

# THE STRUCTURE OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Charles H.H. Scobie

The phrase 'Biblical Theology', as H.H. Schmid has pointed out,<sup>1</sup> is capable of being regarded either as a tautology or as a contradiction in terms. It may be regarded as a tautology in so far as every theology which claims to be Christian claims to be in agreement with the Bible. (This holds true for Roman Catholic just as much as for Protestant theology, though the relationship between Scripture and Church tradition may of course be differently defined). On the other hand, 'Biblical Theology' is regarded at least by some as a contradiction in terms on the grounds that the Bible, with its great variety of literary forms, actually contains very little 'theology'. Everyone agrees that dogmatic theology must lay claim to some form of scriptural authority, but not everyone agrees on whether it is possible to construct a Biblical Theology separate from Dogmatics. The attempt in the late 18th and early 19th centuries to develop a purely historical and descriptive independent Biblical Theology soon split into separate Old Testament and New Testament Theologies which in turn were succeeded by studies of the religion of ancient Israel and the early Church.

In a previous article<sup>2</sup> an attempt was made to establish a case for an 'intermediate Biblical Theology', which would be a bridge discipline, assuming and accepting the fruits of historical (and literary) study of the Bible but undertaking a synthesis of the biblical material which would mediate the results of specialized biblical studies to those engaged in dogmatic theology and related fields. Such a Biblical Theology would be 'canonical' in the sense that it would be concerned with both the Old Testament and New Testament together, would be based primarily on the final canonical form

---

<sup>1</sup>H.H. Schmid, 'Was heisst "Biblische Theologie"?', in H.F. Geisser and W. Mostert, *Wirkungen hermeneutischer Theologie* (Zürich, Theologischer Verlag 1983) 35.

<sup>2</sup>C.H.H. Scobie, 'The Challenge of Biblical Theology', *TynB* 42.1 (1991) 31-61.

of Scripture, and would deal with the full range of canonical materials. While this type of Biblical Theology might be engaged in as part of exegesis, or of the study of individual biblical books or themes, it is doubtful whether such fragmented study can be sustained without some undergirding framework or structure for understanding Biblical Theology as a whole. The question arises in fact as to whether it might again be possible to attempt the writing of 'a Biblical Theology' despite the violent objections which will undoubtedly be launched against any such project by many academic biblical scholars. However, recent attempts at writing a truly Biblical Theology, for example by the American scholar S. Terrien and the German scholar H. Seebass<sup>3</sup>, and renewed discussion of the possibility of an 'all-biblical theology' (*eine gesamtbiblische Theologie*) provide encouragement to raise some basic questions regarding the possible structure of such a Biblical Theology.

It will obviously be helpful to look at how the problem of structure has been handled in the past. Everyone who writes a Biblical Theology, or an Old Testament or New Testament Theology, must adopt a structure of some kind. This is much more than simply a question of the order of chapters in a book and of suitable titles; it goes to the very heart of the understanding of the nature of Biblical Theology.

A typology is here proposed which makes a distinction between 'systematic', 'historical' and 'thematic' approaches. Admittedly the classification is a somewhat rough and ready one; particular theologies do not always fall clearly into one or other of the categories, and there certainly are hybrid types. Examples will be given of the main types but no attempt is made to provide an exhaustive list.

## I. The History of Biblical Theology

### 1. The systematic approach.

The oldest approach is the 'systematic' one by which is meant the structuring of Biblical Theology in accordance with the subject divisions of dogmatic theology.

---

<sup>3</sup>S. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: The Heart of Biblical Theology* (San Francisco, Harper and Row 1978); H. Seebass, *Der Gott der Ganzen Bibel* (Freiburg, Herder 1982).

Biblical Theology as an independent discipline developed out of the practice, especially within Lutheran Orthodoxy, of compiling collections of proof-texts (*dicta probantia* or *dicta classica*) in order to demonstrate the biblical basis of Protestant doctrine. These collections, sometimes referred to as 'Collegia Biblica' (*collegium* meaning 'collection') were widely used for teaching purposes, and the biblical passages were usually accompanied by exegetical comments.

The standard practice was to arrange the texts under the principal topics or subjects (*loci communes*) dealt with in Protestant dogmatic theology. Particularly influential was the *Loci communes rerum theologicarum* (first edition, 1521) of the Reformer Philipp Melanchthon. Melanchthon's arrangement was partly indebted to the structure of the Epistle to the Romans, but also to the *Sentences* of the 12th century theologian Peter Lombard. His scheme covered the following twenty-four subjects: God; One; Triune; Creation; Man; Man's Powers; Sin; Fruits of Sin, Vices; Punishment; Law; Promises; Restoration by Christ; Grace; Fruits of Grace; Faith; Hope; Charity; Predestination; Sacraments; Human Orders; Magistrates; Bishops; Condemnation; Blessedness.<sup>4</sup>

Various works on the *dicta probantia* model produced during the 17th and 18th centuries generally followed this type of outline, though one significant difference was the insertion in first place of the topic of 'Holy Scripture'. As the writing of independent Biblical theologies began to be developed within Pietism and especially by Rationalist scholars the traditional systematic structure tended to be continued; it is still found, for example, in the Biblical Theology of C.F. von Ammon published in 1792.<sup>5</sup>

With G.L. Bauer, who wrote separate theologies of the Old Testament (1796) and of the New Testament (1800, 1802), we witness not only the separation of Biblical Theology into two separate disciplines of Old Testament and New Testament

---

<sup>4</sup>As listed in J.H. Hayes and F.C. Prussner, *Old Testament Theology: Its History and Development* (London, SCM 1985) 16, 17. In this discussion of the *loci communes* I am indebted to Hayes and Prussner, 15-19.

<sup>5</sup>C.F. von Ammon, *Entwurf einer reinen biblischen Theologie* (Erlangen, J.J. Palm 1792).

Theology but also the beginning of the historical approach to structure. Nevertheless, the systematic approach was by no means abandoned; it continued to be employed in some Biblical Theologies, though generally in combination with some form of the historical approach. Thus for example the Biblical Theology of L.F.O. Baumgarten-Crusius (1828) consists of two parts, the first dealing with historical questions, but the second discussing biblical concepts under the simplified systematic headings of God, Man and Salvation.<sup>6</sup> A notable Biblical Theology from later in the 19th century which retains the systematic scheme is that of H.G.A. Ewald (1871-6).<sup>7</sup>

After a long gap one of the few attempts to produce a truly Biblical Theology in the present century is Millar Burrows' *An Outline of Biblical Theology* (1946).<sup>8</sup> Despite the writer's claim that 'the outline of topics has been derived, so far as possible, from the Bible itself' the structure is clearly based on the traditional systematic categories as the main subjects covered demonstrate: God, Christ, The Universe, Man, The People of God, The Divine Requirement, Sin, Judgment and Salvation, Eschatology and the Future Life, The Way of Salvation, The Christian Life, Special Offices and Functions, Public Worship, Christian Service, Moral and Social Ideas.

With the development of Old Testament Theology as a separate discipline in the 19th century, the historical approach tended to dominate, though the historical and systematic approaches were combined in various ways by conservative or moderately conservative scholars such as H.A.C. Hävernick (1848), E.A.H.H. Schultz (1869), E.K.A. Riehm (1889) and C.F.A. Dillmann (1895).<sup>9</sup> Despite the

---

<sup>6</sup>L.F.O. Baumgarten-Crusius, *Grundzüge der biblischen Theologie* (Jena, F. Frommann 1828).

<sup>7</sup>H.G.A. Ewald, *Die Lehre der Bibel von Gott, oder Theologie des Alten und Neuen Bundes*, 4 vols. (Leipzig, F.C.W. Vogel 1871-6).

<sup>8</sup>M. Burrows, *An Outline of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia, Westminster 1946). Quotation from p. 6.

