

Biblical Theology and From Where it Came

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What's in a Name?

In 1970, the late Brevard Childs (1923-2007) published a provocative book entitled *Biblical Theology in Crisis*.¹ As Childs saw it, the previous generation had witnessed the growth of a Biblical theology movement, mainly in the United States, that had reached its apogee sometime around 1960 but only a decade later had already fallen into disarray. The basic problem, as Childs saw it, was that the leaders of the movement could not agree on where to go next and were in serious danger of splitting it up by following different and mutually incompatible theological options.

Childs' analysis of Biblical theology's supposed crisis did not go unchallenged. In their different ways, Bernhard Anderson (1916-2007)² and Bruce Vawter (1921-86)³ both questioned its legitimacy, pointing out that there was no real "movement" called Biblical theology and that many, if not most of its supposed protagonists were British or European, not American as Childs seemed to think. This line was subsequently taken up by James Smart (1906-82) in a series of lectures, originally delivered at the Bangor School of Theology in Maine and eventually published as *The Past, Present and Future of Biblical Theology*.⁴ Smart took issue with Childs' interpretation of what had been going on in twentieth-century Biblical studies and offered his own counter-analysis, which in effect led him to redefine the term "Biblical theology" in a looser, more comprehensive direction.

Like Anderson and Vawter before him, Smart argued that there was no such thing as a Biblical Theology *movement* and pointed out that the scholars associated with the term held different and sometimes incompatible views of what Biblical theology was. Without totally denying Childs' claim that

¹Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

²Bernhard Anderson, "The Crisis of Biblical Theology," in *Theology Today* 28 (1971-72): 321-7.

³See Vawter's review in *Biblica* 52 (1971): 567-70.

⁴James Smart, *The Past, Present and Future of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979).

Biblical theology had entered a crisis in the 1960s, Smart nevertheless tried to broaden the field of discourse in a way that was designed to make Childs' approach appear to be provincial and inadequate. He also wanted to show that Biblical Theology, far from having run its course as a scholarly fad, was in fact embarking on a series of new developments that held great promise for the future.

By now it will be clear that we shall not get anywhere with this until we have defined what we understand by Biblical theology. If we take it to mean the theological content of the Bible, and in particular the common outlook that binds the New to the Old Testament, we might be able to trace it back to the Epistle to the Hebrews. That epistle can plausibly claim to have been the first systematic attempt to demonstrate that the true meaning of the Hebrew Bible can only be found in the person and work of Jesus Christ, to which it bore witness "at many times and in many ways," as its opening sentence so memorably states. Few analysts of modern Biblical theology would go that far back, but there is little doubt that virtually all serious Christian writers from New Testament times to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment took the approach of Hebrews as axiomatic for their interpretation of the Bible and their understanding of what Christian theology is. Systematization, which began with what we now call scholastic theology in the thirteenth century and was adapted to both Protestant and Eastern Orthodox needs after the Reformation, may have gone beyond the Bible but it did not go against it, at least not intentionally.

In this connection, it is important to point out that the many differences that appeared among people who were equally devoted to the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, occurred most often over matters on which Scripture was silent or ambiguous. Divisions in the church occurred over things like worship, the structure of church government, and the administration of the sacraments but not over the Trinity, the work of Christ, or the way of salvation. The doctrine of predestination was a borderline case. The principle itself was generally accepted, but disagreements emerged about the implications that could legitimately be deduced from Biblical teaching, particularly when it came to reprobation. Yet even here, the problem arose mainly because Scripture was not entirely clear, not because its teaching was rejected or supplemented by something else.

In the seventeenth century, the different Protestant churches produced confessions of faith that were more or less systematic in form and governed the way the Bible would be read in the different churches. The classic example of this in the English-speaking world was the Westminster Confession of Faith, with its numerous proof-texts that were designed to show just how Biblical it was. The amazing thing is how widely the Westminster Confession was adopted, even by those like the Baptists who had to modify some of its provisions to make it fit their particular emphases. Modern church historians, seduced as they have sometimes been by the anti-confessional propaganda of the late seventeenth-century Pietists, have tended to deplore the

confessional era and see it as one in which different systems of theology were allowed to corral the Bible for their own purposes and divide the church. It might be better to say that this tendency was usually reserved for relatively secondary matters and that what the great confessions really show is how united the Protestant world was in its interpretation of the Bible as a whole.

