, and draw out the

-
5. For an articulation of this way of phrasing the definition of systematic theology, see John Webster, “What Makes Theology Theological?” *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3 (2015): 17–28. Webster argues that “the object of Christian theology is twofold: God the Holy Trinity and all other things relative to God” (17). Note also the discussion and distinctions Webster advances in his chapter “Principles of Systematic Theology,” in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 133–49. For a further contemporary example of this phrasing, see Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Pre-modern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 63–64.
 6. Along these lines, Vanhoozer notes that systematic theology involves “faith seeking understanding—of God, the world and ourselves—through an ordered presentation of the doctrines implicit in the biblical testimony to the history of creation and redemption.” See “Systematic Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016), 885. Vanhoozer notes further that this theological reflection is “expressed via contemporary idiom and addressed to relevant cultural intellectual issues” (885).
 7. Cf. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 29: “To assume that the Bible itself gives us a system of doctrine and practice is simply to acknowledge its organic unity as a single canon: the interdependence and coherence of its various teachings.” On the relationship between the disciplines, Horton also notes that “if biblical theology is a topographical map, systematic theology is more like a street map, pointing out the logical connection between various doctrines spread throughout Scripture. Without biblical theology, systematic theology easily surrenders the dynamism of revelation to timeless truths; without systematic theology, biblical theology surrenders the Bible's internal coherence—the relation of the parts to the whole” (29).

theological implications of what the Bible says, biblical theology is mostly focused on how the Bible says what it says and how the biblical authors have composed their books.⁸

Each of these disciplines are critically important and should be constantly related to one another in the context of ministry. They are necessary for the life and practice of the church. To be sure, exegesis, biblical theology, and systematic theology are each required in order to achieve “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Consequently, it is counterproductive to set these tasks against each another in some sort of disciplinary combat. Rather, they complement one another, even if the process they move in is not strictly linear. Recognizing its organic connection to both biblical exegesis and systematic theology, the focus of the discipline of biblical theology is to articulate and defend the value and significance of the study of the whole Bible on its own terms as a discernable and discrete task.

A Tale of Two Testaments

This way of understanding biblical theology strikes at the heart of another definitional question: How do the Testaments relate to one another? By defining biblical theology as the study of the *whole* Bible on its own terms, we are required to grapple with this and other related questions. How do the textual connections between the books in these collections impact our area of study? How does the ordering of the canonical collections, alongside the shape and meaning of the individual biblical books, contribute to how we address this relationship? If we define biblical theology the way that we have, these are the questions that we should anticipate.

As we understand the discipline, the aim of biblical theology is to behold the big picture of the biblical writings and convey the inner workings of that big picture. How does the big picture of Genesis, for instance, relate to the big picture of the New Testament? Or, how does the book of Romans fit into the meaning of the rest of Paul's Letters? Biblical theology tells a story from *beginning* to *end*. The story of the Bible begins with the Genesis creation account and ends with the outline of the “last things” in Revelation. These are the bookends of the grand storyline of the Bible. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and in the end he makes a new heaven and a new earth. This cosmic scope is the staggering perspective that we encounter as we make our way through the biblical narratives. So, when we engage the Scriptures at any level, we must keep in mind the grand storyline that we examine and reflect upon in biblical theology.

8. Cf. Karl Barth's understanding of the task of systematic theology (dogmatics) as “the self-examination of the Christian Church in respect of the content of its distinctive talk about God.” See *Church Dogmatics, Volume I: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part One*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 11. In relation to the other disciplines, Barth later notes that “exegetical theology investigates biblical teaching as the basis of our talk about God” and “dogmatics as such does not ask what the apostles and prophets said but what we must say on the basis of the apostles and the prophets” (16).

These preliminary reflections help us unpack our working definition of biblical theology as *the study of the whole Bible on its own terms*. The discipline of biblical theology can be understood first in relation to biblical exegesis and systematic theology (A Tale of Two Senses), and second by its relentless pursuit of the question about the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament (A Tale of Two Testaments). This working definition and these two distinctive areas of emphasis give shape to this discipline and characterize much of the work that flies under the banner of biblical theology.

The History of Biblical Theology as a Discipline

Another useful way to get a handle on what biblical theology is all about is to consider what others in the past have understood this task to entail. This seemingly simple procedure, though, is fraught with difficulty because the history of biblical theology is engrossed in the question of the definition of the discipline. Indeed, while maintaining the coherence of the parameters of our working definitions outlined above, we also recognize that there are a host of challenging and diverse issues involved in the discipline of biblical theology. Nevertheless, a brief survey of how theologians throughout history have engaged these questions can help orient our contemporary pursuit of biblical theology.

Biblical Theology before the Modern Period

According to some, the discipline of biblical theology began with the advent of the modern era of biblical studies. This conclusion, of course, anticipates the question of definition and whether biblical theology should take a predominantly historical or theological approach. Before we address the rise of biblical theology as an independent discipline, we will briefly consider a few historical figures who pursued some of the enduring concerns of the discipline prior to modernity. To our point, it is important to see that leaders and theologians of every age “struggled to find models for dealing theologically with both testaments of Scripture as a revelation of Jesus Christ.”⁹ As soon as the canon developed, there was a need to describe the unified and consistent theology of the two-testament Christian Bible. Most of the influential leaders in the history of the church were biblical theologians of some sort, or pursued aspects of the biblical-theological task.