<sup>9</sup>H.A.C. Hävernick, *Vorlesungen über die Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Erlangen, Heyder & Zimmer 1848); E.A.H.H. Schultz, *Alttestamentliche Theologie: Die Offenbarungsreligion auf ihrer vorchristlichen Entwicklungstufe* (Frankfurt, Heyder & Zimmer 1869); ET, *Old Testament Theology: The Religion of Revelation in its Pre-Christian Stage of Development* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark 1892, from 4th German ed., 1889); E.K.A. Riehm, *Alttestamentliche Theologie* (Halle, Eugene Strien 1889);

preference for a chronological treatment expressed in the preface, the important English Old Testament Theology by A.B. Davidson (1904) follows a scheme of God, Man, Sin, Redemption and the Last Things.<sup>10</sup>

The revival of Old Testament Theology from the 1930s onwards saw a return to a systematic structure on the part of some scholars for example, L. Köhler (1935). O.J. Baab (1949) and P. van Imschoot (1954).<sup>11</sup> The influence of the categories of dogmatic theology is very evident in an early Roman Catholic Old Testament Theology, that of Paul Heinisch (1940) the major divisions of which are God (with sub-divisions on the Nature of God, the Attributes of God, Preparation for the Mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, Creation, Human Acts, Life After Death and Redemption).<sup>12</sup> The major headings of E. Jacob's *Theology of the Old Testament* (1955) suggest an attempt to break new ground — 'Characteristic Aspects of the God of the Old Testament', 'The Action of God According to the Old Testament', and 'Opposition to and Final Triumph of God's Work'; closer examination, however, reveals that the approach is in fact still largely determined by the traditional systematic categories.<sup>13</sup>

As New Testament Theology went its separate way most of the works produced in the 19th century followed some form of historical structure. In the 20th century, however, we find scholars reverting to a systematic approach. Thus F.C. Grant's *New Testament Theology* follows a fairly conventional systematic scheme.<sup>14</sup> A. Richardson's *The Theology of the New Testament* (1958) rings some changes on chapter titles but after

C.F.A. Dillmann, *Handbuch der alttestamentlichen Theologie* (Leipzig, S. Hirzel 1895).

<sup>10</sup>A.B. Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark 1904). The discrepancy is explained by the fact that the work was left in an unfinished state and was published posthumously with a minimum of editing.

<sup>11</sup>L. Köhler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr 1935); ET, *Old Testament Theology* (Philadelphia, Westminster 1957); O.J. Baab, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (New York, Abingdon 1949); P. van Imschoot, *Théologie de l'Ancien Testament*, 2 Vols. (Tournai, Desclée et Cie 1954, 56).

<sup>12</sup>P. Heinisch, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Bonn, Peter Hanstein 1940); ET, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Collegeville, Liturgical Press 1950).

<sup>13</sup>E. Jacob, *Théologie de l'Ancien Testament* (Neuchâtel, Delachaux et Niestlé 1955); ET, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London, Hodder & Stoughton 1958).

<sup>14</sup>F.C. Grant, *The Thought of the New Testament* (Nashville, Abingdon 1950).

an opening discussion of faith and revelation, proceeds in fact along familiar lines to cover God, the Holy Spirit, Christology and Atonement, while the concluding chapters deal with Church, Ministry and Sacraments.<sup>15</sup> K.H. Schelkle's four volume work (1968-76) also adopts a form of the traditional approach: Vol I deals with Creation (World, Time and History, Man), Vol II with Salvation-History-Revelation (Revelation, Redemption and Salvation, Spirit of God, Belief in God and Doctrine about God), Vol III with Morality (Basic Concepts, Basic Attitudes, Objections, Various Areas for Consideration), and Vol IV with The Rule of God (Church, Eschatology).<sup>16</sup> A good example of a hybrid form is provided by D. Guthrie's *New Testament Theology* (1981).<sup>17</sup> After weighing the pros and cons of systematic and historical approaches, Guthrie opts for the systematic for his basic structure and has major sections on God, Man, Christology, the Mission of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Christian Life, The Church, The Future, Ethics and Scripture. Not only in each major section, however, but also in each sub-section the approach is historical with separate discussion (where appropriate) of the treatment of the topic in the Synoptics, the Johannine Literature, Acts, Paul, Hebrews, Other Epistles and Revelation.

It is clear that the systematic approach still has its defenders. In its favour it can be argued that while the system is derived from dogmatic theology, dogmatic theology derived it from the biblical material in the first place; that it is a natural outline corresponding to the basic questions concerning human life which arise in every age; and that it is a simple and logical scheme which is as good as any.<sup>18</sup> Against this, however, it is widely held that a systematic scheme imposes categories which are alien to biblical thought.<sup>19</sup> 'It is now recognized', asserts S. Terrien, 'that such attempts, inherited in

<sup>15</sup>A. Richardson, *The Theology of the New Testament* (London, SCM (1958).

<sup>16</sup>K.H. Schelkle, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 4 vols. (Düsseldorf, Patmos, 1968-76); ET, *Theology of the New Testament* (Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1971-8).

<sup>17</sup>D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester, IVP 1981).

<sup>18</sup>See R.C. Dentan, *Preface to Old Testament Theology* (New York, Seabury, 2nd ed. 1963) 119-120; D. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, 73.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (London, SCM 1961) I. 32-3.

part from Platonic conceptual thinking and Aristotelian logic, were bound to translate the *sui generis* thrust of biblical faith into the alien idiom of didactic exposition'.<sup>20</sup> While some of the traditional categories may correspond to important biblical themes a major charge against the systematic approach must be that it fails to include important aspects of the biblical material. For example, there is no place for a theme such as 'the land' which plays a significant role in Old Testament Theology. In particular it does not accommodate the theme of 'Wisdom' which has been recognized in much recent work as a major aspect of biblical thought.

## 2. The historical approach

The advance of the historical-critical approach to the Bible in the late 18th and early 19th centuries led not only to the splitting of Biblical Theology into Old Testament and New Testament Theology but to the widespread adoption of a quite different method of ordering the material. The Bible began to look less and less like a textbook of systematic theology and more and more like a history book. The only order it contains, it was argued, is the historical and chronological order in which God's people (Israel and the Early Church) received the divine revelation and committed it to writing in the various books. It is this order therefore which should be followed by the biblical theologian in the presentation of the material.

We have already alluded to the beginnings of the historical approach with G.L. Bauer. It appears for example in the Biblical Theologies of W.M.L. De Wette (1813) and D.G.C. von Cölln (1836).<sup>21</sup> De Wette divided the religion of the Old Testament into 'Hebraism' and (post-exilic) 'Judaism', a scheme followed by a number of scholars generally with the assumption of the inferiority of the latter period to the former.

In the field of Old Testament Theology a pioneer in tracing the historical development of Old Testament thought

---

<sup>20</sup>S. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence*, 34.

<sup>21</sup>W.M.L. De Wette, *Biblische Dogmatik des Alten und Neuen Testaments, der kritische Darstellung der Religionslehre des Hebraismus, des Judentums und Urchristentums* (Berlin, Realschulbuchhandlung 1813); D.G.C. von Cölln, *Biblische Theologie*, 2 vols, (Leipzig, J.A. Barth 1836).

was J.K.W. Vatke.<sup>22</sup> During the 19th century the particular chronological scheme followed varied with the advance of critical studies. The development of Pentateuchal source criticism in particular introduced major changes in the outline; Genesis 1, for example, was no longer assigned to Moses but to the Priestly writer, the last of the four main sources, and hence was treated much later in the scheme. Works thus came to be based not on the historical order of Jewish and Christian tradition but on an order which was the product of scholarly reconstruction. This was particularly true in the case of those who increasingly took a History of Religion approach. From the publication of R. Smend's *Lehrbuch der alttestamentlichen Religionsgeschichte* in 1893 historical studies of the religion of Israel dominated the field for four decades.