Can the Protestant Reformers be regarded as forerunners of modern Biblical theology? They certainly made a clear distinction between historical and textual exegesis, which they practiced according to the best principles of the humanistic scholarship available to them, and theological application. Usually both things were included side-by-side in their writings, but Calvin broke with this habit by putting his exegesis in his commentaries and his exposition in his *Institutes* and his sermons, which applied the text to the pastoral needs of his hearers. Each of these three things has been an essential component of modern Biblical theology, whose practitioners have also recognized the distinctions we find in Calvin. Indeed, in some cases it appears that modern Biblical theologians, particularly those of a Presbyterian or Reformed background, have done much the same thing as Calvin did, the major difference lying at the exegetical level, where modern developments have often made sixteenth-century conclusions appear out of date.

As an example of this, few modern exegetes would assume, as Luther and Calvin both did, that Paul's letter to the Galatians was especially relevant to the churches of France and Germany because the Galatians were a Celtic people, and therefore closely related to both the French and the Germans! Still less would they imagine that this can explain why the disarray in the sixteenth-century Western European churches was so much like that in first-century Galatia. Modern scholars smile at such naivety, though they may be more inclined to accept the broader principle, that all human beings are fundamentally alike and so the problems Paul encountered in ancient Galatia can find ready parallels in the modern church. They know that Galatians was written to address a specific historical situation, and one that does not recur in the same form nowadays, but they still think that the epistle contains lessons that can be applied with profit in the church today.

If that were the only difference between the Reformers and modern Biblical Theologians, there would be every reason to regard the former as the true harbingers of twentieth-century Biblical theology. The differences would be largely confined to the realm of historical knowledge and would be ones of degree, rather than of kind. Some modern scholars like to point out that Luther and Calvin were not confessional theologians in the sense that their later followers were, and so they can be rescued, so to speak, from the clutches of that debilitating dogmatism which has used their names to betray their ideas and their ideals. It is something of a truism to say that Luther was not a Lutheran and that Calvin was not a Calvinist, but it is perverse to conclude from that that they were not dogmatic or confessional at all. Not only did both men operate within the historic framework of the Catholic Church, which they wanted to reform, not overthrow, but they believed,

as every Christian generation before them had believed, that the Scriptures were the Word of God, who was their true author.

They knew, of course, that God had spoken to particular individuals through the prism of their historical circumstances, but the light that was refracted through them was essentially the same. In their minds, what the Apostle Paul wrote in his epistle to the Romans then was what God is saying to us now. Just as a modern theater-goer can enter into the spirit of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* without being an expert on Renaissance England or on medieval Denmark and Scotland, so a Christian can understand the message of Romans without knowing anything about Rome, or even about the Jewish-Gentile conflict that apparently sparked the writing of the letter in the first place. The circumstances of time and place are interesting details that put flesh on the bones of doctrinal principle, but it is the latter that gives the body its shape and its meaning, and it is not bound by the limitations of time and space.

It is here that the Biblical interpretation of men like Luther and Calvin differs most obviously from that of modern Biblical theology and makes it hard to acknowledge them as its forerunners. The world has changed since the Reformation, and Biblical theology today reflects a way of thinking that was unknown to the Reformers and would probably have been rejected by them. To understand the difference, consider the word "atheism." Today, atheism is a philosophical position that denies the existence of a Creator God, but in the sixteenth-century an atheist was a man who lived an immoral life. Like a modern smoker, he knew the facts, but was determined to ignore them, even if it meant going to eternal damnation. Nowadays however, philosophical atheism is the default position, the common ground on which believers and unbelievers are expected to operate in the name of "objectivity." It is in that world that modern Biblical theology has come into being, and it is for those scholars and works which take that worldview as a given that the term is now generally reserved.

The Enlightenment Era

Biblical theology as we know it today is a child of the Enlightenment. The founding of the Royal Society in 1660, whose charter forbade any discussion of religion or politics that might intrude upon its purely scientific deliberations, and the settlement of the Carolinas twenty years later, for which John Locke wrote a constitution embedding the principle of religious toleration in the public life of the new colonies, were signposts of the new era that was dawning. If science could be pursued without reference to God, and if a society could be created in which different opinions about him could enjoy equal currency and respect, it would not be long before theology would be regarded as superfluous to requirements. That it took a century to happen says more about the innate conservatism of human life than it does about the resilience of the church, though intellectual defenses of the Christian tradi-

tion were not lacking, especially in England.