Irenaeus on the Order and Connection of the Scriptures

One early example of a premodern biblical theologian is Irenaeus of Lyons, who in the late second century wrote works that defended the Christian faith against false teachings

9. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 30.

as well as articulated the nature of the gospel message for the churches.¹⁰ His major work, *Against Heresies*, partakes in both of these tasks. In this writing, Irenaeus refutes the teaching of Gnosticism, defends the coherence of the Christian faith, and proclaims the gospel message. Throughout *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus employs a “rule of faith” that allows the totality of the biblical witness to God’s person and work to inform his defense of the faith and proclamation of the gospel. In order to refute the “story of Gnosticism,” Irenaeus articulates the story of redemption that is shaped by the biblical storyline and the revealed character of God’s inner being.¹¹

One particular teaching Irenaeus sought to counter was the idea that the God of the Old Testament was full of wrath and evil because he created the material world, which was considered corrupt and tainted. Conversely, the Father of Jesus Christ portrayed in the New Testament represented an entirely different divine being, full of love and untainted by having created the material world.¹² Irenaeus argues that this “system” was one which “neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered, but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge” (*Haer.* 1.8.1). Here Irenaeus emphasizes the priority of special revelation over any “secret” knowledge, the flow of redemptive history, and also the shape of a two-testament witness to Christ.¹³ Irenaeus notes that these theological conclusions were built upon a faulty hermeneutical method.

10. See John Behr’s translation and introduction to *On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997) and Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

11. Childs begins his survey of early Christian examples of biblical theology with Irenaeus, noting in particular the way he “sought to present a comprehensive summary of the Christian faith in terms of the testimony of Scripture as the written form of the church’s rule-of-faith” (*Biblical Theology*, 30). Childs summarizes the import of Irenaeus’s emphasis on “recapitulation” for biblical theology: “Because of the unity of God’s salvation, it was absolutely essential to the faith that the two testaments of the Christian Bible be seen as a harmonious witness to the one redemptive purpose in history” (31).

12. Irenaeus summarizes and confronts different forms of this false teaching throughout his work. For example, see *Haer.* 1.2–8 and 1.23–29. All quotations from this work come from *Against Heresies* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1896), 1:315–567.

13. Irenaeus draws on this broad shape of the biblical collection regularly. For instance, he says, “Since, therefore, the entire Scriptures, the prophets, and the Gospels, can be clearly, unambiguously, and harmoniously understood by all, although all do not believe them” (*Haer.* 2.27.2). Irenaeus concludes book two of *Against Heresies* by summarizing, “Now, that the preaching of the apostles, the authoritative teaching of the Lord, the announcements of the prophets, the dictated utterances of the apostles, and the ministrations of the law . . . are all in harmony with our statements” and show that “there is but one God, the Maker of all things” (2.35.4). In the middle of this sentence, Irenaeus includes summary affirmations that these diverse sections of Scripture all “praise one and the same Being, the God and Father of all.” When Irenaeus characterizes the Scriptures as a whole (“the entire Scriptures”), he shows remarkable sensitivity to the shape of the biblical canon, the notion of theological unity/diversity, the organic relationship between economic development in redemptive history (the prophets, the Lord, and the apostles) and ontological identification (the God of Israel is the Father of Jesus Christ), and the urgency of carefully specifying the proper object of worship across the entire collection of biblical texts. Note also the connection of Irenaeus’s phrasing to Peter’s comment in 2 Peter 3:1–2. There Peter combats false teaching by reminding his readers of “the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles” (3:2).

They used scriptural words, but re-located them, re-organized them, and fit them into an alternative textual strategy.¹⁴ “In doing so,” Irenaeus insists, “they disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures, and so far as in them lies, dismember and destroy the truth” (*Haer.* 1.8.1).¹⁵

To illustrate his point, Irenaeus envisions a “skillful artist” who constructs a beautiful image of a king out of a set of precious jewels. When the false teachers take biblical passages out of context and re-interpret them according to a different storyline and an alternative theological worldview, it is like they are taking those precious jewels and re-arranging the image of the beautiful king into an ugly dog or fox (and that “poorly executed”). In this manner, the false teachers “patch together” their theological formulations and then “endeavor, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions” (*Haer.* 1.8.1). Irenaeus’s metaphor demonstrates how knowing the subject of Scripture as a whole and how the pieces of the Bible fit together can *rule out* these interpretive and theological disasters. Knowing that the final form of the mosaic’s pattern will resemble a beautiful king will assist you if you ever start to discern an ugly fox begin to emerge in a given ordering of the gems.

The “rule of faith” is a strategic summary of the message of the biblical writings that functions as a kind of hermeneutical guide for understanding the Scriptures as a whole.¹⁶ In this summary, it is clearly understood that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God and father of the Lord Jesus Christ. As a summary of the Scriptures, the rule of faith provides an interpretive lens that highlights the interconnections appearing across the Scriptures and the theological relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In one instance, Irenaeus describes the content of this rule of faith as belief in:

One God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the

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14. As Irenaeus notes, “They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures; and, to use a common proverb, they strive to weave ropes of sand, while they endeavor to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles, in order that their scheme may not seem altogether without support” (*Haer.* 1.8.1).
 15. For Irenaeus, the result of this literary disjunction is theologically disastrous: “By transferring passages, and dressing them anew, and making one thing out of another, they succeed in deluding many through their wicked art in adapting the oracles of the Lord to their opinions” (*Haer.* 1.8.1).
 16. The scholarly discussion on Irenaeus’s rule of faith is vast. Two major perspectives on the rule of faith are: (1) that it provides a summary of Scripture’s overarching narrative as a whole; and (2) that it functions as an interpretive summary Scripture’s theological message. On the former, see Paul M. Blowers, “The *Regula Fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith,” *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1997): 199–228. On the latter, see Nathan MacDonald, “Israel and the Old Testament Story in Irenaeus’s Presentation of the Rule of Faith,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3.2 (2009): 281–98.

dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord and His future manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father “to gather all things in one,” and to raise up anew all flesh of the human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Savior, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, “every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess” to Him, and that He should execute just judgment towards all. (*Haer.* 1.10.1)

Irenaeus insists throughout his writings that the two-testament portrait of God and redemption in Christ, found in the proclamation of the prophets and apostles, is textually consistent and theologically coherent. For Irenaeus, redemptive history begins with God's creative work and climaxes in Christ's redemptive work on the cross.¹⁷ Because there is a unity in God's plan of redemption, there is a unity in God's character and being. These features of Irenaeus's work make him a valuable resource for those who understand the task of biblical theology to be the study of the whole Bible on its own terms. Accordingly, Irenaeus and other theologians of the early church can serve as fruitful dialogue partners for those engaged in the discipline of biblical theology.

Aquinas on the Shape of the Canon

Another influential thinker who engaged some of the main concerns of biblical theology is Thomas Aquinas. Born in Italy, Aquinas served as a Dominican friar and taught theology and philosophy in Paris and Rome during the mid-thirteenth century. In much of his writing, Aquinas focuses on systematic formulations, the philosophical examination of theological language, and issues of ethics and epistemology. Running throughout his major works, though, is careful consideration of biblical texts and the nature of textual interpretation.¹⁸

17. Cf. MacDonald, “Israel and the Old Testament Story,” 293–94: “With his attention to the shape of the canon, we can justly speak of Irenaeus as the first canonical interpreter. There is a genuine diversity to Scripture in the different parts of the canon [for Irenaeus], but the Rule of Faith points to the Scripture's unity in the story of Jesus Christ.” Emphasizing the *hermeneutical* function of the rule of faith for Irenaeus, Christopher Seitz argues that the rule is “the scripturally grounded articulation, based upon a proper perception of the hypothesis of Scripture, that Jesus Christ is one with the God who sent him and who is active in the Scriptures inherited, the Holy Spirit being the means of testifying to his active, if hidden, life in the “Old Testament” and our apprehension of that.” See his *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 198.

18. In addition to his major works such as *Summa Theologica*, *Summa contra Gentiles*, and *Scriptum super Sententiarum*, Aquinas also wrote commentaries on several Old Testament books (Psalms, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Isaiah, and Job), the Gospels of Matthew and John, and each of the Pauline Epistles (including Hebrews). He also published collections of selected quotations from the patristic era on each of the four Gospels (*Catena Aurea*). For recent scholarship that highlights this aspect of Aquinas's approach to the Bible, see Christopher T. Baglow, “Rediscovering St. Thomas Aquinas as a Biblical Theologian,” *Letter and Spirit* 1 (2005): 137–46; Terence McGuckin, “Saint Thomas Aquinas and Theological Exegesis of Sacred Scripture,” *New Blackfriars* 74.870 (1993): 197–213;

For example, in one of his inaugural lectures at the University of Paris known as *Hic est Liber* (*This is the Book*), Aquinas provides a “commendation of Sacred Scripture” (part 1) followed by an analysis of the “division of Sacred Scripture” (part 2).¹⁹ In the first part, Aquinas gives a devotional account of Scripture’s authority and ability to teach, delight, and motivate its hearers. In the second part, Aquinas speaks about the Scriptures by describing and discussing the ordering of canonical collections and the possible theological reasons behind their literary shape.

Aquinas begins by characterizing the Old Testament as leading people to life “by commanding” and the New Testament leading humans to life “by helping.” “The whole of sacred Scripture,” Aquinas continues, “is principally divided into two parts, namely, the Old and New Testaments, which are mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew” (citing here Matt. 13:52 and Song 7:13). Focusing first on the Old Testament, Aquinas articulates three ways the Old Testament conveys its message: the precepts of a king; the proclamations of a herald; and the instructions of a father. These three theological images map onto the “three parts” of the Old Testament. First, the Law is “as it were a precept proposed by the king himself” (citing Isa. 33:22). Second, the Prophets are “like messengers and heralds of God, speaking to the people in the person of God and inducing them to the keeping of the law” (citing Hag. 1:13). Third, the “works of the hagiographers” (i.e., the Writings) who were “inspired by the Holy Spirit” serve a “paternal” function (citing Prov. 6:20) by speaking “not on behalf of the Lord, but on their own behalf.”²⁰

Next, Aquinas further refines his theology of the Old Testament by exploring themes that explain the structure and sequence of each of its “three parts.” He starts with the Law, which he divides into the “private law” and the “public law.” The “private law” was given to the individuals mentioned in Genesis (e.g., Noah, Abraham). The “public law” was given to the people through a mediator in two steps: “First, the law comes from the Lord to the mediator, and this is contained in three books, namely, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Hence, in those books we frequently read: *God said to Moses*. The second step is that by which the law is expounded to the people by the mediator, and this is contained in Deuteronomy, which is clear from its beginning” (citing Deut. 1:1).²¹

and the essays in Thomas G. Weinandy, Daniel A. Keating, and John P. Yocum, eds., *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to his Biblical Commentaries* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