Within the context of the 20th century revival of Old Testament Theology a quite different type of 'historical' approach is found in the powerful and influential Old Testament Theology of G. von Rad<sup>23</sup> who rejected any form of systematic scheme and contended that Old Testament Theology is basically kerygmatic and confessional in character, testifying to 'a continuing divine activity in history' (I:106). Vol. I follows the order of the Pentateuch and the historical books under the heading of 'The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions'. A final section deals with Israel's response to saving history in psalms and wisdom. What emerges is something quite different from a critically reconstructed history of Israel; in fact von Rad believes that critical scholarship has destroyed the picture of Israel's history (especially its early stages) which is found in the Old

---

<sup>22</sup>J.K.W. Vatke, *Die Religion des Alten Testaments nach dem kanonischen Büchern entwickelt* (Berlin, Bethge 1835).

<sup>23</sup>G. von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich, Chr. Kaiser 1957, 60); ET, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd 1962, 65). Von Rad's approach has provoked endless debate. See e.g. G. Henton Davies, 'Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*' in R.B. Laurin, *Contemporary Old Testament Theologians* (London, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1970) 63-89; H.-J. Kraus, *Die Biblische Theologie: Ihre Geschichte und Problematik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag 1970) 133-9; D.G. Spriggs, *Two Old Testament Theologians* (London, SCM 1974); M. Oeming, *Gesamtbiblische Theologien der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer 2nd ed. 1987) 20-33, 58-80.



Testament. The true subject of an Old Testament Theology is the proclamation of Yahweh's activity in history embodied in Israel's historical traditions.

New Testament Theologies as they developed in the 19th century generally followed a historical outline and this too changed with changing critical opinion on authorship and dating of the books of the New Testament. The *New Testament Theology* of the moderately conservative W. Beyschlag (1891) for example, illustrates an intermediate position.<sup>24</sup> He begins with 'The Teaching of Jesus according to the Synoptists', followed by 'The Teaching of Jesus According to the Gospel of John', 'Views of the First Apostles' (which uses not only Acts but also James and 1 Peter, both regarded as authentic), 'The Pauline System', 'Continuation of the Primitive Apostolic Method of Teaching' (covering Hebrews, Revelation and the Johannine Literature), and 'Common Christian and Post-Apostolic Modes of Teaching' (which includes Jude, 2 Peter and the Pastorals, all regarded as non-authentic).

As critical opinion changed, books such as James and 1 Peter lost the position they had held in earlier schemes. Changing views on the nature of the Gospels also had their effect. Is the life and teaching of the 'historical Jesus' a proper subject for New Testament Theology, or only the witness to Jesus in each of the Gospels? One extreme is reached with R. Bultmann whose *New Testament Theology* does not deal directly with Jesus at all, listing 'The Message of Jesus' as a 'presupposition' of New Testament Theology.<sup>25</sup> H. Conzelmann follows suit, but does provide separate treatment of 'The Synoptic Kerygma'.<sup>26</sup> Those works which accept the results of more radical scholarship tend to devalue the Lucan writings, the Pastorals, the minor epistles and Revelation. Where this

<sup>24</sup>W. Beyschlag, *Neutestamentliche Theologie oder geschichtliche Darstellung der Lehren Jesus und des Urchristenthums nach den neutestamentliche Quellen*, 2 vols. (Halle, Eugen Strien 1891-92); ET, *New Testament Theology, or, Historical Account of the Teaching of Jesus and of Primitive Christianity According to the New Testament Sources*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark 1899).

<sup>25</sup>R. Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2 vols. (Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr 1948, 53); ET, *Theology of the New Testament* (London, SCM 1952-5).

<sup>26</sup>H. Conzelmann, *Grundriss der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Munich, Chr. Kaiser 1967); ET, *Theology of the New Testament* (London, SCM 1969).

is combined with scepticism about the historical Jesus the result is an overwhelming concentration on Paul and John. A more balanced historical approach is found, for example, in the New Testament Theologies of M. Meinertz (1950), J. Bonsirven (1951), W.G. Kümmel (1969) and L. Goppelt (1975, 76).<sup>27</sup>

Another approach which might perhaps be regarded as a sub-category of the historical is found in those theologies which deal with books or sections of the Old Testament and New Testament in something approaching the canonical order. G.F. Oehler's *Theology of the Old Testament* (1873)<sup>28</sup> is divided into three major sections: 'Mosaism' (which however includes Joshua), 'Prophetism' and 'Old Testament Wisdom'. Terrien's *The Elusive Presence* follows an order which, in the Old Testament at least is close to the (Hebrew) canonical order. The *Biblical Theology* of G. Vos follows an incomplete canonical scheme which covers Law and Prophets in the Old Testament, Gospels in the New.<sup>29</sup> W.E. Ward argues that 'the structure, or principle of organization, for a biblical theology should be determined by the literary units within the Old and New Testament canons.'<sup>30</sup> The Danish scholar J. Høgenhaven proposes a structure for Old Testament Theology based on canonical units, but in an unusual order: 'Wisdom', 'Psalmic literature', 'Narrative literature', 'Law' and 'Prophecy'.<sup>31</sup> A New Testament example would be G.E. Ladd's *A Theology of the New Testament* (1974)<sup>32</sup> which adheres strictly to the

<sup>27</sup>M. Meinertz, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Bonn, Hanstein 1950); J. Bonsirven, *Théologie du Nouveau Testament* (Paris, Éditions Montaigne 1951); ET, *Theology of the New Testament* (London, Burns & Oates 1963); W.G. Kümmel, *Die Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1969); ET, *The Theology of the New Testament* (Nashville, Abingdon 1973); L. Goppelt, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2 vols (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1975, 76); ET, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1981, 82).

<sup>28</sup>G.F. Oehler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 2 vols. (Tübingen, Heckenhauer, 1873, 74); ET, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark 1874, 75).

<sup>29</sup>G. Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1948).

<sup>30</sup>W.E. Ward, 'Towards a Biblical Theology', *Review and Expositor* 74 (1977) 383, 384.

<sup>31</sup>J. Høgenhaven, *Problems and Prospects of Old Testament Theology* (Sheffield, JSOT Press 1987) 111, 112.

<sup>32</sup>G.E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1974).

canonical order: 'The Synoptic Gospels', 'The Fourth Gospel', 'The Primitive Church', 'The General Epistles' and 'The Apocalypse'. Obviously these canonical schemes are historical only in part.

It should be noted that many of these 'historical' theologies are really hybrid types since within the treatment of particular books, periods or authors a systematic order of some kind is often followed. In New Testament Theologies this is particularly true of what is always a major section on Pauline theology. W. Beyschlag, for example, discusses Paul under the headings of 'Flesh and Spirit', 'Adam and Christ', 'God and World', 'The Establishment of Salvation', 'The Way of Salvation', 'The Life in the Spirit', 'The Christian Church' and 'The Consummation of the Kingdom'; whereas Bultmann's section on Paul reveals his strongly anthropological approach with its two major divisions, 'Man Prior to the Revelation of Faith', and 'Man Under Faith'.<sup>33</sup>

The strength of the historical approach is that it does justice to the diversity of Scripture and demonstrates the development of biblical thought. It does not lend itself so well to the treatment of Psalms or the Wisdom literature which were written and edited over a period of time. A purely historical scheme also renders more difficult the interface with dogmatic theology.

### 3. The thematic approach

A thematic approach to Biblical Theology seeks to structure its treatment around themes or topics which arise from the biblical material itself rather than being imposed upon it on the basis of a predetermined dogmatic system. Thus J.L. McKenzie for example contends that Old Testament Theology should be based on 'those themes which occur most frequently and which appear to be decisive in giving Old Testament belief its distinctive identity'.<sup>34</sup> It is readily conceded that in some

---

<sup>33</sup>W. Beyschlag, *New Testament Theology*, II, 27-281; R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, I, 187-352.

<sup>34</sup>J.L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (Garden City, Doubleday 1974) 24, 25. McKenzie's own approach, however, tends to be fragmented as he does not believe that the various themes can be integrated into any overall structure.

cases there may be no hard and fast line separating the systematic and thematic approaches. What they have in common is the search for some form of synchronic rather than diachronic structure.