One of the curious results of this is that even as the new radicalism was spreading to France and across Europe, it was dying out in the land of its birth. Its funeral can be dated to 1776, the year that David Hume died, the year that the mature John Wesley first ventured beyond England with his message of spiritual regeneration, and the year that Thomas Jefferson made it clear that Enlightenment political ideas were not in Britain's interest. The fact that the American rebels were prepared to ally themselves with France and Spain, then regarded as the heart of darkness, shows how complex and contradictory the Enlightenment had become, and things were only to get worse as time went on. The French revolution introduced the virus of rationalist secularism into the European body politic which finally succumbed to it in the carnage of the First World War, dragging Enlightenment idealism down with it. The European Enlightenment committed suicide in the trenches of Flanders and Galicia, but in America, largely untouched by the catastrophe, the flame continued to burn and is only now showing signs that it may be starting to fail. It is against this background that modern Biblical theology came into being, and in both the triumph and the tragedy of the Enlightenment that it has flowered and faded. If the American experience of Biblical theology has been different from the European one, as Brevard Childs insisted, that is only because the Enlightenment and its idealism took a different course there and survived the European collapse by at least two and perhaps three generations.

To someone living in 1776, the term "Biblical theology" would have sounded strange and might even have been incomprehensible. What other kind of theology could there have been? University faculties and the churches to whom their graduates ministered were still locked in the confessionalism of an earlier era and those who tangled with them had to be careful, but other ways of circumventing their influence could be found. Voltaire spent time in the Bastille for his blasphemies, but that did not stop him from being idolized all over Europe, including by such unlikely people as Frederick the Great of Prussia. Diderot's famous *Encyclopedia* was soon doing the rounds of cultivated society everywhere and Rousseau was busily celebrating the noble savage unencumbered by religion or civilization. In Germany, the thoughts of a radical like Herman Reimarus (1694-1768) could not be published in his lifetime, but it was not long before Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81) was circulating them as the *Wolfenbüttel Fragments*. The writings of the English deists were freely available in the university library of Göttingen, founded by King George II of Great Britain who was also the Elector of Hanover in whose principality Göttingen lay. The philosopher Immanuel Kant was in full flow and was establishing the principle that religion had to be contained within the bounds of reason – not abolished, but domesticated and made useful as a moral bond for society as a whole.

It would be nice to think that the Enlightenment could have broken down the confessional barriers between Protestant and Catholic, but instead

it made the division between them deeper. The Roman Catholic Church turned its back on the new way of thinking and excommunicated anyone it caught subscribing to it. As a result, Enlightenment and Protestantism were paired together as the harbingers of a future era of reason and prosperity. This alliance, so foreign to the spirit of the Reformers, took a long time to mature and win converts, but eventually it prevailed. In the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the acknowledged father of nineteenth-century liberalism, the two coalesced. Schleiermacher understood religion not as outmoded superstition but as the expression of the non-rational side of life. Reason was vitally important but it did not cover everything, as the phenomena of love and beauty demonstrated. Where do such feelings come from? By 1776, a reaction to pure rationalism was setting in and a generation later it flowered into what we call the Romantic Movement. Romanticism displaced the center of culture from the mind to the feelings, or to what came to be understood as the "heart." Science was no longer the only, or even the main, source of knowledge. After all, what could a machine tell you about life?

As religion came back into the picture and was accorded an important place in human thought, its relationship to wider society had to be redefined. The religious impulse was not the same thing as confessional theology – almost the opposite, in fact. The Bible was a storehouse of passionate expression, but it had been chained up and almost killed by its official interpreters. The only way to rescue it and revitalize its message was to liberate it from this imprisonment and let it speak for itself. This was the task undertaken by Johann Philipp Gabler (1753-1826), who in 1787 declared that Biblical theology was quite independent of dogmatics.⁵ A truly scientific approach to the Scriptures, said Gabler, would seek to unlock the minds of the Biblical writers themselves, seeing them in the context of the ancient Middle East and interpreting them as voices rooted in their own time and culture. Gabler did not deny that the Biblical writers might have a message that we need to hear today, but that was true of all such literature. Gabler, after all, lived in the age of Herder and the brothers Grimm, who went around collecting the ancient folk wisdom and legends of whatever primitive peoples they could find, hoping to discover in them the essence of human spirituality unclouded by subsequent dogmatic elaboration.