19. See *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Ralph McInerny (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 5–17. The *Hic est Liber* lecture has recently been translated by John R. Gilhooly for The Aquinas Institute (available online at <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~HicEst>). All quotations from *Hic est Liber* come from Gilhooly’s translation.
20. Aquinas clarifies at this point in *Hic est Liber* that this is the reason why “the hagiographers are called sacred writers or sacred scribes, from ‘agios’ (that is, sacred) and ‘graphia’ (that is, writings).” In the subsequent section, Aquinas also discusses how Jerome includes the Apocrypha in his canon and his doubts about these books. Regarding the Apocrypha, he remarks that “they have their strength not from the authority of the authors, but more from the reception by the Church.”
21. Aquinas further characterizes the function of these books: “The three books just mentioned are distinguished according to the three ways in which people should be organized. First, in precepts related to the equity of judgment,

Like the Law, the Prophets are also divided by Aquinas into two parts, “according to the tasks that a herald ought to perform.” These two tasks are to “expound the goodness of the king to incline men to obedience” and to “declare the rule of the law.” Regarding the historical books included among the Prophets, Aquinas views them as prophets who showed divine goodness to the people: Joshua demonstrates the “result of heredity”; Judges exhibits the “destruction of armies”; Ruth shows the private “exaltation of the people”; and Kings conveys the public display of “royal dignity.” The other books in the Prophets declare “divine rules for the observance of the law.” The Major Prophets do this on a general scale (“sent to the whole people to call them to observe the whole law”) whereas the Minor Prophets do this for particular groups (“sent for different reasons to special peoples”). The prophets employ both “promises of goodness” (seen especially in Isaiah) and “the threat of punishment” (seen especially in Jeremiah) as they warn the people about the “condemnation of sins” (seen especially in Ezekiel).²²

In his final discussion of the Old Testament, Aquinas discusses “the hagiographic and the apocryphal books.”²³ Perhaps because this collection is more eclectic, Aquinas uses several categories to describe these books (e.g., ways of training, levels of virtues). Overall, though, these books are ordered under the rubric of the way fathers train their sons in virtue. For example, the Psalms teach “by the mode of speaking to God in prayer.” The book of Job “destroys errors” by using the “way of disputation.” The Song of Songs instructs a person who spurns the cares of the world and “delights in only the contemplation of wisdom.”

As he moves to the New Testament, Aquinas notes that this collection is “ordered to eternal life, not only by precepts, but through the gifts of grace” and is “divided into three parts.” The first part, the Gospels, treats the “origin of grace.” The second part, Paul’s Letters, treats “the strength of grace.” The third part, the “remaining books” of the New Testament, discusses “the carrying out of the aforesaid power.” For the Gospels, Aquinas describes the unity and diversity of the Gospels by noting the particular prominence of the person of Christ:

In Christ two natures are considered, namely, a divine; and the gospel of John is principally concerned with this. Hence, it begins: *in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God* (John 1:1). And, a human; and the other

and this is in Exodus; second, in sacraments related to the display of worship, and this is in Leviticus; third, in offices related to public administration, and this is in the book of Numbers.”

22. He prefaces these characterizations by noting that “these three are all found in each prophet.” Pushing further (“they can also be distinguished in another way”), Aquinas notes next the unique way Isaiah “foretells the mystery of the Incarnation, whence the Church reads him during the time of advent.” Jeremiah shows the “mystery of the passion” (and is read at Easter). Ezekiel speaks of the “mystery of the resurrection.” Aquinas also counts Daniel among the prophets because of his prophetic predictions (“he did not speak to the people from the person of the Lord, he described the divinity of Christ”). In these ways, “the four prophets correspond to the four evangelists, and also the call to judgment.”
23. The apocryphal books that Aquinas mentions in this section include Wisdom, Judith, Maccabees, Tobit, and Sirach. He also mentions Joshua again here due to Jerome’s inclusion of the book “in the hagiographies.”

Evangelists principally treat of this, which are distinguished according to the triple dignity that belongs to Christ as man. Matthew designates his royal dignity; hence, in the beginning of his Gospel he shows that he descended from kings according to the flesh and was adored by the Magi kings. Mark designates his prophetic dignity; hence, he begins with the preaching of the Gospel. Luke designates his priestly dignity; hence, he begins with the temple and the priesthood, and he concludes his Gospel in the temple, and frequently returns to the temple, as the gloss says on Luke 2:46: *they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers*.²⁴

Aquinas concludes his lecture by outlining the shape of the rest of the New Testament. The “beginning of the Church” is found in the Acts of the Apostles.²⁵ The “progress of the Church” is delineated in “the apostolic teaching in the canonical epistles.” Finally, the “end of the Church” is seen in the Apocalypse, “with the spouse in the chamber of Jesus Christ sharing in the life of glory, to which Jesus Christ himself conducts us.” Aquinas notes, too, that in this book, “the content of the whole of sacred Scripture concludes.”

There are a number of relevant observations we can make after this brief reflection on Aquinas’s *Hic est Liber*. Aquinas here develops the theological message of the Scriptures as a whole. In order to do this, he draws out thematic categories in terms of their unity and diversity. Moreover, he allows the shape of the Old and New Testaments to guide this reflection.²⁶ While much of Aquinas’s work fixates upon systematic and philosophical study, discussions such as this show that Aquinas was also engaged in the hermeneutics of textual analysis with an awareness of the implications of the canonical context.