The thematic approach is in general a relatively modern one, though it should be noted that recognition of 'covenant' as a key theme of Biblical Theology has deep roots in Reformed theology especially in the thought of Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669) whose work laid the basis for the influential federal or covenant theology.<sup>35</sup> Cocceius did not follow the standard outline of topics but organized his theological system around a theme derived directly from the Bible, that of the covenant. He distinguished the covenant of works (*foedus operum*) or covenant of nature (*foedus naturae*) in operation before the fall, the covenant of grace (*foedus gratiae*) operative thereafter. Within the latter, two (or in some forms of federal theology, three) economies or dispensations were distinguished, so that thereby elements of a historical scheme were also included.

From the time of De Wette onwards many biblical theologians sought some central organizing principle for their work. The modern discussion of thematic structure took a new turn however with the publication of W. Eichrodt's impressive *Theology of the Old Testament*<sup>36</sup> in which he sought to present a 'cross-section, (*Querschnitt*) of Old Testament thought. Rejecting both the systematic and historical options Eichrodt took the concept of 'covenant' as his organizing principle and arranged the main themes of the Old Testament under the three major headings of 'God and Nation', 'God and World' and 'God and Men'.

Illuminating though Eichrodt's work is the fact remains that the structure is not altogether successful. 'Covenant' (as recent research has further underlined) is not an all-pervasive theme in the Old Testament, and parts of the outline are linked with it in a quite artificial way. Another

---

<sup>35</sup>J. Cocceius, *Summa doctrina de foedere et testamento Dei* (Lugduni Batavorum, Elsevirorum 1648). See C.S. McCoy, 'Johannes Cocceius: Federal Theologian', *SJT* 16 (1963) 352-70; J.C. McLelland, 'Covenant Theology - A Re-Evaluation', *CJT* 3 (1957) 182-8; J.H. Hayes and F.C. Prussner, *op.cit.*, 19-23.

<sup>36</sup>W. Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Leipzig, J.C. Hinrichs 1933, 35, 39); ET, *Theology of the Old Testament* (London, SCM 1961, 65).

work which employs 'covenant' as its organizing principle is Barton Payne's conservative *Theology of the Older Testament* (though Payne prefers the translation 'testament').<sup>37</sup>

Eichrodt's work sparked off a long scholarly debate on an appropriate 'centre' or 'focal point' (*Mitte*, *Zentrum*, *Mittelpunkt*) for Old Testament Theology<sup>38</sup> in the course of which numerous suggestions have been made for a more appropriate centre. For example, W.C. Kaiser in his *Toward An Old Testament Theology*<sup>39</sup> takes 'the promise' as the organizing principle, though this is combined with a form of historical approach which divides the Old Testament into eleven periods. On the other side of the argument von Rad declared flatly that the Old Testament 'has no focal-point (*Mitte*) such as is found in the New'.<sup>40</sup>

There has also been discussion of a 'centre' of the New Testament, often in conjunction with the question of the unity of the New Testament.<sup>41</sup> Many have found the centre in the Christ event or in Christology, or else, in the tradition of Luther, in the concept of 'justification'. P. Stuhlmacher has maintained that 'the gospel of reconciliation, must be the

---

<sup>37</sup>J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan 1962).

<sup>38</sup>See G. Fohrer, 'Der Mittelpunkt einer Theologie des Alten Testaments', *TZ* 24 (1968) 161-72; R. Smend, *Die Mitte des Alten Testaments* (Zürich, EVZ-Verlag 1970); G. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1975), Chap IV, 'The Center of the Old Testament and Old Testament Theology'; W. Zimmerli, 'Zum Problem der "Mitte des Alten Testaments"', *EvTh* 35 (1975) 97-118; D.L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible: A study of some modern solutions to the theological problem of the relationship between Old and New Testaments* (Leicester, IVP 1976), 'The Debate About the "Centre" of the Old Testament', 377-86; J.H. Hayes and F.C. Prussner, 'The Problem of a Center of the Old Testament', in *Old Testament Theology: Its History and Development*, 257-60; H.G. Reventlow, 'The "Centre" of the Old Testament', in *Problems of Old Testament Theology in the Twentieth Century* (London, SCM 1985) 125-33; M. Oeming, 'Die "Mitte" der Schrift?' *op. cit.*, 182-5.

<sup>39</sup>W.C. Kaiser, *Toward An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan 1978). Cf. W.C. Kaiser, 'The Center of Old Testament Theology: The Promise', *Them* 10:1 (1974) 1-10.

<sup>40</sup>G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, II, 362; cf. I, 115.

<sup>41</sup>See G.F. Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1978), Chap. III, 'The Center and Unity in New Testament Theology'.

centre of a Biblical Theology of the New Testament.<sup>42</sup> Others have been much more sceptical about finding any centre in the diverse 'theologies' of the New Testament.

If finding one central theme for the Old Testament and for the New Testament poses difficulties, this is even more the case in relation to one theme which could serve as an organizing principle for a Biblical Theology which embraces both Testaments. Yet suggestions have not been lacking. One of the commonest is the theme of 'the Kingdom of God'.<sup>43</sup> A recent example is G. Goldsworthy's *Gospel and Kingdom*<sup>44</sup> which utilizes the following outline: The Kingdom pattern established (Eden), The Kingdom promised (Abraham), The Kingdom foreshadowed (David, Solomon), The Kingdom at hand (Jesus Christ) and The Kingdom consummated (Return of Christ). Using one term as the key to the whole of Scripture in this way inevitably appears somewhat forced and artificial. A particular problem with the expression 'the Kingdom of God' is that while it is a major theme in the Synoptics the actual phrase does not even occur in the Old Testament and it plays almost no role in the New Testament outside the Synoptics. It can however be argued that a more general expression such as 'the rule of God', 'the reign of God' or 'the sovereignty of God' does identify one of the major themes of the Bible. G. Fohrer contends that it would be possible to sketch a Biblical Theology on the basis of the twin themes of 'the rule of God' and 'communion between God and man'.<sup>45</sup>

'Covenant' has been suggested as a central theme for both Testaments,<sup>46</sup> but covenant is actually even less of a pervasive theme in the New Testament than it is in the Old Testament. One of the strongest contenders for the position of

---

<sup>42</sup>See P. Stuhlmacher, 'The Gospel of Reconciliation in Christ - Basic Features and Issues of a Biblical Theology of the New Testament', *HBT* 1 (1979) 161-190.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. G. Klein, "'Reich Gottes' als biblischer Zentralbegriff", *EvTh* 30 (1970) 642-70.

<sup>44</sup>G. Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Exeter, Paternoster 1981).

<sup>45</sup>'Der Mittelpunkt einer Theologie des Alten Testaments', 71-2.

<sup>46</sup>See W.G. Most, 'A Biblical Theology of Redemption in a Covenant Framework', *CBQ* 29 (1967) 1-19; F.C. Fensham, 'The Covenant as Giving Expression to the Relationship Between Old and New Testament', *TynB* 22 (1971) 82-94.

the unifying theme of Biblical Theology has been the concept of 'the history of redemption' or 'salvation history' (*Heilsgeschichte*) worked out in the 19th century by J.C.K. von Hoffmann and the Erlangen School, and developed more recently in various ways by G. von Rad, O. Cullmann, L. Goppelt and G.E. Ladd. Though highlighting a central biblical theme it is not found in all the material e.g. the Wisdom literature. S. Terrien's *The Elusive Presence* takes as its controlling theme 'the presence of God', a presence which stands at the centre of biblical faith yet is always elusive. This theme is more successful in incorporating the theology of Wisdom, yet here too one has to ask whether one theme can accommodate with equal success all the varied emphases in Scripture.

A new proposal for a central unifying theme for Biblical Theology has recently been made by Hans Klein in an important article, 'Leben - neues Leben: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer gesamtbiblischen Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments'.<sup>47</sup> Klein emphasizes the need for a concept or leading idea (*Leitgedanke*) which will make possible the ordering and understanding of the biblical material. For a theology of the whole Bible a word or pair of words is required which will link the Testaments. Klein's own proposal is to discuss the Old Testament under the rubric of 'Life' and the New Testament under that of 'New Life'. 'Life' has the advantage of being highlighted not only in the Torah (Deuteronomy) and Prophets (Ezekiel) but also in the Psalms and Wisdom literature. Klein speaks of 'Life' and 'New Life' not as the centre (*Mitte*) of the Old Testament and New Testament respectively but rather as the goal (*Zielpunkt*) which they envisage.