Gabler's achievement marked a significant milestone in the development of modern Biblical theology because as something quite distinct from dogmatics, it was outside the control of the churches, but for that very reason Gabler was less influential than we might suppose. The churches were still highly confessional and for them, theology *was* dogmatics. To the extent that Biblical studies had become a science in its own right, it was based on very different principles. These principles were not necessarily opposed to the teaching of the church, but they claimed an objectivity that was lacking

⁵See L. T. Stuckenbruck, "Johann Philipp Gabler and the Delineation of Biblical Theology," in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52 (1999): 139-57.

in confessional theology. There had long been a strong philological streak in the Protestant theological tradition, where the study of Hebrew and Greek had been pursued with great rigor, but its proponents had little to go on besides the texts themselves. Until the French revolution it was virtually impossible for scholars to travel to Biblical lands, most of which were ruled by the Ottoman Turks, but Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, which resulted in the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, among other things, changed all that. By the middle of the nineteenth century, scholarly expeditions were combing the Ottoman Empire, with men like Constantin von Tischendorf (1815-74) discovering the *Codex Sinaiticus*, deciphering previously unknown languages and developing Biblical archaeology.

For the first time in centuries, objective academic study of the Bible in its Near Eastern context could expand and acquire its own distinctive flavor. It was often conservative in outlook, but it was decidedly non-theological, and even anti-theological. Its practitioners felt that theology got in the way of objectivity and they preferred to stick with the facts as they found them on (and in) the ground. Fascinating discoveries were made that strengthened the faith of conservative Christians the world over but also, in a strange way, distanced them from the Bible. The reason for this was that the more archaeologists and philologists emphasized the exotic nature of Biblical times, the less ordinary believers could identify with what Scripture said, even if they were relieved to discover that Babylon and Nineveh had actually existed. As far as relevance to the modern church was concerned, the historical study of the Bible showed how far the human race had come over the years. The Old Testament got even older and more distant, while the New Testament was of interest mainly because the figure of Jesus continued to command widespread devotion. In extreme cases, theologians tried to detach Jesus from his historical environment, even to the point of almost denying that he was a Jew.

By the time a chair of Biblical theology was established at Princeton in 1894, Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949), its first holder, was forced to admit that Biblical theology had become a new discipline, born (as he put it) under an "evil star" and desperately needing to be rescued from its chief professors.⁶ In many ways, Vos was continuing the line developed by the German confessionalists of the previous generation, of whom Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1802-69) was the greatest example and whose technical expertise in Old Testament studies was most clearly revealed in the outstanding commentaries of Karl Friedrich Keil (1807-88) and Franz Delitzsch (1813-90). It would not be too much to say that the main thrust of their work was what Hengstenberg famously called *The Christology of the Old Testament*.⁷ The aim

⁶Geerhardus Vos, *The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph and Co., 1894).

⁷Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, *The Christology of the Old Testament* (London: Francis and John Rivington, 1847). Translated from *Die Christologie des Alten Testaments*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1829-35).

was to show how, over the course of many centuries, God had revealed his purposes to Israel in such a way as to make the New Testament's claim that the Hebrew Bible speaks of Christ seem irrefutable.

However, it was left to Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) to demonstrate just to what extent liberal nineteenth-century German theology rested on ideology as opposed to the facts of history. In his classic book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1906), he virtually demolished it, though without subscribing to the conservative position of men like Hengstenberg and Vos. As far as Schweitzer was concerned, Jesus was a child of his time, an apocalyptic visionary as far removed from us as his contemporaries were from him. If this was indeed the authentic Jesus, then the Bible was even more remote from our everyday concerns than most people had thought and it might as well be abandoned altogether. The moral teachings attributed to Jesus were still valid, but just as his disciples had rescued them by domesticating him as a somewhat unusual rabbi, so the modern church had to save what it could and rebuild its teaching and preaching accordingly.

The Barthian Revolution

There things might have rested had it not been for the First World War and Karl Barth (1886-1968). How far Barth was moving away from liberal theology when war broke out in 1914 is disputed, but there is no doubt that by the time it was over, he was a changed man. In 1919, he put out the first edition of his commentary on Romans, which was followed three years later by a second and even more radical one. As men like Bernhard Anderson and James Smart saw it, the publication of that second edition launched Biblical theology as we know it today. Barth's intention was to show that the words of the Bible were not just a record of what ancient people thought about God, each other and themselves, but a revelation of what God was saying to them and is still saying to us today. He accepted the results of nineteenth-century historical criticism but was convinced that the Bible had survived and continued to form the centerpiece of Western civilization because it was more than just a record written by fallible human beings. It was when that civilization was falling apart, as it seemed to be doing in 1918, that the Bible spoke the Word of God again, pointing the church to repentance and to salvation by grace through faith, and not by reason or by the works of human hands.