Luther on Law and Gospel in Both the Law and the Gospels

As the Reformation developed, Martin Luther’s teaching and preaching exerted immense influence. Part of Luther’s break with the Roman Catholic Church of his day related to theological method: Where does ultimate authority reside? Besides advancing a strong theological position on the authority of all Scripture (*sola scriptura*), Luther also reevaluated his understanding of the literal sense of all the Scriptures (*sensus literalis*).²⁷

24. Following this discussion, Aquinas revisits the analogy of the four beasts to describe the Gospels. Matthew designates Christ “principally in terms of the mystery of the Incarnation” (a man), Luke speaks of the “mystery of the passion” (a bull), Mark speaks of the “victory of the resurrection” (a lion), and John “flies to the heights of his divinity” (an eagle).

25. Quoting Jerome, Aquinas notes that “the Acts of the Apostles seems to give the bare history and to clothe the infancy of the nascent Church.”

26. Aquinas makes this explicit in several places (e.g., Joshua–Kings being located among the Prophets and Revelation containing and concluding “all of Scripture”).

27. Many have noted these particular features of Luther’s thinking, their interrelationship, and the historical context and development they underwent throughout Luther’s career. For recent scholarship that draws out the hermeneutical and biblical-theological significance of Luther’s writing, see Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to*

Luther's sustained consideration of the way biblical texts speak of Christ and the function of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture occurs in his lectures, sermons, letters, and prefaces to his biblical translations. One of his brief works that addresses the relationship between the Testaments is his 1525 sermon "How Christians Should Regard Moses."²⁸ In this reflection, Luther argues that the distinction between law and gospel is not a conceptual scheme divided between the Old and New Testaments respectively, but rather that law and gospel appear together in both Testaments. Luther begins by reflecting on the two "public sermons" from heaven: the giving of the law at Sinai and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. From these revelations, Luther discusses the nature of law and gospel. The law "commands and requires us to do certain things." The gospel "reverses the approach of the law" and does the opposite. The law says, "Do this, avoid that, this is what I expect of you." The gospel says, "This is what God has done for you; he has let his Son be flesh for you, has let him be put to death for your sake."²⁹

As he reflects further, Luther insists that the Mosaic covenant is no longer binding.³⁰ Even the establishment of the Mosaic covenant was intended for the Jews, not the Gentiles. "We will regard Moses as a teacher, but we will not regard him as our lawgiver—unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law."³¹ Luther protests that "not one little period in Moses pertains to us" and entertains the question: "Why then do you preach about Moses if he does not pertain to us?"³² However, rather than "sweep him under the rug," Luther maintains that Christians should "keep Moses" for three reasons. First, though the Mosaic covenant is not binding, it does contain examples of wise statutes and commandments. If willingly accepted rather than adopted through coercion, these elements of the Mosaic covenant can prove edifying.³³

Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004); Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012); Brian T. German, *Psalms of the Faithful: Luther's Early Reading of the Psalter in Canonical Context* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2017); and William M. Marsh, *Martin Luther on Reading the Bible as Christian Scripture: The Messiah in Luther's Biblical Hermeneutic and Theology*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene: Pickwick, 2017).

28. See "How Christians Should Regard Moses," in *Luther's Works: Word and Sacrament I*, vol. 35, ed. and trans. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 155–74. The citations of this work in the following discussion come from this volume. Originally delivered in August 1525 as a part of a series of sermons on Exodus, this sermon was subsequently published as a separate pamphlet and included as an orienting introduction to several volumes of collected sermons on the Old Testament.
29. Luther, "How Christians Should Regard Moses," 165.
30. Luther states provocatively, "Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came. He is of no further service" ("How Christians Should Regard Moses," 165). Part of Luther's motivation to forcefully argue this point is how figures in the peasants' war and some of the radical Anabaptists used the Mosaic covenant and its regulations. See the brief overview of these contextual factors in Bachmann's introduction to "How Christians Should Regard Moses," 157–59.
31. Luther, "How Christians Should Regard Moses," 157–59. In theological terms, Luther adds that Moses "has given the Jews a sign whereby they should lay hold of God when they call upon him as the God who brought them out of Egypt. The Christians have a different sign, whereby they conceive of God as the One who gave his Son, etc." (165).
32. Luther, "How Christians Should Regard Moses," 165.
33. Luther, "How Christians Should Regard Moses," 166–68.

Second, the Book of Moses contains something found nowhere else: “the promises and pledges of God about Christ.”³⁴ Luther states that “this is the best thing” and admits that “I read Moses because such excellent and comforting promises are there recorded, by which I can find strength for my weak faith.”³⁵ The texts Luther discusses in this section include the promise of the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15), the blessing and promise of a descendant for Abraham (Gen. 22:18), and the expectation of a coming prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15–16). Luther remarks, “Many are these texts in the Old Testament, which the holy apostles quoted and drew upon.”³⁶

Third, according to Luther the Book of Moses includes “beautiful examples of faith, of love, and of the cross, as shown in the fathers, Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the rest.” From these figures, “we should learn to trust in God and love him.” The Book of Moses also offers “examples of the godless, how God does not pardon the unfaith of the unbelieving.”³⁷ Luther states that these narrative examples possess a formative function and are necessary “for although I am not Cain, yet if I should act like Cain, I will receive the same punishment as Cain.”³⁸