A five-part outline for a Biblical Theology is sketched out, though not in any detail. The first part would speak of God as the one who gives life and new life, and here the New Testament section would speak also of Christ. God could be presented as the creating, providing and redeeming God (Koch), or as the saving and blessing God (Westermann). The second part would focus more directly on 'Life' and 'New Life', with

---

<sup>47</sup>*Evangelische Theologie* 43 (1983) 91-107.

the Old Testament section discussing the significance of law, wisdom and cult as ways of ordering life, as well as land, blessing, guidance and revelation as gifts of life, while the New Testament section would deal with the different understandings of salvation in various New Testament writings. The third part would deal with the threat to life (and new life) from sin, death and the devil. This could include discussion of the prophetic call for justice and of the problem of suffering in the Old Testament section, and of the overcoming of temptation and of false teaching in the New Testament. In the fourth part the expectation of new life would be discussed as the promise of salvation in the Old Testament and as its fulfilment in the New. A fifth and final part would (rather belatedly?) make clear the relationship between the Testaments.

This is one of the few proposals which has been made for an 'all-biblical' theology and it certainly has its attractive features. It attempts to do justice to the Old Testament on its own terms stressing that all areas of life belong to life under God. It seeks to recognize elements of both continuity and discontinuity in the relation between the Testaments (Klein recognizes that there are considerable differences in the understanding of 'life' in Old Testament and New Testament, and indeed in different parts of the New Testament). Nevertheless as the whole scheme is developed one has to ask whether it does not begin to become somewhat artificial. Sub-themes are introduced which are not related to 'life' in the biblical material itself. 'Life' is an important biblical theme, but not the only one. Once again, exclusive emphasis on one theme tends to downplay other major themes which run through both Testaments (in this case, for example, the theme of 'the People of God' appears to be under-represented).

It is difficult to understand the obsession with finding one single theme or 'centre' for Old Testament or New Testament Theology and still less for an entire Biblical Theology. It is widely held today that the quest for a single centre has failed.<sup>48</sup> An approach which recognizes several themes would appear to be more productive and this seems to be the trend in a number of more recent Old Testament Theologies

---

<sup>48</sup>Cf. M. Oeming, *op. cit.*, 182-5.



including those of J.L. McKenzie, W. Zimmerli, W.A. Dyrness and C. Westermann.<sup>49</sup>

## II. Toward a New Structure for Biblical Theology

The above survey reveals the problems and pitfalls of constructing a suitable structure for a Biblical Theology particularly when, as here, we are concerned with a theology encompassing the totality of canonical scripture.

In what follows an attempt is made to sketch out the main features of a suitable structure for a canonical Biblical Theology.

### 1. A multi-thematic approach

At the outset, a systematic approach based on categories imported from dogmatic theology is to be rejected as inevitably distorting biblical thought and failing to deal adequately with all aspects of the biblical material. A historical approach tracing the development of biblical thought period by period or book by book is of course valuable but it belongs rather to the kind of historical study of the Bible which is pre-supposed by an 'intermediate Biblical Theology'. The most promising approach is clearly the thematic one which seeks to construct an outline based as closely as possible on themes which arise from within the Bible itself. As the survey has shown, attempts to fit all the material into a scheme determined by one single 'centre' or organizing principle have not been overly successful. But a multi-thematic approach appears to hold more promise.<sup>50</sup>

Two recent multi-thematic schemes are worthy of mention. E.A. Martens in his *Plot and Purpose in the Old Testament*<sup>51</sup> assumes that the central subject of the Old

---

<sup>49</sup>J.L. McKenzie, *op. cit.*; W. Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark 1978); W.A. Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity 1979); C. Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (Atlanta, John Knox 1982).

<sup>50</sup>This is in line with the 'multitrack treatment of the longitudinal themes, motifs, and concepts' frequently advocated by G.F. Hasel; see e.g. 'Biblical Theology: Then, Now and Tomorrow', *HBT* 4:1 (1982) 80. Hasel however gives little or no indication of how the themes should be co-ordinated in any overall structure of a Biblical Theology.

<sup>51</sup>E.A. Martens, *Plot and Purpose in the Old Testament* (Leicester, IVP 1981); published in North America as *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament*

Testament is Yahweh and contends that the key passage, Ex 5:22-6:8 reveals the plan and purpose of God in the Old Testament. 'This plan is one to bring deliverance, to summon a people who will be peculiarly his own, to offer himself for them to know and to give them land in fulfilment of his promise'.<sup>52</sup> Thus four interrelated key themes are identified: Salvation/Deliverance, the Covenant Community, Knowledge /Experience of God, and Land. These are traced in turn through the pre-monarchy era, the era of the monarchy and the post-monarchy era. Thus a grid is constructed which forms the overall structure of the theology. A final chapter discusses in a limited way how the four themes are exhibited in the New Testament, specifically in Matthew and Romans.

Martens' scheme is certainly moving in the right direction. One of the main problems is with the theme of 'land' which, as one of only four major themes, tends to be over-emphasized. It creates special problems if the themes are to be traced through the New Testament as well as the Old Testament, since 'land' scarcely figures at all as a New Testament theme. Martens seeks to get round this problem by arguing that in the Bible 'land' becomes in effect a symbol for 'life' or for the 'blessings of a good life. If this is the case would it not be better to employ either 'life' or 'blessing' as a major theme?

A further demonstration of the possibilities of a multi-thematic approach is seen in W. Dumbrell's *The End of the Beginning: Rev 21-22 and the Old Testament*<sup>53</sup> though it is not a fully-fledged Biblical Theology. Dumbrell identifies five related themes which appear in Rev 21-22: the New Jerusalem, the New Temple, the New Covenant, the New Israel and the New Creation. He then traces the development of these 'theological themes' through Old Testament, Gospels, Epistles and back to Revelation. This is seen as 'the method of biblical-theology' which serves to show how 'the entire Bible is moving, growing according to a common purpose and towards a

---

*Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker 1981).

<sup>52</sup>*Op. cit.*, 20.

<sup>53</sup>W. Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning: Rev 21-22 and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Baker 1985). The quotations which follow are from the 'Introduction'.

common goal'. Dumbrell regards these five themes (which of course do not exhaust the biblical material) as inter-related through their common relation to 'the Bible's wider concept of government, the Kingdom of God.

For a full-scale Biblical Theology it would be desirable to identify a limited number of major themes around which related minor themes could be grouped. In fact when the numerous suggestions for a single 'centre' are examined many similarities are to be observed, and the suggestions tend to fall into about four major groups. This is the basis for the multi-thematic approach which will be outlined below.

## **2. An approach to the correlation of Old Testament and New Testament**

It is of the essence of the approach proposed here that the key themes be traced through both Old Testament and New Testament. A major problem is how to approach the relationship between Old Testament and New Testament. This problem has concerned the Church from the very beginning and has generated a vast literature.

Since the majority of 'Biblical Theologies' have been in fact either Old Testament or New Testament Theologies they do not offer much help in discussing problems of structure. Many New Testament Theologies tend to regard the Old Testament simply as 'background' (in fact, one background among others) to New Testament thought. Old Testament Theologies have on the whole shown more interest in the link between the Testaments and a number have included important discussions of the subject.<sup>54</sup>

No pretence is made here of dealing adequately with this vast subject. Helpful summaries will be found in works by D.L. Baker and G.F. Hasel<sup>55</sup> both of whom provide typologies

---

<sup>54</sup>E.g. Vriezen, von Rad, Kaiser, Westermann.

<sup>55</sup>D.L. Baker, *op. cit.*; G.F. Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, Chap. IV, 'NT Theology and the Old Testament'. See also G.F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, Chap. V, 'The Relationship Between the Testaments'; H.G. Reventlow, *Problems of Biblical Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia, Fortress 1986), Chap. II, 'The Relationship Between the Old Testament and the New'; J. Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Leicester, IVP 2nd ed. 1990), Chap. 4, 'The Old Testament as witness to Christ'. For recent discussion

of the various types of relationships between the Testaments which have been proposed.