Barth's choice of Romans for making his point was a good one. Not only does the epistle speak clearly to that very subject, but the historical critical questions it poses are relatively few. Nobody seriously doubts its Pauline authorship, and the fact that it was written before Paul went to Rome means that its *Sitz im Leben* is less significant for interpretation than it is in his other epistles. The apostle would hardly have written such a magnificent letter to a church he did not know personally if all he had wanted was a bed for a few nights on his way to Spain, so a good case can be made for arguing on purely historical critical grounds that the theology Paul outlines in it is

central to its meaning. Even so, Barth's commentary got a rough reception in academic circles, and was particularly criticized by Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) who thought that his former pupil had apostatized from the liberal faith which he took for granted as the way of the future. But in spite of the criticism, Barth's approach struck a chord in Germany and by the time the second edition of his commentary had appeared he was already teaching theology at Göttingen, the original home of the German Enlightenment.

It soon transpired that Barth was not alone. Other Biblical scholars had been moving in his direction even before the war, men like Martin Kähler (1835-1912) and Adolf Schlatter (1852-1938). Kähler's reputation was posthumously revised upwards and Schlatter embarked on a career which would see him write a commentary on every book of the New Testament before his death in 1938. Barth's influence even rubbed off briefly on Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), though Bultmann soon dissented from Barth's theological platform and moved off in quite a different direction.

Perhaps the most important thing about Barth's commentary on Romans was not the direct influence that it had on other theologians but the encouragement that it gave to the younger generation to pursue the theological meaning inherent in the Biblical texts as a proper subject of academic study. The old fear that such an approach would inevitably lapse into the confessional grooves of the post-Reformation era was not entirely dissipated, and the project was largely a Protestant enterprise until Pope Pius XII legitimated Biblical criticism in his encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu*, issued in 1943, but the traditional constraints were much less evident than they had been before 1914. Thus, Walter Eichrodt (1890-1978) could develop a covenantal reading of the Old Testament which was rejected by Gerhard von Rad (1901-71) who had a more individualistic approach to ancient Israelite spirituality, but both men shared the same theological concerns in a way that would have been regarded as unscientific by the men of Harnack's generation. More boldly still, Oscar Cullmann (1902-99) developed the notion of salvation history into a full-blown interpretation of the entire Bible, which found its ultimate fulfillment and meaning in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁸ Though Cullmann was very popular in some circles for a while, most Biblical scholars recoiled from his somewhat extreme programmatization, but the fact that he could be taken seriously at all shows how much times had changed since the appearance of Barth's commentary.

What this shows is that theological interpretation of the Bible, no longer tied to the confessional churches as it would once have been, developed a considerable diversity which made it hard to pin down. From the academic point of view, theological interpretation called into question the objective basis of Biblical science as it had developed in the nineteenth century. There had always been disagreements about matters of textual criticism, but these

⁸Oscar Cullmann, *Heil als Geschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1965), translated as *Salvation in History* (London: SCM Press, 1967).

were relatively minor compared to what now emerged, especially in Old Testament studies. It was one thing to argue that the Pentateuch had been put together from a number of different sources, but quite another to suggest that each of these sources had its own theological outlook which might be incompatible with that of the others. Likewise, the synoptic problem of the Gospels was transformed by the suggestion that the evangelists all had a theological program which led them to adapt their common material to suit their own agendas. That in turn contributed to the claim of men like Walter Bauer (1877-1960) who argued that the early church held a wide range of theological beliefs that was only gradually narrowed down to the orthodoxy with which we are familiar today.⁹ But if there was a Matthaean community, a Markan community, a Lukan community, and a Johannine community in the early church, how and why did they coalesce and exclude the rest as heretics? According to men like Bauer, this was more a political than a theological judgment, which leaves open the possibility that a broader range of views ought to be accepted within the church today. In other words, Biblical theology, which started out as an orthodox or at least neo-orthodox reaction to classical liberalism, could be co-opted into producing an even more radical program than the one it was superseding, especially once confessionism ceased to operate as a check on theological speculation.

Biblical Theology in the English-Speaking World

So far we have been considering the development of what might be called Biblical theology in the German-speaking world, which by common consent was the most productive area of theological discourse in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet many people today think that Biblical theology is (or was) a peculiarly American phenomenon. That was certainly the case with Brevard Childs, whose critique of it was based on that assumption, although James Smart was able to show without much difficulty how ill-founded that assumption actually was. Nevertheless, even Smart had to allow that there was a different atmosphere in America which could at least create the illusion of theological independence. Both Childs and Smart also pointed to the impact of certain British scholars on the American scene, reminding us that the English-speaking world has a cultural unity of its own that cannot be overlooked.