For these three reasons, Luther argues that “we should not sweep Moses under the rug.”³⁹ He also brings these interpretive principles to bear on the reading of the larger biblical context. As he notes, “The Old Testament is thus properly understood when we retain from the prophets the beautiful texts about Christ, when we take note of and thoroughly grasp the fine examples, and when we use the laws as we please to our advantage.”⁴⁰ This hermeneutical guideline is likewise operative in the New Testament: “The same is true also in the gospel.”⁴¹ To illustrate this continuity, he observes that “in the account of the ten lepers, that Christ bids them go to the priest and make sacrifice (Luke 17:14) does not pertain to me. The example of their faith, however, does pertain to me; I should believe Christ, as they did.” These hermeneutical distinctions are crucial because many well-meaning preachers and teachers “do not know how to preach Moses, nor how properly to regard his books.”⁴²

In this brief work, Luther shows a keen interest in the relationship between the theological concepts of law and gospel. He also connects these theological categories to the relationship between the Testaments. In Luther’s view, there is both law and gospel in both the Law and the Gospels. The implication of this textual observation is that interpreters must

34. Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” 168.

35. Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” 169.

36. Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” 169.

37. Luther gives Cain, Ishmael, Esau, the Flood generation, and Sodom and Gomorrah as examples.

38. Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” 173.

39. Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” 173.

40. Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” 173.

41. Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” 174.

42. Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” 174.

think carefully about not only *what* the Scriptures say, but *how* they say what they say and *to whom* a particular command is addressed within a biblical text. As he remarks, “One must deal cleanly with the Scriptures.”⁴³ Luther also seems to value the close connection between the events of redemptive history and the words of the biblical authors.⁴⁴

The hermeneutical and theological issues addressed early in Luther's career in “How Christians Should Regard Moses” resonate with the concerns Luther engages in one of his last major writings: his 1543 “Treatise on the Last Words of David.”⁴⁵ In this substantial work, Luther examines the christological significance of David's final poetic text in 2 Samuel 23:1–7. Luther also outlines his hermeneutical approach to reading the Old Testament and interacts with non-messianic Jewish interpretation. Luther's orienting assertion is that “we Christians have the meaning and import of the Bible because we have the New Testament, that is, Jesus Christ, who was promised in the Old Testament and who later appeared and brought with Him the light and the true meaning of Scripture.”⁴⁶

For Luther, this interpretive approach “is the all-important point on which everything depends.” Luther states that “whoever does not have or want to have this Man properly and truly who is called Jesus Christ, God's Son, whom we Christians proclaim, must keep his hands off the Bible.”⁴⁷ Towards the end of the treatise, after rejecting non-messianic inter-

43. Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” 170. Luther follows this statement with a reminder of the strategic significance of genre: “From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God's word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day.” As an example, Luther notes that although God spoke to David (citing the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7), “this does not pertain to me, nor has it been spoken to me. He can indeed speak to me if he chooses to do so. You must keep your eye on the word that applies to you, that is spoken to you” (170). These hermeneutical distinctions guard against misappropriation and harmful direct applications of the Mosaic covenant in a contemporary context (like the “enthusiasts” or the leaders of the peasants' war). Luther states that those teachers indiscriminately proclaim, “God's word, God's word” and do so “without any distinction” (171). In this context, making careful distinctions is critical, “for everything depends entirely upon it.”

44. For example, after outlining the “public speeches” of God at Sinai and Pentecost at the beginning of the work, Luther comments on the speech “by the mouth” and “in the books of the holy prophets” (“How Christians Should Regard Moses,” 162). At the end of the work, Luther distinguishes between Moses as a person (which he sometimes uses as a way of referring to the Mosaic covenant) and “his books” (to “preach Moses” and “properly regard his books”) (174).

45. See “Treatise on the Last Words of David: 2 Samuel 23:1-7,” in *Luther's Works*, vol. 15, trans. Martin H. Bertram (St Louis: Concordia, 1972), 265–352. The citation of this work comes from this volume. Marsh notes in particular the strategic significance of this treatise for Luther's understanding of “the Messiah in the OT and Christ as the sensus literalis of Scripture.” See Marsh, *Luther on Reading the Bible*, 162–92. Noting that this treatise is often understood as polemical and grouped with Luther's other anti-Semitic writings, Marsh maintains that the prefaces to Luther's biblical translations provide the necessary historical context for this significant work. Marsh details the content of the prefaces (28–99) and also synthesizes the hermeneutical implications of these remarks for Luther's approach to Christ as the literal sense of Scripture (100–61). The prefaces span Luther's career as a biblical interpreter/preacher and so provide a particularly instructive line of sight into Luther's biblical-theological development. Luther's reflection in this treatise, then, demonstrates his enduring concern for these hermeneutical areas.