While it may be argued that in the past there have been forms of Christianity in which the Old Testament has been allowed to dominate the New, there is likely to be very little support today for those approaches which Hasel characterizes as 'Under-emphasis of New Testament—Over-emphasis of Old Testament' or Baker as "'Old Testament" Solutions', as exemplified for example in the works of A.A. van Ruler or K.H. Miskotte.<sup>56</sup> There is a long history of support, however, for the opposite view, 'Over-emphasis of New Testament—Under-emphasis of Old Testament' (Hasel) and "'New Testament" Solutions' (Baker). In the present situation it is more essential than ever to avoid solutions and structures which devalue the Old Testament, portraying it merely as a quarry of Messianic proof-texts, or as characterized by 'Law' in contrast to the New Testament which is 'Gospel', or as a 'history of failure' (Bultmann).<sup>57</sup> The New Testament, it is true, sees the Christ event as the unique, final and decisive act of God for the salvation of the world and of humankind and obviously this must be a determining factor in any Biblical Theology. But the God of the New Testament is the same God who speaks and acts in the Old, and the Christian Church recognized not just the Old Testament passages quoted in the New Testament but the Old Testament in its entirety as an essential component part of Holy Scripture. The true task of Biblical Theology, as B.S. Childs has said, is 'not to Christianize the Old Testament by identifying it with the New Testament witness, but to hear its own theological

---

in relation to the possibility of a Biblical Theology see P. Pokorný, 'Probleme biblischer Theologie', *TL* 106 (1981) 4-6; S. Wagner, 'Zur Frage nach der Möglichkeit einer biblischen Theologie', *TL* 113 (1988), especially 163, 164.

<sup>56</sup>A.A. van Ruler, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1971); K.H. Miskotte, *When the Gods are Silent* (London, Collins 1967). Baker summarizes van Ruler's position as 'The Old Testament is the essential Bible, the New Testament its interpretative glossary', and Miskotte's as 'The Old Testament is an independent witness to "the Name", the New Testament its Christian sequel'.

<sup>57</sup>Cf. R. Bultmann, 'Prophecy and Fulfilment', in C. Westermann (ed.) *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation* (London, SCM 1963) 50-75. See the comments by M. Oeming, *op. cit.*, 17, 18.

testimony to the God of Israel whom the church confesses also to worship'.<sup>58</sup>

The structure of the Old Testament-New Testament relationship must arise from within the Bible itself and this clearly implies elements of both continuity and discontinuity between the Testaments. It must constantly be kept in mind that the Old Testament was the 'Scriptures' of the writers of the New Testament. If, for example, the theme of creation does not figure prominently in the New Testament this is not because it was unimportant to the New Testament writers but rather because the Old Testament view of God as Creator was simply assumed by them. This is the clear implication of the church's recognition of both Testaments as constituting Scripture and it must be reflected in a canonical theology.

A major theme of Scripture is the working out of God's purposes in history through a people chosen to serve him - the people of Israel in the Old Testament, and the continuation and expansion of Israel in the Church of the New Testament. This 'history of salvation' (though also of judgment) constitutes a chord which binds the Testaments together. The biblical material may be said to witness to a type of 'progressive revelation',<sup>59</sup> provided that it is not assumed that the graph takes an absolutely regular upward climb, and provided also that the assumption is not made that each advance to a new level involves the total abrogation of what has gone before. The New Testament witnesses to the Christ event as the fulfilment of God's purposes revealed in the Old Testament; fulfilment not in the sense of abolishing but rather of continuing and completing what went before.

The New Testament constantly draws on images, persons and events from the Old Testament as it seeks to bring out the significance of the Christ event. This can be described as 'typology' provided it is granted that the original images, persons and events are seen as having value in their own right

---

<sup>58</sup>B.S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London, SCM 1985) 9.

<sup>59</sup>E. Jacob prefers to speak of 'the dynamism of revelation', thought of as the constantly renewed struggle to disengage God from his image so that he can be grasped in reality and truth; see 'Possibilités et limites d'une théologie biblique', *RHPR* 46 (1966) 121.

and not merely as 'types', and provided also that the New Testament use of typology is not viewed in terms of a mechanical fulfilment of predictions but is recognized as not only fulfilling but also transcending the type. Thus for example, justice must be done to the place of Moses in the Old Testament as the mediator of deliverance and of covenant and law to the people of Israel. In the New Testament Moses also serves as a type of Christ, but the relationship is a complex one in which Jesus can be seen as a new Moses or second Moses (Matthew), as the prophet like Moses of Deuteronomy 18:15 (Luke), in contrast to Moses (John), or as standing in a basically different relationship to God than Moses (Hebrews).

What is proposed here is a structure in which the major themes of Old Testament and New Testament are *correlated* with each other. The tracing of such themes through both Testaments suggests a pattern which is common to almost all major themes. Within the Old Testament there is a two-fold emphasis on *Proclamation* and on *Promise*. While proclamation (*kerygma*) is a New Testament term the Old Testament also proclaims what God has done both in nature and in history. It proclaims God as the one on whom all living things depend, whose order can be discerned in creation. And it proclaims God as the One who chose Israel and entered into a special relationship with her, a relationship constantly threatened by Israel's disobedience.

If the Old Testament proclaims what God has done, it also contains a strong element of promise. Israel lives between past and future, between the already and the not yet, between memory and hope, between proclamation and promise. The shape of the Christian canon with the prophetic books coming as the last section (in contrast to the Hebrew canon which ends with the Writings) makes the Old Testament an open-ended book with a strong emphasis on the promise which points to the future.

The New Testament proclaims that in the Christ event God has acted for the salvation of mankind. In the context of the canon this is seen as a *fulfilment* of the Old Testament as a whole and especially of the promise. Yet the New Testament too is open-ended; it also contains a tension between the already and the not yet represented by the Parousia and the

final triumph of God's purposes. It looks back to the fulfilment of the promises, but it also looks forward to the final *consummation*. Unlike the traditional systematic scheme which almost always has 'Eschatology' as the last chapter, this proposal recognizes that eschatology is woven into the fabric of almost all biblical themes.

The analysis offered here suggests a framework for discussing the main biblical themes. Not only is there a relationship of Promise/Fulfilment between Old Testament and New Testament; within the Old Testament there is the tension between Proclamation and Promise, just as in the New Testament there is the tension between Fulfilment and final Consummation. The pattern of Proclamation/Promise/Fulfilment/Consummation offers a way of discussing the major themes which will reveal their inner theological dynamic rather than just their tradition-historical development.

### 3. A dialectical approach

Any proposal for a Biblical Theology based on the whole Bible and adopting a thematic approach faces the inevitable criticism that it will in effect impose a false unity on the biblical material which will thus be seriously distorted, and that it will thereby undervalue the rich diversity of the biblical witness. It may be maintained, on the contrary, that it is precisely a canonical Biblical Theology which will seek to do justice to the whole sweep of biblical thought. The structure which is proposed here allows for the surveying of the full range of the biblical material. It will indeed seek to identify similarities, continuity and even unity of thought where these clearly exist. But it also provides ample scope for the recognition of diversity, tensions even paradox in biblical thought. No option is closed off in advance.