In the United Kingdom, the influence of nineteenth-century German Biblical scholarship was largely confined to the area of textual criticism. The innate conservatism of the British establishment was still resisting such things as the documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch as late as the 1880s but after that the collapse was sudden and almost total. Even so, however, British scholarship remained extremely cautious and conservative, especially

⁹Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1934). Translated as *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

in New Testament studies where the influence of Joseph Barber Lightfoot (1828-89), Brooke Foss Westcott (1825-1901) and Fenton John Anthony Hort (1828-92) remained dominant well into the twentieth century. Part of this conservatism, however, was an inherent resistance to theology, which was largely excluded from Biblical studies. The result of this was that a conservative Evangelical scholar like Frederick Fyvie Bruce (1910-91) could work happily alongside a radical liberal like John Arthur Thomas Robinson (1919-83) because they both shared the same conservative views about New Testament origins, although they interpreted its theological meaning very differently. To this day, British Biblical scholarship is remarkably open to people of both conservative and liberal theological views, largely because there is a sense of the objectivity of the Biblical text which transcends such things and a very cautious attitude towards theories of any kind.

In the United States, that approach has made its impact, especially in Evangelical circles where British influence has allowed many scholars to engage with critical theories without abandoning their conservative theological convictions, but as James Smart pointed out, the American scene has also been deeply affected by connections with Germany that go much deeper than anything found in Britain. The fact that Biblical theology could be called a “movement” in the United States but not in the United Kingdom shows us that, and it is to this phenomenon that we must now turn our attention.

A uniquely American factor at work in the development of modern Biblical theology was the damaging conflict between so-called “fundamentalists” and “liberals” or “modernists” in American universities and seminaries, which culminated in the reorganization of Princeton Theological Seminary in 1929. Largely because of the separation of church and state, theological institutions in the USA were more closely tied to their respective churches than they were in Europe, with the result that the controversies that shook them had a greater effect on ordinary churchgoers. Most of these were considerably more conservative in their outlook than the new breed of theology professor, and to keep them happy it was necessary to show that a change in scholarly methods and outlook need not affect them in any negative way. Scholarly methods might change but the same theological message could still be preached and so the gap between the liberals and the fundamentalists could be papered over at grassroots level.

In this climate, Biblical theology seemed to be an ideal way forward because it took both theology and historical criticism seriously. It was also able to benefit from the progress made in archaeology, which could be used to support conservative conclusions, as the career and influence of William Foxwell Albright (1891-1971) demonstrated. Though not a Biblical scholar or theologian himself, Albright’s impact was enormous and his highly conservative estimation of the historical reliability of the Bible made it, and a theology based on it, once again respectable in academic circles. Along with this came a renewed interest in Hebrew and Greek semantics, with scholars

postulating that the Hebrew language (and therefore the Bible) reflected a Semitic mentality quite different from that of the Greek world. The ancient Israelites had supposedly lived in a world of action and movement whereas the Greeks were more at home with theory and reflection, a difference that later produced the Christian dogmatic tradition and alienated it from its Biblical roots. Getting away from confessional theology could therefore be presented as a "back to the Bible" exercise that would appeal to people who were unsettled by modern theological developments.

Another influence on the American scene was the impact of Emil Brunner (1889-1966) who spent part of the Second World War in the United States and was able to mediate Karl Barth's theology to Americans in a way they could understand. The message that came across was that God is active in human history, working out his purposes in historically verifiable events, ranging from the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Israel's self-understanding was based on that historical reality and the life of Jesus was its natural (and from the Christian point of view, inevitable) culmination. This combination of ideas appealed to Americans, and after the war there was a steady stream of books and a number of new journals, including *Interpretation* and *Theology Today*, that were launched in order to reflect these concerns. By the mid-1950s it looked as though a new synthesis of critical scholarship and conservative conclusions based on the Bible had emerged as the dominant force in American Protestantism. Furthermore, the effects of this were beginning to be felt among Roman Catholics as well, as they gradually moved into the mainstream of Biblical scholarship.

Unfortunately, as Brevard Childs pointed out, the new consensus was more apparent than real. The English language does not distinguish, as German does, between *Historie*, which is the bare record of facts, and *Geschichte*, which is the narrative that explains their meaning. Because of this, American scholars were slow to pick up on discussions in Germany about whether (or how much) the Bible's interpretive *Geschichte* had a bearing on objective *Historie*. Even if some events recorded in the Bible, like the fall of Babylon to the Persians, were well documented in other sources, the Biblical authors wove them into their own *Geschichte*, which was essentially no different from myth. The common assumption that Israel's religion was radically different from anything in its contemporary world was highly unlikely to be true. Perhaps Israelite religion developed in a different direction later on, and it certainly did so if it was fulfilled in Christ, but to argue that it was like that from the beginning seemed to be taking things too far.