46. Luther, “Last Words of David,” 268. Here Luther cites John 5:46 and Luke 24:44–45.

47. Luther, “Last Words of David,” 268.

pretations, Luther reiterates that “the letter harmonizes readily with the New Testament, and it is certain that Jesus Christ is Lord over all. To Him Scripture must bear witness, for it is given solely for His sake.”⁴⁸ Luther’s purpose in writing is so that his reflection will equip others to “diligently seek and find the Lord Jesus in the Hebrew Old Testament.”⁴⁹ This goal is possible, according to Luther, because God “lets Himself be found there very readily, especially in the Psalter and in Isaiah.”⁵⁰

These brief historical snapshots from the early church, the medieval period, and the Reformation illustrate the enduring concern for various elements of the biblical-theological task. Irenaeus brings figural reading and the storyline of the two-testament biblical canon to bear on his teaching and defends the “order and connection” of the Scriptures. In strategic works, Aquinas allows the shape of the biblical literature to guide his articulation of the theological message of the Bible. Throughout his ministry, Luther reflects broadly on the proper use of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture and specifically on the way Christ is presented in the literal sense of individual Old Testament texts. These examples are illustrative but not isolated. Approaching the history of interpretation in this way, we might add many more premodern examples of preachers and teachers who grappled with some facet of biblical theology.⁵¹

The Rise of Biblical Theology as an Independent Discipline

The remainder of this survey will orient us to the significant changes that have transpired within the field of biblical and theological studies in the modern era. The advent of the “modern era” (approximately the eighteenth through mid-twentieth centuries) has many facets worth exploring. The broad intellectual currents that swept through Europe impacted the study of the Bible within both academic and church contexts. The European Enlightenment celebrated reason, science, and human ingenuity as the keys to a flourishing society. Broadly speaking, faith in God was replaced by faith in reason. General trust in

48. Luther, “Last Words of David,” 343.

49. Luther, “Last Words of David,” 344.

50. Luther, “Last Words of David,” 343. Luther restates this notion as his conclusion: “Then we will again find and recognize our dear Lord and Savior clearly and distinctly in Scripture. To Him, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be glory and honor in eternity. Amen” (352).

51. For example, we might examine the hermeneutical and theological focus of the fourth-century theologians who contributed to the discussions that led to the Nicene (325 AD) and Nicene-Constantinople creeds (381 AD). Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus each engaged the theological task with an awareness of the influence the “biblical idiom” has on readers. We could also examine the entire structure of biblical scholarship embedded in the medieval education system, the monastic emphasis on scribal production and piety, and the proliferation of translations and translational techniques that surface at the rise of the Reformation. In other words, our quest for historical precursors to and resources for a contemporary “big picture” biblical theology offers an embarrassment of riches. For a possible way to incorporate this aspect of the history of interpretation into a study of biblical theology, see the assignment examples and primary sources mentioned in “Case Study 3” in chapter twenty-two.

divine providence was replaced by specific trust in human progress. This intellectual context produced several challenges to the central tenets of Christianity.⁵²

During this period, the rejection of the church's worldview replaced a "hermeneutic of trust" with a "hermeneutic of suspicion."⁵³ In this cultural atmosphere, divergence from Christian beliefs and traditional assumptions was construed as movement away from intellectual darkness. This resulted in a shift away from the Bible as an authoritative guide for faith and practice. This period also prompted growing skepticism regarding the concept of revelation due to the Enlightenment's emphasis upon objectivity, empirical knowledge, and scientific reasoning.⁵⁴

This type of mentality affected the discipline of biblical studies. Removed from its privileged position, biblical literature was now studied alongside other ancient literature and apart from any type of faith claim. The historical-critical method viewed the writings of the New Testament, for example, in the same way it viewed every other ancient document. For these scholars, too, the theory of evolution helped explain the rise and development of religions within ancient cultures (progressing from primitive beliefs to complex systems). Both in terms of method and confessional stance, this approach transformed the study of the New Testament into a sort of history of religions rather than a specific study of the New Testament canon.

It was also during this time period that biblical theology emerged as a discrete academic discipline. One of the benchmarks of this development was the 1787 lecture given by the German theologian J. P. Gabler, entitled "An Oration on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each."⁵⁵ Though Gabler was not the inventor of the distinction mentioned in his lecture's title, his address nevertheless

52. This summary is, of course, only a snapshot of this historical period. For a survey of the broader factors of this time period, see the wide-ranging analysis in John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. James III, *Church History: Volume Two: From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 315–562. See also Matthew Barrett's focus on the shift in the doctrine of Scripture in this same period in *God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 76–114. For a contemporary defense of "criticism" as a sound interpretive approach, see John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007). Conversely, for a direct engagement and strong critique of the modern period's ongoing influence in contemporary biblical studies, see Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*, 3–126. In *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Michael Legaspi also discusses the antecedent factors that led to a distinction between "the scriptural Bible" and "the academic Bible" in the modern period.

53. For these categories in relation to the history of interpretation, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 25–29; and Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 57–78.

54. As an illustration of this mindset, observe Immanuel Kant's characterization of the Age of Reason's impulse: "Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* 'Have courage to use your own reason!'—that is the motto of enlightenment." See "What Is Enlightenment?" in *The Enlightenment: A Sourcebook and Reader*, ed. Paul Hyland (London: Routledge, 2003), 54.

55. Gabler gave this address as his inaugural lecture at the University of Altdorf in Nuremberg, Germany on March 30, 1787. The text of his address can be found in John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and

summarized and signaled a new approach to the academic study of the Bible. Gabler attempted to “establish methodological clarity respecting the subject matter of Biblical Theology.”⁵⁶ Because, in many ways, dogmatics held intellectual sway during that time, Gabler wanted to take back the normative nature of biblical theology by making the assured results of the latter discipline the necessary requirements to even begin engaging the former discipline. In this way, Gabler distinguished “pure” biblical theology from “true” biblical theology. Whereas pure biblical theology involved the descriptive task of discerning what the biblical authors said in their historically conditioned context, true biblical theology involved the prescriptive task of culling universal truths from the biblical data. These timeless truths would then form the foundation for dogmatic reflection.⁵⁷