Recent years have seen an ever-increasing series of studies of the dialectical or bi-polar nature of much of Biblical Theology.<sup>60</sup> For example, the so-called 'Biblical Theology movement' laid great stress on 'salvation-history' (*Heilsgeschichte*), on the 'God who acts', and on revelation in

---

<sup>60</sup>Cf. the assessments by W. Brueggemann, 'A Convergence in Recent Old Testament Theologies', *JOT* 18 (1980) 2-18; B.C. Birch, 'Biblical Hermeneutics in Recent Discussion: Old Testament', *Religious Studies Review* 10:1 (1984) 1-3.

history as a unique feature of biblical thought. This over-emphasis has more recently been questioned on several grounds, not least because it fails to recognize the place the Bible gives to creation. One factor here has been the resurgence of Wisdom studies and the recognition that Wisdom theology is basically creation theology.<sup>61</sup>

Now it is not a case of either/or. The Bible speaks of God's activity in nature *and* in history, and throughout the Bible there is an ongoing dialectic between the two. This dialectic is reflected for example in P. Hanson's identification within the biblical heritage of what he calls a 'cosmic vector' and a 'teleological vector'.<sup>62</sup> Similarly L. Thompson in a book on the literary criticism of Scripture<sup>63</sup> speaks of the Bible's cosmogonic mythology' and 'covenantal mythology'. Related to this also is C. Westermann's dialectic between 'The Saving God and History' and 'The Blessing God and Creation'.<sup>64</sup> Most significantly, John Goldingay in a very important study of *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament*<sup>65</sup> has written of 'The Polarity of God's Involvement in the Regularities of Life (Creation) and His Acts of Deliverance (Redemption)'. He goes on to discuss the dialectical relationship between creation and redemption under four headings: 'The World God Redeems Is the World of God's Creation', 'The World God Created Is a World That Needed to Be Redeemed', 'Human Beings Are Redeemed to Live Again Their Created Life before God', and 'The Redeemed

---

<sup>61</sup>Cf. C.H.H. Scobie, 'The Place of Wisdom in Biblical Theology', *BTB* 14 (1984) 43-8.

<sup>62</sup>P.D. Hanson, *Dynamic Transcendence* (Philadelphia, Fortress 1978).

<sup>63</sup>L. Thompson, *Introducing Biblical Literature: A More Fantastic Country* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall 1978).

<sup>64</sup>See C. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and in the Life of the Church* (Philadelphia, Fortress 1978). These phrases are employed as major headings in Westermann's *Theologie des Alten Testaments in Grundzügen* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1978); ET, *The Elements of Old Testament Theology* (Atlanta, John Knox 1982). Cf. also B.A. Meyer, 'Critical Realism and Biblical Theology', in *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Allison Park, Pickwick 1989) 207; Meyer identifies as a criterion of authenticity for Biblical theology 'the affirmation of God as Lord of nature and Lord of human events, Lord of his people, and Lord of all mankind'.

<sup>65</sup>J. Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1987).



Humanity Still Looks for a Final Act of Redemption/Re-creation'. There is a certain tension between the emphasis on creation and the emphasis on redemption; but tension can be creative. Goldingay's discussion illustrates the exciting possibilities of a dialectical approach to Biblical theology.

Terrien's *The Elusive Presence* is another recent work which is richly suggestive in its discussion of the dialectic of a theology of the 'name' and a theology of 'glory', of biblical cultus and biblical faith, of the aesthetics of the mystical eye and the demands of the ethical ear, of God's self-disclosure and his self-concealment, and so on. D.A. Carson has explored the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.<sup>66</sup> W. Brueggemann contends that any Old Testament Theology must be bi-polar' and argues that Old Testament faith 'serves both to *legitimate structure* and to *embrace pain*'.<sup>67</sup>

A Biblical Theology need not deal in 'doctrines' which distort the true nature of the biblical witness. The structure proposed here is capable of incorporating the recent recognition of the dynamic and dialectical character of much of biblical thought.

### III. The Skeleton of a Biblical Theology

Finally, some more specific suggestions will be made regarding the themes which might be employed in a Biblical Theology constructed in accordance with the above principles. Four major themes are proposed which may be designated as 'God's Order', 'God's Servant', 'God's People' and 'God's Way'. Around each of these major themes a number of sub-themes is grouped, and the intention is that each theme and sub-theme be traced through Old Testament and New Testament following the scheme of Proclamation, Promise, Fulfilment and Consummation.

It is strongly contended that this structure is not imposed on the biblical material from without but rather arises naturally from within it and provides a framework for discussing Biblical Theology with a minimum of distortion. In

---

<sup>66</sup>D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (London, Marshall, Morgan & Scott 1981).

<sup>67</sup>W. Brueggemann, 'A Shape for Old Testament Theology, 1: Structure Legitimation', *CBQ* 47 (1985) 30.

point of fact the major themes were arrived at largely through study of the numerous proposals made for a 'centre' of biblical thought, so that it may be claimed that in a sense the themes represent a consensus of biblical scholarship.

### 1. God's Order

To assert, as many have, that God is the centre of Biblical Theology (*theos* = God) is to state the obvious; more than this is needed to form an organizing principle for a complete theology of the Bible. Similarly neither 'monotheism' (Hitzig), the first commandment (W.H. Schmidt), nor a single attribute of God such as 'holiness' (Dillmann, Hänel, Sellin) or 'presence' (Terrien) can be considered adequate as a focal point. More helpful are suggestions which range from 'the Kingdom of God' (Baumgarten-Crusius, Steudel, Hävernack, Riehm, Schultz, Bright, Goldsworthy, Klein), to 'the rule of God' (Fohrer), or 'the sovereignty of God' (Jacob; cf. Calvin), or 'the activity of the independent, sovereign God' (Rowley). We have already noted problems with the actual term 'Kingdom of God'.

But God's rule/reign/sovereignty/activity must not be defined too narrowly. The themes of salvation or redemption (Ewald, Hirsch), or of 'salvation-history' (von Hoffmann, Cullmann, von Rad) have tended to dominate. Recognition must be given to the dialectic between creation and redemption. God is Creator and Sustainer as well as Redeemer, is active in nature as well as history, and has a relation to all mankind as well as to Israel. Concisely put, the Bible discerns a God-given 'order' in both nature and history.<sup>68</sup>

The Old Testament *proclaims* that God, the ruler of history has a purpose for his people, but that he is also the creator and sustainer of all things, the one whose order can be discerned in nature. Since God's purposes are not fully realized in history and creation, the Old Testament *promises* the ushering in of a new order, in which God will truly reign and creation itself will be renewed. The New Testament proclaims

---

<sup>68</sup>H.H. Schmidt has argued that 'world order' is a basic category of biblical thought in his *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung* (Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] 1968) and 'Schöpfung, Gerechtigkeit und Heil: "Schöpfungstheologie" als Gesamthorizont biblischer Theologie', *ZTK* 70 (1973) 1-19. Cf. also R. Knierim, 'Cosmos and History in Israel's Theology', *HBT* 3 (1981) 59-123.

the *fulfilment* of this promise: with the Christ event the new order has dawned, God's rule is inaugurated and already there is a new creation. But the New Testament also believes that only at the final consummation will all that opposes God's will be eliminated and the present world order be replaced by a new heaven and a new earth.

Other minor themes might be considered in conjunction with this section. One is the question of the forces that oppose God's rule. In the Old Testament the 'adversaries' belong mainly to the historical order, whereas in the New Testament they are largely the 'principalities and powers' of the created order, and the 'adversary' is identified as Satan. A further sub-theme which bridges the Testaments might be 'the Spirit' of God. Thus under the general heading of 'God's Order' there might be sub-sections with such titles as 'The Living God', 'The Lord of Creation', 'The Lord of History', 'The Adversary', and 'The Spirit'.

## 2. God's Servant

Christ is certainly a centre, if not the centre of the New Testament. It is not separate elements such as the cross (Luz) or the resurrection (Künne), important though they may be, but rather the 'Christ event' in its totality (Reicke, Lohse) which constitutes the major theme. Numerous scholars identify Christology as the centre of the New Testament, but this must be broad enough to encompass what is traditionally designated as both the person and work of Christ. Some put the emphasis on the results or benefits of the Christ event such as justification of sinners (Käsemann, Schrage) or on reconciliation (Stuhlmacher). The balance becomes quite distorted however when the main emphasis falls on anthropology (Bultmann, Braun).