The Christological question was another problem. Biblical theology was concerned to maintain the fundamental unity of the two Testaments, and for this a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament was essential. That could be achieved by saying that Jesus and his followers claimed Israel's history for themselves. In this way, it was possible to give full historical credibility to the Old Testament as it stood, without having to resort

to allegory or other devices in order to discover Christ hidden somewhere in the text. At the same time, it also made it possible to make sense of the New Testament in its Hebraic context. One result of this was the emergence in the United States (and virtually only in the United States) of the term “Judaico-Christian” as a synonym for “Biblical,” which (if strictly interpreted) would make Judaism the basic revelation with Christianity as a kind of add-on. This Judaizing of Christianity tapped into an ancient strand of American fundamentalist Protestantism which only made it more welcome in the churches and was given added relevance by the re-establishment of the state of Israel in Palestine, which could be interpreted as the latest act of God in history. Only in America is there an alliance between right-wing Christians and secular Israelis based on the conviction of those Christians that their destiny is bound up with that of the Jewish people.

The belief that God intervenes in human affairs to work out his purposes is characteristic of Biblical theology, and the cataclysmic events of the first half of the twentieth century provided a congenial atmosphere in which that notion could flourish. But when asked how God is at work on a daily basis in the lives of his people, Biblical theology was hard pressed to give a satisfactory answer. Some of its advocates just assumed that God works today in and through the ministry of the institutional church, but that was hardly a plausible position to hold. Why would God have sent his prophets to upset the religious establishment in ancient Israel only to rest content with the middle class suburban captivity of the modern church? In the United States, that question became acute in the 1950s as the civil rights movement gathered steam and Martin Luther King appealed to Amos: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). The institutional church had done nothing but institutionalize racism and so the prophetic voice moved elsewhere, making Biblical theology as it was practiced in the academy look anemic and even hypocritical.

From within the scholarly guild came other challenges. Johan Christiaan Beker (1924-99) for example, on his appointment to Vos’ old chair at Princeton, announced that he was completely disillusioned with Biblical theology and even blamed it for the apparent lack of interest among seminarians in the Bible!¹⁰ More rigorous and systematic than this was the critique that came from the philologist James Barr (1924-2006) who in 1961 published *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, a seminal work in which he demolished the claim that there was a Hebrew mindset different from that of the ancient Greek world. Before long, other scholars were questioning the foundations of Biblical archaeology and the reliability of Old Testament history was once more thrown into the melting pot. Biblical theology’s attempt to defend the exodus as a historical event, while at the same time dismissing much of the detail surrounding it as pious legend, came to seem feeble and inadequate,

¹⁰See *Theology Today* 25 (1968-69): 185-94. The lecture was delivered on 21 February 1968.

but the choice Biblical theologians faced was a stark one. Either they could accept the liberal challenge and in effect cease to be Biblical, or they could retreat into a quasi-inerrantist position and claim that everything in the text happened just as the Bible said it did. Since most Biblical theologians had escaped from such fundamentalism and had no intention of returning to it, there was really little option for them but to surrender to the liberal attack, even if they tried to be as conservative about it as they could.

Another challenge that Biblical theology had not even begun to face and was ill-equipped to deal with was that of hermeneutics. Brevard Childs was right to suspect that the so-called “new hermeneutic” of Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), Ernst Fuchs (1903-83) and Gerhard Ebeling (1912-2001) was unlikely to make much of an impact in the English-speaking world, but if their tortuous and incomprehensible philosophy was hard to digest, the wider hermeneutical question was not. Biblical theology had to make the Bible come alive and be relevant today, and for that, some way of applying the data of an ancient text to modern conditions had to be devised. Of course, this had long been done by resorting to allegory and most preachers could extract moral lessons from particular Biblical episodes, but this was not a systematic or scientific approach. The trouble was that no adequate or comprehensive method was readily available, with the result that hermeneutics became and has remained the most important single issue in Biblical interpretation to the present day.