Following the trend summarized in Gabler’s address, universities and seminaries began to separate Old Testament studies from New Testament scholarship, and biblical exegesis from theological studies. Accordingly, biblical scholars and theologians were encouraged to think of their respective fields as immune from the constraints and unique challenges of other disciplines. This move towards increased specialization was a hallmark of the modern period’s quest for objective viewpoints and unbiased analysis. This scenario is also significant because it “not only reflected the growing complexity of the discipline, but far more importantly the growing conviction that the historical discontinuities between the testaments defied all attempts to maintain a traditional canonical unity.”⁵⁸

A paradigmatic articulation of this position in the field of New Testament theology was given by William Wrede in his 1897 address entitled, “The Task and Methods of ‘New Testament Theology.’”⁵⁹ By presupposing the “strictly historical character of New Testament theology,” Wrede sought to carry out the implications of Gabler’s approach and deepen the distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology.⁶⁰ Rather than take a confessional stance,

the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980): 133–58.

56. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 4.

57. See Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, “Gabler and the Distinction,” 137–44. For a recent critical evaluation of the significance and reception history of Gabler’s address for the field of biblical studies, see Mark W. Elliott, “The Pure and the True Gabler: Questioning a Received Image in the History of Biblical Theology,” in *Biblical Theology: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Mark W. Elliott and Carey Walsh (Eugene: Cascade, 2016), 3–17. Elliott emphasizes that Gabler pursued methodological distinction because he “aimed to free practical dogmatics (in preaching and catechizing) from a proof-texting way of using the Bible, but he also wanted to go further, by allowing biblical concepts, hermeneutically re-cast to inform dogmatics” (5). Because Gabler avoids a purely descriptive approach, Elliott concludes that “it is to be doubted that Gabler can be held responsible for the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule” (5).

58. Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 5.

59. Wrede delivered this address originally at a faculty session for the University of Breslau, Germany (now Wrocław, Poland). This essay appears in Robert Morgan, ed. and trans., *The Nature of New Testament Theology: The Contribution of William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1973), 68–116. Morgan introduces Wrede’s lecture, provides the full text, and brings Wrede into dialogue with the work of Adolf Schlatter.

60. Because Gabler still argued for the role of biblical theology identifying the timeless truth that connects directly to the work of systematic theology, Wrede saw the need to absolutize the distinction by considering the task of

Wrede argues scholars must be “guided by a pure disinterested concern for knowledge.”⁶¹ Wrede avers confidently that “no New Testament writing was born with the predicate ‘canonical’ attached.” Rather, “the statement that a writing is canonical signifies in the first place only that *it was pronounced canonical afterwards* by authorities of the second-to-fourth-century church, in some cases only after all kinds of hesitation and disagreement.”⁶² According to Wrede, any privileging of the boundaries of the biblical canon is arbitrary and driven by overtly imported theological concerns. Indeed, the biblical books should “be seen not as canonical but simply as early Christian writings.”⁶³ For Wrede, this scenario demands that scholars view the New Testament exclusively in the purview of a broad history of religions paradigm.⁶⁴ The work of biblical theology, then, has only a tangential relationship to theological disciplines and no organic connection to the church.⁶⁵

Consequently, during the modern period the study of biblical theology was pursued as a wholly independent discipline that worked with primarily historical categories. In this approach to biblical studies, the “diversity” of the biblical writings is assumed and any “unity” of the biblical literature must necessarily be a theological construct. As Scobie summarizes, this led to “the *division* of biblical theology (into OT and NT theology), the *decline* of biblical theology (as it was absorbed by the history of religion), and finally the virtual *demise* of biblical theology.”⁶⁶

biblical theology in a truly independent, historically focused manner. Wrede makes this historical connection explicit by discussing Gabler's address as an orientation to his further developed proposals (see “Task and Methods,” 68–69). On the relationship between the disciplines, Wrede starts with the assumption that the notion of inspiration is “untenable.” Consequently, biblical theology “has to investigate something from given documents—if not an external thing, still something intellectual. It tries to grasp it as objectively, correctly and sharply as possible. That is all. How the systematic theologian gets on with its results and deals with them—that is his own affair. Like every other real science, New Testament theology has its goal simply in itself, and is totally indifferent to all dogma and systematic theology” (69).

61. Wrede, “Tasks and Methods,” 70.

62. Wrede, “Tasks and Methods,” 70–71. Emphasis added.

63. Wrede, “Tasks and Methods,” 71.

64. Wrede concludes his address, for instance, by arguing that “the name New Testament theology is wrong in both its terms. The New Testament is not concerned merely with theology, but is in fact far more concerned with religion.” Accordingly, “the appropriate name for the subject-matter is: early Christian history of religion, or rather: the history of early Christian religion and theology. If anyone protests that this is no longer a New Testament theology, that is a strange objection. The name is obviously controlled by the subject-matter, not vice versa” (“Tasks and Methods,” 116).

65. See Wrede, “Tasks and Methods,” 70–73. On this point, Wrede concludes that “the questions and needs of the churches can be a legitimate influence only in a limited sense—and probably least of all in the biblical field. On the whole it is not within the historical researcher's power to serve the church through his work. The theologian who obeys the historical object as his master is not in a position to serve the church through his properly scientific-historical work, even if he were personally interested in doing so” (73).

66. Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 6. The brief survey given here focuses on the rise of the scientific method and the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation. Another alternative during the modern period was Pietism, which favored the religious experience of faith in Christ over the systematic study of the church's theological formulations. These approaches to