The major challenge in this section is the correlation of the New Testament Christological theme with the Old Testament. One formula which has been proposed to link the Testaments suggests that 'the Old Testament tells us *what* the Christ is; the New *who* He is'.<sup>69</sup> This formula is defective in

---

<sup>69</sup>W. Vischer, *The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ* (London, Lutterworth 1949) 7.

two directions. Firstly, no one clear concept of a coming Messiah emerges from the Old Testament, but rather a variety of conceptions alongside one another. Secondly, the New Testament does not portray Jesus as fulfilling any one concept of the Messiah. It links him in some way with virtually every form of expectation and with a variety of Old Testament types, but equally portrays him as transcending all types and expectations.

Rather than adopt a narrow messianic proof-text approach, the method of correlation suggests comparing the means whereby God makes himself known and acts to save his people in the Old Testament and New Testament. The controlling theme which suggests itself is 'God's Servant'.

In the Old Testament God acts through chosen servants; Moses supremely, but also through prophets, priests, kings and wise persons. The failure of each of these categories generates expectations of a future servant; the New Testament proclaims how Jesus fulfils and transcends each of these categories. The book of Daniel points towards a 'son of man' who will represent mankind as God originally intended them to be. The New Testament sees Jesus as the New Man, the true, representative human being, the Second Adam.

The Old Testament can also envisage God acting not through a chosen servant but directly, through such concepts as God's Glory, Word and Wisdom which were developed to safeguard God's transcendence while still allowing for his activity on earth. These concepts, along with that of Sonship, become the basis of the fully developed incarnational Christology of the New Testament.

The Old Testament also knows of a suffering servant of God, particularly in the Psalms and in Isaiah 40-55, a servant who suffers for the sins of others but who will ultimately be vindicated. The New Testament links the figure of the Suffering Servant with that of the Messiah and sees his death on the cross as an atonement for the sins of the world, and his resurrection and ascension as the vindication of God's servant.

In brief, the Old Testament *proclaims* that God makes himself known to his people through a series of servants. Since these are all imperfect, the Old Testament *promises* the coming of a new servant, the true mediator between God and his

people. The New Testament proclaims the *fulfilment* of the promise; Christ is the new servant who both fulfils and transcends all forms of expectation and through whom God comes in person to his people in a new way. The servant comes *incognito*, and faces suffering and death. At the final *consummation* however he will come in power and glory

The sub-themes of the section on God's Servant might be headed 'The Messiah', 'The Human One', 'Glory, Word, 'Wisdom', The Servant's Suffering' and 'The Servant's Vindication'.

### 3. God's People

Many scholars see as a key biblical theme the relationship between God and his people. This finds expression in those theologies which make 'covenant' an organizing principle (Cocceius, Eichrodt, Procksch, Prussner, Payne). Others prefer to speak of 'communion between God and man' (Vriezen, Fohrer), and many utilize some such formula as 'Yahweh, the God of Israel. . . Israel, the people of Yahweh' (Duhm, Wellhausen, Davidson, Stade, Noth, Smend). The theme of election (Dentan, Wildberger) highlights only one aspect of the relationship and is less satisfactory. It is clear that 'God's People' is a major theme linking the Testaments.<sup>70</sup>

The Old Testament *proclaims* that in the context of his concern for all mankind God chose a particular people to be the servant people of the Lord. The Old Testament is also aware of the failings and limitations of this people and holds out the *promise* of a time when God's people will be renewed, resurrected and reconstituted. The New Testament sees the *fulfilment* of these promises in the community which the Christ event brings into being, a people in continuity with Israel yet also a new community which is open to all the peoples of mankind. The Church is indeed the eschatological community, though it too is imperfect and the people of God will only be truly constituted at the final *consummation*.

<sup>70</sup>Cf. H. Cazelles, 'The Unity of the Bible and the People of God', *Scripture* 18 (1966) 1-10; R. Deutsch, 'The Biblical Concept of the "People of God"', *Southeast Asia Journal of Theology* 13 (1972) 4-12; *contra* J.M. Leonard, 'Invitation à la prudence dans l'emploi de l'expression "Peuple de Dieu"', *Communio Viatorum* 19 (1976) 35-60.

Several sub-themes could be linked with the major theme of 'God's People'. The relationship of Israel and of the church to the nations of mankind should be explored. The destiny of God's people is closely linked with a holy land, and with its focal point, a holy city. God's people find and express their identity through worship, and are led by ministers appointed by God. Thus the sub-headings for this section might be 'The Covenant Community', 'The Nations', 'Land and City', 'Worship' and 'Ministry', with each of these again traced through both Old Testament and New Testament.

#### 4. God's Way

In contrast to the previous three sections virtually no one would claim that such themes as 'piety', 'spirituality', 'ethics' or 'ethos' constitute *the* centre of Biblical Theology, though there is some recognition of this area as *a* major theme. For example there has been discussion of 'Law' as a topic of Biblical Theology (Siegwalt, Hübner, Stuhlmacher). Biblical ethics has been a greatly neglected field, though there are now signs of progress being made. Christians could learn here from Judaism which has always emphasized the importance of 'halakah', i.e. norms of conduct derived from Scripture. In noting some of the many suggestions which have been made for a 'centre' of Old Testament Theology J.D. Levenson comments that it is interesting to note some of the rather obvious candidates which do not appear on the list. 'One', he says, 'is humankind's duties, a theme that occupies most of the biblical materials, legal, prophetic, and sapiential alike'.<sup>71</sup> There is a whole area here relating to the life or way of life of the People of God which is of central importance in the biblical material itself.

The pervasive biblical image of the 'way' is suggested as a term which best encompasses this broad area. 'The primary image to express conduct or behaviour in the Old Testament', writes James Muilenburg, 'is the "way" or "road" (*derek*). No other image was more rich and manifold, none

---

<sup>71</sup>J.D. Levenson, 'Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology', in J. Neusner *et al.*, (edd.) *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, Fortress 1987) 299.

more diverse in nuance and connotation'.<sup>72</sup> The concept is equally at home in Torah, prophets and writings: the two ways open to mankind are spelled out in Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Jeremiah reminds the people that God told them 'Walk in the way that I command you' (Jer 7:23); while the theme of the two ways also runs through Proverbs 1-9. Jesus taught 'the way of God' (Mk 12:14) while the early Christians were known as 'those who followed the Way' (Acts 9:2, etc.).

The Old Testament *proclaims* that God has offered to Israel in the teaching of the Torah, in the preaching of the prophets and in the way of Wisdom, a life style which will lead to blessing and life. Israel's repeated disobedience leads to a deepened understanding of human sinfulness, but also to the *promise* of a new quality of life in the new age. In the New Testament these promises find *fulfilment* in the new way of life demonstrated and communicated by Jesus, the life of the new order which believers can begin to live in the present although it will be experienced in its fullness only at the final *consummation*.

This would seem to be the most appropriate place to examine the biblical understanding of human nature as a preface to the rest of the section. The reaction of people to God's approach involves a dialectic of faith and doubt. The basis for biblical ethics is found in the concept of 'God's Commandments' and the central biblical ethical imperative is 'Love your neighbour'. A 'Way' always leads to a destination. The delineation of the two ways in Deuteronomy 30 climaxes in the appeal: 'I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live. . .' (Deut. 30:19). A final sub-theme could thus be 'life', the life which God's people enjoy here and now, as a foretaste of the future fullness of life to which God's promise points. The sub-themes for the section on 'God's Way' might thus be 'Human Nature', 'Faith and Doubt', 'God's Commandments', 'Love Your Neighbour', and 'Life'.

Despite the massive literature on Biblical Theology and related topics, the countless proposals and programmatic

---

<sup>72</sup>J. Muilenburg, *The Way of Israel* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1962) 33.

essays, relatively little discussion has been devoted to the specifics of a suitable structure for Biblical Theology. The attempt has been made here to survey the main types of structure actually employed in Biblical Theologies and especially Old Testament and New Testament Theologies in the hope of learning from the experience of others, incorporating features which appear to be promising and avoiding what appear to be weaknesses and mistakes in previous schemes. The results have been embodied in a very specific proposed structure which is offered not as the definitive scheme but as a basis for discussion and as a stimulus to further exploration of a suitable structure for a comprehensive canonical Biblical Theology.