In earlier times, the church’s theology had been its hermeneutic, but most scholars rejected that approach, with the result that there was soon a proliferation of different hermeneutical methods which often reflected contemporary trends rather than anything directly related to the Bible. A good example of this can be seen in feminist interpretation, which from the 1970s began to impose its agenda on the Biblical texts. Feminism was especially important because it had a practical effect on the life of the church, persuading many to accept the validity of women’s ordination. The contortions into which feminist Biblical scholars were forced in order to explain away the clear Scriptural prohibition on giving women authority over men in the church provide a clear example of how a particular hermeneutic can distort and even contradict the plain meaning of the Biblical text. Yet it is the inability or unwillingness of so much of the scholarly world to stand out against this that impresses us most. A solid theological framework, rooted in the Biblical doctrines of creation and the fall, might be able to withstand this assault, but although it exists in the textbooks of systematic theologians it is resisted by Biblical scholars who will not accept that theology of that kind can be an adequate, let alone a scientific, hermeneutical principle.

This brings us to the most serious defect of mid-twentieth century Biblical theology, which was its inability to move the hearts and minds of the church. A theology of proclamation should have resulted in great preaching, but it did not—instead, seminary students were given lectures on the importance of *kerygma*. Concepts like sin, grace and atonement were seldom

heard and when they were, they were not applied to the lives of those who heard them. Somehow or other, Biblical theology managed to be a study of the Bible without the challenge of the gospel. Those in the church who still preached for conversion could be grateful for its conservative stance on historical and textual questions, but could not relate to it at a deeper level because it never touched the heart of the matter. Brevard Childs noted that in his analysis and although James Smart did his best to ignore the charge, even he had to admit that the most promising future for Biblical theology lay with the erstwhile fundamentalist and now evangelical wing of the church, where these old-time truths had been preserved.

Finally, although critics of Biblical theology could attack its presuppositions and cast doubt on its supposed “results,” they were much less able to provide a viable alternative. This was particularly true of James Barr, who could demolish almost anything he came across but had nothing constructive to put in its place. It was in an attempt to do this reconstruction and to rescue Biblical theology from the *impasse* into which it had apparently stumbled that Brevard Childs put forward his own program of canonical criticism. Canonical criticism had the advantage of being both solidly Biblical and comprehensively hermeneutical without being specifically theological. Childs, it should be said, admitted that there were problems with using the canon as a guide. For a start, the differences between Protestant and Roman Catholics over the Apocrypha, which reflect those between Jerome and Augustine in the fourth century, affect the value we place on Hebrew and the Jewish tradition generally, which in turn affects the way we understand our faith. Then again, we do not know precisely how or why the canon came together as it did. All we can say is that the Christian church now recognizes it as the framework within which the Bible is read as the Word of God. Accepting it as such is not a scientific decision but an act of faith, even though that is not how it was seen by those who established it. They believed that they were hearing the Word of God in the texts and so canonized them, whereas what Childs was advocating is really the exact opposite—we ought to hear the Word of God in the texts because they are in the canon!

Childs pursued his vision of canonical criticism for the rest of his life but with very limited success. He has few followers, even though many people have benefitted from some of his insights. His real contribution has been to the history of Biblical interpretation rather than to Biblical interpretation itself, and in that respect he has helped to open up a whole new field of inquiry that may yet have fruitful results for the future of Biblical theology. Whether canon criticism can ever be revived is another question, and the answer must be very doubtful. It is possible that some books in the Old Testament were written with inclusion in a canon of Scripture in mind, but there is no evidence one way or the other. As for the New Testament, its authors clearly accepted the existence of an Old Testament canon but did not think that they were adding to it themselves, unless we interpret 2 Peter 3:16, where Peter refers to Paul’s letters as Scripture, in that sense. It seems

that the canon established itself by use over time and was not consciously assembled by anyone with a particular theological aim in view, which makes it hard to establish what its underlying theological principles might be and therefore almost impossible to construct an objectively verifiable Biblical theology on the basis of it.

At the same time, Childs is right to say that the Christian church has built its theology on the canonical books of Scripture, and in Protestant circles at least, regards itself as bound by them. What we have is a confessional theology based on the canon, not a canonical theology based on tradition. In the end, that may be the only way for Biblical theology to go. It can perhaps peel off certain elements that are not really Biblical, such as the claim that the pope is the Antichrist, which was made by the Westminster Confession of Faith (25.6), and add subject matter that the existing confessions omitted or had no cause to consider, like issues relating to human sexuality. But in the end, Biblical theology will look more like confessional theology than the attempts to replace it do. Perhaps this is the inevitable consequence of living in a church with a tradition stretching back to Biblical times that has drawn on the Scriptures for its life and its teaching from the very beginning.